

*Sheri Eleese*

Crystal  
Magic

- STARFALL GROVE 1 -

**Crystal Magic**  
*Starfall Grove - Book One*

Sheri Eleese

# **Crystal Magic**

## **Starfall Grove - Book One**

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Written by Sheri Eleese

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## About Crystal Magic

*Jasper wants two things in life; to help people with his magic and the sexy detective who keeps arresting him. An enemy he's unaware of wants to make sure he gets neither.*

**Jasper Belmont**, a third-generation crystal witch, has long dreamed of opening a store specializing in magic-infused crystal jewelry that will help his customers however they need it most. He's only a few weeks away from making that dream a reality when he attracts a stalker who turns his life into a nightmare.

What starts out as a few embarrassing incidents soon escalates, putting everything he's worked towards at risk. The hot detective who's sent to investigate thinks Jasper's staging everything to drum up publicity for his store's Grand Opening.

Which is not how he'd envisioned his first meeting with his mate to go.

Jasper will have to convince his detective that the threat is real before his stalker, who's closer than he realizes, sets their sights on the man who is the other half of Jasper's soul.

Or was it already too late?

For Angela,

Who asked me to write her a witch series.



## The Beginning

Everything changed the day the meteor tore through the atmosphere and crashed to the ground in Cherry Grove...most of all for Old Thomas Graves, who was out walking his dog Daisy at the time.

When the terrified and confused townsfolk had dug themselves out from under the rubble of their homes, flattened by the shock wave when it hit, they went looking for the cause of their town's destruction.

And found it in the middle of Old Thomas' beloved cherry orchard.

The sun had just started to rise when the townsfolk, whispering excitedly amongst themselves, gingerly approached the silvery-black rock. Gasps of amazement filled the quiet of the early morning air when they found Daisy, alive and well, curled up next to the gigantic stone. They quickly unhooked her from the leather leash that was pinned under the rock, immediately understanding what had happened to Old Thomas.

Attempts were made to retrieve his body, but eventually the townsfolk gave up the task, consoling themselves with the knowledge that the silvery-black rock from outer space was a fitting monument to mark the final resting place of the ninety-eight-year-old founder of Cherry Grove.

To honor his memory, they erected a memorial plaque next to the meteorite, along with a wrought-iron bench so those visiting Old Thomas could sit comfortably while they gazed over what remained of the orchard he'd lovingly nurtured into existence.

And life went on.

But the fallout from the meteorite's arrival didn't stop there.

It didn't take long for word of it to get around. People from far and near began flocking to Cherry Grove to see it.

Among the first to arrive were the Government officials who tried to claim the interstellar rock, stating it was a matter of national security. But when they were unable to move it—something the townsfolk could have told them was impossible if they'd bothered to ask—they said it could stay. But more than one person overheard them talking about bringing in a special army unit to relocate it to a secret military installation.

Scientists showed up and set up camp in a nearby field so they could study it.

Concerned families began trickling in, bringing their sick and ailing to touch the meteorite, desperately hoping the stone had healing properties that would cure them. And miraculously, many of them did recover, though the scientists said there was no way to know for certain that the meteorite had been responsible for their loved one's healing.

But the people of Cherry Grove knew the truth.

Those who were sensitive to nature and the spirit world thought the meteorite had mystical powers and spent long hours communing with it, afterward saying the stone held secrets far beyond their understanding but were certain it could do wondrous things.

Their words found fertile ground in those searching for a miracle.

Young brides wanting to get pregnant pressed their flat bellies against the stone, certain contact with it would make them fertile.

Those financially destitute begged the meteorite for help, convinced it would fulfill their wishes if only they were passionate enough in their requests.

The lonely and desperate would lay their hands upon its silvery-black surface and whisper their yearnings of having someone to love.

And for many, their deepest desires were granted.

And with every dream fulfilled, every healing performed, every love found, the legend of the miraculous rock from outer space grew, bringing more people to Cherry Grove. And all who arrived were given an opportunity to touch the meteorite so they, too, could ask it for what they needed most, with the meteorite bestowing its blessings on a fortunate few.

But that all came to an abrupt end when a group of men attacked it with pickaxes and chisels, trying to chip off pieces of the space rock to sell on the black market. Overnight, a metallic barrier went up around the meteorite.

From that day forward, nobody could get near the stone unless the shimmering black gate in the newly erected barrier opened and granted them access, something that infuriated the Government officials. Determined to get through, they brought in their specially trained army unit. But when even their attempts to drop down on it from helicopters were repelled—the soldiers stopped by an invisible force mid-jump—they had no choice but to accept defeat and move on.

Months passed.

But the flood of visitors arriving in Cherry Grove showed no signs of slowing, even though only a few managed to get in to see the meteorite. The small town was soon overrun when many of them decided to stay. Low-rise apartment buildings went up to accommodate the newcomers. Merchants opened shops of every kind on Main Street, then Second, and even on to Third. Stop lights, which had never been needed before, were erected to control the surge in traffic as the population of the small town expanded.

And people kept coming.

The borders of the town doubled, then doubled again as more visitors arrived wanting to see the falling star of Cherry Grove until the once small town was a thriving community of over twenty-three thousand and growing.

Newspapers from the larger cities took notice of them, sending their reporters who wrote articles about the meteorite

and its wondrous powers, driving even more people to Cherry Grove. The town's borders were pushed out again. Grassy fields were replaced by apartments and plots of land were marked off and filled with single-family homes. Shops flourished with the steady influx of big city money until they too expanded, setting up second and sometimes third locations.

The Town Council, seeing the opportunities in the unprecedented growth affecting their town, decided to formally change the name of Cherry Grove to take full advantage of their newfound notoriety. Thus Starfall Grove came into being. The newly named and expanded town was like any other midsize American town...with one major difference...the large cosmic stone that lay at the center of everything.

More than just their town was changing.

Those living within the meteorite's sphere of influence realized they were becoming more sensitive to nature and the powers of the earth. Babies were born with strange markings on the palms of their hands or soles of their feet, and as they grew, manifested powers that affected the world around them. Still others, especially those in areas of law enforcement and education, gained extrasensory powers, which, when added to their natural abilities to read and connect with people, made them a force to be reckoned with.

The stone also began to draw those who were Other to Starfall Grove.

Shifters, dragons, vampires, and even a few stranded Fae began trickling into town, all looking slightly bemused even as they made arrangements to stay, unsure why they'd packed up their old lives and come, knowing only that this was where they needed to be. The townspeople would nod in understanding and welcome the newcomers to the community with open arms, knowing their celestial stone had called them to Starfall Grove.

And for the few who thought the stone was an abomination and were unaccepting of the many different beings making Starfall Grove their home...well, they soon found reasons to leave and were never heard from again.

That's not to say everything was perfect. Starfall Grove was no different than any other community, containing a mix of good people and bad, friendly and curmudgeonly, wealthy and poor, those who resented everything and those who found joy in every day. But overall, it was a great place to live where everyone looked out for their neighbors...most of the time. Because even the best of people can have an off day.

Like the time Elizabeth Kendall's cherry peach pie took the blue ribbon at the Annual Spring Fair, beating out Barbara Ellen, who'd taken first prize for her cherry berry explosion pie nine years running. Barbara Ellen was so outraged by her defeat she threw her second-place cherry berry explosion pie, with its intricate lattice top, into the judges' faces, then tackled Elizabeth Kendall to the ground. By the time they'd managed to separate the ladies, not a single table with baked goods was left standing, to the dismay of everyone who'd won the raffle enabling them to claim one of the non-winning entries to take home.

Then there was the time the Johnson boys stole Barney Ridley's work truck to go joyriding and ended up driving it into the duck pond at the edge of town. Being that it was a warm summer day, half the town was there to witness as it sank beneath the algae covered waters. They cheered when the three soaked and shamefaced boys waded through the cattails at the edge of the pond to be met by their irate mother who dragged them off by their ears, switching which triplet she was holding every few steps so no one's ear got missed being yanked.

And then there was old Fred, who had a habit of drinking away his weekly paycheck, then passing out in Mrs. Phife's garden. The police officers on duty the night Fred got paid would sit with Mrs. Phife on her veranda, drinking tea and chatting as they waited for Fred to stagger down the back lane,

where he would, like clockwork, stop in the exact same place to light a cigarette. As he'd lean back against Mrs. Phife's fence to take a long drag, he would, without fail, topple over the low barrier and land in her daisies. After a couple of abortive attempts to get up, Fred would collapse to the ground and, surrounded by the bright, cheerful flowers, begin snoring.

Once Mrs. Phife had made sure nothing had caught on fire, she would ask the officers if they had time for another biscuit, which they always did, after which they would fish the slumbering man out of her garden and let him sleep off his drunk in the jail cell they kept set aside for him.

All in all, life in Starfall Grove was much the same as you'd find in any other mid-sized town, having just enough excitement to keep the local police force busy but without any of the major crime of a big city.

Or so they thought.

What none of the good people of Starfall Grove were aware of was that under the façade of politeness and goodwill, there was a darkness. A contingent of those who didn't want to live in peace and harmony. Ones who believed the powers they held gave them the right to take what they wanted. They chafed at having to live by the rules of the community, when by rights, they should be ruling over everyone who was weaker than them.

They attempted to sway the others who had influence and strength to their way of thinking, but were met with disbelief, then, when they pressed further, anger and contempt.

So they tried to take control by force, but to their shock, were easily stopped. How was that possible? They were the strongest, the chosen ones. How could anyone have stood against them?

That's when they discovered a select few had been gifted with shards of the meteorite that amplified their powers.

Their fury knew no bounds. How dare the stone give pieces of itself to *them*, those who'd shown themselves to be

weak, unworthy, their unwillingness to wield their power for their own benefit proving how undeserving of it they were.

So they tried to obtain their own shards but were unable to get near the meteorite, its unearthly power holding them at bay. Their hatred for those who had been favored by the stone was now matched by their obsessive need to take those powerful shards for their own.

But knowing they weren't strong enough to defeat the shard-holders, they fell back, giving every appearance of being beaten. Acting subdued, they pretended they'd learned their lesson, that they'd given up on their plans, then, when attention turned away from them, they looked for other ways, darker ways, to gain the power they needed.

Ancient texts of dark magic were unearthed from family vaults and studied. When they'd learned everything they could from those, they went hunting for others, chasing down every rumor until they found what they were looking for, taking those texts from their rightful owners, feeding the dark tomes their blood to transfer ownership to themselves.

And then they looked for more, continuing their searches until they finally found the texts that showed them what they needed to do.

Every lesson required the spilling of blood.

They went after the weak and vulnerable, sacrificing them so they could extract their power. Loners arriving in town were captured and drained. The righteous, who'd wanted to live anywhere but Starfall Grove, never made it far past the town's borders before they were taken and made to suffer for hours before finally being allowed to die.

And sometimes, when one of them proved weak, they would turn on each other.

But they learned. And grew stronger.

They operated in the shadows, presenting polite public faces as they delved deeper into the ancient texts, going further down the darker paths. Voices, heard only by them, fed into their deepest desires, their narcissism, their greed, encouraging

them to more monstrous deeds, pulling them further into the abyss.

As their powers grew, so did their hatred at having to conceal their true natures. They hungered for the day they would no longer have to hide, when they could destroy those who stood in the way of what they wanted. When they would wrest control of Starfall Grove from those protecting it and rule over all. Then they'd take over the next town, and the next, until they controlled everything.

*“Patience,”* the slippery voices from the dark whispered. *“You are not ready. Watch. Wait. Prepare.”*

Knowing better than to disobey and wary of alerting the shard-holders to their plans, they heeded the voices and stayed in the shadows, biding their time in seething frustration as they waited for their moment to strike.

That day was almost at hand.



## Prologue

*Seventy-five years ago...*

It waited under the rays of the full moon, its hulking form glowing with an unearthly light as it called to her, tugging at her, pressing on her will as it urged her to come closer.

But Clarissa Belmont, her heart pounding hard enough to burst from her chest, stayed where she was. Leaning against the iron fence surrounding it, she gripped the metal bars and stared at the glowing rock trying to decide if she was going to walk through the gate that had opened for her when she'd arrived or do the smart thing, the expected thing, and return home to her bed before her parents realized she was missing.

For a girl, almost a woman, who tried to follow the rules, the decision was more difficult than she'd expected. But the call of the meteorite had been almost impossible to resist.

And Goddess knows she'd tried.

For the last few weeks, the stone had been pulling at her, urging her to come to it. Clarissa, wary of the changes it would bring to her peaceful life, had ignored it. But as stubborn as she could be, obstinance running strong in her line, Clarissa was no match for the might of the meteorite, its powerful draw weakening her resistance with each day that passed until she found herself standing before it, not quite sure how she'd come to be there.

But even now that she was here, with only a fence standing between her and the meteorite, Clarissa hesitated to go nearer. Chewing on her top lip, a nervous habit her mother had been unable to break her of, Clarissa's mind raced as she tried to think of reasons for why the stone wanted her and what possible consequences would result from her acceding to its wishes. And if she was willing to bear the cost.

Struck with indecision, she continued to hold her position.

Then everything stilled.

Clarissa tore her eyes off the stone and looked around when the sounds of the night went quiet, the low hum of insects silenced, the chittering of the squirrels breaking off. Even the slight breeze that had been rustling the leaves in the trees stopped. Holding her breath, she waited to see what would happen next. A moment later, a pulse of energy washed over her, bringing with it a sense of assurance that all would be well. That she was safe. That she was needed. Along with the knowledge that she was but the First.

Clarissa made her decision.

Hesitation gone, she stepped through the opening and slowly approached the meteorite until she was within touching distance, the ever-present energy that surrounded it prickling her skin and making her hair fly. At a silent prod from it, she took a deep breath then placed her hand upon its rough surface, letting out a soft gasp when a small fragment broke free, practically pushing itself into her hand. Closing her fingers around the shard that pulsed gently in her grip, Clarissa immediately understood she'd been given a powerful and wondrous gift. And a great responsibility to go along with it.

Resting her forehead against the stone, Clarissa whispered her thanks and promised not to betray the trust that had been given to her. Heat flooded her, almost painful in its intensity, before it faded, leaving behind a feeling of approval and pride. Head spinning, Clarissa pushed herself off the rock and turned to leave, then froze, struck by the certainty that she was no longer alone. Squinting into the darkness, she strained to see who, or what, was out there. After a few moments, when nothing moved and the sounds of the night started up again, Clarissa shrugged it off as nervousness at being out by herself in the middle of the night.

Clutching the shard to her chest, she whispered goodnight to the stone, then took off, sprinting through the darkened orchard as fast as she could run, trying to get home before her family began stirring for the day.

From that day forward, Clarissa devoted all of her time and energy to the study of crystals and their inherent properties in hopes of learning everything she could about the powers locked in the fragment of silvery-black rock that had been entrusted to her.

When the time for the Great Task arrived, she and her heirs would be ready.

# Chapter One

*Present Day...*

Jasper choked, the slice of pizza falling from his hand when his orgasm face flashed on the television screen.

“What the fuck?” He stared at the TV in horror. This couldn’t be real. Squeezing his eyes shut, he cracked one open, hoping what he’d just seen had been some kind of hallucination, but no, his orgasm face was still on the evening news. The same evening news that sixty-eight percent of Starfall Grove watched nightly, according to the latest poll results. When his phone rang, Jasper pulled it from his pocket and answered it, not taking his eyes from the screen to see who was calling, something he immediately regretted.

“Jasper.”

“M-mom?”

“Why are you making that horrible face?”

“Uh...” He looked around the room for inspiration. “It’s, uhm...”

“Were you in an accident? Which hospital are you at?”

“I wasn’t—”

His front door slammed open.

“Jasper! Turn on the news,” his best friend and next-door neighbor Spencer shouted from the hallway.

“Spence, I’m on the—”

His friend rushed into his living room, sliding to a stop on his hardwood floors. “Oh my god. Your orgasm face is on TV.”

Shit.

“Is that Spencer?” his mother asked.

“Yes, Mom,” Jasper said, staring pointedly at his friend, who winced when he saw the phone in Jasper’s hand.

“Put me on speaker so I can talk to him.”

“I don’t think—”

“Now, please.”

Sighing, Jasper pulled the phone away from his ear and pressed the button. “You’re on speaker, Mom.”

“Wonderful. Hello Spencer.”

Mouthing *sorry* to Jasper, Spencer hesitatingly said, “Uh, hi Mrs. Belmont. How are you?”

“I’m fine, dear. Thank you for asking. Did you just say that was Jasper’s orgasm face on the news?”

“Uhm...” Spencer sent Jasper a panicked look.

Jasper shook his head and closed his eyes, knowing this wasn’t going to end well.

“You know, Jasper’s father used to make a face like that during sex,” she said conversationally.

Jasper’s eyes snapped open. No. Surely she wasn’t going to—

“Then we made our first sex video—”

Oh, god, she really was.

“—and Shaw saw what he looked like when he climaxed.”

Jasper flinched when his mother said the C word.

“To say he was appalled would be an understatement. At first, Shaw thought he was just in character because of the mercenary and captured princess scenario we were roleplaying.”

Spencer looked at Jasper, his eyes begging for help, but there was no help for either of them. Not now.

“But when he realized that was how he looked every time he climaxed—”

Jasper and Spencer both cringed when she said *climaxed* again.

“—he apologized and said he would work on changing his expression before he scared me off.”

Spencer cleared his throat. “Mrs. Belmont, I don’t think \_\_\_”

“As if there was any chance of me going anywhere. I loved that man to death.”

And still did. Which Jasper thought was wonderful. But he really didn’t need to know the details. “Mom, maybe don’t \_\_\_”

“It took practice, Spencer. So much practice. But Shaw was determined to get it right,” she said with a laugh, then sighed. “That was such a fun couple of weeks.”

Jasper dropped his head, knowing they hadn’t heard the worst.

“With some hard work and a lot of repetition, Shaw was finally able to refine his orgasm face.”

“Th-that’s great, Mrs. Belmont,” Spencer said, kicking Jasper in the shins and making big eyes at him. “But perhaps you shouldn’t—”

“Now, when Shaw orgasms, there’s only a slight scrunching around his eyes, a little nose flare, and a small whistle like a balloon deflating.”

Spencer made a croaking sound.

“Which was a relief, Spencer. I can’t tell you how difficult it is to find your own pleasure when your partner looks like they’re in agony.”

“I, uh, can only imagine,” Spencer said, his gaze darting around the room as if looking for somewhere to hide.

Jasper could have told him there wasn’t.

“Or that they’re possessed and possibly about to kill you.”

Jasper glanced at the television screen, seeing exactly what she was talking about.

“It’s unfortunate I didn’t realize Jasper had inherited that trait from his father. There’s no telling how many men he’s scared off by this point.”

Which was a bit insulting. “Mom, I didn’t scare off anyone. And could you please stop talking about my sex life. And yours. Spencer and I don’t need to hear this.”

“Jasper Edison Belmont. We do not sex shame in this family.”

“I wasn’t—”

“There is nothing wrong with having a healthy conversation about sex.”

“No, I know. It’s just—”

“Did I not teach you that sex between consenting adults is a natural and beautiful way to express attraction and affection.”

“You did.”

“And that even when it’s only for physical release, as long as there’s full understanding between partners so no one is hurt from having expectations they shouldn’t, it’s an amazing and beautiful way to find pleasure together.”

“Yes.”

“So there’s no reason why we can’t talk about it, is there?”

Jasper sighed. “No, Mom.”

“How can we ever learn anything if we’re not open to discussing it?”

“We can’t.”

“That’s right we can’t. And right now we need to talk about your face because it just won’t do. You have to consider the effect it’s having on your partners.”

“It’s never been a problem before.” Which might not actually be true since he’d never thought to ask.

“As far as you know,” his mother said, proving she hadn’t lost her ability to read his mind. “I think you need to take a lesson from your father and work on it. Change can happen, Jasper. All it takes is time and a bit of practice.”

“I really don’t think it’s necessary.”

“Not necessary? Look at the television right now and tell me you’re fine with how you look when you climax.”

Jasper shuddered at hearing it again. Please, god, someone make her stop saying that word.

“I swear, it looks like you’re in pain.”

“Mom, please,” Jasper said weakly.

“A lover might think you’re having a heart attack.”

Jasper let his head fall back with a groan, squinting when he noticed a purple mark on the ceiling. How had that gotten up there?

“What if they call an ambulance for you?”

He closed his eyes in defeat.

“Or the police.”

Sighing, Jasper opened his eyes. “If I promise to work on it, will you stop?”

“Of course.” A small pause. “You know I only want what’s best for you?”

“I do, Mom.” And he did. His mother loved with her whole heart and was passionate about showing it. Even if it was sometimes in ways he wished she wouldn’t.

“Good. And Spencer...”

Giving Jasper a scared look, Spencer said, “Yes, Mrs. Belmont.”

“You should find out what your orgasm face looks like as well. Heaven forbid it’s anything like Jasper’s. Nobody should be subjected to that horror when they make love.”

“Mom!” Jasper objected, flipping his friend off when Spencer snorted. “It’s not that bad.”



“It truly is. Spencer will never find himself a nice young man if his face looks anything like yours. Spencer, you need to check that out right away.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll do that as soon as I get home.”

“Wonderful. And if you experience any chafing, the apothecary on Elm Street carries a wonderful lotion. Just let Jasmine know and she’ll hook you up.”

Spencer made a strangled sound.

Jasper had to look away from him or he’d start laughing. He really needed to get them out of this tortuous conversation before his mother said something worse, if that was even possible. “I’m going to have to let you go, Mom. I’ve still got a few things to do tonight.”

“All right, dear. We can discuss this further when you come over for dinner tomorrow.”

“Sure,” Jasper said, willing to agree to anything to get her off the phone.

“You come too, Spencer.”

“I, uh, wish I could, Mrs. Belmont, but I told Forrest I’d meet him after work.”

Which was a lie. *Coward*, Jasper mouthed at his friend.

Spencer nodded, looking completely unrepentant.

“Next time then,” Jasper’s mom said. “I’ll make that cobb salad you enjoy so much.”

“That’d be great, Mrs. Belmont,” Spencer said, giving Jasper a relieved look. “I look forward to that.”

“As I look forward to seeing you. And Jasper...”

“Yes, Mom.”

“When you’re here, I’ll have your father show you some facial exercises he knows. You and he can practice them after dinner.”

“I don’t really want—”

“Bring lip balm so you don’t crack your lips.”

Spencer burst into laughter, then clapped his hands over his mouth when Jasper glared at him.

“Sorry, Mom. I’ve really got to go. See you tomorrow.” Jasper ended the call before she could say anything else, and scowled at Spencer. “Do you have any idea of the trouble you just caused me?”

Spencer dropped his hands, his words hard to understand through his laughter. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea your mom was on the phone when I came in.”

“Sorry isn’t good enough, jerk. Because of you, I have to practice making sex faces with my father.”

“I know,” Spencer howled as he fell to the carpet. “It’s like...like...the gay birds and bees talk. But...so much worse.”

“God, don’t remind me.” Jasper scrubbed his hands over his face, then pointed a finger at him. “Let this be a lesson. You never talk about anyone else’s orgasm face unless you’re actually having an orgasm with them. And maybe not even then.”

“But then how will I find out what my orgasm face looks like?” Spencer asked, blinking up at him innocently.

Jasper brandished his phone. “One more word and I’m going to tell Mom you lied about meeting Forrest. Then you’ll have to practice making sex faces with my father too.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll stop.” Spencer lay there, giggling a bit more before pushing off the floor and climbing onto the couch next to Jasper. “No more. I promise.”

Jasper didn’t believe that for a minute.

After a few seconds of staring at the television, Spencer cleared his throat and turned to him. “So, that was crazy, huh? Did you know your mom and dad made sex videos?”

Jasper punched him in the leg, then shoved him off the couch. Ignoring his idiot friend who was laughing between groans as he rubbed out his charley horse, Jasper turned back

to the TV where his orgasm face was still showing. Then his name flashed up on the screen. He stared at it in horror.

“Oh, God,” Spencer gasped, as he leaned against the couch. “They just told everyone who you are.”

Jasper nodded, unable to tear his eyes off the screen as the news anchors gave up any semblance of decorum and scrambled around the set, holding sheets of paper in front of the monitors—which didn’t do a damn thing to help—while a skinny guy in a bad-fitting suit ran around screaming for someone to shut off the cameras. But every time the screen went dark, it lit up again seconds later to show his name and face. His scary, make-lovers-think-he-was-having-a-heart-attack-or-going-to-kill-them orgasm face his mother wanted him to work on changing. With his father.

Groaning, Jasper fell sideways, burying his face in the couch cushion. No amount of crystal magic was going to be able to fix this.

## Chapter Two

Jasper broke down the last carton and put it on top of the cardboard stacked in the corner for recycling, then stretched his back, groaning when it cracked. Turning back to his shop, he let out a pleased sound when he saw how much he'd accomplished that day.

The wall shelves he'd installed yesterday all held clear-sided bins, a quarter of which had been filled with raw crystals, which was only a fraction of the inventory he would carry but was enough for him to visualize what it would look like when his shelves were overflowing with the crystals and specialty stones that had yet to arrive.

Next, his gaze moved over the middle section of the room where the freestanding racks and cabinets he'd put together to display his handcrafted jewelry were waiting to be filled, and grinned, easily seeing how it would all work together. Then, so thrilled at being this close to realizing his dream, he did a little happy dance. Another week or two to get the rest of his stock in and organized, then he could hang some pictures on the walls, set up his sales desk and information racks, and he'd be ready to open.

But now, as a reward for getting so much done, he was going to do what he loved the most; creating one-of-a-kind magic-infused crystal jewelry. Brushing off his hands, Jasper headed for his workroom at the back of his store where he kept his jewelry-making supplies, eager to get to work on a special pendant for one of his mother's friends.

Jasper hummed along with the music playing in the background as he put the finishing touches on the pendant. Wrapping the silver wire around the crystal for a final time, he ended at the top loop, or bail, then fed the wires through the loop and twisted them around the base, pulling them tight, before grabbing his cutters and snipping them. After making sure there were no edges to catch on fabric, or more importantly, skin, he set his cutters to the side. Holding the

silver-wrapped aquamarine pendant in his palm, Jasper covered it with his other hand, then released a small burst of power into the gemstone to awaken it and boost its inherent properties. When he took his hand away, the crystal glowed with the bit of magic he'd given it.

Jasper examined the pendant critically, turning it this way and that, using his pliers in a couple of places to bend and tighten the wire, then chuckled when excited pulses of energy started coming from the crystal, the small gemstone apparently ready to get on with the task Jasper had told it about as he'd wrapped it in silver. Smiling, he ran his fingers over the blue-green surface to calm it.

“Shh. Not yet, little one.”

The aquamarine stone glowed brighter instead of settling.

Laughing, Jasper said, “I know you're excited, but it's not time yet. Rest and save your energy.”

There was a flurry of little pulses before the light streaming from the crystal subsided into a gentle glow. Jasper sent a touch more of his magic into it, then studied it again. Perfect. The pendant was now ready to give to Samara and would help her heart heal from the pain of losing her husband, as well as assist her with finding her inner strength again.

Plus, the blue-green silver-wrapped crystal would look fantastic against her dusky skin, something that pleased his artistic soul no end.

Jasper carefully wrapped the pendant in tissue and put it in a royal-blue velvet bag, and set it to the side to deliver to Samara later.

Then he grabbed the book he wrote his commissions in and opened it to the first page. Closing his eyes, he slowly ran his finger down the list, turning the page when he reached the bottom and starting at the top of the next one as he let his power guide him to what he needed to work on next. When he felt a slight tingle, he stopped. Opening his eyes, Jasper smiled when he saw the name he'd chosen. Jessica, who was going after a huge promotion at work.

Sticking with the silver wire, he selected a few carnelian and citrine crystal beads from the small bins in front of him, then started fashioning a bracelet that would augment her already confident nature and help her get what she was looking for...though Jasper suspected it wouldn't be the high-level job she thought she wanted, but rather, the attention of the company's owner, Hudson. Whispering to the crystals as he worked, Jasper couldn't help but smile at the thought of his magic helping Jessica get exactly what, or rather who, she needed.

He rather hoped Jessica and Hudson invited him to the wedding. He loved seeing the magic that was created when two perfectly matched souls were bound together. And in Starfall Grove, binding went deeper than just the signing of a legal document.

And one day, if he was lucky, it would happen to him.

Jasper set the partially finished bracelet to the side, and leaned back, stretching his arms over his head with a groan. Letting them fall, he rotated his shoulders a couple of times, then tilted his head to the left, then to the right, his neck cracking slightly on each side. He was reaching for the bracelet again when his phone vibrated with an incoming call. Checking the screen, he saw it was from an unknown number so he ignored it and attached the next citrine bead to the bracelet.

A couple of minutes later his phone vibrated again.

After making sure it wasn't from someone he knew, Jasper continued working. His damned phone had been ringing non-stop for most of the day. The first couple of calls had been from reporters wanting to interview him about the newscast the previous night. He'd politely declined and hung up, but they'd been persistent enough that he'd turned off his ringer and started screening his calls. Which had proven to be a good thing or he wouldn't have gotten any work done since pretty much everyone he knew had reached out.

There'd been calls from people he hadn't heard from in months asking him why he'd been on the news and what was wrong with his face. Some thought he was in a new reality show and wanted to know what it was about. Others thought he'd been in an accident and were checking to see if he was still alive. And then there was the call from Spencer who laughingly wished him good luck with his after-dinner sex-face session with his father.

Spencer could be a real ass sometimes.

Sighing when his phone vibrated again, he glanced at it, then snatched it up when he saw it was a text from his mother.

*"Dinner's almost ready. Are you on your way yet?"*

He sent back a reply letting her know he was just cleaning up and would be there soon, then got up from his workbench and quickly put away his supplies. Once everything was in order, he freshened up in the small bathroom in the back, then let himself out the rear exit door. After giving the handle an extra tug to make sure it locked properly, he jogged over to his car parked in the small communal lot behind his shop.

Keys in hand, Jasper skidded to a stop when he saw his flat tire. Ah, shit. That's the last thing he needed. Quickly going to the trunk to get his jack, he saw that the back tire was flat too. What the hell? One nail he might have run over, but two? Going to the other side of his car, he saw both of those tires were flat as well. Crouching next to one, he ran his fingertips over it, easily finding the slit in the rubber.

Son of a bitch. Some asshole had slashed all four of his tires.

Standing, he pulled out his phone and called his parents' house.

"Hey. Mom. I'm...no, I'm not calling to cancel. Yes, I know I promised to work on my sex-face with Dad." Jasper rolled his eyes as he listened to her tell him again why it was necessary. "I know, Mom. I'll be there. I was just calling to let you know I was going to be late. I have a flat tire to deal with."

After assuring her he'd be there as quickly as he could, Jasper ended the call and rang up Cliff's Garage and made arrangements to have his vehicle towed to the garage the following morning. Once that was done, Jasper pulled up his Uber app and ordered a ride, thinking if it came quickly enough, he might just make it to his parent's house before dinner was over.

Which would make his mother happy because heaven forbid he miss the all-so-important after dinner orgasm-face training session with his father.

While Jasper was waiting for his driver to pick him up, he decided to take a quick walk around the parking lot to check if anyone else's tires had been damaged, and more importantly, to see if he could find anything to identify the person who'd vandalized his car.

Gravel crunched under his feet as he inspected the other three vehicles in the lot, which took about two minutes. But crossing back and forth over the small area, his eyes in constant motion as he searched for clues, took about ten. All he'd discovered when he was done was that one, only his car's tires had been slashed, and two, he had no idea what he was looking for.

Pulling out his phone to see what the internet had to say about searching for clues, he was in the middle of an article about how to track your quarry in a forest—not helpful but quite interesting—when his app notified him that his driver would be there shortly.

Putting his phone away, Jasper headed toward the front to wait for his ride. Partway there he stopped and looked back, frowning when he realized he couldn't just leave his car unprotected overnight. Turning, he walked back to it, pulling off his black tourmaline ring when he reached it. Holding the crystal ring in his fist, Jasper called up his magic and pushed it into the crystal, along with instructions for what he wanted it to do. When the crystal warmed in his hand, he unlocked the driver's side door and tucked the ring under the floor mat



before locking his car up again. Seconds later, a field of protection settled around his car, which should be enough to keep it safe.

But just in case...

Jasper pulled a piece of magnetite out of his pocket, understanding now what had prompted him to grab it before he'd left his shop. Setting it on the roof of his car, he covered it with his hand and released a small burst of power into the stone. The matte black paint under the crystal began to shimmer, spreading slowly outward over the roof, picking up speed until his entire car shone brightly with magic. He sent another burst of power into the crystal. Light flashed, illuminating his car before slowly fading, but leaving the black paint gleaming with a luster it hadn't had before. Jasper lifted the magnetite off the roof and stepped back, nodding in satisfaction as he took in his gently glowing vehicle.

If anyone tried tampering with his car again, they'd be in for one hell of a shock.



Jasper thanked his Uber driver when she dropped him off at home. Wishing her a good night, he got out of the car and jogged up the narrow path to his front door. Picking up the box sitting in front of it, he unlocked the door and slipped inside, leaning against it to close it, relieved the long night was finally over. As much as he loved spending time with his parents, sometimes their interest in his life could be a bit much.

Setting the box on the side table, Jasper kicked off his shoes, then rubbed his cheeks which still ached from all the contortions his father had talked him through to fix his sex-face, with his mother shouting encouragement from the kitchen the whole time—god, how could this even be his life—as he shuffled to the kitchen. Running the cold water, he filled a glass, then held it to his sore face, his mind going back to what his mother had said to him as he was leaving.

*“You need to think about who might want to hurt you, dear.”*

And he had, all the way home. The thing was, he didn't really have any enemies. Sure, he'd annoyed a few people over the years—who hadn't—but not to the point they'd want to get back at him. And they were few and far between since he always tried to be kind to others and went out of his way to help the people in his community.

After looking at it from every angle, he could only think of one person who might have it in for him.

Setting his glass down, Jasper pulled out his phone and dialed his ex-boyfriend, going on the attack the moment Lucas answered, in hopes of startling a confession out of him.

“Why did you put my sex-face on the news last night?”

“Oh, my god. That was awesome. I've never laughed so hard in my life.”

“What it was, asshole, was a violation of privacy.” And probably illegal as hell. He'd have to check with his mother's lawyer. “Why would you do something like that?”

“Wait. You think I did it?” Lucas snorted. “I wish.”

“You're the only one who could have taken that photo of me.” Jasper squinted as he tried to think of when. “I just don't remember you doing it.”

“That's because I didn't.”

But he must have. The photo on the news showed Jasper with a second ear piercing. Something he'd had done when he'd still been with Lucas. And since he hadn't been intimate with anyone else since they'd broken up...

“Lucas, you don't need to lie. I know you took it.”

“I'm telling you I didn't. But even if I had, I couldn't have hacked the news to put it up.” He snickered. “Though I wish I could because that was epic.”

Jasper frowned. “Don't you work for a tech company now?”

“In administration, yeah. Not as part of the geek squad.” Someone said something in the background. Lucas replied, too low for Jasper to hear. Then he was back. “Is my job at SG Tech why you thought it was me?”

“Well, that and the photo,” Jasper said as he picked up his glass of water and headed toward his living room.

“Which I said I didn’t take,”

But Jasper knew he had. “I also couldn’t think of anyone else who’d want to embarrass me.”

Lucas’ laugh had an edge to it. “I can. You’re not nearly as well-liked as you think you are.”

Jasper blinked at the sudden animosity in his tone. “What are you—”

“Now, if that’s all you wanted, I’ve got better things to do with my time than talk to you.”

“Wait,” Jasper shouted, trying to stop him before he could hang up.

“What?”

“I need your help.”

“After what you did?” Lucas sneered. “Why the hell would I want to help you?”

Seriously. What was with the attitude? Blowing out a breath, Jasper tried to reason with the man he’d been in a one-year relationship with. “Look. I get that things didn’t work out between us and there might be some unresolved feelings—”

“Nope. I’m pretty resolved in my hatred of you.”

“And I know there was fault on both sides—”

“Mostly yours.”

Like hell. Lucas had only been with him so he’d have an in with Jasper’s mother. But arguing about who was at fault wasn’t going to help, so Jasper kept his tone light and tried again. “And even though a lot of ugly things were said the day

we broke up, there's no reason why we can't be civil to each other."

"And no reason why we should be. I'm perfectly fine with the way things are."

Striving to hold on to his patience, Jasper continued. "But regardless of how things between us turned out, I didn't deserve to be humiliated on TV. That was a real dick move."

"But fucking hilarious."

Clenching his teeth, Jasper bit back the words that wanted to escape. Barely. "It could also damage my professional reputation and I'm trying to start a new business."

"I heard. Not sure what that has to do with me."

Neither was Jasper by this point. Luckily, the crystals in his wrist wrap pulsed, reminding him what he wanted to say. "I know you know who hacked the news station."

Silence. Then, "I hate your fucking crystals."

That wasn't news. "Who put up that picture of me?"

"Why don't you ask your crystals?"

He had, and for some reason, they couldn't tell him. "I'm asking you. Do you know who it was?"

"Maybe."

Which meant yes. "Who was it?"

"I'm not saying."

"Lucas—"

"No."

"Damn it, Lucas," Jasper said, finally losing his patience. "Don't you even care that they're trying to ruin me?"

"Not one fucking bit," Lucas spat out, his voice hard and uncompromising.

It took a couple of seconds for Jasper to get over his shock. He'd thought Lucas might still be angry over everything that had gone down, but he'd had no idea he could

be so cold. Or mean. “Do you honestly hate me that much that you’d let someone destroy me?”

“In a heartbeat.”

Now Jasper was pissed. “Why the fuck are you being like this? You’re the one who betrayed me. I never did anything to you.”

Lucas scoffed, “Of course you’d think that.”

“Because it’s true.”

“To you maybe. I see it differently. I guess it depends which side of the Belmont fence you’re standing on.”

“For fucks sake, Lucas. You tried to use me, not the other way around. It’s not fair to blame me because things didn’t work out the way you wanted.”

“Maybe not, but you still fucked up my life. Let’s see how you like it when someone fucks up yours.”

That sounded ominous. “What are you—”

But Lucas had already hung up.

Jasper quickly called him back. His call went straight to voicemail. He dialed again with the same result. The third time he tried, the call didn’t even go through. The fucker had totally blocked him.

Fuming, Jasper shoved his phone into his pocket so he wouldn’t be tempted to throw it at the wall. What an ass. And Lucas blaming him for what had happened was total crap. He’d been the one who’d used Jasper. Their whole relationship had been nothing but a lie, a way for Lucas to get close to Jasper’s mother so he could convince her to use her connections and influence to help his father get elected as mayor. Which had backfired spectacularly once Jasper had found out—he’d overheard Lucas talking about it on the phone with someone—since his mother had used those same connections to ensure Earl Johnson would never get elected in any official capacity in Starfall Grove. But even with all their history and knowing Lucas had never truly loved him, Jasper

hadn't thought he could be so cruel that he'd want to see him humiliated and his reputation destroyed.

Just went to show he hadn't learned a damned thing when it came to his ex-boyfriend.

He just wished he'd been able to find out who Lucas was protecting. Especially since it was probably the same person who'd slashed his tires. But with Lucas not talking, and his crystals not able to tell him anything—which was a bit puzzling—and Jasper having no way of knowing who'd messed with his car, there was nothing he could do—

Wait a minute. The businesses next to his store had security cameras. Which meant they might have video footage of whoever had vandalized his vehicle. If he asked nicely, Jasper was sure they'd let him have a look. Then he'd have a name to give to the police.

Returning his glass to the kitchen, he went to his bedroom and got ready for bed, falling asleep almost immediately, secure in the knowledge that tomorrow he'd know who was trying to hurt him and could put a stop to it.

Too bad he was wrong. About pretty much everything.

## Chapter Three

Crawling out of bed early the next morning, Jasper stumbled to the kitchen in search of coffee to help him wake up for what was going to be a busy day. Idly scratching his chest, he put a paper filter into the brewer's basket, then turned on the tap and filled the carafe with cold water. Letting out a huge yawn that cracked his jaw and made his eyes water, he poured the water into the top of the machine, then went to the fridge and pulled out the bag of grounds he kept in the freezer and began scooping them into the drip basket.

Coffee went flying when loud banging on his front door scared the crap out of him.

Jasper squinted at the clock over the stove. Six-thirty. What kind of idiot knocked on someone's door this early in the morning?

The kind of idiot who knocked barely a second later.

Scowling at his front door—whoever was there could bloody well wait until he'd had his coffee—Jasper looked at the grounds covering his counter and floor, then glared at the door again. He'd better be able to make a pot or someone was going to die. Peering into the crushed bag in his hand, he thought there might be enough. Barely. He'd have to scoop up the grounds covering the counter to make up the difference, but at least there'd be no bloodshed.

He almost changed his mind when whoever was at his front door pounded on it again, this time hard enough to rattle the picture hanging on the wall next to it. For fuck's sake. Slamming the bag to the counter, Jasper hurried to the door and yanked it open. “What do you—”

A microphone was shoved into his face. “What can you tell me about the billboard on Canyon Drive?”

Jasper blinked at the strange woman standing on his front step. “I'm sorry, what?”

“The digital billboard on Canyon Drive. Sexual poses of you and an unidentified man have been streaming on it for the

last two hours.” She pushed the microphone further into his face. “Do you have any comment?”

He stared at her, trying to make sense of what she was saying. Sexual poses? “I don’t...what?”

Hearing his name, Jasper looked up, his eyes going wide when he saw the reporters gathered in front of his house. Two news vans from the city’s rival news stations, Channel Six and SGTV, were parked on the street. Cameramen from both stations and a reporter he recognized from Channel Six were standing at the end of his walkway. Next to them were Stan, Lou, and Fred, three seniors who had gotten together to buy a police scanner, who moonlighted as reporters for extra beer money.

When Stan saw Jasper looking, he waved his cane in the air and almost fell over, saved only by Lou and Fred grabbing hold of him.

“What’s with them nekid pictures, Jasper? Does your mother know you have a tattoo on your bum?”

Jasper reflexively reached a hand behind him to cover the tattoo. How did Stan know about...wait. Naked pictures of him? The microphone was shoved in his face again, almost bumping his nose. Pushing it aside, he frowned at the woman reporter who was watching him with a predatory gleam in her eyes. Suddenly feeling like a mouse about to be eaten by a lion, Jasper started to back up.

Stan shouted again, this time joined by Lou and Fred, their voices jumbling together so he couldn’t understand what any of them were saying. Both cameras swung in his direction, red lights glowing, then the reporter from Channel Six began coming up his walk. The woman reporter, who he now recognized from SGTV’s weekly wrap-up show, stepped closer, her eyes roaming over Jasper’s chest, then dropping lower.

Which is when it hit him that he was standing there in only his boxers.

His favorite, well-worn, almost see-through boxers.



One hand came up to cover his naked chest, the other lower to cover the front of his shorts. “Excuse me,” Jasper mumbled and stepped back, blocking the reporter with his elbow when she tried to follow him in—which surely had to be against journalistic rules—then closed the door in her face, quickly locking it. Then he threw the deadbolt for good measure.

Staring at the dark brown wood, he wondered what in the hell was going on. Had she really said there were images of him having sex with some man streaming on Canyon Drive? Then Stan’s question about the tattoo on his butt, which he should know nothing about, echoed in his mind.

Jasper let his head thunk against his door. Fuck. He was never going to live this one down.

Two cups of coffee later and feeling much more alert, Jasper was resolved about two things. First, no matter what someone was trying to do to him, he wasn’t going to let this morning’s incident or any fallout from it prevent him from getting his store ready to open on schedule, and second, he was going to find whoever was harassing him and stop them before they could do anything else, even if that meant hunting Lucas down and shaking the name out of him.

Of course, he’d have to get out of his house first.

Using a fingertip to push the curtain aside, Jasper peered through the small opening and saw the reporters were still waiting out front. So no going that way unless he was willing to risk giving them another soundbite for the evening news.

Though at least this time he’d be wearing clothes.

Deciding to try another route first, Jasper set his empty cup in the kitchen sink, then went to his bedroom to get his phone. After ordering an Uber, using Spencer’s address next door for the pickup, he pulled on his favorite jeans and a coral and aqua t-shirt. Shoving his wallet into his back pocket and phone in his front, Jasper grabbed a ball cap off his dresser and pulled it low on his head, then looked around for his

sunglasses to finish off his disguise. Not seeing them in his room, he did a quick search of his house, finally finding them, for some unknown reason, in the back of the fridge.

Jasper put them on, then looked at himself in the mirror and snorted. This wasn't going to fool anyone who knew him. Then he shrugged. It seemed to work for actors in Hollywood. So who knows, maybe it would work for him too.

Grabbing his keys from the bowl next to the front door, he took one more look through the front window—the reporters were still there—then slipped out the back. Moving quickly, he snuck over to the hedge separating his and Spencer's yards, thankful he didn't have to try scaling the tall fence that had been there before he and Spencer had torn it down and replaced it with shrubs when his best friend had moved in next door.

Putting Jasper's world back in balance.

Their parents had lived next to each other when he and Spencer had been born, so they'd been best friends practically from the womb. Growing up, they'd done almost everything together; from learning to ride bikes for the first time, to trying out for the basketball team—Jasper had easily made it, but Spencer, who hadn't hit his growth spurt yet, hadn't—then the volleyball team—which Spencer had made but Jasper hadn't since his face was a ball magnet—then signing up for the chess club—which both of them found mind-numbingly boring—to dating girls and experiencing their first kiss—which is when both of them realized girls were fine as friends but they really didn't like kissing them—they'd been inseparable.

When Jasper had decided it was time for him to move out of his parent's house, Spencer had helped him look for a new home and celebrated with him when Jasper had signed the papers on the cozy little two-story he'd fallen in love with. Then Spencer had rolled up his sleeves and helped Jasper move his belongings into his new home.

The moment the property next to Jasper's went on the market, Spencer had placed an offer. Within two months, they

were living next door to each other again. Something Jasper was grateful for now as he slipped from between the cedar bushes and crept around to the back of Spencer's house, out of sight of the street where the reporters were gathered.

He was passing under the bedroom window when it opened and Spencer leaned out.

"What are you doing down there?"

"Shhh," Jasper whispered, holding his finger in front of his mouth as he stood. "I'm trying to get away from the reporters."

Spencer blinked. "What reporters?"

"The ones in front of my house."

"Why are there reporters at your house?"

"They want to talk to me about some pictures on the billboard on Canyon Drive."

"Oh my god. That's you?" Spencer shouted.

"Would you keep it down," Jasper whisper-yelled, glaring at him.

"Sorry," Spencer said, speaking quieter. "The news has been going on about the porn on the billboard for the last couple of hours. I didn't realize it was about you."

Porn? That sounded a lot worse than just naked. "How bad is it, Spence?"

"Uhm, not good." Spencer scrunched up his face as he gave Jasper an apologetic look. "It sounded like there were a lot of shots that make it pretty clear what you are doing. They, uh, apparently don't hide much."

Jasper closed his eyes and sighed. Opening them, he said, "Stan was asking about my tattoo."

Spencer winced. "Oh, shit. If he knows, everyone's going to know it's you by noon."

"Yep." Including his mother. Jasper would have to call and let her know before she heard about it from someone else.

“So what are you going to do?”

“Go to my shop.” When Spencer looked at him in surprise, Jasper shrugged. “There’s not much I can do, not without knowing who’s behind it. So I’m just going to focus on getting my store ready for the opening.”

“Good for you. If it was me, I’d probably go into hiding.”

Which is most likely what the person doing this to him expected. Fuck that. “I’m not going to let some asshole push me around.”

“They have no idea who they’re messing with, do they?”

No, they did not. But they were going to find out.

Spencer looked him over, then leaned down and flicked the rim of Jasper’s ball cap. “I don’t think this disguise is going to get you very far. You want me to smuggle you out of here in my car?”

Jasper shook his head. “I’m good, thanks. I already called for a ride.” He pulled his phone from his pocket when it buzzed and looked at the screen. “Actually, it’s coming down the street right now.”

“You’d better go then.” Spencer pointed his thumb over his shoulder. “I’ll go create a distraction to help you make your escape.”

Jasper eyed him suspiciously. “How are you going to do that?”

Spencer grinned, then smoothed out his face, trying to look innocent but failing miserably. “I thought it might be a good time to water the lawn. With my power sprayer. And if it goes into your yard and gets those pesky reporters all wet...” He held up his hands. “Well, your grass needs to be watered too.”

Jasper snorted, easily imagining Spencer dousing everyone and then claiming it was an accident. But he didn’t want his friend to get himself into trouble. “It’s fine, Spence. I’ve got this.”

“If you’re sure.” When Jasper nodded, he said, “Alright. But if you change your mind...”

“I’ll let you know.” Rapping his knuckles on the vinyl siding, Jasper scooted to the corner of the house. After checking to make sure the coast was clear, he sprinted for the Uber that was just pulling up. Diving into the backseat, he told the driver to step on it.

Having obviously watched one too many Fast and Furious, his driver took off with a squeal of tires—an impressive feat for a Focus—and zoomed past the reporters. It took them a moment to realize Jasper was in the car, then they raced for their vehicles and started to give chase. When they went around the corner and he lost sight of them, Jasper faced forward and grinned at the reflection of the Uber driver in the rear-view mirror. Then he did a double-take. “Clem?”

The Uber driver stared at him for a minute, then broke into a big smile. “Oh, hey Jasper. I didn’t recognize you in those glasses and hat.”

Good to know they actually worked. “I’m in disguise.”

“Hiding from those reporters?” Clem asked, pointing his thumb behind him.

“Yep. Nice driving, by the way.”

“Thanks.”

“So when did you start working for Uber?” Jasper asked, leaning forward and resting his arms on the top of the front seats.

“About three months ago. Maisie wanted to take dance lessons,” Clem said, glancing over his shoulder at Jasper as he spoke about his younger daughter. “And what with Lorraine being laid off again, we didn’t have enough to cover it.”

Jasper nodded, getting it. Lorraine was the nicest person in the world and a fantastic mother, but she had a hard time keeping a job. Not because she wasn’t skilled or a good worker, but because she and electronics didn’t get along. At all. As the great, great, a thousand times great-granddaughter of Elektra, if she didn’t keep her storm power locked down at

all times, things had a tendency to explode around her. Especially electrical equipment.

