



CHAMBERED

A BUREAU STORY

KIM FIELDING

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CHAPTER 1



PORTO, PORTUGAL

2022

Under the brilliant sun, a breeze played up from the river and carried the scent of salt from the Atlantic, six kilometers away. Dash Cooke leaned back in his chair and twirled the stem of a wineglass between his fingers. With most of a bottle of vinho verde gone, he was a little buzzed—just enough that as he watched the tourists waiting in line for their Douro River cruises, he felt amused rather than annoyed. Hell, maybe once he'd finished the wine, he'd shell out fifteen euros for a ride of his own. Or maybe he'd just wander up and down the narrow cobbled streets until he got hungry or tired. Or maybe—

His phone rang.

He was positive he'd put the damn thing on silent, but in addition to feeling the vibration in his shirt pocket, he heard the tinny ringtone that he'd assigned to his boss's landline.

Fuck.

Dash ignored it. He even considered tossing the phone into the river and strolling away. The ringing stopped but then immediately resumed, voicemail be damned. And, old habits dying hard, he finally picked up the call with a deep growl.

“Yeah?”

“The chief wants to speak with you.”

Even from thousands of miles away, Agent Holmes's voice made Dash shudder slightly. Aside from the chief himself, everyone at the Bureau was terrified of Holmes, and not just because—as assistant to the boss—he knew all the secrets.

Still, Dash managed a bit of resistance. "I'm on vacation."

Holmes didn't bother to answer, and the line beeped, indicating that he'd connected Dash to the chief.

"Agent Cooke! It's been a few weeks, hasn't it?"

As usual, Chief Townsend sounded avuncular and jolly, like a man making a social call. But Dash, having worked for the Bureau for nearly two decades now, knew better. Although loyal to the agency and his boss, he was well aware that Townsend always had a reason for what he did, always had a set of complex plots in motion. And the guy didn't have any qualms about collateral damage if it furthered his schemes.

Dash scowled. "I'm on vaca—"

"I'm glad Holmes was able to track you down so quickly. Cellular phones, my boy—they've made such a difference in communication."

"You made me take a va—"

"I need to meet with you right away. New assignment."

"I'm in Portugal. It was your recommendation, sir."

Actually, it had been more than that. Dash hadn't taken more than a few days off in years, which was fine with him. But then the chief had called him into his office, said he was being forcibly placed on a month's leave, and handed him a stack of glossy brochures advertising the allure of the Iberian Peninsula. Dash had grumbled about it, but now that he'd been here a week, sipping wine and strolling around while admiring tile-fronted buildings, he was enjoying himself. Sleeping better than he ever had.

Now, apparently, Townsend had other ideas.

"Agent Holmes is arranging your journey home. Tomorrow you'll fly from Porto to Paris to Los Angeles. He'll text you the details and will arrange for someone to pick you

up at LAX. We're even paying for you to fly business class—how about that for a treat?" The chief chuckled.

Although Dash knew resistance was futile, he had to try. "Sir, it's my vacation. First one in forever, remember?"

"I know, I know. A pity. But you're the agent best suited for this assignment, and it can't wait until your vacation ends. You can resume travel once you've completed the mission. I'll see you tomorrow afternoon."

And that was the end of the call.



Though Dash's mood remained foul, he did have to admit that business class beat the hell out of the cheap seats. The food was better, for one thing, and his seat folded flat into a bed long enough for his six-foot frame. Problem was, his inner clock said it wasn't time for sleep, so he resorted to staring sullenly at the in-flight movies.

By the time he arrived in LA at 5 p.m. local time, he was exhausted and crabbier than ever. The rookie agent who picked him up looked worried, as if Dash might obliterate him at any moment. He wasn't far off the mark.

"Holmes give you my address?" Dash growled as he flung his carryon suitcase into the trunk of the Bureau's Mercedes.

The agent, whose name Dash hadn't bothered to remember, quailed visibly. "I'm supposed to take you to HQ, sir."

Fuck. Not even time for a shower and change of clothes. Well, Townsend would just have to deal with Dash being rumpled.

As the crow flies, it wasn't far from the airport to HQ—only twenty miles or so. But at this time of day, traffic crawled on the Ten. The baby agent attempted light conversation twice, which was more than Dash would have given him credit for. But after the second time Dash firmly shut him down, the kid remained quiet.

Dash closed his eyes but still couldn't catch a nap. He'd always been a shitty sleeper. When he was a kid, he used to get up in the middle of the night, slip out of the house, and wander the neighborhood for hours. If his family hadn't lived there long—which was the usual case—he sometimes got lost. Oddly, that never bothered him.

“Would you like me to drop you off in front, sir?”

Returning from his reveries, Dash felt a twinge of guilt over his rudeness to the other agent. It wasn't the kid's fault that the chief was... the chief.

“Nah,” Dash replied. “Go ahead and park in the garage.”

After they pulled in, the kid offered to help Dash with his luggage, which was completely unnecessary but sort of sweet. Dash traveled light—always had, even before the Bureau—so he grabbed his small suitcase, shooed the kid away, and proceeded somewhat reluctantly into the building.

As always, the vast main lobby was stark and nearly empty, every sound echoing off the white marble floors and unadorned walls. Agent Ricketts was on duty at the reception desk. He'd been there when Dash left and would probably remain there for a couple more months while he recovered from a run-in with a characteristically ill-tempered oni. He seemed cheerful enough, though, and waved as Dash made his way to the elevator.

“Back already?” Ricketts asked.

“Chief calls, I come.”

“Yeah, I know how that goes. Hope it's a good assignment, at least.”

Nodding, Dash pressed the elevator call button. He idly wondered what Ricketts considered a “good” assignment. Maybe one with no oni. Dash defined it as one where he could drop in, obliterate a few monsters with a minimum of fuss, and have a nice simple report to file afterward. In fact, he sort of specialized in those kinds of jobs. Let the other agents deal with sensitive shit, like negotiating with gnomes and

sasquatches or consulting with witches. He'd rather blow away a serial-killing were-scorpion any day.

Townsend's office was on the top floor, of course, and today the elevator felt especially slow. It gave Dash too much time to think, and he wasn't in the mood for that.

At long last he exited the elevator and opened the double doors to the chief's reception area, where he met Agent Holmes's baleful glare. At some point in the past, an encounter with an ogre had left him heavily scarred and wheelchair-bound. It hadn't improved his disposition either.

His greeting wasted no time. "He's waiting for you."

In the twenty years that Dash had worked for the Bureau, neither the chief nor his office had changed. The office had solid, old-fashioned furniture, ancient framed newspaper articles on the walls, good views of the mountains, and the pervasive scents of cigarettes and booze. As for Townsend, he appeared to be somewhere around sixty, but he'd looked that way for two decades now, so his age was a mystery. He was a big man whose large belly strained his suits; thin white hair trailed across his scalp.

Now he sat behind his desk, a cigarette between his fingers and a highball glass full of whiskey close at hand. Smiling, he gestured Dash to one of the uncomfortable low-slung chairs in front of him.

"Welcome back, son! I trust your flight was comfortable."

Dash parked his suitcase and collapsed into the seat. "You have an assignment for me? One that's time-sensitive?"

Instead of replying, Townsend stood and walked to the bank of windows. He moved lightly and gracefully, as if most of his bulk was helium instead of meat and bone. With his back to Dash, he gazed outside and smoked. After a few moments, he turned to face Dash.

"*All* living things exist within certain parameters, yes? A goldfish must swim. A pine tree must affix itself to the ground with roots and grow upward toward the light. A vampire must drink blood."

“So I’m going after vampires?” They weren’t Dash’s favorite assignment; he preferred his foes to be less human-looking. But he’d staked quite a few over the years and wouldn’t object to doing more.

The chief shook his head. “No. I’m making a point. All living things are constrained by their nature, but circumstances and sometimes choices can make a great deal of difference. That goldfish may remain an inch or two long and have a short, unhappy life in a tiny tank—or it can grow to over a foot in the wild. A pine may be tall and straight, or at high elevations it may be stunted and gnarled. A vampire may choose to drink donated blood instead of killing.”

Perplexed, Dash wished he had a drink. Booze, not blood. Or better yet, that he were back on the banks of the Douro. He waited for the chief to get to the point.

“That goldfish and that pine tree have little input into their fates, but the story’s different with us, isn’t it? With humans and almost-humans and most of the beings we encounter in our work with the Bureau. We are what we are. We’re all given certain raw materials, but we have some control over what we do with those materials. Whether, for instance, we behave like monsters.”

The chief watched Dash expectantly, as if Dash was supposed to glean something important from this little lecture. But Townsend apparently enjoyed being cryptic and his meanings were frequently opaque. So Dash considered his boss’s words carefully. *Behave like monsters.*

“Are you talking about Grimes and Tenrael, sir?” Charles Grimes had been a Bureau agent once, long before Dash’s time, and had continued to contract with the Bureau now and then when his assistance was needed. His partner, Tenrael, was a demon, and Grimes was... one of those almost-humans that the chief had referred to. But they were good guys, at least in Dash’s estimation. Hard, yes, but not ruthless or cruel.

Townsend smiled as he shook his head. “Not them specifically, no, but they’re excellent examples. They each have the potential to wreak terrible harm—and perhaps

sometimes they've been tempted to do just that—yet instead they protect others. They remain who and what they have always been and find ways to channel their nature toward... well, toward good, I suppose. They are not monsters.”

“Yeah, I get that. I'd trust either of 'em with my back.”

“As would I, son. As I *have*, in many cases. As I will again soon.”

Frowning, Townsend returned to his desk and sat. He pulled the half-full whiskey bottle out of the drawer, and held it up, as if to admire the amber hue of the liquid. Dash tried very hard not to yawn and slump in his seat. What time was it in Portugal? Middle of the night, probably. He could have been lying in his hotel bed, belly full of codfish cakes and pastries, with nothing planned for the next day except more cheap wine by the river.

“There's beauty in it,” said Townsend, and at first Dash thought he meant the whiskey. But then Townsend set down the bottle and leaned forward, expression earnest. “In the choice, you see. A man who has behaved monstrously can mend his ways, and one who has never hurt a soul can choose one day to do terrible things. How wonderful! How powerful each of us is as we navigate these routes! How exciting to see the universe's balance tip this way and that!”

For the first time ever, Dash began to worry about the chief's sanity. Sure, the guy was often impossible to figure out, but generally he came off as calculating, not fanatical. It was a relief now to watch him refill his glass and take one of his customary generous swallows.

“Sir, what's my assignment?”

Townsend sighed and drank some more. “Maybe someday you'll appreciate the poetry of it, son.”

“I, uh, I'm not real big on stuff like that.” Dash's mother had been a fan of mystery stories, which was why he had been named Dashiell, but he'd never been the literary type himself. Books made him restless.

“But you’re a part of it nonetheless, son. My job—and therefore your job as well—is to help make sure the balance never leans too far the wrong way. It’s delicate work and often dirty work as well.”

Dash stared at him flatly. “You know me, Chief. Not the delicate type. I shoot things. Blow shit up.” Then a clever thought occurred to him. “That’s the nature of *my* beast.”

“Perhaps. But sometimes a man may think of himself in one particular way, may act in accordance with that self-image... and then circumstances force a change. For better or worse. When it’s for better, some folks call it redemption, but there’s no such thing, boy. There are only twists in the path.”

Even if he hadn’t been jet-lagged, Dash wouldn’t have had the faintest idea what the hell his boss was getting at. He yawned hugely before responding. “And this important assignment you called me back from vacation for?”

With an enigmatic little snort, Townsend returned the bottle to his desk drawer and lit another cigarette. They both watched the smoke rise slowly toward the ceiling. If Dash squinted just a little, the smoke resembled a living thing: a genie not quite formed, a demon coalescing, a ghost that had forgotten how to look human. He shuddered and wished again for his bed.

“Poltergeist,” Townsend said at last.

“What?”

“We have received reports of a poltergeist in Sacramento. Lights flickering, dishes crashing to the floor, furniture toppling, floors thumping. That sort of thing.” Townsend pointed his cigarette at Dash. “You’ll head up there in the morning to investigate.”

With a great deal of effort, Dash quelled the tempest of cursing that threatened to erupt. “A fucking *poltergeist*? That’s the big emergency?”

The chief shrugged. “There is a time element.”

Dash doubted that. Poltergeists could be a pain in the ass, but they were rarely dangerous, and even then, they started at

barely annoying and slowly worked their way up. Cleaning them out wasn't a risky process, but it was tedious.

“Chief, I don't do poltergeists. You know that. Get Chen or Douglas to do it—they're good at that kind of thing. They enjoy it, even.” In fact, given the opportunity, Chen would corner people in the HQ cafeteria and go on at excruciating length about differences between ghosts and poltergeists and the latest techniques in cleansing either of these unwanted guests from someone's home. Douglas was quieter about it, but she loved those jobs too. Dash hated them; you couldn't shoot a spirit.

“Agent Cooke, *you* are the optimal choice for this particular assignment.”

And that was that. Because at least as far as the West Coast Bureau was concerned, Townsend's word was law.



He got to go home first, at least. There was that much consolation.

For the past year he'd rented an apartment on Sepulveda, just a short drive from HQ. It was a nice place, close to the 405 and the 101, handy for decent grocery shopping and takeout food. He didn't know any of his neighbors beyond an occasional nod in the parking lot, but they were mostly quiet single people who worked long hours at fairly good-paying jobs and minded their own business when they were at home. Dash had occupied a series of similar apartments over the years, staying in each for a couple of years and then moving on.

Now, everything looked a little dusty and forlorn due to his recent absence, but that wasn't why he frowned as he unpacked his suitcase. It was just that the apartment didn't feel like home. None of them had, which was one reason he never stayed for long. Even after he carefully picked out furniture, it was like living in a hotel room. It never seemed as if the place was his.

“That’s fucking stupid,” he growled, shoving his dirty laundry into the washing machine. Of course it was his. He paid the rent, didn’t he? And to the best of his recollection, nobody else had set foot in his apartment since he’d moved in. When Dash hooked up with someone via an app, he went to the other guy’s place. On the rare occasions when he got together with people from work, they’d hit a bar somewhere. What remained of his family was scattered around the country, and Dash didn’t keep in touch. He’d certainly never had relatives come to visit.

With the laundry churning away and a couple of carne asada burritos filling his stomach, Dash collapsed onto the couch. He should probably just go to bed, but it wasn’t even nine o’clock and he wanted to get his inner clock back on Pacific Time. He had a long drive up to Sacramento in the morning. To deal with a goddamn poltergeist.

And then, goddammit, although he tried to watch something stupid on TV, his stubborn mind kept detouring to the conversation he’d had with the chief today. If you could even call it a conversation, considering its one-sided nature.

The chief had mentioned redemption and then dismissed the concept. Dash wasn’t sure what he thought about that; religion was definitely not his thing. But the chief had also spoken about pathways changing, and Dash could understand that.

Dash had been a... troubled kid. “Nothing too bad,” he reminded himself aloud. Running away. Minor brushes with the law. Getting in fights. His foster parents said he was on the road to hell, and that was probably an exaggeration, but he certainly wasn’t heading anywhere good.

But now here he was, with twenty years as an upstanding member of society. Paying his taxes and fighting monsters.

“Practically a fucking Boy Scout.”

So why had Townsend insisted on giving him that lecture and sending him on this bullshit assignment?

And how come, no matter how many monsters Dash killed, there was an angry fucking emptiness somewhere deep in his gut?

“Dammit!” Dash threw the remote across the room. It hit the wall, shattering into pieces and leaving a mark on the white paint.

His apartment complex had a decent fitness center—not as good as the one at HQ, but serviceable. He didn’t care how exhausted his body felt. It was time for a good, long workout.



The quickest route from LA to Sacramento involved four hundred miles of I-5, most of it through the godforsaken Central Valley. The ground was brown and dusty beneath orchards and grapevines, the air was thick with smog, and even from the freeway, the towns reeked of desperate poverty.

It was funny, really. During his childhood in the Midwest, Dash had always imagined California as a glamorous place: movie stars, palm trees, beaches. He’d been shocked when he first saw the reality. Only the palm trees proved to be real in this part of the state, and even they looked unhappy.

Well, at least Townsend had let him use a company car: a brand-new top-of-the-line Range Rover that probably cost more than two hundred grand. The vehicle was possibly meant to pacify him over the shitty assignment, because Dash couldn’t think of any other reason why his own Toyota RAV wouldn’t have sufficed for this trip. In any case, he enjoyed the sound system, blasting Korn and Disturbed and Metallica and Tool, and kept a heavy foot on the gas pedal.

He’d made an early start to avoid morning traffic and stopped only once, briefly, to gas up and eat. So it was only a little past two o’clock when he arrived at his destination.

There was nothing outwardly remarkable about the house. It was in what appeared to be a fairly ritzy neighborhood, with quiet streets shaded by enormous trees and lined with older houses in excellent condition. The house on Henry Lane was a

squarish two-story with pale-yellow stucco walls and a small front porch. The landscaping wasn't particularly imaginative but it was immaculately maintained. This appeared to be one of those places where someone from the HOA would hound you if you had more than three dead leaves in your front lawn.

Dash parked on the street, got out, straightened his jacket and tie, and marched toward the house. The front door swung open before he had a chance to ring, revealing an attractive man and woman in their early thirties. They gaped for a few seconds, which didn't surprise him. No matter how expensive and well-tailored his clothing, he knew he always came off as threatening. His posture and build were partly to blame—tall, heavy-boned, muscular—but according to Agent Chen, Dash also had Resting Thug Face, a vaguely menacing expression even when he didn't intend one.

“Agent Cooke.” He held out a business card. “Bureau of Trans—”

“Yes, come in, come in.” The man practically dragged him inside, most likely not wanting the neighbors to see. Without another word, the couple led Dash into a living room that was furnished expensively but with all the personality of a chain-hotel room. He sat on a beige armchair; they took seats on the matching couch opposite him. Then he pulled out his notepad. Although some agents used electronic devices for this, he preferred good old-fashioned pen and paper.

“All right. Tell me what's going on. You can start with your names.”

The couple exchanged a quick glance and then the woman spoke. “I'm Stephanie Frost and this is my husband, Justin. We were told that the Bureau could assist with our... infestation.”

Dash sighed. “We're not exterminators, ma'am.”

“Yes, I know. But my uncle is Paul Adams—that's United States Representative Paul Adams—and he says that your agency takes care of these sorts of things.”

“It's your job,” Justin added primly.

They both had I-want-to-speak-to-the-manager expressions. Dash would have cheerfully told them both what they could do with his “job,” except then they would bitch to Uncle Paul, and Uncle Paul would call the chief, and Dash would be hauled into HQ for another lecture. Or worse.

So Dash drew on his thin store of patience and managed to keep his tone even. “What are the things you want me to take care of?”

“A poltergeist of course!” said Stephanie.

“You know, most poltergeists are slightly annoying but harmless. It’s like having squirrels stealing from your bird feeder.” This was true, according to his Bureau training. “If you ignore it, it’ll most likely cease activity fairly quickly.”

“We can’t *ignore* it,” she retorted angrily. “We want to put this house up for sale.”

“Even better. Just move. The buyers can deal with it.”

Now Justin huffed. “California Civil Code mandates that if a prospective buyer asks about paranormal activity, the seller and his or her agent are required to disclose it. *We* do not wish to be so obligated if a buyer inquires.”

Oh, fuck. Justin was a lawyer—Dash would bet his retirement account on it. Possibly Stephanie was as well. In Dash’s experience, there was little use for lawyers except to make easy things difficult and difficult things impossible.

“All right, fine. So you want to get rid of it. Tell me what it’s been up to. You can start by telling me how long ago it showed up.” This was potentially important because the longer a poltergeist was in residence, the harder it was to dislodge.

His hosts relaxed a bit, clearly relieved he wasn’t blowing them off. But Dash was disgruntled. He’d driven four hundred miles to help them out, and they hadn’t so much as offered him a glass of water. They probably never offered water to their gardener either, even on hot days, and they likely undertipped waiters. They seemed like the type.

“We don’t exactly know,” Stephanie said in answer to his question. “The house has been vacant for some time, so we

only noticed when we came in to fix things up and stage it for showings.”

“You don’t live here?”

She shook her head. “This was my grandparents’ house. It was built in the twenties but they bought it in 1953. Even then it was an excellent neighborhood with high property values. Did you know that Ronald and Nancy Reagan lived just a few blocks away when he was governor?”

Unless this place was haunted by the Ghost of Trickle-Down Economics, that seemed irrelevant. Dash gave Stephanie a go-on gesture.

“Well, my mother and my uncle were raised here. And my grandmother stayed on after my grandfather passed away, even though we all kept trying to convince her that she’d be better off in a retirement community or assisted living. She died two years ago.”

Justin intervened quickly. “We don’t have to disclose *that* because she didn’t die in the house.”

Dash ignored him and addressed Stephanie instead. “Did your grandmother experience poltergeist activity?”

“No, of course not.” She seemed offended at the notion, as if poltergeists were signs of poor housekeeping.

“Well, there was the fairy.”

Justin’s comment earned a withering glare from his wife. “That was dementia.” Stephanie frowned at Dash while she explained. “She thought there was a fairy living in the house. She never saw it, but she claimed it would do little chores for her, like washing the dishes. She used to leave out little bowls of milk and honey.”

Dash, who’d slept poorly the night before, felt a sudden wave of jet lag. He tightened his jaw to suppress a yawn. “Fairies are nothing like poltergeists.” Also factual, per the Bureau. In fact, fairies were covered in an entirely separate training module. “So Grandma died a couple of years ago....”

“And the house stayed empty because she left the place to my mother, but Mom was busy with her new boyfriend in Phoenix so she didn’t want to deal. I mean, it was just sitting here, costing her for taxes and utilities and landscapers, but she and Bob were building a place there and planning a huge wedding, which is dumb anyway for a sixty-three-year-old woman on husband number three, but she—” Stephanie stopped abruptly and took a few deep breaths.

Justin patted her knee and stepped in. “We’ve finally convinced her to sell. Perfect timing, with real estate prices what they are.”

This house in this neighborhood would probably sell for a million or more. Dash wondered what these people would do with the money. They didn’t seem to be hard up for cash, and by the sound of it, neither was Stephanie’s mother, so maybe they’d just invest it. Or splurge on something ridiculous. Dash once worked on a case where a B-list actor had blown half a million bucks on a Lamborghini, promptly crashed the thing into a bridge abutment, and then claimed that he’d been possessed by a demon with poor driving skills. It took only about an hour of investigation for Dash and the other agent to figure out that the only thing possessing that guy had been a meth habit. Which made him the LAPD’s problem not the Bureau’s, but Dash still had to deal with a stack of paperwork.

“Agent Cooke?”

Brought back by Stephanie’s sharp tone, Dash shook his head. “I was thinking. Okay, so the poltergeist activity began while the house was vacant?” That was unusual; unlike ghosts, poltergeists generally did their thing only in occupied homes.

