



# HEX



# K.L. SAVAGE

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**RUTHLESS KINGS MC  
NEW ORLEANS CHAPTER  
BOOK THREE**

**K.L. SAVAGE**

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## HEX

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***We're all going to die one day. But I'm not dying today. I'm choosing to live.***

New Orleans is full of spirits, but now something sinister has settled over the city. The ghosts are all gone or hiding from me.

I have to find a way to help. Track down any spirit willing to talk. When I meet Juliana, she catches me off guard. I feel seen for the first time. She makes me feel understood in a way no one else ever has.

But with the death toll rising no one is safe. Our enemies are being hunted and we are next. Is the disappearance of the ghosts, the deaths, and this dark spirit all connected?

We are at war with an enemy we can't see. Fighting a losing battle. But we are the Ruthless Kings and a King never bows to anyone, especially not an enemy.

***I've lived a life that's all about death, but Juliana makes me want to live.***

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## PROLOGUE

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**M**y parents and I sing along to some old Brazilian song as we drive along the highway. They laugh, the love for each other so evident in their eyes that it almost makes me sick. I love my parents so much, but their love for each other can be a little overwhelming. It makes me long for someone of my own, but it's become clear that that's not happening anytime soon.

This is how they always are when we're out celebrating. When we get home, they'll probably blast the music so loud that the neighbors will complain. Papa will twirl Mama around the living room and they'll pretend they're still in their early twenties, rather than their late 50's.

For now, my father kisses my mother's hand in the front seat and she laughs, delighted. He turns the music up even louder and they dance in their seats. I join them, my body moved by the beat, electrified. I may be chronically single, but that isn't going to stop me from enjoying the night. We're all too distracted to notice the oncoming headlights.

Everything goes dark, but I can still see Papa's face in my head, staring adoringly at Mama. I try to open my eyes, but the pain is too much. When I breathe in, it's like a thousand shards of glass are working their way through my lungs. I'm terrified I'm going to combust from the inside.

I feel someone approach, and I pray it's Papa, coming to check on me. But as I painfully open my eyes, I realize I don't know the figure approaching me. He's dressed in all black, holding a large book and chanting in some language I can't make out. His presence sends a fearful chill through my body. I have to get up, find my phone and call an ambulance. We'll be okay, if only I can get away from this man.

But then his hand is on my forehead, and if I thought I knew what pain was, I was seriously mistaken. I cry out, despite the pain in my throat and lungs, and then there's silence and darkness like I've never known. The world is black nothingness, emptiness, and I'm all alone.

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## CHAPTER ONE

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A gentle trill of laughter catches the wind and I follow it. I don't recognize the voice, yet it's like I've known it all my life. The high-pitched, feminine sound draws me in, and I am powerless. I must follow.

It echoes behind buildings and under doorways but remains out of reach. I will tear up all of New Orleans to identify the woman who makes this sweet sound. She is nowhere to be found. As fast as I run, as hard as I look, I find nothing but a whisper in the air.

The ghosts don't help. They point and laugh and joke that I've met my match. Bastards. It's just like them to be silent when I need them the most. After everything I've done for them, the least they could do is help me locate her.

A stroke of luck and a strike of raven hair. There's a form to match the sound. She's turning the corner, darting behind a headstone. I chase after her, confident I can overtake her. As I get closer, I see the space is empty. I stop and survey my surroundings.

I see her hair blowing in the wind again, this time outside the cemetery gate. She has nowhere to hide, and I'll easily overtake her. I run as fast as my feet will carry me and call after her, but the moment she turns to face me, she vanishes into thin air. What the hell is going on?

And how did I get to the graveyard? I wasn't here a moment ago. I was inside a bar. What is that cold chill going through me? It should be much warmer—it's the middle of August.

I sit up in my bed, drenched in a cold sweat, and angrily eye the ghost, Cassandra.



“What did I tell you about watching me sleep?” I growl at her, which only makes her giggle.

Cassandra is a harbinger of chaos, having died when she was eight years old. Her afterlife’s mission is to make me her perpetual babysitter. As if I don’t have enough things on my plate. As if I only live to entertain a young ghost.

“You were having a nightmare,” she says cheerfully, reaching for my hand and causing another chill to shoot through my arm. I hate when she does that.

“Cassandra,” I warn. “You have to respect my personal boundaries or you won’t be allowed into my room anymore.”