So if her control slipped the slightest while she was using a computer or a phone, all that was left was a smoking ruin.

And her control often slipped when she sneezed.

And Lorraine was subject to seasonal allergies.

Hence her being laid off again.

“I’ll keep working on a crystal combo to help dampen her powers,” Jasper said. “I thought I’d figured it out the last time.”

“We did too,” Clem said, stopping at a red light. He turned in his seat and gave Jasper a rueful smile. “The purple charm worked for a couple of months. Then she exploded her boss’s computer.”

Jasper winced. “Shit.”

“Yeah,” Clem sighed. “It was just before Christmas too.”

“I’m so sorry. I’ll keep trying.”

“I appreciate that.” He squinted in the rearview mirror, then looked at Jasper. “Those reporters caught up to us.”

Jasper turned in his seat. Sure enough, the reporters were almost on them. “Do you think you can lose them?”

“Don’t you worry, Jasper. I won’t let those damn paparazzi catch you.”

Jasper snorted at the thought of two news vans and three old men in their seventies driving a wood-paneled station wagon being called paparazzi. But if Clem could get rid of them, he could call them whatever he wanted.

Jasper turned to face the front again when Clem revved the engine.

The light turned green.

The Focus shot forward with a squeal of tires, the reporters and the station wagon in hot pursuit.

What followed next was the strangest, most law-abiding high-speed chase Jasper had ever been in—not that he'd been in any—through the streets of Starfall Grove. Clem's little Focus zipped through the neighborhoods surrounding Jasper's, coming out near the grocery store, then taking a hard left at Third and heading down to the river before going up Larch and driving past the elementary school.

And every time they stopped for a light or a stop sign, the reporters and Stan's crew would catch up and fall in behind them. Then, when the light turned green, Clem would take off in a squeal of tires, and the chase would be on again.

With everyone driving within the posted speed limits.

Clem didn't want to risk getting a ticket.

After about fifteen minutes of what had to be the slowest chase in history, which felt a lot more like they were the lead car in the Annual Spring Parade, Jasper resigned himself to the fact that they were never going to shake the reporters.

He should have had more faith in Clem, the new Uber driver who knew the streets of Starfall Grove like the back of his hand, and who still had a trick or two up his sleeve.

As they neared downtown, Clem began circling the park—which took up two full city blocks—over and over. After their fifth time around, Jasper leaned forward in his seat.

“What are we doing?”

“Waiting for 8:17.”

Which told Jasper nothing. But since it was 8:13, he sat back in his seat to see what Clem had planned.

He didn't disappoint.

On what had to be their seventh, or maybe eighth, time around the park, Clem suddenly took a hard right and raced—still staying under the speed limit—to the end of the block, then took a left and another right, leaving the reporters about half a block behind them.

“Hold on, Jasper,” Clem shouted back at him. “It's about to get bumpy.” He whipped his car to the left, taking them

down a narrow alley. They came flying out of the alley and took another right, cutting off a farm truck full of produce. Squealing brakes and horns honking filled the air, but Clem kept going. Just before he reached the next intersection, Clem put on a burst of speed, possibly going five miles over the speed limit, which felt a whole lot faster when they hit the railway tracks on the other side.

Jasper braced his arms on the roof as he was bounced around hoping Clem hadn't broken an axle with that stunt.

Unfazed, Clem slowed down, then grinned back at Jasper. "That should get rid of them."

Jasper looked back and saw the lead news van turning out of the alley, with the others close behind it.

Clem pulled the car over to the side of the street.

Frowning, Jasper was about to ask why he'd stopped when the lights on the railway crossing arms started to flash. Then they dropped down, cutting off the reporters. A few seconds later, he heard the rumbling clickety-clack of an oncoming train. A loud whistle pierced the air. The clickety-clacking grew louder, then a train passed between them and the reporters.

Jasper grinned and turned to Clem, his fist held out. "Awesome driving."

After a quick fist bump, Clem got them moving again.

Relieved to have lost the reporters, Jasper relaxed back in his seat and chatted with Clem as he drove through the streets at a more leisurely pace to Jasper's shop.

But Jasper knew it would only be a matter of time until the reporters found out about the new business he was opening and tracked him down at his store. It wouldn't surprise him if Stan and his gang, the founding members of the Starfall Grove grapevine, weren't already on their way there to meet him.

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As they pulled into the parking lot behind his shop, Jasper pointed to his car. “You can drop me off there.”

Clem frowned as he got closer. “Looks like you have a flat.”

“Yeah. I think I drove over a nail.”

Clem’s frown deepened when he pulled around to the other side of Jasper’s car and saw those tires were also flat. “Must have been a lot of nails.”

Jasper made a non-committal sound.

Clem put the Focus in park and turned to look at him. “This nail you run over have anything to do with why those reporters wanted to see you?”

No one could ever accuse Clem of not being sharp.

Jasper shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

“You in any trouble?” Clem asked, suddenly looking concerned.

“No. At least, nothing you need to worry about,” Jasper said as he opened the door.

“Jasper—”

“It’s okay, Clem. I’ve got it handled.”

“And your car?”

“Cliff’s meeting me here this morning to pick it up.”

Clem nodded. “Good.” But he didn’t look any less worried.

Patting him on the shoulder, Jasper got out of the car. Clem rolled down his window. Jasper leaned down and gave him a reassuring smile, hoping that would allay Clem’s worry. “Say hi to Lorraine and the kids for me. And let Lorraine know I should have something for her by next week.”

“Alright. But if you need any help, call. Me and Lorraine owe you for everything you’ve done for us.”

“Sure,” Jasper said, nodding as he stood upright. There wasn’t a chance in hell he was letting Clem get close to

whatever was happening to him. Smacking the roof, he stepped back, then waited until Clem drove out of the parking lot before going to his car and deactivating the shock field around it.

After double-checking to make sure his vehicle hadn't been disturbed overnight—it hadn't—Jasper headed down the side of the building toward the front entrance, slowing when he saw the empty red paint cans on the ground.

Crouching next to them, he touched the closest one, frowning when his fingers came away wet. Standing, he looked up at the side of his building and let out a pained gasp.

“No. Oh, god. No.” Stumbling forward with his hands outstretched, Jasper's eyes moved over every inch of the mural he had specially commissioned for his grand opening. The three-dimensional crystal masterpiece, created by his amazingly talented friend Trish, had been ruined. Completely and utterly destroyed by the hateful words painted over it in red. *Sex Fiend*, *Deceiver*, *Fraud*, and *Whore* had been written over and over, covering the entire wall, red paint dripping from them like blood oozing from an open wound. The sheer maliciousness of it made him want to cry, not because of the offensive words but for the senseless destruction of what had been a work of art.

But instead of crying, Jasper got mad.

Pulling out his phone, he called the police. Then he called his mother.

“Mom,” he said when she answered the phone. “That bastard got me again.”

## Chapter Four

While he was waiting for the police to arrive, Cliff showed up with his tow truck. Muttering as he walked around Jasper's vehicle, the large man crossed his arms and asked who Jasper had pissed off badly enough they'd slashed all four of his tires. Not having an answer for him, Jasper shrugged, then filled out the necessary paperwork to get his car hauled off to the garage and repaired.

After that was sorted out, Jasper called Trish and explained what had happened to her mural. She told him she would be right over to see what could be done to salvage it. Grimacing as he looked at the vandalized wall, Jasper ended the call. As good as Trish was, he doubted even she'd be able to fix the mess that had been made of it.

Then, with nothing else to do until the police arrived, Jasper called Spencer.

Jasper was just finishing his call when the police arrived. Telling Spencer he'd catch him up on everything later, he hung up and hurried out front to meet them, his steps slowing when the first officer got out of the vehicle. Well, hello handsome, Jasper thought, liking everything he saw.

Dressed in a sleek dark gray suit, pastel pink silk tie, and Italian leather shoes, the officer, who totally rocked the tall, dark, and handsome vibe, looked like he should be gracing a runway in Paris, not responding to a vandalism call. His eyes sparkled as he gave Jasper a wide smile, the warmth in them making his heart beat a little faster.

Then *he* got out.

Tripping over his feet, Jasper had to fight to keep breathing as he took in the dark-haired, dangerous-looking man dressed in black leather.

Wearing a fierce, almost mean expression on his face, the second officer stepped from the vehicle, planted his feet, then

put his hands on his hips, his unzipped black leather jacket spreading to expose his muscular chest as he looked around.

Hidden behind his sunglasses, Jasper was free to gawk at him, and he took full advantage, letting his gaze slide down the skin-tight t-shirt that perfectly outlined the ridges of a mouth-watering six-pack, lingering for a moment before dropping lower to snug black jeans, tight in all the right places. Another pause while he appreciated the view, then he continued down long, muscular legs that ended in large feet encased in scuffed black leather boots before making the return trip back up that tall, powerful body. His breath caught when he reached piercing dark-blue eyes that seemed to look right into his soul.

Jasper moved toward him, drawn to the man like iron to a loadstone. His magic rose, then the crystals in his wrist wrap started to glow. They began chattering excitedly, making it hard to hear. Or that could have been the blood pounding in his ears. When he was a few feet from the officer, a burst of euphoric energy shot through Jasper, making him lightheaded. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath to try get his balance back. Then another. Once he felt steady, he opened them again and was instantly trapped by intense, heart-stopping blue, which made him lose his breath all over again.

Magic surged again, leaving Jasper dizzy. And confused. And a little bit scared. What was happening to him?

His crystals all flashed at once. Jasper staggered, almost tripping over his feet for the second time when he realized what they were telling him. The sexy, dangerous-looking man, the one who called to his magic, was Jasper's mate. The other half of his soul. The one person in the universe who could complete him.

And he was glaring at Jasper as though his very existence offended him.

Jasper's crystals exploded again, filling him with so much energy he felt giddy. And drunk. Stupid, without-a-care-for-the-consequences drunk. But before he could make a fool of himself by throwing himself at his scowling mate's feet, the

well-dressed officer with the big smile stepped in front of Jasper, blocking his view of the other man.

Jasper took a deep breath, which was so much easier now, and smiled back. “Thank you for coming so quickly, officer. I really appreciate it.”

“It’s Detective,” he said, grinning as he held out his ID to Jasper. “Detectives Emerson Trewitt and Gabriel Prescott at your service.”

Jasper looked at him in shock. Detectives? For a vandalism call?

The grin dropped from Detective Trewitt’s face. “Is everything okay?”

Jasper shook his head, then nodded. “Sorry. I’m just...I’m a bit surprised. I didn’t realize detectives responded to vandalism calls.”

“We don’t,” Detective Gabe Prescott growled. Leather creaked as he crossed his arms and scowled at Jasper, his scorching look making his heart beat a little faster. And not from fear.

“Ignore Gabe,” Detective Trewitt said, thwacking his partner’s chest with the back of his hand hard enough to draw a grunt from the other man. “He hasn’t had his quota of coffee yet this morning.”

“Sure,” Jasper murmured, eyeing Gabe, who was still glaring at him. He was pretty sure the detective’s surliness had nothing to do with a lack of coffee and everything to do with him reacting to Jasper the same way Jasper had reacted to him. But instead of embracing it, he was fighting it, which made Jasper want to find out why. But carefully. Something told him poking at Gabe would be a lot like poking an angry bear with a stick.

His crystals pulsed in agreement.

After a last look at his mate, Jasper turned back to Detective Trewitt. “If you guys don’t normally handle these kinds of calls, why are you here instead of a regular officer?”

Gabe snorted, drawing his attention again. “As if you don’t know,” he said, his voice full of accusation.

Except...he didn’t.

Jasper looked at Detective Trewitt, who rolled his eyes and nudged his partner back with his elbow—hard, judging by the sound Gabe let out. “The Captain told us to get our asses over to Cherry Street and 2<sup>nd</sup> and speak with the owner. Which is you.”

Jasper nodded, even though that hadn’t been a question.

Detective Trewitt shrugged, giving Jasper a good-natured grin. “My guess is someone called in a favor.”

Gabe looked pointedly at Jasper.

He groaned. Oh god. His mother. He should have known she’d reach out to Captain Bristow and pull some strings.

Detective Trewitt chuckled. “I take it you know who it was.”

Jasper nodded. “I’m pretty sure my mother called your Captain.”

“She do that for you a lot?” Gabe asked, his upper lip curling in a sneer.

Jasper had to fight back a laugh, something about Gabe reading false. Like he was trying too hard to be combative, trying too hard to be an ass. Shaking his head, Jasper said, “No, Detective. This is the first time she’s done this.”

“Sure it is,” Gabe scoffed, shifting closer and subtly widening his stance, everything about him suddenly more imposing.

Jasper blinked. Was his growly, hot detective mate looking for a fight? Jasper wasn’t opposed to giving him one, but now was not the time. And they were wearing far too many clothes. His crystals flashed, emitting a small burst of energy that prickled his skin. *I know*, Jasper sent back, not needing them to tell him there was something more going on with his snarly detective than him just fighting the pull between them.

However... Jasper didn't think it would set the right tone for their future relationship if he let his mate think he could push him around.

Since he was no match for Gabe's angry surliness, Jasper went in the opposite direction. Coating his voice with as much sugar as he could, he gave Gabe his biggest smile—the one that made his mouth hurt—and said, “It really is the first time she's done this, Detective. I'm so sorry you were pulled away from your very important job because of my mother. You shouldn't have to spend your valuable time checking on some petty vandalism when you could be doing much more important things.” He almost batted his eyelashes but figured that would be overkill.

Gabe seemed to pick up on it anyway, looking like he wanted to throttle him as he snarled, “No we shouldn't.”

“But since we're here,” Detective Trewitt said, laughter dancing in his eyes as he bumped Gabe back again, “we might as well take a look around.”

Dropping his hands—and his act, which was a little sweet even for him—Jasper gave him a genuine smile. “I'd really appreciate that. And thank you for being so understanding about my mother. She's just worried because of some trouble I've been having lately.”

“Oh. What kind of trouble?” Detective Trewitt asked, pulling out his phone and a stylus.

“Just some things that have been happening. I'm starting to think I might have a stalker,” he said with a laugh, though it sounded fake even to him.

Detective Trewitt frowned. “Why do you think you have a stalker?”

Jasper bit his lip, then shrugged. “It sort of started yesterday. When I came out after work, all the tires on my car were slashed. Then today I got here and found my mural destroyed.”

Detective Trewitt made a note on his phone. “This is the vandalism you called us about?”

“Yes. It’s just over there,” Jasper said, pointing to the side of his building before leading them over to it.

Detective Trewitt let out a low whistle when he saw the mural. “Damn. Someone really did a number on it.”

Jasper nodded. They had. And seeing it again made him want to cry. And punch whoever did it, even if he’d never hit anyone before in his life.

After making some more notes on his phone, Detective Trewitt looked up at Jasper. “You said your tires were slashed as well?”

“Yes, last night.”

“And where’s your car now?” He looked around the empty parking lot.

“I had it towed to Cliff’s Garage. Do you want to look at it?” Jasper asked, pulling out his phone to give Cliff a head’s up.

“No use now since any evidence has been destroyed,” Gabe growled, then walked closer to the mural, hands on his hips as he stared at the paint cans on the ground.

Realizing he might have made a mistake, Jasper gave Detective Trewitt an apologetic look. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think of that before calling Cliff.”

Gabe glanced over his shoulder at Jasper, looking like he wanted to say something, then just grunted before looking up at the *Grand Opening* banner strung on the wall.

Detective Trewitt frowned at his partner, then turned back at Jasper. “There’s nothing to do about it now, but we’ll have a look around the lot to see if we can find anything.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“So, other than the slashed tires and vandalism of your building, has anything else happened?”

“Well, the other night...” Jasper’s voice trailed off, really not wanting to mention the news incident. If his mate never knew about that photo he’d die a happy man.



Detective Trewitt peered at him. “Was there something else?”

Not wanting to lie, Jasper looked away, then nervously reached up to brush his hand through his hair, completely forgetting he was wearing a hat. When it fell to the ground, he quickly scooped it up and jammed it back on his head.

But the damage had been done.

Detective Trewitt frowned, then squinted at him.

“I know you from somewhere,” Gabe said, appearing next to him like a damned ninja.

“Uh, no, I don’t think you do.” Jasper pulled the brim of his ball cap lower and turned his head slightly. Oh, god. Please, please don’t let Gabe have seen his freaky orgasm face.

“I do,” Gabe said, leaning closer and peering at him. “Your face looks familiar.”

Jasper shook his head and reached up to push his sunglasses higher up his nose.

“Take off your sunglasses.”

His hand froze mid-motion.

Detective Trewitt glanced down at his phone, then back to Jasper. “You know, we never did get your name.” He looked at Jasper expectantly.

“Do you really need it?” Jasper asked, his eyes flicking to Gabe, then back.

Detective Trewitt nodded. “We do. For the police report.”

Jasper sighed. He’d figured as much. Taking off his sunglasses, he hooked them over his shirt collar, then pulled off his hat, rolling it between his hands. “It’s Jasper. Jasper Belmont.”

Detective Trewitt nodded. “Mariella Belmont’s son, right?”

Jasper nodded.

“Which explains why the Captain sent us. He and your mother are good friends.”

“They are,” Jasper said, waiting for the fallout. It didn’t take long.

“Jasper Belmont,” Gabe said, glaring down at him as if he’d personally offended him. Or his freaky orgasm face had. “You were on the news the other night. That’s how I know you.”

Jasper wanted to die. Closing his eyes, he braced himself for the judgment. But it didn’t come the way he’d expected.

“What the hell were you thinking with the stunt you pulled this morning on Canyon Drive? They’re still trying to sort the mess you caused.”

Wait. What? Jasper looked at him in surprise. “The stunt I pulled?”

“Yeah,” Gabe said, scowling at him. “Why would you do something as stupid as putting up pornographic photos of yourself for half the city to see?”

Jasper’s mouth dropped open. Snapping it closed, he said, “I didn’t.”

“You sure as hell did. We both saw them.” Gabe motioned between him and Detective Trewitt, who grimaced and nodded.

Jasper shook his head. “That wasn’t me. I didn’t put them up there.”

“Then who did?”

There was only one possible answer. “It has to be the person stalking me.” But where they got the photos, Jasper had no idea.

“You mean the mysterious stalker who slashed the tires on a car you had towed before we could see it, destroying the evidence?”

Jasper winced at being reminded of his mistake. “Yes.”

“This would be the same stalker who supposedly painted over your mural?”

Supposedly? Pointing to the destroyed mural, Jasper said, “That didn’t happen by itself.”

“You’re right. It didn’t. But no need to search for some mysterious stalker when you’re standing right here with red paint all over your hands.”

He was? Jasper glanced down. Oh shit. He looked at his palms then turned his hands over. Paint streaked both sides. How had that happened? He vaguely remembered touching the cans, but that wouldn’t account for the amount of paint on them.

“Can you explain why you’ve got paint all over you?”

Rubbing his hands together, Jasper said, “I think it happened when I touched the cans.”

“To get rid of the evidence.”

Jasper’s head shot up at the accusatory tone. “Of course not.”

“But you contaminated the scene. That’s twice you’ve destroyed evidence. Are you deliberately trying to make our jobs more difficult?”

Jasper shook his head. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking about evidence. I didn’t even realize there was a problem until I saw my mural. That’s when I called the police.”

“And your mother,” Gabe said, giving him a scathing look Jasper didn’t understand.

“Yes.”

Gabe just stared at him. Long enough to make Jasper nervous. He looked at Detective Trewitt, but he was watching his partner with a frown on his face. Glancing back at his mate, Jasper wished he knew what was going through his mind.

Then the old adage of being careful what you wished for reared its ugly head and bit him in the ass.

“I have a theory about what’s going on,” Gabe finally said. “Want to hear it?”

Jasper hesitated, knowing a trick question when he heard one. Every instinct he had was telling him to say no, but Gabe’s eyes dared him to say yes. Never one to back down from a challenge, Jasper straightened his shoulders and nodded. “Sure, Detective. Tell me your theory.”

“Alright.” Gabe moved closer and stared down at Jasper. “Here’s the thing. I don’t think you have a stalker.

Jasper blinked, not having expected that. “You don’t?”

Gabe shook his head. “No. I think you made it all up.”

Jasper frowned. “Why would I do that?”

“To cover up your actions.” Gabe leaned in, his eyes glittering with an intensity that was a bit unnerving. “Because you are the stalker.”

“Excuse me.” Jasper couldn’t have heard that right.

“What the hell are you doing, Gabe?” Detective Trewitt said, grabbing him by the shoulder and yanking him back.

Gabe knocked his hand away. “I’m solving this case.”

“No, you’re not. You’re harassing the victim.”

“There’s no victim here. Just a criminal.” Gabe sneered at Jasper. “Isn’t that right, Mr. Belmont?”

It took Jasper a second. “You seriously think that I’m the stalker? That I destroyed my own mural?”

Gabe nodded. “Yes.”

Jasper stared at him in shock, not sure what to say. Then he recalled the way Gabe had looked at him when Jasper had told them he’d had his car towed. “I suppose you think I slashed my own tires too.”

Another nod.

“And that I publicly humiliated myself with those photos.”

“Yes.”

“Why would I do that?”

“For the publicity.”

Jasper squinted at him. “The what?”

“The publicity.”

It didn't make any more sense even hearing it a second time.

“Let's look at the facts.” Pinning Jasper with his eyes, Gabe started ticking off points. “One, you're trying to get a new business off the ground. Two, you have a Grand Opening coming up.” He pointed to the sign that hung above the mural. “Three, you need publicity to get the word out, and that shit isn't cheap. And lastly,” he said, so smugly Jasper was tempted to kick him in the shins, “you conveniently attracted a stalker who's sent a whole lot of free publicity your way just when you need it most.”

Jasper just looked at him, waiting to hear if there was more, but that seemed to be it. A laugh bubbled up, escaping from his mouth before he could stop it.

Gabe bristled, those dark blue eyes sparking with an anger that made him even more attractive. Exciting. Dangerous.

His mate truly was a beautiful man. It's too bad he was an idiot.

“Your theory is flawed, Detective.”

Scowling, Gabe stepped closer, making Jasper's blood pump faster. “My theory is solid. Want to know how I know?”

“Sure.” Jasper couldn't wait to hear this.

“Gabe, can I have a word with you?” Detective Trewitt grabbed his arm.

Gabe shook him off, keeping his eyes locked on Jasper's. “Your plan worked. Your little stunts have drummed up all kinds of interest in your business.” He pointed to something behind Jasper.

Jasper spun around and saw that Stan, Lou, Fred, and the reporters from Channel Six and SGTV had finally tracked him

down and were gathering on the sidewalk. Along with a few business owners and some interested pedestrians. Then he felt heat at his back. Jasper shivered, goosebumps raising on his skin when Gabe's breath tickled the back of his neck.

"There's just one thing you didn't take into consideration before calling us in and wasting the taxpayers' money and police resources," Gabe said, his husky voice raising goosebumps on goosebumps.

"And what's that?" Jasper rasped, barely able to think through the fog covering his mind, his mate's nearness and raw, sexual energy scrambling the synapses in his brain.

"Falsely reporting a crime is against the law."

When Jasper felt him move away, he turned around to tell him he hadn't broken any laws, but the scary, mean smile on Gabe's face, the one that made him look dangerous—and so damned hot—stalled the words in his throat.

"You might want to keep that in mind the next time you try to manufacture publicity for your business." Gabe reached into his front pocket.

Jasper's breath started coming fast, something unexpected sparking to life when Gabe pulled out a set of handcuffs and held them up.

He reached for Jasper's arm.

Jasper yanked it away, realizing almost immediately that might have been a mistake.

Gabe's smile got bigger. "And now we can add resisting arrest to your charges."

Seriously, why was that scary smile so hot? And why did the thought of Gabe putting those cuffs on him make his heart race?

As if hearing his thoughts, Gabe paused, then his eyes filled with heat. "It's like that is it?"

The sexy growl in his voice distracted Jasper long enough for Gabe to snap the handcuff on his arm. A small gasp

escaped when the steel band closed around his wrist. Looking down at the silver cuff, Jasper found it hard to breathe.

Gabe took hold of his other arm.

Jasper's gaze flew to his.

The fire in Gabe's eyes flared bright when he hooked the cuff around Jasper's wrist.

He stood unresisting, heart pounding loudly in his ears as Gabe slowly pushed the ends of the cuff together.

One click. Two clicks.

Jasper trembled, trapped in the heat of his gaze, still unable to take a breath.

Three clicks.

Then Detective Trewitt was there, stepping between them and pushing Gabe back. Giving Jasper a tight smile, he said, "Excuse me while I have a word with my partner."

Jasper nodded, then sucked in a breath as he looked down at the cuff hanging loose on his arm. A slightly scary, holy-crap-he-had-no-idea-why-he-was-so-turned-on part of him wished Gabe had finished locking it. He went lightheaded at the realization of how badly he wanted that.

Feeling like his skin was on fire, Jasper looked up and saw Gabe watching him over Detective Trewitt's shoulder as he was pushed further down the building.

Driven by an impulse he couldn't control, feeling like everything was moving in slow motion, Jasper slipped the cuff over his hand and placed it on his other wrist next to the other.

Hunger blazed in Gabe's eyes as they followed the motion.

His eyes never leaving Gabe's, panting like he was running a marathon, Jasper slowly pressed the ends together, the final click as the cuff locked into place making him shudder.

Blue eyes turned black.

Jasper stumbled forward a step, everything in him needing to be near his mate. But before he could take another, a car roared into the parking lot, tooting its horn as it came to a stop next to him, breaking the hold Gabe had over him.

Feeling as if he'd just woken from a trance, Jasper turned to the vehicle, a grin forming when a colorfully dressed woman hopped out of a fluorescent blue Mini and waved to him before running over to the mural.

“Who’s that?” Detective Trewitt called back to him.

“My artist friend Trish,” Jasper said, turning to where he was standing at the corner of the building with Gabe. Keeping his gaze firmly on Detective Trewitt—absolutely not looking at his mate whose eyes were filled with a hunger that had Jasper wanting to throw himself at him—he asked, “Is it okay if I go speak with her? I need to see if she can do anything about my mural.”

“No problem at all, Mr. Belmont. We’ll be waiting for you when you’re done.”

Nodding, Jasper’s eyes skipped to Gabe’s, the fire in them almost pulling him in again, but he forced himself to look away, then hurried over to Trish.

But he could feel those eyes burning a hole in his back with every step he took.

Jasper wondered how long it would take for the detective to come for his handcuffs. And if he intended to follow through on what his eyes had promised when he did.

And if Jasper would survive the experience with his heart intact.

He was pretty sure the answer to the last one was no.



## Chapter Five

Gabe went easily when Emerson shoved him around the corner, thinking he might possibly have crossed the line. Or maybe not. His mind wasn't tracking well enough just then to figure that out. The only thing he was certain of was that the moment he'd laid eyes on Jasper his system had gone haywire, attraction stronger than anything he'd felt before taking over, flaring so hot it had scared the fuck out of him.

So he'd reacted like any rational man would in that situation and had tried to fight it off with anger. When that hadn't worked, he'd reminded himself that guys like Jasper were bad news and brought nothing but trouble—something he knew, being burned by them before—but even that hadn't been enough, which had taken his fear to a whole new level, a level matched only by his lust.

A lust that was partially cooled when his back slammed against the brick wall, Gabe's first clue that Emerson was pissed. The second clue—

“Are you out of your goddamned mind?” Emerson yelled, then fisted the front of his jacket and slammed him against the wall again.

—was that.

“Reporters,” Gabe gasped, the second hit knocking the wind out of him.

Emerson froze, then glanced at the reporters a few yards away. Turning back to Gabe, he leaned close and hissed, “Tell me you weren't seriously going to arrest Belmont.”

Sucking in air, Gabe nodded. Damned right he'd been going to arrest him. Finding out that not only was he the one who'd caused a sensation on the evening news but was also responsible for the fucking disaster on Canyon Drive because of his porno shots had solidified Gabe's instinctive distrust of him. Jasper calling his mother to pull strings with the captain, the paint on his hands—visible proof of his guilt in vandalizing the mural—then him destroying evidence, not once but two times, were the chocolate sauce, nuts, and cherry

on top of Gabe's arrest-his-ass-and-throw-him-in-the-slammer sundae.

And what the fuck was that with him fondling Gabe's cuffs, staring him right in the eyes as he taunted him, filling his mind with forbidden images, fucking daring Gabe to do things he knew he shouldn't do...at least not with him. And then to boldly steal them, leaving Gabe with no choice but to take them back. Didn't he realize Gabe was too fucking dangerous to play that game with?

Unless...

Gabe's eyes narrowed. Maybe he did. Maybe he knew damned well and wasn't worried about what Gabe would do to him. Hell, what if he wanted Gabe to do those dark and dirty things to him? The idea that Jasper wasn't afraid of him, like so many were, and that he might crave what Gabe could give him, was far more tempting than seeing him lock Gabe's cuffs around his wrist, his eyes glazed over with passion.

Which made him too fucking dangerous for Gabe's well-being and sanity. He needed to stay the hell away from him so he didn't do something stupid. The fact that Jasper had no qualms about breaking the law and using his mother's status to get away with it should make that easy.

His back hit the wall a third time. "Would you fucking stop," Gabe gasped out, shoving Emerson back. That was starting to fucking hurt.

"Not until you pull your head out of your ass and tell me you're not going to arrest him."

"I am going to arrest him. He's a goddamned criminal."

"No, he's not."

"He is, and I'm—"

"Being fucking stupid. The Captain's a personal friend of his mother's. He'll have your balls, and maybe even your badge, if you arrest her son."

That brought Gabe's anger back full force. Grabbing Emerson by the lapels of his suit jacket, he pivoted and

slammed him into the wall. “I’m not going to fucking let him get away with breaking the law because his mother leaned on the Captain.” If anything, that made Gabe even more determined to make sure he paid for his crimes.

Emerson shoved him back. “He didn’t break the law.”

“He sure the fuck did. You saw the paint on his hands as well as I did.”

“There could be a thousand reasons for that. None of which make him guilty.”

“Or just one, because he fucking is.”

“He’s not.”

Gabe shoved off of him. “Come on, Em. Surely you’re not that blind you can’t see what’s going on. Between whatever that was on the news the other night to the billboard this morning, this guy’s pulling in major coverage.” He jerked his head toward the gathered reporters. “Any fool can see this so-called stalker is nothing but a ploy to drum up interest for his Grand Opening.”

“The only fool here is you if you think Belmont’s behind this. The kid is innocent.”

Gabe clenched his teeth at his partner’s stubborn refusal to see what was so obvious. “He’s fucking guilty. He’s nothing but an entitled punk who uses his mother’s connections to get away with doing whatever the fuck he wants. And I’m not going to fucking let him get away with it. Not this time.”

“He’s not guilty...wait.” Emerson frowned at him. “What do you mean, this time?”

Gabe stiffened.

“Oh shit. You’re talking about—”

“Don’t,” Gabe said, holding up his hand. Then he had to look away, not able to meet Emerson’s eyes when they filled with compassion, which felt a lot like pity. And fucking burned.

“Belmont’s not Robbie,” Emerson said, putting his hand on Gabe’s shoulder and giving him a gentle shake. “He’s not like your ex-boyfriend.”

Gabe snorted, still not looking at him. Emerson was wrong. Jasper was exactly like his ex-boyfriend. Or close enough to make no difference. And Gabe should know since he was intimately familiar with the type.

Before moving to Starfall Grove five years earlier, Gabe had been a homicide detective in Chicago. Within a few years of reaching that rank, the violence, drugs, corruption, and evils of what one human could do to another had come close to breaking him. But Gabe had held on and kept going, determined to find justice for the victims and their families.

And he’d found justice for many in that violent city.

Until the day he’d discovered his boyfriend, the man he’d intended to marry, had been using his relationship with Gabe to get out of numerous traffic violations and more than a few minor drug possession charges.

And when tossing Gabe’s name and rank around hadn’t been enough, Robbie would offer up his lithe dancer’s body and fuck his way out of a ticket.

The fact that his fellow officers, the guys who should have had his back, had slept with Gabe’s boyfriend had been bad enough—and had hurt him more than he wanted to admit—but that they’d done so in return for letting Robbie off for his crimes, ultimately breaking the law themselves, had been more disillusionment than he could handle.

Gabe had been done.

Done with the betrayal, done with the never-ending violence, done with the corruption, especially among his brothers in blue—which is what had finally broken him—Gabe had handed in his weapon and badge. He’d gone home and canceled his lease, put his belongings in storage, then driven out of the city with no destination in mind. All he’d known was that he’d needed to get away before he ended up

killing someone, namely his lying, cheating, douche-bag ex-boyfriend and whichever cop he'd been fucking when Gabe had dumped a box of his shit onto the hood of the police car parked in Robbie's parking spot.

The next day when Robbie, his faithless, dirtbag ex had phoned to ask why his key to Gabe's place wasn't working, Gabe had gleefully informed him that he didn't live there anymore.

"What!" Robbie shrieked. "You just moved out without telling me? What the fuck, Gabe?"

Gabe snorted. Served the little bastard right.

"Where did you move to?" Then before Gabe could answer, his tone abruptly shifted. "Is your new place closer to the studio? Because that would be perfect. They've offered to let me teach the senior classes, which is more money, but also longer hours. If I don't have such a long commute from your place, I'll be able to do the extra classes and still get my Gabe time."

Gabe just shook his head, amazed at how quickly Robbie had turned that around to how it would benefit him. And how the fuck did he plan on squeezing in Gabe-time around everyone else he was fucking if he was working longer hours?

"So when do I get my new key?"

"You don't. I'm moving away. Out of the city."

"But...what about me? Your job? You can't just leave everything."

"I sure the fuck can. And I did."

There was a brief hesitation, like maybe Robbie was finally getting a clue. "Where are you going?"

"Somewhere where I don't have to run into men you fucked behind my back every time I turn around."

Robbie's gasp was loud. And the denials came fast. "I never cheated on you, Gabe. Not once. Whoever said I did was lying."

“Save it,” Gabe snarled. “My fellow officers had a lot to say about how much fun they had fucking my boyfriend.” Mostly because they hadn’t known he was listening.

“I didn’t,” Robbie said, his voice quivering, his eyes probably welling up with crocodile tears, an act Gabe would never fall for again. “You have to believe me, baby. I would never betray you. You’re my one and only. The man I’m going to marry.”

At those words, all of his suppressed hurt, his disillusionment, his anger, boiled over. Too furious to drive, Gabe pulled over to the side of the road and slammed his car into park, then sat there, his body rigid, fingers opening and closing, clenching the steering wheel then loosening, his breaths coming hard and fast. Fuck Robbie and fuck marriage. Gabe couldn’t believe how stupid he’d been to think Robbie was the one. How gullible he’d been to fall for his act, for all of his lies. Working far too many hours, raw and almost broken from seeing the worst of humanity, Gabe had been easy pickings, too blinded by need and, let’s face it, lust—Robbie’s long bendy body and tight little ass hard to resist—to see what Robbie was really like when he’d swooped in and slotted himself neatly into Gabe’s life.

Gabe had been so grateful to have someone to come home to on the nights Robbie was free, so thankful to have a warm body to sink into to wash away the horrors of that day, he hadn’t questioned all the nights Robbie hadn’t been available. He’d been so happy, felt so fortunate to have someone there to hold him, to tell him everything would be all right, someone whose kisses and caring—which he’d mistaken for love—had patched the worst of the wounds on his soul, that he’d blindly trusted, believing Robbie when he’d said dance rehearsals had put those marks on his body.

Finding out everything had been a lie, that Robbie had only been using him, stringing him along for whatever the fuck reason he had, had ripped a hole in his heart. But the betrayal from his brothers on the force had cut deeper, tearing his soul open so wide he wasn’t sure he’d ever recover.

“Tell me you believe me, baby,” Robbie said, his voice wobbling as he sniffed back those fake tears. “Tell me you know I wouldn’t be unfaithful.”

Gabe’s knuckles turned white, the steering wheel creaking under the strain of how hard he was squeezing it, part of him wishing it was Robbie’s neck. Or the bastards who’d fucked him. “Reg and Tate had pictures of the time they double-teamed you.”

“Baby, no. That wasn’t... I didn’t—”

“In my own fucking bed, Robbie,” Gabe yelled, feeling murderous all over again. Only his partner holding him back had stopped Gabe from killing those two motherfuckers when he’d caught them flashing the photos around the locker room. But he hadn’t been fast enough to stop Gabe from breaking their faces. “You fucked those fuckers in my bed. More than once.”

There was a loud sob. Followed by a sniff. “I, I...they made me, Gabe. You have to believe me. They said if I didn’t do what they said...”

“Stop fucking lying to me,” Gabe roared. “You fucking went after them. You fucking threw yourself at them. At all of my brothers. Don’t fucking try to turn this around on them.”

A louder sob. “I’m sorry. I think...I think I have a problem. I need help.”

“I don’t fucking care.” Which was a lie. But he was going to try his damndest to make it true.

There was a long silence, punctuated by sobs, before Robbie asked, his voice sounding lost, “Will I...” Another long sniff. “Will I ever see you again?”

“Not if I can fucking help it.” Then, needing to be done, Gabe ended the call, blocked Robbie’s number, and tossed his phone into the backseat, closing that chapter of his life.

He’d driven into Starfall Grove three weeks later and known immediately that he’d come home. He’d built a new life filled with people he trusted, doing a job he loved in a

community he was proud to serve. He wasn't about to let some pretty, entitled, magic boy fuck it all up.

Been there, done that, and wasn't about to drink from that well again.

No matter how much he might be tempted to.

“Gabe.” Fingers snapped in front of his face. “Are you listening to me?”

Blinking, Gabe came back to the present and saw Emerson frowning at him.

“Did you hear me? Belmont's not like Robbie.”

“Yeah, he is,” Gabe said, then holding his hand up to stop whatever else Emerson was going to say, walked to the corner of the building. Crossing his arms, he leaned against the brick wall, eyes narrowed as he watched the animated conversation Jasper was having with his artist friend. Against his will, Gabe could feel his body reacting, everything growing tight, hardening at the sight of that lanky form stuffed into skin-tight jeans and a blue and pink t-shirt that sat higher than his waistband, exposing a strip of pale skin Gabe wanted to sink his teeth into.

Which pissed him off, but that didn't stop his cop's eyes from taking in all the details, from the untamed, light brown hair with a slight curl at the ends—long enough to get a good grip of—to his wicked mouth—the full bottom lip just begging to be bitten—that had a natural twist to it that made it seem as if Jasper was laughing at a private joke. Then there was the protruding Adam's apple Gabe could easily visualize stretched out as Jasper threw his head back in ecstasy, exposing the hollow at the base of his throat where sweat would pool until it spilled over the sides and streamed down the long, slender column of his neck as he looked at Gabe out of half-slitted amber eyes full of mysteries Gabe wanted to unravel.

Just then, those dark golden eyes looked over and locked on him. Gabe clenched his teeth when the side of that laughing mouth curled up as Jasper cocked an eyebrow, his expression



telling Gabe he was an idiot. And since Gabe couldn't decide if he wanted to strangle the infuriatingly sexy man or kiss the smug look off his face—or better yet, fuck him until they both couldn't walk—he probably was.

Which was annoying as fuck.

He glanced over when Emerson came up beside him.

“Look at him, Gabe. Even though he's trying to hide it, you can see how upset he is about his mural. That's not the face of a guilty man.”

No. It was the face of a good actor. Gabe's Spidey senses, the ones he'd developed shortly after moving to Starfall Grove and had come to depend on, were telling him something was going on with Jasper, that he needed to be wary of him. He turned to his partner and shook his head. “You're wrong, Em. I know he's behind this stalking crap and I'm going to prove it.”

Emerson sighed. “Gabe—”

“Don't fucking Gabe me. Our job is to look at all the evidence, not just assume someone's telling the truth because they have a pretty face.” Gabe stopped. Fuck. Why the hell had he said that?

Emerson squinted at him. “You think he has a pretty face?”

Gabe shook his head. “No.”

“That's what you just said.”

“I didn't mean it like that.”

“I think you did,” Emerson said. “You want him. That's why you're being such an ass.”

“I'm being an ass because he's guilty as fuck.”

“Sure you are,” Emerson said, then snorted. “I saw the way he was looking at you. And you were looking right back.”

Motherfucker. “You saw nothing,” Gabe snarled.

“I saw everything. You want him, Gabe.” Emerson leaned in, whispering in his ear. “You want him real bad.”

Gabe shoved him back. “Would you fucking stop?”

Emerson just snickered and made kissy faces at him.

Gabe gave him a disgusted look, mostly to hide the fact that Emerson had hit too close to a truth he wasn't about to admit, and jerked his head to where Jasper was standing. “Let's just finish taking his fucking statement so we can get on with some real police work.”

Part of which would be proving Jasper was guilty.

“Alright, but this conversation isn't over.”

“It's over.” Bumping Emerson's shoulder, Gabe started walking to where Jasper and his artist friend were waiting.

Catching up with him, Emerson said, “Maybe you should let me do the talking this time. Your new boyfriend already thinks you're an idiot. No need to let him know you want to cuff him to your bed and go bad cop all over his ass.

Fucking Emerson. He should have known he hadn't missed that.

They only got a few steps before one of the reporters, moving fast on stiletto heels—how the fuck women could do that without breaking their necks was something Gabe would never understand—called out to them. “Detectives, a word please.”

Gabe scowled at her, which only slowed her down for a second, then she kept coming. Shoving Emerson in her direction, he said, “You fucking deal with this.” Then he took off.

“You asshole. Get your ass...would you get that thing out of my face.”

Looking back over his shoulder, Gabe laughed when he saw Emerson leaning away from the microphone the reporter had shoved at him.

Undaunted, the reporter kept holding the microphone out to him as she asked, “Are you here to investigate the recent spate of indecent exposure incidents involving Jasper Belmont?”

“I can’t discuss an ongoing investigation,” Emerson said, trying to move around her, but the reporter shifted quickly to stay in front of him.

“Then you must be here to make an arrest. What are the charges?”

“I really can’t comment. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to speak with my partner.” Gabe snickered when Emerson tried to go around her again, but moving like lightning in those heels, she cut him off, shoving the microphone back in his face.

“The public has a right to know what’s going on, Detective.”

“And they’ll find out once we’ve finished our investigation. Now please move.” Emerson held out his arm to block her, and finally got away, scowling at Gabe who didn’t even try to hold back his laughter when his partner reached him.

“You’re an ass, you know that.”

“Yep.”

“My editor will be calling your Captain about your lack of cooperation,” the reporter shouted after them.

“We’ll let him know to expect their call,” Gabe called back, smirking when she glared at them before storming off, her heels clicking loudly against the pavement. Turning back, the smile fell from his face when he saw Jasper watching him with those witchy amber eyes.

Emerson glanced between him and Jasper, his shrewd gaze missing nothing. He snorted, made another kissy face at Gabe—fucker—then walked over to where Jasper was waiting.

“We have just a few more questions for you, Mr. Belmont, then we’ll let you get back to your day.”

Jasper nodded, his eyes staying on Gabe’s as he ran his slender fingers over those damned cuffs. Then he tugged on them.

Gabe went instantly hard.

Fucking fuck. He was so screwed.

## Chapter Six

As Detective Trewitt added a note to his phone, Jasper's gaze drifted to Gabe who was standing next to him with his arms crossed, looking all kinds of dark and menacing. Which was working on Trish, who kept shooting nervous glances at him. Gabe's aggressive stance was working on Jasper too, but not quite the same way. Keeping his eyes on him, Jasper ran his thumb back and forth over the cuffs, an almost unconscious action by this point. Heat flared in those piercing blue eyes, making his stomach jangle. Then Gabe blinked and the heat was gone, his expression dark and menacing again. Which, because he obviously had no sense of self-preservation, made Jasper want to push him further. For whatever reason, the scowlier Gabe got, the faster Jasper's blood pumped and the more alive he felt, which made him more daring, driving him to greater risks, which in turn made Gabe's scowl deepen, making him look even more dangerous.

The cycle of taunting, heat-filled angry eyes, blood-pounding excitement, and dark scowls might have continued indefinitely if Detective Trewitt hadn't cleared his throat, bringing Jasper's attention back to him. The detective's eyes were filled with amusement, making Jasper think he knew what was happening between him and Gabe. Which meant he should probably knock it off before he got his mate into trouble. Darting another glance at the scowling visage, Jasper's heart began to race when the flames in those eyes burned brighter. Ookay then. Maybe not. Slowly tearing his eyes away, he gave his attention to Detective Trewitt. Mostly. At least enough that he could answer questions.

"Can you think of anyone who might have any reason to come after you?" Detective Trewitt asked.

Jasper opened his mouth, then hesitated. Should he throw Lucas under the bus? Then he thought back to how Lucas had taunted him. Hell yeah. He deserved to have to deal with Gabe.

"Mr. Belmont," Detective Trewitt said, watching him closely. "Do you have an idea of who's stalking you?"

“Not exactly. But I’m pretty sure my ex-boyfriend knows who’s behind it.”

“What makes you think that?”

“My crystals told me.”

Detective Trewitt’s eyebrows shot up. “Your crystals told you?”

Jasper nodded. “Kind of. It’s hard to explain. But my ex did say some things when I accused him of putting that picture up on the news that tells me he knows who’s doing it. But he wouldn’t tell me who.”

Gabe’s eyes narrowed. “So your ex is fine with this person going after you. Is there some reason for him to want to get back at you?”

Jasper shook his head. “Not really. We broke up because of a stupid misunderstanding. Nothing major that would warrant this level of harassment.” Which wasn’t strictly true, but there was no way he was going to let his mate know how pathetic he’d been, thinking Lucas had actually cared, trusting him with his heart when the only reason he’d been with Jasper was because of who his family was. Something someone like Gabe wouldn’t understand. He’d never let anyone make a fool of him like that.

“Just a stupid misunderstanding? Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Gabe grunted, the sound so full of disbelief it was impossible to miss, then he went back to scowling at Jasper.

Glancing sideways at his partner, Detective Trewitt let out a sigh, like Gabe was testing his patience, which made Jasper think his mate might be a bit difficult to work with. Turning back to Jasper, Detective Trewitt asked, “What did your ex-boyfriend say when you accused him of putting that photo up on the news?”

“Just that he didn’t do it. I also accused him of taking that photo without my knowledge, but he denied it.”

“Do you believe him?”

Jasper shook his head. “He’s the only one who could have taken it.”

Gabe snorted.

Ignoring him, Jasper pointed to his second earring. “I had this in the photo. Lucas was the last person I was intimate with since I got it, so it had to have been him who took it.”

Detective Trewitt nodded. “What’s your ex-boyfriend’s full name?”

“It’s Lucas Johnson. Lucas with a C.”

Detective Trewitt made a note on his phone. “We’ll have a talk with him and see what he has to say.”

“Thank you.” After another quick glance at Gabe, Jasper asked, “Do you need anything else?”

Detective Trewitt shook his head and put his phone in his pocket. “This should be enough for now. We’ll call you if we have any other questions.”

“Okay.”

Detective Trewitt handed him two business cards. One with his name and number, the other with Gabe’s. “If you think of anything else, please give us a call.”

“I will. Thank you again.” Nodding to him, Jasper glanced at Gabe, then unable to resist, touched the cuffs again, a small smile escaping when Gabe’s eyes narrowed, then he grabbed Trish’s hand and quickly pulled her over to the mural. Gesturing at it, Jasper asked, “Do you really think you can save it?”

Leaning her head against his shoulder, she looked up at him. “Yes. But I’d rather talk about the scary hunk of a detective who looked like he couldn’t decide if he wanted to toss you over his shoulder and carry you off to do unspeakable things to your body or throw you off a cliff.

Jasper snorted. “That scary hunk of a detective is my mate.”

“Your mate. Oh, my god.” Trish’s squeal had both detectives turning to them.

Jasper grabbed her when she jumped up and wrapped her arms around his neck, laughing when she started talking a mile a minute, her words running over each other in her obvious excitement for him.

He just grinned and held on tight. He’d had pretty much the same reaction when he’d first realized Gabe was his mate, even if he hadn’t been able to show it.

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The sun was just setting when Jasper pulled into his driveway in his newly tuned-up car that now sported four brand-new tires. He turned off his vehicle, then just sat there, taking a moment to enjoy the silence broken only by the ticking of his engine as it cooled, his body relaxing after what had been a wild roller coaster of a day, filled with highs and lows, the highest of which had been meeting his mate...even if he did think Jasper was criminal who should be behind bars.

He chuckled quietly to himself. Oh well. No relationship ever started out perfect. There were always growing pains as people got to know each other. His were just a bit more problematic than most. But Jasper knew deep in his soul that whatever he had to put up with until he could break through Gabe’s walls would be totally worth it in the end.

And until then, Jasper would just keep having fun playing with him.

Fingering the cuffs the detectives for some reason had let him keep—probably because of the call they’d received that had them rushing off—Jasper took a quick look around the darkened neighborhood, checking if there were any reporters still lurking nearby, which there weren’t, then got out of the car and went inside, instantly feeling better when the safety and warmth of his house wrapped around him.



Leaning against his door to kick off his shoes, he noticed the heavily taped box on the side table. Damn. He'd completely forgotten about bringing it in the day before. Dropping his keys into their bowl, he grabbed the box and carried it to the living room, setting it on the table, before picking up the remote and turning on the local news. He squinted at the TV, bracing himself as he waited for it to come on, then let out a breath of relief when it did without his sex face taking over the screen. Putting the remote down, he sat on the couch and pulled the box toward him and began ripping off tape. Then more tape.

When he'd torn off enough to make a medium-sized ball but was no closer to getting into the box, Jasper pulled open the drawer built into the living-room table and fished around in it until he found the utility knife he kept in there, then sawed through the thick layer of tape, finally getting the box open.

Peering inside, he found a picture of himself with the eyes gouged out, the crushed fragments of a red jasper stone—a symbolic threat if he'd ever seen one—dried black rose petals, the melted remains of a black candle, and nail clippings.

Fucking great. Someone had sent him a hex box. And not a very imaginative one at that.

As a heavy miasma of despair settled around him, Jasper set the box down, then ran his fingertips over the black tourmaline ring on his hand to wake up the crystal. Holding his closed fist over the box, he called on his magic and sent a burst of power through the ring to dispel the negative energy he'd unwittingly brought into his home. Jasper frowned when the heaviness in the air didn't lift.