“Yes,” Stephanie said. “The workmen brought it to our attention. My grandparents hadn’t renovated this house since the seventies, so we’ve had to redo everything—kitchen, bathrooms, closets, floors.... The men we hired started complaining. They said their tools would go missing or their lunches would disappear, or the tiles they’d installed one day would be stacked on the counter when they returned the next morning. We assumed it was just an excuse for missing deadlines.”

Dash had been taking notes as she spoke, and now he looked up at her. “What convinced you otherwise?”

She shrugged. “It started happening to us too. The furniture kept getting rearranged. We had the house listed briefly, but every time our Realtor showed up, she’d find something really strange, like dead flowers scattered over the carpets or all the artwork turned upside-down. We installed cameras, but they kept get *uninstalled* and dumped in the garbage bins—and the images never showed a single person. I discussed it with Uncle Paul. He told us about the Bureau and what you guys do, and he made a couple of phone calls.”

Good old Uncle Paul.

“And that’s it?”

Justin leaned forward. “We need this cleared up immediately. Time is money, and every delay is eating into our profit margin. Also, the Fed just raised interest rates, which means home prices are on the cusp of dropping.”

Dash was on the cusp too, but in his case he was in danger of losing his cool. “Who told you this was a poltergeist?”

“Well, of course it is,” Stephanie snapped. “This is what poltergeists do. I researched it online.”

Ah. And Google was definitely the equivalent of eighteen months of training followed by two decades of experience. “Ma’am, poltergeists break stuff. Yeah, they might hide things too, but their main thing is smashing shit up.” Oops, that was adult language. Well, the Frosts would just have to deal. “Have any of the windows or pieces of furniture been broken? Has there been a bunch of thumping inside the walls? Have faucets been turned on, flooding the place? Have there been—”

“*This* poltergeist doesn’t do those things,” Stephanie insisted.

Sure. The Frosts were so special that they had a schmancy poltergeist instead of the ordinary kind. Their spirit had class.

Although Dash opened his mouth to argue, he quickly closed it again. What was the point? These assholes wouldn’t listen anyway, and they’d probably run off whining to Uncle

Paul about how the nasty agent was disrespectful and negligent.

Stephanie stood and crossed her arms. “What’s the process of getting rid of it?”

“There’s a cleansing ritual.” Which wouldn’t do a stroke of good but wouldn’t hurt anything either, and at least it would get these people off his back. He could do the ritual and head back to LA, and if the chief called him on it, well, Dash had simply complied with the citizens’ request.

But he didn’t have to do it right this second. Instead, he could check into a nice hotel, eat a good dinner at the Bureau’s expense, and pretend he was still on vacation. Sacramento wasn’t Porto—despite the presence of palm trees and rivers—but that was okay. Maybe he’d even find a hookup. It had been a while, and he couldn’t remember ever fucking anyone from Sacramento. It was a whole city of fresh meat.

“I have to collect some materials,” he lied. “And make some preparations. I’ll come back tomorrow at ten.”

Hell, he might as well sleep in a little while he was at it.

His hosts looked less than thrilled, but they were stuck and they knew it. Sour-faced, they walked him to the front door, where Justin then stopped him from leaving. “This... cleansing. It will rid us permanently of our problem?”

“It’s almost a hundred percent effective on poltergeists.” Not a lie. Of course, the ritual would have no effect at all on whatever entity was actually causing the issue. But the Frosts would be unwilling to hear that.

“Ten sharp,” Stephanie said.

Dash nodded.

The three of them continued the charade of cordiality, Dash shaking hands with both of them. And then, just before he turned toward the open doorway, he caught a flash of movement in the hallway behind the Frosts.

It was a person, elderly and male, with startlingly pale skin and long gray hair that looked as if it hadn’t been brushed in

years. The man locked gazes with Dash for just a moment... and then disappeared.

Mind whirring, Dash spun around and hurried to the Land Rover.

CHAPTER 2



THE MAN—A BIG MAN WITH A HANDSOME, ANGRY FACE—HAD seen him. Henry had been so startled by this that he'd instinctively retreated to his room. He sat there now, in that cozy space between the walls at the center of the house, breathing heavily and feeling dizzy.

Humans weren't supposed to see him; that was simply a law of nature. Sometimes it comforted him and sometimes it frustrated him, but he'd never thought to question it. And now his world had shifted on its axis. As if things hadn't already been bad enough.

As he'd done so often lately, Henry calmed himself by sorting through some of his treasures. He had a moderate stash of items he'd pilfered over the years, things the residents of the house had barely noticed had gone missing. A big stack of magazines and a few paperback books, a couple pieces of costume jewelry that had fallen behind a dresser decades ago, an assortment of Barbie clothes and Matchbox cars and other small toys, a lot of pens and pencils, and a small mountain of socks. He valued each of these items and spent much of his time organizing and admiring them. But they weren't his favorites.

In one corner of his room were his special possessions. He picked them up now, one by one, giving each a few gentle strokes.

He had a framed photo of the first residents of this house, the Buttons, all sitting at a little table in the back garden and grinning at the camera. For a time they'd hung the picture on

the wall, but after they'd taken it down and stored it in the back of a closet, Henry spirited it away to his room.

There was a pale blue melamine bowl that Stephanie's grandmother used to leave out for him some nights, filled with sweetened milk. She had been under the misimpression that he was a fairy, and although Henry had no use for the food, he'd appreciated the thought nonetheless.

From Stephanie's grandfather, there was a pipe that still smelled faintly of tobacco. Sometimes he had retreated to the tiny room he called his den, claiming to have work to complete, but instead he'd sit and smoke and stare placidly at nothing. Henry would watch from inside the walls, sharing a silent, hidden companionship.

Henry also had a tiny china teacup. That was from Stephanie's mother, Lori, who used to have elaborate tea parties as a young girl. At that age she believed the stories about the resident fairy, so she used to invite him and pretend he attended.

From Lori's brother, Paul, there was a plastic camera with a string strap. If Henry pressed the button on top, an imitation flashbulb rotated, and through the eyepiece he saw pictures of zoo animals. As a preschooler, Paul had constantly carried the camera, pretending to snap photos as he went. But by first grade he'd abandoned it at the bottom of the toy box, where Henry acquired it.

Although Stephanie had never lived in this house, she used to visit often as a child, occasionally spending a night or two. So Henry had something of hers as well: a small fabric bluebird filled with plastic pellets. Stephanie—she'd been called Steffy back then—had given it the rather unimaginative name of Bluey, and she used to set it beside her pillow when she came for sleepovers. In her mid teens, she'd declared herself too old for stuffed animals and had thrown Bluey away. Henry had retrieved the toy from the wastebasket the same night.

This house had stood for almost a century, and Henry considered the two families who had lived here as his own.

Nobody lived here now except him. Strangers had been coming in and changing everything, and he felt old and tired and scared. He owned a tiny mirror that had fallen out of a makeup compact long ago, so he knew he looked as aged as he felt. He was probably dying. Maybe becoming visible to humans was another sign of his impending doom.

Hunched on the mattress he'd constructed from old towels and sheets, Henry petted Bluey and sobbed.



The next day, Henry heard Stephanie and Justin as soon as they entered the house. They were arguing, a rehash of a disagreement they'd been having for months. Justin thought they should convince Lori to keep the house and rent it out as an Airbnb. He kept insisting that because of the nice neighborhood and with Sacramento being the state capital, they could attract a lot of people interested in staying for a few weeks while conducting business. "Positive cashflow," he kept repeating. The whole concept made Henry shudder.

Stephanie, however, just wanted to get rid of the place. "Wash our hands and move on. Mom's promised us a chunk of the proceeds, which would be a nice bump for our investment portfolio." Her arguments made Henry uneasy too, because what if the new family that moved in was unfriendly? What if they sensed something living inside their walls, as Stephanie's grandmother had, and were repelled by the idea? Solitude and indifference were aging him, but hatred would destroy him immediately.

"*You* could live here," Henry whispered, far too softly for them to hear. "It's a very nice house. Solid construction. Plenty of room for the children you've been talking about having. A nice garden. And me—I'm here too."

The couple continued to bicker without energy, as if it were mostly a habit they hadn't bothered to break. And then the doorbell rang and the big man from the previous day entered. Agent Cooke, Henry remembered. The man didn't

look any happier today, but now he carried a large leather bag similar to what doctors used to bring on their house calls.

Henry remained hidden inside the walls.

The three stood awkwardly in the living room for a few moments until Stephanie glanced at her phone. “How long is this going to take? I have a meeting.”

Cooke shook his head slightly. “Dunno. Could be hours. Look, you guys don’t need to be here. In fact, it’s better if you’re not—the, um, energies are simpler with fewer people around. I can just call to let you know when I’m finished, and I’ll lock up when I leave.”

Justin looked unhappy. “How will we know whether you’ve succeeded?”

“Easy. The poltergeist activity will stop.”

Although Stephanie and Justin didn’t seem especially pleased to be excluded, Cooke managed to herd them to the front door. He watched through the little window for a couple of minutes before grunting in satisfaction and turning the deadbolt. Then he marched into the living room, set his bag on the coffee table, and stood with legs slightly spread and arms crossed.

“Okay,” he said loudly, “I know you’re not a poltergeist, so we can drop that shit, right? I tried calling HQ to find out what the hell you are, but my boss isn’t taking my calls. That means we’re stuck with each other. I did some research online last night, and I’ve got you narrowed down to the ten most likely things to be infesting a house—and I know how to get rid of all ten. I can go through my bag of tricks until I get it right, or you can save us both the hassle and just clear the hell out on your own. What’s it gonna be?”

Henry’s heart beat so fast that it was almost a steady thrum, and it was hard for him to breathe. *Infesting. Get rid of. Clear out.* He shrank farther back into the house’s inner spaces, hoping that Cooke was simply bluffing but yet certain he wasn’t.

When he didn't receive a reply, Cooke sighed. "Guess we're doing this the hard way then. I hate this stupid-ass assignment, but I'm not in any hurry to drive back to LA, so fine. We can play."

He opened the leather bag and, after rummaging around for a moment, pulled out a white paper sack. He held this up as if for Henry's inspection. "This is how we get rid of a trasgu. It's also gonna piss off the Frosts, which I'm going to consider a bonus." He opened the sack and dumped it onto the carpet. "All right. Come on out and pick up the rice."

Henry blinked. He wasn't sure what he'd expected from Cooke, but it certainly wasn't this. Even though Henry much preferred a tidy house, the mess on the floor certainly wasn't enough to eject him.

Cooke waited silently for a few minutes, then toed gently at the pile he'd made. "No? Guess you're not a trasgu then. According to the Bureau, if somebody challenges one of them to pick up grains, he can't refuse. But he can't actually accomplish the task 'cause he's got a hole in his hand and the grains keep falling through. He gets frustrated and takes off. It sounds pretty dumb, but then so does that crap about vampires needing invitations to enter homes, and I know *that's* true. Lemme tell you, if there are gods, they've got a hell of a sense of humor."

Cooke returned to the leather bag and extracted a couple more items. That took long enough for Henry to get a good look at him. Cooke had a nice solidity, with a muscular frame and a square jaw. He was somewhere in his forties, Henry guessed, with creases at the corners of his dark eyes and some strands of gray in the short dark-brown hair. His skin—what Henry could see of it, anyway—was tanned. Despite his impressive size, Cooke moved fluidly, as if confident in his body and in his ability to make it do his will.

He wore a gun strapped under his jacket. Henry hadn't noticed at first and didn't know what to make of it. He'd never seen a real gun before, although he was certainly aware of the damage they could cause. This one made him uneasy, but then,

so did Cooke's very presence. It was a strange unease, however, because it was mixed with fascination.

Henry had been alone too long. That was it. Any living presence in the house was better than nothing.

Muttering to himself, Cooke picked up another white paper bag, this one bigger, and tore a small hole in one corner. "Okay, I guess we'll go with poltergeist next, even though I know that's not right. Turns out different things work on different poltergeists, so I'm gonna try a few of them. Maybe one of them will turn out to be your bane. We'll start with salt since it's a nice all-purpose anti-ghostie." He began spilling the salt around the perimeter of the room, leaving a thin white trail that added to the mess the rice had already made.

Henry followed along inside the walls as Cooke traveled the entire first floor, eventually emptying the entire bag and returning to the living room. "Yeah, the Frosts are gonna have a conniption." He seemed cheerful about this, and his smile made him even more handsome.

"I'll be back in a few minutes for step two. If you want to take this opportunity to exit gracefully, by all means go for it." He stomped through the kitchen and out the back door. Henry couldn't watch him without emerging from the walls, which he was afraid to do—even though he desperately wanted to see what Cooke was up to. Step two probably wouldn't involve anything as drastic as burning the house down. At least Henry hoped not.

He was relieved but puzzled when Cooke returned with an armful of tree branches, which he carried into the living room and scattered across the floor and furniture. They smelled pleasant, like the Christmas trees Henry's families used to decorate. It had been a long time since there had been any holiday decorations in the house.

Cooke brushed his hands clean. "Handy that there was a cedar tree out back. Poltergeists are supposed to be averse to evergreens."

He waited, as if he expected Henry to appear and then run away screaming. When that didn't happen, Cooke sighed.

“Y’know, a few months ago I had an assignment in Montana, up near the Canadian border. Wendigo was wandering around munching on people. I tracked it down and blew it away. Bam.” He sighed again. “It was really fucking cold up there, but I’d take that assignment any day over this one. Tree branches and rice my ass. The only good way to deal with a monster is to kill it.”

Henry shrank back. Of course he wasn’t human, but he’d never thought of himself as a monster. He’d been quite nice-looking back when his house was occupied, and he’d never harmed anyone. Yes, he’d stolen some things from his family, but they were small items and never missed. As for his recent antics—the workmen’s tools he’d hidden and the furniture he’d moved around—those were simply self-defense measures to keep his house from being altered. Surely he didn’t deserve death for that. All he’d ever wanted was his home and a nice family inside it, and he had even done some chores to show his appreciation.

Cooke, who certainly had no idea of Henry’s distress, had picked up another item from the coffee table. “Some of the guys at HQ said this works on poltergeists and hauntings in general. Some of the others said it’s cultural appropriation for the Bureau to use it, which is probably true. But man, if appropriating gets the job done here, I’m all for it.”

He used a lighter to make the item in his hand start smoking, and within a few moments the scent of burning sage overwhelmed the cedar. Henry didn’t know what effect the sage had on ghosts, but he rather liked it, although it tickled his nose. He watched warily as Cooke wandered around the room, waving the smoking bundle and muttering something in a language Henry didn’t understand.

Eventually Cooke gave up on the sage, tossing it into the kitchen sink and running water over it. He returned to the living room and scowled some more. Mumbling something about a bag of tricks, he pulled a black plastic box out of his satchel and set it on the coffee table. It looked a little like a radio, with some knobs on the top and, Henry thought, some kind of screen, like a tiny TV.

“Dragged this up from HQ. It emits frequencies that goblins hate, or so I’ve been told.” He played with the knobs for a few minutes and then stood back. “I don’t hear anything, but I’m not a goblin.”

Henry didn’t hear anything either, aside from his own heartbeat. He hadn’t done anything today except watch Cooke, yet he felt exhausted. He wanted to retreat to his room, undergo the comforting ritual of admiring his favorite possessions, and then fall asleep. But then he’d miss whatever Cooke was doing, an omission that could be dangerous.

With a grunt of annoyance, Cooke turned the box’s knobs until they clicked and shoved the box back into his bag. Then he collapsed into a relaxed sit on the couch. “I can feel you, you know. Whatever you are. I know you’re watching. Why don’t you come out and we’ll have a little conversation?”

Henry was crazily tempted to accept the offer. It would be so nice to talk to someone. He’d dreamed his whole life of doing that, always assuming it would be impossible. But Cooke had a gun and a bag full of supplies meant to fight monsters. So Henry remained hidden.

“God, I need coffee. And if it wasn’t for you, I’d be sitting by the Douro right now. Maybe I’d even have company. There’s a decent gay scene in Porto, or so I’ve been told. I could be hooking up with someone right now instead of sitting here, doing the bidding of a couple of spoiled idiots who call Uncle Paul every time their life isn’t perfect.”

His voice rose by the end of that little speech, making him even scarier. But then he fell quiet for a while, staring up at the ceiling as if watching something interesting.

When he spoke again, his tone was calmer. “Look, whoever you are. The Frosts don’t want you here. They’re gonna keep at it until you’re gone, and until then they’ll make us both miserable. You might think I’m not very bright, but I have the whole Bureau behind me, and when my boss wants something done, well... it gets done. Come on out and tell me what you are. Maybe we can find you somewhere else to haunt.”

Somewhere else. Somewhere *else!* As if this wasn't Henry's house. As if he hadn't been here longer than any humans—caring for it, making sure the structure stayed sound and insects stayed away and the interior stayed tidy. As if he didn't love it.

As if he wouldn't die if he had to leave.

Suddenly Henry was awash in grief and despair and anger. His eyes burned with tears and his throat felt closed. He was going to die. Agent Cooke would destroy him, or the Frosts would find someone else to do it. Or the house would remain empty and Henry would simply wither away.

Henry materialized outside the walls, only a couple of feet from where Cooke sat on the couch, and he shouted as loudly as he could: "I won't go!"

And then he fell to his knees, sobbing.

CHAPTER 3



DASH JERKED UP OFF THE COUCH SO VIOLENTLY THAT HE almost pulled a muscle, his hand going automatically to this shoulder holster. The only thing that kept him from automatically shooting the apparition was uncertainty over whether ordinary bullets would work.

But then the creature collapsed to his knees, hands covering his face, shoulders quaking. He was crying, dammit.

Monsters didn't cry.

A few awful moments passed. Dash was usually confident about his actions in almost every situation—a characteristic that had saved his life more than once. But right now he had no idea what to do.

Well, holstering his gun was a good first step. The sobbing creature didn't seem imminently dangerous, and waving handguns around unnecessarily was never wise. After securing the firearm, he stood there feeling big and stupid and awkward.

Finally the tears ebbed to sniffles and the creature looked up at him, red-eyed.

“What are you?” Dash asked as gently as he could, which probably wasn't effective. Giving solace wasn't exactly second nature to him.

The answer came in a whisper. “I'm... Henry.”

Not exactly an answer, but it was better than silence or more crying. “All right. I'm Agent Dash Cooke, from the

Bureau of—”

“I know.”

“You’ve been listening since I got here? Watching?”

“Yes.”

Henry got slowly to his feet. He appeared more or less human, aside from his pointed ears. After the brief glimpse yesterday, Henry had clocked him in his seventies, but now he saw that he’d been wrong; Henry looked more like sixty. Although without knowing his species, that was a wild guess. Every creature aged differently. In any case, his waist-length steel-gray hair was tangled, his skin moon-pale, and his eyes the color of lush grass. He was very thin and wore a confusing assortment of threadbare clothing: a pair of 1970s faded red running shorts with white trim; a short-sleeved collared shirt that looked like something Ward Cleaver might wear to the Beave’s weekend Little League game; one pink ankle sock with lace and a white tube sock, both with holes; and a floral-print silk neck-scarf tied in a bow. He should have looked ridiculous, but with his back straight and chin defiantly raised, he somehow managed a fragile dignity.

“How come you can see me?” Henry asked.

Dash, who hadn’t expected that question, blinked. “Because you’re standing right there.”

“But humans can’t see me.” Henry tilted his head inquisitively. “*Are* you human?”

“Far as I know.” The Bureau employed quite a few agents who were not, or at least not fully, human. But although Dash had never bothered to do 23andMe, he had no reason to doubt that he was firmly established in team *Homo sapiens*.

Henry took a long, shaky breath. “You want to kill me.”

“I want to evict you. Strike that. I don’t personally give a shit whether you stay or go, but my boss says I gotta get rid of you, so that’s what I’m gonna do.”

“You could tell your boss no.”

“He’d only send someone else to do it. And I’d be unemployed.”

“But this is my home.”

“Maybe.” Dash crossed his arms. “But the law says it belongs to the Frosts—well, actually Stephanie Frost’s mother, I guess—and they don’t want you here.”

Henry’s brow creased. “But why? I only.... What I did with the tools and the furniture, that was because things were wrong in the house. When my families lived here, I helped them. I swept the floors and did the dishes. Shooed away squirrels from the attic. Cleared the pipes when they were clogged and watered plants when the people forgot to.” He looked as if he was going to start crying again.

But Dash knew he had to be firm. “People don’t want to buy a house if it’s got something creepy in it.”

“I’m not creepy!”

This conversation wasn’t getting them anywhere. Dash had been forced to endure classes on negotiation during his training, so now he dredged up the dusty memories and lowered himself onto the couch. In the event that Henry turned out to be a threat after all, Dash could still draw his gun. He’d had a lot of practice.

“Okay. So I’m assuming you’re some kind of household spirit. Right?”

“Yes?” Henry didn’t sound particularly convinced of his answer.

“What kind? We can rule out trasgu and poltergeist, and you seem too solid to be a dead guy’s ghost.”

“I’m not dead.”

Dash vaguely remembered from his newbie days that there were approximately a hundred species of supernatural beings that lived in people’s houses. Which made sense, since humans had been living in houses for thousands of years. Insects and other critters had evolved to take advantage of igloos, longhouses, villas, cottages, and condos—and other creatures

had as well. Dash was no expert in this area, but it would really help to know what he was dealing with.

“Right. So zashiki-warashi? Lar familiaris? Agathodaemon? Domovoi? Help me out here, Henry.”

However, Henry looked confused. “I don’t... I don’t know.”

“Well, what do your people call yourselves?”

“I have no people.”

Just four words, stark and plain, but it was as if a shard had pierced Dash’s heart. He cleared his throat. “Look. This place isn’t working out for you. Why don’t you move somewhere else? You’ve been stashed away here rent-free for a while, yeah?”

“My house and I were born together.”

Dash whistled. That was a hundred years. “Okay, but there’s thousands of other houses in Sacramento, and I bet you can find one where nobody notices you. Or better yet, you could live in a business. Move into Target or Costco and you’d have a lot more space. Hell, I’d pick Ikea, myself. You could sleep in a different bed every night.”

Actually, Dash had fantasized about something very similar when he was a little kid. He’d read a book about two siblings who ran away from home and lived in a museum, and he’d pictured doing something like that himself. Not a museum, though. Maybe a shopping mall or a sleek office building or a recreation center.

But Henry shook his head. “I can’t leave my house. I’ll die. I’m dying anyway without a family.” He sank back to the floor, this time sitting rather than kneeling, his back deeply bowed. “You might as well shoot me.”

“Would that kill you?”

Henry’s answer was monotone, as if the subject didn’t really matter to him. “I don’t know.”

Well, fuck it all. This was a lot more complicated than Townsend had let on. Certainly nowhere near as

straightforward and satisfying as tracking down a ghoul and lopping off its head with a single arc of a sword.

With an aggrieved grunt, Dash pulled out his phone. Henry watched from the corner of his eye but, looking utterly defeated, didn't otherwise move.