She looks at me skeptically, knowing I would never truly take measures to shut her out. Of all the ghosts at the clubhouse, she’s the least problematic. Not that she isn’t consistently a pain in the ass, but hey, she’s only eight, after all. I can’t blame her for lacking maturity.

“Tell me about your nightmare,” she demands, a hopeful gleam in her eyes.

Cassandra loves nightmares. The gorier, the better. She’s endlessly entertained hearing the other Ruthless Kings’ nightmares. They, of course, aren’t aware that she’s privy to their private conversations, but I can’t control where she goes. This house is as much hers as it is mine.

I shake my head, not because I want to deny her pleasure of the macabre but because it wasn’t a nightmare at all. It was a frustrating dream, sure, but I felt hopeful and excited. I still hear the woman’s laughter echoing around my brain.

“It wasn’t a nightmare. And you shouldn’t have woken me up. That wasn’t nice, and if you keep it up, I’ll put you in time out.”

She sticks her tongue out at me and crosses her arms petulantly. I shoo her off of my bed and turn over, trying to get back to sleep and find the woman who was teasing me.

“You can’t go back to sleep,” she says in a bored tone. “Something bad has happened. Pocus is calling church.”

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I stumble down the main stairs of the clubhouse, rubbing my eyes. It’s only

3:00 AM, and

I'm pissed at Pocus for making us get out of bed. What could possibly be so important that it can't wait another few hours? Based on the looks of the other club members, I'm not the only one thinking that.

But Pocus is the Prez, and what he says goes. I've been loyal to him since I joined the Ruthless Kings, and I won't be disloyal now. An early wake-up call is hardly grounds for a mutiny. It better be good, though, that's all I'm saying.

As I look around, I realize I'm nearly the last one to arrive. Great.

"Nice of you to join us, Hex," Pocus says sarcastically. "I'm sorry to interrupt your beauty sleep."

I flip him the bird and take my seat. Seer files in after I do, and I notice Pocus doesn't say a word to him. Dick. They've gotten closer since Seer's brush with death. Do we all have to be hunted down by our murderous twin brothers to earn that kind of respect? I control my bitterness and stifle a yawn.

"Thank you for joining me at this early hour," Pocus begins gravely. "I'm sorry I had to drag you out of bed for this, but I've received word that Anderson Grey is dead."

Shock ripples through the assembled crowd and the men whisper among themselves. I look at Pocus, who seems more stressed than ever. Which says a lot because Pocus has been stressed out a lot in the last year. The last few, come to think of it.

He's a dad now, though, which adds a layer of worry I can't imagine. We all hear little Daisy at night when Pocus brings her out of his soundproofed bedroom to give her a bottle. She's nearly a year old and still hasn't settled into a sleep routine. She might be the death of us all.

Although, she may also be the reason Pocus couldn't wait until morning to share this news. He probably figured since he was up anyway, we should join him. In my tired, grumpy state, all I can think about is how I want to punch him in the face. Prez or not, he's keeping me from my literal dream woman.

"Do we have confirmation he's dead?" Seer asks, shell-shocked.

Pocus nods seriously, his face extra gaunt.

"A guard confirmed it just moments ago. He was murdered by a gang member on the inside. Apparently, it was a nasty affair."

Pocus absentmindedly wipes down the front of his shirt, as if he's

imagining the scene. He probably would have liked to be the one who dealt the fatal blow after everything Anderson put his wife through.

“Well, as tragic as that is, why drag us out of bed?” Knix interjects. “If anything, we should all sleep better knowing that son of a bitch is gone.”

A few men cheer, but Pocus hisses at them to quiet down.

“He made our lives a living hell,” Bones chimes in. “We should be celebrating!”

“Quiet,” I shout to the room. My booming voice brings the conversation to a halt. I see on Pocus’s face lines of distress and I know he doesn’t consider Anderson’s death good news.

“Thank you, Hex,” Pocus says. “There will be no celebration because his death doesn’t mean we’re free of him. For all we know, he arranged his own death so he could blame us for it.”

“Or he faked his death and is on his way here,” Seer mutters.

Pocus fixes him with a serious look.

“Anything you’d like to share, Seer?” he asks. Seer immediately looks sorry and shakes his head.

“All this to say,” Pocus continues, “we aren’t in the clear yet. We need to be more on our guard than usual and make sure our assets are fully secured. Anderson has tried to bring down this club before. I wouldn’t put it past him to keep trying, even in death.”

More grumbling comes through the room, and everyone gets lost in their memories of Anderson’s cruelty. Pocus is right, even in death he has the power to royally fuck us over. That’s the kind of man Anderson is. Or was.