Huh. The hex was stronger than he'd thought. Getting up, he went to his bedroom and brought back the selenite crystal wand he kept on his windowsill. Holding it in his fist over the box, he focused his will and sent another burst of magic through the cleansing crystals.

There was a slight lightening in the room, but the darkness lingered, which was a bit concerning. Whoever had

sent him the hex box had used a lot of magic to power it. And nasty magic at that, the kind that left a rotten bitterness he could now taste on the back of his tongue.

The bitter rot that signified black magic.

Jasper was going to need something a bit more traditional than just these two crystals to counter it.

Getting up, he carried the box into his spare bedroom, which also doubled as a ritual room, and set it down in the middle of the carpet before going to the dresser in the corner and opening the top drawer which was filled with an assortment of stones and crystals. Letting his magic guide him, he selected the crystals he would need, then pushed the drawer closed and grabbed the large lava rock sitting on top of the dresser—the lava stone had been spelled to withstand high temperatures but not get hot itself—and set it down next to the box. Then Jasper went to each of the four cardinal points and put down one of the crystals he'd selected, speaking quietly to it as he set it in place to wake the power inside of it and invoke the spirit that aligned with its element. Once the crystals for air, earth, fire, and water were in place and charged, Jasper called up his power and moving in a clockwise direction, slowly drew out a circle with his finger, linking the crystals as he came to them, then carefully joined the ends of his circle when he returned to his starting point.

With the circle complete and the protective magic in place, Jasper knelt next to the box and removed the elements of the hex, placing them in a small circle formation on the lava stone, then poured the Red Jasper stone fragments in the middle of it. As a final step, he placed a small piece of his namesake stone, Red Jasper, on top of each component of the hex, then stood and moved a few feet back from it. Taking a moment to feel the energies in the room, he nodded. Everything felt right, including his choice of Red Jasper, which wasn't customarily used for purification and cleansing. But the symmetry of using the stone that had been meant to harm him to counter the spell felt appropriate in this case, so he'd gone with it.

Closing his eyes, he centered himself, then opened them and focused on his crystals. “Are you guys ready?” Pulses of energy flickered in each of them as crystalline tinkles of agreement filled the air. “Alright, then. Let’s destroy this thing.”

Jasper called up his magic, then released it. A line of fire raced around the circle he’d cast, enclosing the protected area in blue flames. He raised his hands. The flames rose higher. Pointing one hand toward the hex components, Jasper released another burst of magic, channeling it through the Red Jaspers, his power lighting a spark in the heart of each stone. Then he pushed more power at them until the stones glowed red. The protective circle, catching the edge of his magic, rose to the ceiling. Thrusting one hand out to the side to hold the flames of the circle in place, he pushed even more power through the Red Jaspers until they glowed like little suns.

But the hex remained intact.

Calling up more of his magic, he increased the flow he was channeling into the stones until there was a loud pop and they burst into flames, incinerating the components of the hex.

But the dark magic lingered.

Jasper fed more power into the stones until the flames turned white, which finally started to burn away the black magic. But it didn’t go easily. Jasper let out a yelp when sharp claws scraped at him, digging at his soul. Gritting his teeth and locking his knees—which had started to wobble—he pushed out more power until the tips of the flames turned purple. There was a high-pitched shriek that he felt more than heard, then the magic binding the hex shattered. But Jasper kept the flames burning until the air in the room felt lighter, cleaner, with no sense of darkness remaining. Only then did he release his magic.

And promptly fell to his knees, then forward onto his hands, his entire body trembling, breaths coming fast, and sweat pouring down his face. When his elbows gave way, he collapsed to the carpet, then rolled to his back and stared up at

the ceiling. Holy crap. He couldn't believe how much effort it had taken to destroy the hex. Someone really had it in for him.

Which was not a comforting thought at all.

Once he'd gotten his breath back, Jasper wiped the sweat from his face, then sat up and slid across the carpet to look over the remains. All that was left of the hex components were a few small piles of ash and...he blinked, then gently blew on the ash pile in the center of the small circle, letting out a surprised laugh at what was revealed.

Sitting in the middle of a bed of ash, surrounded by the small pieces of Red Jasper he'd used to destroy the hex, was a new Red Jasper stone, larger than the others, glowing with an inner fire, an actual tiny flame that flickered in the center of it. Jasper stared at it in awe. No matter how much he thought he knew about crystals, they always managed to surprise him. But none more than this beautiful Red Jasper, formed from the fragments of stone in the hex box and the collision of crystal magic and black, reshaping itself into this fiery new stone like a phoenix rising from the ashes of what it had been.

Studying the energy it was giving off, Jasper knew exactly what he was going to do with it. Once it cooled, he was going to fashion it into an amulet so he could always carry with him the powerful fire magic that had been woken in the stone, turning what had been meant to harm him into something that would protect him.

His own little fuck you to the asshole who'd sent him the hex.

Leaving the stones where they were to cool, Jasper swept up the ash for disposal, then cleansed his room using a combination of sage smoke and quartz. The sage wasn't strictly necessary since his crystals could have done the job, but he figured you couldn't be too careful when dealing with a hex that powerful. Besides, he liked the way it made the room smell.

Closing the door behind him, he disposed of the inert ash, washed his tourmaline ring carefully to ensure all residue from using it to dispel the hex was gone, then dried it off with a soft

cloth and placed it on the kitchen windowsill where it could catch the early morning rays of sunlight and recharge. Taking the selenite wand back to his bedroom, he placed it in its spot on the windowsill, thanked it for doing its best to help, then left his curtain open enough to allow the moonlight to fall on it so it could cleanse and recharge, too drained to do it himself. With all that taken care of, Jasper got ready for bed, pretty much done with that day.

As his body relaxed, his mate's growly face, never far from his thoughts, flashed into his mind. Jasper drifted off to sleep with a smile on his face, looking forward to what the next day would bring, almost certain he'd be seeing Gabe again. Thank god it would be under better circumstances than what he'd experienced today.

Once again, he was wrong.

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Jasper jerked upright and looked blearily around his darkened bedroom, wondering what had woken him. Then he heard the banging on his front door. Glancing at his phone he saw it was barely past four. Who the hell would be knocking this early? Shit. It better not be those damn reporters again.

Scrambling out of bed, he tripped and almost fell face-first into the wall when his feet got tangled in the jeans he'd left on the floor the night before. Kicking them aside, he hurried from his bedroom as the banging on his front door got louder. Jasper rushed down the stairs, having to grab the railing part way down so he didn't break his neck, then leapt from the second to last stair to the ground and raced down the hallway as the pounding on his door picked up speed.

"Motherfucker!" Jasper grabbed at the toe he'd rammed into the hall table leg, dancing around in place as he inspected the damage to his foot.

Then whoever was at his door started ringing the doorbell, adding a loud chiming accompaniment to the continued

banging.

Pissed, his toe throbbing in time with the banging on his door, Jasper hopped the rest of the way there and threw it open.

“What the fuck do you...Spencer? What are you doing here?”

“Katie just called. She said something’s going on at your shop.”

Jasper blinked. “Katie?”

“Katie. My assistant. She said fireworks are shooting off the roof of your building.”

“Fireworks?” Then what Spencer said finally made it through the fog in his head. “Shit. My store. I gotta get down there.”

Spencer blocked him when he tried to leave. “You might want to get dressed first.”

Jasper looked down and saw all he had on were his boxers. “Right. I’ll, uhm, get dressed and be right back.”

“I’ll drive,” Spencer said, holding up his keys. “Your tires are flat.”

“Tires? All of them?”

Spencer nodded.

“Son of a bitch. That bastard hit me again.”

“Looks like.” Spencer pointed down the hall. “Go and get dressed. I’ll be waiting in the car.”

Nodding, Jasper hobbled back to his bedroom as quickly as he could, wondering what the hell was happening at his store.

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Whatever he'd expected, it didn't come close to the reality.

Spencer had barely come to a stop in front of his store before Jasper was out of the car, running toward the stairs that led to the roof, having no trouble seeing where he was going with the sparklers and showers of color lighting up the sky above him. He was halfway up the stairs when the sound of sirens filled the air. Then two police cars roared into the lot, screeching to a stop below him.

Jasper let out a heavy sigh when a scowling Gabe climbed out of the second vehicle and shouted at him to freeze, knowing his anticipated bright new day had just gone from bad to worse.

## Chapter Seven

Gabe jumped out of the car and slammed the door, cutting off Emerson who'd been telling him to calm down. He didn't want to fucking calm down. He was too fucking pissed that Jasper was once again in the middle of some spectacle meant to draw attention to himself. And even though it wasn't even dawn, Gabe had no doubts the news crews would soon be there taking soundbites to boost their ratings and generating more publicity for Jasper's fucking Grand Opening.

Zeroing in on the man caught halfway down the stairs fleeing the scene, Gabe shouted at him to freeze. Jasper looked at Gabe with wide eyes then heaved a whole-body sigh before his shoulders slumped, obviously realizing how fucked he was. Gabe's lips curled in the smile that had made more than one suspect tremble. This would be the last stunt Jasper pulled. After today, he'd be lucky to be out of jail in time for his store's one-year anniversary.

Stalking over to the bottom of the stairs, Gabe ordered Jasper to come down. When he reached the bottom, Gabe grabbed him by the arm and spun him around to face the wall, then standing closer than was strictly necessary, he yanked Jasper's arms behind his back and pulled his handcuffs from his pocket.

"You're making a mistake, Detective."

"Not fucking likely." Gabe snapped out his cuffs, a deep satisfaction filling him when they closed around those slender wrists.

With Jasper secured, Gabe went to step back but found himself moving closer, crowding him until there wasn't an inch of space between them. He groaned under his breath at the feeling of that lanky body under his, Jasper pressed up against the brick wall with Gabe surrounding him. Controlling him. Owning him. It was heady, everything he'd ever wanted.

And so very fucking dangerous.

Gabe's chin rubbed against flyaway brown locks, then unable to resist, he buried his nose in that soft chestnut-colored



hair and breathed deep. Coconut, citrus, and a warm musky fragrance his brain associated with just-rolled-out-of-bed-man filled his lungs. It was exotic, tangy, and too fucking tempting. He dipped his head in search of more of that fragrance, his nose brushing the top of a perfectly shaped ear. Jasper let out a raw, gasping sound and tilted his head to the side, baring his long, slender neck for Gabe's touch. Just as his teeth scraped over that soft skin, Emerson shouted, bringing Gabe back to his senses.

What the fuck was he doing? He was supposed to be arresting Jasper, not treating him like a hookup in the back room of a club.

Anger clearing the mind-fogging lust from his brain, Gabe moved back, putting a proper distance between them, then pissed at his loss of control—and how fucking far over the line he'd just crossed—he tightened the cuffs around Jasper's wrists and yanked him away from the wall.

It didn't help his control one fucking bit to see those amber eyes glazed over with passion and the healthy hard-on straining the front of those skin-tight jeans.

Gabe forced his eyes away and his mind back to what he was supposed to be doing.

“Jasper Belmont, you are under arrest for setting off fireworks without a permit, disturbing the peace, damaging private property, and fleeing the scene of a crime.”

Jasper blinked at him. “What?”

“You have the right to remain silent.”

More blinking, then, “You're arresting me?”

“Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.”

“But...I didn't do anything.”

Except drive him fucking crazy. “You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you.”

Jasper pulled against his hold. “You're making a mistake.”

Gabe tightened his fingers and held him in place. “If you choose to answer any questions now without an attorney present, you have the right to stop answering at any time. Do you understand the rights I have just read to you?”

More blinking. “Why are you...I don’t understand.”

“Do you need me to repeat your rights?”

Jasper shook his head. “No. But why—”

“Do you understand the rights I have just read to you?”

“Will you just listen to me?”

Not if he wanted to keep his sanity. “Do you understand —”

“Yes, I understand, but—”

“With these rights in mind, do you wish to speak to me?”

“I want to know why you’re arresting me.”

“So do I,” Emerson said, coming up next to them. “What the hell are you doing, Gabe?”

Gabe positioned himself between Jasper and Emerson, ignoring the tiny voice inside of him that asked why he felt that was necessary. “I’m arresting Mr. Belmont for setting off fireworks without a permit, disturbing the peace, damaging private property, creating a fire hazard, and fleeing the scene of a crime.”

“I wasn’t fleeing the scene,” Jasper said, stepping around him.

Gabe quickly pulled him back before he could get any closer to Emerson.

Jasper frowned down at Gabe’s hand on his arm, then raised his eyes and gave Gabe a look he didn’t understand, but which made him fucking twitchy, before turning to Emerson. “I wasn’t fleeing, Detective Trewitt. I was trying to get up to the roof to stop the fireworks from going off.”

“You were running away,” Gabe said.

“No. I was going up,” Jasper said, yanking harder against Gabe’s hold, this time almost pulling free.

Gabe tightened his hand and hauled him close. “Try that again and I’ll add resisting arrest to your charges.”

Jasper’s mouth moved like he wanted to say something else, then he turned his head and looked away.

Which should have pleased Gabe. But there was a small part of him, a stupid, completely illogical part that was disappointed Jasper wouldn’t look at him, even when he shifted slightly, moving into his line of sight. Then Jasper did, giving him an inscrutable look that had Gabe desperately wanting to know what he was thinking. It was almost a relief when he looked away again.

Before Gabe could do something stupid like ask what that look had been about—and why the hell did he even care—he hauled Jasper over to the police car and shoved him into the back seat. Then sighed when Emerson grabbed his arm and pulled him off to the side.

“Can we not do this?”

“Oh, we’re going to do this. What the hell is going on with you?”

“Nothing.”

“There sure the fuck is. Why are you arresting Belmont? You know as well as I do he didn’t set off the fireworks.”

Gabe frowned at him. “What are you talking about? We caught him red-handed.”

Emerson looked at him like he was stupid. “No, we didn’t.”

“The fuck,” Gabe said, scowling at his partner. “You saw him heading down the stairs the same as I did.”

“No. I saw him on the stairs leading to the roof. He could have been going either up or down.”

“Yeah. And he was going down,” Gabe said, knowing he’d read the scene correctly.

“I’m not so sure,” Emerson said as he looked toward the stairs. “I think he was going up to check on the fireworks, just like he said.”

“More like fleeing after setting them off.”

Emerson turned back to Gabe, shaking his head. “I just can’t see him setting off fireworks from his own building. He’s not the type.”

Gabe couldn’t believe his partner was so blind. “He’s exactly the type. He thinks he can do whatever the fuck he wants because he knows he’ll get away with it.”

“Gabe—”

“But not this time. I’m going to make sure of it.”

“Jesus. This kid’s got you all twisted up.” Emerson tapped Gabe on the temple. “Use that brilliant brain of yours and think about it, really think about it without letting all this anger cloud your mind and tell me how him doing that makes any sense.”

“It makes perfect sense to me.”

“Does it? Or are you letting all that crap with Robbie screw with your mind?”

“What the fuck, Em?” Gabe couldn’t believe he’d brought that up. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“You’re treating Belmont like he’s Robbie, Gabe.”

“No, I’m not.”

“You are. You need to stop looking at him as though he was your ex and start seeing him for who he is.” He put his hand on Gabe’s shoulder. “Belmont’s the victim in this, Gabe, not the criminal.”

The certainty in Emerson’s voice had Gabe hesitating. Could he have read the scene wrong? Read Jasper wrong? He didn’t think so, but...could he really be seeing him through the lens of Robbie’s betrayal?

Gabe looked over his shoulder at the stairs and played through what had been going on when they’d pulled up. Jasper

had been in the middle of the staircase, looking down at them with his right hand on the railing, which is why Gabe was so sure he'd been going down. But since Jasper had been standing in place, facing outward, it was possible he could have been going up like Emerson thought, even if Gabe didn't think so.

He turned back to his partner, ready to concede he might have a point when a news van flew around the corner and raced into the parking lot with another one right behind it. Then a station wagon rumbled into the lot from the alley, almost hitting their car before jerking to a stop.

Stan leaned out of the back passenger window and shouted, "Does anyone know where Jasper is? We want to interview him about the fireworks."

Gabe's anger flared back to life. He fucking knew this had just been another stunt to get free publicity.

Shoving Emerson back, Gabe stalked over to the squad car and scowled at Jasper through the window.

Jasper looked at him, then to the reporters in the parking lot, his eyes widening in surprise—which didn't fool Gabe for one fucking minute—then back to Gabe.

Gabe felt Emerson come up beside him but didn't take his eyes off Jasper. "He's no innocent victim. I'm going to make him admit he did it, and then I'm going to lock him away so he can't pull any more fucking stunts like this one."

Emerson grabbed his arm. "Gabe—"

Shrugging him off, Gabe motioned to the officers standing at the front of the car. "Take him away. We'll catch up with you at the station when we're done here."

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It was three hours before Gabe and Emerson finished going over the crime scene. Arriving back at the station, they

found Jasper had made it through booking and was waiting for them in interrogation room three.

Flipping through the folder Emerson had handed to him after he'd gone through it, Gabe frowned, then looked at the booking officer. "He refused Council?"

The officer nodded. "Said he'd use his call to arrange one if it became necessary."

Gabe held out his hand. "It'll be necessary. Give me the phone." He waited while the officer pulled out the hands-free they provided prisoners to make their one call, then started toward the interrogation room.

"I still don't think Belmont's our guy," Emerson said, keeping step beside him. "The evidence we found was just a bit too convenient."

Gabe thought so too. Once his anger had cooled—and let's face it, his frustrated lust from not finishing what he'd started with Jasper—he'd begun to see things clearer. And the things he was seeing weren't adding up. Particularly, the evidence. There was too much of it. And it all pointed at Jasper.

First was the leather and crystal bracelet Jasper had been wearing when Gabe and Emerson had first met him laying conveniently on the ground next to the fireworks. Then there was the receipt for the timers and explosives—paid for by a credit card in Jasper's name—that they'd found crumpled in a ball along the edge of the roof. But the most damning piece of evidence had been the cardboard box the fireworks had come in with Jasper's name and address in big, bold letters on the shipping label.

It was too much, too obvious, and too on-point to be believable.

And Gabe didn't.

But that didn't mean he was ready to give Jasper a pass. There were too many things at play and too many unanswered questions for that. But it did have him doubting.

Not that he'd said anything to Emerson about his doubts. Gabe had taken too hard of a stance against Jasper that he wanted to be sure before he changed his position because if he did and it turned out he'd been right all along, he'd just look like an idiot.

Though he suspected he already did.

Turning to Emerson, Gabe said, "The evidence might be convenient, but it gives us enough to hold him. And keeping him off the streets for twenty-four hours will give everyone a break from the drama."

"Everyone?" Emerson asked, grabbing Gabe by the arm and pulling him to a stop. "Or just you?"

Gabe eyed his partner. "What are you trying to say?"

"That he gets to you. And you don't like it."

"And what? I arrested him because he pisses me off?"

Emerson hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah."

"Fuck you, Em," Gabe said, yanking his arm away. "I wouldn't abuse my authority like that and you fucking know it."

"Not normally, no, you wouldn't. But you're not acting like yourself with him. You're not acting like my partner of the last five years."

Gabe didn't say anything because as much as he hated to admit it, he hadn't been.

"You're so determined to pin everything on him, for whatever fucked up reason you have, that you're not seeing things clearly."

"I'm seeing things just fine."

"You're not. If you were, you'd know this was a setup," Emerson said, looking so frustrated, and... fucking hell... disappointed—which hurt like a fucking stab to the heart—Gabe knew he had to come clean.

"I know."

Emerson froze. “You know?”

“Yeah.”

“That this is a setup?”

Gabe nodded.

“Then you agree he’s innocent.”

Gabe shook his head. “That’s not what I said.” He held up his hand when Emerson went to speak. “We wouldn’t be doing our jobs if we didn’t follow the evidence, and right now, it’s pointing to Belmont. So as far as I’m concerned, he’s guilty until proven otherwise.”

“That’s not the way it works.”

“It does today.”

“He’s not guilty, Gabe.”

“We won’t know for sure until I talk with him.” And Gabe wouldn’t be leaving the interrogation room until he was certain one way or another.

“I?” Emerson asked, his eyebrow shooting up. “You want to do the interview without me?”

“Uh, huh. You can watch from the observation room.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Emerson said, shaking his head. “You’re too determined to pin this on him.”

“And you’re too determined to let him walk,” Gabe countered.

“Gabe—”

“Just let me have a go at him first, Em, and you can do clean up.”

Emerson stared at him for a long moment, then sighed. “Fine. But don’t step out of line Gabe, or I’ll end the interview right there.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t.”

“Make sure you don’t.”



Gabe waited until Emerson was about to go through the door of the observation room, then said, “Oh, and Em. Just so we’re clear, it’s an interrogation, not an interview.” He snorted when Emerson flipped him off, then continued down the hallway until he reached the room Jasper was in.

Peering through the window, he saw Jasper slouched in his chair, his cuffed hands clasped in front of him on the table and his head tilted to the side, looking for all accounts like he was bored and barely able to stay awake. But Gabe could see the slight tremor running through him, giving lie to the casualness he was attempting to convey. The sign of Jasper’s nervousness hit him like a punch to the stomach.

Which was fucking annoying since Gabe shouldn’t care how he felt.

Wrenching on the handle, he shoved the door open with enough force it slammed against the wall, startling Jasper so badly he jumped in his seat, knocking his knees on the underside of the table.

Ignoring the way Jasper was glaring at him—and his annoying stomach that was happy to see the nervousness replaced by some fire—Gabe crossed the room and stood on the opposite side of the table. Keeping his eyes on Jasper, he set the file folder on the table, then the phone next to it, and lastly, the evidence bags, keeping the opaque side turned up to hide what they contained. Not losing eye contact, he took off his jacket and hung it over the back of his chair, then slowly pulled the chair out, hiding his wince, unlike Jasper whose shoulders came up to his ears at the loud noise the metal legs made as they scraped across the floor. Then Gabe sat down and folded his hands in front of him and waited.

And waited some more.

And continued waiting, getting irritated when Jasper refused to say anything, just stared at him with those big witchy eyes, using Gabe’s own tactics against him. And from the stubborn set to his chin, he was determined to win the little battle of wills they had going on. And Gabe wasn’t so sure he

wouldn't. He could all but feel Emerson laughing at him behind the one-way mirror.

Fucker.

When fifteen minutes had passed without Jasper saying anything—which was about thirteen minutes longer than anyone else had lasted against him—Gabe gave up, realizing that his normally very effective silent treatment wasn't going to get him anywhere.

Breaking eye contact, Gabe pulled the file folder toward himself and flipped open the cover. Quickly scanning the documents inside, he closed it and pushed it away, leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed. “Tell me what you were doing at Cherry Street and 2<sup>nd</sup> at 4:47 a.m. the morning of March 21.”

Jasper glanced down at the folder, then back to him. “I've already given my statement to the other officer.”

“And now you need to give it to me.”

“Why? You didn't want to hear it before.”

“That was then. Now I do.”

Jasper looked at the folder again. “Everything I have to say is in there.”

“I need to hear it in your own words.”

“Which are in the statement I already gave.”

Gabe could feel his eyelid twitch. Fucking Jasper was still winning their unspoken battle. And from the amusement that flickered across his face before he looked down, Jasper knew he was getting under Gabe's skin.

Which didn't work for Gabe. He was the one in charge here, damn it.

Straightening in his chair, Gabe pulled on the authority ten years as a hard-ass detective had given him and barked out, “I'm waiting, Mr. Belmont.”

Jasper's head snapped up. He gave Gabe a mulish look, glanced at the folder, then sat back in his chair and averted his

eyes, every stubborn line of his body telling Gabe he wasn't going to say anything else.

Time to change tactics.

Gabe pulled the file folder back to him. Flipping it open, he took out a blank piece of paper, then closed it, setting the paper on top of it. Twisting in his chair to get a pen from his jacket pocket, he casually said, "Just so you know, we can keep you here for twenty-four hours if we only suspect you're guilty of a crime." Turning back, pen in hand, he held it over the piece of paper. "Longer if we have evidence to prove it." He let his eyes stray to the evidence bags.

Jasper's gaze dropped to them, then lifted back to Gabe. They sat there staring at each other, Jasper still refusing to say anything. But every few seconds, he would look at the bags, then back at Gabe, then look at the bags again, the crease between his eyebrows getting deeper every time.

Just as Gabe was thinking he was never going to back down, Jasper finally did.

"I think..." Jasper stopped and started chewing on his top lip as his gaze drifted to the evidence bags again. Swallowing hard, he looked back at Gabe. "I'd like to call my lawyer now."

"That is your right." Gabe slid the phone across the table, then stood. "You have one minute. Make it count." Grabbing the folder and evidence bags, he left the room and hurried down the hall toward the observation room, meeting Emerson as he was coming out.

"Damn," Emerson said, whistling under his breath. "That kid is one cool customer."

Gabe nodded. He was. And he hadn't acted guilty or defensive. Or like any criminal Gabe had faced before. "Em, between you and me. Do you really think he's innocent? After everything we found? After the witness statements?"

Emerson nodded. "I do. And I think you do too. Otherwise, you'd have pounded him hard instead of going easy on him."

Gabe's body reacted instantly to Emerson's words as his mind flooded with images of Jasper that had nothing to do with the case and had no place at work. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to unclench enough to mutter, "I didn't go that easy on him."

"No, but you weren't as forceful as I was expecting."

Gabe grunted because he hadn't been. And that wasn't like him. There was a reason criminals feared him. But him not pushing Jasper hard enough to break him told Gabe he'd already made up his mind about him before ever going into the interrogation room.

"It's like your heart wasn't in it," Emerson said, echoing Gabe's thoughts too close for comfort. Then he squinted at Gabe, a smile slowly forming. "It wasn't, was it?"

Gabe shook his head. "But I'm not ready to just let him walk. There's something going on with him. I can feel it."

Emerson frowned. "Your feelings are usually spot on. Uncannily so."

Gabe nodded. They were. Shortly after he'd arrived in Starfall Grove he'd started getting feelings about people, an ability to read their character, to sense when they were up to no good. And his abilities had only grown stronger and more accurate the longer he lived there to the point he was never wrong. Until now. Until Jasper.

Looking at Emerson, he said, "They're telling me... I don't know what exactly. But there's something about him. Something important."

"Then we'll find out what it is. Now, c'mon," Emerson said, slapping him on the shoulder. "His lawyer is probably almost here. Let's go wait for them, then we'll see what Jasper has to say before we let him go."

Gabe blew out a breath and followed him back to the interrogation room. Fuck, but he hated being wrong. And he was pretty sure he'd gotten almost everything wrong about Jasper from the very beginning.

## Chapter Eight

Jasper took his first easy breath when Caspian, his mother's lawyer, was shown into the room. He'd done his best to hide his anxiousness but was sure his sexy, badass detective mate—who'd almost made him cum in his jeans when he'd put those handcuffs on him, then left him high and dry before shoving him into the back of a police car—had picked up on it. His gaze strayed to the man in question and was caught by those piercing eyes that always seemed to reach into his soul. Jasper, annoyed by Gabe's refusal to believe he wasn't a criminal and more than a little hurt that Gabe didn't even realize he was Jasper's mate, wanted to look away. But he was nothing if not stubborn—thanks Grandma Clarissa—so was determined to win this next battle of wills between them like he'd won the others.

But the longer he held Gabe's eyes, the more Jasper thought he could see some hesitancy in them. Along with confusion. And was that regret? Eh, maybe not. But whatever he was seeing, it gave Jasper hope that deep down—like really freaking deep—Gabe knew he wasn't a liar or the type of person who would break the law to get ahead.

Even if surface Gabe still did.

When Caspian pulled out the chair next to him and sat, placing his briefcase on the floor between them, Jasper finally looked away, letting out a slow breath at being out from under the intensity of that blue-eyed stare. Then quickly looked up, almost certain he'd heard Gabe let out a breath as well, but was only met with a steady gaze and hard expression.

Caspian touched his arm, drawing Jasper's attention. Giving him a confident look that promised he had nothing to worry about, Caspian turned to the other two men. "Shall we get started, Detectives? I told my wife I'd be home in time for dinner."

After two hours, Caspian put his files back in his briefcase and pressed the locks closed. “You have nothing on my client.”

“That’s not true,” Gabe said, his eyes flicking to Jasper. “We caught him at the scene and—”

“You found him on the stairs leading to the roof, for which we have a witness who verified he was going up. The fireworks and the timers were purchased using a credit card that does not match the one you currently have in custody and that my client says he never signed up for. So unless you can prove it was my client who entered into a contract with the creditor and purchased the explosives, I’ll have your evidence dismissed before we ever make it to court.”

Jasper’s fingers twitched when Gabe held up the evidence bag containing his leather wrap, wanting to snatch it away so he could cleanse it of the imprint of whoever had taken it from his workbench.

“We have this, which is your client’s, and places him directly at the scene.”

“As my client has previously stated,” Caspian said, exasperation coloring his words, “the last time he saw his bracelet was yesterday morning when he left it in his workroom for repair. You have nothing, Detectives.”

“We only have his word for that.”

“True. But as you can’t prove someone didn’t break into his shop and take it, what you have is circumstantial at best.” Caspian leaned forward. “Seriously, Detectives. You’ve seen my client’s mediocre security system. Any enterprising twelve-year-old would have no trouble getting past it.” Caspian sat back and gave Jasper a withering look.

“I have someone coming to replace it tomorrow.”

“Good. That will make your mother happy.” Turning back to the detectives, Caspian said, “All you have is a suspicion of guilt with no hard evidence to back it up; therefore, you have no grounds to hold my client.”

Gabe’s jaw flexed, but he didn’t argue.

Caspian stood. "I believe we're done here, Detectives. When can I expect my client to be released?"

"We'll need a few minutes to process his paperwork and then he'll be free to leave," Detective Trewitt said.

"We'll wait out front while you take care of that. Let's go, Jasper," Caspian said, walking to the door.

Jasper stood, then hesitated, looking at Detective Trewitt. "Is it...can I ask what's going on with my stalker case?"

"We're still investigating."

"Okay. Did you find out who slashed my tires?"

"Unfortunately, no. Video surveillance didn't show anyone near your vehicle from the time you arrived in the morning until you returned to it that night."

Jasper frowned. "That doesn't make any sense. There has to have been something."

"There wasn't."

"Maybe another business has a different view of the parking lot."

"We obtained the security footage from every business that had cameras on that lot. There was nothing on any of the feeds."

"What about the night my mural was painted over? Did you find something for that?" Somehow, Jasper wasn't surprised when Detective Trewitt shook his head.

"The cameras on that side of the building were offline that night."

"All of them? For every business?"

Detective Trewitt nodded.

"Doesn't that seem suspicious to you?"

"It does seem highly irregular, but there was no indication that they were tampered with."

"Someone obviously hacked them."

Detective Trewitt inclined his head, like maybe he agreed. “That is a possibility, but as I said, there was no indication of foul play.”

Which meant they weren’t going to do anything. “Did you talk to Lucas? Because I’m sure he knows who hacked the news station. They might be the same person who messed with the security cameras.”

Detective Trewitt hesitated, then slowly nodded. “We did.”

“And?”

“Mr. Johnson advised us that he doesn’t have the technical skills that would have enabled him to hack into either the news station or the digital billboard.”

“But he knows someone who does.”

“He told us he didn’t.”

“And you believed him?”

“We have no reason not to.”

“What about the security cameras? Did you ask him about those?”

“We did. Mr. Johnson denied all knowledge of them and had an alibi for both times in question.”

“So there’s nothing then.”

“No. Not at this time.”

Jasper sighed. “Did Lucas at least tell you something that could help identify who’s doing this to me?”

Detective Trewitt hesitated again, giving Jasper a look that had him tensing.

Son of a bitch. Jasper had a really bad feeling about what his jackass ex-boyfriend had told them.

Before he could ask, Gabe leaned forward in his chair, those hard eyes locking on him. “Your ex thinks you hired someone to hack the news station and billboard.”



Jasper clenched his teeth. He fucking knew it. “I didn’t hire anyone. I have no idea why Lucas would say I did.”

“He told us you did it for attention,” Gabe said, watching him with an intensity that was more than a bit unnerving. “According to him you’re needy for it. He says you always want to be at the center of everything.”

Jasper huffed out a breath. “And I suppose you believed him.”

“What I believe or not isn’t relevant at this time.”

“Sure it’s not,” Jasper muttered, wishing Lucas was there so he could strangle him for being a lying dick. He’d fed right into Gabe’s suspicions of Jasper. And Gabe’s next words proved Lucas’ lies had found fertile ground.

“But what with your new business opening up.” Gabe shrugged. “You can’t deny you’ve gotten a lot of publicity out of it.”

“None of which I asked for.”

“Doesn’t change the facts.”

“No, I guess it doesn’t,” Jasper said, holding Gabe’s gaze. He tried to see any signs of give in his mate, a hint that he believed Jasper, but Gabe’s closed expression gave nothing away. Jasper looked a bit longer, then not finding what he was hoping for, glanced away, so disappointed in Gabe for believing Lucas over him he could barely breathe. Turning to Caspian, he said, “I’m ready to leave now.”

“If you’ll give me a couple of minutes, I’ll meet you out front and get everything wrapped up so you can go,” Detective Trewitt said, giving Jasper a gentle smile, as if knowing how close to breaking he was.

Jasper nodded, then followed his lawyer from the room.

“You need to watch yourself,” Caspian muttered as they walked down the hallway. “That detective is quite fixated on you.”

“I know. He’s convinced I’m staging everything that’s happened for the publicity,” Jasper said, the words hurting his

heart more than he'd expected. And Lucas' lies, added to Gabe's own suspicions, meant he might never believe Jasper was innocent.

"Hmmm. I'm not sure that's entirely correct," Caspian said.

Jasper looked over at him, but Caspian didn't offer anything else. Then they were in the busy front area. By the time they'd finished dealing with all the paperwork involved with getting him released, Jasper had forgotten to ask him for an explanation.

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"So?" Emerson asked when the door closed behind Jasper and his lawyer.

"Fuck," Gabe groaned, flopping back in his chair. "I'm such an idiot."

Emerson snorted. "I take it you saw him for who he actually is this time and not who you assumed he was?"

"Yeah," Gabe said, rubbing his eyes. He'd used every sense he had to read Jasper as deeply as he could. Then he'd pushed him and looked some more. And what he'd found had proven he'd made a huge mistake. Oh, there'd been something there, something he hadn't quite got a handle on yet, but it didn't feel wrong. And Gabe had no doubts he'd unravel that mystery soon. But as far as everything else, he really had been seeing Jasper through the lens of Robbie's betrayal. "I don't know how I could have ever thought he was devious enough to set up his own stalking. He's too upfront and honest."

"And feisty. And kind. He also has the patience of a saint to put up with your idiocy."

"Yes. All of that." Gabe looked at his partner. "But most of all he's innocent. And whoever's targeting him is stepping up their game."

Emerson nodded. “I know. I have a feeling that things are going to escalate quickly.”

So was Gabe. Which worried the hell out of him. “We need to press harder on the ex-boyfriend. Force him to tell us what he knows.”

“Agreed. I’ll clear it with the Captain.”

“Tell him to be prepared for some complaints because I’m going to go hard on Johnson. With the way this fucking stalker is able to erase all signs of their actions—”

“Your boy could be in a lot of danger.”

Gabe’s eyes shot to Emerson. “My boy?”

“Do you deny it?”

Gabe opened his mouth to do just that.

“Don’t even bother,” Emerson said, holding up his hand. “I’ve seen what’s been going on between the two of you. You want him. And for more than just a quick hook up. And he wants you too.” Then he snorted. “At least, he did. Right now he mostly wants to push you off a cliff.”

Gabe made a face, knowing Em was right. “Doesn’t matter what I want. He’s an active case and off limits.”

“Only until we catch whoever’s after him.”

There was that.

And with his head out of his ass, it shouldn’t take him and Emerson more than a few days to find whoever was stalking Jasper and put them behind bars where they belonged. With any luck, Jasper wouldn’t still want to push him off a cliff by the time they solved the case. And if he did, well, then Gabe would make sure Jasper came with him.

If he was going to fall, he wasn’t going alone.

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Jasper blew out a breath of exasperation and squatted, stretching his arm as far as he could, but his fingertips just brushed over the front of the glass jar. Seriously? Was nothing going to go his way today? From being arrested at the crack of dawn for the fireworks display that had left black scorch marks on the roof and sides of his building, to Gabe being a pigheaded fool, then not being able to find Lucas so he could kick his lying ass, and now the damn jar of nacho cheese he wanted was at the back of the shelf where he couldn't fucking reach it, there wasn't much left that could go wrong.

After hearing about his day, Spencer had declared they were going to have a night of cheesy action movies, bad food, and imported beer. And he'd told Jasper he could bitch at him for as long as he wanted...or until the food ran out. So Jasper needed to make sure there was enough food to feed Spencer for a long time because he had a lot of bitching to do to blow off the craptastic day he'd just had.

Hence why he needed the jar of nacho cheese. It was the perfect indulgent, bad-for-you-but-oh-so-good accompaniment for his legendary chili nachos. Jasper tried again to grab the jar, but when his fingers kept brushing across the front of it, but not quite enough to push it to where he could get a hold of it, he finally just dropped to the ground and slid under the shelf to get it.

Backing out with the coveted jar in hand, Jasper immediately realized two things. One, his day hadn't stopped screwing with him, and two, Gabe had really big feet.

Pushing himself off the ground, Jasper took his time brushing off his jeans and shirt, making sure to get rid of every tiny speck of dust before looking up at the glowering, yet still mouthwatering man looming over him. "Something I can help you with, Detective?"

Gabe just stared at him with those searing blue eyes and didn't answer.

"You know," Jasper said conversationally, dropping the jar of cheese into his cart before turning back to Gabe, "a suspicious man would think you're following him."

Gabe gave no response other than a tightening of his jaw.

“But since I’m not a suspicious man, unlike some people...” He paused for a beat, smiling at the scowl he got. “I’m sure you have a good reason for being here.”

Gabe just kept looking at Jasper, not saying anything.

After a few more seconds, Jasper shrugged. “Well, Detective, if that’s everything, I’d better get going. Big plans tonight.”

Gabe growled and crowded Jasper against the shelves.

His magic went haywire, shooting through him like wildfire, bursts of energy that ran along his veins sparking every nerve ending and leaving him lightheaded. The black tourmaline ring on his finger started to glow and the loose crystals in his pockets began sending out little zings of power that made the hair on his legs stand up. Then his magic reached for Gabe, wanting to connect with him, sending Jasper into a panic. Shit. Gabe would never forgive Jasper if he bound them without his consent.

Jasper put his hands on Gabe’s chest to shove him away before his magic could irrevocably tie them together, then let out a small, “Oh,” when he felt the hardness under his palms. Having absolutely no control over his fingers, he watched as they flexed, digging into that muscular chest, kneading those firm muscles. Jasper told himself to let the detective go, but his hands had a mind of their own and squeezed again. The nipples under his palms hardened, drawing another breathy sound from him.

Then Gabe leaned in, blocking out the light.

Or that might have been Jasper closing his eyes.

Overwhelmed by the heat radiating off that hot, muscular body and pushed on by the magic that was rocketing through him, Jasper, having obviously lost his mind, slid his hands up that hard masculine chest and locked them behind Gabe’s thick neck. Hardly daring to breathe, he tipped his head back and lifted his eyelids, and was immediately trapped by searing blue.

And Gabe still didn't say a word.

As the silence went on, Jasper's body wound tighter and tighter until he felt like he was going to explode. Desperately needing to break the tension before he actually did, Jasper breathed, "Gabe, what—"

Then his mouth was taken in the hottest, most explosive kiss he'd ever experienced. Clutching tight to broad shoulders when his knees buckled, Jasper held on, trying to stay afloat as his lips were ravaged, the ferociousness of Gabe's mouth on his beating down of his defenses, stripping him bare. He groaned when Gabe wrapped his arms around him, surrounding his body in heat, and took the kiss deeper until Jasper was sinking, falling so fast and so hard he didn't know if he'd survive the landing.

Then, as suddenly as he'd appeared, Gabe was gone.

Jasper grabbed onto the shelves to keep from falling, panting as he drew air into his lungs, wondering if that had actually happened. But his bruised lips and the hard-on from hell trying to push its way through his jeans told him it had.

Holy fuck could Gabe ever kiss.

And how soon could Jasper get him to do that again?

"My, oh my," Mrs. Phife said, walking up to him. "That was quite the kiss that young man laid on you."

Jasper turned to her. "Wh-what?"

She smiled kindly at him. "Give yourself a minute, dearie. A kiss like that can scramble the brain."

Jasper nodded. It certainly could. And had.

Mrs. Phife leaned in. "Take some advice from someone who's seen it all and done even more. Don't let that man get away. Passion like that is almost impossible to come by, so when you find it, you need to hold tight with everything you've got."

"I-I will."

“Good.” She looked him over, then giggled. “Yes, you really must not let that young man get away.” Then she patted his arm, sending a zing through him as her magic touched his, and tottered off, chuckling to herself as she pushed a shopping cart filled so high with groceries it was almost taller than she was.

Jasper stared after her. He’d never been able to figure out what Mrs. Phife was, and it was rude to ask. He only knew that she was incredibly powerful and had lived in Starfall Grove back when it had been Cherry Grove. Though it wouldn’t surprise him if she’d been there even before that.

When Mrs. Phife turned left at the end of the aisle, Jasper collapsed against the shelves, then slid down until he was sitting on the floor, his mind still reeling from the kiss—such a tame word for the fiery explosion of hunger and need that had rocked his world. Which is when he realized his hard-on was still straining the front of his jeans. And that there was no way Mrs. Phife could have missed seeing it.

Which explained her laughter.

He closed his eyes and let his head fall back. Fuuuuck. Would this day ever stop screwing with him?

## Chapter Nine

Jasper turned away from the window and looked at his dresser when his phone rang. He was half tempted to ignore it, having answered enough questions about the fireworks display a couple of days earlier, including from his Great Aunt Mildred on his father's side who'd wanted to know if they were part of his new reality show, though she hadn't quite been sure how the sex pictures fit in—Jasper had gotten off that call as quickly as he could—but the part of him that was curious to know who was calling was stronger, so he set down his teacup and went to grab it.

Smiling when he saw the name on the display, Jasper answered it as he returned to his vantage point at his second-story bedroom window, which gave him a clear view of the street in front of his house. “Hey, Spencer. What's up?”

“I don't want you to freak out,” Spencer whispered, “but I think someone's watching your place.”

“Oh?” Jasper murmured, taking a sip of his tea, making no effort to hide from the man watching him from the muscle car parked in front of his house.

“Yeah. There's a black car on the street outside your place with a man inside. I'm pretty sure he's spying on you.” Spencer's voice went quieter as he said, “I think that same car was in front of your house last night too.”

“It was.”

There was a pause, then in a more normal tone of voice, Spencer said, “You know, for a guy with a stalker, you don't sound very worried. Why is that?”

“Because it's just Gabe.”

“Detective Dickhead?” Spencer said, his voice going huffy. “What's he doing out there?”

“Probably keeping an eye on me to make sure I don't cause any more trouble,” Jasper said, his gaze sliding to the handcuffs on his bedside table, a bit disappointed Gabe hadn't come to claim them, especially after Jasper had gone to so



much trouble to make sure they hadn't gotten damaged coming off. When he hadn't been able to remove them on his own—since handcuffs used by law enforcement in Starfall Grove were specially designed and spelled to secure beings with powers—Jasper had gone to see Sydney, a dwarf who owned a brewery by the river. Even though he no longer worked with metals, Sydney still had all of his metalworking tools and had finally managed to get them off.

With a great deal of laughter when Jasper had candidly explained how he'd ended up with both cuffs locked around the same wrist.

Walking over to the table, Jasper ran his fingers over the cuffs and sighed. It was probably just as well that Gabe hadn't come to claim them, what with the arrest and subsequent interviews where Gabe had shown how little he trusted Jasper. Sleeping with him beforehand would have only banged up, or maybe even broken, Jasper's heart that still had hope things between them would work out.

He took another sip of tea, then returned to the window, realizing Spencer had been talking and he'd missed the beginning of what he'd said.

“—idiot not to realize someone's actually after you,” Spencer said, his voice dripping with disdain. He'd formed a strong opinion of Gabe that might become a problem if Gabe and Jasper ever got together. “Instead of watching you, he should be looking for your stalker before they strike again.”

Which was a good point. Too bad Gabe thought Jasper was the stalker.

“Are you going to report him?”

“No,” Jasper said, before drinking the last of his tea. He knew Gabe was wrestling with some demons from his past that Jasper reminded him of. He wasn't going to make things more difficult for him than they already were.

“Why the hell not?”

“Because he's important.”

There was an even longer pause. “Oh.” Then, “So, uhm, what if he knocks on your door? Are you going to let him in or tell him to take a hike?”

“I’m not sure.” Which was a lie. After that mind-blowing kiss in the store, Jasper would throw the door wide open if Gabe wanted to come in. Even with everything that had happened between them and knowing he’d be risking heartbreak when Gabe only wanted him for sex, Jasper would welcome the pain because he knew it would only be a matter of time before he and Gabe would be together. His mate would only be able to hold out against fate for so long before he’d eventually have to give in.

And Jasper would be waiting for him when he did.



*Two days later...*

Jasper raised his face so he could feel the rays of the early morning sun on his skin and breathed deep, taking in a lungful of the fresh morning air. He held it for a few seconds, then slowly released it, feeling lighter and more in balance than he had when he’d first arrived at the park.

After a restless night where he’d barely gotten any sleep, Jasper had woken feeling drained, with a headache from hell, his stomach twisted in knots, and a deep pain in his heart. He’d been so certain something terrible had happened to someone he loved, he’d immediately reached out to his parents and Spencer, feeling immensely relieved when he’d found out they were all okay. Still, the feelings had persisted, even though Jasper had tried to convince himself they were just a delayed reaction to the stalker attacks and being arrested.

But in his heart, he knew they weren’t.

Dragging as he’d left his house, Jasper had adjusted his route to take him past the park and had spent the last hour

communing with nature. Standing barefoot in the grass among the trees, he'd opened himself up to the energies of the life teeming around him and just breathed, letting all the stress, tension, and pain he'd been holding in his mind and heart fade away. When the last of the negative energies left him, Jasper had felt renewed and refreshed and ready to take on the world.

Sending his thanks to Mother Earth for the gifts she'd given him, he'd put his shoes back on and feeling so invigorated, decided to walk the rest of the way to his store.

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Whistling under his breath as he strolled down the sidewalk, Jasper turned the corner onto the street where his store was located and ran into a wall of wrongness so thick it knocked him back a pace. Pushing through the crushing sensation of darkness and dread that surrounded him, he hurried as fast as he could to his store, instinctively knowing that whatever had kept him up all night stemmed from there. As he reached the front of his shop, Jasper pulled up short, his stomach clenching when he saw the shattered windows. "Oh, god, no. Please, no."

He rushed up the sidewalk to the front entrance and after a quick look at the inside of his store, Jasper pulled out his phone, his hands shaking so badly it took him two tries to pull up the correct number. Taking shallow breaths as he waited for his call to connect, Jasper kept staring at the destruction, his heart not wanting to believe what his eyes were telling him.

Finally, after a lifetime of waiting, his call was answered.

"Detective Trewitt speaking."

"Detective. My store. It's...they broke ...everything. It's...it's all gone. They destroyed everything."

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It took most of the day for the police and the forensics team to clear the scene. As the hours passed, Jasper had gone from shocked and devastated to nauseous at the destruction of his beautiful crystals, which had shifted into anger at whoever had done this to him. Then he started to worry that he'd never get his store open so wouldn't be able to bring his magic to everyone who needed its help. The thought of that hurt his heart so much it had sent him through the cycle again.

He'd placed calls to his parents and Spencer, who'd wanted to come support him, but Jasper had told them no, asked them to please wait until after the police were done. It would break him if they showed him any sympathy and right now he needed to be strong. Stronger than he'd ever been before in his life. It took a bit of arguing, especially with his mother, but eventually everyone had agreed to stay away until he called them. Spencer had told Jasper that he and their friend Forrest would be there to help him clean up as soon as they could get inside. Thanking him, Jasper had hung up, and after watching the police for a few minutes through the broken windows of his shop, had started going through his cycle of emotions again.

Jasper was now nursing what he thought was a very healthy rage. Whoever had done this would regret every bit of heartache and pain they'd caused him. He had friends who'd help him bury the body. And a mother who'd lend him a shovel.

And a father who'd drive them all back home.

When Detective Trewitt came and quietly told him he could now come inside, Jasper nodded and silently followed him in, glass crunching under his feet as he stopped just inside the doorway. Clenching his jaw, Jasper took shallow breaths through his nose as he looked around the once pristine and carefully laid out display area he'd been so proud of.

Tables were knocked over and broken into pieces, display shelves had been torn down, the crystals and stones that had been stored on them scattered around the room as if they'd

been flung by an angry toddler having a temper tantrum, and the clear plastic bins that had held them were a melted ruin in the center of the room.

Looking down at his feet, Jasper sucked in a breath when he saw the black shards mixed in with the broken glass from his display window. Crouching to touch the pieces, a little zing went through his fingers before it died out, the fragments of crystal now lifeless. His gaze shot to the four corners of the room, a low moan escaping when he saw that the large crystals of black tourmaline he'd placed there to protect his shop had been smashed to smithereens, the fragments sprayed out across the floor. Touching the dead shards again, he closed his eyes and swallowed, taking a moment to grieve for his crystalline sentinels who'd given up their magic and lives in a futile defense of his property.

Jasper drew in a shaky breath, then opened his eyes. Pulling a mantle of rage around himself so he wouldn't fall apart in front of everyone, he stood and moved further into his store, stopping next to where his wooden sales desk had stood. Jasper squatted and picked up one of the legs, running his fingers over the smooth light brown ash he'd lovingly sanded until it had glowed. He'd built this desk with his father and though it had been simple, it had been well-made and sturdy and had been the most beautiful thing they'd ever created together.

Until some fucking asshole had destroyed it.

A red mist settled over his eyes.

Setting the broken leg down gently, Jasper got back to his feet and stepped around the rubble, intending to go to Detective Trewitt when a flash of light caught his eye. A hurt sound escaped before he could stop it when he saw the bent and twisted remains of a silver and stained glass ethereal display rack he and his mother had stumbled across while antiquing. After looking it over they'd agreed it would be perfect to showcase his best pieces and had immediately arranged to have it shipped to his home.