"Hi, Holmes. Cooke here. I need to talk to the chief."

"Chief Townsend is not available."

"This is important."

"Chief Townsend is not available."

Christ. Dash had very little patience on a good day, and lately it felt as if the universe was conspiring to drain his small store completely. "Fine," he growled through gritted teeth. "Please ask him to call me the minute he *is* available."

"Noted." The connection ended.

For what felt like several days, Dash stared at Henry, totally at a loss. Henry simply slumped. And then Dash realized he was hungry and tired—still not really on California time—and that his muscles were tight.

"I'm going to call the Frosts and tell them this is taking longer than anticipated. They'll probably squawk, but oh well. I'm going to leave here and hit the gym at my hotel. Have lunch. Maybe catch a nap. Have a chat with my boss. When I get back here, I hope you've seen the light and moved out."

"I can't," Henry said, sounding exhausted. "I told you."

So he had. But Dash didn't know whether he was lying. It could be a ploy to gain sympathy and, ultimately, be granted permission to stay.

Instead of responding, Dash gathered up his things and stuffed them back into the leather bag. He didn't bother cleaning up the mess he'd made with rice, salt, and tree boughs. The Frosts could deal with that themselves. He started to walk toward the front door but paused to look back at Henry, who hadn't moved. "You said humans can't see you."

"They can't. Just you."

“*Never* until me?”

“Never.”

Later, Dash would dig around to find out why he was apparently an exception to the rule, but that wasn’t the point right now.

“Can they hear you?”

“I try to be very quiet. Except when I was banging things while the workmen were here.”

“Yeah, but who have you been talking to all these years?”

Henry shrugged and looked down. His voice was very small. “Nobody.”

Even Dash didn’t know what his own answering growl meant. He stomped away and slammed the door on his way out.



By the time Dash had spent over an hour in the hotel fitness center, showered in his room, and grabbed a burger, Townsend still hadn’t called back. Dash considered trying Holmes again but quickly rejected the idea. Dash would only make him angry.

As he sat on the edge of his bed, scowling, an idea hit him. The archivist. Well, shit—Dash should have thought of her long ago; but then, his assignments rarely called for assistance of that sort. He didn’t need research to know that when he was attacked by a kishi, Dash needed to burn it to ashes. This case, however, was different.

He called the main number for HQ, which always led to a mysterious voice. None of the agents knew who the voice belonged to or where they were physically located; in fact, everyone had concluded that this was one of those things about the Bureau that they were better off not knowing.

“Library, please.”

The operator's gender wasn't obvious from their voice, which was neither deep nor high-pitched. They had an odd accent too, which nobody could place. It was very sibilant. "Isss this Agent Cooke?"

"You know it is, based on my number."

"You never assk for the archivissst."

"Well, today I am."

"Interesssting."

Before Dash could express his annoyance, the call went through and was picked up by a woman. "Afolabi here."

"Uh, hi. Dash Cooke."

When Dash was first hired, the archivist was a man named Des Hughes. There was some kind of backstory about the guy, some sort of mysterious and possibly shady past, but nobody had ever filled in the details. Anyway, he liked Des well enough. Dash had even attended the party when Des and his husband—another agent named Kurt Powell—both retired. That had been a few years ago, and since then Dash had spoken with the new archivist, Diana Afolabi, only a few times.

"Good afternoon, Agent Cooke. How can I help you?" At least she didn't comment on the rarity of their communication.

"I need some help ID'ing a... a house spirit of some kind. And finding out the details of what makes him tick."

"Do you mean you want to know how to destroy him?" Her voice had sharpened.

"Not really." Surprisingly, Dash meant it. "Just what is he, and what are his habits. He claims that if he leaves the house, he dies. I want to know if that's true. And, uh, find out whether he's capable of doing enchantments or something." That last part was a long shot, although it would explain why Dash was feeling unexpectedly sympathetic toward a creature he was supposed to get rid of.

"All right. Tell me what you know."

Dash did, even though it wasn't much. Afolabi promised to call as soon as she dug up anything useful. That left Dash sitting on his rented bed with not much to do except wait. He tried lying down, but after a half hour, sleep still hadn't come. He gave up and stared out the window for a while instead.

As he gazed across the street at an unremarkable office building, an ancient memory surfaced. He'd been fifteen or sixteen, and he couldn't recall where he was living at the time. Possibly Omaha. Anyway, Dash had run away for the umpteenth time, not even bothering to take a backpack. It was just him, the clothes on his back, and a bus station bench. There had been only a few other waiting passengers, each traveling alone, and an eerie silence shrouded the dingy space.

One of the other passengers was a man in his twenties, unremarkable-looking except for the dark bags under his eyes. He was reading a paperback with a torn cover, pulled from a battered duffel bag. But perhaps sensing Dash's gaze, the man had looked up at him, and a weird communication passed between them. Not a sexual come-on. Just a silent acknowledgment that they shared something—a similar past perhaps, and a similar future. And certainly an identical present: alone in a bus station in a nowhere town, going nowhere.

The man had given Dash a slight nod before returning to his book. Dash wondered now what had happened to the guy. Had he found friends or family? Had he found a home?

Silently cursing his own idiocy, Dash put his shoes back on and headed for his car.

CHAPTER 4



HENRY DIDN'T RETURN TO HIS ROOM THAT AFTERNOON. HE felt hollow and knew his pitiful stash of possessions wouldn't bring comfort.

When the front door opened an hour before sunset, he didn't bother to watch the Frosts, who wouldn't sense him and didn't want him anyway. But it wasn't Stephanie or Justin who entered the living room; it was instead Agent Cooke, who'd changed out his suit and into jeans and a plain black T-shirt.

Cooke came to an abrupt halt. "The mess is gone."

"I cleaned it up."

"Why?"

"I like my house tidy." And besides, what else did Henry have to do with his time? There were no conversations to eavesdrop on, no radio shows to listen to or TV shows to watch, no books or magazines to borrow. "Did you figure out how to get rid of me?"

"No. I still don't even know what you are."

"I'm Henry."

Dash narrowed his eyes. "That's the name of this street."

"Yes." Which, honestly, was a lucky thing. Most of the surrounding streets were either numbered or had a letter as their name. He wouldn't have wanted to spend his existence being called 46th or M.

"Who named you?"

Henry had no idea where this conversation was going or what Cooke was getting at, but at least the agent wasn't presently trying to evict him. "I... It's as you said. The street name."

"Did your parents call you that?"

"I had no parents."

"So you just... *poof*. Popped into existence when this house was built."

Henry's memories of that time were hazy, and his origins weren't something he gave any thought to. "I started... I started as the house was being built. But I finished becoming when my family moved in."

"Your family. You mean the first owners of this house?"

"Yes."

Brow furrowed, Cooke sat on the couch. Henry knew it wasn't an especially comfortable piece of furniture, having no doubt been chosen for looks rather than function, and Cooke spent a few moments shifting awkwardly. He took up a lot of space. Not only because he was big, but because he had such a solid presence. Suddenly he leaned forward, staring hard. "What happened to your hair?"

"What?" Henry reached up to pat it. He had a comb somewhere, which at one time he'd used daily. But for the past couple of years the effort hadn't seemed worth it; some days he could barely get dressed.

"It's less gray than before. Darker."

"It used to be black. Until Steffy's grandmother died and my house was empty."

"Huh."

Although Henry didn't find his hair to be an especially interesting topic, it didn't involve evicting him, so that was good. He warily approached the couch. "May I sit near you?"

"Sure. I guess. This couch sucks, but those chairs look even worse."

That made Henry laugh for the first time in... ages. “They’re awful. But they are easy to move around.”

Moving slowly and cautiously, he sat on the couch as far from Cooke as possible. Although Henry sometimes used his families’ furniture, it was never when they did. It felt too uncomfortable to be perched there, among them but unseen and unsensed. It was different with Cooke, however, more like the kinds of social visits humans had—if Cooke wasn’t being paid to get rid of him. Henry tried not to sigh.

Meanwhile, Cooke watched him appraisingly. “So you have no parents. Is that normal for your kind?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s never come up in conversation?”

“I’ve never met anyone like me. I’ve never left my house, Agent Cooke. At least, not for more than a few moments.” He frowned at those memories.

“Who do you talk to, then?”

“You.”

Cooke looked troubled. “But how do you... how do you know things? Everything. I mean, you’re obviously not ignorant about the world.”

Henry took that as a sort of backhanded compliment. “I watch. I listen. I read. I’ve been doing those things for a century.” Until recently, at least, when the house had been empty most of the time.

After staring at him for a few moments, Cooke pulled out his phone. “Hang on. I’m going to text this info to our archivist. She’s researching your species.”

Your species. The phrasing was disconcerting, as was the idea of being researched. But Henry doubted he could stop Cooke from pursuing this, and there was little point in trying. Either Cooke would find a way to destroy him or someone else would, or the house would remain unoccupied and Henry would die. No happy endings any way he looked at it, so he might as well enjoy the company while he could.

Cooke had put away the phone and was peering at him again. “You told me that if you leave the house, you die.”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“The Termites.” It had been decades since he’d tried to leave, but Henry shuddered in remembered horror.

“Termites? I don’t understand.”

So now Henry was going to have to explain something he really didn’t want to talk about. He considered disappearing into his room, but he wasn’t sure whether Cooke would find a way to come after him. Besides, despite the unpleasant topic, it was nice to actually be seen and heard as he sat near someone.

“Not the insects,” Henry said, “although they’re nasty enough. I’ve had to chase the bug kind away from my house a few times. I don’t know what these things are really called. I just call them Termites because termites destroy houses and these things destroy... me.”

Cooke’s hands had curled into fists and he frowned deeply, but he didn’t seem angry at Henry. “What are they like? Describe them.”

Henry searched for the words but they evaded him. Well, he *found* words—*terrifying* and *deadly* and *swarming*—but he knew that wasn’t what Cooke meant. “They’re... big. With mouths.” Yes, surely that was helpful. Henry sighed. “As soon as I step outside they attack me.”

“Step outside the property line or the building?”

“The building.”

“Wow. Gives a new meaning to *housebound*. Day and night?”

“Yes.”

“So these Termites have been hanging around for a hundred years, waiting for whenever you leave.” Cooke didn’t sound skeptical, exactly. More like someone who wanted to get the facts right.

“I can’t see them while I’m inside. If I look out the windows or through an open door, they’re not there. But if I go out...” Henry wrapped his arms around himself.

Cooke was rubbing his chin. He had a bit of five o’clock shadow, which made him look both more handsome and more dangerous. Henry couldn’t grow facial hair, although at times he’d wished he could. There used to be a razor-blade disposal slot in one of the bathroom cabinets. The small opening had long ago been plastered over, but a pile of rusty blades remained caught between the walls.

Cooke suddenly stood, startling Henry from his reverie. “Show me.”

“Wh-what?”

“We’ll use the back door in case there are any nosy neighbors watching. You go out, but you come back in as soon as the Termites show up.”

Shaking his head violently, Henry shrank back against the couch cushions. “No. No.”

“I need to see these things to make an accurate report. It’s not a big deal. I’ll be right there, and I’ll make sure to slam the door closed as soon as you’re back inside.” When Henry shook his head in silent denial, Cooke came closer and crouched in front of him. “Look. If I can report that this threat is real—that I’ve seen it with my own eyes—maybe my boss will decide not to evict you. But I can’t just say, ‘Oh, there’s some invisible monsters that Henry can’t describe and I haven’t seen,’ and expect Townsend to tell the Frosts to forget about the whole thing.”

There was a miserable sort of logic to Cooke’s argument. Why would anyone believe Henry? He was just an unknown thing that lived between the walls. But Henry didn’t know whether he could trust Cooke. Maybe this was just a ruse to kill Henry, now that Cooke knew how. All Cooke would have to do was block Henry from getting back inside his house; the Termites would do the rest.

But Cooke was still there, right in front of Henry, and he was big and had a gun. “An offer I can’t refuse,” Henry whispered.

“What?”

“Nothing. Something I once heard in a movie.”

Cooke stepped back so Henry could stand, because apparently they were going to do this right now. Henry’s legs felt wobbly and his throat was tight. Maybe getting eaten by Termites would be better than slowly wasting away in an empty house. Or so he tried to convince himself as they walked into the kitchen.

When his families lived here, Henry used to spend a lot of nights in the kitchen. He could always find some tidying to do there and cookbooks to read and foods to look at and wonder about. He’d always been curious what it might be like to taste things and swallow them. It seemed such an odd thing to do, and yet very human. Henry had also been fascinated by the way the kitchen changed over the years, with new appliances that did astounding things.

But of course Cooke wasn’t interested in the refrigerator that generated shopping lists or the oven that could be operated from someone’s phone. He led the way to the back door, unlocked the bolt, and stepped aside.

Through the open doorway, the backyard looked inviting rather than threatening. It had been many years since anyone had tended the flower gardens, but some tall trees and nice shrubbery remained, along with a pleasant patio. Birds and butterflies flew around in the last light of the day. Henry could hear children laughing somewhere and a lawnmower rumbling. He had spent so many hours wistfully dreaming about what it might be like to sit out there and feel the breeze on his skin. To walk out the gate and stroll around the neighborhood. To expand his world beyond the tiny sliver that was his house.

Now, however, he stood a few feet inside, muscles frozen. His insides were in knots, and he wondered if this was what it was like to feel sick.

Cooke must think him a coward. But Cooke had a gun and muscles and his Bureau, and Henry had nothing but himself and a few bits of unwanted household items he'd stashed away over the decades. And his house, which—from everyone's standpoint but his own—wasn't truly his.

Swallowing a sob, Henry took a deep breath and stepped outside.

For a few seconds, nothing happened. He smelled freshly cut grass. He looked up at the flawless blue sky. He took another step forward—

And the Termites attacked.

Screaming, he tried to scramble back into the house but tripped over his own feet and fell onto the patio. The Termites swarmed over him at once, tearing his flesh, overcoming him with terror and pain. He had a tiny moment to wonder whether a being such as him would be entitled to some kind of afterlife.

And then the Termites were gone.

Henry fell into blackness.

CHAPTER 5



DASH HAD A LOT OF TRAINING AND EXPERIENCE IN REACTING quickly. It had saved his life more than once. Still, when the Termites attacked Henry, Dash wasted a few precious moments gaping. One second there had been nothing more remarkable than a house spirit stepping into a sunlit backyard. A split second later, Henry was down on the ground, buried under dozens of tall translucent orange things that seemed to be nothing but claws and fangs. Henry's shrieks were muffled by the Termites' mass.

Then Dash acted, although foolishly. Instead of reaching for his gun and hoping that bullets would stop the things, and instead of closing the door between himself and the roiling pile, he darted forward, shouting something incoherent.

The Termites disappeared.

Dash grabbed Henry under the arms and hauled him back inside, shutting the door with his foot. He gently laid Henry down on the expensive limestone tiles.

Henry's eccentric clothes were in tatters—as was his body. There were jagged holes in his torso, his limbs, and his face. One eye was missing. Even more horrifying than the usual blood, muscle, and bone that Dash was accustomed to seeing, these wounds were simply... empty. An absence, as if something had scooped away parts of Henry's essential nature.

“Oh, fuck.” This was Dash's fault. He'd forced Henry to show him the Termites, and dammit, Henry had. And this was the result.

Dash was in a dilemma about what to do. His Bureau training hadn't included first aid for whatever Henry was, and Dash couldn't exactly take him to a hospital. Not only would the staff have no clue how to treat Henry, but they might not even be able to see him.

Maybe someone at HQ could help. But when Dash tried to retrieve his phone, his pocket was empty. He'd left the damn thing in the living room.

He wasted more precious time on indecision but eventually decided he didn't want to leave Henry alone on the floor. As carefully as possible, he lifted Henry into his arms. Henry moaned, his remaining eyelid fluttered, and then he went still again.

He weighed almost nothing, as if he were made of little more than paper. For some reason this twisted Dash's heart. He barely knew Henry, but the poor guy deserved to have some substance in the world.

Henry didn't look any less awful arranged on the couch. He was breathing, though, which Dash hoped was a good sign. And he had a pulse, although it was shallow and slow.

Townsend still hadn't returned Dash's call, so the archivist would probably be easier to get hold of. Dash paced restlessly while the phone rang.

"I'm still working on your inquiry," Afolabi said sharply when she picked up. "You need to—"

"He's hurt. Badly. Tell me how to help him."

There was a sharp intake of breath. "What happened?"

Dash explained as succinctly as possible, keeping a close eye on Henry as he spoke. He could hear a clicking on the other end of the line that sounded as if Afolabi was typing furiously.

"I can't find anything for you right off the bat," she said when he was through. "Nothing pops up immediately that fits the description of your Termites. It doesn't help that we don't know the victim's species."

Victim. That was Henry now, thanks to Dash's bullheadedness.

Dash made a frustrated growl. "I can't just do nothing!"

"You can stick close to him, convey to me any additional information you obtain, and be patient. I'll get back to you immediately if I learn anything."

Dash ended the call less graciously than he should have. Then he tried to speak with the chief, but as predicted, Holmes wouldn't put him through. Not even when Dash begged. And after that, he had nobody else to consult. During his career with the Bureau, he hadn't cultivated much of a network. Sure, he worked with partners sometimes, but never for long and only when the assignment required it. Being a lone wolf wasn't such a great thing when you suddenly needed help.

With few other options available, Dash sat on the floor next to the couch and carefully watched Henry. The holes were surrealistic and awful, as if Henry were made of Swiss cheese. They didn't seem to be getting any worse, however, and Henry's vital signs hadn't shifted.

After what felt like a year but was probably just five or ten minutes, Dash belatedly registered the state of Henry's clothing. Maybe he couldn't do anything about the wounds, but at least Dash could deal with the mangled scraps of cloth. Moving very cautiously, he removed the remains of Henry's outfit and tossed them aside; he noted briefly that naked, Henry closely resembled a thin adult human male, except for the lack of both a navel and body hair. Feeling awkward and stupid, Dash draped his sport coat over Henry's torso as a makeshift blanket.

"I'm sorry, dammit. You don't deserve this." Not that anyone deserved to be eaten alive by those awful Termites, but especially not Henry. Dash had been thinking of him as an unwanted interloper, a squatter, when in reality Henry was a prisoner. A hundred years confined to a single building, with nobody to talk to, nobody to acknowledge his existence.

Dash sighed deeply and leaned sideways against the couch.

“C-Cooke?” Henry’s voice was faint, but his eye was open and looking at Dash.

Dash rolled to his knees and bent close. “Henry? Jesus, what can I do to help you?”

“I... I’m in my house.”

“Yeah, but—”

“The Termites?”

Dash winced. “I’m sorry I made you face those things. They’re fucking awful.”

“But... they didn’t kill me?”

“They disappeared when I yelled at them. And then I dragged you inside before they came back. I should have been faster, but—”

“You saved me.” Henry looked astonished, as if such a possibility had never occurred to him.

“I wasn’t... Gods, it was my fault. You’re in bad shape and I don’t know how to treat your wounds.”

To Dash’s astonishment, Henry smiled. “You saved me,” he repeated. He let out a long breath, and when he shakily reached out, Dash took his hand. Then Henry closed his eye and slipped back into unconsciousness. Or maybe sleep was a better term for it, because his breathing was stronger and he looked oddly peaceful.

In fact, he looked... more whole. Dash leaned in closer and squinted and.... Yes. The ragged edges of the bites had smoothed and filled in. Dash could still see the couch cushions through the wounds, but the holes seemed smaller.

Still clasping Henry’s hand, Dash managed to dial Afolabi with his free one.

“I told you I’d call if I found anything.”

“I know.” Dash spoke quietly, not wanting to disturb Henry. “But I think he’s healing on his own.”

“What do you mean? Can you send me a photo?”

That was awkward one-handed, but Dash succeeded after some fumbles. “Can you even see him?”

“Yes, I can. Fascinating.”

Well, maybe so, but Dash wanted Henry cured, not studied. “Those holes were uglier before. Bigger.”

“Perhaps he’s self-healing. In any case, nothing you’re doing appears to be harming him, so you might as well keep it up.”

And that was good advice, he supposed. He disconnected and set his phone down, giving Henry’s hand a gentle squeeze before rearranging himself into a seated position. The carpet wasn’t comfortable, but it was better than tile. Better, in fact, than a lot of the spots where he’d crouched silently in the past, waiting for some monster to make itself known. This was a different kind of waiting, as he counted the minutes to see whether Henry would take a turn for the worse or continue to improve. This was more nerve-wracking than Dash being hurt or killed himself.

He closed his eyes and leaned back against the couch.



“Agent Cooke?”

It took a moment for Dash to regain awareness. The first thing he noticed was that Henry was staring at him with two eyes instead of one. The second thing was that they still held hands.

“Call me Dash.”

Henry smiled. “Because you’re quick?”

“No, because my mother—”

Dash woke up enough to get the conversation back on its proper track. “You’re looking much better.” Not only were most of the holes entirely gone and the rest reduced in size, but Henry’s hair was now predominantly black and most of the

lines had faded from his face. He looked as if he was barely Dash's age.

Smiling, Henry sat up, his legs still stretched out on the cushions and Dash's jacket over his lap. "You saved me from the Termites."

"It's my fault they attacked you."

Henry shook his head. "You saved me."

Well, this wasn't getting them anywhere. "Are you going to be okay? Do you always heal so quickly? How? And why do you look thirty years younger than you did yesterday?"

"You have a lot of questions." Henry looked down at his lap. "My clothes?"

"They were ruined."

"Oh." Henry slumped a little, but only for a moment. "I have more, though." He stood up quickly, allowing the jacket to fall to the floor. Then he strode across the room and walked into the wall. Not *against* the wall, bumping into it, but *inside*, as if the wall wasn't even there. Henry disappeared completely, and when Dash crossed over to check for himself, the wall was most definitely solid.

"Henry?"

There was no answer. Dash's sense of loss was ridiculous, especially considering that he was here to get rid of Henry, not to socialize with him. Still, he couldn't help a sigh of relief when Henry materialized out of the wall a minute or two later wearing a too-large undershirt and brown wool tights.

"Where did you go?" Dash asked.

"To my room." Clearly noticing Dash's confusion, Henry shrugged nonchalantly. "It's inside the walls."

"Like... a secret compartment?" Had the builders included one, or had one been created after the house was built?

But Henry was shaking his head. "No. Just in the wall. Right here." He knocked on the spot in question.

Dash walked into the dining room on the other side to see whether there was, in fact, a hidden compartment. He didn't have any measuring tools, but he'd seen quite a few hidey-holes in his years with the Bureau and was fairly adept at judging spaces. As far as he could tell, it was just an ordinary wall, maybe four or five inches thick. Well, if Henry could walk through solid objects and quickly heal holes in his body, maybe it wasn't a surprise that he could possibly bend space.

And that chain of thought led back to one of Dash's earlier questions. "Do you always heal so fast?"

"I've never been hurt so badly. The other times, the Termites only got in a few bites before I got back inside. But those injuries took a few days to go away."