“Hex,” Pocus calls out. “You’ll need to keep an ear to the ground and see if the ghosts know anything. The last thing we need is Anderson’s ghost haunting the clubhouse.”

I fix him with a wide-eyed gaze, surprised at his request. Pocus is kind to the ghosts, such that he allows them to wander around the clubhouse and refuses to use salt to keep them away. That doesn’t mean he’s a fan, and he’s certainly never asked me to directly request anything of them.

His stress is much deeper than parenthood or concern about retribution. Pocus is afraid of something, but he isn’t ready to share his fear. He’ll act calm and pretend everything is fine, but deep down, a war will wage inside of him that he’ll tell us nothing about.

I nod, assuring Pocus that I’ll do as he asks.

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I walk into the kitchen, looking for something that might soothe me back to sleep, but of course, Tory is always a step ahead. She stands at the stove, brewing an earthy-smelling tea that I'm sure is for all of us. She may not be the psychic in her relationship, but she always seems to know what we need.

"You look tired, Hex," she says bluntly. Though, to be fair, Tory is always blunt. She can't help it.

"I'm exhausted. I hope whatever potion you're brewing is for me."

She sticks her tongue out at me and pours the pale-brown liquid into a teacup for me. She adds a squirt of honey and a generous spoonful of sugar and mixes the liquid delicately before handing the mug to me.

"It's hot," she warns. "Don't forget to blow on it."

I roll my eyes, resenting the way she chides me like a child, but then I take a sip without cooling it and I regret it. She smirks at me and gives me a knowing look. I pretend my mouth isn't on fire as I casually blow into the teacup.

"What's wrong?"

"Why would you think something is wrong?" I say, testing her. Tory has become one of my best friends in the world, but I often dislike how well she can read people. She knows me better than I know myself sometimes.

"Well, besides the obvious fact you've just come from church in the middle of the night, your stress is rolling off of you in waves."

"You know I can't talk about church," I warn.

She shoots me a secret smile and assures me Seer will fill her in on everything, so not to worry. "You might as well spill the beans. What's causing the premature frown lines?"

I sit down at the table, and she joins me, holding her teacup. Before the women arrived at the clubhouse, this would have been a ridiculous scenario, but Tory and I often ate breakfast together, talking over mugs of coffee. It became our routine over the last year.

"Pocus wants me to investigate the ghosts," I admitted.

She frowns and nods, understanding the gravity of his command. She knows as well as I do how Pocus feels about the ghosts.

"But that's not what's really bothering you," she pushes. "You're stressed about something else."

Sometimes I hate that Tory is so intuitive. She sees things I'm not ready

to share and pushes me to confront my demons. Sometimes I just want to ignore my demons. I sigh and take a long sip from my cup.

“I had a weird dream,” I say after a long pause.

She quirks her eyebrow at me, prompting me further.

“There was a woman, and—”

She claps her hands excitedly, not letting me finish my thought. Typical Tory.

“It’s about time,” she whispers conspiratorially. “You’re due for love. It’s your turn! Tell me more about her.”

I shrug off her excitement. After all, there isn’t anything to tell. Not yet, anyway.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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# Pocus

What did mankind do before coffee? Probably killed each other for sport to feel alive. It's not a bad idea, come to think about it. Fuck Anderson for dying in the middle of the night. Fuck my life.

I open all the cabinets, searching for the fresh coffee grounds Buffy keeps around here somewhere. When I finally find what I'm looking for, I scoop out more grounds than I need, knowing the stronger the better. As the Prez, I can't look weak in front of my men. They can be tired all they want, but I have to appear strong.

When the brew is finished, I pour myself a large mug of coffee and take a long gulp before it has a moment to cool. The hot liquid surges through me and gives me an ounce of a will to live this morning. Life would be so much better if I could crawl back into bed with Abigail and sleep off the bullshit waiting for me.

Of course, if that happened little Daisy would probably wake up and start screaming, and disturb our peace again. I love my daughter with all my heart. I'd literally take a bullet for her, which is not a sentiment I ever thought I'd feel about another person. Unfortunately, with the way she's been interrupting my sleep schedule, sometimes I think I'd prefer the bullet.

I lean against the counter and get lost in my thoughts. My vision is clouded at the edges by blackness, and I'm falling into the sweet escape of sleep when I hear loud footsteps bounding through the kitchen.