Falling to his knees, Jasper sifted through the broken shards of glass, gathering up every piece of crystal he could find, his soul weeping at how few remained, the life snuffed from them when someone had maliciously destroyed the beautiful pieces of jewelry he'd created to help people.

“Jasper.”

His heart broke when he found the rose quartz and amethyst bracelet, the silver wire that had bound them mangled and broken. Half the crystals had been crushed and the others were fading, pain pouring from them as they died in his hands, stinging his fingers as the last of their magic left them, leaving them dull and inert.

“Jasper. Jasper! You need to stop.”

Setting the bracelet to the side, Jasper dug around some more, letting out a cry when he unearthed the opal. A perfect, undamaged fire opal that glowed under the overhead lights. He carefully set it with the tiny pile of crystals he'd managed to collect.

“Jasper! Look at me.”

Finally hearing the voice, he lifted his head and found Detective Trewitt staring worriedly down at him. “What?” he asked hoarsely, his throat tight and sore as if he'd been screaming.

“You need to stop. Your hands are getting cut up.”

Jasper squinted at him. “I don't...what?”

“Your hands. They're bleeding.”

Jasper blinked at him in confusion, then looked down at his hands, surprised to see blood dripping from them. “Oh. I... I didn't realize.”

“Why don't you go clean them up and I'll see if I can find you a pair of gloves.”

“O-okay.” Jasper scooped up the crystals he'd saved, then staggered to his feet. He looked around dazedly, searching for somewhere to put them where they'd be safe, but there was no safe place left, not here, not anymore, so he just stood there,

holding them against his chest. Part of him knew he needed to wash the blood off his hands, but he didn't want to leave his crystals unprotected and vulnerable again, so he just stayed there, frozen with indecision, not sure what he should do.

“Here,” a voice said gently. “Let me hold them. I'll keep them safe while you get cleaned up.”

Thankful someone knew what he should do, Jasper carefully set the crystals in Trewitt's hands, then turned to go to the small washroom at the back of the store.

Then he saw *him*, and his grief and rage boiled over.

Fury and pain driving him, Jasper charged across the room and slammed his hands into Gabe's chest, shoving him backward. “Still think I'm lying, you motherfucking bastard? Or has the fact that some goddamned fucking asshole destroyed my shop finally got it through your thick head that someone's after me?” He shoved him back again. “Or have you twisted it inside that stupid head of yours to make this my fault too? Is that it? Do you think I did this to myself for the fucking attention and publicity I need so goddamned much,” he screamed, shoving Gabe again.

“Jasper, stop,” Gabe said, reaching for him.

Jasper slapped his hand aside and stepped back. “Fuck you, Detective. Fuck you for not believing me. Fuck you for not seeing the truth. Fuck you for thinking I'm so greedy and shallow I'd do this for attention. Fuck you for thinking I'd let my crystals be killed for publicity. Just...just...fuck you.”

Jasper stormed to the washroom, barely able to see through the tears filling his eyes. Reaching the small room, he slammed the door behind him, then threw his head back and screamed. Then he screamed again, pouring out his rage and hurt. The third scream sounded more like the cry of a wounded animal. After the fourth, Jasper collapsed to the floor, his whole body shaking when it hit him, really hit him, how much he'd lost. His whole world had been violated, ruined by someone who was trying to destroy everything he'd worked for, everything he held dear. His crystals, his reputation, his

privacy, his honor, his sense of safety, and finally, his dream. All gone. Destroyed. And he had no idea why.

A harsh sob escaped as he mourned the loss of the crystals he'd lovingly selected and cared for. He grieved for the beautiful jewelry he'd created and brought to life with his magic. He wept for the destruction of his dream when it had been so close to being realized.

And when he was done grieving for his crystals, he grieved for himself, his soul crying from the pain of knowing that the man who should have been his, never would be. That the person who should have been his staunchest defender and ally was instead his accuser and greatest adversary. That his soul mate, the one person who should have trusted him, had instead wrongly judged him, having no idea the kind of person Jasper was and hadn't cared enough to find out.

Jasper had no idea how long he'd been laying on the ground, but by the time he moved to get up, his head ached, his face felt swollen and sore, and his hip and shoulder were bruised from where they'd been pressed against the hard bathroom floor tiles. Staring at himself in the small mirror, he let out a hoarse, watery laugh when he saw his reflection. He was a freaking mess. Hair standing up every which way, bloodshot eyes, the skin underneath them bruised and swollen, his face pale, and streaks of blood smeared everywhere, making him look like the victim in some horror slasher movie.

Running water into the sink, Jasper used half the stack of paper towels trying to put himself back together. Once he'd cleaned up as best as he could, he fisted his hands on the counter and let out a loud sigh as he hung his head, not sure what he should do now.

The only thing he knew for certain was that he wasn't ready to face Gabe after his raging meltdown, so he was going to just stay in the bathroom until everyone had left and figure out the rest of it later.

The washroom doorknob rattled, followed by a low creak as the door slowly swung open. Raising his head, Jasper watched in the mirror as Gabe walked in, closing and locking



the door behind him. Then he just stood there, his blue eyes reflecting back at Jasper.

The tension in the small room grew as they stared at each other, neither of them speaking, the silence broken only by the sounds of their breathing. When Jasper couldn't stand it any longer, he turned around and leaned against the low counter, crossing his arms. "What are you doing here, Detective?"

Gabe shifted as though to come closer.

"Don't," Jasper said, his voice raw and broken as he raised his hand to stop him. "Just stay there and tell me what the hell you want."

Looking uncomfortable for the first time since Jasper had known him, Gabe looked away, then back. His mouth opened slightly, then closed, his lips tightening.

"Well?" Jasper asked.

Huffing out a breath, Gabe said, "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry."

An abrupt nod. "Yes. I'm sorry for what someone did to your store. I'm sorry for the things that have been happening to you. I'm sorry—"

"For being a pigheaded jerk? For not believing me when I told you someone was after me? For arresting me and not listening when I tried to explain? For thinking the worst of me every fucking time something happened? For believing fucking Lucas over me? For kissing me in the store and then running like a goddamned coward," Jasper shouted, his voice getting louder with every word. "Fuck you and your apology, Detective. Fuck you and your fucking—"

Jasper's furious words were cut off when Gabe's mouth covered his, his rage finding a new outlet as they clawed at each other, teeth bumping and scraping as tongues waged a war of anger and lust. Biting at his lips, Gabe pressed forward, crushing Jasper against the counter as his tongue drove deep, the power in his kiss making Jasper whimper. Hands slid under his shirt, moving over his skin, branding him, owning him, erasing everyone who'd come before.

Jasper's magic rose, firing his nerve endings, making his skin tingle as it moved through him, then past him, out of his control. Tendrils reached out to Gabe, touching, retreating, then touching again, finally wrapping around Gabe and connecting. Jasper tried to pull it back, to stop it before it was too late, but he was too lost in the power of Gabe's kiss, too out of control of himself to pull it back. He let go, losing himself to the magic, to Gabe's passion, to his hunger, to the sensation of belonging, of being owned, not sure if he could find his way back. And not sure he wanted to.

Then everything slowed.

Gabe's mouth gentled, brushing softly over Jasper's bruised lips before sliding off. Hands that had inflamed just moments before now soothed, pressing and kneading the muscles of his back, calming him. Jasper's breath stuttered in his throat, ending in a sigh when Gabe nibbled his way down his jawline and bit down gently on his earlobe. Hot breath washed over his skin, making Jasper shiver when Gabe whispered in his ear.

"I'm so sorry. For everything."

"F-fuck y-youahhh." Which would have sounded so much more impressive if his voice hadn't gone up when Gabe sucked on the skin behind his ear.

Gabe let out a soft laugh, then kissed him again, swallowing anything else Jasper might have said. Then he pulled back, giving them just enough room to look into each other's eyes. "I really am sorry, baby. You have no idea how much."

"Don't call me that," Jasper croaked, his voice almost gone. "I'm not your damned baby."

Gabe's smile turned dangerous, making Jasper's heart beat faster. But not as much as his words.

"Oh, you are, Jasper Belmont. You're mine and no one else's. And you'd better get used to it."

The challenge in his words fired Jasper up again. He opened his mouth to tell Gabe where he could shove it when

Gabe took control of it, devouring him like he already owned him. Jasper tried to fight back, to take charge of the kiss, but god, he was no match for Gabe's hunger and sank quickly beneath the force of his passion. He moaned when Gabe's hand fisted in his hair, tilting his head back and stretching out his neck. Teeth scraped over sensitive skin as Gabe tongued and sucked down his neck, working his way to Jasper's shoulder, his mouth closing over the large muscle, pulling at Jasper's skin, sucking and biting, drawing blood to the surface, working the same spot over and over until Jasper's entire focus was on that one throbbing point. Then Gabe bit down. Hard.

Jasper hissed, fingers clutching at Gabe's shirt when his knees gave way. Calloused fingers slid from under the hem of his shirt and grabbed his butt, lifting and pulling Jasper tight to him. Jasper wrapped his legs around Gabe's waist, groaning loudly when their lengths rubbed together. Holding tight, he rocked against Gabe's hard body, letting out another loud groan, then Gabe's hot mouth was on his again, swallowing Jasper's noises as they moved against each other.

Just as Jasper was reaching the point of no return, someone banged loudly on the door, causing them both to freeze.

"Gabe. The Captain just called. He wants us back right away," Detective Trewitt said.

"Fuck," Gabe breathed hotly against Jasper's neck, his voice rough when he whispered. "I'm sorry, baby. I've got to go."

"I'm not your baby," Jasper muttered, even though he was. And they both knew it.

Snorting, Gabe lifted his head and set Jasper on the counter. Sliding his hands up Jasper's arms, he cupped the sides of his face and tilted his head back, then stared down at him, his eyes holding a message that had Jasper's heart racing faster. Giving him a slow smile, Gabe pressed a gentle kiss to his forehead, then stepped back, slipping out of the bathroom without another word.

And quite possibly taking a piece of Jasper's heart with him.

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"All right, Mrs. Johnson. Thanks anyway," Jasper said into the phone. "But if you do hear from Lucas, can you let him know I'm looking for him."

"Of course, dear. And if I don't see him in the next few days, he'll be here for dinner on Sunday, so I'll let him know then."

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

"You're welcome. Just because you and my boy had a falling out doesn't mean we can't be civil to one another. Why, I was just telling your mother the same thing the other day."

While Mrs. Johnson recited—in mind-numbing detail—how she'd run into Jasper's mother at the farmer's market the previous weekend, Jasper, mumbling something every once in a while so she'd think he was listening, started putting together an order of crystals from his favorite supplier to replace the ones which had been destroyed. It had taken him, Spencer, and Forrest three days of hard labor to clean up his store, salvaging what they could and making lists of everything that needed to be replaced, but they'd gotten it fixed up to a point Jasper could now start ordering in supplies.

As he put the last items into his cart, Mrs. Johnson sounded like she was finally winding down, so Jasper quickly cut in before she could get started on something else.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt, Mrs. Johnson, but I can hear someone knocking at the door. I'll have to let you go."

"All right, dear. You have a lovely evening."

"You as well." Jasper ended the call with a sigh of relief, then mentally scratched Lucas' mom's name off the list of people he was going through in his efforts to find his lying, asshole ex-boyfriend so he could get the name of whoever was

after him. Destroying his store was the last straw. Jasper was done playing nice. Lucas was going to tell him what he knew even if Jasper had to shake it out of him.

On the off-chance Lucas had unblocked him—because he was hopelessly optimistic like that—Jasper sent him another text, but his message showed as undelivered, the same as the last five, or possibly ten, messages he'd sent. Muttering under his breath about Lucas being a lying user and a coward, Jasper put his phone down and stood, stretching out his back with a long groan, then grabbed his empty tea cup off the desk and headed for the kitchen.

Setting his cup in the sink, Jasper froze when he heard a sound outside the kitchen door. Sending a whisper of magic through his black tourmaline ring, Jasper leaned sideways over the kitchen sink to peer out the window, then let out a soft laugh when he saw who was standing in the shadows. Hurrying over to the door, he opened it, then leaned on it as he raised an eyebrow at the man who stepped forward into the light.

“Little late for an interrogation, isn't it, Detective?” When Gabe only stared at him, Jasper's mouth curved in a smile. “Or are you here for something else?”

“You know why I'm here.”

“Do I?” Jasper all but purred.

Heated eyes raked his body.

Jasper's smile widened.

“Are you going to let me in or not?”

“Of course, Detective.” Jasper moved to the side and motioned with his hand. “Please come in.”

Gabe brushed past him, the brief touch of his body making Jasper's magic flare. As Jasper was closing the door he saw Spencer watching him through the side window of his house. He smiled and raised his hand in greeting. Spencer's eyes narrowed as he mouthed *what the fuck?* Jasper snorted, then shut and locked the door, knowing Spencer would be

grilling him in the morning about his midnight tryst with Detective Dickhead.

Jasper had a feeling there'd be a lot to talk about.

## Chapter Ten

Gabe was drifting between asleep and awake, his body loose and pleasantly exhausted, his mind calm for the first time in days. Then his phone began to ring. Groaning, he brushed his lips over Jasper's shoulder, then rolled to the other side of the bed and pawed through his clothes on the floor, coming up with his phone on the fourth ring. Squinting at the screen, he swore when he saw it was Emerson, realizing his night with Jasper was over.

Tossing back the covers, Gabe slid out of bed, answering his phone as he grabbed his jeans off the carpet. "What's up, Em?"

"We've caught a body."

"Shit. I'll be there as soon as I can." Tucking the phone between his ear and shoulder, he shoved his legs into his pants. "Text me the address."

"Meet me in the back lot of Cherry Street and 2<sup>nd</sup>."

Gabe froze as he was pulling his jeans over his hips. "Cherry and 2<sup>nd</sup>. That's—"

"—Jasper Belmont's shop."

"Fuck," Gabe said, then lowered his voice when Jasper stirred. "Are you sure?"

"Of course, I'm fucking sure. I'm standing here next to the body."

Gabe closed his eyes, his gut telling him this was bad. Really fucking bad.

"It's not looking good for your boy."

Gabe's eyes popped open "He didn't do it, Em."

"I don't know, Gabe. We're still going over the scene, but it looks like you were right about him all along."

"I wasn't. He didn't—"

"Hang on. The coroner's waving at me." Gabe squinted, trying to hear what his partner and the coroner were saying,

but there was too much background noise. Then Emerson came back. “You need to get your ass down here.” Then he was gone.

Gabe squeezed his phone so tight it creaked. “Fuck.” He tossed it on the bed so he didn’t break it.

“Gabe?” Jasper said drowsily as he sat up, the sheet sliding down his lean body and pooling around his waist. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Gabe muttered as he zipped and buttoned his jeans.

Jasper squinted at him. “You sure?”

“Yeah.” Gabe grabbed his t-shirt off the floor and pulled it over his head. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You’re leaving,” Jasper said, hurt in his eyes, his voice sounding resigned like he hadn’t expected anything else.

Which didn’t work for Gabe. There’d been enough misunderstandings between them. He wasn’t going to allow another one. Jamming his arms through the sleeves of his shirt, he yanked it down, then sat on the bed, reaching over and putting his hand on Jasper’s thigh. “I’m not leaving because I want to. We caught a body. Em’s waiting for me.”

“Oh, no,” Jasper said, the sad look disappearing from his eyes. He rested his hand over Gabe’s. “Is it anyone I know?”

“I’m not sure who it is. Em didn’t give me any details.” Squeezing Jasper’s thigh, Gabe turned away and reached for his boots on the floor next to the bed. Looking over his shoulder as he pulled them on, he said, “But I couldn’t tell you even if he did.”

“Right. I know that. Sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s fine.” Quickly lacing his boots, Gabe stood, grabbed his phone off the bed and shoved it in his pocket, then walked over to the chair in the corner and grabbed his jacket, sliding it on as he rounded the bed to Jasper’s side. Bending down, Gabe pressed what was meant to be a quick goodbye kiss to his lips, but then Jasper’s mouth opened under his, coaxing



him into a deeper kiss, one filled with a hunger even hours of sex hadn't been able to sate. When Jasper's arm wound around his neck and tugged, Gabe followed him as he sank back onto the bed, not having had nearly enough of his warm and responsive body. Then his phone chimed with an incoming text, reminding him that Em was waiting for him. Gabe reluctantly pulled away. "I'm sorry. I've really got to get going."

"I understand." Jasper smiled and touched his face, fingertips stroking over his cheek. "Stay safe out there."

Gabe froze, not realizing until that moment how long it had been since anyone had cared enough to wish him well. And how much he'd fucking missed it. When Jasper's forehead creased in concern, Gabe gave himself a mental shake, smiled to let Jasper know everything was okay, then stood. Patting his pockets to make sure he had everything, Gabe turned to go. Just as he reached the doorway, Jasper called out.

"Detective, I think you forgot something."

Gabe turned back to him and saw Jasper holding up his right arm, which was still locked in the handcuff chaining him to the bed.

"Shit." Gabe hurried back over to him, pulling the keys from his pocket as he kicked himself for doing something so stupid and so fucking dangerous as forgetting to free Jasper. It just went to show how screwed up his mind was.

Quickly unlocking the cuff from around his wrist, Gabe let it fall, the rattle of the metal against the bedpost eliciting an immediate visceral reaction, his body going hard as images of Jasper thrashing in his cuffs as Gabe devoured his body flooded his mind. Clenching his jaw, Gabe breathed through his nose as he rubbed his thumb over the faint line on Jasper's wrist, fighting to get his body under control. He almost had it, then made the mistake of looking at Jasper. His glazed eyes and parted lips, swollen and bruised from Gabe's kisses, proved to be his undoing. Unable to resist their lure, Gabe bent down for another taste.

One kiss turned into another, and before he knew it, Gabe had shoved down his jeans and was sinking into Jasper's welcoming body, getting lost in him all over again.

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Gabe stirred when Jasper's hand rubbed up and down his back. "You'd better go. Detective Trewitt's waiting for you."

"Fuck." Gabe groaned, pushing away from him and rolling off the bed. "Em's going to kill me." He quickly pulled up and fastened his jeans before his unruly dick could distract him from what he was supposed to be doing a second time.

Jasper, skin flushed and damp, and sporting a new bite mark on his shoulder, snickered and pushed himself up to lean against the headboard. "Just throw on the sirens in that muscle car of yours and you'll be there in no time."

Especially since he didn't have that far of a drive to get to Jasper's store, Gabe thought, the reminder of the body waiting there instantly wiping away the pleasurable aftereffects of great sex that had been humming through his body.

"Gabe? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. But I gotta go."

"I know," Jasper said, then gave him a sweet smile so full of joy it tore at Gabe's heart, knowing that whatever was waiting for him was likely to wipe it away. Needing a taste of that joy—something he'd had so little of in his life—before it disappeared, Gabe leaned down for another kiss, which turned into two.

"I wish you could stay," Jasper breathed into his mouth on the third.

Gabe pulled away, brushing his thumb over a crease in his cheek. "So do I." Instead, Gabe did the smart thing—for the first fucking time that night—and hurried from the room, down the stairs, and out of the house, making sure the door was locked securely behind him.

Pulling out his phone as he walked to his car, he read the text Emerson had sent.

“Victim alive. Evidence of assailant at scene. It’s bad.”

Gabe swore, having a feeling that whatever Emerson had found was going to fuck up Jasper’s life big time.

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Gabe roared down the street, then slammed on his brakes, sliding to a stop next to the curb in front of Jasper’s shop. Then he was out and running over to Emerson, who was standing next to the body on the ground that, for some reason, the EMTs were giving oxygen to.

Emerson gave him a suspicious look when he came up next to him. “Took you long enough. You get lost?”

“Something like that,” Gabe muttered, then ignoring the questions he could see in his partner’s eyes, squatted next to the body. “What have we got?”

Emerson gave him a hard look. When Gabe just raised an eyebrow and waited, Emerson snorted, then pulled out his phone. “According to the responding officers, an anonymous tip was called in shortly after two. When they arrived, they thought the victim was dead and called in the coroner. She discovered he was still alive but had been put into a magically induced coma. She’s pretty sure it was caused by this.” He handed Gabe an evidence bag.

Gabe took it, squinting at the large pulsing red and black stone inside. He brought it closer to study it, then shoved it away from him when he was hit with a sensation of wrongness so strong he felt instantly nauseous. Feeling like his skin was crawling, he handed it back to Emerson.

“Yeah,” Emerson said as he put it in a lead-lined silver evidence box they used to contain magical objects. “Makes me feel the same way.” He handed the box to one of the officers

standing nearby, who shuddered, then hurried over to Emerson's car, putting it in the trunk.

Gabe looked back down at the unconscious man, something about him seeming familiar even though it was hard to tell what he looked like through the full-face oxygen mask. He stood and moved back when the EMTs shifted the body onto a wheeled stretcher, then turned to Emerson. "We get an ID on him yet?"

"Sure did. You're not going to believe it. It's Lucas Johnson."

Gabe's head snapped back to the man being loaded into an ambulance. "Jasper's ex?"

Emerson nodded, his face turning grim. "We also found this." He held out an evidence bag with a cell phone in it.

Gabe reached for it slowly, the sudden tension in Emerson's body making him feel like he was being handed a bomb. "What am I going to find?"

"Wake up the screen."

Holding his partner's gaze, Gabe tapped the screen. A notification popped up. *Meet me at my store. I need to talk to you.* The screen went blank. Tapping it again, he saw the text had been sent by Jasper at one twenty-seven a.m. Which would have been impossible, since he'd had Jasper pinned face-down on the bed at that time. He handed the bag back to his partner. "Jasper didn't send this."

Emerson looked at him regretfully. "I know you don't want to believe it. I didn't either. I really thought he was innocent, but it turns out I was wrong."

"No, you weren't. He's—"

Emerson put his hand on Gabe's shoulder. "I'm sorry for not trusting you when you tried to warn me about him."

Gabe grabbed Emerson's arm. "Listen to me. Jasper didn't do this."

"Gabe—"

“He’s innocent, Em. I’m telling you, Jasper had nothing to do with this.”

“The evidence says he did.”

“The evidence is wrong. This is a fucking setup. Someone’s trying to frame Jasper for murder.” And knowing that had Gabe’s fury rising like nothing had done before in his life.

“Gabe—”

“No. I can prove Jasper didn’t do it.”

Emerson stopped and stared at him, a wrinkle forming between his eyebrows. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Grabbing Emerson’s arm, Gabe pulled him around the corner out of earshot of everyone. “I know he didn’t do it because I was with him tonight.”

Instant scowl. “What do you mean you were with him?”

“Just what I said.”

“What the fuck?” Emerson hissed. “Are you trying to lose your job?”

“No.”

“You know better than to get involved with someone who’s part of an active investigation. I may have teased you about being his boyfriend, but I didn’t think you’d be stupid enough to go near him before the case was officially closed.”

“I didn’t intend to.”

“You didn’t intend to. Well, that’s just fucking great.” Emerson walked a few feet away, then came back and stabbed his finger at Gabe. “I thought you were smarter than this.”

He usually was. “I tried to stay away from him, Em, but —”

“You should have tried harder.”

“I know. But I couldn’t. Something kept pulling me to him. The harder I fought it, the stronger it pulled at me until the next thing I knew, I was at his door asking to come in.”

Emerson stopped pacing and stared at him, long enough that Gabe shifted uncomfortably. Then his face cleared. “You really couldn’t, could you?”

Gabe shook his head.

“I think I know why.”

Gabe was glad one of them did.

“If I’m right, and I’m sure I am from the way you two have been pushing at each other...” A smile spread across Emerson’s face, which seemed inappropriate considering the seriousness of their conversation. “I think the two of you are mates.”

“Mates?” Gabe squinted. The emphasis Emerson had put on the word telling Gabe he wasn’t talking about the meet you for a beer kind of mate. “You’re saying like...soul mates?”

Emerson nodded.

“That’s a real thing?”

Another nod. “In Starfall Grove it is. And from what I’ve heard, the pull of a mate is powerful. That’s why you couldn’t stay away from him.”

Gabe stared at him. While part of him was glad to have an explanation for why he’d been acting like an idiot, the other part was kind of pissed there was something that could make him act against his will. Something he couldn’t control. “That’s fucked up.”

Emerson shrugged. “That’s the power of a mate bond. If it helps, I hear that the feeling of oneness you get from bonding with your mate makes everything worth it.”

“It doesn’t. You know I hate being forced into doing anything.” Especially by something he couldn’t fight against.

“That I do,”

“And this mate pull thing made me break the fucking rules. I could have fucked up this entire case.”

“I know,” Emerson said, putting his hand on Gabe’s shoulder. “But don’t worry. I’ve got your back. I’ll help you

explain it to the Captain so you don't lose your job."

Which should have made him feel better but really didn't. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me yet. It could still get rough."

Of that, Gabe had no doubts. "I know. But thanks anyway."

Emerson nodded and stepped away, looking around the corner. Glancing back at Gabe, he said, "We still have to deal with this mess. You know we're going to have to bring him in for questioning."

Gabe nodded. "I know."

"He's going to be pissed."

And hurt. "I know that too," Gabe said as he joined him. "But we don't have a choice. At least it won't be for long. Once I give my statement, he'll be released."

"Hopefully."

Gabe turned to him. "What do you mean, hopefully?"

Emerson shrugged. "The judge may not accept his alibi."

"Why the fuck not? What better alibi is there than him being with a cop?"

"You're forgetting he's a powerful witch. He could have easily gotten past you when you were sleeping."

"There wasn't a lot of sleeping going on."

"As far as you know. He could have put a spell on you to make you sleep, then snuck off. His place isn't that far from here. It wouldn't have taken him long to meet with Lucas, take him out, then sneak back and wake you up without you even realizing he'd been gone."

Gabe shook his head. "I know he didn't sneak off."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I had him cuffed to the bed."

Emerson stilled. Then he asked, "Police issued?"

Gabe nodded.

“Okay, good. Then he’s got a solid alibi.”

“Yeah,” Gabe said, so fucking thankful Jasper had been fascinated by his handcuffs. If Emerson was right about the judge, Jasper being locked up in them at the time of Lucas’ attack might be the only thing keeping him out of jail.

“Don’t relax just yet. Your boy’s still not out of the woods. The evidence against him is damned convincing. Whoever’s behind this knows what they’re doing.”

“And they’re a fucking whiz at tech,” Gabe said, clenching his jaw at the thought of how much trouble they’d caused Jasper.

Emerson nodded. “Yeah. Even with an alibi, it’s going to be hard to prove Jasper didn’t send that message.”

“Maybe not,” Gabe said, frowning at the evidence bag he was holding. “We might have a phone showing that Jasper sent a text to Lucas, but his phone won’t have the same message on it.”

“Proving he didn’t do it,” Emerson said, smiling. “We’ll take it into evidence when we pick him up.”

Gabe nodded, then realized they couldn’t and shook his head. “It can’t be us. We need to send a couple of uniforms to bring him in.”

“You sure that’s the way you want to handle it? It’ll be easier for him if we were the ones taking him into custody.”

“I know, but we have to do everything by the book from now on. I’ve already compromised this case enough.”

Emerson snorted, “That’s for damned sure.”

Gabe scowled at him. “It’s not like he was a suspect when I slept with him.”

“I’m not sure that’s going to matter to the Captain,” Emerson said. “Don’t be surprised if he pulls you off the case.”



Which was Gabe's second biggest worry. The first was Jasper not forgiving him when he found out Gabe was the one who'd ordered the cops to bring him in.

## Chapter Eleven

When Jasper was led into the squad room in handcuffs, the first person he saw was Gabe. His mate. His new lover. The person who'd ordered his arrest, something Jasper had thought Gabe was done with. But when he'd overheard the officers talking about how angry Detective Prescott had sounded when he'd ordered them to pick him up, Jasper had realized Gabe still wasn't sure about him. Which had been a really crappy way to cap off what, until then, had been the most amazing night of his life.

When Gabe, who must have been watching for him, turned away from his conversation with Detective Trewitt and faced him, Jasper glared at him accusingly and raised his cuffed wrists. A muscle in Gabe's jaw bunched as he looked at him, his eyes pleading for Jasper to have faith, to trust, his body straining like he wanted to come to him and was fighting to keep himself in place.

Or that could have just been Jasper's heart talking. The same foolish heart that was urging him to give Gabe that trust.

As he was escorted by the officers, who each had a hold of one of his arms, across the room on a path that took him past Gabe and Detective Trewitt, Jasper kept his gaze trained on his mate, desperately wanting to believe the message in his eyes. As he passed Gabe, Jasper turned his head to keep him in sight, his heart skipping a beat when Gabe took a step toward him. Then Jasper was led out of the squad room and down a hallway he was all too familiar with, ending up in the same interrogation room he'd been in before.

He sighed and laid his head on the table once the officers had left the room, wondering for the hundredth time why he'd been arrested this time. God. Two times in one week. His mother was going to kill him when she found out.

Then she'd probably kill Gabe.

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It felt like hours before the door opened to admit Detective Trewitt and an officer he didn't recognize.

Lifting his head, Jasper looked from Detective Trewitt to the new guy and back. "Where's Gabe?"

"Detective Prescott is with the Captain," Detective Trewitt said, the seriousness of his expression causing a sinking sensation in Jasper's stomach. "Detective Hawkins will be assisting me with this interview."

"Oh," Jasper said, his heart clenching with worry for Gabe, hoping his discussion with the Captain had nothing to do with Jasper.

Detective Hawkins pulled out the chair directly across from him and flipped it around, straddling it backward with his arms crossed over the top of it as he stared at Jasper, the hard look in his eyes more than a little bit scary.

Detective Trewitt pulled out the chair next to Detective Hawkins, then set a stack of folders and a couple of evidence bags on the table, one of which held Jasper's cell phone. He then placed a small silver box on top of the folders before taking his seat.

Jasper frowned at the silver box, something about it making him uneasy. Enough so he didn't want to take his eyes off of it, having the strangest feeling it was waiting to attack the moment he did. It took Detective Trewitt calling his name two times before he was able to force himself to look away from it and give the Detective his attention.

Trewitt looked at the silver box, then back at him. "Problem?"

"I'm not sure." Jasper was about to ask where he'd gotten it, then hesitated, thinking it might be better if he didn't know. Plus, Caspian had warned him the last time he'd been arrested to not offer up information too freely if he didn't have to, so Jasper shook his head. "No. It's...it's nothing."

Detective Trewitt studied him, his eyes narrowing as if he didn't believe him and wanted to push. Just as Jasper was

about to break and ask him if he knew what was inside the box, Detective Trewitt looked away and pulled out a pad of paper from under the stack of folders. Taking a pen from his inside jacket pocket, he looked at Jasper and said, "Please tell us where you were between the hours of ten p.m. and five a.m. on March 29th."

"Last night?" Jasper asked, looking at him in confusion. "I was at home. Why?"

"Is there anyone who can confirm your whereabouts?"

"My next-door neighbor can."

"Name."

"Spencer Harris."

Detective Trewitt jotted a note on the pad, then raised his eyes to Jasper. "Will Mr. Harris be able to vouch for your presence the entire time?"

"Uhm, no, probably not."

"Is there anyone who can?"

Jasper hesitated, biting his lip. "There might be," he finally offered.

"Name."

Shooting a quick look at Detective Hawkins, Jasper shook his head. "I'd rather not say."

Detective Trewitt raised his head from where he was taking notes. "Why not?"

"Because it's of a personal nature."

"Meaning they were with you last night for intimate reasons?" Detective Trewitt asked, the directness of his stare slightly unnerving.

Jasper nodded. "Yes."

Detective Trewitt jotted another note on his pad as he said, "Then they should be able to provide you with an alibi."

"Yes," Jasper said, still not knowing why he needed one. "But I'm not sure if they want their involvement with me

made public.”

Setting his pen down, Trewitt clasped his hands on the notepad. “Mr. Belmont, these are serious allegations being laid against you.”

Serious allegations? What was he talking about?

“So if you have someone who can vouch for your whereabouts, you need to tell us.”

His stomach churning with uneasiness, Jasper still shook his head. “I-I can’t.”

Detective Hawkins leaned forward, his face going harder as he asked, “Can’t or won’t?”

Jasper looked between him and Detective Trewitt, swallowing hard. “Uhm, won’t, I guess.”

“You may want to reconsider,” Detective Trewitt said. “As the prime suspect in our investigation, it’s in your best interests to provide us with an alibi if you have one, or you’ll be charged with the attempted murder of Lucas Johnson.”

Jasper’s eyes, which had been sliding toward the box, snapped back to Detective Trewitt. “Did you say murder? Wait. Lucas Johnson? Someone tried to murder Lucas?”

Detective Trewitt frowned at him. “Did the arresting officers not tell you why you were being brought in?”

Jasper shook his head, then stopped and squinted, trying to think. “I’m...not sure. It was all so confusing. I was in the bathroom showering when they kicked the door in and started shouting at me. Next thing I knew I was being yanked from the shower and tossed to the ground and handcuffed.” He shook his head, still not believing what had happened. “The officer that cuffed me wasn’t even going to let me get dressed at first until the other officer made him.”

Detective Trewitt pinched his nose and sighed. “Did they at least Mirandize you?”

Jasper nodded. “Yes.” Which is why he’d kept his mouth shut and not asked any questions.

“At least they did that much,” Detective Trewitt muttered, looking at Jasper, his face more serious than it had previously been. Jasper immediately tensed. “Jasper Belmont, it’s my duty to inform you that you are being charged with the attempted murder of Lucas Johnstone, aggravated assault with intent to harm, use of deadly force with a magical object, and fleeing the scene of a crime.”

Jasper’s mouth fell open in shock. “What? There must be some mistake.”

“There’s no mistake.”

“But I didn’t do anything,” Jasper gasped, finding it hard to breathe. Holy fuck. They were charging him with attempted murder.

“You did,” Detective Hawkins barked out.

Jasper turned to him and shook his head, spots floating in front of his eyes. “I-I didn’t.” When he felt himself tipping sideways, Jasper grabbed onto the edge of the table and tried to focus on Detective Trewitt’s face, which kept going in and out of focus.

“Our preliminary investigation of the crime scene found evidence that points to you as Mr. Johnson’s attacker. If you have an alibi for the time in question, you need to provide it now or you will be charged with the attempted murder of Mr. Johnson.”

“But I didn’t do it,” Jasper whispered. “I didn’t.”

“If you didn’t do it, then you need to tell us who was with you between the hours of ten p.m. and five o’clock a.m. this morning so we can confirm your alibi. If it checks out, we’ll be able to release you. If it doesn’t...”

Jasper stared at him, his body numb as his mind spun in a thousand directions. Why would the police think he’d hurt Lucas? What kind of evidence had they found? He hadn’t even seen him so there must be something to prove Jasper hadn’t done it. Oh, god. But what if there wasn’t? What if they locked him up for the next twenty years? What would that do to his mother and father? What would that do to Gabe? Should tell

them who'd been with him last night. But what would happen to Gabe if he did? Would it cost him the job he loved? What if it ruined his life? Would he hate Jasper forever if he told them? Or would he understand and forgive? Or did that even matter since Jasper knew he'd never forgive himself if his cowardice harmed his mate?

When he realized he'd do anything, face anything, sacrifice anything for Gabe, all the other noise in his head disappeared. Jasper knew what he had to do.

"Mr. Belmont." Detective Trewitt said, staring at him with an intensity that had Jasper sitting up straighter. "Please tell us who you were with last night."

Jasper took a deep breath, then shook his head. "I'm sorry. I can't tell you that. Not without their permission."

Trewitt studied him a moment longer, then nodded, giving him a look that held both frustration and approval. "All right. Then we have no choice but to continue."

"I understand," Jasper said calmly. He'd made his decision. He just had to see it through to the end. And pray that the police found something that would prove his innocence.

Detective Trewitt moved the silver box to the side—drawing Jasper's attention to it again—and flipped open the top file folder. Shuffling through the papers, he pulled out a couple of pages and slid them across the table to Jasper. "Please tell me why you wanted to see Lucas Johnson."

Tearing his gaze off the box, Jasper squinted at him. "I'm sorry."

"Why were you trying to contact Mr. Johnson?" He pointed to the pages on the table.

Jasper kept one eye on Trewitt as he picked them up. Glancing down at the top sheet of paper, his stomach rolled when he saw what was on it.

"That's a log of the messages you sent to Lucas Johnson from your phone over the past week," Detective Trewitt said. "Tell us why you were trying to reach him."

Jasper licked his lips nervously. “I, uhm, wanted to talk to him.”

“About?”

“I wanted to ask why he’d lied to the police about me. I wanted to know why he tried to convince you I was faking the stalking to get attention when he knows I’m not like that.”

“And when you finally got in touch with him, you what? Didn’t like what you heard so you tried to take the law into your own hands and punish him for it?” Detective Hawkins growled.

Jasper’s eyes shot to him. “What? No. I wouldn’t. And I never reached him. Lucas blocked me so he didn’t receive any of my texts.”

Trewitt slid another piece of paper across the table. “This is the message log from Mr. Johnson’s phone.”

Jasper made no move to touch the page, knowing he didn’t want to see what was on it.

“Please read the text that came in at one twenty-seven a.m.”

Jasper’s fingers trembled as he picked up the paper. Looking down at the sheet until he found the correct text, he froze, then started shaking his head. “No. This isn’t...no.”

“Please read the text, Mr. Belmont.”

Jasper looked at him, then back down at the paper, his hand shaking so badly he could barely make out the words as he read, “*Meet me at my store. I need to talk to you.*”

“And where did that text originate from?”

Jasper opened his mouth, but couldn’t make himself say it.

“Please tell us where the text originated from.”

Jasper licked his lips. “It says...but it can’t...it’s not...”

“Just answer the damned question,” Hawkins said, banging his fist on the table.



Eying Hawkins warily, Jasper whispered, “It says it came from me.” He looked at Detective Trewitt. “But it couldn’t have. I didn’t send this.”

“Please look at the last message sent from your phone.”

Jasper set down the record of texts from Lucas’ phone and picked up the log from his. He flipped to the last page and sucked in a breath, going lightheaded when he saw the last entry. “*Meet me at my store. I need to talk to you.*”

He shook his head. “I didn’t send this.” Looking at Trewitt, he said, “Please. You have to believe me. I didn’t send this. I don’t know why it’s on my phone.”

“What happened when you met up with him?”

“Nothing. I mean, I didn’t. I never—”

“Tell us the truth, Mr. Belmont,” Hawkins said, leaning forward and bracing his hands on the table. “What did you do when you met Mr. Johnson at your store?”

“I didn’t. I wasn’t there. I-I—”

“You were.”

“I wasn’t. You have to believe me.” He looked at Trewitt. “Please. I didn’t do anything.”

“Just be honest with us, Mr. Belmont, and tell us everything you know,” Detective Trewitt said, giving Jasper a look he didn’t understand. “Everything. The evidence always has a way of telling out.”

But if all the evidence was pointing to him, how was that going to help? Jasper stared at Trewitt, not sure what he expected him to do. When the detective’s eyes flicked toward the doorway, Jasper glanced over to it and then back to him, not understanding but knowing he was missing something. When Detective Trewitt did it again, this time making a scowly face, Jasper finally caught on. Oh shit. He must know that Gabe was his alibi and wanted Jasper to admit it.

But if he did, it would go in his statement and could destroy Gabe’s career. If he didn’t, he was going to jail for

attempted murder since there was no way to explain away the text messages on his phone and Lucas'.

Jasper stared blankly at the pages he was holding, wishing, not for the first time, that Gabe was there so he could ask him what he should do. But since Gabe wasn't, Jasper was going to have to make the decision on his own.

Or was he?

Setting the pages down, he pushed them to the middle of the table, then sat back in his chair and clasped his hands in front of him, squeezing them tightly to try to stop them from shaking. "I think I'd like to speak to my lawyer before I say anything else."

As if he'd been standing in the wings waiting for his cue, the door opened and Caspian stepped into the room. "Not another word, Jasper."

Jasper slumped in the chair, never happier to see anyone in his life.

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"Bah," Caspian said, tossing the papers back on the table. "This means nothing. We already know we're dealing with an experienced hacker. It'd be the work of a minute to break into Jasper's phone and make it look like he'd sent those texts."

"Which doesn't prove he didn't send that last text," Detective Hawkins said.

"No. But you have no way to prove that he did," Caspian rebutted, shoving the pages over to him. "This will never make it to Court, Detective."

"Your client admitted to wanting to meet with Mr. Johnson," Detective Trewitt said.

"Wanting to doesn't mean he did. And my client has an ironclad alibi for the time in question."

Jasper looked at Caspian in surprise. How did he know that?

“Does your client have an alibi for this?” Detective Hawkins asked, reaching for the silver box.

Jasper’s head snapped around. He jerked forward in his chair, reaching toward it. “Don’t—”

But he was too late. Hawkins flipped open the lid and shoved it to the center of the table.

Jasper cried out when a wave of wrongness poured from the red and black stone inside of the box and slammed into him, invisible fingers going around his throat and choking him. Fumbling for the box, it took Jasper two tries to get the lid closed. As he flicked the latch down, cutting off the malevolent energy, the fingers around his neck slid away. But a residual darkness still hung in the room, settling on his skin like an oily film.

“Fuck,” Jasper gasped, falling forward as he tried to get air into his lungs.

“Are you alright?” Trewitt asked.

“Not sure,” Jasper wheezed, touching his neck, hissing when his fingers made contact, his skin feeling like it had been burned. Panting, he raised his head and squinted at Detective Trewitt. “Where the hell did you get that stone?”

“It was on the ground next to Lucas’ body.” Detective Trewitt leaned closer to him. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

Jasper nodded. “Just...just give me a minute.”

“Take as much time as you need,” Detective Trewitt said, frowning at the box.

The room fell silent, everyone watching as Jasper pulled himself together. After a few minutes, his heart finally slowed and his breaths started to come easier, though still painfully, through what felt like a crushed throat.

When Jasper sat up, Detective Trewitt looked him over carefully, then quietly said, “The stone didn’t affect any of us the way it just did you? Do you know why?”

Looking at the box, Jasper motioned for Detective Trewitt to move it further away from him, which he immediately did. Blowing out a breath, Jasper leaned back in his chair. “I think it was targeted at me.”

“To you,” Detective Trewitt asked, still frowning as he looked from Jasper to the silver box, then back.

Jasper nodded.

“What kind of stone was that?” Detective Hawkins asked. “I didn’t recognize it.”

“A Red Jasper stone.” Jasper took another breath, this one coming even easier. “Or at least, it used to be.”

“It’s not anymore?”

“No.” Jasper shook his head as he stared at the silver box trapping the black and red hate-filled stone that wanted to destroy him. He shuddered, running his hands up and down his arms, trying to wipe away that crawling sense of evil. “It’s been contaminated. Changed. The magic at its core has been destroyed, consumed by whatever took its place. It’s...it’s like the stone’s spirit, its purpose, was erased and replaced by something else. Something dark. Something dangerous.”

Detective Trewitt stared at the box. “Could it be used to kill?”

“Yes,” Jasper whispered, not taking his eyes off it. “If someone channeled power through it, yes, it definitely could.”

“Shit.”

Then Jasper gasped, his gaze flying to Detective Trewitt. “Did you touch it? Did Gabe?”

“No,” Detective Trewitt said, his words immediately calming Jasper’s heart. “Gabe and I didn’t like how it felt, so we put it in the container we use to contain unknown magic.”

Which was good thinking on their part. “And you’re sure nobody touched it with their bare hands?”

“Nobody touched it.”

Jasper blew out a breath. “Okay. Good.”

Detective Trewitt pointed to the box. “That’s lead-lined silver. Will that be enough to contain it?”

That was a good question. Jasper studied the silver box. He’d known there was something not right about it before, but now that he knew what was inside, he could feel the wrongness seeping from it. “The box shields most of it, but not all. If someone is around it too long, they could become infected by the darkness in it.”

“Then we can’t keep it in the evidence locker.”

Jasper shook his head. “No. The stone will have to be destroyed.”

“How? By smashing it?”

“God, no,” Jasper said, looking at him in horror. “If you do that, you’ll just set the darkness free. The magic needs to be nullified first before the stone’s destroyed.”

“How the hell are we supposed to do that?” Hawkins asked.

“It might be possible to neutralize it by cleansing it. I just...I don’t know if I’m strong enough.” Jasper looked at Detective Trewitt. “We’re going to need my mother. She’s the only one powerful enough to take care of it.”

“Alright,” he said, picking up his pen. “Give me her number and I’ll call her as soon as we’re done here.”

“Which I believe is now, Detectives,” Caspian said, standing. “I’ll let Mrs. Belmont know you wish to speak with her. I expect she’ll be quite eager to talk to the detectives who arrested her son for the second time this week.”

Detective Trewitt winced, then nodded. “I expect she will.”

The door opened, sending everyone into a flurry of motion.

Detective Trewitt was out of his chair in a flash, his hands raised. “I’m sorry. You can’t be in here.”

Detective Hawkins jumped to his feet, his hand on his weapon. “Ma’am, you need to leave.”

Caspian smiled at the woman. “Mariella. I thought you’d be here sooner.”

Jasper blinked, sure he was seeing things. “Mom?”

Detective Hawkins’ head snapped around. “That’s your mother?”

Jasper nodded, stunned that she was actually there.

They both looked back at the doorway when someone else appeared.

“Captain?” Detective Trewitt said, looking at him in surprise.

“At ease, Detectives,” Captain Jack Bristow said as he walked into the room. “Mrs. Belmont is here at my request.”

His mother followed the Captain in and came over to Jasper, frowning as she looked over him, before resting her fingers against the side of his neck.

Jasper sighed when the burning faded, replaced by a cool, tingling sensation. “Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re welcome, dear.”

Then Gabe appeared in the doorway.

Jasper’s heart shot to his throat when those piercing eyes locked on him. He began to tremble when Gabe headed directly for him, easing past his mother until he stood over Jasper.

“Gabe,” he breathed, “you’re here.”

“I’m sorry I’m late.”

When Gabe squatted in front of him and took hold of his hands, Jasper closed his eyes, knowing in that moment that everything was going to be all right.

## Chapter Twelve

It took a few minutes for extra chairs to be brought in, but when everyone was finally settled around the table Jasper had his mother on his right and Gabe to his left. Caspian had moved to the end of the table with the Captain sitting opposite him, and Detectives Trewitt and Hawkins were in their original seats across from Jasper, both of them looking puzzled, though Detective Hawkins seemed more annoyed than anything else.

When Jasper felt Gabe's fingers thread through his, he looked away from the frowning detective and down at his hand, his heart giving a bump at Gabe's open display of affection and support. Especially in front of his mother and the Captain. Jasper squeezed Gabe's hand and grinned up at him, which might have been a bit out of place considering the seriousness of the situation, but he couldn't help it. He was so pleased with Gabe that he wanted to shout out his joy to the world.

Instead, he faced forward, grinning stupidly like only a man halfway in love with his mate could, and tried to focus on the conversation going around him.

"What's this about, Sir?" Detective Trewitt asked, glancing away from the Captain to Jasper, his eyebrow going up when he saw his and Gabe's linked hands. He winked at Jasper before looking away.

"We're going to have a little chat." Captain Bristow turned to Jasper's mom. "Mariella, if you wouldn't mind."

"Not at all." She reached behind her neck and unhooked the silver chain hanging from it, then closing her hand around the pendant as she pulled it from her shirt, she set it down in the center of the table, keeping it covered. "I must have everyone's promise that you will not speak of what you see or hear in this room today."

"They'll keep their mouths shut or I'll have their badges and toss them in jail," Captain Bristow said, looking at his detectives. "Give the lady your word so we can get started."

Detective Trewitt didn't hesitate to say, "You have my word."

Gabe responded slower, staring at her hand for a few seconds before turning to Jasper, who just grinned stupidly at him. Snorting, Gabe squeezed Jasper's fingers and said, "I promise not to say anything."

"I promise as well," Caspian said, even though Jasper knew he was already bound by his word not to reveal what his mother was concealing under her hand.

Hawkins sat back in his chair with his arms crossed, a scowl on his face as he looked from Captain Bristow to Jasper's mother, then back to the Captain.

"I'm waiting, Hawk."

"You know damn well I don't talk about anything said in confidence."

"I know. We still need your word."

Glancing again at Jasper's mother, who only raised an eyebrow, Detective Hawkins turned back to the Captain, who was looking at him expectantly. He shook his head. "Fine. I promise to keep my mouth shut. But it's bullshit that you're making us promise something we already do."

"Your objection is noted," the Captain said, his eyes going hard as he looked at his detectives. "But if one word of what goes on in this room gets out, I will have your badges. And that's a promise."

"It's fine, Jack," Jasper's mother said, smiling up at him as she rested her free hand on his arm. "Everyone here is pure of heart, even those who think they're not." Her gaze darted to Hawkins and Gabe before returning to him. "They'll keep their word."

Then she lifted her hand, revealing what had been underneath.

"Fuck me," Gabe gasped, leaning forward to look at the piece of meteorite sitting in the middle of the table. "Is that what I think it is?"



“That’s a shard,” Detective Trewitt said, his gaze flying from the stone to Jasper’s mom, who smiled at him. “You have a shard.”

“I do, Detective.”

He glanced briefly at Jasper before looking back at it, nodding to himself as though the answer to some riddle had fallen into place.

“I’ve never seen a shard before,” Detective Hawkins said as he reached for it.

“Hawk!”

Snatching his hand back, Detective Hawkins’ head snapped to Captain Bristow, his eyes wide. Muttering a quick sorry to Jasper’s mother, he sat back and stared at his hand as though he’d never seen it before.

Jasper got it. The power in the shard was irresistible to anyone who carried even a hint of magic, never mind the levels he could feel coming from Hawkins.

“It’s fine, Detective. I understand its lure,” Jasper’s mom said, smiling kindly at Hawkins. “But it’s always wise to ask before touching something that belongs to someone else.”

Hawkins nodded, the tips of his ears turning red. “Yes, ma’am. Again, my apologies.”

“Accepted.” Turning her attention to the shard, Jasper’s mother rested her fingers on it. “First, let’s do something about that box.” She closed her eyes. A few seconds later, the air hummed, a low vibration filling the room. Raising her other hand, she circled it in a clockwise motion above her head three times, then thrust it out in front of her. Magic rushed from her palm and surrounded the silver box. There was a bright flash, then a glowing blue shield formed around it.