Dash glanced at his watch. "These were gone in less than an hour."

Henry didn't seem interested in pursuing this. In fact, Dash realized, Henry appeared completely dispassionate about any of the mysteries of his own existence. He simply accepted himself as is and moved on to other things. Such as Dash's holstered gun, which Henry was now openly staring at.

"Do you use that weapon often?"

"Depends how you define often."

"Have you killed people with it?"

"Depends how you define people."

At Henry's raised eyebrows, Dash sighed. "I've shot a couple of humans in the line of duty. My aim's good—they both died. Mostly, though, the beings I've killed were not human." He could have explained how the Bureau issued specific bullets to target vampires, or werereatures, or other things he was likely to face on an assignment. But Henry looked uncomfortable, so Dash stayed silent about that part.

"Why did you do it?" asked Henry.

"It's my job."

"As an agent with the Bureau of...?"

“Bureau of Trans-Species Affairs, the BTA. We’re a federal agency that deals with matters related to non-human sentient species or NHSSs.” Jesus. he sounded like the training manual.

“Species like me.”

“There are thousands of things out there, Henry. A lot of them want to mind their own business, like sasquatches. Most humans don’t even notice NHSSs. But sometimes the interests of NHSSs and humans collide, and that’s when we step in. And if the NHSS in question is harming people, well, we take care of that.”

Henry’s expression was grave. “Like me,” he repeated.

“I don’t want to kill you. I know you’re not dangerous. But this house belongs to the Frosts, and they—”

“They want me out.”

“Yeah.” Dash rubbed his forehead. “Look. I’ll find a way to resolve this without harming you, okay?” He tried to sound more confident than he felt.

“Why not harm me? Why did you pull me back into the house? You could’ve just let the Termites have me and your problem would have been solved.”

Dash searched for an explanation and came up with the truth. “I don’t want you dead.”

Unexpectedly, Henry broke out in a wide grin. And fuck, but he was handsome when he smiled. Which wasn’t relevant and which Dash shouldn’t even be noticing, but apparently his brain wasn’t functioning properly today. Maybe it had something to do with jet lag. Before he could decide what to do about it, Henry walked past him—almost skipping, really—and plopped down on the couch. He bent to pick up the jacket, which he draped carefully over the arm of a nearby chair.

“How did you become an agent? And why? Is it dangerous? What sorts of, um, NHSSs have you met?”

Now who was the one asking all the questions? “I’m not here to be interrogated, Henry. I need to solve this problem.

I'm gonna start with the archivist." He picked up his phone.

Afolabi didn't have anything to tell him yet, but she was eager for the new details Dash was able to pass along. And that was fine; it made sense that a researcher would be excited to bury her head in dusty books and forgotten computer files. But Dash had a job to do, and he couldn't just sit here indefinitely. The Frosts were going to expect results.

When Henry saw Dash slumped in one of the uncomfortable chairs, looking unhappy, he evidently decided he needed to provide entertainment. So he did, telling little stories about things his families had done. They were diverting tales—especially the one about the time Stephanie was a little girl and snuck into the kitchen to gorge herself on the plums her grandmother intended to can. Stephanie ended up with a sore tummy and a lot of unhappy hours in the bathroom that night.

"Greedy thing," Dash noted through his chuckles. "Served her right."

"It did, although she certainly enjoyed the fruit while she was eating it. I'm envious of humans and their food."

Dash hadn't even thought about that issue. "You don't eat?"

"No."

"Not anything? Do you drink?"

Henry shook his head.

"Then what provides your energy? As far as I know, every living thing requires energy from somewhere, and I'm fairly certain you're not dead. Or undead."

"I'm alive," Henry said confidently. But this topic didn't interest him any more than his other existential mysteries, and he launched into another tale about the excitement of the original owners over their first refrigerator. "Imagine if they saw my house today! They didn't even have a television, let alone computers and tiny little magic phones."

As if on cue, Dash's phone came alive with the chief's tinny ringtone. He grabbed it so quickly that he almost dropped it.

"Chief! What the hell am I—"

"Calm, son. Take a few moments to collect your thoughts."

"A few moments! I've been trying to reach you since yesterday! This isn't a poltergeist, which I'm pretty sure you knew from the start, but I don't—"

"I know. I've had a conversation with Dr. Afolabi. She's filled me in quite well."

"She told you about the Termites?"

Townsend clicked his tongue. "Indeed. Unfortunate turn of events, although I understand it turned out all right in the end."

"He almost died," Dash growled.

"But he did not, and I'm told he healed very quickly. Now let's move forward, shall we?"

Dash very nearly told his boss where he could stick his *moving forward*, but Henry, who'd been listening in, gave such a sweet, encouraging smile that Dash was able to rein in his temper. "What is he? He has no idea."

"Nor do I. Dr. Afolabi has yet to find any pertinent information, and I've never heard of such a creature. Which is intriguing because I have been around for a very long time. Consequently, son, we have a change in plans."

"Change?"

"One that will provide several solutions at once, I believe."

Henry was definitely interested in this, and he leaned closer, expression intent. Which was only fair considering that Townsend was blithely scheming about his future. Dash wished he could reassure Henry that all would be well, but he didn't want to create false expectations. With Townsend, you never knew.

"What do you have in mind, Chief?"

“You are going to bring the house spirit to Los Angeles.”

CHAPTER 6



DASH WAS PACING THE ROOM AND YELLING INTO HIS PHONE, but Henry could tell he was losing the argument. Henry himself was caught between horror at what Dash's boss was requiring, excitement at the hope it might work, and happiness that Dash was standing up for him. Henry had never expected to have a human ally, and when Dash had first appeared, he'd seemed an extremely unlikely candidate for that role. But he'd saved Henry from the Termites, and here he was, doing his best to protect Henry from his own boss.

Eventually the call ended with Dash growling and throwing his phone across the room. Fortunately it landed on a chair and didn't break, but Dash didn't seem to care. "Conniving, cold bastard!"

Human relationships were a constant mystery to Henry, who'd never had relationships at all. From his observations, they were so complicated, so layered with often contradictory feelings. Steffy and Justin, for instance. Sometimes Henry wasn't even sure they liked each other, yet they'd been married for several years.

"If you hate him so much, why do you work for him?"

Dash sighed dramatically. "I don't hate him. You know, I've always been confident he's playing on the right side of things—that he's working for good. But he's an ends-justify-the-means kinda guy. And nobody can ever tell what the hell is going on in his head. We don't even know what he is, although it's not human. Not entirely, anyway."

“Like me?”

“No. Whatever he is, it’s not... whatever you are.”

Interesting. The world was more complicated than Henry had realized. “Will I meet him if I get to Los Angeles?”

Now Dash looked furious again. “I’m not doing that. I’m gonna drive to HQ and tell Townsend to fuck off.”

“He’ll just send someone else. Or find a way to destroy me.”

“You’ll be destroyed if we do what he says.”

Henry was afraid that was true. On the other hand, there was a chance that he might survive. At least Dash’s boss thought so. “Is your chief a stupid or foolish man?”

“He’s a lot of things, but neither of those.”

“So if he believes you can protect me from the Termites, maybe he’s right.” After all, the Termites had disappeared as soon as Dash threatened them.

“If he’s wrong, you die.”

Henry had been thinking very hard about this while Dash was on the phone. “I’m old in human terms. I’ve already had a long life. But I’ve never.... I love my house. But I’ve never been anywhere else.” He smiled at a memory. “When Steffy’s grandfather had to make a hard decision, he’d use something he called a Ben Franklin chart. Do you know about those?”

Dash nodded slightly. “A list of pros and cons.”

“If I made a Ben Franklin chart about trying to leave with you, the con is that the Termites might get me.”

“That’s a pretty fucking big con.”

Henry smiled. None of his family members had cussed often, but it was fun to hear Dash do it. “It is a big con. But what about the pro side? If the Termites don’t kill me, I get to see the world outside my house. That’s huge, Dash! And also you and the Bureau won’t have to keep trying to evict me. You get to keep your job. Steffy and Justin will be happy. The pros are longer than the cons.” And they were. In fact, the more

Henry thought about it, the more excited he became. Until yesterday, he'd been wasting away. Now he had a chance for adventure.

As long as Dash stayed at his side.

That thought sobered Henry. "I understand. You don't want to be stuck with me."

Dash blinked. "What? No, that's not what.... Look, if you really want to try this, you can trust me. I'll do my best to keep you from the Termites."

"I know." How Henry could be so confident in that, he wasn't sure. But he *was* confident.

For several moments, Dash just stood there and chewed on his lip, his gaze unfocused. Henry didn't interrupt his thoughts, but he took the opportunity to stare. He liked the look of this man. Now that they'd spent some time together, Dash no longer looked threatening, and his anger was understandable. He was courageous. Strong. Honorable.

"We're going to test it," Dash finally said.



For the second time that day, Henry stood in front of the open back door. The sun had set, and they'd switched on the exterior light. The cool evening breeze carried the faint scent of water.

This time Dash was inches behind him, his big hand resting on Henry's shoulder.

Henry was still terrified. Now, though, that gut-clenching dread was laced with hope.

"You can change your mind," said Dash.

"No."

"This is bravery. I want you to know that. I haven't known many people who'd be able to do what you're doing."

Warmth spread through Henry's body. Being praised like this was better than watching a good TV program, better than reading a book, better even than finding a nice sock in good condition and carrying it to his room. He glanced back to give Dash a thankful smile, took a deep breath, and stepped out of the house. Dash came right along with him and stood beside him on the patio, arm around Henry's shoulders.

Oh, that was *nice*.

And then as always, the Termites were there. Huge swarms of them, mindless and vicious, fangs and claws glistening in the artificial light.

"Leave him alone!" Dash bellowed.

The Termites disappeared.

Dash and Henry shared surprised and triumphant laughter. Of course, there was no guarantee that the Termites would stay away, but Henry had come this far already; he might as well dare to do more. He clasped Dash's hand—for companionship as much as protection—and began to walk across the patio and toward the lawn.

Nothing horrible happened. A moth dipped down near his face, making Henry laugh with delight, and overhead a jet roared by. The grass was cool and tickled his bare feet, which made him laugh again. He stroked the rough bark of a tree and the soft leaves of a shrub. He inspected a rectangle where an herb garden used to be but which was now just white pebbles. There was still a sundial on a pedestal, however, and he traced his fingers along the roman numerals.

When they reached the far back of the yard, Henry turned around to look at his house. He'd never seen it from the outside, and the change in perspective made him a little dizzy. There were the windows he'd spent so many hours gazing out of.

"It looks so empty," he said sadly.

"It won't stay that way for long. A house that nice in this neighborhood will sell fast and new people will move in."

"They won't be my family, though."

“No.”

What if... Henry could find a new house? One where the residents didn't mind having him there. Then he'd have a new family. This idea felt daring, but he was afraid it was just a dream. Still, he filed it away for later contemplation.

Henry looked up at Dash, who still held his hand. Dash was scanning the yard as if vigilant for Termites or other threats, and his free hand—his right one—was slightly raised, ready to grab his gun if need be. But there was nothing here to be scared of.

“Let's go to Los Angeles,” Henry said.



Henry stared at his possessions in dismay. He hadn't thought he owned that much, but now that he was forced to choose only a few items, his collection seemed to have grown. And it was hard to think of leaving anything behind. Every item had belonged to one of his family members, and each thing was tied to memories of the person who'd owned it. Mrs. Buttons used to wear this kerchief on her hair after having it styled. Steffy's Uncle Paul had worn that plastic Casper the Friendly Ghost mask for Halloween when he was eight. That candle had been on one of Lori's birthday cakes.

In the end, Henry picked a sparkly pen, a battered paperback novel about rabbits, and four assorted socks. Maybe he'd find some new treasures during his travels.

He reemerged into the living room, slightly startling Dash. “I'm ready,” Henry said. And he truly was. He couldn't remember being this excited about anything. Sure, he was also a little apprehensive, but Dash had called him brave. Henry could do this.

Dash gave him a long look. “That's all you want to take? I have room in my car for more.”

“I think... it feels like enough. If I'm going to have a new life in a new house, I want to start fresh.”

“Okay, I get it. I’m not big on accumulating stuff, myself. Sometimes I rent furnished apartments, so all I have to move is my clothing and some kitchen stuff.”

Henry clutched his possessions against his chest. “You don’t have your own house?” He hoped he didn’t look too horrified.

“I have a nice apartment. Convenient location, decent amenities, quiet neighbors. I’ll probably look for a new place when my lease is up, though. I never stay anywhere more than a couple of years. Which is a good reason not to own a lot of shit—makes it easier to move.”

Everything Dash had just said made Henry feel uneasy. He was aware that humans weren’t tied to their homes the way he was, but that was one of the things about them he just didn’t understand. Yes, he knew some of them were forced to move due to various circumstances, but it sounded as if Dash did it by choice. As if he didn’t want a house of his own.

“Let’s go,” said Dash, interrupting Henry’s thoughts. But Dash didn’t move—he was staring assessingly at Henry. “Um... not to be offensive, but... your clothes.”

Henry looked down at himself. All of his favorite items of clothing had been destroyed by the Termites, leaving only what he wore now and a lot of mismatched socks. Honestly, until yesterday there had been little reason for Henry to wear anything, since nobody saw him and the temperature in his house was always comfortable. But it made him happy to have things that reminded him of his families. “Is there something wrong?”

“Your outfit is kinda... eccentric. Hell, I don’t know if you’re visible to anyone but me anyway. But would you maybe like to have something more conventional?”

“I like your suits. You look very handsome in them.”

Dash’s cheeks went a little pink. That was blushing, Henry thought. He’d read about it, but he didn’t know what it meant right now. He was opening his mouth to ask when Dash shook

his head. “You’d swim in my clothing. How about.... Do you want to stop at a store before we head out of town?”

“*Shopping?* I can go shopping?” Henry couldn’t resist bouncing on his toes. He’d been exposed to advertising for a hundred years, and the ads made everything sound so appealing, but of course he’d never had the chance to pick things out for himself. He’d always wondered what the experience was like.

“Sure. Gonna be interesting if other people can see you and interesting if they can’t.”

When they walked out the front door, Henry didn’t hesitate. Not with Dash’s hand on his shoulder. The Termites materialized after a few steps, but Dash made a threatening noise and they disappeared at once. Henry found that very satisfying.

And then he was getting into a car and Dash was showing him how to buckle the seatbelt, and Henry was so thrilled he could barely sit still. The car was like a tiny home, with comfortable seats and a small computer screen and all sorts of intriguing buttons and lights. Henry wanted to ask about a thousand questions, yet he remained quiet while Dash slowly backed out of the driveway.

But Henry couldn’t contain a small squeak of excitement when they started moving forward.

“You okay?” Dash asked.

“We’re going so fast!”

“Oh, man. Wait until we hit the freeway.”

The drive to the store didn’t take long, but Henry was overwhelmed by the number of things he saw along the way. He had to close his eyes for a while just to keep calm. Soon, though, Dash parked the car in a big lot among a dizzying variety of other vehicles and helped Henry unbuckle himself.

“Ready?” Dash asked.

“Shopping!”

The pavement was rough on Henry's bare feet, and he didn't like it. He didn't complain however, and when he and Dash came to a glass door that slid open all by itself... they were suddenly inside the store.

Henry stopped in his tracks. "Oh, my gracious."

The space was enormous. That alone would have astounded him, but there were also dozens and dozens of rows of shelving—so many he couldn't see them all—covered in things for sale. So many things! And there were lots of people, most of them pushing carts, and the scents of popcorn and perfumes and plastic and cleaning fluids, and voices talking and music playing and—

"Henry?"

"Sorry."

"Look, we can skip this if you—"

"No. Please." Henry squared his shoulders. "I want to do this."

"If you're sure. At least now we know whether you're visible."

That was when Henry realized that everyone nearby was staring at him. Maybe because of his clothing. But he also hadn't brushed his hair in years—it must look awful. Plus his ears were pointed, and humans had round ones. Being stared at made him a little uncomfortable, but it was nowhere near as scary as being attacked by Termites, so he decided not to notice.

Another thought occurred to him, though. "Shopping requires money. I don't have any." There had often been money in his house: bills in purses and wallets, coins in jars or between couch cushions. He'd never taken any of it. That would have felt like theft, and besides, what would he have done with it besides add it to his collection?

Dash seemed unperturbed. "The Bureau will pay."

"Why?"

“They’re the ones who want you to come to LA. They can cover your expenses. C’mon, let’s get this over with.”

Henry would have loved to spend hours wandering slowly up and down the aisles and investigating the products. But Dash, who seemed in a hurry, took him directly to a section with clothing. He told Henry he could choose whatever he wanted, and when that proved too overwhelming, Dash provided guidance. Henry ended up picking shirts in a variety of fabrics and colors, some jeans and sweatpants, and navy pajamas with a wonderfully silky texture. He skipped the socks because they were all boring colors, and since he’d never seen the point of underwear, he skipped that as well. Still, he had so much that they needed a wheeled cart to hold it all.

Then Henry tried on shoes, eventually opting for a pair of red slip-on sneakers and some tan sandals. Dash offered to buy him socks from the women’s department, which had a far more interesting variety than the men’s, and Henry chose a couple of pairs.

“Anything else you want while we’re here?” Dash asked. He was smiling as if he, too, was enjoying the shopping trip.

Henry patted his own head. “A brush?” So Dash found him one. To store all of his things, they got a little suitcase with wheels and then a couple of paperbacks from the book department and a bottle of green nail polish. Henry hadn’t had the chance to wear nail polish since Lori was a girl. They were almost to the cash registers when Dash saw Henry eyeing a polyester scarf printed with images of sea life. Grinning, Dash tossed that into the cart as well.

The woman at the cash register asked whether they wanted to buy shopping bags, and whether they wanted to open a credit card account. She also commented on the cute scarf. But she didn’t stare rudely at Henry or comment on his oddness. Maybe she had a lot of strange customers.

“That was fun!” Henry said when they were back in the car. He’d never had new clothes before and ran his hands over

the khaki shorts and button-down shirt printed with colorful birds.

“Usually that much shopping is too much for me—and I’m used to doing it. But you were really enthusiastic.”

“You don’t enjoy it?”

“It’s.... I don’t know. The lights are always too bright, and there’s so much going on. I always feel like something might jump out at me from between racks of towels or something.”

It hadn’t occurred to Henry that Dash might be afraid of things. This was a man who killed monsters for a living. Who faced down Termites. Who even yelled at his boss when they disagreed. Yet a store made him uneasy.

Now, though, Dash wiggled his shoulders and started the car, then turned to Henry with a grin. “Ready to *really* go fast?”



Zooming down the freeway felt very much like flying. The velocity with which they passed things was unreal. Dash explained that he didn’t have to worry about getting speeding tickets since he was a federal agent. He also said he’d had a lot of training on how to drive well, so Henry wasn’t worried.

“I bet the Termites never get to do this,” Henry pointed out.

“Probably not.”

Dash showed Henry how to work the radio, and Henry spent a long, delightful time listening to the various options. In his house, he had been limited to listening to his family’s radio stations and watching only their shows. He’d never been bold enough to try those things on his own when the family was gone for the day. But now it was all up to him, just as his clothing had been up to him, and he was thrilled. He liked all the music, he decided, even when it was in languages he didn’t understand. The talking was less interesting, so he scrolled past it.

After a while it was too dark to see much through the windows. Dash explained that most of this area was farmland and small towns.

Henry nodded. “I remember reading about the San Joaquin Valley in the newspapers not long after my house was built. People came here desperate for jobs. The Okies, they called them.” He’d read a book about it too, by a man named John Steinbeck, and it was heartbreaking.

Dash couldn’t really look at him since he was driving, but he snuck a glance anyway. “Jesus. My grandparents were babies when you were, uh, born. I can’t imagine being a hundred years old.”

“But you’ve experienced far more than I have.” Henry furrowed his brow thoughtfully. “What do you do when you’re not killing monsters and rescuing house spirits?”

“You mean, like, hobbies?”

“Sure.” Henry knew about hobbies. Some of his family members had gardened. Mr. Buttons collected stamps, and Mrs. Buttons sang in a choir and sewed beautiful clothes. Stephanie’s Uncle Paul collected baseball cards and, later, played golf. As an adult, Stephanie spoke at length about something called hot yoga. Henry considered his collections a hobby too, even if humans wouldn’t consider it an interesting one.

Dash was silent for a long time. Finally, he cleared his throat. “I go to the gym.”

Although Henry waited, Dash didn’t add anything to that. There was a tightness around the corners of his mouth that Henry might have interpreted as anger a day earlier. Now, though, he suspected it was something else.

Henry made another stab at it. “Are you married? Do you have a girlfriend? Do you go out often with friends?”

“Gay. Single.” There was a long pause. “No friends.”

“I thought all humans had friends.” It was one of the things Henry envied most about them.

“Not me.”

“Why?”

Dash made an irritated noise. “You’ve met me. Not exactly Mr. Charming, am I? Anyway, the job makes it hard. I can’t really talk about it to civilians, and even if I could, they wouldn’t understand. Someone else, his hard day at work might mean a bunch of stupid meetings or dealing with obnoxious customers. A hard day for me means I almost died. Or maybe somebody else *did* die.”

The words were bitter, but he seemed more tired than anything. Henry wished he knew how to console him—assuming Dash wanted consoling, especially from the likes of him.

Dash stopped for gas eventually. Henry remained in the car, but that proved interesting enough with the bright lights from the gas station and surrounding fast food outlets, and with the other cars gassing up as well. The colors were pretty and the scents intriguing. He wondered whether businesses ever had resident spirits the way houses did. It might be interesting to live in a hamburger place, what with all the people constantly going through, but it would also be noisy. And he’d miss having a family.

Not that he had one anymore.

Dash got back into the driver’s seat but drove only a few yards before parking in front of the gas station’s store. “I need to take a leak and get some coffee. I don’t feel comfortable leaving you here alone.”

“Termites.” Oddly, Henry had almost forgotten about them in the excitement of the journey. Now he peered nervously through the window.

“Come on in with me.”

It turned out that the gas station store had a lot of snack foods. Henry wanted to investigate, but he trailed Dash to the bathroom and—politely—turned his back while Dash used a urinal. Henry knew that humans valued their privacy, so he’d

never peeked when his family members were doing private things. Even when he had been curious.

Back in the main part of the store, Dash grabbed a ready-made sandwich, a candy bar, and a huge cup of coffee. Grumbling under his breath about how he'd rather be eating fried cod in Porto, he paid for his purchases. Then they sat in the parked car while he ate.

He didn't start the engine right away after finishing his food; instead he stared through the windshield at nothing Henry could discern. When Dash spoke, his voice was low.

"Had a lover once. Not long after I joined the Bureau. He was an agent too. Back then, two guys couldn't marry each other, but we were a solid thing. Lived together. We were even talking seriously about buying a place. He fell in love with this bungalow that was out of our price range, but he came from some money, so...."

Henry remembered what Dash had said about always renting. "You decided not to buy it?"