"Damn, mon ami." Seer laughs, pulling me out of my stupor. "If this is what parenthood is like, I might start using condoms."

He walks to the coffee pot and pours himself a mug, wincing when he tastes the extra-dark roast. He'll thank me later when he's able to stay awake.

“That’s more information than I’ve ever needed,” I tell Seer, annoyed. I already feel the effects of a migraine working its way through my body. “Merde. I have to get more sleep!”

“Well, you can start by postponing church for later in the morning.”

I glare at him. We both know it wouldn’t matter. The news of Anderson’s death would never come at a good time. The men needed to know because his death could blow back on all of us. Today, we’ll have to assess the damage, but knowing Anderson, he set a plan into place that will keep us scratching our heads for months.

I hated the man with every fiber of my being but once I met Abigail, I realized how evil he actually was. His death should be a relief, but I know him better than that. He would have backup plans and cronies in place. He’s too evil to simply die and leave us be.

“Fat load of good you’ve been, asshole,” I grumble at him. “Couldn’t you see that Anderson would die? Couldn’t you have warned me?”

I look at Seer, who eyes me warily. He takes a deep breath and shuffles his feet, holding back. Then he shakes his head and talks, unburdening himself from whatever he’s been hiding.

“You know my visions come when they will but they have been... testy for the last year. I didn’t want to tell you. I didn’t want you to get worried, but they’re not like they used to be. The future is even less clear than it was before.”

The news washes over me like a bucket of ice-cold water. Things had been bad since his fight with his brother, Edward, but things had been good, too. He had Tory, who seemed to keep him grounded and made him incredibly happy.

He’s always been a little cagey about his visions, only sharing what he felt was necessary. But he’s helped us avoid scrutiny many times. If his visions aren’t working properly, we’re down a weapon.

“Worry not, mon frere.” He laughs. “You have more than enough to concern you. I’m just saying, if I’d had any idea about Anderson, I would have told you in a heartbeat. He’s been the last thing on my mind.”

He smirks, and I know he’s thinking of his wife upstairs. I wish I was as lucky as to never think about Anderson again, but his life was inextricably linked to mine. Abigail came such a long way since we rescued her from Anderson’s grasp, but that doesn’t stop the occasional nightmare.

Now that Anderson was dead, we’re theoretically safe, but something in

my gut knows safety will never be an option. If it's not Anderson, it will be some other asshole trying to take away everything I've worked so hard for.

It's not just the club that has me worried. There's so much more at stake now. The little girl who's blissfully sleeping upstairs with no idea what kind of world she's been born into is my highest priority. The moment she was born, I was filled with anxiety that I'd fuck her up the way my parents had fucked me up.

At the very least, I would never abandon her and make her fend for herself. But I couldn't control the darkness that surrounded me at all times. It was closing in on me, and I couldn't let it touch her. I would die if something happened to my daughter.

Anderson's death is the opposite of good news. It's a reminder that nothing is in my control, and anything can spring up to threaten my family. Abigail has been through enough. Hell, we both have, but we promised that we'd give Daisy a life unlike ours. We promised to keep her safe and make her feel loved. We can't do that if something happens to us.

I will go to Hell myself to ensure Anderson is there. If that's what has to be done, I'm willing to do it for my family.

## Seer

Pocus is in a terrible mood, so I leave him in the kitchen to stew in his misery. When he gets like this, nothing can make it better. He is complicated and broody, and I can't help him. I simply have to focus on my own happiness.

Despite the darkness of the last few months, Tory has been my shining light. She's helped me to see the world in a way I never thought possible, and I swear to God her pussy is magical. Every time I tell her that, she laughs, but I've never been so satisfied.

When I get to my room, I find my love tossing and turning in her sleep, tangling herself in our sheets. I immediately go to her, gently placing my hands on her shoulders to wake her up. Her red hair is soaked with sweat,



making her hair even curlier. She's beautiful always, but in her sleep, she's radiant. I only wish she wasn't so afraid of whatever she faces in her dreams.

I place a gentle kiss on her forehead, hoping to wake her, but she thrashes violently against me and pushes me away with such force that I stumble backward and have to catch myself. My admiration of her beauty turns to fear. I grab her shoulders more forcefully, shaking her and calling her name.

Her eyes snap open and she sits up, immediately clutching my shirt and pulling me toward her. She breathes heavily from fear and cries softly against me. She's disoriented and confused, so I rub her back and whisper it was just a dream, but she shakes her head.

"You don't understand," she cries. "You didn't see it."