Jasper took a deep breath and let it out with a sigh when the dark heaviness in the room vanished.

But his mother wasn’t done yet. The shard began to hum louder, the vibrations around them increasing in intensity. Streams of magic began swirling around the room.

Jasper closed his eyes and tilted his head back, opening himself up to the combined magic of his mother and the shard, the comforting familiarity of it soothing the last bit of tension even Gabe holding his hand hadn't been able to erase. When the humming stopped, Jasper sighed again and opened his eyes, smiling at his mother.

“What the fuck was that?” Gabe asked, looking a little shell-shocked as he stared at Jasper's mother, who was sitting serenely in her chair, the shard pulsing on the table in front of her.

He wasn't the only one off-balance. Hawkins looked dazed and was staring at Jasper's mother with his mouth open. Even the Captain looked a bit stunned. The only one who didn't seem to be affected was Detective Trewitt, who was staring at the shard with a frown on his face.

Raising his eyes from it to Jasper's mom, he asked, “What did you just do?”

“I did two things. The first was to shield the box to stop the negative energy leaking from it from contaminating us further. It's only a short-term solution, but will do until I can deal with it permanently. The shield will also prevent the corrupted magic from relaying everything we discuss back to the person it originated from.”

Jasper startled, not having considered that.

“And the room? It feels different in here. And more than just you blocking the negative energy. There's a...a...” Detective Trewitt looked at the Captain then back to her. “I'm not sure how to explain it, but there's something.”

“There is indeed, Detective. I put a shield of power around the room to ensure nobody can listen in on our conversation, either by overhearing it as they pass by,” she motioned to the door, “or by using magic to eavesdrop on us.”

“And if I understood Mariella correctly,” Captain Bristow said, “she's also using the shard as a kind of frequency jammer in case anyone's phones have been compromised, which we know was the case with Jasper's.”

Caspian hmphed, a satisfied expression on his face as he looked over at Trewitt and Hawkins. “Which is as I advised the Detectives.”

Captain Bristow nodded. “Whoever we’re dealing with has both technical and magic expertise greater than we can properly defend against.” He smiled at Jasper’s mom. “Which is why I called in a favor from an expert. The one person I know who could counter them.”

Jasper’s mother smiled, though it held an edge. “I was always going to be here, Jack. Your boys arrested my son for the second time this week. I wasn’t about to allow that to continue.” She turned and fixed icy eyes on Detective Trewitt and Detective Hawkins, who both shifted nervously under her gaze. Then she turned them on Gabe, who gave no outward indication he was bothered by it, but his grip on Jasper’s hand tightened almost to the point of pain.

Jasper reached out with his free hand, touching her arm. “It’s okay, Mom. They were only doing their job.”

“Were they?” she asked, keeping her eyes on Gabe.

Jasper hesitated because Gabe hadn’t actually had a valid reason for arresting him the first time, even if he’d thought he did. Then, feeling the tension in his mate increase, Jasper nodded. “They were. And with any luck, I’ll be able to keep the cuffs off for at least the rest of the week,” he said with a laugh. But his joke fell flat.

“I’m sure that won’t be a problem. Will it, Detectives?” his mother asked, her voice deceptively quiet as her eyes dared any of them to disagree.

“No, ma’am. Not a problem at all,” Detective Trewitt said, quickly followed by both Gabe and Hawkins.

“I’m glad to hear that.” She turned to Captain Bristow. “The floor’s yours, Jack.”

Glancing at his cowed detectives, he snorted, shaking his head, then got up and went over to the large whiteboard attached to the wall. Picking up a marker, he said, “Let’s go over what we know.”

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Two hours later, the picture was bleak. They had nothing.

Oh, Captain Bristow had jotted down precise notes that laid out the campaign against Jasper, neatly documenting the series of events that had started with harassment, escalated to property damage, then to a minor misdemeanor, before they changed the stakes and tried to frame Jasper for murder, because by that point, everyone was convinced Lucas had been meant to die not merely be put into a coma.

But other than that, they had nothing. No leads. No witnesses who'd seen anything. Nothing on any security system, from either the businesses next to Jasper's or from the private security cameras in his neighborhood.

Whoever was after him was a ghost. And they had no ideas for how to find them other than waiting for them to go after Jasper again, and possibly hurting someone else if they got in their way.

Which wasn't a risk any of them were prepared to take.

“Since we know whoever's stalking Jasper is willing to kill to advance their agenda, we're going to have to be cautious with how we proceed from here,” Captain Bristow said as he put down the marker and turned to face them. “Starting with not letting them know we're onto them. Fortunately, one of the lead detectives has been quite vocal about blaming Jasper for the incidents, so as boneheaded as that was, it now works in our favor.”

Jasper pressed his lips together to hold back a smile when Gabe let out a huge sigh next to him.

“And when Detective Prescott compounded his idiocy by breaking police procedures and getting involved with Jasper,” he scowled at Gabe, then turned to Jasper, “he gave you an iron-clad alibi for the time of the attack against Mr. Johnson,

something your stalker couldn't have anticipated. As far as they and everyone else is concerned, you're still the prime suspect for attempted murder which gives us an opportunity we haven't had up to now."

Jasper squinted at him, not sure what he meant.

But Gabe did.

"Wait just a damned minute. You want to use him as bait."

Captain Bristow nodded. "I do."

"No fucking way."

Captain Bristow held up his hand. "You don't have a say in this."

"Fuck that. This is my case."

"Not anymore. You're sitting this one out."

"Not a fucking chance. I'm not letting you put a bigger target on his back than is already there." Gabe scowled at Detective Trewitt. "Did you know about this?"

"No, I didn't," he said, frowning at Captain Bristow. "Sir, I'm sure there's a better way."

"The decision has been made."

"Then fucking unmake it," Gabe shouted.

Ignoring him, Captain Bristow turned to Jasper's mother. "You're certain you can protect him?"

She nodded. "Don't worry, Jack. Whoever's after my boy won't get another chance to hurt him."

"Good. Then we'll proceed as planned."

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Gabe said, standing and dragging Jasper up with him.

"You don't," Captain Bristow said, pointing his finger at Gabe. "Now sit down, Detective, before I lock your ass up with your boyfriend."

Which didn't sound so bad to Jasper. Except for the locked up part. He squeezed Gabe's hand as he looked

between his mother and the Captain. “Uhm, I don’t really want to go to jail.”

“I’m sure that high-priced lawyer of your mother’s will be able to get you released in no time,” Captain Bristow said, looking pointedly at Caspian. “Especially if I give Judge Seymour a call before your bail hearing.”

“Which should speed things up considerably,” Caspian said, standing and grabbing his briefcase from the floor. “Don’t worry, Jasper. I’ll have you out before dinner.”



Caspian was a big old liar.

Once the secret meeting broke up, Detectives Trewitt and Hawkins escorted Jasper to the jail cells and locked him in one. But only him and not Gabe, to his great disappointment.

It didn’t take Jasper long to discover he didn’t do well locked in a cage on his own without even his crystals for company.

After only being in there a few minutes, Jasper began to get restless, so he started pacing across the small space, but as it only took about three and a half steps to cover the distance from the back wall to the bars at the front, that got old quickly. So he changed it up and started walking around the circumference of the cell, which worked for about three minutes before that too got boring.

Jasper sat on the bed wondering how criminals didn’t go insane with all this alone time. Then he flopped backward, wriggling on the hard mattress trying to get comfortable. After a few minutes of staring at the ceiling, he began to feel itchy, which is when it occurred to him that the bed and the rough blanket might not have been cleaned in a while. Or ever. He jumped up and looked at the bed suspiciously as he scratched

the itchy spot on his arm. Then the one in the middle of his back that had him bouncing around trying to reach it.

After he'd finally scratched everything that needed scratching, he started pacing again, this time going backward, which was a bit more interesting since he had to concentrate so he didn't trip over his feet and fall on his butt. Which only happened once. Okay, twice. But the entertainment factor didn't last long, so he started doing a series of jumping jacks, lunges, and pushups which ended with him lying on the dirty floor, a sweaty, out of breath mess, and no closer to being out of the cell than he'd been hours ago.

So much for Caspian's promise.

When he'd gotten his breath back, Jasper pushed off the ground and tried to think of something else to do to pass the time, but all he could come up with was singing. So he started with Lady Gaga's greatest hits. He was in the middle of Million Reasons when the person in the cell next to him, who he hadn't even noticed buried under the thin grey blanket, woke up and yelled at him to shut the fuck up. Jasper grinned at Old Fred's grandson, Billy—who had unfortunately inherited his late grandfather's propensity of getting drunk then falling into Mrs. Phife's garden, now filled with marigolds—so thrilled to see another face after so long he didn't even take offense when Billy swore at him again, threw up on the floor of his cell, then turned away and curled up on the dirty, and probably flea infested, mattress.

Scratching his arms again, sure he felt those same fleas biting him, Jasper started singing Poker Face, quieter this time. Okay, so he didn't actually sing quieter, but he did add in some dance moves to entertain Billy as he strutted around his cell doing his best Lady Gaga impersonation.

Days later, he finally heard back from Caspian who'd arranged to get Jasper a hearing with Judge Seymour.

Standing in front of the judge, Jasper leaned over and whispered to Caspian, asking why it had taken him so long to get him out. Caspian looked at him like he was nuts and said it had only been a few hours. Jasper corrected him and told him that it had been at least three days. Caspian told him he was an idiot. Jasper said that just because he wasn't cut out to do jail time didn't make him an idiot and perhaps Caspian needed to get a better watch. When Caspian flashed his Rolex Daytona, Jasper sniffed and said it was obviously a fake and maybe he should stick with Timex. At which point Judge Seymour pounded his gavel and said he needed to save Jasper from himself before Caspian killed him, and just like that, he was released on bail.

Walking out of the courthouse with his mother and Caspian, Jasper shook Caspian's hand, any hard feelings between him and the lawyer completely forgotten in his euphoria of being free. "Thank you for everything."

"That's what I'm paid for. And this little fiasco of yours is going to cost your mother plenty." Okay, so Caspian wasn't as forgiving as Jasper. "Try to stay out of trouble before you drive your mother to the poorhouse."

"I'll do my best."

"See that you do."

Jasper grinned at him, certain he'd seen the corners of his mouth twitch.

"Thank you for all your help, Caspian," his mother said, holding out her hand.

"Anything for you, Mariella." He took her hand between his, bowing slightly, then stood upright and flashed a fang at Jasper—who hadn't realized Caspian was a shifter—then left them, briefcase swinging and fake Rolex flashing in the sun.

Jasper's mother turned to him. "Walk with me." Hooking her arm through his, they started making their way to where she had parked her car. "So, you and the grumpy looking detective, huh?"



“Mom,” Jasper groaned. “Could we not?”

She laughed. “Of course we must. You should know that.”

Jasper shook his head because he did. “What do you want to know?”

“How serious is it between you two?”

Jasper shrugged. “It’s barely started.”

“Which means nothing,” she said, turning to look at him. “I knew with your father the first time I met him.”

“I know. But we’re not all as lucky as you and Dad. Besides, we haven’t even gone on a date yet.” Just had sex. Lots and lots of sex. Really great sex. So much great sex.

His mother laughed. “So other than the really great sex you’ve been having a lot of, how serious is it?”

Jasper’s eyes went wide. Oops. He hadn’t meant to say that out loud. “It’s, uh...” Then he couldn’t hold back his grin. “I think he’s the one.”

She nodded. “I thought as much.” They walked a bit further, then she said, “I like him. He has a strong aura about him. He’ll be a steady influence on you.”

“I don’t need steadying.”

“You do,” she said, patting his arm. “But don’t worry. Steady doesn’t mean boring. Your detective is going to make life very exciting for you.”

The thought made Jasper ridiculously happy.

Arriving at her car, his mother turned to him. Pulling the amulet from her pocket, she fastened it around his neck, then tucked the shard under the neckline of his shirt. He looked down, then back at her in surprise since she rarely took the amulet off. And she definitely didn’t let anyone else wear it. “Mom? Grandma Clarissa gave it to you. You shouldn’t—”

“Shhh. Don’t argue,” she said, pressing a finger over his lips. “Someone is going to great lengths to harm you and I fear it’s only going to get worse. I want you to be as protected as possible.”

“My crystals—”

“Won’t be enough.”

Jasper didn’t argue because he had the feeling she was right. And it was pointless since he never won against her anyway. Instead, he grasped the shard through his shirt. The metallic rock warmed under his hand, then pulsed, sending out a burst of its strange energy as it greeted him, before going mostly quiescent, the slight tingle against the skin of his chest letting him know it was still paying attention. “Thank you. I promise to take good care of it.”

“You take good care of you.” Cupping his face, she pressed a kiss to his forehead, then stepped back. “Are you sure I can’t give you a ride home?”

“No. I’ve got to pick up a couple of things on my way.”

“All right. Stay safe.”

Jasper patted the shard. “I will. You made sure of it.”

Nodding, his mother got into her car. Rolling down the window, she said, “I expect you for dinner on Sunday.”

Jasper nodded. “I’ll be there.”

“Bring Spencer.” Once Jasper said he would, she rolled up the window and drove off.

Jasper stood watching until she exited the parking lot, then pulled up his app and ordered an Uber. Then he called Spencer.

“Hey, Jasper. You okay? Word is you were arrested today.”

“Word is correct. I just got out. You up for pizza and beer? I’ll tell you all about it.”

“Absolutely. What time do you want me to come over?”

“As soon as I get home. I figure I should be there in about twenty minutes.”

“I’ll order the pizza now. See you in a few.”

“You bet.” Jasper ended the call and clutched the shard, hoping he wouldn’t need the extra layer of protection wearing it gave him, but having the feeling he probably would.

## Chapter Thirteen

Spencer was waiting for him on his porch, pizza in hand, when the Uber dropped Jasper off at his house. Grabbing his shopping bags from the seat next to him, he wished the driver a good night, then got out of the car and joined his friend.

“So, how come you were arrested?” Spencer asked, moving to the side so Jasper could get to the door. Then he squinted. “Was it Detective Dickhead?”

Jasper snorted as he shoved his key in the lock, thinking he should probably tell Spencer to stop calling Gabe that. “Sort of. He—”

“What the fuck, J? What kind of asshole sleeps with you and then arrests you?”

“It wasn’t like that. Gabe—”

“It was exactly like that. Don’t try to defend him.”

“I’m not.” Jasper pushed the door open and motioned for Spencer to go in. “And he didn’t arrest me. He just ordered for me to be brought in.”

“Which is the same thing,” Spencer said, dropping the pizza on the kitchen island. “What a fuckhead.”

“He’s really not,” Jasper said, setting his bags next to the pizza.

“He really is. But your mind’s too messed up by the hot cop sex to see it.”

Jasper laughed. “No, it’s not.” Which was mostly true. “There’s just some stuff going on that you don’t know about.”

“Then why don’t you tell me and I’ll let you know if he’s a fuckhead or not.”

Jasper laughed again. “Fair enough. It started with...” He stopped. Then, taking a lesson from his mother, he unhooked the shard from around his neck and set it in the center of the island.

Spencer gasped. “That’s your mother’s—”

“Wait,” Jasper said, holding up his hand. “Give me a second first.”

And though his eyes were full of questions, Spencer nodded and pressed his lips together.

Smiling his thanks, Jasper rested his fingers on the shard and pushed a trickle of magic into it. But not having his mother’s finesse or familiarity in working with the shard, he accidentally pushed out too much. The stone flared to life, returning his magic to him along with its own, the combined force of the power that flooded Jasper strong enough to take his legs out from under him.

“Fuck,” Jasper shouted as he grabbed onto the island. “Too much. Too much.”

The tenor of the flow changed, causing a buzzing in his ears that made his teeth hurt, but the power flooding him didn’t lessen in intensity.

Dragging himself up, Jasper locked his knees and fought to stay upright as power continued to pour into him. Reaching a trembling hand to the shard, he rested his fingers on it and mentally sent it a message asking it to pull back on its power. The flow rushing through him decreased, then slowed a bit more until the loud buzzing faded into a soft murmur of white noise. Jasper collapsed against the counter, panting as he grabbed for one of the tall stools tucked under the island. When his fumbling fingers found it, he tugged it out, then sat—more like fell—on it. Then he buried his face in his arms and tried to catch his breath.

“Can I talk now?” Spencer asked quietly.

“Yes,” Jasper mumbled, not lifting his head.

“So, uhm, that’s your mother’s shard.”

Looking up at him, Jasper nodded.

Spencer rubbed his arms as his eyes moved from Jasper to the shard and back. “That was a lot of power you just used.”

“It was.”

“What did you just do with it?”

Sitting up straight, Jasper blew out a breath, then said, “Shielded the room so no one could overhear us.”

Spencer’s eyebrows shot up. “It’s that bad?”

“It’s worse.” Jasper pulled out the stool next to him. “Have a seat. I’ll tell you all about it.”

Looking at the shard again, Spencer murmured, “I think we’re going to need beer for this.”

Jasper nodded. “So much beer.” He handed Spencer the bags on the island. “I picked some up on the way home, but there should still be some cold ones in the fridge.”

Spencer took the bags from him and put the two six-packs of craft beer Jasper had picked up into the fridge and grabbed a couple of bottles from the pack sitting on the shelf, then sat down on the stool and slid one of the bottles over to him.

Jasper cracked it open and took a long drink. Then another. After a third, and feeling more like himself, he flipped open the pizza box lid and grabbed a slice. Suddenly ravenous, he shoved most of it into his mouth—jail time sure made a guy hungry—then washed it down with another mouthful of beer, motioning for Spencer to help himself. Waiting until his friend had taken a large bite of pizza, Jasper casually said, “Did I mention I was arrested for attempted murder today?”

He snorted when Spencer choked. Taking another long pull from his beer, Jasper finished off the slice of pizza in his hand, then lifted another from the box, highly entertained by the hacking noises coming from his friend. He was licking sauce off his fingers when Spencer finally stopped coughing long enough to ask him a question.

“Did you say...murder?”

“Attempted murder. Gabe got called out to investigate a body, so after he unlocked me from the bed—”

He stopped and took another drink from his bottle as he waited for Spencer to stop choking on his beer.

*Thirty minutes later...*

Jasper looked at his friend in concern. Spencer was frozen with his empty beer bottle halfway to the table. After a bit, when he still hadn't said anything, Jasper removed the bottle from his hand and replaced it with his own half-finished one. Spencer quickly guzzled it down. Realizing that wasn't going to be enough, Jasper went to the fridge and grabbed two more bottles. Twisting the cap off of one, he handed it to Spencer then climbed back onto his stool. When Spencer had finished that bottle, Jasper asked, "You going to be okay?"

"Not sure," Spencer said, his voice sounding hoarse as he held out his hand.

Snorting, Jasper handed over his beer, watching in amusement as Spencer drained that one as well.

When he was done, Spencer set the empty down, swiped his hand across his mouth and let out a loud burp. After clearing his throat, he said, "So, uh, framing you for murder is a long way from slashing your tires or putting your sex face on TV."

"It is."

"I guess since Lucas was the one who was almost killed, we can rule him out now."

Jasper nodded. "Yep."

"And since this person has no problem with killing, we can only assume they'll try to kill you next."

"That's the working theory." And one that worried the hell out of Gabe, no matter that Jasper and his mother had reassured him that he'd be fine.

"So, what are you going to do?"

"Other than let them come after me?"

"Yeah. Other than that. Which is fucking crazy if you ask me."

"You know they won't be able to hurt me."

"Doesn't make it any less crazy to agree to be bait."

Jasper shrugged. “Maybe not. But it’s the best way to find this asshole before they can hurt anyone else.”

“True,” Spencer said, nodding. He tipped his bottle at Jasper. “You want any help?”

“I was counting on it.” Sliding off his stool, Jasper went over to the refrigerator and pulled a can out of his freezer.

“What are you doing now?”

“Making you coffee. We’re going to need you sober for this.”

Spencer let out another belch. “Good idea.”

---

Swaying only slightly on his stool, the third, or was it the fourth, beer finally kicking in, Spencer held his cup in both hands and took a sip. “So what have the police come up with so far?”

“Not very much,” Jasper said, looking at the pad of paper he was making notes on. “We know this person is a technical wizard, has magical powers on par with my mother, is screwing around with dark magic, and knows a hell of a lot about me.” Including having naked pictures of him that Jasper still hadn’t figured out how they’d gotten.

“That’s not a lot to go on.”

“Nope.”

“Can you think of anyone who hates you?”

“Other than Lucas?” Jasper shook his head. “Not a clue.”

“Do you have any unsatisfied customers who might want to get back at you?”

Jasper thought about it, then shook his head again. “Not that I can think of.”

“What about your charms? Could someone have bought one and the person they used it on is mad and blaming you for



whatever they had to do?”

“None of my charms can make anyone do anything they don’t want to do. All they do is open them up to the possibility.”

“So no forcing someone to fall in love with them.”

“Nope.”

“Guess we can rule that out as well.” Spencer rubbed his chin. “What about someone from school? Was there anyone who hated you? Or maybe it was someone who moved away who’s come back recently and might still be holding a grudge?”

Jasper tapped his pencil on the pad of paper. “I can’t think of anyone right off, but it might be worth looking into.” He jotted down a note to ask his mother about it. She’d know if anyone had recently moved back to Starfall Grove. “Anything else you can think of?”

Spencer shook his head, then frowned. “Actually, I might have an idea.” Setting his cup down to the side, he crossed his arms on the table and leaned forward. “Do you remember Forrest’s older brother Elwood?”

“Skinny guy who likes to wear a bow tie and suspenders.”

“That’s the one.”

“Vaguely. I was never really friends with him. Why?”

“Forrest mentioned something the other day about Elwood taking some online computer courses. It sounded like it’s just basic stuff, but he might be able to help us.”

Jasper shook his head. “I don’t know, Spence. Whoever’s stalking me has a lot more than basic skills. Not sure how Elwood can help.”

“He probably can’t on the hacking stuff, but he may have some ideas of where to find someone with those kinds of skills. Or even who we could ask about it. At worst, he’ll be able to tell us what questions to ask.” Spencer shrugged. “It couldn’t hurt to talk to him.”

“I guess not.” Jasper wrote it down even though he thought it would be a waste of time. But then again, it might not be. And as Spencer said, what could it hurt to ask?

---

At the knock on his back door, Jasper looked out the kitchen window, then rushed to open the door, smiling at Gabe when he came in. The smile dropped from his face when Gabe brushed past him without saying a word and sat at the island. After a second, he grabbed Jasper’s beer and drained it, then got up from his stool and went to the fridge and grabbed another. And while Jasper was happy Gabe felt comfortable enough in his house to make himself at home, he was worried about how tired and defeated he looked.

Quietly closing the door, Jasper asked, “Are you okay?”

Gabe nodded as he twisted off the cap, but from the way he guzzled back half the bottle, Jasper didn’t believe him.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Gabe said, going back to the island and retaking his seat. “Just a long, frustrating day that started with an attempted murder and ended with the Captain kicking my ass for getting involved with you.”

“Oh.” Jasper bit his lip, then asked, “How much trouble are you in?”

“No more than I expected. And less than I’d have been in somewhere else.”

“Okay. That’s good, I guess.”

“I still have my job, so yeah, it’s good.” Gabe took another drink of his beer, then looked at the pad on the island. Setting his bottle down, he picked it up. Then frowned. “What’s this?”

“Spencer and I were making notes to try to figure out who might be stalking me.”

Gabe dropped the pad and scowled at Jasper. “You talked to him about the case?”

“Uh, huh,” Jasper said, going over to the fridge to find something to make for Gabe. He had to be starving by now.

“The Captain said not to discuss it with anyone.”

Jasper nodded and pulled out some sandwich meat and lettuce that didn’t look too wilted. “I know. But I’m sure he didn’t mean Spencer.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

Jasper closed the fridge and turned to him. “What?”

“You were told not to discuss the case with anyone.”

“I didn’t discuss it with anyone. I discussed it with Spencer.” He set the meat and lettuce on the island counter and then went to grab some bread from the pantry.

“Would you fucking stop and listen to me?”

Jasper stopped and turned to him. “I don’t understand why you’re so upset”

“Because you were supposed to keep your mouth shut. Why the fuck did you tell Spencer?”

Jasper shrugged. “He’s my best friend. I tell him everything.” When that didn’t seem to help, Jasper said, “I trust him.”

“For fuck’s sake. You can’t trust anyone,” Gabe said, sliding off his stool and walking over to him. “Especially not someone who has this kind of access to your life. Do you have any idea how often someone is killed by a trusted friend or family member?”

“Spencer wouldn’t—”

Gabe grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. “You have to be smarter than this or you’re going to get yourself killed.”

“It’s okay,” Jasper said, patting his chest. “You’re worrying over nothing. I’ve known Spencer since we were

kids. I trust him with my life.”

“You’d better fucking hope he’s not the one stalking you, or you’ve just handed it to him on a silver platter.” He moved Jasper to the side and went to the door, “And you better not have fucked up this case or I might just kill you myself.”

Oh shit. Gabe was angrier than he’d thought. Jasper hurried after him, stopping in surprise when Gabe flipped the lock. “Oh. I thought you were leaving.”

Gabe turned away from the door “I am. I have to go to the station to let Em and the Captain know that you’ve compromised the case.”

Jasper winced. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it would be a problem. I’m just used to telling Spencer everything.”

“Sorry isn’t going to cut it when the Captain throws your ass in jail,” Gabe said, coming back and tossing Jasper over his shoulder.

Jasper grabbed onto the back of his jacket. “What are you doing?”

“Taking you to bed first. If I can fuck my anger out, I might not want to kill you.”

Which worked for Jasper. He’d take angry sex with Gabe any day of the week.

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Back in the kitchen after Gabe had left, slamming the door behind him with a warning for Jasper to keep his mouth shut from now on—which hadn’t been as forceful as he’d probably intended since Gabe had done as promised and fucked his anger out, leaving him a mellow, if grumbly mess—Jasper guzzled half the glass of water he’d just poured then held the cool glass to his overheated face. He had no idea how Gabe had enough energy to slam doors after the marathon of angry sex they’d just had. Jasper’s legs were shaking so hard he could barely stand and Gabe had done most of the work.

He grinned thinking of how much work his detective had done.

A few seconds later he heard the angry rumble of Gabe's muscle car as it started up then roared off down the street. He drank the rest of his water snickering to himself when he realized Gabe's vehicle had the same temperament as him.

He was looking around his messy kitchen trying to decide if he had enough energy left to clean it up then or just leave it for the morning when there was a quiet knock on his back door before Spencer stuck his head in. "Is it safe to come in?"

Jasper grinned. "Yes. The big, scary detective is gone."

"Thank fuck," Spencer said as he came in, closing the door behind him. "You alright?"

Jasper's grin got bigger. "Never better."

Spencer snorted. "So, I see." He looked away, then back. "So, uhm, the detective, he's uh, he's pretty intense, huh?"

Jasper nodded. "Yep. He's also kind of pissed at me right now."

Spencer nodded, looking everywhere but at Jasper. "I heard. I think the whole neighborhood heard."

Hopefully, they hadn't heard what Jasper had been yelling during sex or he'd never be able to look his neighbors in the face again. He squinted. Kind of like how Spencer was avoiding his eyes right now. "How much did you hear?"

"Not much," Spencer said, shrugging. Then he looked at Jasper, his eyes full of laughter. "Just a few *fuck me* and *harder, harder*." He snorted. "I might also have heard a couple of *spank me, officer, I've been a bad boy*."

Jasper laughed. "I gotta tell you, it adds a little something to the spanking when the one doing it is actually a cop." His butt cheeks were still burning.

Spencer snickered and shook his head. "I'm not sure I'd have been brave enough to let him do that, not with how pissed he was."

Jasper figured he probably shouldn't mention he'd been in handcuffs at the time.

Spencer sat at the island. "So what was Detective Dickhead so angry about?"

Jasper sobered, thinking about what Gabe had said to him just before he left, that by Jasper talking and getting Spencer involved, he could have put a target on his friend's back. "He was angry about me telling you what was going on."

"Why?"

"Because it's confidential information about an active case and might have compromised it. So, we, uh, maybe shouldn't try to find who's stalking me."

"You don't want to look for them anymore?"

Jasper hesitated, then shook his head.

Spencer's eyes narrowed. "What else did your detective say?"

"Nothing."

"Try again."

Jasper sighed. His friend knew him too well. "Just that you knowing what's going on could have put you in danger. I don't want you to get hurt, Spencer."

"So you're calling it off because you're worried about me?"

Jasper nodded.

"Well, I'm worried about you too, dummy, so we're going to do this."

"Spence—"

"No," Spencer said, holding up his hand. "I get that you're worried. And I understand Gabe doesn't want us ruining his investigation. So we'll be careful and we'll try not to get in his way, but I'm not going to let some asshole keep taking shots at you."

Which is about what Jasper had expected because he'd have said the same thing if Spencer had been in trouble. Glancing at the back door Gabe had gone through, Jasper bit his lip, then turned back to Spencer. "Okay. We'll do it together. But we're not going to take any unnecessary risks or do anything that'll mess up Gabe's case."

"Agreed."

"And we can't let him know what we're doing."

"He'll never suspect a thing."

Jasper hoped not. If Gabe had been mad enough to kill him for only talking to Spencer, he didn't want to think about how livid he'd be if he found out they were investigating on their own.

There was no way his butt could take angry sex at that level of furious.

At least...he didn't think so.

But maybe...

Damn. Now Jasper didn't know if he wanted Gabe to find out what he and Spencer were up to or not.

## Chapter Fourteen

*A few days later...*

Relaxing with a vanilla latte at a small table in the corner of Leavenly Delights, Spencer's bakery and specialty coffee shop, Jasper sat forward in his chair when his friend dropped a still steaming cinnamon bun on the table in front of him. Setting his latte down, Jasper tore into it, groaning when warm sweet yeasty cinnamon flavor burst over his tongue. Quickly chewing the soft doughy goodness that tasted even better than it smelled, Jasper swallowed then stuffed another hunk into his mouth, the almost obscene noises coming from him making the customers at the tables closest to him snicker. Not that Jasper cared. He just grinned at them and shoved another piece into his mouth, making more noises of appreciation for what was truly an epic cinnamon bun. Just like everything Spencer made.

His best friend was a freaking wizard when it came to combining flour, sugar, and butter and Jasper couldn't get enough of anything that came out of Spencer's ovens. And neither could his customers.

Spencer had opened Leavenly Delights shortly after finishing culinary school. Within a year, his baked goods had become so popular he'd had to double his staff to meet the demand. Five months after that he'd outgrown his small shop, with customers lining up down the block waiting to get in, so he'd leased the vacant spaces next to his bakery, knocked down the walls, and expanded. He now had a huge seating area which Spencer had filled with cozy round tables and cushiony chairs for his customers to relax at while they sipped their specialty coffees and groaned over the mouthwatering desserts that came out of the massive display case that stretched across the width of his bakery.

Jasper was so damn proud of what his friend had accomplished he could burst. Or that could be because of the



extra-large brownie Katie, Spencer's assistant, had slipped to him when Spencer had been in the back getting the cinnamon buns out of the oven.

Licking the last bit of creamy frosting off his fingers, Jasper sighed as he looked at his empty plate, kind of wishing he hadn't eaten his cinnamon bun so quickly, but its demise had been inevitable the moment it had been placed in front of him. He glanced over at Spencer and saw the almost full tray of buns on the counter behind him and smiled. Maybe he'd just have to try to score another one.

Getting up from his seat, Jasper joined the long line of customers waiting to place their orders. When he reached the front, he held out his empty plate and gave Spencer a sad face. "Please, sir, can I have another?"

Spencer snorted. "Idiot." Then shaking his head, he plated another cinnamon bun, adding a chocolate chip cookie on the side—he knew all of Jasper's weaknesses—and set it on the counter. "That's all you get or I'll have nothing left for my paying customers."

"I can pay." Jasper reached for his wallet.

Spencer scowled. "You know your money's no good here. Now get. You're blocking the line."

Jasper laughed and grabbed his plate, moving to the side so Spencer could serve the next customer. But before putting his wallet away, he dropped a five-dollar bill in the tip jar on the counter, then returned to his table.

When the second bun had gone the way of the first, Jasper leaned back in his chair and sipped his latte, keeping an eye on the door for Elwood who'd agreed to meet with him before going into the office. To amuse himself while he waited, Jasper studied the constant stream of people coming in to get their morning pastry and coffee, trying to predict what their favorite treat was. So far he was batting zero except for Mrs. Phife who'd ordered a dozen lemon drop cookies. But since he knew that's what she always got when it was her turn to host

the reading club on the last Thursday of the month, it didn't count.

Jasper waved at her when she walked past him on her way out, then sat up straight when a short skinny man with dark round glasses and a bowtie came into the bakery. Elwood.

Mouthing *showtime* to Spencer, Jasper stood and waved to get Elwood's attention. Elwood nodded when he saw him, then pointed to the counter and mimed drinking. Jasper gave him a thumbs up, then sat. While he waited for Elwood to get his coffee, Jasper went over what he was going to say one final time. He and Spencer had agreed that he needed to tell Elwood enough to give him something to work with but not so much that it compromised the police investigation. And since dissembling had never come easy to Jasper, what with being brought up by parents who believed in being completely open and honest about everything—to the point of embarrassing uncomfortableness at times—and who'd expected the same from him, he was going to have to be extra careful not to say something he shouldn't.

Sooner than he was ready for, Elwood appeared next to his table.

"Hey, Jasper. How are you doing?" Elwood asked as he set his cup and plate on the table and pulled out the chair across from him. "It's been a while."

"It has," Jasper said, taking a sip of his latte. "How have you been?"

"Good, good." Elwood peeled the lid off of his cup and blew on his coffee before taking a sip. Looking at Jasper, he said, "I hope whatever you want to discuss won't take long. I have a meeting with my father in an hour and he doesn't appreciate it if anyone is late."

"No, it shouldn't take long at all," Jasper said, then frowned when he realized the crystals in his wrap—which he'd finally gotten back from the police—had gone quiet. Brushing his fingers discreetly over them, they responded with little pinpricks of magic, then faded again, almost as if they'd gone to sleep. Which was...not normal.

Suddenly second-guessing what he was about to do, Jasper glanced over at the counter to Spencer, who looked questioningly at him. Jasper tipped his head toward Elwood and raised his eyebrows, silently asking if he should keep going.

Spencer's eyes flicked to Elwood, then back to Jasper. He shrugged and mouthed, *stick to the plan*. Jasper nodded, then taking a deep breath, he turned and faced Elwood.

Elwood glanced from Jasper to Spencer, then back to Jasper. "Did you want to go get something?" he asked, pointing to the display case.

"No. I'm good. Just, uhm...I'm good," Jasper said, pasting a smile on his face as he set his latte to the side and folded his arms on the table. "Kind of. I need your help."

Elwood paused with his coffee halfway to his mouth. "You need *my* help?" When Jasper nodded, he took a sip, then motioned toward him with the cup. "What kind of help are you looking for?"

"I need some technical help and I heard you're fairly knowledgeable when it comes to computers."

Elwood's nose wrinkled. "I wouldn't say knowledgeable. I took a few online courses that covered the basics. But for anything advanced..." He shook his head. "No. I'm no expert."

"Oh," Jasper said, feeling disappointed even though he'd expected as much. "I don't think basic knowledge is going to be enough for what I need."

"You'd be surprised what can be done with even basic knowledge. Why don't you tell me what you're looking for and I'll let you know if I can do it. If I can't, there's a good chance I'll know someone who can." He raised his cup to his mouth and looked at Jasper over the rim.

Which was pretty much what Spencer had said. Suddenly feeling better about the plan, Jasper leaned closer to Elwood and said, "I think a hacker's after me." Then jerked back when

Elwood spit out his coffee, but not quickly enough to avoid getting splashed.

“Sorry, sorry,” Elwood said as he grabbed a napkin and wiped up the coffee sprayed over the table. “I didn’t mean to do that. Did I get any on you?”

“Just a bit,” Jasper said, blotting off his jacket, then crumpling his napkin in his fist and setting it next to his cup.

Elwood looked over Jasper’s jacket. “Do you want me to have that cleaned?”

Jasper shook his head. “It’s fine. I’ll look after it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It’s kind of my fault anyway since I just sort of blurted that out.”

Elwood let out a small laugh. “It definitely wasn’t what I was expecting to hear.”

“Oh. What did you think I was going to say?”

“To be honest, I thought you wanted some investment advice.” Pushing his coffee to the side, Elwood rested his arms on the table and leaned forward, keeping his voice down as he asked, “Why do you think a hacker is after you?”

“Because things keep happening to me.”

“Like what?”

“Like...did you see the news a couple of weeks ago?”

“Probably. I watch it every night. What about it?”

Jasper just looked at him and waited.

Elwood stared at Jasper, confusion slowly spreading across his face. Then it clicked. “Oh,” he said, his eyebrows going up. “You’re talking about the night they aired your photo.”

“Yes.”

“Why would you have let them use that particular image? It was rather...unflattering.”

Which was generous of Elwood since the photo had been so much worse than that. “I didn’t have anything to do with it. Neither did the news station.”

“They didn’t?”

Jasper shook his head. “No. Someone hacked them and put that photo up.”

“Why would someone do that?”

“I have no idea.”

“Is that why you think there’s a hacker after you?”

Jasper nodded. “That’s part of it. My tires were also slashed and then my building was vandalized.”

Elwood stilled. “Jasper,” he said slowly, “it sounds like maybe you’ve got a stalker, not a hacker.”

Jasper barely held back his wince, realizing too late he should probably have kept quiet about his tires and building. Damn it. He knew he’d be no good at this. Giving Elwood a weak smile, he said, “Do you really think so?”

Elwood nodded. “I do. You need to be careful in case they do anything else.”

“Yeah, about that,” Jasper said, shooting a quick look at Spencer, who nodded for him to continue. “I think the same person also hacked into the billboard on Canyon Drive and put up some, uhm, some...not safe for work pictures.”

Elwood’s eyes went wide, which, with his round glasses, made him look a bit like an owl. “I heard about those, but didn’t realize they were of you.”

Which was a surprise. Stan’s grapevine was usually more efficient than that.

“This is just...wow,” Elwood said, leaning back in his chair and picking up his cup. “Whoever this is really has it in for you, don’t they? Any idea why?”

Jasper shook his head. “No. I can’t think of any reason for someone to come after me.”

“Well, there has to be something.”

“I know. I’m just not sure what it could be.”

“It’s probably got something to do with money, lust, or revenge. Those are the reasons most crimes are committed.”

Jasper looked at him in surprise. “How do you know that?”

Elwood shrugged. “I read a lot of true crime novels. It’s the underlying theme in most of them.”

“Oh.”

“So if you take money, lust, or revenge into consideration as the motivating factor, does that bring anyone to mind?”

Jasper thought about it, then shook his head. “Not really. I don’t have any enemies as far as I know.”

“It looks like you’ve got at least one,” Elwood said, then tipped his cup back and finished off his coffee.

Jasper couldn’t deny it, not after what had been happening the last couple of weeks.

Elwood put his cup down and looked at his watch, then grimaced. “I’m sorry. I’m going to have to go. Was there anything else you wanted to ask me?”

“Just one thing,” Jasper said, then hesitated, wondering if this would be crossing too far over the line into Gabe’s investigation.

“What is it?” Elwood asked, looking at his watch again.

Deciding it should probably be all right if he kept it vague, Jasper said, “I think my phone may have been hacked but I’m not sure how to tell. Do you know how to check for something like that?”

Elwood shook his head. “Sorry. That’s a bit over my skill set.”

“Do you know anyone who does have those skills?”

“Off the top of my head? No.”

Jasper sighed and slumped in his chair. “Okay. Thanks anyway, Elwood.” It had been a long shot, but it was still super disappointing.

“Hey. Don’t get all down. Just because I don’t know now doesn’t mean I don’t have ways to find out.”

“Really?” Jasper asked, perking up.

Elwood nodded. “Really. I’ll ask around and see if I can find someone who knows about this kind of thing.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate that.”

“No problem. I’ll start looking into it as soon as I get home.”

“Great,” Jasper said, smiling at him. “But be careful. If you can’t find anyone by casually asking around, don’t go digging. You don’t want to draw the attention of this hacker.”

“Don’t worry. I know how to be discreet.”

“Okay, good,” Jasper said, relieved he could leave everything in Elwood’s capable hands.

“You know,” Elwood said, tapping his fingers on the table. “This whole situation of yours reminds me a lot of a mystery series I’m reading.”

“It does?”

Elwood nodded. “Not the vandalism and nude photos, but the secret enemy working from the shadows using tech against you.” Elwood’s eyes were glittering as he got up from the table. “That’s very similar to what happened in the third Jack Riddlestone book I just finished. In the story, Jack was trying to track down a Soviet spy and had to search for signs of him on the web.”

Uh, oh, Jasper thought, getting a bad feeling about where this was going.

“I’m going to use the same strategy Jack did to try to find your hacker.”

It was worse than he’d thought. “Uh, Elwood, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“It’s a great idea,” Elwood said, his face animated in a way it hadn’t been a minute before.

“No, it’s really not,” Jasper said, shaking his head.

“It is. I know exactly what to do in a situation like this. The Jack Riddlestone novels are very detailed.”

Oh, god. “Elwood—”

“Don’t you worry about anything, Jasper. I should know who your hacker is before the week is out.”

“Elwood, no. You can’t—”

“But you need to be more careful until I do.” Elwood leaned over the table and whispered, “First lesson in spying. Don’t trust anybody. Ever.”

How was this even happening? “Elwood, please,” Jasper said, standing. “You really shouldn’t—”

Elwood pressed a finger to Jasper’s mouth, cutting him off. “Shhh. Don’t say anything else. You never know who’s listening.” He glanced furtively around the sitting area. Then giving Jasper a brief salute, he flipped his jacket collar up, ducked his head, then hurried from the bakery.

In a zigzag pattern.

“Fuuuuck,” Jasper groaned, dropping back into his seat and banging his head on the table, realizing he’d just made a huge mistake. Gabe was going to kill him when he found out.

And with how not discreet Elwood was, it wasn’t going to take long.

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Jasper pulled into his driveway and turned off his car, then sat there wondering what the hell he was going to do about Elwood. He’d seemed so normal when he’d first arrived at the bakery that Jasper hadn’t realized he was off his flipping rocker until he’d slipped into super spy mode. Jasper had been



debating all day on whether or not to tell Gabe about him before finally deciding he was going to try reigning in Elwood first.

If he would ever answer his damn phone.

Sighing, Jasper unbuckled his seatbelt and got out of the car. As he was pulling a piece of black obsidian from his pocket to protect his vehicle, he caught a flash of movement from the corner of his eye. But before he could react, he was grabbed. The black crystal fell from his hand when he was shoved against the passenger door.

His magic rose.

Then subsided when arms came around him and a husky voice whispered in his ear, "I'm sorry."

Gabe, Jasper thought, everything inside of him settling.

"I shouldn't have been such a dick the other night."

"It's fine." Jasper nudged him back, then turned around and slid his arms around Gabe's waist.

"It's not. I shouldn't have yelled at you. I just don't react well when I'm worried."

Jasper let out a soft laugh. "I noticed. You also don't react well when you're scared or don't get your way. Or when you meet an amazing crystal witch who makes you feel things you didn't want to feel so you try to arrest him instead."

Gabe grumbled. "You're more troublemaker than amazing."

Jasper smiled up at him, letting Gabe's avoidance of his feelings slide. For now. "You think I'm a troublemaker?"

"I know you are."

"Then maybe I should convince you I'm worth the trouble," Jasper said, sliding his hands up Gabe's back and pressing his body closer.

"Maybe you should," Gabe murmured as he shoved his hands in Jasper's hair and tipped his head back.

Jasper's eyes slid half shut as the force of Gabe's presence wrapped around him. "You want to come in?" he asked breathily.

"God, yes," Gabe said, heat rising in his eyes as he bent down. Then it banked. He stopped with his lips poised just over Jasper's. "After I finish apologizing. Because if I go into the house with you now, I'll get distracted and forget what I want to say."

"It's fine. You don't need to apologize," Jasper said as he tried to pull him into a kiss, then sighed when Gabe turned slightly, his lips landing on the skin next to Jasper's mouth. "I'm serious, Gabe. I know you were just reacting because you were angry and worried."

"That doesn't give me the right to yell at you," Gabe said, brushing his lips along Jasper's jawline. "It's just hard not to when you do stupid things."

It took Jasper a moment since he was distracted by the feel of Gabe's teeth on his ear, then the less than loverlike comment made it through. Pushing Gabe back, he squinted at him. "Did you just call me stupid?"

"No," Gabe said, brushing the hair back from Jasper's face and tucking it behind his ears. "I said you do stupid things."

A small laugh escaped. "I'm not sure that's any better."

"I just meant that sometimes the things you do aren't very smart."

Jasper snorted.

Gabe groaned. "You know what I mean."

"I'm not sure that I do," Jasper teased.

Gabe sighed. "I'm talking about you telling Spencer about the case. It was a dumb thing to do and it put you at risk."

"Telling Spencer wasn't a risk."

"Telling anyone is a risk. The minute you said something to him, you put yourself in danger."

Jasper shook his head, “Maybe if it was someone else, but not Spencer.”

“This is exactly what I’m talking about. You trust Spencer so much you refuse to believe he could be a threat when the reality is you could be at most risk from him because you let him get so close. You’d never see the danger coming until it was too late.”

Jasper sighed, knowing they were never going to agree on this. “Gabe—”

“No,” Gabe said, his hard-nosed cop’s face putting in an appearance, letting Jasper know how serious he was. “You have someone after you who can avoid detection, which makes it almost impossible to protect you from them. And chances are it’s someone you know, which means you can’t trust anybody. That should have included Spencer.”

Jasper shook his head. “He’s not—”

“Nobody, Jasper. Not a single fucking person.”

“What about the police?”

“Not even them,” Gabe said, shaking his head. “Until we catch this asshole, nobody, not even my fellow officers, can be trusted with you.”

“Not even Detective Trewitt?”

Gabe hesitated, then nodded. “Em’s okay. And so’s the Captain. I’d trust either of them with my life. And I mostly trust them with yours. But I still don’t want you alone with them. If you have to talk to them, I need to be there.”

Which is when Jasper got how worried Gabe was. His head thumped down on Gabe’s shoulder as he realized he’d have to come clean. Gabe would never forgive him if he found out later that Jasper had gone behind his back to search for the hacker. Or that he’d involved Elwood. “I, uhm, have something I need to tell you.”

Gabe stiffened. He unhooked Jasper’s arms from around his waist and stepped back. “This is going to piss me off, isn’t it?”

Jasper nodded. “Yeah.”

Gabe closed his eyes and let out a heavy sigh. “Does it have to be now or can we talk about it later?” His eyes cracked open. “Unless you’re looking for more angry sex, in which case, you’d better tell me now.”

Jasper had to think about it because the angry sex had been phenomenal. But he was kind of enjoying Gabe not being mad at him. And really, with how easily he drove Gabe insane, he’d have plenty of opportunities for angry sex in the future. “We can talk about it later.”

“Good. Because it’s been too long since I’ve been inside of you and I don’t want to have to wait another minute.”

“Me either,” Jasper said, then laughed when Gabe tossed him over his shoulder and started up his walkway. He quickly dug for his keys in his front pocket, which was harder than he thought it would be when being carried like a bag of rice, but he had them ready when Gabe reached his front door.



When the light on the second floor went out, a dark figure slipped around the side of the house, slinking through the shadows like a wraith, appearing next to the car between one second and the next.

A black leather gloved hand reached down and plucked the crystal from the gravel. A low hissing growl issued from the figure’s throat, then the leather-clad hand closed around the black crystal and squeezed.

There was a crack, followed by a high-pitched crystalline shriek that was quickly cut off as the shadow drained the protective crystal of its magic. Opening its hand, the shadow let the lifeless fragments fall to the ground, then completed the task it had come for before slipping off, fading into the night the same way it had arrived.

## Chapter Fifteen

Jasper felt like a limp, sweaty noodle when Gabe tugged at him until he was half-sprawled over him. Forcing his trembling limbs to move, he pushed himself up further, shifting until his head was resting comfortably on Gabe's chest, and his leg was draped over Gabe's with his foot tucked behind his knee. Then he just breathed and listened to the steady beating heart under his ear. When Gabe ran his hand up and down Jasper's back, he let out a sigh of contentment, happiness, and the stirrings of new love filling him as he sank into the completeness that being this close to his mate gave him.

After a few minutes, Gabe's arm slid down his back, his hand coming around to rest on Jasper's hip as he tucked the other behind his head. "All right. I'm all relaxed and mellow now. Tell me what's going on."

Jasper's fingers, which had been playing with the hair on Gabe's chest, jerked, tugging on the short curls and making him hiss. "Sorry, sorry." Patting Gabe's chest to soothe the sting, Jasper took a deep breath, then tipped his head back so he could see his face. "So, uhm, Spencer and I had this great idea."

Gabe groaned. "God. What did you two do now?"

"We didn't do anything. Mostly. Well, Spencer didn't. I might have. Actually, I did, but it's not—"

"Stop." Resting his hand on Jasper's neck, Gabe said, "Just spit it out and tell me what's going on."

Jasper nodded, took another deep breath, and started again. "Okay. It was like this. Spencer and I got to talking..."

*Six and a half minutes later...*

After Jasper finished what had to be the fastest recap in history, he braced himself for the explosion. But it didn't

come. Gabe just looked at him, a muscle bunching in his jaw, but he didn't say anything. Then he pushed himself up on the bed, taking Jasper with him, and leaned against the headboard with Jasper straddled across his lap. Jasper was taking it as a good sign that Gabe wasn't yelling.

But then, he was optimistically foolish like that.

Gabe blew out a breath, then put his hands on Jasper's hips and pulled him a bit closer. "So let me see if I've got this straight. You and Spencer continued with your plan to track down your stalker."

Jasper nodded.

"Even though I explicitly told you not to."

"Uh, huh," Jasper said, biting his lip, wondering if the yelling was going to start after all.

"And then you talked to somebody else and got them involved with your plan," Gabe said, his fingers flexing on Jasper's hips.

"Yes."