"He got killed. Called out to an assignment in Long Beach, and a fucking kraken drowned him. Two other agents too."

"Oh, Dash."

"We all know about the risk when we sign up for this job. Anyway, as a couple, we probably wouldn't have lasted. I'm too much of a bastard."

Dash started the engine and the radio blared, filling the car with mournful Spanish singing.

Henry turned down the volume. "What was his name?"

"José." Dash shot Henry what seemed like a grateful look, shifted into reverse, and drove out of the lot. He didn't speak again until they were back on the freeway. "I know you don't eat or drink or bleed, but do you sleep?"

"Yes."

"Well, you might as well do it now. Nothing much to look at and we still have a few hours."

Henry leaned his seat back the way Dash had shown him earlier. He didn't say anything else, and he didn't sleep.

CHAPTER 7



DASH WASN'T THE CONFESSING TYPE. HE'D WORKED WITH some agents for years without ever sharing personal information. So he had no idea why he'd spilled that shit from his past to Henry. Maybe it was because he was tired.

Surprisingly, however, it felt... well, maybe *good* wasn't the right word. But talking about José had been like deadlifting at the gym and finally putting the barbell down: he felt sore and tired but also relieved. And pleased with himself for his hard work.

He turned the radio volume up, but not too loud. He didn't think Henry was really sleeping, but for once Dash wasn't in the mood for the pounding of drums and wailing of guitars. They were driving uphill now, the freeway curving as they made their way through the Grapevine. This time of year, the hillsides would be parched and brown, but he could picture them in the early spring, with a dusting of snow at the highest peaks and green grass and orange poppies carpeting the slopes.

José used to drag Dash on camping trips during the spring. Dash would grumble and complain—the weather was bad, the ground was hard, the bugs were biting, nature was boring—but José just laughed. And although Dash would never have admitted it, there was something sort of magical about snuggling up next to José, belly full of half-raw fire-charred steak, knowing there were no other humans for miles around. It was even kind of nice when it rained and they stayed inside the tent, drops drumming a beat on the nylon and not much to do except play cards and make love.

On one particularly damp trip, José had dared Dash into a game in which one challenged the other to belt out a song, and the singer had to shed an item of clothing if he got the lyrics wrong. Neither of them could really carry a tune, and in the end they were both naked and crying with laughter.

For what might have been the first time since José died fifteen years ago, Dash smiled at his memory.



It was very late by the time they hit Los Angeles, which was good because traffic was light. Dash zipped smoothly past the few other vehicles.

“Are we near Hollywood?” Henry sounded sleepy.

“Pretty close.” In fact, they’d just merged from the 5 onto the 405.

“I know it’s not really as glamorous as it seems on TV, but do you ever get to meet celebrities?”

“Now and then.”

Henry smiled. “What are they like?”

Dash decided not to burst his bubble with a dose of reality; the guy had been through enough these past two days. He sidestepped instead. “I heard about this case the Bureau had back in the eighties. A big-time talent agent brokered would-be actors in selling their souls to the Devil. Not only that, but he had these guard dogs who were really shapeshifters, and he treated ’em like shit.”

“What happened?”

“Bureau sent in an undercover guy who took care of the problem. Plus the guy hooked up with one of the dog shifters, and then they both worked for the Bureau for a while. They retired before I came on, though. I heard they have a cabin up in the mountains somewhere.”

Henry had turned in his seat to stare. “The Bureau has agents who aren’t human?”

“Sure.”

“But I thought you killed monsters.”

Dash winced. “Yeah, well, just because someone’s not human, doesn’t mean they’re a monster.” He’d known that all along, of course, but maybe sometimes he allowed the truth to slip his mind.

A few minutes later, Dash parked in the garage at HQ. He decided to leave his own belongings in the Range Rover; he could transfer them to his car when he left. Instead he helped Henry gather his things and stuff them into the suitcase. Then they crossed the garage side-by-side, the case wheeling along behind them.

Henry hesitated at the door leading into the building. “Is anyone in there going to try to kill me?”

“No. They’d have to get past me first.” And Dash meant it. He didn’t understand why he felt so protective of a house spirit, but he’d gotten Henry this far safely and wasn’t about to let some trigger-happy son of a bitch take a potshot. Not that most of his fellow agents were as trigger-happy as he was, but when you worked for the Bureau, hesitation got you dead. Pause a moment too long and the vampire bit you, the dragon crisped you, the gorgon turned you to stone. Or the kraken grabbed you and held you under the waves.

Ricketts was on duty at the reception desk, no doubt bored out of his skull. He perked up when he saw he had company but then gaped as Dash and Henry drew closer. “Uh, I—”

“Going to see the chief.” Dash sounded surlier than he felt, but he didn’t want anyone goggling at Henry, with his pointed ears and startling green eyes.

“Okay. Sure.” Ricketts knew better than to ask questions, and Dash was in no mood to share. Anything he told Ricketts would be common knowledge around HQ by dawn, but Henry was none of their goddamn business.

Henry, who’d smiled at Ricketts, balked when the elevator doors opened. “We’re going in there?”

“Just for a minute or so.”

“I’ve seen them on TV. Sometimes people get stuck in them.”

Dash snorted. “Maybe on TV, but I guarantee that Chief Townsend wouldn’t stand for that in *his* HQ. He runs a tight ship.”

Apparently reassured, Henry followed him into the elevator, standing very near to Dash and startling slightly when the car began to rise. “This feels strange.”

“I suppose it’s something you have to get used to.”

The top floor was empty and echoey, and the deep shadows—created between the pools of illumination from the overhead lights—seemed to fall differently than they should have. But the chief’s office wasn’t far, and within seconds Henry was following Dash into the reception area.

Victor Holmes sat at the desk, squinting at a computer screen. His eyes registered mild surprise when he saw Henry, which was, as far as Dash knew, a first for Holmes. Nothing ever seemed to shock the guy.

“This is Henry,” Dash announced. “Chief told me to bring him here.”

“I am aware of that.”

“So... here he is.”

Henry was still standing close to him, looking uneasy. Not that Dash could blame him. Dash never felt completely comfortable around Holmes—or around Townsend, even though he knew Townsend wouldn’t kill him. Well, *probably* wouldn’t kill him.

Holmes steepled his fingers primly. “The chief is busy with important matters. I am to tell you that you may deliver... the house spirit... to the basement cells.”

Dash’s blood boiled. “The hell I will! Henry hasn’t harmed anyone, and there’s no way I’m putting him down there.” Dash had been down to the basement only a handful of times, mostly to deliver something dangerous but subdued, and every time came away feeling grimy and malicious. It didn’t feel

right to leave even monsters down there. And in Henry's case, what if the Termites appeared? They probably couldn't enter HQ, but Dash didn't know that for sure.

"Agent Cooke—"

"I don't want to hear it. Henry's not going down there, and I'll shoot anyone who tries." Dash, previously, had never been brave enough to confront Holmes, but dammit, this was important.

"Dash?" Henry was frowning with worry.

"There are holding cells in the basement. We sometimes keep prisoners down there until they can be transferred to our permanent secure facility in Nevada." Or until Townsend decided they were too dangerous to live.

"I don't—"

"You're not going down there."

"But your boss said—"

"Holmes *claims* the chief said, but I didn't hear it from the chief himself, and Holmes isn't my boss. And anyway, even if Townsend was standing right here, I'd tell him to take a flying leap."

Holmes had been watching this little interchange with raised eyebrows. He didn't seem especially hostile—just annoyed. He let out a noisy sigh. "Agent Cooke, it's going to be a while before the chief is available. What alternative do you propose? Do you want to camp out in your office with the spirit?"

"He has a name. It's Henry. And no." His office wasn't awful, but it was intended for work, not leisure. And he shared it with two other agents, neither of whom he was especially chummy with.

"Agent Cooke—"

"I'm taking him home. To my apartment. The chief can call when he has decided he's ready to see us." Dash hadn't actually planned this course of events; the words just seemed to tumble out of his mouth. But Henry looked relieved and

Holmes wasn't putting up a fight, so this would have to do for now. Maybe the chief would hurry things along if he knew Henry wasn't locked up all nice and tidy in a fucking cell.

"Come on," Dash said to Henry, who obediently followed him back to the elevator. It was still waiting at the penthouse floor, and the trip down seemed unnaturally fast. In the lobby, Dash waved at Ricketts as they passed. And in the garage, he decided he might as well keep custody of that very nice Range Rover, seeing as he was technically still on duty.

Only when they were both buckled in did it occur to Dash to check in with Henry. "You okay with this? Staying at my place for a little while, I mean?"

Henry nodded eagerly. "Yes! Please! But you won't get in trouble for it?"

Dash just shrugged. It was a risk he was willing to take.



Although Dash's apartment was nice, it was nothing to get excited about and was nowhere near as fancy as Henry's house in Sacramento. The furniture was midrange and comfortable. The kitchen contained decent appliances and enough supplies for Dash to get by, his cooking skills being fairly basic. The single bedroom was dominated by his California king bed and a huge TV; the living room TV was even bigger and was hooked up to an expensive sound system.

The walls were landlord-white and without pictures or other adornments. The built-in shelves near the TV contained only a few games to go with his PS-5. The floors were a luxury vinyl that looked like wood planks. Dash had considered getting an area rug to add some color—and maybe one to put at his bedside for chilly mornings—but he'd never gotten around to it.

Henry opened all the kitchen cabinets and peered inside. And he seemed to think that the place was wonderful. "It's so bright! And you have a balcony."

“It’s exactly like fifty other units in this complex. The other fifty are two-bedrooms.”

“It’s new?”

“A few years old.”

“It feels so different from my house.”

Dash scowled. “Sorry.”

“It wasn’t a complaint.” Henry ran a finger along the granite countertop. “It’s only the second house I’ve seen in real life. I think it’s interesting that it’s not the same.”

For a moment Dash thought about how to respond but then he was overcome with a jaw-cracking yawn. “I’m wiped. Gonna hit the sack.”

Henry looked around. “May... may I sleep on the furniture? I could go into the wall if you like, but I’ve never slept on a cushion and it would be fun to try.”

Fuck. Dash really hadn’t thought this through. He was going to tell Henry he could have the couch, but then he had a vision of Termites bursting through the windows and feasting on Henry while Dash snored in the next room. “We can share my bed. It’s big.”

That earned him one of Henry’s wide grins, which reminded Dash how handsome Henry was. This was definitely not a good time to remember that.

Henry continued to poke around the apartment while Dash went into the bathroom and readied himself for bed. His muscles felt so tight that he seriously considered a warm shower, but then he decided he was more tired than sore. He’d make sure to hit the gym in the morning. He emerged from the bathroom in his boxer briefs and slid into bed. God, it felt good to be home. Hotel mattresses were never quite right.

Dash was almost asleep when the bathroom door opened, revealing Henry backlit and standing uncertainly. He’d somehow managed to tame his hair, an impressive feat considering the tangles it had been in. Now it hung straight and smooth past his shoulders, barely any gray remaining. He

was wearing the pajamas he'd picked out earlier that day. "I'm.... It's okay?"

"Look, there have been plenty of times I've slept in a bed with another man—happens sometimes on assignment when we have to catch some Zs in weird-ass places. I've never molested any of them and I'm not going to touch you."

For a moment Henry looked confused, and then he laughed. "I meant are you sure you're okay with sharing your bed with a house spirit?"

Oh. That. It hadn't even occurred to Dash. At some point during this long day he'd stopped thinking of Henry as an NHSS and began thinking of him as... a person. "As long as you don't hog the blankets."

Henry laughed again before switching off the bathroom light. A moment later he was getting gingerly into bed beside Dash. There was plenty of space between them, but Henry's presence was strong even in the darkness.

"Dash?" Henry's voice was a tiny whisper. "I don't think I'd mind if you touched me."

CHAPTER 8



HENRY KNEW ABOUT SEX.

Not long after his existence began, he discovered that touching himself in particular places and particular ways felt very nice. With little else to occupy his time, he practiced that often. Eventually he came to understand that Mr. and Mrs. Button touched each other to feel similarly nice, but this was a private activity so he didn't watch, and for a long time he remained vague about the details of what two people could do together.

Several decades later, Stephanie's grandparents brought a book called *Tropic of Cancer* into the house, and Henry learned a lot more.

Then Stephanie's grandfather began buying *Playboy* magazine, so Henry got visuals. Later, Paul—then in his late teens—hid porn magazines under his mattress, which is when Henry realized that two men could have sex together in a variety of interesting ways. Later the household got Cinemax on cable, and much later the Internet arrived, and so Henry's education expanded.

At times he'd wistfully imagined what it would be like to have sex with someone else, but he knew it was never going to happen. Just as he'd never have a friend or leave his house.

But now... he'd left his house, hadn't he? And he'd ridden far and fast in a car, and he'd gone into two stores, and he'd been in an elevator, and he was in an apartment in a bed. Not only that. Dash had spoken with him for hours today, telling

little stories about himself, and had saved Henry from the Termites and also refused to let the Bureau stick Henry in a cell. All of these things had been unimaginable just two days ago.

Perhaps sex wasn't impossible either.

Dash said he was gay; his lover had been a man. Henry was male, and even though he wasn't exactly a human man, his anatomy closely resembled one.

So Henry told Dash he wouldn't mind being touched. Which was an understatement because, in fact, Henry very much *wanted* to be touched, especially by Dash. Who was very handsome, and who'd been kind to Henry even when he wasn't supposed to be. And to be honest, from the moment Henry had seen Dash—well before Dash had become his savior—something about the man had drawn Henry to him.

Now Henry rolled to face Dash and reached for him. But Dash gently took his hand and moved it back. “No.”

“I'm very close to being a human man. In ways that count.”

“I know.”

“Am I unattractive?”

Dash shook his head slightly. “You are beautiful.”

“Then—”

“It's not ethical. For all intents and purposes, you're my prisoner. Our power balance is wildly uneven. I may not always be the epitome of perfect morals, but I feel strongly about this. I won't fuck someone who can't freely consent.”

Although Henry understood his point, he didn't want to concede. “But I really do want this. Want you.”

“Maybe. But have you ever heard of Stockholm Syndrome?”

“Yes.” Henry blew a dismissive puff of air. “Can house spirits get Stockholm Syndrome? And in only two days?”

“I have no idea. But that’s part of the thing—I don’t really know much about you, and I don’t want to be responsible for harming you.”

“I trust you.” Henry meant that sincerely.

“I’m flattered. But Jesus, Henry, I’m the first person you’ve ever had a conversation with. Give yourself some time. You’ll find a whole world of choices out there.”

Henry didn’t want a whole world of choices, and he wasn’t at all certain he *had* time. The Termites might return. And this time they might get past Dash’s defenses. Or Chief Townsend would stick Henry in a cell—or worse. But among Henry’s very limited possessions was a shred of pride. He wouldn’t beg.

He nodded at Dash, turned over, and pretended to fall asleep.



Both Dash and Henry expected to hear from the Bureau in the morning, but nobody called. Dash didn’t seem annoyed by this. He took Henry to the apartment’s fitness center and showed him how to use some of the equipment, which was a lot of fun. Henry turned out to be stronger than either of them expected. The few other people in the fitness center stared at first, but Dash glared at them threateningly until they turned away.

After that, he and Henry returned to the apartment. After Dash showered, he made himself brunch while Henry took his turn in the shower. In the past, Henry had done his best to keep himself clean with a rag, a bit of pilfered soap, and some water, but the shower was infinitely better. And once he’d dried off with one of Dash’s huge, fluffy towels, Henry got to put on another of his new outfits, his own brand-new clothing that he’d picked out himself.

They sat together at the table while Dash ate. Although Henry didn’t need any food, he enjoyed the aromas of coffee,

bacon, and toast. And he liked watching Dash eat, which he did in big bites.

“You’re quick,” Henry observed.

Dash got an odd look in his eyes. “Old habits.”

He tried to stop Henry from doing the washing up afterward, but Henry insisted—quite honestly—that he liked doing chores and wanted to help. In fact, after the plates and pans were put away, Henry found cleaning materials in a closet and proceeded to tidy the entire kitchen. He’d always found these activities satisfying. Not only did they occupy his time, but he knew that his families appreciated it even if they had no idea who was responsible. And he liked his house to be clean.

He was about to start dusting the living room when Dash stopped him. “How about I give you a little tour of LA since we have time to kill?”

Well, that was a lot more exciting than housework.

They hurried to the Range Rover, where Henry was now a pro at the seatbelt and radio, and they drove for hours. Even the traffic was interesting, with all the different vehicles and the people inside. But it was even better to see those places that Henry had previously seen only on TV: Griffith Observatory and the Hollywood sign. The Hollywood Walk of Fame. The tall shining buildings downtown. The train station. The mansions. Angels Flight Funicular.

Henry especially liked seeing the ocean. After he mentioned this, Dash drove them to a parking lot, where a short walk along a clifftop path rewarded them with a panorama of the Pacific. “It’s so big,” Henry breathed, feeling slightly dizzy.

“Sometimes the world feels way too small. I come here to remember that it’s not.”

They watched the sunset, a vibrant tapestry of hues, and then waited until dark to examine the stars. “Not really the best place for it,” Dash said. “Too much light pollution, and the air isn’t all that clear. José and I had an assignment in Utah

once—one of the few times we were on the same job. Middle of fucking nowhere. After we were done, he insisted we take a few days for ourselves and camp out. I bitched about it, of course. But man, laying back and looking up at that night sky....” His voice trailed away.

For several minutes neither of them said anything; they simply stood close and gazed out over the dark water. Then Dash shook himself slightly. “That was a good memory. I’d forgotten about it.”

They walked slowly back to the car.

Dash turned to look at him. “Anyplace else you want to go before we head home for dinner? Harder to sightsee at night.”

Henry was struck with an idea. “Could we maybe... go shopping?”

“Sure. What do you need?”

“I just wanted.... That store we went to yesterday in Sacramento—is there one like it here?”

Dash chuckled. “Target? Yeah, I think we can find one.”

“I’d like to look around one, if you don’t mind.”

“There’s one really close to my place. We can go there. I can pick up dinner somewhere afterward.”

Traffic was a little lighter now than during the day, and Henry couldn’t see inside the other cars very well. He liked looking at the signs along the freeway, though. Lots of nice colors.

This Target was laid out differently than the one in Sacramento, but it smelled the same. Dash grabbed a cart as they went in. “Anything specific you want to get, or...?”

Abashed, Henry realized his plan had a barrier. “I don’t have any money. Sorry. I forgot about that part.”

“Don’t worry about it. If I think I can justify it, I’ll make the Bureau reimburse me. And if not, it’s my treat.”

“You don’t have to spend your money on me.”

Dash looked unconcerned. “I make a good salary and don’t spend much. I’ve got plenty more than I need stashed away. I’ll be happy to share a little of it with you.”

That pleased Henry. Not just because he’d get to buy things but because Dash was being generous with him. Sharing. Henry’s families had shared things with him, but not knowingly. He’d taken things he thought they wouldn’t miss and sometimes borrowed things for a while. This was different.

They walked slowly up and down the aisles. Henry skipped the clothing, because he now had more of that than he’d ever owned before. He chose some books, however. When they got to the home-goods section, he added several items to the cart: candles that smelled individually like cookies, pomegranates, and chamomile; a large decorative bowl of carved wood; a framed photo of the ocean and another of the night sky; a quartet of gray-and-white throw pillows; a small wool rug in gray and navy; a realistic-looking fake succulent in a pretty pot; and an extremely soft throw blanket made of gray fake fur.

“Wherever you end up, your new house will be well decorated.” Dash had been patient while Henry shopped, giving his opinion whenever Henry asked, and now he was smiling.

Henry made a noncommittal sound.

Dash picked up a television remote control, explaining that his was broken. Henry suspected there was a story behind that but didn’t ask.

After they loaded up the car, Dash drove them a few blocks to a restaurant for takeout Thai. The scent of spices filling the car was almost intoxicating. Not for the first time, Henry wished he could eat. But he’d tried it three times over the decades and each time had become violently ill. His body just wasn’t made for it.

“I hope I didn’t bore you today,” said Dash as he drove them back to his apartment. “I think I’m a shitty tour guide.”

“You’re not, and I wasn’t bored for a single second. Even if we’d sat nowhere, doing nothing, I would have enjoyed your company.”

“Nobody enjoys my company. Unless they’ve gone a century without talking to anyone.”

“You’re not nearly as awful as you think.”

“Only half as awful?” And Dash shot him a grin.



They carried their purchases into the apartment, and Dash sat down at the table with his dinner. “You can put your Target stuff in that closet.” He pointed with a fork. “There’s plenty of room.”

But, grinning to himself, Henry took everything out of the bags and started arranging the items in the living room.

“What are you doing?”

“Decorating.”

“You said those things were for you.”

Henry fluffed one of the throw pillows. “They were. For me to give to you. I guess we can’t call them a thank-you gift since you paid, but maybe we can consider the *concept* a gift.”

Dash looked utterly baffled. “Why would you do this?”

“This is your home, and—”

“It’s just a rented apartment. Nothing special.”

“Your *home*,” Henry repeated. “But it doesn’t feel like you. Nothing says ‘This is where Dash Cooke lives.’ And honestly, we could probably do better if we poked around in different shops and found things more personal to you. But this is a start.”

“But I don’t need this stuff.”

Henry set the decorative bowl in the middle of the coffee table, shifted it a bit, and sighed. “Of course not. I didn’t need

most of the things I collected from my families. I had probably a hundred pens and pencils, but I never wrote anything. Those items, though, they made me feel connected. As if I belonged. As if the house was mine.” He sat heavily onto the couch. “Even though it never really was.”

For a few minutes, Dash stared into his Thai food, not eating. Then he stood, picked up his plate and fork, walked into the living room, and sat a few inches away from Henry. “I’m sorry. It’s not fair.”

“Lots of things aren’t fair. I know that.”

But Henry appreciated Dash’s sympathy. Even if Dash didn’t understand exactly how it felt, he realized that Henry was grieving, and just knowing that helped Henry feel a little better.

“I’ve never lived anywhere for very long,” Dash said after a few bites of pad thai. “Never had any real connection to a place. I mean, I appreciate living somewhere nice, but...”

Henry’s insides hurt, almost as if a Termite had taken a giant bite. Dash wasn’t a house spirit, but almost all humans craved a place to call their own. During today’s drive, he’d seen people living on the streets of LA in tents and other makeshift shelters, which he knew must be terrible for most of them. But even they had clearly made efforts to claim their improvised spaces as their own.

“What about when you were a child?” Henry prompted.

“Ugh.”

“Ugh?”

Dash set his half-full plate on the coffee table, his scowl fully in place. “We moved constantly. My dad died of a heroin overdose when I was four. I don’t remember him much. Mom had three kids by then. Not too much later she married my stepdad, who had four kids of his own. Then together they had two more. They couldn’t afford us all. And my stepdad had a fucking temper, plus he liked to drink. Not a good combo.”

That ache inside Henry had grown worse. “Did he hurt you?”

“Yeah. Sometimes. That wasn’t even the worst of it, though. He kept getting fired because he’d lose it at work or he’d show up drunk... or not show up at all. Then we’d have to pick up and move to a new rathole.”

If Henry had been telling such a painful story, he’d want to be comforted. And maybe Dash did too. Henry scooted nearer on the cushions until he sat very close. He didn’t say anything, though. Dash should choose on his own what to say and when.

Apparently Dash was in the mood to talk, because he continued fairly quickly. “I didn’t have friends. Could’ve maybe been friends with my sibs, but Mom and Gary liked to pit us against each other, so none of us got along. We moved so often that half the time I didn’t even bother to learn our address. It was a shitty way to grow up, Henry.”

Henry nodded and cautiously put a hand on Dash’s knee. Dash didn’t seem to object.

“Then things got even worse, if you can believe it. Gary beat my little sister so badly that she ended up in the hospital with a permanent brain injury. The son of a bitch went to jail. Mom left with some guy she’d met somewhere. Those of us who were still underage went into foster care. I was twelve. I don’t remember how many different placements I had. I used to run away, even from the decent ones. Don’t know why. I didn’t know where I was going.”

When Dash paused, frowning deeply, Henry finally spoke. “You survived all of that and made a successful life for yourself. You’re very strong.”

“Successful.” Dash snorted. “It was that bastard Townsend, you know. They were gonna put me in a juvie facility. I hadn’t done anything really bad, but I guess they didn’t know what else to do with me. Then one day this weird guy shows up out of nowhere at my court hearing, and he has a chat with the judge and my social worker, and the next thing I know, I’m in a studio apartment in Omaha.

“The weird guy tells me it’s all mine. He works for some federal agency, and he’ll cover my rent and food if I get my high school diploma, graduate from college, and promise to

come work for him when I'm done. I was going to refuse, but he took me out to a shooting range, showed me how to work a couple kinds of guns, let me blast away at paper targets with zombies printed on them. It was great. So I figured, why the hell not? And here I am today." His expression suggested he wasn't especially impressed with his current status.

Henry's hand remained on Dash's knee. "Don't take this the wrong way, but why you?"

"No fucking idea. I used to ask him, but he'd just call me *boy* and say something cryptic. He knows things normal people don't. Everything he does is part of some huge plan he won't share with anyone. So I don't know." Dash looked thoughtful. "But I'm grateful even if I don't sound like it. I usually like my job. It's sure better than whatever I was heading for before he got his claws into me."

Dash stood suddenly, dislodging Henry's hand and almost knocking over the coffee table. He grabbed his plate and took it into the kitchen, leaving it in the sink. "I need a shower," he announced. Which was odd, because he'd taken one that morning and he didn't smell unpleasant at all.

Henry packaged up the leftover Thai food and tucked it in the fridge, which was pretty empty otherwise. He threw away what was left on Dash's plate, washed the dish and fork, dried them, and put them away. He wiped down the counter, the kitchen table, the coffee table. He refluffed the throw pillows. He didn't want to hang the pictures without permission—and besides he didn't have a hammer or nails—so he set them on the floor and leaned them against the wall.

Then he had nothing to do. Well, that wasn't really true. He had books to read, or he could watch TV using the new remote. He could unpack the rest of his belongings from the suitcase and put them in the closet with the cleaning supplies. There were shelves in there, and plenty of room.

But none of those things appealed. Henry kept thinking about what Dash had just shared. The worst part, perhaps, was that Dash had at one time been so close to gaining all the riches he'd never had but secretly wanted: a beloved with

whom he could become a family, and a home they could call their own. But he'd lost those possibilities when José died. Perhaps that had been the last straw, the wound from which Dash would never heal. Because of it, he might spend the rest of his life lonely and rootless.

And yes, Henry realized his own future was very much in question. But at least he'd had years of contentment in a house with his families. Those years had been a wonderful gift.

As Henry looked around Dash's apartment for some way to occupy himself, his gaze fell on the photo of the night sky, and he suddenly yearned to see it for real. There likely weren't many stars visible here in the city, especially with the apartment-complex lights beaming onto walkways and parking lots. That was okay—he'd settle for anything.

He slid open the glass door and stepped onto the balcony.

Other residents had things on their balconies: potted plants, bicycles, chairs, grills. Dash's, however, was completely empty. Henry wondered if Dash ever went out here. The view of a lawn and parking lot was unimpressive; the air smelled of other people's dinners and car exhaust. But it was at least outdoors.

Outdoors.

The realization struck Henry a moment too late. The Termites were all around him, blocking him from getting back inside, striking at him with their gaping, fang-filled maws and their long talons.

"Go away!" he bellowed. Or tried to, because the old familiar terror had paralyzed his lungs—paralyzed *all* of him—and all he could do was gasp and regret his own stupidity. The agony was terrible. Each Termite strike undid a little more of him, unbeing him chunk by chunk. Once they were through, it would be like he'd never existed at all.

Just as Henry was about to give in to the inevitability of it, something roared. Hands grabbed him and dragged him back inside.

He looked up at Dash, who was naked and wet. Henry tried a smile. “These two days with you were my favorites in a hundred years. Thank you.”

And then everything was gone.

CHAPTER 9



DASH LOOKED AT HENRY, FULL OF HOLES AND LYING ON THE living room floor, his visibility fading in and out like a bad phone signal. You couldn't shoot death to make it stop, and you couldn't scare it away. So Dash did the only thing he could think of, which was to cradle Henry's head on his lap, brush the strands of black hair away from his face, and yell at him to stay alive.

"Come on, Henry! Dammit! Don't let those fuckers get the better of you. You have so much more to see in the world. Stay with me!"

After a while Dash realized that Henry was remaining solidly in this plane, although his body was still riddled with... absences. As Henry continued to breathe, Dash toned down his voice to something softer. Nobody would call it crooning—he likely wasn't capable of that—but it was as gentle as he could manage. It was just a bunch of nonsense sentences, a stream-of-consciousness litany simply intended to keep Henry grounded.

"That was exciting, but I'd rather you stick to interior decoration. I can't believe none of the neighbors called the cops. How could they not notice a screaming naked guy on the balcony? Not that anyone around here is nosy. We're all pretty much the same—we keep to ourselves, we nod when we pass. I don't know anyone else's name because what would be the point? Still, there are limits to minding your own business. I think.

“If the cops had come, we’d still be okay. Flashing a Bureau badge does wonders. Most of the local boys in blue want nothing to do with NHSSs. ‘I hate that spooky shit,’ seems to be the universal opinion. So they wouldn’t give us trouble. But I’d have to get up to answer the door, and you seem pretty comfy in my lap. Also, I have no clothes on.

“Man, I was stepping out of the shower when I got this... I don’t know the word for it. Intuition? I knew you were in trouble. Which you were. Those fucking Termites. I’d hoped we left them in Sacramento. Anyway, I’m sorry I wasn’t faster. I’m sorry I wasn’t there to keep them from getting you. I promised I’d keep you safe.”

When Dash paused to take a breath, Henry made a soft sigh. His eyes were closed, but he didn’t seem to be in pain. And yes—the holes were beginning to disappear.

The bed was a better place for this than the floor, as the stark patio doors offered no privacy. Dash lifted Henry into his arms, carried him to the bedroom, and set him down as if he might shatter. Henry’s clothes were ruined again, but since Dash didn’t want to wake him, he let them be. He climbed in next to Henry and remained there, combing Henry’s hair with his fingers.

Some part of Dash had hoped that the Termites were no longer a threat, and that Henry would now be free to go wherever he wanted. Bureau be damned, he could simply take off and see the world. An even tinier part of Dash—one he hadn’t acknowledged until now—had fantasized about Henry wanting to stay with him, at least for a little while.

But now was the time to face cold reality. Henry wasn’t free. And he wasn’t safe with Dash, not even in Dash’s own apartment while he was at home. And really, Dash should have known better. Nobody was made safer by being near him.



When the morning sun came through the window and awakened Dash, Henry was fully healed, lying on his side, and

gravely watching him.

“I’m sorry,” they both said at once. And then they chuckled, because life was a fucking black comedy.

Henry spoke next. “I’m sorry you had to save me again.”

“You wanted to stand on a goddamn balcony. You shouldn’t apologize for that.”

“And why are you apologizing?”

“I should have kept you safe.”

“You’re not responsible for me.”

Dash sat up quickly. “But I am. It’s my job. And it’s my.... I *want* to protect you. But I can’t; I don’t know how, not unless I chain you to me.” And that was damned hard to admit, because battling supernatural threats was his one and only purpose in life, the one thing he’d ever been good at.

“Nobody asked this of you, Dash. You were supposed to exorcise me, remember?”

Of course Dash remembered, and he was ashamed of the original plan. He’d blundered in, intent on getting rid of whatever haunted the Frosts’ house, just because somebody told him to. He hadn’t questioned whether the entity he was evicting had a right to be there too. He didn’t think about what would happen to the entity once it was forced to leave the house. Yeah, *just following orders*. What a crock-of-shit defense that always was.

“If anyone knows how to free you from those Termite monsters, it’s Townsend. I’ll get his assurance that he won’t harm you, but....”

“I understand. I can’t stay with you. It’s too huge a burden.”

To Dash’s mind, Henry didn’t feel even remotely like a burden, but at least they were both in agreement about what had to happen next.

With what he hoped was an encouraging smile, Dash got out of bed and headed to the bathroom. Then the regular

morning routine began: some time in the fitness center, a shower for each of them, breakfast for Dash. Henry insisted on cleaning up afterward, and since he genuinely seemed to enjoy household chores, Dash didn't argue.

Looking around the apartment, Dash had to concede that it looked nicer with Henry's decorative touches. Even though he didn't need any of the things Henry had chosen, he liked them and they made the apartment more comfortable. Maybe he'd hang those two pictures today. Or maybe he and Henry could do more sightseeing. Henry might enjoy the Getty with its art collection and views. They could go to the beach. Or perhaps visit an antique store or two—Henry would love that.

Dash picked up his phone, intending to research some antiques prospects, but then the damn thing rang. With Townsend's tone.

"I trust all is well, my boy?"

"It's *not* fucking well. The Termites almost got him again."

The chief tsked. "You could have let us put him in the basement. He would have been quite safe there."

"He would have been cooped up in a miserable cell, and he doesn't deserve that."

Henry had abandoned the Swiffer he'd been using on the kitchen floor and now approached the couch, where Dash glowered. As if to give support, Henry gently patted Dash's shoulder.

Townsend was apparently in one of his avuncular moods. "Your dedication is admirable, son. I'm ready to see him now, so please bring him on in."

"Not if you're gonna lock him up."

"I will not confine your house spirit."

Dash wasn't sure what he thought of the *your* in that sentence, but at least he'd obtained some reassurance from the chief. He needed more, though. "And you won't kill him, or pick him apart to see what makes him tick, or—"

“Agent Cooke, I can assure you that I do not wish harm to come to him. Bringing him here will be in everyone’s best interest.”

Dash hoped that wasn’t a veiled threat. He felt so damned helpless—an emotion he thought he’d shed long ago. “Okay, fine. We’ll be there in a little bit. You’re not gonna have Holmes play guard dog, are you?”

Townsend laughed. “No, but he’s very good at it. Come in to HQ, son. I’ll be waiting for you both.”

After the call ended, Dash and Henry stared at each other. “Don’t look so grim,” Henry said. “I was slowly dying before you came, and now, whatever happens to me, I’ve had the most amazing adventures.”

“It’s been so little, though.”

“Even the smallest thing can be valuable.”

Suddenly Henry closed the distance between them, leaned down, and kissed Dash’s lips. Because it was Henry’s first kiss, it was awkward: close-mouthed and not quite properly aligned. But to Dash, it was as sweet as rain on parched ground.

When Henry stepped back, he looked smug. “That was very nice.”

“Yes, but—”

“It’s a gift from me. So you’ll remember how much I like you.”



Dash helped Henry pack his few belongings into the suitcase. Just before they left the apartment, though, Dash paused. “Hang on.” He jogged back to the bedroom, rummaged through a dresser drawer until he found what he was looking for, and jogged back. He held out his hand. “For you.”

Henry peered closely at it. “Your badge?”

“Not my current one. It’s the one new guys wear until they complete training. I haven’t used it for twenty years.”

“But you’ve kept it, so it’s important to you.”

“Yeah.” Dash pressed it into Henry’s hand. “That’s why I want you to have it. You can use it to start a new collection.”

That was when Dash learned that house spirits could cry from more than just despair.

“I’m so lucky to have found you,” Henry said before launching himself at Dash for an embrace. Dash was a lot bigger, but Henry was surprisingly strong. And God, it felt good to be wrapped in someone’s arms. Dash had always believed that he was immune to the normal human need for bodily contact—he hadn’t even bothered with hookups that often in recent years—but he’d been wrong. He needed this.

But they couldn’t stay this way forever. Townsend was waiting, and he knew exactly how long it took Dash to drive to HQ. Henry tugged Dash’s head down for another sweet, inexperienced kiss, and then they left.

During the short journey, Henry watched Dash rather than the scenery. Not that the scenery was particularly exciting in this area, Dash knew, but then neither was he. They didn’t talk, and Henry turned off the radio. There was an odd intensity to his gaze, as if he were trying to memorize Dash’s face. Dash tried to keep his own attention on the road, but it wasn’t easy. Henry was simply too *present*. Which was ironic for a being who’d been invisible for a century and had been nearly eaten out of existence the night before.

At this time of day the HQ garage was almost full. Dash found a space not far from his own Toyota, which was looking a little forlorn. He killed the engine in the Range Rover and then remained seated. As did Henry.

Finally, Dash cleared his throat. “If I could, I’d ask you to stay with me. If it was possible. I mean, you’d get sick of me pretty soon, but—”

“If I could, I’d stay. I’d never get tired of you.”

It seemed to be an honest declaration, just as Dash's was. But that didn't change anything. Still, Dash needed to say something else.

"The other day I was trying really hard to figure out what you are. What makes you tick. That was stupid of me."

"I'm too ignorant to give you any of the information you needed."

"You're not ignorant." Dash squeezed Henry's knee. "You just never questioned your own identity because you knew the truth: you are who you are, and that's perfect. You don't need a label or explanations. You're Henry."

Henry's answering smile could have melted iron. This time Dash kissed *him*—mouth still closed, but with more practice to guide him. And then they got out of the car.

Ricketts had been replaced at the reception desk by a newbie agent who looked bored. Until she caught sight of Henry, of course. Then her stance straightened and her eyes widened. It might have been Henry's pointed ears and kelly-green eyes that sparked her interest, or it might have been because he was incredibly handsome. Dash had noticed that some time ago, but he mostly hadn't allowed himself to notice he'd noticed.

Dash gave her the briefest of waves and led Henry to the elevator. Henry didn't appear scared of it this time; he adjusted to things so quickly. Considering what he'd been through in the past few days, it was a major miracle that he wasn't a complete basket case. Instead he stood calmly next to Dash, one hand on his suitcase handle, the other hanging loosely at his side. There were no mirrors in the elevator, but Dash suspected he looked a mess. He knew for sure he was scowling, but he couldn't seem to make his face do anything else.

Holmes was in his usual spot behind the desk, reading what appeared to be a printed report. He didn't look up as Dash and Henry entered, and his greeting was succinct. "He's waiting."

When Dash opened the inner door and stepped into the office, Henry close behind him, Townsend was indeed waiting. He stood at the window with his back to the glass, a whiskey bottle in one hand and a cigarette in the other. His smile was strained. His voice was hearty enough, however. “Come in, come in. I’m delighted to finally meet you, Henry.”

Dash couldn’t quite hold his tongue. “Took you long enough.”

“Yes, and I’m sorry. I had several pressing matters to attend to. Mustn’t allow disorder, you know. It ruins plans.”

Of course Dash had no idea what he was talking about, but that was nothing new. Besides, the only important thing was making sure Henry remained safe. “You promised Henry wouldn’t have any more Termite troubles. How can you guarantee that? They’re here in LA too, based on last night’s attack.”

“If my hypotheses are correct, these Termites are everywhere.”

Henry took the news stoically, but Dash’s gut clenched. “Everywhere. No, that’s not acceptable. You said he’d be safe, and you promised not to lock him up, so how the hell is that gonna happen? What are your damn hypotheses?”

Townsend didn’t seem angry about being yelled at by a subordinate; he simply reacted to the outburst with a small shake of his head. “I’m afraid that information will remain only between me and Henry, son. I can tell you, however, that this building is impregnable to any hostile forces, including Henry’s Termites. And I believe I know how he can be protected when he leaves.” At that point, the chief took a disconcertingly hefty swig from his bottle. Yeah, the guy swilled booze constantly, but he always poured it into a glass. Until now.

“How can he be protected?” Dash growled.

Another swig, this one longer. “Agent Cooke, it’s clear to me that you’ve grown very fond of this house spirit, and—”

“His name is Henry!”

At this outburst Henry let go of his suitcase, settled a hand on Dash's arm, and spoke softly. "It's all right, Dash. Don't get yourself in trouble." Then he spoke in a normal voice to address Townsend. "I know you sent him to get me out of my—out of the *Frosts*' house. Which he did. And he made every effort to communicate with you and to hand me over promptly. But he's also been very kind to me, and he's acted like a perfect gentleman. I have grown very fond of *him*."

For some obscure reason, this clearly pleased the chief. "I see, I see. Well, Cooke, you've successfully completed this assignment. You took a rather unorthodox approach, to be sure, but it is an unusual case. Now you may resume your vacation. I've instructed Agent Holmes to book you first-class tickets anywhere in the world. Simply let him know where you wish to go, and you'll be in the air tomorrow."

God, what would Henry make of flying in a jet? Of traveling not just outside his house and city, but to another continent? He'd probably love the tile-fronted houses in Portugal and the interesting shops, and he'd have great fun on one of those tourist-boat jaunts on the Douro River. Dash would take him on a train too, and then—

None of that was going to happen. And Dash realized that nowhere in the world appealed to him if Henry wasn't there.

But there was no use saying this. Townsend wouldn't care, and it might make Henry as upset as Dash felt. So he simply nodded stiffly and turned to look at Henry. "I hope you have wonderful adventures and add to your collection. I hope you find a new home."

"I already have," Henry said sadly.

And Jesus, they'd known each other... what? Three days? Dash's heart shouldn't seem so shattered. Walking away from Henry shouldn't feel similar to losing José.

Ignoring Townsend, Dash tried to smile at Henry, who tried to smile back. Then Dash did one of the hardest tasks of his life: he walked out of the chief's office.

“Where should I book tickets to?” Holmes’s expression made it clear he thought this task beneath him.

“Book ’em to Hell for all I care.” Dash marched past him and out into the hall. He felt as if he might throw up. Or maybe he was having a heart attack. Or a stroke. Maybe he was as full of holes as Henry after a Termite attack, but with holes that could only be felt, not seen.

He was halfway to the elevator when the screaming began.

True to his name, Dash was a fast runner. When he used the track at HQ, people often commented on how speedy he was for such a big man. Now he covered the distance to Townsend’s office in a flash, Henry’s shrieks deafening him. Holmes must have been in the outer office, but Dash didn’t see him as he raced into the inner sanctum.

And came to a stop so fast that he almost fell.

Townsend stood in the middle of the room, whiskey bottle in one hand. The other hand, raised, clutched something that looked like an ordinary cheap pen. A slender line emanated from the pen’s tip, bright red and glowing, twisting and looping like a snake. The other end of that line was buried in Henry’s chest.

And Henry.... Jesus Christ! He held his arms stiffly forward, palms out, as if he were warding away danger. The rest of his body was unnaturally rigid as well, his eyes and mouth round. That would have been awful enough, especially coupled with the cries of agony. But Henry was also... pixelating. His form was becoming blurrier, less distinct, very much like a computer image losing resolution. In the space of a few seconds, he grew momentarily sharper again, then faded even more, his screams escalating. They’d taken on a hollow tone that didn’t sound human.

“Stop!” Dash bellowed at the chief. “Stop killing him!”

Townsend barely flicked his eyes in Dash’s direction before returning his gaze to Henry. It was now difficult to tell that it even *was* Henry. Except for a split second when he

became clear again, he was nothing but a vague humanoid shape.

Dash took another step forward. “Stop it!”

When the chief continued to ignore him, Dash tried a tackle but reached an invisible barrier several feet away that gave him an electrical shock. His nerves sizzled and his muscles stopped obeying. He landed in a crumpled heap on the floor, where he could barely move. He couldn't stand, and his voice had stopped working.

Mind empty but for rage and grief, Dash resorted to an automatic action: he reached unsteadily for his holster, pulled out his gun with agonizing slowness, aimed, and fired.

Townsend gasped. The whiskey bottle fell and shattered. The pen tumbled to the floor. And then Townsend sank to his knees, set a palm against the red blooming on his chest, and fell face-down.

But it was too late. Henry was gone.

Dash felt as if he'd fallen into a vat of ice water. His heart was tight as a knot, his lungs barely working. But he'd been well trained. He managed to put the safety back on his gun, to scoot the gun across the floor, well out of his reach. Then he knelt, laced his fingers together behind his head, and waited.

CHAPTER 10



COMPARED TO MOST OF THE BUREAU'S BASEMENT CELLS, THIS one was fairly luxurious.

Sure, it was unadorned concrete interrupted only by a heavy iron door. But Dash had a cot with a blanket, a pillow, and a thin mattress. Along the other walls were a metal toilet/sink combo, a small concrete desk with a concrete backless stool affixed to the floor, and a showerhead with corresponding floor drain. He'd been given two greige jumpsuits and two pairs of socks; a towel and bar of soap; a toothbrush, toothpaste, and plastic comb. For nearly sixteen hours a day, the overhead light was on; for the remainder, a very dim light shone from one corner of the ceiling.

Three times daily, a trio of nervous-looking agents entered his cell. Two of them carried handguns. The third carried a tray of food, which was neither good nor plentiful. But Dash didn't care; he wasn't hungry anyway. The agent with the food kept as far from Dash as possible when exchanging the old tray for the new, either to avoid getting attacked or to avoid getting caught in the crossfire if his colleagues had to shoot.

One day the agents delivered two paperbacks: well-worn copies of *Outlander* and *Cannery Row*. Dash didn't know who had chosen these particular titles or why, and it didn't really matter. When he tried to read, the words swam into his head and right back out again. He could stare at the same page for hours without absorbing a thing.

Sometimes he paced his cell, which was roughly six strides in any direction, but mostly he sat on the edge of the bed or lay

on the mattress, eyes as unfocused as his brain.

The other agents never spoke to him. He didn't know what his fate would be. A trial seemed unlikely since the Bureau tended to operate extralegally. The two strongest possibilities were that he'd be sent to the Bureau prison facility in Nevada to rot away for the rest of his life... or he'd be summarily executed. He had no preference, and no fear.

In fact, he had no emotions at all. Oh, he suspected they were there somewhere: grief, anger, regret. But they were at the bottom of a fathomless lake, covered by untold layers of ice, so they might as well not exist.