"So now you, Spencer, and this Elwood person are mucking around in my case?"

"Kind of," Jasper said, a bit surprised at how calm Gabe was. "Elwood doesn't actually know about—"

"Are you fucking kidding me? Which part of staying out of my fucking case wasn't clear to you?"

So much for calm. "I just thought—"

"You didn't fucking think at all and now I've got some James Bond wannabe running around trying to find the bad guy who'll probably fuck up our entire investigation."

"I'm sure Elwood won't do that," Jasper said, not sure of any such thing.

"He'd better fucking not. Christ. I can't believe you did this to me again." Gabe scrubbed his hands over his face, then took a deep breath. Then another. Speaking more calmly, Gabe said, "The Captain's going to have a fit when I tell him about

this. I wouldn't be surprised if he doesn't throw your ass in jail and leave you there."

Shit. Jasper had forgotten about Captain Jack threatening to do that if anyone talked. "He wouldn't really do that, would he?"

"To keep you from fucking up our investigation, you'd better believe it." Then Gabe sighed and took hold of his hand, threading their fingers together. "Did it even cross your mind when you came up with this grand plan of yours that this Elwood guy could be your stalker?"

A laugh escaped before Jasper could stop it. When Gabe stiffened and tried to pull away, Jasper held tight to his hand. "I'm sorry. I'm not laughing at you. It's just...if you'd ever met Elwood, you'd see how crazy that sounded. Elwood's so...he's just so...he's kind of a geek. And scholarly. He's so not the type of person who'd try to hurt someone."

"Everyone has the potential to hurt someone given the right circumstances and motivation."

"I guess. But I can't see it with Elwood. He's so tiny and non-threatening." Even if he was off his rocker.

"The right weapon can make even the smallest opponent formidable," Gabe said, rubbing his thumb over Jasper's knuckles. "Which means this small, geeky, scholar could still hurt you if he wanted to."

Jasper snorted. "Not likely." Before Gabe could get upset, he held out his arm. "I'm not exactly defenseless. I do have my crystals to keep me safe."

Gabe glanced at the leather wrap on his wrist, then back at him. "Can your crystals stop a knife attack? Or a bullet?"

Jasper started to nod, then stopped and thought about it. Then he shrugged. "I think so. I've never been shot at before to know for sure, but they should be able to keep me safe. And if they can't, my mother's shard definitely can."

Gabe studied the shard around his neck, then shook his head. "I'm not going to trust your safety to a bunch of rocks I know nothing about."

“They’re more than just a bunch of rocks,” Jasper said, realizing he needed to show Gabe exactly what his crystals and the shard could do.

“I’m still not trusting your safety to them. Until we can catch whoever is after you, Em and I are going to be the ones protecting you. And you can help us by not being so damned trusting of everyone.” Gabe tugged Jasper closer. “It would be even better if you started assuming that anyone you engaged with was your stalker. That way you’d be prepared if they tried anything.”

Jasper made a face. “I’m not going to walk around being suspicious of everyone.”

“It might save your life.”

“I know but...I’m not like that. I can’t even imagine...I just can’t. I’m sorry. That’s not who I am.”

“Which is part of what makes you so special.” Before Jasper could get too swoony about that, Gabe finished with, “But it also makes you blind to the risks you’re taking.”

“The shard will keep me safe.”

“Not safe enough,” Gabe said, then he cupped Jasper’s cheeks, pulling him forward until their foreheads pressed together. “I want you to promise not to take any more chances. No more talking to people about the case. No more making plans with Spencer. No more sleuthing on your own to find your stalker. You need to leave the investigating to me and Em. Trust us to find this bastard.”

“I promise I won’t do anything to compromise your case,” Jasper hedged, having the feeling he’d end up doing something on that list.

Gabe squinted at him, then shook his head. “Not good enough. I want your promise, spoken in plain English, that you won’t try to investigate on your own in any way, shape, or form.”

“But—”



“No arguing. No trying to get out of it. Just your promise.”

“Gabe—”

“Please. For my heart.”

Well, if he was going to put it like that. “Okay. I promise I won’t—”

He was interrupted by the sound of Gabe’s phone ringing. Jasper leaned to the side, stretching to grab it off the bedside table, then handed it to Gabe.

Looking at the screen, Gabe cursed under his breath, then nudged Jasper off of him, answering it as he got up from the bed. “What’s up, Em,”

“We caught a body.”

Oh crap, Jasper thought, then slid out of the other side of the bed and started looking through the pile of clothes on the floor for his sleep pants, half listening as Gabe spoke with Detective Trewitt. He looked up when Gabe tossed his phone back on the bedside table.

“I’m sorry. I’ve got to go.” Gabe grabbed his jeans off the floor and quickly pulled them on.

“I heard.” Finally finding his sleep pants, Jasper slid them on, then went and grabbed Gabe’s jacket from the chair in the corner, holding it out to him so he could put it on.

Gabe pulled his shirt over his head as he walked over to him, then slid his arms into his jacket. Turning back to him, Gabe hauled Jasper in, giving him a hard kiss. “Stay out of trouble while I’m gone. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“I will.”

“And send me Elwood’s info so Em and I can pull him off this quest of yours before he gets himself killed.”

Jasper nodded. “I’ll do that right after you leave.”

“And try not to do any more stupid things.”

“I won’t.” He gave Gabe a quick kiss, then stepped back. “You’d better go. Detective Trewitt’s waiting for you.”

Gabe nodded, then rushed from the room. A couple of minutes later, his car roared to life.

Jasper sat on the edge of his bed listening to the fading sound of Gabe’s vehicle as it raced off into the night and wondered how long it would take him to realize Jasper hadn’t finished his promise to stop looking for his stalker.

---

Unable to sleep after Gabe left, Jasper decided to sketch out some ideas for a new jewelry collection that had been circling around in his brain for the last few days. He was just putting the finishing touches on a design for a red garnet and rose quartz bracelet when his phone started to ring. He set his pad of paper down, worry immediately rising at why someone was calling—please don’t let it have anything to do with Gabe—this time of night. Glancing at the screen, his worry ratcheted up when he saw that it was Elwood. Oh god. Something must have happened.

“Elwood, are you—”

“Jasper. I need you right now.”

Shit. He really was in trouble. Jasper jumped up and raced for his keys. “I’ll be right there. Try not to move.”

“Um, okay.”

“Do you need an ambulance?” he asked, throwing open the deadbolt on his door.

“Why would I need an ambulance?” Elwood asked, his voice filled with confusion.

“Because you’re hurt.”

“No, I’m not,” Elwood said, stopping Jasper as he was halfway out the door.

“You’re not?”

“No. I’m fine. Why would you think I was hurt?”

Jasper stepped back inside and closed the door, leaning against it as he waited for his racing heart to slow down. “Because you’re calling at three in the morning, Elwood. Why would you do that if it wasn’t an emergency?”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it was that late. Or early. I can never remember which one is right. Maybe it’s—”

“Elwood, why did you call me?” Jasper asked, wondering, not for the first time, why he’d let Spencer convince him that reaching out to him would be a good idea.

“I found something that might lead us to your hacker,” Elwood said, his voice rising with excitement.

Then again. “You did? Wow. That’s just...wow.”

“You sound surprised.”

“I am. I didn’t think you found something so quickly.” Or at all.

“I told you I knew what I was doing. And Jack’s methods worked just like I’d thought they would.”

Jasper shook his head, amazed that a fictional character had helped Elwood find his stalker. “That’s amazing, Elwood. Great job.”

“Well,” Elwood said, clearing his throat. “It might not be as great as you think. I mean, I think the information I found is about you. But then again, it might not be.”

“Oh,” Jasper said, disappointment heavy in his stomach. He should have known it was too good to be true.

“It’s just hard to know for sure without having all the details and I feel like you left a few things out.”

“Uh, nothing that was important.”

“If you say so,” Elwood said, sounding like he wasn’t so sure. “Anyway, I need you to come to my place right away so you can look at what I found. Things on the dark web—”

“You know how to get on the dark web?”

“Yes. Well, no. I didn’t. But I met a guy online who does. He hooked me up and showed me how to navigate around it. That’s when I found some stuff I think might be about you.”

Which was amazing. And kind of scary. The dark web wasn’t a place Jasper wanted to be. “What, uhm did you find?”

“Just some documents about you. At least, I think they are. There are a lot of code words I don’t understand that I thought you might be able to figure out. Which is why I need you to take a look at them.”

And Jasper wanted to. But it was three in the morning and Gabe could be back any time. “It’s kind of late, Elwood. Can it wait until morning?”

“Unfortunately, it can’t. I was told things on the dark web disappear fast, so you need to look at it right away before it vanishes.”

“I don’t know,” Jasper said, thinking of his almost promise to Gabe. “Can you take a screenshot of it and I’ll swing by to look at it tomorrow.”

“I tried, but the images were all scrambled. It turns out there are all sorts of protections in place to prevent that kind of thing.”

“Oh,” Jasper said, biting his lip as he tried to figure out what he should do. “I do want to come, it’s just—”

“Jasper, don’t you get it?” Elwood said, his voice rising again. “This might be what we were looking for. If what I found really is about you, we’ll be able to figure out who your hacker is. Tonight.”

“But—”

“Unless everything disappears while you’re deciding.”

Which tipped the scales from staying home to going. Jasper couldn’t take the chance of losing whatever Elwood had found. “I’m on my way right now.”

“Just hurry. I don’t know how long this stuff will be here.”

“I’ll get there as quickly as I can.”

“Okay.”

When Elwood hung up, Jasper put on his shoes—something he’d forgotten to do in his hurry to leave the first time—and raced out of the house, hoping that Gabe didn’t come back while he was gone.

As he was doing up his seatbelt, Jasper was hit by an overwhelming feeling of wrongness. Scrambling out of his vehicle, he clutched the amulet and moved a short distance away, then circled his car looking for anything that could have caused that feeling of danger that still had his heart pounding in his chest. After checking his tires—which were fine—he squatted at the front of the car and shined his phone’s flashlight underneath, but couldn’t see anything there. Then feeling slightly foolish, he went around to the side and got down on his stomach and shined the light onto the undercarriage of his car checking for signs of a bomb. Not that he had any idea what he was looking for. When he didn’t see anything that didn’t look like it belonged, Jasper got to his feet and stared around the darkened neighborhood, but everything was quiet.

Which didn’t reassure him like it should have. There was something unsettling in the air that had the hairs on the back of his neck standing up.

He gave a moment’s thought to going back inside and waiting until it was light out, but by then the information Elwood wanted to show him might be gone.

Jasper bit his lip as he tried to decide what he should do when the shard tingled against his chest. He snorted as he realized he was worrying over nothing. The shard would keep him safe. And he had promised Elwood he’d hurry.

Decision made, Jasper got back into his car. A few seconds later, he’d backed out onto the street—without his vehicle blowing up—then he was on his way.

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He was driving along Canyon Drive, almost to the infamous digital billboard, when Pink's 'So What' came on the radio. Turning it up, Jasper sang along at the top of his lungs, banging his head like a rockstar. Passing the billboard at high speed, Jasper flipped it off as he belted out the chorus, though slightly changed up.

*"I'm a crystal witch. I've got my witch moves. I'm gonna catch you tonight."*

Then he laughed and pressed harder on the gas.

Approaching Dead Man's Gulch, Jasper eased off the gas and tapped the brakes to slow down before he got to the curvy section that had sent more than one unwary driver off the road. As the first turn loomed ahead, Jasper realized he was still going too fast so he pressed down on the brakes again. When his foot met no resistance, Jasper began pumping the brake pedal quickly, letting out a sigh of relief when he felt pressure under his foot and his car began to slow.

Then he shouted when his vehicle lurched forward and shot him into the curves faster than he'd been going before.

"Fuuuuck." Jasper held tightly to the steering wheel as he navigated the first s-turn, tires squealing as he came safely through the curve. He stomped on his brakes again. And again. Then he entered the second set of curves. White knuckling the steering wheel, he steered left, then right, then back to the left, shouting again when his car started sliding sideways, holding onto the steering wheel for dear life as he somehow forced his vehicle back into the center of the road.

Holding his breath, his attention laser-focused on the road lit up only by his headlights, Jasper fought to keep his bucking vehicle in the center of the highway as he raced along the twisting highway, his entire body leaning to the left and then to the right as he drove through one curve after another.

By the time he'd made it safely through that series of bends, Jasper's eyes were blurry, his hands were sweaty, and his breathing was as fast as his frantically beating heart. Blinking to clear his eyes, Jasper wiped the sweat from his forehead with his forearm and got ready as he approached the final, and most treacherous, section of highway along Dead Man's Gulch.

Flexing his cramped fingers, Jasper adjusted his grip on the steering wheel and sucked in a breath as he entered the first turn. Tires squealed and gravel from the shoulder spit into the air when his back end slipped off the pavement. Jasper muscled his car back onto the road as he reached the second curve. Tires squealed again as the air was filled with a chorus of *fuck, fuck, oh god, fuck*, then he was safely through. But he barely had a chance to take a breath before he was in the final set of s-curves. Jasper wrenched the steering wheel to the left, holding on tight as the force against his car pulled him to the right, then quickly steered right as his car slid around the reverse curve, tires squealing as they fought for traction. Left, then right, then a final left, gravel spitting and tires squealing. Then he was through with only a gentle curve to navigate before the road ran straight for the next few miles.

Jasper eased his car out of the final turn and let out a half-hysterical laugh. Holy fuck. He'd made it. He'd actually made it through Dead Man's Gulch at race car speed without going over the edge. Spencer was going to die when he told him about it.

Jasper kept his foot off the gas, letting his car coast as he tried his brakes again. This time they worked. Pumping them gently to slow down, he was looking for a place to pull over when something slammed into the side of the car. He stepped on the gas and checked his side mirror for whatever had hit him, but there was nothing there. Jasper looked in the rearview mirror to see if he'd run over something, then shouted when something slammed into him again, knocking his car toward the edge of the highway. Jasper wrenched the steering wheel to the left, keeping his vehicle on the road through sheer force of will. Just as he got his car back under control, he was hit

again, the impact against the back end of his car sending him into a spin.

Losing the battle to keep his vehicle on the road, Jasper held tightly to the steering wheel, praying harder than he ever had before in his life as his car careened sideways, breaking through the guardrail and going over the edge into the deepest part of Dead Man's Gulch.



## Chapter Sixteen

Gabe typed out the last few words of his report on the body that had been discovered in the alley behind the grocery store, then scrolled back to the beginning to make sure he hadn't missed anything. Reaching the section where he'd described the condition of the body and its immediate surroundings, Gabe read through it slowly, then went back to the top and read through it again, something about it bothering him. After another read-through, he pulled up the notes app on his phone to check what he'd written there, muttering under his breath as he tried to figure out what the fuck he was missing. And he knew he was. Something about the way the body had been discovered reminded him of Lucas. But damned if he could figure out what it was. None of the details matched, but his gut was telling him the cases were connected.

Minimizing his report, he pulled up Emerson's to see if he'd noticed something Gabe had overlooked. When he couldn't find anything that didn't line up with his, he put both reports side by side on his screen and started going through them line by line. When that didn't yield anything new, he pulled up the responding officer's report on his second screen and started working through all three reports, jotting down notes on the pad in front of him.

Gabe was going through the responding officer's report for the third time when his gut started to jangle, telling him he was getting close. He squinted at the screens, his eyes bouncing from report to report, searching for the connection he fucking knew was there.

Gabe was briefly distracted from what he was doing by the fast click-clack of high-heeled shoes, something rarely heard in the squad room, but he easily tuned it out and jotted another note on his pad before looking back at the reports.

Less easily ignored was the way the room went quiet, all conversations stopping until the only sound that could be heard was the quick staccato strikes of heels on tiled floors. That were headed in his direction. Fuck. Gabe kept his head down and continued working, hoping whoever was

approaching was there to see Emerson, but the sinking sensation in his stomach told him those shoes were coming for him.

Almost impossible to ignore—though he did manage it—was the sound of someone clearing their throat next to his desk. Not acknowledging his unwanted guest, Gabe scanned his handwritten notes into his phone, then forwarded them to his computer. He attached the scan to his report, then sent a copy of everything to Emerson and the Captain, adding a note that he thought the case was connected to Lucas' attack but hadn't yet found the connection. That done, Gabe closed everything on his screens, knowing he wasn't going to get any more work done until he'd dealt with his visitor.

Barely a second later there was a huff of annoyance, followed by a briskly spoken, "Detective, I need to speak with you."

Instantly recognizing the voice, Gabe sighed. He'd been expecting this confrontation for the last week, though he hadn't anticipated it happening this early in the morning. Locking his computer, Gabe leaned back in his chair, finally giving his attention to the person standing there. "Something I can do for you, Mrs. Belmont?"

"Jasper's in trouble. I need your help."

Gabe was up from his desk before she'd finished speaking. Grabbing his jacket off the back of his chair, he slipped it on as he asked, "Where is he?"

"I don't know."

Freezing as he reached for his phone, Gabe turned to her. "You don't know?"

"Not precisely. But I know he needs our help."

"How?"

"Because I'm his mother."

"Riiight." Gabe picked up his phone, then leaned his hip against his desk and crossed his arms. "I'm going to need a bit more than that, Mrs. Belmont."

Irritation flickered in her eyes. “Detective, my son needs our help. We don’t have time for this.”

“We’re in the middle of a murder investigation. We can’t just drop everything and rush out of here because you have a *feeling*.”

“Detective—”

“Do you have any idea of the number of calls we get every month from parents worried about their children when they can’t get hold of them? Hundreds. Even if we only responded to the ones who were certain something had happened because of a *feeling*, we’d never have anyone left to solve any real crimes.”

“This is different. I know something is wrong, and I expect you to help me.”

Adrenaline spiked at the certainty in her voice. Glancing at his phone, Gabe saw it was eleven past four, which meant Jasper was safe at home in bed, right where Gabe had left him. Telling his heart it had no reason to panic, Gabe looked at Mariella and shook his head. “I’m sorry. Unless you have something more to go on than that you have a feeling, there’s nothing I can do.”

“My son is in danger, Detective,” Mariella said, fire sparking in her eyes as irritation gave way to anger. “I need your help to save him. Are you going to assist me or do I have to get your Captain to assign me someone who will?”

A muscle bunched in Gabe’s jaw as he stared at her. “Are you threatening me?”

“I am.” She glanced at her watch. “Time is passing, Detective. Are you going to help me or should I have a word with Jack?”

Gabe slid off his desk and moved in close so that he towered over her, grudgingly respecting the fact that not only did she not back down, she didn’t look the slightest bit intimidated as she glared up at him. “Blackmailing a police officer is against the law, Mrs. Belmont.”

Mariella arched an elegant eyebrow. “Is it?”

“It is, and you damn well know it.”

“Ask me if I care?” She held up her hand when Gabe went to speak. “I realize I’m out of line, but Jasper needs us, Detective. I’ll do whatever I have to to ensure your cooperation.” Her gaze slid toward the Captain’s office before returning to him, the threat implicit.

Gabe scowled down at her. Mariella glared back. He edged in closer. Mariella didn’t move an inch. Emerson started laughing behind him. Flipping off his partner behind his back, Gabe glanced over at the Captain’s office, then back to Mariella’s unblinking gaze. After another couple of minutes, he snorted and took a step back, knowing he wasn’t going to win this one. He had no doubts that Mariella wouldn’t hesitate to make good on her threat of complaining to the Captain if he didn’t cooperate with her.

And since Gabe was already on thin ice from getting involved with Jasper when he was part of an active investigation, the last thing he needed was to give the Captain another reason to chew out his ass.

Hearing Emerson coming up behind him, Gabe turned to him, ready to tell his partner that he could deal with Mrs. Belmont when Emerson leaned in and whispered in Gabe’s ear.

“You think maybe you shouldn’t antagonize your future mother-in-law like that.”

Gabe froze. His future what-the-fuck-in-law?

“Just a thought,” Emerson said, his eyes dancing with laughter. Bumping Gabe’s shoulder as he moved past him, he greeted Mariella. “It’s a pleasure to see you again, Mrs. Belmont. I’m sorry it’s under such difficult circumstances.”

“It’s lovely to see you as well, Detective Trewitt. Tell me. Is your department going to assist with finding my son?”

“Absolutely. Gabe and I are at your disposal.” He held out his elbow. “If you’ll allow me to escort you to our vehicle, we can begin looking for him right away.”

Hooking her arm through his, Mariella gave him a small smile. “Thank you, Detective. It’s refreshing to know that there’s at least one person who understands the urgency of the situation.”

“Well,” Emerson said, his smile wide as he glanced back at Gabe. “I did get the beauty, charm, and brains on the team.”

She let out a small laugh, then quickly sobered. “We really should get going. Jasper is going to need our help soon.”

Emerson nodded. “Our vehicle’s just out front.”

As the two of them walked off, Gabe stared after his possible future mother-in-law—correction, his possible future *blackmailing* mother-in-law—and his ass-kissing partner who was going to get shot if he didn’t stop fucking with Gabe.

As if hearing his thoughts, Emerson looked back at him and winked.

Fucker.

“Are you coming, Detective?” Mariella called out over her shoulder. “Jasper will likely want to see you when we find him.”

Gabe scowled at their backs as he started after them. Jasper had better fucking be at home or Gabe was going to take out his frustrations on his ass. Hell, he was probably going to do that even if he was at home.

Knowing that Jasper would be a willing victim to whatever he wanted improved Gabe’s mood instantly. His steps quickened. The sooner they finished with this wild goose chase, the sooner Gabe could get back to Jasper and show him what else his handcuffs were good for.

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Gabe frowned as they drove further into Dead Man’s Gulch. What the hell were they doing here? He looked over at Emerson and saw a matching frown on his face.

Emerson's eyes flicked to his before he looked in the rear-view mirror. "Are you sure he's this way, Mrs. Belmont?"

"Yes. I can feel that he's close."

Before Gabe could ask how, the car's headlights picked up the black streaks on the pavement. "Em, do you see—"

"I see them."

"What is it, Detectives?" Mariella asked as she leaned forward between the seats. She gasped when the next set of black streaks appeared. "Those are from Jasper's vehicle."

"How do you know that? They could be anyone's," Gabe said as he looked back at her, his heart needing her to agree. But Mariella wasn't playing along.

"They're Jasper's."

"No," Gabe said, shaking his head at her. "They can't be." Please, God, don't let them be Jasper's.

"They are," Mariella said, her gaze as unwavering as her words.

Gabe's stomach clenched at the certainty in her voice. "Em," he whispered, not looking away from her, more terrified than he'd ever been in his life, "if Jasper went over the side..." He couldn't finish knowing that if Jasper had gone off the highway, there was no way he would have survived. Not along Dead Man's Gulch.

"I know," Emerson said quietly, his hand landing on Gabe's arm.

"He's not dead, Detective. Not yet anyway. But we need to hurry."

Too scared to believe but wanting to desperately, Gabe turned around in his seat. His eyes stayed locked on the road as Emerson drove along the twisting highway, his heart breaking a little more with every black streak they drove past.

Gabe saw the broken guardrail the same time as Mariella. Her hand shot between the front seats as she shouted, "There.

He went over there.”

Emerson slammed on the brakes, sending the car fishtailing. Once he got it stopped, Emerson pulled over to the side of the road near the broken guardrail.

Gabe was out of the car before Emerson had put it in park, emergency flashlight in hand as he moved past the broken barrier, getting as close to the crumbling edge as he could. He shined the light over the side and shouted in disbelief when he saw Jasper’s car wedged between two giant rocks that jutted from the side of the ravine about sixty feet below.

Emerson skidded to a stop next to him, his light joining Gabe’s. “Holy shit. He’s right there. How’s that possible?”

Gabe shook his head, not having an answer.

“The odds of him going over in this exact spot have to be astronomical,” Emerson said, shining his flashlight to the left and the right.

“Or a miracle,” Gabe whispered, unable to take his eyes off the vehicle that held what might be his only chance for happiness, something he hadn’t realized until almost losing it.

“It was the shard,” Mariella said as she joined them. “It looks after its own. Isn’t that right, Detective?” she asked, glancing at Emerson.

“Does it?” Emerson asked, his face blank as he looked at her. “I wouldn’t know.”

She studied him for a long moment, saying nothing, then nodded. “Something to look into, perhaps.”

The exchange was strange enough that Gabe looked up, glancing back and forth between them. “Is there something I should know?”

“No,” Emerson said. Then he looked at Gabe and frowned. “Actually, there is. But it’ll have to keep for another time. Right now we need to work on getting Jasper out of that car before gravity takes over.”

No sooner had he finished speaking than they heard the ominous sound of groaning metal. Gabe’s heart jumped into

his throat when Jasper's car dropped a few inches. There was a loud crack. Then another. The glass in the rear window shattered. Metal screeched as the car dropped another few inches.

"Fuck!" A blast of panic-fueled adrenaline rushed through Gabe as he reached for it. Emerson's hand fisted the back of his jacket, yanking him back. When he let go, Gabe immediately moved back to the edge and looked down. "We need to get him out of there, Em." Gabe looked away from the car to the deserted dark highway, to his partner, then back to Jasper's car, the panicked chaos in his mind making it hard to think. "We have to. Now. Before I lose him." He looked at Emerson again. "But I don't know how."

"It's okay, partner. I do," Emerson said as he pulled Gabe back from the edge again. "But I want you to stand here. Okay?"

When Gabe nodded, Emerson took Gabe's phone from his pocket and handed it to him.

"I'm going to call Cliff's Garage and tell him we need his winch truck. You call the fire department. Tell them we need someone trained in rappelling."

"I think Tank and Jefferson took a course," Gabe mumbled as he pulled up the number for Starfall Grove's main fire station.

"I'd better call Shaw and let him know we found Jasper," Mariella said, pulling out a tiny phone from her skirt like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

Gabe just stared at it, wondering where she could possibly have hidden it in the tight skirt she was wearing. Then wondered why he was worrying about something so stupid when the man he lo—liked might be moments away from falling to his death. Then his call went through. After talking to the Fire Chief, who said they'd be right there with their ladder truck, Gabe called the Captain to let him know what was going on.

And tried not to think about the word he'd almost used.



It took four heart-stopping hours before they managed to pull Jasper from the car and get him to the top of the ravine.

They were unhooking him from the safety harness so the paramedics could check him over when there was a shriek of metal stressed beyond the point of holding itself together, followed by a loud crack that shook the ground under their feet when the car broke free. A few seconds later there was the sound of a distant explosion.

Gabe stared at the fiery mass at the bottom of the ravine hundreds of feet below. Then reaction set in. He stumbled back from the edge, falling to the ground when his legs gave out on him, his entire body shaking from knowing how close they'd come to losing Jasper. If they'd taken even five more minutes to get there...

If Mariella hadn't been so determined to make Gabe listen to her...

If Emerson hadn't taken over when Gabe had gotten stubborn...

If the rescue teams hadn't arrived as quickly as they had...

If the fire department hadn't had recent training in rappelling...

If Cliff's winch hadn't been strong enough to hold the car as long as it had...

If any of that hadn't happened...Jasper would have died.

Gabe raised trembling hands to his face, not sure how he would have lived in a world without Jasper. A world without his laughter and joy. Without his snarky sunshine. Without his daring and willingness to challenge Gabe. Without his optimistic belief in his own invincibility, or his determination to see only the good in people, something that drove Gabe crazy but made him like him even more.

Overwhelmed by the emotions running through him, Gabe just sat on the ground, watching numbly as the paramedics

loaded Jasper onto a stretcher and began checking him over, knowing he should go over but for some reason, he couldn't make himself move.

"You really care for him, don't you, Detective?" Mariella as she sat on the ground next to him.

Gabe looked over at her. "What?"

"My son. You love him."

Gabe just stared at her. Love Jasper? No. He liked Jasper well enough and couldn't imagine not being with him, but that didn't mean he loved him. Anyone would like Jasper and the joy and energy he brought to everything he did. Even when Gabe had arrested Jasper, thinking he hated him, he still hadn't been able to resist him. And then, when Gabe had finally learned what it was like to be inside of him, it had been like coming home. He'd never felt more at peace, more balanced in his life. He could easily imagine spending forever with Jasper. But love? No. Gabe wasn't ever doing love again. He was too fucking scarred, too broken by what Robbie had done to him to be willing to risk his heart with anyone a second time. Not even Jasper.

He shook his head. "No. I don't love him." Then winced, pressing a hand to his chest when he felt a sharp pain.

Mariella studied him, then murmured, "I think maybe you do."

"No, I don't. We're just—"

Mariella raised her hand, cutting him off. "It's fine Detective, I know how you feel about my boy. And when you're ready, you'll know it too."

"No. Seriously," Gabe said, needing her to understand. "I don't want you to get your hopes up thinking Jasper and I are some epic love story, because we're not."

"One day you might very well be."

"We won't," Gabe said, then pressed harder on his chest when he felt another stab of pain, stronger this time. "I'm sorry, but we won't ever be that."

Gabe found it suddenly hard to catch his breath.

Mariella's smile was as gentle as the hand she rested on his arm, her touch unlocking his lungs and letting him breathe again. "It's alright, Detective. If you say you don't love my son, I believe you."

Which should have made him feel better, but for some reason, it didn't.

"But perhaps you could do me one favor and look out for him," Mariella said. "Better than you have been."

Gabe sighed. "I'm trying. Believe me. But he doesn't make it easy."

"No. I don't imagine he does."

"He's just so damned stubborn and won't listen to anything I say."

Mariella laughed, getting to her feet with a grace that shouldn't have been possible in that tight skirt. "He gets that from me, I'm afraid."

Gabe had no trouble believing that.

"Stubborn we may be, Detective, but you'll never find anyone more loyal than a Belmont. Especially when we give our heart to someone," she said, giving him a look that had his heart thundering in his chest.

Unable to hold her gaze, Gabe looked away and pushed himself off the ground, muttering, "I'd be happy if he'd just do what I tell him."

Mariella laughed. "I wish you luck with that, Detective." Then she glanced over to the ambulance. "It looks like they're ready to take him away. Come," she said, holding out her arm. "I'm sure Jasper would like a chance to say goodbye before we go."

Gabe walked with her over to Jasper but managed to only get a few hurried words with him before he was rudely shoved out of the ambulance by a paramedic he didn't recognize—obviously a new guy who'd learn better—who closed the doors in his face when Gabe tried to speak to Jasper again.

As he watched the ambulance drive away, Gabe promised himself this would be the last time. Once he and Emerson had finished processing the accident site and he'd had a chance to check on Jasper himself to make sure he was all right, Gabe was going to pull on every resource he'd accumulated over his years on the force and find the asshole who'd almost killed him. And when he did, he was going to end them.

Permanently.

## Chapter Seventeen

Jasper groaned and pushed his mother's hand away from his head. "Mom. Stop. I'm fine. You heard what the doctor said. There's nothing wrong with me except for some bruising from the seatbelt and where I hit my head on the window."

"I'd still like to check for myself that he didn't miss anything."

When he saw the slight tremble in her hand as she reached for him again, Jasper realized how worried she was. He caught her hand and placed it over his heart. "Check as long as you like, Mom."

Taking him at his word, his mother gave him a thorough inspection, which for some reason included his ears. When she was done, she smiled and brushed the hair back from his face. "It would seem your doctor was correct. Except for some bruising, you appear to be fine."

And even though she sounded composed, Jasper could see the tension around her eyes. "You know I was never in any real danger."

"I know. But sometimes logic doesn't have anything to do with the way a mother feels when her only son almost dies by driving off a cliff."

"I was pushed."

"I'm aware of that." She held his gaze as a tear leaked slowly from her eye.

Shit. Jasper grabbed onto her, pulling her into a tight hug. "I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to scare you."

"I know you didn't. I'm sorry for getting emotional on you."

"It's fine," Jasper said, holding her tighter.

After a moment, she leaned back and brushed the wetness from her eyes, letting out a small laugh. "I'm being silly. I know you weren't in any real danger. But it was rather terrifying seeing your car halfway down the ravine, knowing

the only thing keeping you from falling was this.” She rested her fingers on the shard hanging around his neck.

Jasper’s hand came up and covered hers. He had a pretty good idea of how scary it had been for her after seeing how wild Gabe’s eyes had been during their hurried conversation in the back of the ambulance. “I’m lucky you gave it to me. I’m not sure the shard could have saved me if I hadn’t actually been wearing it.”

“I don’t know that it could have.” Shadows filled her eyes.

“Oh, Mom,” Jasper said, pulling her back into his arms. As he breathed in her familiar and comforting scent, he realized she wasn’t the only one who’d needed a hug. Going over the edge of the cliff had been the most frightening thing he’d ever experienced. And even though he’d known the shard would do its best to save him, that hadn’t made it any less terrifying when he’d seen the ground rushing toward him. Being held by his mother was helping to settle the shakes he’d been holding in. But not all the way. There was another set of arms he needed even more.

Pulling back, Jasper tucked a strand of hair that had come loose from her chignon behind her ear. Another sign of how worried she’d been. “I love you, Mom.”

“And I love you,” she said, cupping his face and pressing a kiss to his forehead. “Try not to worry me like that again.”

“I’ll try,” Jasper said, closing his eyes and leaning into her palm. “Can I go home now?”

She laughed, sounding more like herself. “I’m surprised you lasted this long.”

Jasper was too. He didn’t do well in hospitals.

“I’ll go find the doctor to sign your discharge papers.” Running her hand down his face, she tapped him on the nose. “Go easy on your detective. You gave him quite a scare tonight.” Then she was gone.

Jasper stared after her. Did she mean...was Gabe here? Then he blinked, sure he was seeing things when Gabe

appeared in the doorway.

“Gabe,” he whispered, his throat suddenly tight.

“Shit.” Gabe rushed over and pulled him against his body, wrapping Jasper up so tight he could barely breathe. “I’ve got you. Let it out.”

And feeling truly safe for the first time in hours, Jasper let himself go, giving in to the emotions he’d been holding back, trusting in Gabe to hold him together.

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“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cry all over you,” Jasper said, looking down at his hands, a bit embarrassed at the way he’d fallen apart.

“It’s fine. And completely natural.”

“Sure.”

“Look at me.”

Jasper shook his head.

Fingers under his chin tilted his head back until he could see Gabe, whose eyes held no judgment, only understanding. “It is natural. And healing. When we experience a great shock, sometimes everything gets all bottled up inside. We feel like we’ve got it all under control, that we’re fine, then suddenly, like that,” he snapped his fingers, “it explodes and needs a way out. Tears are one of the ways it releases.”

“I still feel stupid for crying,” Jasper said, thinking Gabe probably never cried like a baby. “It’s not like I didn’t know I’d be okay.”

“What are you talking about? You were forced off a fucking cliff. Of course you wouldn’t be okay. It’s a miracle you’re even alive.”

“Not really. I knew the shard would keep me safe.”  
Mostly.

Gabe glanced at his pendant and frowned. “You and your mother put too much faith in that piece of rock. I’d rather you just stopped taking stupid chances with your safety.”

“I wasn’t taking a stupid chance,” Jasper said. “I was just driving.”

“In the middle of the night when you should have been asleep in bed. What the hell were you doing driving through Dead Man’s Gulch anyway?”

“Elwood called.”

Instant scowl. “Why was he calling you in the middle of the night?”

“He said he found something I had to see.”

“And it couldn’t have fucking waited until morning?”

Jasper shook his head. “It was something on the dark web. Elwood said it could disappear at any time and that I needed to come right away.”

“So you did,” Gabe said, sighing loudly. “Without giving any thought to the danger you were putting yourself in.”

“I was just driving there and back. I should have been fine.”

“But you weren’t. Whoever’s working against you has stepped up their game. Which means you won’t be safe until we catch them.”

“I’ll be fine as long as I’m wearing this,” Jasper said, holding up the shard.

“You can’t trust your life to a fucking piece of rock.”

“I can. The shard—”

“Do you have any idea of what you put me through tonight?” Gabe said, grabbing him by the arms. “I thought you were going to...I thought...you almost...” He stopped, a muscle in his jaw flexing, then ground out, “You almost died.”

“I’m sorry.”



“You don’t get to die on me. I don’t know how...if you’re gone...you don’t get to leave me. You hear me? You don’t.”

Jasper scrambled to his knees and threw his arms around Gabe’s neck. “I won’t. I promise I’ll never leave you. You’re stuck with me forever.”

Gabe buried his face in Jasper’s neck. “I know that should terrify me, but somehow it doesn’t.”

Jasper sighed when Gabe pulled him closer. Both of them held each other tight, not saying anything else until Jasper’s mother returned with his discharge papers.



“So,” his mother said as she pushed his wheelchair down the hall, the only way they’d let him leave. “Your detective has it quite bad for you.”

He looked back over his shoulder, smiling that someone other than himself thought so. “You think?”

“I know. But he’s not ready to admit it yet.”

“No. I don’t think Gabe’s used to dealing with those kinds of emotions. I think they scare him.”

“Not as much as almost losing you did.”

“I know.”

“You should try not to worry him so much.”

“I don’t mean to. It’s just—”

“You don’t see threats everywhere the way he does.”

“No.”

“I didn’t raise you to be overly suspicious and your belief in the essential goodness of people is one of your greatest strengths. However, until the police catch whoever’s after you, it might be in your best interests to be more wary of those around you.” His mother pushed his chair to the side, then set the brake and came around and stood in front of him. Taking

his hands in hers, she squeezed his fingers. “I don’t ask this lightly since I know it goes against everything I taught you, but with how things are going...”

“It’s okay, mom.” Jasper squeezed her fingers back. “I get it. Gabe said pretty much the same thing. Whoever we’re dealing with isn’t playing by the rules. And even if I’ll be okay, whoever’s with me might be seriously hurt.”

She nodded. “True. Though the shard should protect you both.”

“But just in case, I’ll try to be more careful.”

“Which relieves my heart.” She squeezed his hand again and smiled at him. “And will make your detective happy.”

More than she knew.

As they were passing the nurses’ station, Jasper remembered that Lucas was in the hospital. “Wait,” he said, putting his hands on the wheels to stop them from turning. “I need to find out what room Lucas is in. I want to check on him.”

“Whyever would you wish to do that?” his mother asked with a sniff, obviously not having forgiven him for betraying Jasper. “The man is a user and a liar. He established a relationship with you under false pretenses. He—”

“Was hurt because of me, Mom. He may be an ass, but I still want to see how he’s doing.”

She sighed. “Of course you do.”

After wheeling him over to the desk so he could find out what room Lucas was in, she pushed him through the hospital and got him up to the third floor, then parked his wheelchair outside Lucas’ room. But she refused to go in, saying she’d wait for him to be done with his foolishness.

Shaking his head at her stubbornness—she was usually more forgiving, but not when it came to him—Jasper rolled himself through the doorway and over to Lucas’ hospital bed, sucking in a breath of horror at his first sight of his ex-

boyfriend. Moving closer, Jasper's heart squeezed when he saw how frail Lucas was, which was so far from how he normally looked that Jasper couldn't reconcile what his eyes were telling him. The Lucas he knew was fit and muscular—mostly from being naturally athletic, but he was also disciplined when it came to working out and eating well—and glowed with health. But this Lucas looked like he'd been wasting away in the hospital bed for years, not a matter of days.

Whatever the tainted stone had done to him wasn't going to be fixed by medical means or regular healing magic, which were barely keeping him alive. But if Jasper added his magic to the mix, his crystals might just be able to save him.

Jasper untied the wrap from around his wrist and ran his fingertips over the healing and protective crystals woven in it to wake them, then reached for Lucas' arm. Just before his hand made contact he stopped, realizing these crystals weren't going to be enough to heal him. But he had one that would.

He quickly took the wrap apart, separating the leather strips from the crystals, which he set aside, then dug into his pocket and pulled out the Red Jasper stone that had been created when he'd destroyed the hex. Holding its warmth in his hand, Jasper rubbed his thumb over it, now understanding why he'd felt compelled to keep it with him. This special stone, transformed through fire and magic into something greater than it had been, was the only thing that was going to be able to help Lucas. It was the yang to the corrupted Red Jasper stone and would bring everything back in balance.

Laying the strips of leather cord across his lap, Jasper began braiding them together. When he reached the midway point, he added the Red Jasper, knotting the leather around it to secure it in place, then finished braiding the rest of the strap. When he was done, Jasper tied it around Lucas' wrist.

The Red Jasper pulsed, alive with its own power, the flame inside of it growing brighter when Jasper rested his fingers on it and let a trickle of his power flow into the stone to give it a boost. He knew Lucas would need all the help he

could give him to fully recover from the dark magic that had taken him down.

After checking the energies swirling around Lucas, which already felt improved, Jasper collected the crystals scattered on the blanket and shoved them in his pocket.

“Hey, you. What are you doing in here?”

Jasper looked over at the nurse who was standing just inside the doorway, eyeing him suspiciously. “I’m sorry. I just wanted to see my friend before I left.”

“Nobody’s supposed to be in here. How did you get past the guard?”

Guard? “There was nobody there when I came in.”

Scowling at the doorway, the nurse muttered under his breath before turning back to Jasper. “You’re going to have to leave. This is a restricted room.”

“Okay,” Jasper said, wheeling back from the bed. “I’m really sorry. I didn’t realize the room was off limits.”

The nurse came over to the bed, frowning when he saw Lucas’ arm. He pointed to the wrap. “What is this?”

“That’s a healing stone,” Jasper said, though it was a lot more than that. “I thought it would help him.”

“You can’t just come in here and start using unapproved magic on my patient.”

“I know I should probably have asked first. But I really think this is the only thing that’s going to help him,” Jasper said. “I can already tell that it’s working.”

“I’ll just see about that.” Keeping one eye on him, the nurse studied the stone tied to Lucas’ wrist. Jasper felt a slight tingle in the air, then the nurse looked over at Jasper. “What kind of stone is this? I don’t recognize it.”

“It’s a Red Jasper.”

“It feels alive.”

“It kind of is, in a way.”

“Hmm.” The nurse studied the monitors over Lucas’ bed and nodded. “His vitals are improving. And some of the heaviness that’s been lingering around him feels lighter.” He pulled out a chart from the foot of Lucas’ bed and jotted down some notes, then put it back. Turning to Jasper, he said, “I’ll make an exception and let you stay for a bit because whatever you’re doing is helping him. But I can only give you five minutes. Then you’ll have to leave.”

“I understand.”

“I’ll let the guard know you have my permission to stay.”

“Thank you.” Jasper waited until the nurse left the room, then rolled his wheelchair to the top of the bed. Crossing his arms on the bed rail, he rested his chin on them. “I’m sorry you got hurt, Lucas. I’m so sorry that someone harmed you to get to me. We’re trying to find them but, well, it’s not going well. They seem to have a way to avoid detection. It’s like they’re invisible since nobody has seen them even with everything they’ve done. Except maybe for you. I think you might be the only one who knows who they are...oh.”

Jasper looked toward the doorway, suddenly understanding why there was a guard outside, even if they were doing a crappy job of keeping people out of Lucas’ room. Something he had a sneaky suspicion the nurse would be addressing with the guard’s supervisor. He turned back and let out a little shriek when he saw Lucas looking at him.

“Holy shit. You almost gave me a heart attack.” Then it hit him. “Oh my god, you’re awake. You’re really awake.” He looked toward the door, wondering if he should go get the nurse, when Lucas made a gasping sound, drawing his attention back to him.

Jasper leaned closer. “Are you okay? Are you in any pain?”

Lucas tried to say something, but it was too garbled for Jasper to understand.

“Maybe you shouldn’t try to talk yet.”

But Lucas' mouth opened again. This time Jasper could almost make out what he said, though his words were mostly air. "Ah...woo..."

"Ahwoo? What's that?"

"Ah...woo...pu...puh...leez."

Jasper squinted and leaned closer, his ear almost touching Lucas' lips.

"El...woo."

Jasper sat back. "Did you say Elwood?"

"El...woo. Puh...leez." Lucas' eyes closed.

"What about Elwood? Do you want to see him?"

Lucas' eyelids fluttered open. "Puh...leez."

That was definitely a please. "Okay," Jasper said, gently stroking his arm. "I'll let him know you want to see him."

"Elwoo...puh...leez. Elwoo..."

"Wow. You really want him bad, huh?"

"Elwoo..."

"Yeah, I got it, Lucas. I'll make sure he comes to see you."

The nurse came running in, took one look at Lucas, then rushed over to the bed and started looking at the screens. Pressing a couple of buttons, he turned to Jasper. "You have to leave now."

Jasper nodded and rested his hand on Lucas' arm. "I'll come see you again when you're better."

"Elwoo...puh...leez."

"He'll be here soon, Lucas. I promise." Jasper would make sure of it.

"Elwoo..." Then Lucas' eyes closed. And stayed closed.

Jasper sent another pulse of magic through the stone on Lucas' wrist, then quietly wheeled himself out of the room, noting the guard was back on duty.

He stopped by the nurses' station and talked to them for a few minutes, then went searching for his mother, who was apparently terrorizing the doctors on the fourth floor. As he wheeled himself down the hallways, he couldn't help but wonder if Elwood wasn't part of the reason he and Lucas hadn't worked out—well, that and the whole Lucas using him on orders from his father thing—because it was clear Lucas cared for Elwood a lot. More than he'd ever cared for Jasper.

Which didn't sting the way it would have only a few weeks back, before Gabe owned a huge piece of his heart.

## Chapter Eighteen

Jasper unbuckled his seatbelt, then leaned over and hugged his mother. “Thanks for the ride home.”

“No need to thank me. I was more than happy to drive you. Besides,” she said, tugging on his hair, “it gave us some time alone to talk about your detective.”

“You mean to grill me about my detective,” Jasper said with a laugh as he pulled back.

“Grilling your child on their new love interest is one of the joys of being a mother.” Her laughter was like tinkling drops of sunshine. Tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear, she said, “Your father’s on his way home.”

Jasper groaned. “Didn’t you tell him I was fine?”

“I did. But despite my assurances, he wanted to see for himself that you were okay.”

“But his work.”

“Is only work. His clients will understand or he’ll get new clients.”

“But I know how much he’d been looking forward to meeting Mr. Ramirez’s team.”

“You’re his son. There is no contest.”

Jasper nodded. The one thing he’d never been in doubt of was how much his parents loved him. “When will he be back?”

“His flight gets in tomorrow at midnight. You can expect to see us that morning.”

“Uhm, Gabe might be here.” At least, Jasper sure hoped he would be.

“Tell him to put on the coffee. We should be here by nine.”

“Alright.” He hugged her again. “I’m glad you were with me today.”



“Your father and I will always be there for you.” She pressed a kiss to his forehead. “As will your friends. You’d better go. Spencer is waiting for you.”

Jasper looked over and grinned when he saw Spencer on his porch, telltale pink pastry box in his hands. The big one. Jasper gave his mother a quick kiss. “Love you, Mom. Drive safe.”

“You as well.” A small pause. “Though I suppose you’ll have to replace your vehicle first.”

Jasper groaned as he opened the car door. “Don’t remind me. The insurance claim is going to be a nightmare.”

“Nonsense. If Steve gives you any trouble, tell him to call me.”

Jasper paused halfway out of the car and looked back at her. “You don’t have to look after all my problems. I can take care of myself.”

“I know that, dear. But have him call me all the same.”

“Sure,” Jasper said, knowing his mom would be on the phone with Steve the minute she got home, smoothing the way for him. Which, in this case, he was grateful for. He closed the door and stood back, watching as his mother backed out of his driveway, then waved her off before loping up the stairs to greet Spencer. “Shouldn’t you be at the bakery?”

“Katie’s covering for me so I could check up on you to make sure you hadn’t broken your head after your daredevil stunt.”

“Gotcha,” Jasper said, unlocking his front door. Grabbing the large pink box from Spencer, he kicked off his shoes in the entryway, then carried the box to the kitchen and set it on the counter. Flipping open the lid, Jasper’s stomach growled when he saw the assortment of donuts, cinnamon buns, and fudge-covered brownies inside. Grabbing a brownie, Jasper stuffed it into his mouth, groaning when the rich chocolatey square all but melted on his tongue. Once he’d finished it, Jasper picked out a donut then went to the cupboard and pulled down two glasses, filling them both with milk. Handing one to Spencer,

he bit off half of the donut, chewing fast, then shoved the rest of it in his mouth as he reached for another brownie.

“Hungry?” Spencer asked with a laugh.

“Starving,” Jasper said, drinking down half his milk, then filling his glass up again.

“I thought you might be. But you might want to slow down or you’re going to make yourself sick.”

Jasper bit into his brownie, hurriedly chewing and swallowing, before saying, “I can’t help it. You brought all my favorites.”

“Least I could do when my best friend drives off a cliff,” Spencer said, picking out a donut, then shutting the lid and putting the box on top of the refrigerator.

Jasper stopped with his brownie halfway to his mouth when the memory flashed into his mind. “God, I hope I never experience anything like that again.”

Spencer looked at him in concern. “Can you tell me what happened? Or will that be too traumatic for you?”

“No, I’d like to talk to you about it. Maybe you can make sense of what happened because I sure as hell can’t.”

“Okay.” Spencer sat on one of the stools at the kitchen island, then dunked his donut in his milk. Nodding his head at Jasper, he said, “You can start by telling me where you took off to in the middle of the night.”

“I was going to Elwood’s,” Jasper said, taking a seat across from him.

“Why?”

“He found some information on the dark web he wanted to show me.”

Spencer’s eyebrow shot up. “Elwood knows how to get on the dark web?”

“That’s what I said. I guess he found a guy who helped him get on there.”

Spencer frowned. "I thought the dark web was this secret place that you needed some special software or something to access. Why would someone just help him get onto it?"

Jasper shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe the guy owed him or something."

"More likely Elwood paid him." Spencer drank the rest of his milk, then pushed his glass aside. "Okay, so he was on the dark web and found something. What was it?"

Jasper shook his head. "I don't know. Elwood wouldn't tell me. Said I needed to look at it myself. He also warned me that information on the dark web can disappear without warning, so he wanted me to get to his place as quickly as possible."

"Which is why you tore out of here in the middle of the night."

Jasper nodded.

Spencer crossed his arms on the island. "And the accident? How did that happen?"

"It was the weirdest thing. I was having a great drive. The moon was bright, there was no traffic on the road, I had the music cranked—"

"Gaga?"

Jasper shook his head. "Pink."

"Solid choice," Spencer said, nodding. "I assume with all that going on you were speeding?"