Whenever he slept, he revisited those terrible moments in Townsend's office. The entire sequence couldn't have lasted more than a minute, but it played over and over and over. Henry's destruction. Dash's own rash yet useless actions. Townsend's death.

He never should have trusted Townsend with Henry. That was obvious. He should have reacted faster and more effectively when he stormed into the office. Also obvious. He shouldn't have murdered the chief. Less obvious, but probably objectively true.

Dash was walking an endless circuit of the cell when he heard the lock start to disengage. He sat down on the cot with his feet on the floor, hands clasped in his lap, head bowed. He didn't want to frighten the agents, who were only doing their jobs.

The door opened and the trio crowded inside. One of the armed agents nodded at the desk.

"Agent Cooke, would you like some new books? I can exchange these."

"I very much doubt I'm still an agent." Dash hadn't said a word in days. His voice sounded thin and raspy.

The agent with the trays—what was his name?—made a small distressed noise. "I don't—I'm sorry. This isn't..."

"Isn't standard operations. I know. They didn't prep us for this during training. I don't need any other books, but thanks

for asking.” Dash’s gratitude was real. Considering what he’d done, he was being treated with great kindness.

The agent bobbed his head, grabbed the tray with the last meal’s half-eaten food, and returned to the doorway. He paused before leaving. “Is there anything else you need, Dash? Are you doing okay?”

Adrian Blanchet. That was his name. He and Dash had worked on a few assignments together. He was a good guy—levelheaded and calm, well-versed in procedures. The kind of agent you wanted to have backing you up.

“I’m fine,” Dash said, briefly meeting his eyes and hoping he sounded sincere. “Thank you.”

Blanchet seemed to want to say something else, but instead he sighed deeply and walked out, followed by the other two agents. The door closed with a soft thud and the lock reengaged.

Dash remained seated on the cot; moving just seemed like too much effort. Once on assignment he’d encountered a gabakuro, a creature that looked remarkably like a pitbull-sized gargoyle. And like a gargoyle, it spent most of its time squatting in stony immobility. At the time, Dash had been disdainful of a being that spent so much of its life doing nothing and slightly disappointed that it wasn’t worth killing. But now he felt as if he had become a gabakuro himself.

Although his body was petrifying and his emotions frozen, his mind had decided to spin. It had been doing so periodically during his captivity, perhaps frustrated that he wasn’t banging himself against the cell walls. This time, however, instead of playing yet another round of What-If, his brain went on a different journey, wondering why the hell Dash had acted as he had.

Well, part of the answer was obvious: Dash was trigger-happy. Always had been. He’d been warned about it more than once by Townsend and others, yet most of the time his first instinct when faced with a problem was to shoot it.

The real question, however, was why he'd considered Townsend's behavior a problem in the first place. Hell, just a few days before the incident, Dash had cheerily attempted to destroy the Frosts' house spirit himself. Somehow, however, things had radically shifted within the space of a shockingly brief time. Instead of wanting to kill Henry, he'd killed in an attempt to save him. And now Dash was nearly shattered, not because he'd murdered his boss and not because his own future was grim, but because Henry was gone.

An emotion suddenly surged through its frozen enclosure, hitting Dash like a volley of bullets. He buried his face in his hands and sobbed.

Later, a different threesome of agents appeared with a fresh tray. None of them spoke to him before leaving, not even to comment on his untouched prior meal. He thought it was dinnertime now, although he wasn't certain. It didn't matter anyway.

Still seated on the edge of the bed, he closed his eyes and tried to turn to stone.

“You need to eat.”

Dash leapt to his feet with a startled cry.

Henry.

The apparition stood only a few feet away, dressed in a pair of navy blue jogging shorts and a grey T-shirt printed with the Bureau's familiar initials, BTSA. Dash's old badge was pinned to the shirt.

Henry smiled.

CHAPTER 11



DASH LOOKED PALE AND GAUNT, WITH DARK CIRCLES UNDER his eyes and about three weeks' worth of coarse beard. His hair stuck up in all directions, as if he were trying to copy Henry's hairstyle from when they first met. And now he was gaping widely.

"Have some dinner," Henry said gently. "It doesn't look very good, but I'm sure it's better than nothing."

"Henry?" Dash's voice was so raw it hurt to hear it.

"I'm sorry I couldn't—"

Henry was interrupted by about two hundred pounds of tall human male grabbing him into a bone-crushing embrace. It was glorious. Henry hugged back as hard as he could, and for a long time they simply stood like that, oblivious to everything but each other.

Even when Dash loosened his grip and took a step back, he didn't let go completely; his hands remained comfortably at Henry's waist. "I thought you were dead." His eyes were glossy and a few tears ran down his cheeks.

"I'm sorry. I was hurt."

"God, what he did—"

"It's all right, Dash. I mean, it *wasn't* all right, it was even worse than the Termites. I sort of... fell apart into little pieces. I don't really have the words to describe it. I hid in the walls while I recovered. And then it took me a long time to find you.

This building is hard to move around in. My house was much easier. But now I *have* found you.” He gave a shuddering sigh.

For a while he hadn’t been at all certain he’d ever regain enough solidity to emerge. And then he’d been incredibly worried that Dash had been taken away and that he’d never find him again. Or worse, that Dash had been killed.

“Jesus, Henry, I’m so sorry I left you with that son of a bitch.”

“You had to. We both knew it. And you didn’t believe he’d harm me.” Henry himself hadn’t been as sure about that, but he had known that remaining with Dash wasn’t an option. So he’d put on his bravest face and pretended everything would be fine.

“I didn’t—” It was Dash’s turn for a shaky breath. “He said he wouldn’t. And I was stupid enough to believe him. I never completely trusted him, but I didn’t expect such a bold-faced lie. Did he explain why he tried to kill you?”

Henry frowned at the memory. “After you left, all he said was, ‘I’m sorry, son.’ Then he took that thing out of his pocket and pointed it at me and....” He shuddered at the memory.

“I don’t understand.” Dash’s shoulders sagged, and Henry then remembered that he’d been trying to get him to have some food. So he gently grasped Dash’s hand and towed him, unresisting, to the desk and maneuvered him onto the concrete stool.

“Eat,” Henry said firmly. Because one thing he’d learned after watching humans for a hundred years was that skipping meals was rarely wise.

When Dash picked up the soggy-looking sandwich and took a bite, Henry rewarded him with a kiss on top of his head.

“I killed Townsend,” Dash said morosely after he’d swallowed.

“I know. I heard the gunshot but didn’t understand what was happening. Once I’d, um, regenerated a little, I listened in on conversations. Bureau agents like to gossip.”

Dash almost smiled. “That they do.”

“So I know you shot him, and nobody seems to know exactly why, and every time people get too nosy about it that Victor Holmes man tells them to shut up.” It was effective, too, because everyone seemed terrified of the man.

“Huh.”

Henry crouched so that he and Dash were eye to eye. “You shot him to save me. Even though he was your boss.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

This was the question that had been haunting Henry as he healed, and yes, he was aware of the irony of a spirit being haunted. He knew Dash had been willing to protect him from Termites, but Termites were nasty things without, as far as he knew, any redeeming qualities. He also knew that Dash had made the chief promise not to hurt him, which was very nice. But there was a big gulf between demanding promises and killing the man who broke them.

But Dash, sandwich in hand, looked as bewildered as Henry felt. “I don’t know. But I do know I’d do it again if someone was trying to destroy you. If *anyone* was trying to destroy you.”

In a way, this was really terrible, that a good man such as Dash felt drawn to homicide. But Henry couldn’t help the warm, soft feeling that Dash would do this for *him*.

“Nobody here is sure what to do with you,” Henry reported, hoping the squeeze he gave Dash’s shoulder was reassuring. “They’re waiting for the new chief to arrive and make decisions, I think.”

Dash shrugged as if this didn’t interest him. Then he frowned. “You have to find someone we can trust. Someone who will keep the Termites away from you.”

“You can do that.”

“I murdered the chief, Henry. The best future I can hope for is being in a cage for the rest of my life.”

Henry looked around the cell, which was the most depressing a place imaginable. “Like this one?”

“If I’m lucky.”

“I’ll stay with you. Wherever you are, that will be my home.”

“No.” Dash shook his head. “You’ve done nothing wrong. You don’t deserve to be locked up.”

“I always have been, in a sense, until you found me. But Dash, it wouldn’t be a punishment for me. It would be my pleasure. As long as I’m with you, I’ll be happy.” Henry knew without a doubt that this was true. With Dash nearby he felt settled. Connected. He felt at home.

Dash was ignoring his dinner again. “And if they execute me?”

Gods, Henry hoped he didn’t look as horrified as he felt. “Then I’ll stay with you to the end, and afterward the Termites can have me. Don’t argue with me. I’ve lived for a hundred years. That’s plenty.”

It looked as if Dash was going to argue anyway, so Henry picked up the sandwich, shoved it into his hand, then waited with eyebrow raised until Dash took a bite.

“I’m not very pleased with our clothing choices,” said Henry while Dash chewed. “That coverall thing you’re wearing does nothing for you. And I’m stuck with these, which I found in the gym.” He tugged with one hand at his T-shirt, with the other at his shorts.

“Most people bring their own exercise clothes, but the Bureau keeps some around. Just in case, I guess.”

“At least I found the badge you gave me. It was on Townsend’s desk. But I miss the clothing we shopped for together. And I miss seeing you in a suit, or in those tight jeans.”

That ghost of a smile flickered again on Dash’s lips before he smoothed a palm over his beard. “I look like shit. They

didn't give me a razor. Afraid I'd slit my wrists, I guess. As if I'd want to save them the effort."

Henry didn't want to think about that. He gestured impatiently for Dash to finish the sandwich and then to eat the remainder of his food: an apple, some cooked carrot slices—which Dash had to eat with his fingers since there was no cutlery—a plastic tube of fruit-flavored yogurt, and a cup of apple juice. Henry wondered if the Bureau made an effort to create such unappealing meals. After all, they could have simply brought him something from the cafeteria which, as far as Henry could tell, served fairly decent food. Well, at least Dash was eating *something*. Based on his reduced muscle mass, he looked as if he'd been fasting.

When the tray was empty, Dash stood and scratched his head. "I feel grimy. Can't remember when I showered last."

"Go ahead." Henry waved toward the corner of the cell. "I'll clean up."

Surprisingly, Dash didn't make a fuss. He sat on the cot to pull off his socks, then stood, unbuttoned the coveralls, and stepped out of them.

It was the first time Henry had seen him naked. Despite Dash's privations since he'd been incarcerated, he looked magnificent. Far more handsome than any of the men in the magazines that Paul used to hoard. Henry was aware that he was staring, but since Dash didn't seem to care, he didn't avert his gaze. At least not until he felt his own dick start to harden, at which point Henry reminded himself that Dash didn't want him in that way.

"Tidying up," Henry mumbled. Not that there was much to tidy in this stark room. He rearranged Dash's empty plastic dishes more neatly, straightened the blanket and pillow, and picked up Dash's discarded coveralls and socks. The clothes were fairly stinky, and he set them aside until he could wash them later in the sink or shower.

By the time Henry had completed his small tasks, Dash was drying himself with the small, thin towel. He was shivering too—the water must have been cold.

“They could treat you better,” Henry complained.

“This *is* better.”

Dash hung the towel on a hook and then simply stood, arms crossed, as if unsure what to do next. Henry hated to see him uncertain. Dash was supposed to be bold and confident.

“Get into bed,” Henry said. “You look exhausted.”

“I haven’t done anything all day. Or any day, however long I’ve been here.”

“You’ve survived. And you’ve been burdened by guilt.”

“I missed you.” Dash’s voice was tiny and lost. It broke Henry’s heart.

Henry walked over, took Dash’s hand, and led him to the cot. The fact that Dash went docilely was a testament to how broken he was. He allowed Henry to maneuver him onto the cot and cover him with the thin blanket, but he was still shivering. Henry eyed him thoughtfully. He could urge Dash to put on the clean coverall. Or he could warm him in a more personal way.

“Can I join you?” Henry asked.

Dash sat up at once. “You can have—”

Henry pushed him back down. “Can I *join* you?”

“There’s not enough room.”

He had a point. The cot was small and Dash was big. But Henry, living as he did between walls, was well accustomed to fitting into small spaces, so he firmed his chin and skimmed out of his stolen clothes as Dash watched, big-eyed. “Henry....”

“We can just sleep. I’ll keep you warm.”

“If you get in here with me, there’s no way I’m going to just sleep.”

That comment cheered Henry up a little because he heard some of the old Dash in it. Good. “We don’t have to just sleep.”

“We’ve been through this.”

“Yes. Power differential, Stockholm Syndrome, blah blah. I’m not your prisoner anymore. If I wanted, I could spend the rest of eternity haunting this building, which is much bigger than my old house and full of all sorts of interesting things. But what I want is to be here. With you.”

Dash sighed. “Now I’m the prisoner.”

“But you’re not *my* prisoner. Dash, please. I want this so badly, and for the past week I’ve thought you were gone and that I’d never have this, never have you, and I can’t....”

Great. Now he was crying, which he hadn’t meant to do. He wasn’t trying to manipulate Dash. But he’d felt so desperate while trying to literally pull himself together and then when he was looking for Dash, while not even sure that he was still alive. Losing him would have been worse for Henry than losing his house.

“Come here.” Dash made a sound that was part amusement and part sadness, which was quite an impressive achievement.

Henry didn’t pause to admire the accomplishment, though. He dried his eyes and climbed mostly on top of Dash, then pulled the stupid blanket over them both.

For a bit, neither of them moved or said anything. Henry could feel Dash’s body warming beneath him as the shivering slowed and stopped. Dash eventually wrapped his arms around Henry and buried his nose in Henry’s hair. “I’m not proud I did it,” Dash whispered. “But I’d do it again. For you.”

He’d said this already, but the repetition was comforting.

Soon, Dash began gently stroking Henry’s back, which was lovely, and Henry responded by petting Dash’s side and flank. It was a little strange—but not in a bad way—how soft his skin felt when his body was so hard. Also his whiskers tickled. He was a complicated man, a study in unexpected contrasts, and Henry liked that. If Dash had been a room, he would be decorated with interesting objects that should have clashed but instead came together into a fascinating whole. Henry would happily inhabit that room.

As the mutual caressing continued, Henry became gradually aware that his dick was erect and that he felt Dash's hardness beneath him. That was pleasant enough, but soon heat pooled low in Henry's belly. He needed more.

"Tell me what to do," he said somewhat breathlessly.

"Whatever you want."

"But I don't know how." Magazines and TV were nothing like having a real, live man beneath you.

"Go with your instincts. Try whatever feels right. There's a million ways to do this, and most of them are pretty damn good. I'll let you know if I'm not into it. Although frankly, I'm not picky, and I'm pretty sure I'll love anything you do."

This was a lot of responsibility. But Henry realized that it was Dash's way of making Henry feel comfortable with his first sexual encounter. Dash was giving him all the choices, all the power. Henry had never experienced much of either, but being granted them now made him feel confident.

Tentatively at first, he moved his hand to other parts of Dash's body. His pectoral muscles and tight abs. His biceps. His narrow hips. When he grew more bold, he used his tongue instead of his fingers, and he concentrated on Dash's nipples. And... oh. Dash gasped and moaned beneath him, his skin now heated and his face flushed. Henry was doing that, making Dash forget about his troubles and lose himself in the joys of his body. The joys of *their* bodies, because Dash wasn't entirely passive. He'd been kneading Henry's ass, and when Henry responded by spreading his legs, Dash lightly brushed fingertips down the cleft.

This was much better than when Henry played with himself.

The bright overhead light clicked off, leaving the two of them in dim illumination from the corner. If Dash noticed, he didn't react. Henry could see fine in almost total darkness, but right now he'd be satisfied with no vision at all. He was getting more than sufficient input from his other senses.

"I want.... I think I want more," Henry panted.

“Take anything you want. Anything I have is yours.”

So Henry tasted Dash’s cock, which was hot and stiff and salty, but even better was when he realized he wanted Dash to do likewise. Henry rearranged himself, bringing each of them face to groin, and he was so overcome with pleasure that he almost started crying again. But then he decided he wanted Dash’s mouth, so he flipped around and they kissed, slowly undulating their bodies together.

They were moaning and gasping, hot and wet and sticky, nerves thrumming and hearts racing.

Henry made a small noise, a wordless plea for just... a little... more. Dash answered by wrapping his big hand around both of their dicks just tightly enough and squeezing Henry’s ass hard with the other.

Oh gods, yes.

Henry flew apart so completely that, dazed, he thought he might have finished the disintegration that Townsend had begun. But of course this time there was no pain—only the antithesis of pain—and he became aware that Dash still held him. Big, strong, solid Dash still, despite his loss of weight.

“Oh,” Henry sighed as he collapsed fully onto Dash’s broad chest.

“Uh-huh.”

It was gratifying that Dash wasn’t any more capable of speech than Henry was.

After several minutes, Henry began to laugh softly. “I understand now what all the fuss is about.”

“That was worth a fuss.”

“It was good? I mean... it was enough for you? We didn’t....” He squinted thinking about some of Paul’s magazines. “You said there are a million ways to make love. We only tried a few.”

That made Dash laugh. “Maybe house spirits have more stamina than I do, but any more than that, and it would have

been the end of me. It was enough, Henry. You're enough. You're exactly right."

Stephanie's grandmother used to watch a TV show called *House Hunters*, in which people toured several homes and decided which to buy. It was Henry's favorite program, because while he loved his home dearly, it was fun to imagine living somewhere else. The people on *House Hunters* would consider the merits and downsides of their options—Open concept! Room for a man cave! Too long a commute!—and then choose the one that fit them best. The end of each episode would show them moved into their new place, raving about how wonderful it was.

And that was how Henry felt now. Dash was his perfect home.



Henry was accustomed to sleeping in tight spaces, so he didn't mind being squished on the cot with Dash. Apparently Dash didn't mind either, because he held Henry tightly all night. They both slept well.

When the bright light clicked on, Dash groaned. "They'll be here soon with breakfast."

"Good. You need to eat more."

"They'll see you."

Oh. Henry was so accustomed to being invisible that he'd forgotten about that. "Do you want me to hide in the walls?"

"What do *you* want to do?"

Henry considered for a moment. "I want to stay here. With you."

"Okay then."

And that was it—Dash respected his wish and moved on. They both got dressed, and Henry was about to offer to wash Dash's dirty clothes when the lock disengaged and the door opened with a soft groan.

Three agents hovered in the doorway, gaping. Henry immediately noted that two of them had guns in their hands and the third had a tray of food.

Dash, who stood near the bed, spoke in a calm, even voice. “This is my friend Henry. I thought Townsend murdered him, but he didn’t quite. If you even think about harming him, I’ll tear you apart. But there’s no reason for you to think about that because Henry is no threat to you.”

“How did he get in here?” demanded the man with the tray.

“He’s a house spirit. Um, unclassified type.”

Unclassified. Henry liked the sound of that; it made him feel exotic and mysterious.

The agent looked deeply uncertain. “He can’t be in here.”

Dash crossed his arms. “Why not? I’ve never seen any rule explicitly prohibiting house spirits from containment cells.”

That seemed to stymie all three of them. The one in front set the tray on the floor and gestured to his colleagues. They all backed out and the door closed. After a moment, Henry fetched the tray and set it on the desk. He was going to order Dash to eat, but then the door reopened.

“We’re going to have to inform Holmes,” said the one who seemed to be in charge. He didn’t look cruel—just worried.

It was nice to see Dash’s scowl reappear. It meant he was feeling more himself. “Why him?” he demanded.

“He’s sort of in charge until the new chief gets here. Townsend left all sorts of instructions in case, um, something like this happened.”

“Fine, tell Holmes. I don’t give a shit.”

The agent nodded and seemed about to leave, but Henry had something to say. “There’s no need to treat Dash so badly.”

Dash opened his mouth, probably to protest, but Henry gestured to him to stay quiet. This was important.

The agent's frown lines deepened. "What do you mean, badly? Nobody has mistreated him. We're supposed to keep him, um, contained until admin makes decisions about him, and that's what we're doing."

Henry did his best to replicate Dash's best glower. "Fine, but bring him decent food. And a better blanket and towels, and shampoo and... and...."

"A razor would be nice." Dash patted his chin.

"And a razor. Dash *saved* me. You people are supposed to be the good guys—act humanely."

The agents didn't seem any less perplexed, but at least they weren't shooting anyone. They muttered something incomprehensible and left, locking the door behind them.

"It's really not bad," said Dash, waving his arms to indicate the cell in its entirety.

"But it could be a lot better. I'm going to do my best to look after you, Dash. Make sure you're in the best possible condition."

"Like keeping your house clean."

Henry grinned, delighted that Dash understood. "Exactly. Now have some breakfast."

CHAPTER 12



TO DASH'S ASTONISHMENT, BLANCHET AND HIS PALS returned a short while later, bringing all of the items that Henry had demanded. Including Wednesday's early-lunch special from the cafeteria: chicken enchiladas with rice and beans, tortilla chips and salsa, plus a plate of flan, several pieces of fresh fruit, and bottled iced tea. Dash gobbled it all.

After that, his meals continued to be of good quality and he received clean clothing daily. Blanchet even brought several pairs of jeans and an assortment of t-shirts for Henry. There were more books too, which they both enjoyed reading.

The shower was still cold, the cot was still narrow, and they were still locked up, but overall it wasn't bad. Henry and Dash enjoyed each other's company, trading stories from their lives, talking about places they'd like to go, or simply sharing silence together. They explored several dozen more of the million ways to make love; Henry seemed intent on trying them all, and Dash wasn't going to argue.

The days passed in a weird sort of domesticity. Of course, nothing about the future looked promising, but they had the present, and that was gift enough.

"This wasn't exactly the vacation I'd envisioned," Dash said with a chuckle one night, then nuzzled Henry's slightly sweaty neck. The evening's sexual adventures had been especially gymnastic.

"I'm sorry."

“Don’t be. I’m here because of decisions I made. Anyway, I’d rather be in a cell with you than sitting on the banks of the Douro without you.”

Henry tickled him. “I think that’s a very romantic thing to say.” But then for a few minutes he was still and silent, his thoughts almost palpable in the dark. “Something occurred to me today.”

“Yeah?” Dash had learned that Henry was clever—far more than he was—and imaginative. His ruminations were fascinating, taking all sorts of unexpected directions.

“When Lori was a girl, she went through a period when she was really into fairy tales. She’d borrow them from the library, and I’d borrow them from her while she was asleep. A lot of those stories involved magic. Is magic real, Dash?”

They’d covered this subject during his training, and Dash had had occasion to reconsider the issue over the years. He’d developed an approach that felt comfortable and right. “Magic is just a word we use when we don’t understand why something works. If you showed a car or a cellphone to someone from the Middle Ages, they would have called them magic. So yeah, sort of. And one thing I can tell you for sure as a Bureau agent is that the world is *full* of surprises and stuff we don’t understand.”

“Like unclassified house spirits?” The smile was audible in Henry’s voice.

“Exactly.”

Henry cuddled impossibly closer, but it was clear he wasn’t through with this discussion. After another pause, he sighed. “You care about me.”

“I love you.” The L-word had tumbled from Dash’s lips a few days earlier, startling him at the time. But he couldn’t deny its truth, and he’d been repeating it since.

“But what if that’s magic? What if I accidentally put some kind of spell on you to make you fall for me?”

“Can you do that?”

“I have no idea. But it happened so quickly.”

Because Henry deserved honesty, Dash weighed the question in his heart. “Well, it doesn’t matter. Whatever the reason, I love you. Hell, falling in love is always kind of magic anyway—nobody really knows exactly how it happens. Anyway, I’m *glad* I love you. You make me happy even here, even with that big question mark in my future.”

Henry, who’d been a little tense, relaxed. “I love you too. I never dreamed I could be this happy.”

“What if I was the one who put a spell on *you*?”

“Then I’m glad you did.”

It was a damned strange route to peace, but Dash was grateful for it nonetheless.



Dash’s breakfast of waffles, sausage, and orange slices had settled comfortably in his stomach. He and Henry sat side by side on the bed, each holding a book. In a little while Dash would do his daily exercise routine. It wasn’t as good as going to a gym, but it was better than nothing. Henry, who didn’t need to exercise, had appointed himself Dash’s personal trainer and barked out commands and encouragement until Dash was sweaty and sore. Now, though, they enjoyed the stillness of quiet companionship.

Suddenly the door unlocked, startling them both. Lunch wasn’t due for hours.

It was the usual daytime trio—Blanchet and his pals—and none of them looked happy. That was worrying. Over the past week they’d relaxed considerably, chatting lightly or even joking with Dash and Henry. Now, though, they all looked grim.

“We’re supposed to take you to the chief.” Blanchet’s tone was funereal.

“Why?”

“Don’t know.”

Although Dash’s gut tightened, he tried to look on the bright side. If the intention was to execute him, that would be less messy to accomplish down here. And if the plan was to transfer him to the prison in Nevada right now, there would be no reason to trot him up to the chief’s office first. Maybe the new chief wanted to debrief him. Aside from a very short round of questions right after he’d been taken into custody, nobody had asked Dash anything about what had happened.

Dash stood and straightened his jumpsuit. “All right.”

“I’m going with,” Henry announced. Nobody argued with him, probably because they all knew it wouldn’t do them any good.

After taking a step toward the door, Dash held out his arms, expecting one of the agents to cuff him. Instead, Blanchet shook his head. “Are you going to give us any problems along the way?”

“No.” What would be the point? Escape was an impossibility anyway, and he didn’t want to make trouble for these agents, who were simply following the chain of command.

“Then we’ll skip the bracelets.”

Well, that was nice, and it gave Dash a modicum of dignity, even if he was stuck in the stupid jumpsuit. It was slightly disorienting to leave the cell after so long, but he tried to keep his back straight and stride confident. Henry had firmed his chin and had perfected an iron glare that Dash would have been proud to sport himself. Although this was a busy time of day at HQ, they didn’t pass another soul—not in the basement hallway, not in the elevator, and not on the top floor en route to Townsend’s office. Which, Dash acknowledged with a pang, wasn’t Townsend’s anymore.

Holmes was in his usual spot behind the reception desk. He was clearly expecting them and didn’t look any more—or any less—pleased than usual to see Dash. If anything, he seemed slightly irritated to be interrupted from whatever he’d

been doing on his computer. “He’s ready,” Holmes said without inflection, and to the agents, “You can go now.”

Which implied, perhaps, that the trio wasn’t going to escort Dash back to the cell when the audience was over. Unsettling. They must have thought so too, because they all gave Dash sympathetic looks before leaving.

Holmes gestured impatiently at the inner door.

“Courage,” Dash muttered under his breath. Henry smiled at him.

With Dash in the lead, they entered the chief’s office.



Dash hadn’t given much thought to who would replace Townsend; the idea itself was almost unimaginable. Townsend had been leading the West Coast district of the Bureau almost since it was formed. In any case, if Dash *had* considered the issue, he never would have guessed this particular outcome.

Sitting behind Townsend’s big, industrial-looking desk was a tall man with hair so white it was almost transparent, and with eyes the color of green bottle glass. And standing slightly behind him, arms crossed over his powerful chest, was a demon with great black wings and red horns and eyes.

“Grimes!”

“Now it’s Chief Grimes,” he replied, not looking remotely happy about it.

“But—”

“Worked it out with Townsend a while back. The rationale is none of your business, and it’s not the reason you’re here.”

Dash managed to get his tongue working properly as he turned to Henry. “This is Charles Grimes. Um, Chief Grimes. And his partner, Tenrael.” Then he faced the desk again. “And this is Henry.”

“I’m Dash’s partner,” Henry said firmly. He didn’t seem put off to be facing Grimes, who was not entirely human and who was, even on his better days, sort of creepy. Nor did Henry appear to be bothered by the presence of a demon. A *naked* demon, now that Dash was paying more attention.

Both Grimes and Tenrael nodded their heads cordially and then Grimes glanced over his shoulder. “Ten, have you ever seen anyone like Henry?”

“I am not sure,” Tenrael replied, his accent thick. “Perhaps once, in Dur-Nabu.”

“Which was...?” Grimes prompted.

Tenrael shrugged. “Two or three thousand years ago.”

When Dash had first met Henry, he’d been frustrated to know so little about him. Now he was proud to know his Henry was unique, although Henry himself seemed neutral about the news.

Grimes, on the other hand looked thoughtful. “Diana Afolabi hasn’t been able to dig up any info either. Interesting.”

“You’re not going to treat Henry like a lab specimen.” Even though Dash realized he was in no position to make ultimatums, he set his jaw stubbornly. He’d already had more than enough of the Bureau fucking Henry over.

Fortunately Grimes didn’t seem angry. “No, we’re not. I was just curious. I’ve been around a while now, and I don’t run into new things very often. It’s refreshing.” He took a sip from the glass on the desk: water rather than whiskey. There was no sign of cigarettes either, but the scents lingered in the office like ghosts. “I’m sorry this took some time.”

“What did?”

“Getting you sorted out. It took a while before all the formalities were finished to bring me on board—I haven’t been a Bureau employee in the technical sense for a very long time. We had to take care of Ten, too. Jesus, the amount of red tape these people put in place. Not to mention all the goddamn *software*. I hate computers.”

Tenrael snorted slightly, as if this amused him.

But Dash didn't care what Grimes thought about modern technology. "Sorted out how?" All kinds of possibilities danced through his head, none of them attractive.

Grimes sipped some more. He looked tired. "You're officially on vacation for four weeks. After that, you're back on active duty, so have fun while you can."

Okay. *That* hadn't been one of the dancing possibilities.

"But... I killed the chief. Um, Chief Townsend."

"I'm aware of that. It was a good shot, too. Straight to the heart. Nice aim."

"But..." Dash was saying that word a lot.

"The Bureau works in mysterious ways, Agent Cooke. The official determination from Washington is that Townsend was abusing his power and that you stepped in to protect the well-being of a non-hostile NHSS. Which is, of course, your job."

Maybe this was some kind of sick joke. Except Grimes wasn't exactly the joking type, and Dash couldn't think of any reason why Grimes would attempt this kind of ruse. "I... can just walk out of here?"

"Yeah. Your car battery's probably dead. I can send someone to jump it, or you can take one of the Bureau vehicles if you'd rather."

Dazed, Dash shook his head.

Henry, who'd been listening carefully, spoke up. "Dash is a good man."

"You don't have to sell me on him. I know. I'll be happy to have him back on board in a few weeks. I think things are going to get interesting around here pretty soon."

Whatever that meant, Dash didn't want to know. It was best to make himself scarce before anyone changed their mind. But before he could move toward the exit, Grimes held up a hand. "Hang on. Two more things."

Uh oh. Dash braced himself.

“The first thing is about Henry. Put your hackles down, Cooke. Nobody’s going to touch him. It turns out that while Afolabi didn’t dig up anything about Henry, she *did* learn some information about the things you’ve been calling Termites.”

Dash felt immediate remorse. Despite the fact that protecting Henry was his top priority, he hadn’t even thought about the fucking Termites in ages. Perhaps reading Dash’s mind, Henry gave him a comforting pat. “What did she learn?” he asked softly.

“They go by several names, but the Bureau rarely messes with them because they don’t have much to do with humans. Or with most NHSSs, for that matter. They’re not sentient, and they feed off certain energy patterns.”

Henry nodded as if that made sense, and Dash thought he was being admirably calm. If he’d been in Henry’s place, he’d be yelling in Grimes’s face, demanding to know more. Although Dash felt his frown deepen, he managed to keep his mouth shut so that Henry could handle it himself.

Grimes finished off his water. “Afolabi found a report from the Indian Ministry of the Uncanny—which I guess is their equivalent of the Bureau—about some research they’d done on Termites. They developed a device that’s supposed to alter energy signals a tiny bit. Just enough to ruin the Termites’ appetite.”

Dash couldn’t keep silent any longer. “How can we get this thing?”

Scowling, Grimes heaved a sigh. “We already did. That’s what Townsend used on Henry. It wasn’t supposed to harm him.”

Oh, fuck. Dash’s stomach plummeted. Townsend really had been trying to help Henry, and Dash had murdered him anyway, and— Wait. “That doesn’t make sense. Townsend knew he was killing Henry. It was obvious.” He shuddered at the memory of Henry’s screams. “That altering of energy patterns wasn’t just ‘a tiny bit,’ and when I yelled at Townsend to stop, he didn’t.”

“I know.” Grimes gazed at him, looking bleak. “Afolabi took a look at the thing afterward. She said the device had been altered. And considering that she’d given it directly to Townsend, he was most likely the one who altered it.”

“Why?” The word left Dash almost as a wail.

“Hell if I know. Jesus, Cooke, who knows why Townsend did most of the things he did?”

Grimes had a good point, and it might have been worth pursuing but Grimes reached into a drawer and pulled out something resembling a silver pen. Dash reached for his gun—which wasn’t there, of course—but Grimes shook his head sharply, placed the object on his desk, and then pulled his hand back.

“This is a new one. Afolabi got it straight from India and handed it to me. Nobody else has touched it. I’m giving it to you two, to use if you wish. Afolabi says you just point and click, and that’s the end of Henry’s Termite problems forever.”

Dash hesitated. He didn’t have any particular reason to distrust Grimes or the archivist, but that didn’t mean the gadget was safe to use on Henry. Maybe its effects were benign on other beings, but for Henry, nobody could know.

Henry, however, reached out, took the device, and put it in his jeans pocket. “Thank you.” It was, after all, his decision to make.

“What’s the other thing?” Dash asked cautiously.

Again Grimes pulled something out of his desk—a white envelope with *Agent Cooke* neatly handwritten on the front. “When I got here, there was a whole box of notes from Townsend waiting for me. I’m still going through the damn things. This was in the box too.”

“What does it say?” Dash eyed it as if it might bite.

“It’s sealed. I didn’t open it.” At Dash’s raised eyebrow, he shrugged. “Got enough of my own shit to deal with without worrying about yours, Agent Cooke.”

“Fair enough.”

“Go home, Dash. Take Henry with you. Have a nice vacation together. Come back in a month ready to face... whatever’s coming.”

Dash noted Henry’s encouraging nod and took the envelope. “See you next month, I guess.”

Then he and Henry left the office.

CHAPTER 13



HENRY WAS EAGER TO GET OUT OF HQ AS QUICKLY AS possible. Grimes seemed okay, and Tenrael was fascinating, but Henry had had more than enough of that building for a while. He wanted to get Dash home.

First, though, Dash had to pick up his wallet and keys from Agent Holmes, who also gave him a bag containing the suit Dash had been wearing when he shot Townsend. Holmes had Dash's gun and badge too, but after staring at them for a moment, Dash shook his head. "Keep 'em 'til I'm back on duty."

That made Henry happy. Dash needed a break from the Bureau.

Dash decided to take his own car, even though somebody had to help him start it. Henry didn't mind that it wasn't as fancy as the Bureau vehicle they'd arrived in. As long as a car had a radio, Henry was content.

"Home," Dash said as they entered his apartment. He was smiling, as if he was truly happy to be there. "It looks nice with your decorations."

"It's dusty. Probably all the food in your fridge went bad. But don't worry. I'll take care of it." Henry rubbed his hands together eagerly, imagining all the lovely chores he had ahead of him. There hadn't been many to do in the cell. "I'll have your home clean in no time."

"Our home."

Those two little words, spoken quietly, froze Henry in his tracks. “Ours?” he rasped.

“Yes. Unless.... You know, instead of going away on vacation, we could spend the next weeks house hunting. We can pick out a place together. Prices are a lot higher than back when José and I were looking, but I’ve got a good stash of savings.”

Henry was going to cry. Instead, though, he nodded stiffly and pulled the Indian pen thing out of his pocket. “Try this. Please.”

Looking horrified, Dash took two steps back. “No! What if it kills you?”

“What if it doesn’t? You deserve someone who isn’t permanently glued to your side. I deserve to be free to walk outside by myself if I want to. I need to do this, Dash.” Because if he didn’t, their relationship would never have the equality it needed. Henry would be hopelessly dependent on Dash and not a true partner.

Dash’s patented scowl was back in full force, but he took the device. Gingerly, as if he were afraid it might explode. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Henry smiled at him. “I know.”

And when Dash pointed the thing at him, Henry wasn’t afraid. Still smiling, he nodded his encouragement.

After briefly closing his eyes and then opening them again, Dash pressed the little button.

Henry felt something touch him, immediately engulfing his body, but it wasn’t painful. Just a slight tingle, hardly more than a tickle... and that was it. “I’m not dead,” he announced brightly.

Dash handed back the device, looking very relieved. “Did it work?”

“Only one way to find out.”

He could have gone out onto the balcony, but maybe that wasn’t a good enough test. Instead he took Dash’s hand, and

together they walked downstairs and out into the parking lot, fairly empty at this time of day. Dash still wore his prisoner coveralls but didn't seem to care. He was too busy looking worried about Henry.

"Stay here," Henry ordered and then began to walk away. While Dash watched nervously, Henry increased the distance between them. Farther and farther, until they both had to raise their voices to be heard.

Dash shouted first. "If the Termites come, I don't think I can get to you in time."

Although Henry believed that to be true, he remained in place. If he was going to feel safe, he had to give this a true test. And if the device wasn't going to protect him, he'd rather get this over with now instead of spending the rest of his future afraid and dependent.

"I love you!" Henry yelled.

"I love you too!"

They waited.

And waited.

Nothing happened. None of that skin-crawling terror that preceded an attack. No swarm appearing out of nowhere. No fangs and claws. No agonizing bites.

Just a neighbor walking to her Prius, giving both Henry and Dash very puzzled looks.

The clearer it became that no attack would occur, the lighter and brighter Henry felt. He'd spent a hundred years chained to an invisible boulder, and now it was gone. He almost felt as if he might float up into the sky. Instead he launched himself at full speed across the pavement... and into Dash's waiting arms.



Although Henry *could* wander off on his own now, he didn't want to. Paradoxically, he felt the urge to snuggle in as close to

Dash as possible. Back in Dash's apartment—their home—Henry smiled. “I bet we can be a lot more inventive in your big bed than on that stupid cot.”

“You're opting for sex instead of chores?” Dash wagged his eyebrows. “I must be extra enticing today.”

“Sex, then chores. Today I feel like I can have it all.”

“Me too.”

But then Dash's expression grew serious. “The envelope.”

Henry hadn't exactly forgotten about it; the envelope simply hadn't been one of his priorities. He would have happily ignored its existence for several more days. But that wasn't fair to Dash, who clearly needed to know what Townsend had left for him.

“It could wait for later,” Henry suggested.

“I want to get it over with.”

Dash retrieved the envelope from the bag containing his suit. He spent a few moments standing in the center of the living room, staring at his handwritten name. When he spoke, his voice was low. “If it wasn't for him, I don't know what would have become of me. Probably nothing good, likely prison. He was the first person who made me feel like I had a future. And my career... well, some parts of it suck, but mostly I've loved it. I feel like I'm doing good. Like I have a purpose. He gave that to me.”

Henry nodded. He didn't hate Townsend—he hadn't known him long enough to hate him. When Townsend had zapped him, it hadn't felt like a personal attack. Henry had even gotten the impression that Townsend regretted having to do it. “People are complicated,” he pointed out. “No matter the species.”

“I wonder if he felt he had to kill you—just like I felt I had to kill him.”

Dash took a few deep breaths and tore the envelope open, then removed a single sheet of paper, which he held toward Henry. “Can you read it to me, please? I just....”

“Of course.” Henry took it.

It was written in a neat, old-fashioned script in blue ink on thick, expensive-feeling stationery, and each line was straight and even, as if the author had used a ruler as a guide. There was no letterhead imprinted on the paper.

“Dear Dash,” he began. Then he paused. “Do you want to sit down for this?”

“No.”

“All right.”

Dear Dash,

Son, I owe you a most sincere apology. You may not believe this, but I never wanted to lie to you or to harm your Henry. Unfortunately, sometimes we are forced to make sacrifices. I’m deeply sorry that yours was involuntary.

I am not necessarily the most infallible moral authority, but I do believe that your act of killing me was the ethically right thing to do under the circumstances. I hope you will not carry guilt over it. I also hope that you can believe in your heart that what I did was necessary and in furtherance of the greater good.

You are a good man, Dashiell. Too eager on the trigger, perhaps, but I do believe you’ve been tempering your inclinations of late.

I am not especially optimistic that your Henry survived the ordeal. If he did not, I don’t expect your forgiveness, but please accept my condolences nonetheless.

If by chance he did survive—and I do believe he is quite a strong person—I have a word of wisdom for you both. Some homes are made of wood or steel or stone. But some, my boy, are made of flesh and blood. Those are the most precious homes of all.

Again, I am sorry. And I wish you strength, joy, courage, and hope. We will be needing all of those in abundance.

Yours,

Herbert Townsend

Dash and Henry stared at each other for several moments.

“He set us up,” Dash finally said. “Set you up to be killed and set me up to shoot him.”

“I don’t think he truly wanted me dead.”

“No, maybe not. But he was willing to sacrifice you if that’s what it took. Henry, why the hell would he want me to murder him?”

Dash sounded shaky and uncertain, so Henry set the paper on the coffee table and took Dash into his arms. “‘In furtherance of the greater good’,” Henry quoted.

“Whatever the fuck that means.”

“When he planned things in the past and his plans didn’t make sense at the time, did he usually turn out to be right in the end?”

“Yeah. Always,” Dash admitted with a sigh. Then his voice tightened. “Doesn’t matter, though. I don’t care what he did to me—I’m a Bureau agent and I pretty much signed on for shit—but I don’t forgive him for what he did to you.”

Henry gave him a hard squeeze. “Okay. I do, though. He made sure you wouldn’t be punished for shooting him, didn’t he? Aside from the time in the cell, I mean.”

“He did. God, talk about having conflicted feelings about someone. If he showed up right now, I’m not sure whether I’d thank him or shoot him again.” Dash laughed without humor.

But Henry had understood something specific as he was reading the letter, and now he was bursting with eagerness to share. This was more important than whatever Townsend’s scheme had been and whatever feelings Dash had over a dead man. Henry squeezed Dash again, even harder this time. “Did you catch his words of wisdom?”

“Um, yeah. But don’t ask me to explain it. He was always full of cryptic shit like that.”

“I don’t need you to explain it. And it’s not cryptic.”

“Oh?”

One more squeeze, a quick kiss on Dash’s lips, and Henry took a step back. “I’m a house spirit.”

“Um... yes?”

“I need a home to inhabit. Even now, without having to worry about the Termites, I need a home.”

“We can start looking for a place tomorrow.”

Henry grinned at him. “That’s fine. It’ll be fun. I hope we find the perfect house. But Dash, I already have a home. That’s what Townsend was saying, and he was right. That home fits me perfectly, and I fit *it*, because it’s been vacant too long.”

Dash looked thoroughly confused. “This apartment? The place in Sacramento? God, it’s not HQ, is it?” He was adorable. Henry wanted to kiss him some more, but that could wait a moment.

“A home of flesh and blood, Dash. Can’t you feel it? My home is right here.”

Henry placed his palm on Dash’s chest, directly over his strong heart.

Comprehension appeared on Dash’s face like the sun after a year-long darkness. He covered Henry’s hand with one of his own—big, warm, a little callused. Perfect. “I am your home,” Dash whispered. “And you are my spirit.”

“Yes.”

And then it was time for those kisses.

According to Townsend’s hints, something loomed in their future. But worrying about that could wait. Now Henry was going to make love in a big bed for the first time, and then he was going to tidy their apartment, and maybe he’d even convince Dash to go shopping after that. Or they could look at

real estate listings online. Maybe they could drive out to the beach to watch the sunset.

Because wherever they went, whatever they did—as long as they were together, Henry would be home.

THE BUREAU OF TRANS-SPECIES AFFAIRS



For many years the United States government has been aware that *Homo sapiens* is not the only sentient species inhabiting the country. Some other species were native to the continent, while others immigrated along with humans. Early on, these nonhuman species (NHS) were largely ignored when they lived peacefully within human communities. At other times they were deemed a threat and local efforts were made to eradicate them. The federal government was not involved in these early efforts.

During the Civil War, both the Union and Confederate armies recruited members of the NHS, with varying degrees of success.

By the early 20th century, some local law enforcement agencies expressed frustration with their inability to deal effectively with the special needs of NHS. Localized incidents of mass violence occurred in several locations, most notably

the Omaha Zombie Epidemic of 1908, the Manchester (New Hampshire) Melusine Drownings of 1911, and the Eugene (Oregon) Sasquatch Riots of 1915.

In response to these incidents, as well as a heightened desire for increased federal control, President Wilson created a new federal agency in 1919 called the Bureau of Trans-Species Affairs. The mission of this agency was to communicate with NHS, to control them, to investigate reported dangerous actions committed by them, and to bring them to justice or eliminate them when necessary. Since then, the Bureau has been quietly active throughout the United States. Its jurisdiction has expanded to include humans who engage in magical or paranormal activities.

Over the decades, a great many dramas have unfolded among the people who work for the Bureau. The **Bureau stories** are a collection of these tales. Each involves different protagonists and is set in a different era, yet all focus on the adventures and struggles of the Bureau's agents. These novellas can be read in any order.

*****The Bureau of Trans-Species Affairs: Strength, Intelligence, Honor*****

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Kim Fielding is very pleased every time someone calls her eclectic. Winner of the BookLife Prize for Fiction, a Lambda Award finalist and three-time Foreword INDIE finalist, she has migrated back and forth across the western two-thirds of the United States and currently lives in California, where she long ago ran out of bookshelf space. She's a university professor who dreams of being able to travel and write full time. She also dreams of having two daughters who fully appreciate her, a husband who isn't obsessed with football, and a house that cleans itself. Some dreams are more easily obtained than others.

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