"A bit. But I slowed down when I got to that bad stretch of road just before Dead Man's Gulch. At least, I tried to. But my brakes didn't work."

Spencer frowned. "Didn't you just have your car in the shop?"

Jasper nodded. "Cliff gave it a complete inspection and tune-up."

"Then why weren't your brakes working?" Spencer's eyes went wide. "Is there any chance...do you think Cliff could

have sabotaged your car?"

Jasper froze. Cliff? It seemed unlikely. He'd known Cliff since he was a kid and had always taken his vehicles to him. So had his parents. But Gabe had said he couldn't trust anybody. Not even people he'd known his whole life. Except...

"It wasn't just the faulty brakes. I'd made it through the twisty section and was coasting to a stop when something slammed into my car and forced me off the road."

"What the hell hit you?"

"Nothing," Jasper said, grabbing onto his friend's arm. "There was nothing there, Spencer."

"Like nothing, nothing?"

"Nothing. So either I somehow missed seeing whatever ran into me."

"Which is unlikely."

"Or there was nothing to see."

"Meaning someone used some powerful magic to force you off the road."

Jasper nodded. "Yeah."

"Fuck." Spencer got up and grabbed the pastry box off of the refrigerator.

*Twenty minutes later...*

Jasper groaned and held onto his stomach. "Oh, god, I think I might have eaten too many donuts."

"You think? You almost finished off the entire box."

"I can't help it. Everything was so good."

Spencer snorted. "I know you love my baking, but maybe you should leave the rest until tomorrow. You don't want to send yourself into a sugar coma."

Coma? Jasper lurched forward in his seat. “Shit. I was supposed to call Elwood. I completely forgot.” He dug his phone out of his pocket.

“What do you need to talk to Elwood for?”

“Lucas was asking for him,” Jasper said as he dialed. “I think they’re dating.”

“Lucas and Elwood? For real?”

Jasper nodded, then put his phone on speaker when his call connected.

“Jasper?” Elwood said, sounding surprised. “How did you...what happened to you last night? I thought you were coming over.”

“I had a bit of an acc—”

“I wish you’d have come here like you said you were going to. The information I wanted to show you is gone. It disappeared about two hours ago.”

“Crap. Is there any way it can be traced back to whoever put it there?”

“I’ve been trying to recover anything, but so far, no luck. Not even Jack’s techniques worked.”

Spencer rolled his eyes. He’d thought the whole Jack Riddlestone thing was beyond ridiculous.

Shaking his head at his friend, Jasper asked, “So we’ve got no way of knowing who it was then?”

“No. Maybe if you’d come here when I asked, you could have given me more information to work with, but it’s too late now.”

“I’m really sorry, Elwood. I tried to get there, but I, uh, got in a bit of an accident.”

“Oh, shit. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Just a few bruises. I actually called because I have some good news for you”

“Oh?”

“I saw Lucas while I was at the hospital and he wants—”

“Why was Lucas in the hospital? Is he sick or something?”

“No,” Jasper said slowly. How did Elwood not know?  
“He’s in a coma.”

“What? Since when? What happened to him?”

“He was attacked about a week ago.”

“Oh my god,” Elwood said. “Is he...is he going to be okay?”

“I think so. Lucas woke up when I was there. It was just for a bit, but it looks promising.”

“Okay, good. That’s good. Thanks for letting me know,” Elwood said, a strange tightness in his voice.

Jasper frowned. “Are you okay?”

“Sure,” Elwood said, the tightness still there. “Why do you ask?”

“You sound a bit strange.”

“It must be the shock. I had no idea Lucas was injured.”

And why was that? Jasper thought, looking at Spencer, who was frowning at Jasper’s phone. “Uhm, Elwood, I don’t mean to be rude, and you can tell me it’s none of my business if you want, but you and Lucas...you’re together, right?”

There was a pause, long enough for Jasper to think he’d gotten that wrong, then Elwood said, “We are. Sorry for not saying anything the other day. I thought it would be too awkward telling you I was seeing your ex-boyfriend so I decided it was probably best if I said nothing.”

“It’s fine. I get why you didn’t want to tell me.”

“So why are you asking if we’re together? Were you hoping to get back with him?”

“God, no. Nothing like that. It’s just...Lucas has been in the hospital for almost a week. How come you didn’t know? Weren’t you worried when you didn’t hear from him?”

“To be honest, I’ve been so busy lately I didn’t even realize how long it’d been since I last talked to him. Father’s got me working on a couple of projects that are taking up all my time. And then you asked me to look into your hacker problem, so…”

“Oh, god. I’m so sorry. If I’d known your workload was that full, I wouldn’t have asked for help.”

“It’s fine. Searching for your hacker was the best part. I had so much fun digging through all those layers of information searching for traces of them.”

Jasper made a face. That didn’t sound like fun to him. “I’m glad it wasn’t too much of a burden for you. But maybe you shouldn’t keep looking.”

“Why not?” Elwood asked, sounding almost hurt. “Is it because of the dark web thing? That’s not my fault. I told you the information might disappear.”

“No, it’s not that. I just didn’t realize how much I was asking of you.” Including the danger he might have put Elwood in.

“It’s fine.”

“No, it’s really not. And I appreciate all of the time you’ve put in, but you don’t need to do any more. You’ve done enough.”

“But—”

“You should spend that time with Lucas instead. He was asking for you.”

There was a pause, then, “He was?”

“Yeah. Quite a few times actually. He wouldn’t settle down until I promised to make sure you came to see him. I know you’re busy, but is there any chance you could go visit with him today?”

“Uhm, sure. I can do that.”

“Great. Just don’t be alarmed if he’s not awake when you get there. The nurses said he’ll be drifting in and out of

consciousness for the next few days before he fully comes out of his coma.”

“Maybe it would be better if I waited until then to visit.”

“No. You should go now. The nurses told me that coma patients are a lot more aware of what’s going on around them than we realize. I’m sure just you being there will make Lucas feel better.”

“Well, we want to do what’s best for Lucas, don’t we?” There was the sound of a drawer opening and closing, then a chair rolling back. “I’ll head over right away.”

“Excellent. Just make sure to check in with the head nurse when you get there so she can get you past the guard.”

There was a loud crash.

Jasper’s gaze darted to Spencer, who still had a frown on his face, then he looked back at his phone. “Elwood? Are you okay?”

Elwood’s voice was faint when he said, “Yes. I dropped something. Give me a sec.” There was a hollow sounding bang, followed by a drawer slamming, then Elwood was back. “Did you say Lucas has a guard?”

“Yes.” Jasper lowered his voice, even though Elwood and Spencer were the only ones who could hear him. “I don’t know this for sure, but I think the guard is there to protect him from whoever attacked him.”

Elwood gasped. “You think Lucas knows who it was?”

“Maybe. If he did see them, he’ll be able to identify them for the police.”

“Shit,” Elwood said. “That’s not good.”

“I know,” Jasper said. “Lucas could be in a lot of danger.”

“It’s a good thing he has a guard then.” There was a pause, then Elwood asked, “Did he...did Lucas say anything to you when you were there? Anything about who attacked him?”



“No. He was barely awake and all he did was ask for you. He must really love you.” There was another crash. Loud enough Jasper winced.

“Sorry, I dropped the phone,” Elwood said, his voice distant. Then he was back. “You think Lucas loves me?”

Jasper rolled his eyes. Geesh. Didn’t these guys talk to each other?

“Of course we talk to each other. But Lucas loving me never came up.”

Oops. He hadn’t meant to say that out loud. “Well now that you know, maybe you should say something back. Lucas deserves to know how his boyfriend feels about him. Especially when he’s been injured.”

“You’re absolutely right. I’ll tell him when I see him.” Another drawer opened and closed. “Do you think I’ll have any problems getting past the guard?”

“No.” Especially not if it was the same guard who’d been on duty when Jasper was there. “But if you do have any trouble, speak to the nurses. I told them Lucas was asking for you, so they’ll get you in.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. They’re the ones who told me that seeing you will make him happy, which will make him want to get better faster.”

“Then I’d better get going.”

“Okay. If Lucas wakes up while you’re there, tell him I said hi.”

“Will do.” Then he was gone.

Jasper looked at Spencer. “Did that conversation seem weird to you? It seemed weird to me.”

“Yeah. Super weird. Especially the shitty boyfriend part.”

“Right? What kind of guy doesn’t know his boyfriend is in the hospital for a week?”

“I don’t know,” Spencer said, shaking his head. “You’d think he’d have wanted to talk to Lucas at least once over the last few days.”

“I couldn’t imagine going that long without checking in with Gabe.”

“Me either. Lucas is obviously more into Elwood than Elwood is into him.”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I kind of feel bad for Lucas. He really does love him. From the moment he woke up, he kept saying, ‘Elwood, please,’ over and over. Well, it was more like, Elwoo...puh...leez, Elwoo puh...leez, but it was clear what he wanted.”

Spencer stilled. “Uhm, J. He was saying, Elwoo...puh leez?”

Jasper nodded. “Yeah. Over and over. Lucas was begging me to get him.”

“I don’t think that was it.”

“Of course it was.”

Spencer shook his head.

Jasper frowned. “Why? What do you think he was saying?”

“Is there any chance he could have been saying Elwood, police?”

“Why would he...wait. You think Lucas wanted the police?”

Spencer nodded.

Jasper stared at his friend.

Spencer stared back.

Jasper broke first. “No.”

“J—”

Jasper shook his head. “Nuh, uh. If you’re thinking Elwood’s the one who attacked Lucas, there’s no way.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s crazy, that’s why.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is. Elwood’s so...so...you know what he’s like. He’s not the killer type.”

“And what exactly is the killer type?”

“I don’t know. But not him.”

“Just because he doesn’t seem like the type doesn’t mean he isn’t.”

“No, but it also doesn’t mean he is.” Jasper tried to bring up an image of Elwood attacking Lucas and leaving him for dead, but couldn’t make it work. “I just don’t see it, Spence.”

“What about your crystals? What do they say about him?”

“Not much. They kind of went quiet when I met with Elwood.”

“That’s not normal, is it?”

“Not really,” Jasper said, shrugging. “But they’d have warned me if there was anything wrong with him.”

Spencer frowned at his wrist wrap. “Unless he messed with them somehow.”

“Why would he mess with them?”

“I don’t know. But maybe you should check.”

Even though he thought Spencer was being a little ridiculous, Jasper ran his fingers over his crystals to wake them, then asked. All he got back was sleepy confusion. He looked back at Spencer and shook his head. “They don’t know.”

“So he could have messed with them.”

“I doubt it.”

“But it’s not impossible.”

“No,” Jasper said slowly. “But I’m not sure how he could have.”

“I don’t like it.”

Now that Spencer had put doubts in his mind, Jasper wasn’t sure he did either. Because if Spencer was right and Elwood had somehow done something to his crystals, that meant... “Why do you think it was Elwood who attacked Lucas?”

Spencer shrugged. “I just got a weird feeling when you were talking to him. Something was off about the whole conversation. The things he was saying...he was acting...off.”

Jasper nodded. The conversation had been weird. But not enough for him to think Elwood was a killer. Spencer had obviously picked up on something Jasper had missed. “You really think he’s the one who hurt Lucas?”

Spencer nodded. “I do.”

“You realize that makes him my stalker.”

“I know.”

“Which means he tried to frame me for murder.”

“Uh, huh.”

“You know none of this makes any sense.”

“I do.”

“But you still think Elwood’s behind everything?”

“Yes.”

Jasper let out a breath. “Okay.”

“Okay.”

They stared at each other, neither of them saying anything else. Jasper broke first again. “I’m going to need more sugar for this.”

Spencer snorted, then grabbed the last two donuts from the box and handed one to Jasper. “Do you think we should say anything to Gabe?”

Jasper bit into his donut, thinking as he chewed. He shook his head. “No. We don’t have any proof Elwood’s done

anything. I don't want to get him into trouble with the police if he's innocent."

"And if I'm right and he was the one who attacked Lucas?"

"Then Gabe's probably going to kill me for not letting him know."

Spencer nodded. "Yeah. I can totally see that." He took a bite of his donut. "So what do you want to do?"

"I don't know. I don't want to accuse Elwood of anything if he's innocent. But if he's the one who attacked Lucas..." Jasper shoved the last of his donut in his mouth. Once he'd swallowed, he said, "Maybe we should watch him for a bit. See if he does anything suspicious."

"And if he does—"

"I'll tell Gabe immediately." And hope his detective was in a forgiving mood.

## Chapter Nineteen

When Gabe showed up later that evening, Jasper was glad he'd taken an extra-long nap after Spencer had gone home. Rushing to open the door, he barely had time to greet Gabe before he was grabbed and backed into the fridge with Gabe's arms locked around him so tight there was no chance he'd be able to get free.

Not that he wanted to.

"You scared me last night," Gabe whispered into his hair, his voice raw and filled with exhaustion.

"I know. I'm sorry." He hadn't even needed his mother to tell him how Gabe had reacted to his car exploding to know how badly his detective had been affected.

"I don't like to be scared. Hell, I'm not used to caring enough about anyone to be scared for them."

Jasper knew that too.

"I wasn't even that scared when Emerson was shot last year."

Jasper nudged him back so he could look at him.

"Detective Trewitt was shot?"

Gabe nodded.

"And you weren't scared for him? But he's your partner."

Gabe shrugged. "It comes with the job. Part of you is always aware something could go wrong, so you're prepared. But what I wasn't prepared for was to lose you because you drove off a fucking cliff." His hands clutched Jasper tighter. "Please don't do that again."

"Don't worry. I won't." It was going to be a while before Jasper would be able to drive along that stretch of highway again anyway.

"And no more taking any unnecessary risks. I don't want to have to go through something like that again."

Jasper hesitated.

“Jasper,” Gabe said, leaning back and staring into his eyes. “Promise me you won’t take any more risks or put yourself in danger.”

Jasper thought about what he and Spencer had planned for the following day. They weren’t actually doing anything dangerous, just following Elwood from the safety of Spencer’s car. And since Jasper was fairly certain Elwood was innocent, no matter what Spencer thought, there was no risk or danger involved. “I promise not to take any chances with my safety.”

Gabe studied him, his eyes narrowed as if he suspected Jasper wasn’t telling him everything, which put a little twist in his stomach he thought might be guilt. Which was kind of annoying when he was skating the edge of the truth a bit by not coming clean about his plans with Spencer. But since he wasn’t actually putting himself at risk, he was able to hold Gabe’s gaze with a mostly clear conscience.

Then Gabe had to go and ruin everything.

“Okay. I trust you.”

That niggle of guilt went rocketing sky-high.

Jasper sighed. Pushing Gabe back, he walked over to the table and leaned against it, crossing his arms. Then thought that might make him look defensive, so he uncrossed them. But then Jasper didn’t know what to do with his hands, so after flailing around for a few seconds, he ended up shoving them in his front pockets. Then looked at Gabe, who was watching him with his arms crossed, and didn’t look at all defensive, which was also annoying. But it did make his biceps bulge nicely, so there was that.

“Wanna tell me what’s going on?”

“Not really,” Jasper muttered. When Gabe’s eyebrow shot up, Jasper huffed out a breath. “Okay, look. Tomorrow, Spencer and I are going to be driving around town.”

“Okay,” Gabe said slowly. “And where are you going?”

“It’s more a case of who we’re going to.”

Gabe’s eyes narrowed. “Explain.”

How to put it so it didn't sound worse than it was? Then Jasper realized there really wasn't any way to put a positive spin on them following Elwood to spy on him so he just went with the truth. "We're going to follow Elwood around."

"Why?"

"Because he was acting weird this morning."

Gabe, the Detective, was suddenly there. "Weird how?"

"Just acting a little strange. But nothing for you to worry about," Jasper said, holding up his hands when Gabe started to scowl. "Really. We're just going to follow him for a bit to make sure everything's all right."

Gabe's scowl got darker. "So you're following him around because he was acting weird but not strange enough for me to worry about?"

"That's right."

"Are you out of your fucking mind? You're barely out of the hospital after someone tried to kill you and now you're planning on running around the streets spying on people."

"Not people. Just Elwood."

"Jesus fuck," Gabe yelled. "There's a goddamned killer after you who almost got you once. When the hell are you going to get it through that stubborn head of yours that you can't keep taking stupid risks like this?"

"I'm not taking a risk. We're just driving around."

"The last time you were just driving someone pushed you off a goddamn cliff."

Which was kind of hard to argue with. "That's not going to happen again. Spencer and I will be in the city in broad daylight. With lots of people around us."

"And what if your stalker comes after you and Spencer?"

"If anyone comes near us, Spencer will just drive away."

"You'll drive away? That's your fucking answer?"

Jasper nodded.



“And if they have a gun? What then? Can Spencer’s car outrace a fucking bullet?”

Jasper was hard-pressed not to roll his eyes. “Nobody’s going to shoot at us.”

“Just because you say it doesn’t make it so.”

“I know. But I highly doubt anyone is going to shoot at us. Why would they?”

Gabe growled, actually growled at him.

Jasper crossed his arms, hoping he looked annoyed and not defensive this time, and growled back. But when it came out sounding more like something a bear cub would make and not an enraged grizzly like Gabe’s had, he stopped. “Gabe, listen—”

“No.” Gabe’s hand slashed through the air. “You listen. No more arguing. No more games. You are not going to chase Elwood around to spy on him and that’s final.”

Jasper’s eyebrow went up. “Are you forbidding me?”

“You’d better fucking believe it.”

Jasper tilted his head. “And what gives you the right to forbid me from going out with my friend?”

A muscle in Gabe’s jaw jumped as he stared at him. Then he spun around and slammed his hands on the counter. “Goddammit. Nothing does. You’re a grown man and can do whatever the hell you want.” He turned back to Jasper and pointed his finger at him. “But I swear to god, if you get yourself killed, I’m going to fucking kill you myself.”

Jasper tried to hold back a laugh, but it escaped.

Gabe scowled at him. “I’m glad you think this is so goddamned funny.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t. But you’re overreacting. Spencer and I aren’t going to do anything but follow Elwood around. We won’t even get out of the car if that helps.”

“No, it doesn’t fucking help. Christ, you’re killing me. Your blindness to the risks you’re taking is going to give me a

heart attack. I'll be dead before I'm forty if you don't start acting smarter than this. Fuck!"

Jasper leaped across the kitchen and plastered himself to Gabe's chest. "Everything's going to be alright. I swear."

Gabe grabbed him by the shoulders. "You can't know that."

"Yes, I can."

"No, you can't," Gabe said, giving him a shake. "You don't know the horrific things people do to each other. Or the lengths they'll go to hurt someone. Someone's already tried to kill you once. What if they try again while you're joyriding with Spencer?"

"Gabe, listen—"

"You can't keep doing this. My heart can't take it."

"Gabe—"

"If I lost you..."

Jasper put his hand over Gabe's mouth. "You're not going to lose me. I promise. The shard will keep me safe."

Gabe pushed his hand away. "You can't trust your life to the shard."

Jasper wrapped his fingers around the shard under his shirt, smiling when it pulsed in his hand. "Yes, I can."

"No, you fucking can't. I don't care how powerful it is. It's still a fucking rock. An inanimate object. Something or someone will eventually be able to get to you because unless the damned thing can wrap you in a bubble, it will not be able to protect you from everything."

Gabe was wrong. But there was only one way to make him understand. "It can protect me from everything. But the only way you're going to believe me is to meet it."

Gabe stilled. "Excuse me?"

"I want to introduce you to the shard." Jasper pulled the shard out from under his shirt. "So that you can see it's more

than just a rock.”

“You want to introduce me to a rock,” Gabe said, looking at Jasper like he was nuts.

Jasper nodded. “I hadn’t planned on doing it this soon, since there’s no undoing it. But you did say you wanted to be with me forever...” He looked at Gabe and held his breath.

Another scowl. “Of course, we’re going to be together forever.”

Jasper’s heart almost stopped at his instant and matter-of-fact response, like how dare Jasper think they wouldn’t be together. “Gabe...” he whispered.

The anger and frustration faded from Gabe’s eyes, replaced by something softer. “I know,” he said, cupping Jasper’s neck. “But later. Right now, tell me about this shard of yours you want me to meet.”

Nodding, Jasper cupped the shard in his palms, his hands trembling as he held it out to Gabe. “You need to touch it.”

Gabe looked at the shard, then back at Jasper. “Why?”

“So it can formally meet you.” Jasper licked his lips. “And, uhm, form a connection with you.”

Gabe eyed the stone suspiciously. “What kind of connection?”

“A permanent one.” When Gabe’s eyes flew to his, Jasper quickly said, “It’s so it can bring you under its protection, the same way it does for my family. But you need to touch it for it to be able to do that.” When Gabe hesitated, Jasper nodded encouragingly. “It’ll be fine. I promise.”

Keeping his eyes on him, Gabe slowly reached out his hand and rested his fingers on it. Then snatched it back when the shard sparked and released a bolt of energy.

Mentally chiding the stone, Jasper reached for Gabe’s hand and brought it back, wrapping it around the shard. A buzzing filled the air. There was a soft pop and then the stone began to glow, its light leaking between Gabe’s fingers. “There. It knows you now.”

Gabe stared at it, a look of wonder spreading across his face. “I can hear...it sounds like it’s talking to me.”

“It probably is.” Jasper shrugged when Gabe’s eyes shot to his. “In its own way.”

“It feels...” Gabe gave a shaky laugh. “It feels like it’s alive.”

“That’s because it is. It has sentience. Not in a way you or I can fully understand, but make no mistake, it is alive.”

Gabe nodded, his fingers loosening on the stone, but not pulling away. “Your mother said the shard kept you alive when you went over the cliff. How?”

“The shard protects all of my family and those we consider family, like Spencer. And now you. But whoever is wearing it receives the most protection because it can act directly when they’re in danger, which is why my mother gave it to me. I’ll be safe as long as I have it on.” He folded his hands around Gabe’s, enclosing the now pulsing shard between them. “Between the shard and my magic, I’ll be fine. And Spencer will be too.”

“I still don’t like the idea of you going out when your stalker is still out there.”

“I know. But if it will help relieve your mind, I’ll tell you where we are every step of the way tomorrow.”

“It would actually.”

“Then that’s what I’ll do.”

“Okay, good.”

Jasper rose to his tiptoes. Pressing a soft kiss to Gabe’s lips, he whispered, “Want to have make up sex now?”

“God, yes.”

Jasper laughed when Gabe tossed him over his shoulder, bracing his hands on Gabe’s hips when he took off at a fast jog, his boots thundering on the floorboards as he carted Jasper off to do dirty and nasty things to him. At least, he hoped that’s what Gabe intended on doing.

His detective didn't let him down.

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*The next morning...*

Feeling surprisingly alert, considering how little sleep he'd had, Jasper bounded up the steps onto Spencer's porch with two travel mugs filled with freshly made coffee. Before he had a chance to knock, the door opened. Spencer took one look at him and started to grin.

"Well, aren't you looking all chipper and relaxed this morning. Good night?"

Jasper grinned. "The best." He handed one of the travel mugs to Spencer. "You sure you're fine with taking more time off from the bakery?"

"It's all good. I went in for a few hours while you were fooling around with that detective of yours and got the prep work done for Katie who is more than happy to have another day without the boss looming over her shoulder. Her words." He turned to lock his door, looking at Jasper over his shoulder. "Besides, I'm the one who thinks Elwood's up to something, so the least I can do is drive us around."

"Especially since I don't have a car," Jasper said drily.

Spencer snorted as he turned to face him. "That too."

Then Jasper noticed the gleam in his eyes. "You little faker. You're doing it for the thrill, not because you feel obligated."

Barking out a laugh, Spencer nudged Jasper back with his elbow before jumping off the porch. "Don't tell me you don't feel the same way."

Jasper laughed as he followed Spencer to his car, not able to deny it. The thought of being a spy for a day did have his blood humming with excitement.

Watching his friend from the corner of his eye as Spencer drove through the still quiet neighborhood, Jasper waited until Spencer took a drink of his coffee to casually say, “By the way. I told Gabe what we were doing today.”

Spitting out coffee, Spencer swerved to the right, almost taking out Mrs. Phife’s mailbox. Slamming on the brakes, he turned to Jasper. “You did what?”

Jasper laughed at the shocked look on his face. “I told him what we were doing.”

“And he let you out of the house?”

“Of course he let me out of the house.” Jasper waited a beat. “With a strict set of rules.”

Spencer snorted. “I figured. What are they?”

Setting his travel mug in the cup holder, Jasper raised his hands and started ticking them off. “No taking any risks. No doing anything stupid. No direct engagement with Elwood. No getting out of the vehicle. Text him where we’re going every time we change location. No doing anything stupid. No—”

“You said the stupid one already.”

Jasper grinned and reached for his coffee. “Gabe felt it needed to be said twice.”

“Detective Do-Me knows you well, doesn’t he?”

Jasper choked, his coffee going down the wrong tube when he heard Spencer’s new name for Gabe.

Laughing, Spencer started driving again, completely unconcerned about the fact that Jasper was choking to death in the seat next to him.

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Jasper was still trying to come up with a way to get back at his friend when Spencer neatly parallel-parked between two

vehicles just down the street from the Carlisle mansion.

Spencer's eyes were sparkling when he turned to Jasper. "You ready for our first stakeout?"

Jasper snorted, then sank lower in his seat when a black car drove past them. "Yeah. How long do you think we'll have to wait?"

"Shouldn't be more than a few minutes," Spencer said, checking his side mirror. "If you get hungry, I packed some snacks."

"You did?" Jasper looked in the back seat and gave a little fist pump when he saw the pink box sitting on top of a gym bag. He grabbed the box and set it on his lap, then lifted the lid. "You brought donuts."

"Can't have a stakeout without coffee and donuts," Spencer said, grinning at him. "I also brought water, chips, nuts, crossword puzzles, a flare gun, binoculars, and gum."

"Really?" Jasper set the donuts on the dash, then hauled the gym bag between the seats and unzipped it. Pawing through the contents, he had to laugh when he saw Spencer had brought a lot more than that. "Just how long do you think we're going to be on stakeout?" he asked, holding up not one, but two brands of deodorant. "Seriously Spencer. We'll be going home at the end of the day."

Spencer shrugged. "It never hurts to be prepared."

Shaking his head, Jasper shoved the deodorant back into the bag and put it on the floorboard next to his feet, then grabbed the pink box off the dash and opened it. Choosing two donuts, he handed one to Spencer and took a big bite out of the other, washing it down with his coffee.

They'd been sitting there for about ten minutes when Spencer sat forward and looked through his side mirror, then turned the key to start the engine. "Get ready. He's coming."

Jasper slid lower in his seat, then grabbed onto Spencer's sleeve to pull him down too. Raising his head just enough to see out Spencer's window, he caught a glimpse of Elwood's red Prius when it zoomed past. "That's him. Let's go."

Jasper kept his head down as Spencer eased out into the street, not sitting up straight until there were a couple of cars between them and the Prius. Then they followed Elwood all the way to his father's office building on Main Street, lucking out when they managed to find a parking spot partway down the street where they could keep an eye on the front of the building.

When Elwood went inside, Jasper texted Gabe to let him know where they were.

And then they waited.

And waited.

Then waited some more.

An hour in, Jasper realized stakeouts weren't all they were cracked up to be. By the second hour, he'd played with everything Spencer had brought in the seemingly bottomless gym bag, which had included cards, travel checkers, crossword puzzles, and a backgammon game. He'd amused himself for another few fifteen minutes spying through office windows with a pair of binoculars he'd found in the side pocket of the bag—it was amazing what people did when they thought no one could see them—but even that hadn't held his interest for long.

“How do cops do this?” he grumbled to Spencer as he grabbed another donut his stomach told him he didn't need. “I had no idea stakeouts were so boring.”

“I don't know,” Spencer said, looking up from his phone. “It looks so exciting on TV, but the reality...” He screwed up his face.

“Yeah. I don't think either of us are cut out to be PIs.” Jasper twisted the cap off his water and took a long drink, then stopped when he realized he'd need to pee if he drank any more. Then started wondering what cops on a stakeout did when they had to go to the bathroom but couldn't leave their vehicle. Oh. Maybe they returned the liquid back to the source. Jasper eyed his water bottle, trying to work out the logistics of



it. Just as he was giving serious consideration to trying it out, Spencer bumped his arm.

“No peeing in the bottle, idiot. You’ll get it all over the seats.”

Jasper looked at him in surprise. “How’d you know that’s what I was thinking?”

“Because I was thinking the same thing until I realized there’s two of us and one can keep watch while the other finds a bathroom.”

“Good point.” Jasper tucked the bottle between the seat and the door, then leaned back and crossed his arms, staring at the entrance to the building where Elwood worked.

A few minutes later, Spencer nudged him again. “So, really. How are things between you and Detective Do-Me?”

Jasper snorted. “You’re going to have to stop calling him that.”

“Why?”

“Because I plan on keeping him.”

“Again why? I get that he’s hot, but he arrested you two times. Other than the muscles and scorching sex, what else does he have to offer?”

“My magic resonates with him,” Jasper said, turning in his seat and grabbing onto Spencer’s arm. “Like, really resonates. The first time I saw him, my crystals went nuts.”

“Whoa,” Spencer said, his eyes going big. “That means...”

Jasper nodded. “He’s the one.”

Spencer lunged at him pulling him into a hug. “I’m so happy for you,” he whispered. “You’re lucky to have found him.”

Jasper grinned as he hugged him back. He really was. And one day, Spencer would be that lucky too. Sooner than his friend realized.

Jasper's crystals were never wrong.

---

They were in the middle of a rousing game of Never Have I Ever when Elwood exited the office building.

"We've got movement," Jasper said, pointing out the windshield.

"Finally." Spencer shoved the last bit of donut he'd been eating in his mouth and started the car. When Elwood took off, he slid into traffic a few cars behind him.

Jasper leaned forward in his seat, keeping an eye on Elwood's car as Spencer navigated through the streets. "It looks like he's heading toward the mall."

A street later, Elwood's car turned into the mall parking lot. Spencer slowed and turned in after him, then went to the right, going down the row of cars one over from where Elwood was driving, with Jasper trying to keep him in sight as they slowly rolled through the parking lot. When Elwood pulled into a parking slot, Spencer pulled into an empty spot a couple of rows over from him.

"What do you think he's doing here?" Jasper asked as he leaned to the left, watching as Elwood got out of his car and went into the mall.

"Don't know. Do you want to follow him inside and see?"

Jasper shook his head. "I don't want to take a chance of him spotting me."

"I'll go have a look." Spencer opened the car door.

"Wait," Jasper said, remembering something he saw in the bag. Twisting to reach between the seats, he rifled through the gym bag coming up with a ball cap. Handing it to Spencer, he said, "Put this on and try to stay out of sight. And have a cover story in case he sees you."

Spencer rolled his eyes. “This is a mall, J. I don’t need a cover story to be here.” But he took the cap and put it on his head anyway.

“Sorry. I’m a bit jumpy. I don’t think I’d make a very good spy.”

“Same.” Pushing his door open, Spencer said, “Be back in a bit.”

Then he was gone, leaving Jasper to his own devices. After two minutes of fiddling with the radio, he started texting bad cop jokes to Gabe to amuse himself while he waited for Spencer to get back.

---

About thirty minutes later, Spencer exited the mall exit and jogged across the parking lot. Jumping into the driver’s seat, he turned to Jasper. “You’d never guess what he’s doing.”

“Why? Did he rob a bank? Is he holding someone hostage? Is he—”

Just then, the exit door opened and Elwood came through, pushing a cart piled high with... Jasper leaned forward in his seat, squinting out the window. Sure he was seeing things, he snatched the binoculars off the dash and looked through them. “Is that dog food?”

“Yep. Ten gigantic bags of it.”

“Why dog food?” He turned to Spencer. “Do the Carlisle’s even have a dog?”

Spencer shook his head. “Nope.”

Jasper looked back through the binoculars. “Then why would Elwood need that much dog foot?”

“Beats me.”

“I’m going to see if I can find out.” Setting the binoculars on the dash, Jasper grabbed the cap from Spencer’s head and

got out of the car, crouching as he gently pushed the door closed. Then, keeping low the way they did in every action movie he'd seen, Jasper scurried from vehicle to vehicle, keeping them between him and his target as he moved closer to where Elwood was parked. Stopping a couple of parking spots away, Jasper peered around the bumper of a truck and watched as Elwood struggled to get the bags that were half the size of him into the back of his vehicle. By the time he was done, Elwood was soaked in sweat, his suit was a wrinkled, dirty mess, his hair was standing up in every direction, and his glasses were crooked on his face.

And Jasper still had no idea what he was doing. When Elwood pushed the empty cart back to the mall, Jasper booted it back to Spencer's car.

Climbing into the front seat, he pulled out his phone and texted Gabe. When his response came back a few seconds later, Jasper snorted. "Gabe says that under no circumstance are we to follow if Elwood takes the dog food to a deserted warehouse or outside city limits."

"Why not?"

"He said it might be for a dog fighting ring."

Spencer frowned at Jasper's phone. "A fighting ring? That's the first place his mind went? Detective Do-Me, er, Gabe," he said when Jasper looked warningly at him, "is a glass-half-empty kind of guy, isn't he?"

While Jasper agreed that Gabe saw worst case scenario first, he didn't think that's what was going on this time. "I doubt he thinks there's a dog fighting ring. I'm sure he said it to try to scare us off."

"Well, if Elwood does go to an abandoned warehouse or leaves the city, we're going to call for backup. If we have to take on the organizers of a dog fighting ring, we're going to need more people than just us."

Jasper laughed. "I don't think it's going to come to that."

"We'll find out soon enough." Spencer pointed out the front window. "Elwood's on the move again."

Two minutes later, they were off, and this time there was at least the promise of something interesting at the end of the ride.

---

In the end, it wasn't all that interesting but it did provide some insight into Elwood's character. Jasper couldn't hold back his smile at Spencer's disgruntled expression when Elwood carted bag after bag of dog food into the Starfall Grove Animal Shelter. When he'd stacked the last one next to the door inside the waiting area, Spencer rested his head on the steering wheel and groaned.

"I can't believe he donates food for abandoned dogs."

"And cats too. Did you see the bags of cans he brought in?" Jasper asked brightly.

"Yes," Spencer groaned, then thumped his head against the steering wheel again.

"And look," Jasper said as he watched through the binoculars. "He just gave the girl behind the counter a big stack of money."

Spencer turned his head toward Jasper. "He's not acting much like a hacker-slash-killer is he?"

"Nope."

"It's starting to look like I might have been wrong about him."

"Uh, huh." Jasper chuckled when Spencer banged his head on the steering wheel one more time.

After leaving the animal shelter, they followed Elwood to the youth shelter and watched as he spent an hour playing three-on-three basketball with the teens, which was all kinds of amusing since most of them were taller than Elwood. But seeing the familiar way the teens interacted with him, Jasper

knew he did this often. After leaving the youth shelter, Elwood went to a senior's center where he spent the better part of an hour playing the piano to entertain them.

But it was when he started handing out money to guys on the street that Spencer lost it.

“Okay. Enough already. Who is this guy and where is the dickhead who didn't even know his boyfriend was in the hospital?”

Jasper snorted. “You're just mad because you don't want to admit you were wrong about him.”

“Of course, I don't want to admit I'm wrong. Because I'm not. Something isn't ringing true about this whole thing. I can feel it. And that...” Spencer motioned toward where Elwood was leaning out his car window to hand money to a panhandler while he waited for the light to change. “That can't be real. No one is this good. Not even you.”

Which was a valid point. Jasper wasn't. But it was starting to look like Elwood was. “I don't know, Spence. This could be the true Elwood.”

“It's not. He's fucking playing us. I know it.”

Jasper shook his head. “He doesn't even know we're here. And those kids at the shelter, they knew him. There's no way that could have been faked.”

Spencer hesitated, then grudgingly nodded. “I guess.”

“So maybe there's more to him than we know.”

“Or maybe he's a stellar actor. We're going to keep following him. He'll slip up eventually.”

But Elwood didn't.

It was when he helped out at the soup kitchen that Spencer finally admitted defeat and said they were done for the day. As he pulled away from the center, Jasper texted Gabe to let him know they were headed to Leavenly Delights.

Walking through the rear door of the bakery, Jasper slung his arm over Spencer's shoulders. "I'm sorry Elwood's not the bad guy you thought he was. I know how much you wanted to be right."

Spencer snorted and shoved his arm off. "Idiot. It's not that I wanted to be right. I really thought he was the one who hurt Lucas."

"But now we know he wasn't."

Spencer sighed. "Yeah. And so we're back to square one trying to figure out who's after you."

"Uhm, the police are. I kind of promised Gabe, well, almost promised him, that we'd stay out of the investigation."

"Then we will. And I guess it's a good thing Elwood's not really a bad guy," Spencer said, grabbing an apron off of a hook on the wall and tying it around his waist. "It would have upset Forrest and Birch to find out their older brother was a stalker-slash-murderer."

Jasper laughed. "You think?"

"Spencer?" Katie poked her head through the door that separated the kitchen from the front. "I thought I heard you back here. I need you out front if you've got a minute."

"I'll be right there." When she ducked back out, Spencer pointed to a small table off to the side. "Grab a seat. After I see what Katie wants I'll whip something up for us to eat."

Not one to pass up anything Spencer made, Jasper quickly sat, then texted Gabe to let him know they'd arrived at Spencer's bakery and weren't going anywhere else for the rest of the night. And then he sent one last joke, snickering as he typed it out.

*What do you call it when a prisoner takes his own mugshot?*

*A cellfie.*

## Chapter Twenty

Gabe glanced at his phone when another text came in. True to his word, Jasper had been in constant communication, letting him know where he and Spencer were at all times, which had done a lot to ease his mind.

But he could have done without the lame cop jokes.

Picking up his phone, he rolled his eyes when he saw the latest one. How was Jasper even coming up with these?

“Whatcha looking at there, partner?” Emerson asked, leaning forward as he tried to peer at Gabe’s phone.

“Nothing.”

“It doesn’t look like nothing. Maybe you should let Jasper know a cop’s phone is city property and can be confiscated at any time without warning. I doubt Mrs. Belmont would appreciate knowing her son’s, umm, assets had been logged into police evidence.”

Gabe rolled his eyes. “He’s not sending me nudie pics.” At the scoffing noise Emerson made, Gabe opened up his texts and read one that had come in a couple of hours ago. “Did you hear about the celery who got arrested?”

Emerson squinted at him. “What does celery have to do \_\_\_”

“They charged him with stalking.”

Emerson blinked, then he leaned across his desk and snatched the phone from Gabe’s hand. He started scrolling through the long list of jokes Jasper had been sending to Gabe all day, making a face as he went. “Jesus. Doesn’t he have anything better to do with his time?” He handed the phone back to Gabe. “I think I’d have preferred it if he’d sent dick pics than those.”

Gabe would have too. But with the amount of exposure Jasper’s dick had seen lately, he understood why that would be the last thing Jasper would do.



When Emerson turned back to his computer, muttering under his breath about cop jokes being worse than dad jokes, Gabe snorted and returned to his report of the bizarre call the Captain had tapped him and Emerson for. Gabe hadn't understood why they'd been sent to investigate a public disturbance until they'd gotten there and realized the sensitivity of the situation.

According to witness statements, Stan had been hosting an all-day backyard BBQ and pool party to celebrate his seventy-fifth birthday. What had started as a gathering of friends, food, and music had, through the course of the afternoon—and a hell of a lot of spiked punch—deteriorated into a raucous, clothes optional, drunken bash, with most of the celebrants choosing the nude option. That might not have been so bad—other than the not inconsiderable amount of wrinkly skin on display—except that the party had left the confines of Stan's backyard and spilled out onto the streets.

Even then, it's possible the situation might have been salvaged if not for the fact that the Starfall Grove Church Ladies Auxiliary were holding a meeting in Jennifer Quigley's back garden, sipping tea and eating cucumber sandwiches while they discussed plans for their community outreach efforts for the following month.

Gabe chuckled to himself as he typed out the highly detailed statement an indignant Mrs. Quigley had given him—along with photographic evidence—about the way Mrs. Phife had yelled, “Hallelujah. Come on, girls. It's time to leave this snoozefest and par-taay.” Then she'd ripped off her blouse and started Walking Like an Egyptian with an inebriated and very naked Stan in the middle of the street. Even worse, according to Mrs. Quigley, was that Mrs. Phife's shameless ways had tempted four other ladies of good standing into joining her in her wickedness.

Mrs. Phife had been completely unrepentant when Gabe and Emerson had confronted her and had even tried to lure Emerson into doing the electric slide with her and the other ladies, looking amused when he'd stammered out a no as he'd tried to get her to put her blouse back on.

Gabe grinned as he finished off his report, making sure to include a full description of the way the ladies had swarmed his partner until Gabe had extricated him from their clutches.

And roaming hands, according to Emerson, who'd offered to buy Gabe's lunch for the next week for saving him.

After attaching the numerous photos of the event that Mrs. Quigley had forwarded to him, Gabe saved his file and sent it to the Captain so that he and his good buddy Mayor Edwyn Phife, grandson of dancing queen Mrs. Phife, could get in front of what would be a public relations nightmare before it could get started.

When something hit him in the ear, he looked up, then scowled at his partner when a paperclip bounced off his nose.

"Why are you throwing shit at me?"

"We gotta go," Emerson said, pulling on his jacket. "The hospital just called. Lucas is awake again and asking for us."

"About fucking time." Gabe locked down his computer, then stood and grabbed his jacket off the back of his chair, putting it on as he and Emerson hurried out of the precinct.

As they neared the parking lot, Gabe grabbed his car fob from his pocket. "We'll take my car. You drive too damned slow." He pressed the button.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion as the world exploded around them.

First was the ribbon of water that shot out from the puddle they were walking past, hitting Emerson in the face. Gabe was turning to ask him how that had happened when Emerson had shouted at him to get down, then jumped and tackled Gabe to the ground.

As they were falling, a loud explosion rocked the area, sending them flying. They landed yards away, with Emerson on top of Gabe. Then an intense wave of heat passed over them, hot enough to sear the hair from the backs of his hands when he covered his head with his arms.

When the pieces of burning metal and debris had stopped falling around them, Gabe pushed Emerson off of him and staggered to his feet, looking for the source of the explosion. It didn't take long to find it. "Motherfucker. Someone just blew up my fucking car."

Emerson got to his feet, stumbling into Gabe as he looked at the flaming remains. "Holy shit. Someone blew up your car."

Gabe turned to him, catching Emerson when he staggered to one side, then snorted when he got a good look at his soot-covered face.

"What's so funny?" Emerson asked. "Someone just blew up your car."

"I know," Gabe said, laughing, feeling a bit punch drunk. He reached up and poked Emerson's blackened forehead, pulling his hand away when his partner hissed. "Your eyebrows are gone."

"Oh shit. I must look like an idiot." Emerson touched his forehead, his fingers moving frantically over his scorched brow ridge.

"You do."

When Gabe laughed again, Emerson scowled at him. "I wouldn't laugh too hard if I were you, partner."

Gabe blinked, then quickly reached up and touched over his left eye, letting out a sigh of relief when his fingers found hair. Then he cursed a second later when he realized there was nothing but frizzled ends over his right eye.

Fuck. He probably looked even stupider than Emerson did.

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It took over four hours before they made it to the hospital. As they headed down the long hall toward the nurses' station,

they were intercepted by a tired-looking doctor in blue scrubs.

“Detectives. I was afraid you weren’t coming.”

“Sorry about that, Doctor...” Gabe looked at his tag, “Henderson. We had a situation that needed to be taken care of first.”

“I see that,” Dr. Henderson said, looking them over, a frown on his face.

Gabe could only imagine what he was thinking as his eyes moved over their scorched clothes, reddened skin, missing eyebrows, or eyebrow in his case, and hair that had been burned on the ends.

“Has anyone checked you two to ensure you haven’t sustained any internal injuries?”

“We’re fine,” Emerson said.

Which was a miracle in itself since he’d taken the brunt of the explosion. But the paramedics attending the scene had said that except for some superficial burns and hair loss, they were good to go.

Dr. Henderson didn’t seem so sure. “I think I should have a look at you anyway.”

“We’re good,” Gabe said. “Lucas Johnson. Can we see him now?”

Dr. Henderson hesitated.

“I promise we’re fine, Doctor,” Emerson said. “But we really need to speak with Mr. Johnson.”

After another quick scan of them, Dr. Henderson nodded. “Alright. But before I take you to him, we need to set some ground rules first.”

“What kind of rules?” Gabe asked, hoping the good doctor wasn’t going to put up any roadblocks that would impede their investigation.

“The kind that will protect my patient.”

Gabe scowled. “Protect him from what? We’re here to talk to him.”

“I know that. And as much as I would like you to find out who hurt Mr. Johnson, if I had my way, Detective, you wouldn’t be here. But Mr. Johnson was quite insistent on speaking with you, and as it’s in my patient’s best interests to keep him as calm as possible, I reluctantly agreed to allow you to be called in. That being said, I need your promise you’ll go easy on him. My patient has been through considerable physical and mental trauma and is extremely fragile. Any further distress could set back his recovery, undoing all our efforts to get him where he is now.”

“We’ll do our best not to upset him,” Emerson said.

Nodding, Dr. Henderson brought the clipboard he was holding up against his chest. “There’s one more thing. When we were unable to produce the police quickly enough for Mr. Johnson earlier, he became quite agitated. So much so that when we were unable to calm him, I had him sedated.”

Gabe looked at Emerson, then back to the doctor. “How long ago was that?”

“About two hours ago. He should be waking now, but he’ll be groggy and disoriented. Don’t be surprised if he drifts in and out on you.”

Gabe frowned. “Is he aware enough for us to question him?”

“I believe so, yes. But you’ll need to be patient with him and not push him for answers he’s unable to give.”

“We won’t,” Emerson said. “I promise.”

Dr. Henderson looked at Gabe and waited.

“We’ll be nice,” Gabe said.

That seeming to satisfy him, Dr. Henderson turned and led them to Lucas’ room.

Gabe scowled at the officer who was sitting in a chair next to the door, playing on his phone instead of standing guard.

The officer looked up when Gabe cleared his throat, went pale, then jumped to his feet and immediately started stammering out an apology. “S-sorry, Det—”

“Save it,” Gabe barked. “Your job is to keep Mr. Johnson safe, not check on your social media accounts. Ignore your duty again and you’ll be answering first to the Captain, then to me.”

There was an audible gulp as the young officer nodded. “Yes, Sir. It won’t happen again, Sir.”

“See that it doesn’t.”

Dr. Henderson gave Gabe an approving look, then led them into the room. “Try to keep your questions to a minimum, Detectives, and stop the moment Mr. Johnson shows any signs of being upset. I’ll be just down the hall if you need me.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Emerson said, smiling at him. “I promise we’ll handle him with kid gloves.”

The doctor nodded, then left the room.

As Gabe approached the bed, he couldn’t help the flicker of excitement that sparked to life, knowing Lucas held the information that could bring his and Emerson’s case to a close. And more importantly, identify the person who’d almost killed Jasper.

And when he found out who it was, Gabe was going to make sure that person never saw the light of day again.

The nurse tending to Lucas turned to them when they stopped next to the bed. After checking their credentials, she said, “Lucas is just waking up, so you’ll need to be gentle with him. Don’t start peppering him with questions right away.”

“We won’t,” Emerson said, going around to the opposite side of the bed from Gabe.

“What about him?” the nurse asked, pointing her chin toward Gabe. “He looks like he’s ready to shake answers from

him.”

“Don’t mind Gabe. He always looks that way.”

The nurse stared at Gabe, her lips pursed, looking like she wanted to say something else. Instead, she leaned down and rested her hand on Lucas’ shoulder. “The police are here to see you, honey.”

Lucas groaned, his eyes flickering open, then falling closed again. Patting his shoulder, the nurse said, “You take your time, sweetie. They’ll wait for you to be ready.” Then giving Emerson and Gabe a warning look, she said, “I’ll be just outside if you need me.”

Gabe waited for her to leave the room, then looked at Emerson. “Why does everyone think I’m going to terrorize Lucas?”

“Because you look like you want to kill someone. And the missing eyebrow makes you look even more terrifying.”

Gabe glanced in the small mirror on the wall next to the bed. “That’s just my normal expression.”

Emerson snorted. “I know. And it scares the hell out of everyone.”

Everyone except Jasper, Gabe thought with satisfaction. He thought Gabe’s cop face was hot. And Jasper’s opinion was the only one that mattered.

When Lucas groaned again, they turned their attention to the bed.

“Lucas,” Emerson said, leaning down, “I’m Detective Trewitt and this is my partner, Detective Prescott.”

“Puh...leez,” Lucas breathed. His eyes slid closed.

“Yes, we’re the police. Can you tell us who did this to you?”

“Ahwoo...” Lucas whispered, not opening his eyes.

“Can you say that again, Lucas?” Gabe leaned closer, squinting as he tried to hear his broken words.

“Ahwoo...no...Ahwoo...”

Gabe stood and frowned at Emerson. “Ahwoo? What the hell is an ahwoo?”

Emerson shrugged. “No idea.”

“Ahwoo...no.”

Gabe frowned at Lucas, turning it over in his mind. Then it hit. “Son of a bitch. He’s saying Elwood.”

“Carlisle? The guy we talked to yesterday?”

“You know any other fucking Elwood?” When Emerson shook his head, Gabe said, “Then it has to be him.” He leaned back over the bed. “Lucas. Is Elwood Carlisle the one who attacked you?”

“Ahwoo...hurfs...Ahwoo...no...puh...leez.”

“Lucas, I need to be sure. Is Elwood Carlisle the one who hurt you?”

“Yshhh. Elwoo...hurf. Elwoo...no. Doon hurf...puh...leez.”

Alarms started going off on the machines at the head of Lucas’ bed.

“Fuck.” Gabe pulled his phone from his pocket.

“What’s wrong,” Emerson asked.

“Jasper and Spencer were following Elwood around today.”

“Why?”

“Jasper said he was acting strange.”

“And you let him go after him?”

“It’s not like I had any fucking choice. He’s a grown man and can chase some idiot around town if he wants to. Even if I asked him not to,” Gabe muttered as he pulled up Jasper’s number.

“You should have stopped him from interfering in a police investigation.”



Gabe pressed the call button and glared at Emerson. “Elwood wasn’t part of the fucking investigation until right this minute. “Jasper,” Gabe barked out when his call connected. “Where—”

“Gabe? It’s Spencer.”

Gabe scowled. “Why are you answering Jasper’s phone?”

“Because it was ringing.”

Biting back his automatic response, knowing Jasper wouldn’t want him swearing at his friend, Gabe gritted out, “Where is Jasper right now?”

“Home. Or he will be soon. He left a few minutes ago.”

“How’s he getting there?” Gabe asked, his mind flooded with images of Jasper getting into an Uber and Elwood being the driver.

“I lent him my car.”

“Okay, good.”

“Is everything alright?”

“Everything’s fine.” Especially if Jasper was at home. “But if you see or hear from Elwood, I want you to call me immediately.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so. Do not approach him and call me immediately.”

“Oh fuck. It was him, wasn’t it? I knew he was the one who attacked Lucas.”

Gabe glanced at Emerson, who looked as surprised as Gabe was. “How do you know that?”

“Because I knew something was off with him. Jasper didn’t think so. That’s why we were following Elwood today.”

Gabe nodded, everything suddenly making sense. Jasper wouldn’t believe Elwood was guilty without proof. “Did you guys see him doing anything suspicious?”

“Not unless you count a lot of over-the-top humanitarian acts as suspicious. Which I did. But Jasper said it only proved Elwood was a good guy.”

Because Jasper always expected the best from people. And while Gabe didn't want to change that fundamental part of him, he needed to fucking start reading people better before he got himself killed.

“Spencer, I'm going to check on Jasper. You stay where you are and call me or Emerson immediately if you see Elwood.”

“I will.”

After giving Spencer Emerson's number, Gabe shoved his phone in his pocket and motioned his head toward the door. “Let's go.”

“I'm right behind you,” Emerson said as the nurse came charging into the room, throwing glares at both of them.

“You two need to leave right now.”

“We're going,” Gabe said.

Lucas' soft pleas of, “Elwoo...no. Doon...hurf,” followed them as they raced from the room.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Arriving home, Jasper put Spencer's car in park, then sat there holding onto the steering wheel, his heart pounding in his chest and his stomach churning with nervous excitement. This was it. The big night. The moment he'd been waiting for since first meeting Gabe. Jasper was finally going to tell him how he felt. And though he hadn't said anything, not with words anyway, Gabe agreeing to be bonded to the shard had proven to Jasper that Gabe felt the same way about him. He had a feeling it was going to be an epic night of hot sex and delicious baked treats. Or if Jasper had his way, both at the same time.

He'd spent the entire drive home thinking up all kinds of creative—and unauthorized—ways to use the box of pastries Spencer had given him.

When Jasper had told Spencer he was going to tell Gabe he loved him, Spencer had squealed, squeezed him so tight it had hurt—but in a good way—then declared such a momentous occasion couldn't be celebrated without sugar, his love language. He'd put together a humongous box filled with all of Jasper's favorites, shoved it in his arms, along with the keys to his car, then pushed him out the door telling him to go home and get ready for his man.

Jasper had gladly accepted both, then after giving Spencer a one-armed hug, he'd taken his advice and rushed home so he could get everything prepared for Gabe's arrival. And while he was waiting for him, Jasper might just have to sample one or two—okay, three...no, make that four—of the treats in the big pink box.

But no more than that. He had *plans* for the rest.

Snickering, Jasper got out of the car and went around to the back and opened the trunk to get his box of pastries. As he grabbed hold of it, he heard a noise behind him. Twisting to see who it was, he felt the shard slip from the collar of his shirt but didn't realize the chain had caught on one of the

appliances Spencer kept in his car until it snapped when he stood. Sighing, Jasper rested the box on his hip and reached down to get it, smiling when a figure moved out of the shadows. “Gabe, you’re early. I thought...Elwood? What are you doing here?”

“I came to ask if you’d come with me to visit Lucas,” Elwood said, moving further into the light.

He hadn’t done that yet? Elwood really was a dickhead boyfriend. Trying to keep the judgment from his face, Jasper shifted to block Elwood’s view of the shard, then turned to face him, bringing the box forward and holding it with both hands. “Don’t you want to see Lucas by yourself?”

Elwood shook his head. “To be honest, no. I’m a bit nervous about seeing him.”

Jasper frowned. “But he’s your boyfriend. Why would you be nervous?”

“I don’t know,” Elwood said, shrugging. “It’s just...it’s different now that I know how he feels. I was really hoping you’d come and give me some moral support.”

“Oh,” Jasper said, trying to think of a way to say no without sounding like a dickhead himself. “I, um—”

“Please,” Elwood said, holding his hand out to him. “You’re the one who made me realize how distant I’ve been with him. I’d really like it if you were there when I tell Lucas how I feel.”

“I don’t know, Elwood. That’s something that should be between the two of you. I really don’t think it’s a good idea for me to be there.” He knew he sure didn’t want to have an audience when he told Gabe he loved him.

“But I’d like you to be there,” Elwood said, coming closer, stopping a few feet away. “Will you please come with me? I’m not sure I’ll be able to tell him without you.”

Well, shit. Now what was he supposed to do?

“So, will you do it?” Elwood asked, the intensity in his eyes making Jasper shift uneasily. “Will you come with me?”

“I guess,” Jasper said hesitantly. “But I can’t stay long. I’m expecting someone later.”

“Who? The cop?”

Jasper frowned. “How do you know about Gabe?”

Elwood shrugged. “I’ve seen you guys around.”

“You have?” Jasper couldn’t think of where. The only places he’d really been with Gabe were at his house and the police station the two times he’d been arrested. And Elwood hadn’t been at either, so how had he—

“Can we leave now?” Elwood asked, shoving his hands in his pocket. “Before I talk myself out of it.”

“I, uh, sure,” Jasper said, not seeing any way out of it without looking like a jerk. “I just need a minute to put these inside.” He raised the large pink box, in case Elwood had somehow missed seeing it.

“Why don’t you bring that with you? I know Lucas would enjoy them. He hasn’t been able to get any since your friend banned him from his bakery.”

“Spencer banned him?”

“Yes. Your friends are ridiculously loyal to you.”

Jasper smiled. They really were.

“Including Lucas.”

Shaking his head, Jasper said, “No. Lucas definitely wasn’t loyal to me. Not even when I was with him.”

“You mean because of the way he used you to get close to your mother?”

“Yes,” Jasper said slowly. “How do you know about that?”

“Lucas told me everything. How he was with you to please his father. How you let him get close to your family, made him feel welcome. How much it hurt him when you cut him off from them. How angry he was that you broke up with him for no good reason. He told me all of it.”

“Uh, lying to me and using me were perfectly valid reasons for breaking up with him.”

“Not really.”

“Yes, they were. He shouldn’t have used me like that.”

Elwood shook his head, his lip curling up in a sneer. “It’s like you don’t understand how things work in the real world. If you want to get ahead you need to use whoever you can, in as many ways as you can, for as long as you can, telling whatever lies you have to to get them to do what you want.”

Jasper stared at him in shock. Elwood didn’t actually believe that. Did he?

“And Lucas knew that,” Elwood said, taking a step toward him. “But you left your mark on him, just like you do on everyone. In the end, he chose you.” Another step.

Dread pooled in Jasper’s gut. “What did you do?” But he knew. Oh, god, he knew exactly what Elwood had done. Spencer had been right all along.

“What I had to.” Elwood came closer. Jasper took a step back, stopping when he hit the car’s bumper. “I couldn’t let his disloyalty go unpunished.”

“But you’re his boyfriend.”

“Which has nothing to do with anything. Lucas should have been loyal.”

“How can you be like this? Today you were so...”

The mean edge to Elwood’s smile had him shifting to the side. “Poor Jasper. Are you confused about the act I put on for you and your friend?”

Jasper blinked. “You knew we were there?”

“From the beginning.”

“But all those good deeds? You’re saying they were fake?”

Elwood nodded. “Every last one of them.”

“No. The kids...they knew you. They trusted you. That wasn't fake.”

“No, that was deliberate. All part of the master plan.”

Jasper felt clueless. “What plan?”

A maniacal light came into Elwood's eyes. “The first rule to gaining power is to start building your army when they're young and impressionable. If you make the lower classes grateful for what you can provide, you control the masses.”

Jasper felt like throwing up. “That's...that's—”

“That's how you win.”

“No. It's fucking disgusting. They trust you. Look up to you.”

“Which is what makes them so easy to manipulate. And control. When I call on them, they'll do whatever I want.”

Bile rose in his throat.

“But enough about them. It's time to deal with you.”  
Elwood took another step toward him.

Jasper tensed as Elwood came closer, ready to hit someone for the first time in his life. He thought he should be a bit worried by how much he wanted to pop Elwood in the mouth, but the little bastard deserved it for messing with those kids. And hurting Lucas.

Elwood took another step toward him.

Jasper's magic rose, making his crystals flare up.

Elwood's eyes flicked to the wrap on Jasper's wrist. He sneered as he looked back at Jasper. “You don't really think you can take me, do you?”

“I'm twice your size, asshole, and ten times as powerful. I know I can take you.” Jasper flexed his knees, getting ready to jump at him.

Elwood laughed. “You have no idea who you're fucking with,” He stepped forward again, then he glanced toward the trunk, his eyes going wide. “Fuck me. Is that a shard?”

Shit. Jasper threw the box of pastries at Elwood's head and lunged for it. As his fingers curled around the chain, Elwood kicked him in the ribs, knocking him sideways. He grabbed onto the edge of the car to hold himself up, then turned to face Elwood in time to see him pull a small black bag from his pocket.

Jasper raised his arms, the crystals in his wrap and his tourmaline ring glowing with the magic he was pushing through them. A protective field snapped into place between him and Elwood.

Elwood laughed again and threw the black bag, which passed through Jasper's shield like it wasn't even there, and smashed onto the ground at Jasper's feet.

Black smoke billowed around him.

Jasper held his breath and tried to move away, but he was locked in place. Smoke curled up his body, squeezing, writhing over his skin like oily streamers of burning ice. Tendrils wound around his head, poking and prodding, forcing their way into his nose and ears. Jasper cried out, breathing them in. He sank to his knees, the silver chain falling from his fingers when his energy, his magic, his life, drained from him. Swaying in place, he stared up at Elwood and gasped, "Why?" before crashing to the ground.

"Because you never deserved Lucas," Elwood said, stepping through the smoke that was swirling around Jasper. "Just like you don't deserve this."

Jasper clawed at his throat when the black smoke forced its way into his lungs, choking him, burning him from the inside out, helpless to stop Elwood when he picked up the shard that had been guarded by Jasper's family since it had first been gifted to Clarissa.

Elwood squatted next to him, the shard dangling from his hand, just out of Jasper's reach. "Now, they both belong to me."

The crazed possessiveness in Elwood's eyes was the last thing Jasper saw before a black fog swept over him, taking



him away.

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“Fuck, Em. We’re too late.” Gabe jumped from Emerson’s car and ran over to the crushed box of donuts laying on the ground. He pulled his phone from his pocket and shined its light on the open trunk, then down to the donut box, which is when he noticed that the grass under his feet was black. Crouching, he ran his hand over it, the brittle blades breaking under his touch and making his skin feel numb. He brought his hand close to his face to look at his fingers, then coughed when a vile, caustic odor attacked his nose.

Emerson joined him, his eyes going from the trunk to the crumpled pink box, then back to the trunk. He crouched and picked up a set of keys, holding them out to Gabe, his eyes filled with worry.

He wasn’t the only one fucking worried. Gabe grabbed the keys, then coughed again. Spitting to clear his mouth of the foul taste of whatever had killed the grass, he stood, wiping his watery eyes on his sleeve. “How the fuck are we going to find him before that bastard kills him?”

Emerson shook his head. “I don’t know. We could try Elwood’s house, but that’s just going to waste time we don’t... wait. I have an idea.” He pulled out his phone.

“Who are you calling?” Gabe asked, then coughed again.

“Mariella. She found Jasper once. Let’s hope she can do it again.”

Gabe nodded, then spit again as Emerson dialed her number. After wiping off his mouth, he stared at the keys in his hand, his heart clenching at the thought of his innocent Jasper in the hands of a madman, then he closed the keys in his fist, squeezing tight as he tried not to think of what Elwood might be doing to him, knowing it would only mess up his mind when he needed to be clearheaded and focused.

But Gabe had seen too much evil in the world, so his mind kept coming up with one horrific scenario after another, no matter how hard he tried to block them.

Emerson's hand landed on his shoulder and squeezed. "Mrs. Belmont. It's Detective Trewitt. Gabe and I...Oh. You're already on your way. Okay. We'll see you in a few minutes."

Not ten minutes later a dark colored sedan drove down the street and stopped in front of Jasper's house. Mariella, and a man who looked enough like Jasper he had to be his father, got out and hurried over to him and Emerson.

"Where's Jasper?" Mariella asked, stopping in front of Gabe.

"We think Elwood Carlisle took him," Gabe said hoarsely, his throat still feeling raw.

She looked at him in surprise. "Montgomery's son?"

"Yes ma'am," Emerson said.

She frowned, then turned, her eyes going from the car to the box on the ground. Walking over to where the grass had turned black, she studied it, then before Gabe could call out a warning, crouched down next to it, but thankfully, didn't touch it. After a moment, she got to her feet. "Someone used dark magic here."

"I figured," Gabe said.

Wiping her hands on her skirt, Mariella said, "This is Spencer's car. Did Elwood take him as well?"

Gabe shook his head. "Spencer's still at the bakery."

"Good." She took another look around, then motioned to her husband, who promptly moved over to her side. "I've seen all I need to, dear. It's time to go get our boy."

They started walking back to their car.

Gabe cut them off halfway. "Hold up. This is police business. You're not going anywhere."

“My son was taken, Detective.”

“I understand that. But his kidnapping is part of an active investigation, which means you need to stay out of it. Emerson and I will rescue Jasper.”

“And how do you propose to find him?” Mariella asked.

“You know where he is,” Gabe said, not sure how, but knowing it was true.

She nodded. “In a way.”

“Then you can tell us.”

“I cannot.”

“What do you mean, you can’t? Jasper’s life may be at stake. This is not the time for some fucking power play.”

She held up her hand. “You misunderstand, Detective. I can feel where Jasper is and can lead you to him, but I cannot provide his exact location. Not until I get closer to him.”

Gabe’s eyes narrowed as he studied her. “You can *feel* him?”

“Yes. And if your heart was more open to him, you’d be able to feel him too.”

Knowing he was being judged and found wanting, Gabe scowled at her.

Mr. Belmont snorted and rested his hand on Mariella’s shoulder. “How about I go wait in the car while you and the detective sort this out?” Then giving Gabe a sympathetic look, he strolled toward the black sedan parked alongside the curb.

Emerson, who should have had Gabe’s back, took off after him. “Why don’t I wait with you, Mr. Belmont? I hate seeing a grown man cry.”

“Call me Shaw,” Mr. Belmont said, holding out his hand. “I have the feeling we’re going to be family. That is if my sweet wife doesn’t scare off Jasper’s young man.”

Gabe turned his scowl on his partner, who only grinned at him, then he turned back to Mariella and crossed his arms.

“Something you’re trying to tell me, Mrs. Belmont.”

Smiling at him in a way that had him gritting his teeth, Mariella said, “Tell me, Detective. Do you love my son?”

“Seriously? We’re doing this again?” Gabe said. “What does it matter? We need to find Jasper before Elwood hurts him.”

“Jasper will be fine until we get there.”

“How can you say that? Elwood obviously has access to black magic. He could be hurting Jasper right now.”

“The shard will keep him safe.”

“Will it? Because that fucking piece of rock didn’t even stop him from being kidnapped, so I’m not going to count on it to keep him safe.”

Mariella nodded, a troubled look coming to her face. “I don’t know why it allowed him to be taken. But I do know Jasper will not come to further harm.”

“Well, I don’t know any such thing. We need to go find him now.”

“The shard will protect him until we arrive,” Mariella said again, the conviction in her voice as strong as it was the first time.

“What if Elwood took the shard from him?”

“Elwood could try and probably has, but the shard is loyal to my family and will not give him what he wants.”

“How can you possibly have this much faith in a piece of rock?” Gabe asked, not getting it. Even though he’d felt the power of the shared, he wasn’t willing to bet Jasper’s life on it.

“Because I know it will not fail him.”

“It already has.”

“And yet, it hasn’t.”

Gabe growled and shoved his hands in his pocket so he didn’t strangle her, realizing at that moment that Jasper had the

same effect on him. He might look like his father, but he sure as fuck took after his mother.

“Now, Detective, if you’ll just tell me how you feel about my son, we could get on our way.”

Gabe stared at her, sure he must have heard wrong. But knew he hadn’t when she arched her eyebrow and tapped the face of her watch. All of his patience—which admittedly wasn’t much—disappeared in a flash.

“You have got to be motherfucking kidding me. Jasper could be dying and you want to know about my goddamned feelings. Have you lost your fucking mind?”

“Detective—”

“Why are we standing here having this stupid conversation when we should be looking for Jasper before he gets fucking killed?”

“Detective, you must calm—”

“And how the fucking hell is a *feeling* going to lead us to Jasper?” When she opened her mouth, he held up his hand. “Don’t. I don’t want to hear one more fucking word about that stupid shard.”

Clasping her hands in front of her, Mariella’s eyebrow went up again as she asked, “Are you quite done now, Detective?”

Was he? Gabe was sure he had more to say, but Jasper was waiting for them. And he’d pretty much covered everything that needed to be said. “I’m done.”

“Good. Now, I’d like to answer your questions, but I cannot until I’m sure of your feelings for my son.”

“Why does that matter so damn much?” Gabe shouted, apparently not having been done with the yelling.

“Detective. Please calm yourself and answer my question.”

“Oh, my god. Would you give it a fucking rest already?”

Looking at him as if he were getting on her last nerve, which was ironic because she had definitely gotten on his, Mariella took a deep breath. Then drawing on a pool of patience that was obviously much greater than what Gabe had, she calmly said, “What you would have me tell you is a closely held secret that is not and has never been shared beyond the members of the Belmont family. If your feelings for Jasper are true, you will soon be one of us and can be brought into our confidence.” She gave him a steely look. “But if you will not open your heart and acknowledge what we both know you feel, then you are an outsider and will not be granted access to the knowledge you seek.” Holding his gaze, she finished. “Or to my son.”

Had she just threatened him? Gabe clenched his jaw and stared at her, seeing the truth of it in her eyes. Motherfucker. How dare she threaten to stop him from seeing Jasper if he didn’t bow down and kiss her ass. What made her think she could make him do anything he didn’t want to? Gabe opened his mouth to set her straight, then realized it didn’t matter. They both knew how he felt. Why was he wasting time fighting with her, refusing to tell her what she wanted to know when her knowing didn’t change anything? Not for him and certainly not for how he felt about Jasper.

But if it would get them on their way, Gabe would tell her what she wanted to know. But he wasn’t going to give in easily. That had never been his way. Crossing his arms again, Gabe scowled down at her. “You can’t stop me from seeing him.”

“I most certainly can, Detective. And I will if it becomes necessary.”

“You will not,” Gabe said, dropping his arms and moving in closer, crowding her, using his greater size to try to intimidate her—which had absolutely no effect—ignoring Emerson when he yelled at him to back off. “Jasper’s mine and I’m keeping him, no matter what you say about it.”

“And why is that, Detective?”

“Because I fucking love him, you old harpy.”

“I know you do.”

“That’s right. And you’d better not fucking get in my way.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. And now that you’ve acknowledged how you feel, maybe one day you’ll be brave enough to tell my son,” Mariella said, her whole body relaxing as she took hold of his hand.

Wait. What?

She smiled up at him. “I could not have asked for a better man for Jasper.”

Gabe gaped at her. “Was that...were you fucking testing me?”

Her eyes sparkled. “Perhaps.”

“Son of a bitch.”

“Welcome to the family, Detective.”

“Son of a mother fucking bitch,” Gabe said again as he stared at her, realizing he’d been played by a master.

Mariella laughed, then hooked her arm through his and started leading him to the car. “Now that we’re finished playing, it’s time to go get our boy.”

His head spinning from what had just happened, Gabe couldn’t muster up any resistance and just went where she led him. “You still haven’t told me how we’re supposed to find him.”

“We’re going to use my blood connection to the shard. It will lead us to Jasper.”

Okay. He had some resistance left after all. Gabe stopped, forcing Mariella to as well. “What do you mean by blood connection?”

“Just what it sounds like. At birth, a small drop of the baby’s blood is dripped onto the shard and absorbed by it, forming an unbreakable bond. Everyone in my line is connected through our blood to the shard and to each other

through our connection with the stone. And for our loyalty, the shard offers its protection to us all.”

What the fuck? Gabe’s stomach twisted at the thought of a baby being bonded to a piece of the meteorite. Especially knowing it had alien sentience. “That’s...that’s—”

“I believe the word you’re looking for is fortunate,” Mariella said, a look of warning flaring in her eyes. “It is fortunate that I have a connection with Jasper through the shard so we can find him. That is what you were going to say, was it not, Detective?”

Instinctively knowing this was one fire he didn’t want to ignite, Gabe nodded. “Yes. That’s what I was going to say.”

“I thought as much.”

Then they were at the black sedan. After helping her into her seat, he and Emerson got into their car and followed Mariella and Shaw as she led them to Jasper.

Through her blood connection with a sentient rock from outer space.

A sentient rock that Gabe had allowed himself to be bonded to.

Fucking fuck.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

As Jasper floated back to awareness, he immediately became aware of two things. The first was that his throat burned like he'd been gargling hellfire, and the second was that he was tied to a chair, that realization coming to him when he tried to grab for his throat and his hands didn't move.

Gasping as he tried to breathe through charred and bleeding lungs—at least that's what they felt like—Jasper squinted down at the ropes around his arms and chest, wondering how he'd gotten here. Wherever here was. Blinking at the fog blurring his vision, he looked blearily around and saw that he was in a small wooden room with no windows. As his vision cleared further, the wall to the left of him came into focus, drawing another gasp from him.

Hundreds of photos, layered one over another, filled the entire space. There were photos of Lucas. Photos of Jasper. Photos of them together. And in every picture that Jasper was in, his face had been marked out. In some, it had been crossed out in red, in others, it had been gouged out. And in a few, his image had been burned away, leaving only part of a shoe or the sleeve of his shirt to identify it was him standing next to Lucas.

And rage and hatred poured off of every one of them.

In contrast, the photos of Lucas were carefully mounted, some framed, others arranged in collages with little notes handwritten on them in silver. There were pictures of Lucas at the gym, at work, and out for dinner. There were also more candid shots, ones of him relaxing on the couch, or reading a book on his back deck. Pictures of him cooking in his kitchen, wearing the gag bodybuilder apron Jasper had given him for one of his birthday gifts. And then there were private ones. Photos of Lucas sleeping, of him lounging in bed, eyes half closed, love bites marking his naked body.

But even with as carefully laid out as the photos of Lucas were, Jasper could feel a dark craving, a tainted lust, emanating from them.

Whoever had taken the photos had an unhealthy fixation on Lucas. And they wanted Jasper to die.

Hearing a noise, he glanced over to the corner of the room and saw Elwood leaning against the wall with his hands in his pockets. And Jasper's shard hanging around his neck.

Memory came flooding back. Elwood, the lying bastard, showing up at his house with his black spell bag of death and almost killing Jasper.

Lunging against the ropes, growling when they thwarted his attempt to get to Elwood, all Jasper could do was glare at him, his voice hoarse as he yelled, "Give me back my shard."

"It's my shard now," Elwood said as he pushed off the wall and crossed over to him. "You don't deserve it. You or your family. None of you are worthy to control its power."

"We don't control it, jerkwad," Jasper said, tugging against the ropes. "We protect it from assholes like you who only want to abuse it."

"Abuse what? It's a rock with power. Just like your crystals." He turned his head and smirked, drawing Jasper's attention to the small pile of fragments on the floor. "Well, they used to be. Now they're just dust."

Jasper couldn't stop the sharp cry that escaped when he saw what was left of his crystals. "You asshole. You didn't have to kill them?"

Elwood squinted at Jasper like he was the crazy one. "They're not fucking alive, idiot."

Maybe not to Elwood, but to Jasper, they'd been very much alive. He took a moment to mourn the loss of the crystals and stones that had been his constant companions and protectors for years.

"Poor Jasper. Do you miss your useless little crystals?"

Jasper scowled at him. "When did you turn into such an asshole?"

Elwood gave him a cold smile. "I've always been an asshole. You were just too stupid to see it."

Jasper couldn't deny it. He had been. But not Spencer. His friend had seen the truth about what kind of person Elwood was and had tried to warn him. But Jasper hadn't listened. He wouldn't make that mistake again. "I feel sorry for Forrest and Birch," Jasper said, thinking about Elwood's younger brothers. "You must have made their lives hell."

Elwood sneered. "They deserved it. They're weak. Useless. Just like you and your stupid family." His gaze strayed toward the wall. "Even Lucas proved weak in the end."

"So you turned on him," Jasper said. He stared at the photos of Lucas, then murmured, "It must have broken your heart."

Elwood's eyes snapped back to him. "What are you talking about?"

"It's obvious you love Lucas." Well...more like, was completely obsessed to the point of insanity, but potato, potahto.

"Lucas was mine," Elwood snarled, his whole body vibrating as he stared down at Jasper. "And you fucking took him from me."

Jasper blinked, the switch from calm madman to raving lunatic catching him off guard. "No, I didn't."

"Yes, you fucking did," Elwood said, leaning down, spittle flying from his mouth and hitting Jasper in the face.

Leaning as far away from him as the ropes would allow, Jasper said, "Well, if I did take him, which I didn't, I gave him back. He's your boyfriend now, so I don't know why you're so pissed?" When Elwood didn't answer, Jasper looked up at him, catching the blank look on his face before he looked away. "Oh, my god. You lied to me. You and Lucas aren't boyfriends."

Stepping back and crossing his arms—which looked defensive even with the scowl on his face—Elwood shook his head, the rage that had been there seconds before suddenly gone. "No."

“Why not? Did he say no when you asked him out?”  
When Elwood looked at him in confusion, Jasper snorted.  
“Seriously? You never even asked Lucas out? Or told him how you felt? You just went right to stalking?”

“Shut up.” But it had no bite, Elwood’s whole posture defensive now.

Jasper pointed his chin to the wall. “Dude. This is way over the top. So not how to catch your man.”

“I said to shut the fuck up.” That one had a bit more fire in it.

Not that it stopped Jasper. “Seriously. Shit like this only looks cool in movies. In real life, a creepy little stalking cave like this just makes you look pathetic.” And freaking nuts.

“Shut the fuck up or I’ll fucking kill you.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t tried already.”

Elwood just stared at him.

Jasper looked back, then realization hit. “Oh. The black smoke bomb. That was meant to kill me?”

“Yes, damn you,” Elwood hissed, the insane anger back in his eyes. “You just won’t fucking die.” He shoved his hand in his pocket, then pulled it out and blew across his palm.

A cloud of black dust settled around Jasper.

At the first acrid bite, Jasper tucked his face into his shoulder and drew in a deep breath, squeezing his eyes shut as he held it. Every few seconds, he’d peek through slitted eyelids to check on the cloud of magic surrounding him. By the time it had cleared enough he thought it might be safe to breathe, Jasper felt lightheaded. But he kept holding his breath.

Eventually, his oxygen-deprived lungs left him no choice. Jasper gasped, taking in a deep breath of air, then started coughing as he inhaled some of the dark magic that was still swirling around him. But that was the only weakness he showed. There was no way he was going to let Elwood know his skin felt like it was on fire.

“That should have killed you,” Elwood said, staring at him in confusion. “Why aren’t you dead?”

Jasper spat a mouthful of black-tinted saliva on the floor, his voice raspy as he said, “The shard protects its own.”

Rage swept over Elwood’s face again. The constant back and forth of crazy was making Jasper dizzy. “I have the fucking shard. It’s mine. I control it. I control its magic.”

“No, you don’t,” Jasper gasped, then sucked in a breath of cleaner air, wheezing out, “You might think you do, but the shard can’t be controlled.”

“It’s a fucking rock. A tool. It’ll do whatever I want it to.”

“No, it won’t. Its magic only works for my family.”

Elwood froze. Then a dark light came into his eyes. “Then I’ll just get rid of your family. The shard’s power will have no choice but to transfer to me when you’re all dead.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a black bag.

Jasper stared at it, a nugget of worry forming in his stomach. The bag looked similar to the one Elwood had thrown at Jasper earlier, but it felt heavier, more oppressive, the dark magic radiating from it making Jasper’s bones hurt. “You know that can’t kill me. All your spell bag is going to do is choke me until I pass out again.”

But even as he said it, he wasn’t so sure. The dark magic coming from this bag felt like it might be a match for the protective power of the shard. Especially since Jasper wasn’t wearing it.

It turned out he was right to be worried.

“The other one was just a small death spell. But this,” Elwood said as he hefted the black bag. “This is not. It has enough death magic in it to wipe out an entire city block.”

Jasper stared at him in horror. “Are you fucking insane? Why would you be carrying that kind of magic around in your pocket? What if you set it off by accident?”

Elwood tossed the bag up in the air, laughing when Jasper’s lunge at him was stopped short by the ropes. “Are you

worried about me? Don't be. I'm immune to the magic. But everyone around me..." Elwood held up his other hand, making a fist, then quickly splaying his fingers. "Poof. All gone."

His cavalier attitude toward killing hundreds of innocent people told Jasper Elwood was probably too far gone to be saved. But he would try. After he got that spell bag away from him. "You're not going to use it on anyone," Jasper said, twisting his arms as he pulled against the ropes, trying again to get free.

"You can't stop me."

That's what he thought. Giving up on the ropes when he couldn't find any slack, Jasper instead focused on the shard, calling it to him. The shard floated away from Elwood's chest, tugging on the chain, then settled back into place. Frowning, Jasper called it again, putting more force behind his request. The shard flopped from side to side like a landed fish, but the stubborn stone still refused to come to him.

"Stop that." Elwood grabbed hold of the shard, then he shouted when it shot out little lightning bolts of energy. "What the fuck?" Elwood blew on his hand, staring at the black marks on his palm.

"Serves you right, asshole," Jasper said, then he focused on the stone, asking why it was resisting him. All he got back was that She was coming.

Ah. Jasper sat back in his chair to wait for his mother's arrival.

"How did you do that?"

Jasper squinted up at Elwood. "How did I do what?"

"The shard. It attacked me. How did you make it do that?"

Jasper shook his head. "Wasn't me."

"Tell me what you fucking did right fucking now," Elwood screamed, spittle flying everywhere.

Jasper frowned up at him, getting a little worried by how unhinged he was, especially since he was still holding the

super-kill-everyone-death-spell. “Elwood. I think you should stop using dark magic. It’s starting to take over your mind.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my fucking mind.”

“Except for the part where you want to kill everyone,” Jasper said, his eyes shifting to the bag when Elwood’s fingers tightened around it. “I think the magic is already controlling you.”

“Nothing is controlling me.”

“Except for the dark magic.”

“Shut the fuck up or I’ll kill you,” Elwood spat.

“You already tried and couldn’t,” Jasper shot back without thinking, which was a huge mistake since it enraged Elwood even more.

He grabbed Jasper by the hair and yanked his head back, holding the spell bag in front of his face. “This will kill you. And if it doesn’t, I’ll keep trying until I find something that does.” Then he pressed the black bag against Jasper’s cheek.

His stomach lurched, bile rising at the touch of black magic against his skin. Jasper tried to yank free, but Elwood jerked his head back, keeping the bag pressed to his face. Looking up at him, he could read his death in Elwood’s eyes. And while Jasper was fairly confident the shard would be able to keep him alive—mostly—when it came to black magic, there were no guarantees.

“Are you ready to die?” Elwood asked, his eyes scary crazy.

“No,” Jasper said, before sucking in a mouthful of air and holding it, really not looking forward to being suffocated by that black smoke again.

“Too bad.” Elwood laughed, then he leaned closer, whispering in Jasper’s ear. “Something for you to think about when you’re choking to death on my magic. Once you’re dead and out of my way, I’m going to kill your family. Then I’m going to go after your cop.” He pulled back enough to look

Jasper in the eyes. Then he smiled. “Oh, I forgot. I already did.”

Rage washed over Jasper the moment Elwood threatened Gabe. Snapping his head forward, he butted Elwood in the face, his stomach lurching again at the crunching pop of Elwood’s nose breaking.

Elwood screamed and fell to the ground, covering his face with his hand, which didn’t do much to stop the blood pouring from it. “You broke my fucking nose.”

Then he screamed again when Jasper kicked out, catching him under the chin with his foot and snapping his head back.

“You’re lucky that’s all I fucking did.” Jasper lunged against the ropes, a feral need to tear Elwood apart taking him over. But as much as he struggled against the ropes, he couldn’t get free. All he managed to do was tip his chair sideways, sending it crashing to the ground. Which fucking hurt. Undaunted, he started inching his way toward Elwood, determined to get his hands on him and end his threat once and for all.

When Elwood realized what he was doing, he scrambled back out of reach, leaving a trail of blood behind him.

Fucking coward. Knowing he’d never reach him as long as he was tied to the chair, Jasper sent a plea to the shard to help him get free of the ropes, but the stone just hummed and told him to be patient.

Which did not help one little bit.

Jasper glared at it. “If you don’t start working with me, I’m going to paint blue and pink stripes over you and dunk you in a bowl of glitter the minute I get home.”

A sense of amusement filled his mind, but the shard still refused to help.

Jasper growled. “If Gabe gets hurt because of you, not even my mother will be able to stop me from turning you into an eyesore of glitter and paint.”

More amusement.



“Who the fuck are you talking to?” Elwood asked, glaring at Jasper over the hand cupping his nose.

“None of your fucking business,” Jasper said, shifting back and forth, twisting his body, looking for some slack in the ropes, which did seem a bit looser now that he was on the ground, but not enough for him to slide free.

Elwood staggered to his feet, wobbling slightly, one hand covering his face, the other holding the black spell bag, which thankfully hadn't broken open in their scuffle. Then Elwood raised it over his head, his voice nasally as he shouted, “Get ready to die, fucker.”

Bang!

The door slammed against the wall as Gabe and Emerson rushed into the room with their weapons drawn. Jasper's heart jumped in his chest when he saw Gabe was okay. Then he frowned when he got a good look at his face. What was with the eyebrow?

Before he could ask, his father came through the door, smiling at Jasper as he walked over to him at a leisurely pace.

“Hey, Dad,” Jasper said, grinning up at him.

“Hi, Son. It's good to see you're in one piece.” Then he bent down, his deceptively strong, lanky body easily righting Jasper's chair. “Now you just wait here while your mother and your detective put a stop to this nonsense.” Then patting Jasper's shoulder, he wandered over to the stalking wall.

“Uh, Dad. My hands.” But he was too late. His father was already engrossed in studying the photos. When Jasper called to him again, his father raised his finger in an *I'll be with you in a minute* gesture, then pulled a little notepad and pencil from his pocket.

Jasper snorted, knowing it would be impossible to get his father's attention until he was done.

Then Jasper's mother walked in, looking cool and composed in her chignon, lace blouse, navy pencil skirt, and heels, the force of her presence drawing everyone's attention. Scanning the room, she nodded at Jasper, who couldn't stop

smiling at seeing her there, then she leveled a withering glare on Elwood, who was looking at everyone in shock as if he had no idea where they'd come from. Which, to be fair, he didn't. When his eyes connected with Jasper's mother's, he flinched and took a step back. Holding his gaze until he stepped back again, Jasper's mother then turned to the photo covered wall, making tsking sounds as she studied it. "What a nasty little obsession you have with Jasper's ex-boyfriend."

Gabe glanced over his shoulder at the wall, his eyes going wide when he saw the pictures, then he turned back to Elwood and cocked his gun. "You sick little fuck. How long have you been stalking him?"

"Now, now, partner," Emerson said. "You know you're not allowed to call criminals names, no matter how creepy and stupid they are. The Captain said we're supposed to treat them with respect."

"Well, the Captain's not here, is he?"

"Doesn't change what's right."

"Fine," Gabe said, glaring at Elwood. "How about I just put a bullet between his eyes then? Respectfully, of course."

"Only if it's in self-defense or to protect a civilian," Emerson said, then looked over his gun at Elwood. "Are you planning to throw that spell at us or are you going to keep holding it?"

Elwood looked between him and Gabe in confusion. "What?"

Emerson shrugged, then scratched his nose with his gun before pointing it at Elwood again. "I just need to know your intentions so I can let my partner know whether he's clear to shoot you or not."

Elwood's eyes flicked to the black spell bag then back to Emerson. "You shoot me and you'll die."

"More like I'll shoot you and you'll die," Gabe said, raising his gun slightly.

“Mom!” Jasper shouted when he saw Elwood’s hand twitch. “Protect Emerson.”

“Emerson?” Gabe lowered his weapon and turned to glare at Jasper. “I’m your fucking boyfriend. What about protecting me?”

Jasper grinned at him. “You called me your boyfriend.”

“Could you stay focused, please?”

“You called me your boyfriend,” Jasper repeated, his face hurting from how wide he was smiling.

Gabe rolled his eyes. “Stop looking at me like that and answer the damned question. Why are you so worried about protecting Emerson and not me?”

“Because the shard looks after its own, Detective,” Jasper’s mom answered for him, which was good because Jasper couldn’t stop grinning at Gabe, who’d publicly called him his boyfriend for the first time. “As you belong to my son, its protection will extend to you. But it has yet to be introduced to Detective Trewitt, so he’s still vulnerable to attack.”

“Gotcha.” Gabe winked at Jasper, making his heart skip a beat, then turned back to Elwood and raised his gun again.

Elwood looked from Gabe to Emerson, who had their guns trained on him, to Jasper who was tied to the chair and grinning like a fool, so happy with Gabe he could barely control himself. Then Elwood glanced over to Jasper’s father, who was looking over the stalking wall, writing notes on his little pad of paper and muttering, “This is most unhealthy, young Master Elwood. Most unhealthy indeed.”

Elwood looked back at Jasper, who shrugged. “He’s right.”

Then Elwood’s eyes went to Jasper’s mother, who gave him a cool look before turning her back on him dismissively, which made him shrink in on himself. Then his anger came back. And his eyes started to glow.

Uh, oh. Jasper flicked his eyes at Elwood, then back at his mother as she walked over to him. She nodded but looked unconcerned, so Jasper let it go, grinning up at her—he honestly couldn't keep the damn thing off his face—when she stopped next to him. “Hey, Mom. What took you guys so long?”

His mother's eyes sparkled. “Your detective and I needed to have a talk.”

“And? Did you get everything worked out?” Jasper asked, having a good idea of what they'd talked about.

“We did. I'm looking forward to introducing him to Clarissa.”

Jasper snorted. His stubborn grandmother and Gabe were an explosion waiting to happen. Motioning her closer, he whispered, “Do you know what happened to his eyebrow?”

His mother's lips twitched. “I don't. It didn't seem the time to enquire.”

Jasper nodded. “I'll ask him about it later.”

“Do try to make sure I'm around, dear. I'd love to hear the story.”

Jasper let out a laugh.

“Excuse me,” Elwood shouted. “I'm the one with the fucking spell bag who's going to kill

you. You should be paying attention to me.”

“Sorry, Elwood. Mom and I had some things to catch up on.”

“This isn't a fucking family gathering.”

Jasper looked around the room, then shrugged. “It kind of is.”

Gabe and Emerson snorted.

Elwood's eyes bugged out of his head. Holding the bag higher, he looked around the room. “What the fuck is wrong

with you people? I'm about to kill you. You should be afraid of me."

Gabe squinted at him, then turned to Jasper. "Is he for real?"

Jasper looked at the five-foot-two, glasses wearing, enraged black magic witch, whose blood was still streaming from his nose and dripping off his chin onto his silk bow tie, and nodded. "Yep. He thinks he's in control of everything here."

"I am in fucking control," Elwood shouted, stomping his foot, proving he really wasn't. "And it's about time you fucking people realized it."

"Elwood, you poor deluded boy," Mariella said, shaking her head. "You're in control of nothing here. Least of all yourself."

"I'm in control of more than you think, you old witch. Including this." Elwood lifted the chain to show her the shard.

"Again, you are incorrect. The shard answers only to my line." She snapped her fingers. The shard darted toward her, pulling free of Elwood's fingers and snapping the chain as it flew across the room to land in her hand.

"Hey. That's mine. Give it back."

Ignoring him, Mariella held onto the shard and made an intricate gesture with her hand. A second later, a wall of power went up around Elwood. Only then did she look at him. "Put the spell bag down, Elwood, before you get hurt."

Elwood pushed against the boundary, hissing when it crackled at his touch. He glared at Jasper like it was his fault.

"The spell bag, Elwood. Set it down. Now."

Instead, he shoved the black bag in his pocket, and cried, "You'll never take me."

Gabe muttered from the corner of his mouth, "Is he always this dramatic?"

“He didn’t used to be,” Jasper said, “but he’s changed. I’m not really sure what Elwood is like anymore. Except crazy.”

“I’ll fucking show you how crazy I am, Jasper Belmont. The next time you see me will be your last.” Then proving he was going to be dramatic to the end, Elwood pulled a black crystal from his pocket and smashed it onto the ground. As it exploded, a cloud of black shot from it, surrounding him. When it cleared, Elwood was gone.

“Well, that was fairly anticlimactic,” Jasper’s father said as he put the notepad and pencil back in his shirt pocket. “I’d expected a bit more of a magical duel than that.”

Jasper turned to his father. “You sound disappointed.”

“I am rather. Seeing your mother in action is hot. And a magical battle gets her riled up like nothing else, which makes the sex a bit dangerous. But damned good.” He leered at his wife.

“Oh, my god. You can’t say stuff like that where I can hear you,” Jasper said, wishing his hands were free so he could cover his ears.

A few seconds later, they were. Gabe knelt in front of him and pulled a knife from his boot—speaking of hot—and slashed through the ropes, setting Jasper free. “Your parents are kind of nuts, aren’t they?” he asked, sliding the knife back into his boot before taking hold of Jasper’s arms and chafing his wrists.

“A bit.”

“And uncomfortably open about sex.”

Jasper snorted. “You have no idea. Remind me to tell you about Dad’s orgasm face exercises.”

Gabe looked at him suspiciously. “Do I really want to know?”

“Nope,” Jasper said, shaking his head. “But if I have to know about them, so do you. We’re a team now.”

“Maybe there’s still time to get out of this.”

“Oh, no Mr. Hot Detective. There’s no take-backsies. You’re stuck with me forever,” Jasper said, grinning when Gabe helped him out of the chair.

“Which won’t be long if you keep doing this to me,” Gabe muttered.

“Doing what?”

“Getting yourself into trouble.”

“It’s not like I asked to be kidnapped.”

“I know. But this kind of shit keeps happening. I’m going to be gray before I’m thirty-five.”

Jasper tilted his head to the side, trying to imagine Gabe as a silver fox. The image slipped easily into his mind and made him sigh.

“Are you listening to me?”

Jasper nodded.

“What did I just say?”

Jasper opened his mouth, then closed it. He thought about it for a second, then shrugged. “I have no idea.”

Gabe snorted, shaking his head. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Love me,” Jasper said, crossing his fingers behind his back.

Gabe sighed. “I think I already do.”

Jasper couldn’t catch his breath. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“I love you too,” Jasper said, throwing himself at Gabe, laughing when they tumbled to the ground.

“Do you love me enough to stop getting yourself into these situations?” Gabe asked, looking up at him like he was precious, a look Jasper could get used to.

Leaning down, he pressed his forehead to Gabe’s. “I can try. But even if something happens, the shard—”

“You and your mother put too much faith in that damned shard. If tonight proved anything, it’s that you can’t depend on it.”

Jasper frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“I know you don’t want to hear it, but the shard let you down.”

“No, it didn’t.”

“Yes, it did. Otherwise, Elwood wouldn’t have been able to take you.”

“Oh. That’s because I wasn’t wearing the shard when Elwood threw the spell bag at me,” Jasper said, sitting back on Gabe’s lap.

Instant scowl. “Why the fuck not?”

Jasper shrugged. “The chain got caught on something when I was getting the donuts out of the trunk and snapped.”

“Excuse me?”

Jasper squinted at him. “What?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Gabe yelled, sitting up and grabbing him by the shoulders.

“Why are you yelling?” Jasper asked, not understanding why Gabe was so mad.

“You drove off a goddamned cliff—”

“I was pushed off a cliff.”

“You were pushed off a goddamned cliff and somehow managed to wedge your car between the only two rocks for miles in either direction because the shard kept you safe, but the chain snapped getting a fucking box of donuts out of the car?”

“Uhm...yes.”

“What the fuck? Why would it do that?”

Jasper shrugged. “The shard must have had a reason for letting Elwood take me.”



“The shard had a reason?”

Jasper nodded, the fierceness in Gabe’s eyes sending a shiver down his spine. And not from fear. “I think there was something we needed to know.”

“Like what?”

“I’m not sure. But there was something important we needed to see tonight.” Jasper could actually see when Gabe switched over to cop mode.

“Tell me everything that happened when Elwood took you.”

Jasper nodded and recited the events exactly as he remembered them, though he did gloss over what it had felt like to be suffocated by the black magic smoke, thinking Gabe didn’t need to hear that. His mother gave him a long look when he described the spell bomb going off at his feet, obviously hearing everything he wasn’t saying. The most troublesome part, at least for him, was telling them about how Elwood kept going from calm to crazy mad, showing how far he’d slipped into madness since the last time Jasper had spoken to him.

But that was the problem with dark magic. It had a way of taking over and consuming the witch. And the further down the path into the dark arts a witch went, the faster the magic took over. Which is why it took a coven to control the darkest and most powerful levels of black magic. At least, in the beginning. Because regardless of the strength of the coven, the dark magic always ended up controlling it.

“Oh, fuck,” Jasper said, realizing what the shard had wanted them to know. He looked up at his mother. “Elwood shouldn’t have been able to escape your containment field.”

His mother pursed her lips, then slowly shook her head. “I wouldn’t have thought so, but I’ve never tried to contain black magic before.”

“What if he wasn’t using black magic? What if he used Black magic to power his translocation spell?”

“You think—” Her eyes were wide as she looked over to the corner where Elwood had been.

“What are you guys talking about?” Gabe asked, frowning as his gaze flipped back and forth between them. “We know Elwood was using black magic. We found the remains of the spell at Jasper’s house.”

Jasper shook his head. “That’s not the kind of black magic I’m talking about.”

“There’s more than one kind?”

“Yes. There’s black magic, and then there’s Black magic.”

Gabe squinted at him. “They sound the same.”

“They’re not. One’s black, the other’s Black.”

“Still sounds the same.”

“Detective, if I may?” When Gabe nodded, she said, “The spell bag we found at Jasper’s house was low level black magic. Something anyone could have put together if they had the necessary components and a lack of conscience.”

“Okay. So then what’s this other black magic?” he asked, looking from her to Jasper.

“The most powerful and darkest magic there is,” Jasper said, grabbing onto Gabe’s hand, needing the connection. “Regular black magic wouldn’t have been enough to escape from Mother’s containment shield. At least, I don’t think it would have. Even with my crystals, I’m not sure if I could have broken out of it. And I doubt Mother could have either.”

“I might have,” she said, “given enough time.”

“But Elwood did it easily,” Gabe said, realization dawning in his eyes.

Jasper nodded. “That’s why I think he was using Black magic. But Black magic takes the strength of an entire coven to control. Which means—”

Gabe caught on quickly. “Elwood isn’t the only one using this Black magic.”

“No.”

“How many witches are in a coven?”

“From the amount of power Elwood used, I would think at least thirteen,” Jasper’s mother said, a frown wrinkling her forehead. “But there could have been as many as twenty-one.” She looked at the corner again. “Unless—”

“What is it, Mom?”

“If they’re harnessing the power of thirty-nine...no. They wouldn’t be that foolish.” But worry clouded her eyes as she turned to look at Jasper.

“What’s so significant about thirty-nine?” Emerson asked.

Glancing over at him, she said, “Thirty-nine is the maximum number of witches who can work together at one time. But doing so comes with great risk. If even one of them falters, the magic consumes them all. That’s why none have been foolhardy enough to attempt it for at least two hundred years.”

Emerson let out a low whistle. “What kind of magical power could thirty-nine witches yield?”

“You don’t want to know, Detective.”

“And regardless of their numbers, no coven will be able to control the Black magic for long,” Jasper said, his fingers tightening on Gabe’s hand. “You saw the madness in Elwood’s eyes. That wasn’t there a couple of days ago. Which means the magic is already taking control of him. It’ll soon be controlling the others.”

“If it hasn’t taken over the coven already,” Gabe said.

“Yes,” Jasper whispered.

“Fuck. Our whole city is in danger.”

But it was so much worse than that. If Black magic was controlling the coven, their city would only be the first to fall. Next would be their country. Then, if not stopped, it would take over the entire world.

## Epilogue

She lifted the receiver, dread filling her when she heard the cold, sibilant tones of Azmn, the one being none of them ever wanted to draw the attention of. She had no idea if they were male or female. Or even human. And she knew better than to ask.

“You said you could control the boy.”

“Forgive me. I didn’t realize the extent of his fixation. Or his anger.”

“His life is forfeit.”

“No, please. You must give him another chance.”

“There are no second chances.”

“Please, I’m begging you. He didn’t understand. There is still much he can contribute. I’ll make sure he doesn’t fail you again.”

The silence went on for long enough that she feared her pleas to save her firstborn had been in vain. Then her prayers were answered. But by the end, she wished they hadn’t been.

“He will be spared. This time.”

“Thank you.”

“Another failure will not be tolerated.”

“I understand.”

“You do not. If he fails us again, his life will be forfeit. Along with the entirety of his line.”

“What? No. You can’t—”

“It is done.”

The finality in those words resounded in her head like an echoing clang of doom long after the call ended. She let the phone fall, knowing there was no saving any of them. Not anymore.

*Fin*



*To be continued in **Dragon Magic**, coming soon...*

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## About the Author

Sheri is an MM Romance writer who believes that love should have no boundaries, in happy-ever-afters, that dragons are real...oh, and bacon; there's always room for bacon.

Her stories are low angst, high action, fade to black or minimal sex, and have characters who know how to kick butt.

She lives in Alberta, Canada with her husband, two sons, four cats, and one crazy, energetic dog.

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