She clings to me, wrapping her arms around my neck. Her body trembles against mine. Something has her seriously spooked.

"Didn't see what?" I ask her gently. "Ma cherie, what's going on?"

She shakes her head and sobs for several minutes, shaking herself off from whatever monster chased her in her dreams. When she finally calms down, she takes several deep breaths and gently releases me.

"There's something dark in the spirit world," she whispers frantically, unable to control the shaking in her voice. "I saw it casting a shadow on everything good, everything we love. It's destroying the spirit world. Even the ghosts are afraid."

I hold her closer and rock her back and forth, absentmindedly playing with her hair. My fingers get caught in the curls, and I gently scratch at her scalp as she leans into me.

"Something is coming," she says in a dark, warning tone. "Something is coming for us, and I'm not sure we can stop it from happening."

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## CHAPTER THREE

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# Pocus

**B**ones and I ride around the Quarter, keeping our eye out for suspicious activity. Of course, it's the Quarter. Everything is suspicious, but there's no sign of Anderson's old men. At least I'll sleep soundly tonight.

Bones continues his drive, but I pull over when I feel my phone buzzing in my pocket. I signal for Bones to go on ahead, and I stop in front of a voodoo shop, a tourist trap if there ever was one. I answer my phone without looking.

"Mr. Pocus," a slimy-sounding voice says from the other end. "I hope you're well."

"Who the hell is this?" I ask through gritted teeth. I'm already annoyed from my lack of sleep. I don't have the patience for a telemarketer.

"My name is Jonathan Ward. I'm the attorney representing Anderson Grey's estate."

I glare at the store in front of me, my blood boiling at the mention of that bastard's name. What the hell could his lawyer be calling me for? Surely, he couldn't already be implicating me in Anderson's murder.

"There's a box of things from Mr. Grey's old penthouse that he's specifically instructed me to send you."

Whatever the hell it is, I don't want it. I tell the lawyer that he can shove it up his ass.

"Mr. Pocus, that's all well and good, but my office legally can't do anything with these artifacts if you don't take them. Throw them out, give them to charity, but you have to take them."

Of course. Smarmy son of a bitch. I don't want anything that has ever

been associated with Anderson, but it seems my hands are tied in this matter. Maybe the men and I will set up these *artifacts* in the backyard and take shots at them. That would be good for the club's morale.

"Fuck," I whisper under my breath. "Fine, Mr. Ward," I grumble into the phone. "I assume you already have my address. Send the things and leave me the fuck alone."

I hang up my phone and slip it back into my pocket. This day has been enough as it is. It's time for me to go back home to my girls and pray I can sleep tonight.

# Tory

I feel her presence before she knocks on the door. She's not surprised at all to see me a split second after she knocks. There she is, her sunglasses covering her eyes and a wide smile breaking out across her face.

"It's good to see you, child," she tells me, as if I'm the guest and she's the one who's welcoming me into her home. But that's Mama. She belongs wherever she steps foot.

I usher her inside and ask if I can get her anything to drink, but she waves me off.

"This isn't a social call, cheri mwen," she says kindly, though there's an edge to her voice. We walk back to the kitchen and she sits down at the counter, fixing me with a stare. "I'm not sure you are aware but you called out to me in your sleep, child. Tell me what's wrong."

I look at her in shock, because no, I hadn't realized my spirit had called out to her. I've been trying to block out the dream, afraid of the repercussions of what I saw. Seer tried to assure me it was only a dream, but he isn't like me. He doesn't feel things in the spirit world as well as the natural.

"You're shaking, child," Mama says, concerned. She walks behind me and pulls things out of the cabinet, making herself at home.

"You don't perceive it?" I ask her, shocked. "I feel like it's eating me alive."

She nods and sings an old Haitian lullaby, ignoring my words as she makes me an herbal blend. She motions for me to sit down, and I do, waiting patiently for her to say something, anything. This is the way Mama works. I love her to pieces, but she can be incredibly frustrating at times.

When the brew is finished, she pours it into a mug and lets it cool off before dipping her fingers in it and covering my head with the liquid.

“This is for protection,” she tells me, focusing on her task.

She dips her fingers in the brew again, running it over the palms of my hands.

“Something in the spirit world is calling out to you, cheri, and you have to be the one to respond.”

She makes me sit and removes my shoes, rubbing the mixture over the soles of my feet.

“It has not reached out to me, so I cannot perceive it. You have been chosen as the messenger, so you are burdened with the task of feeling its presence. You alone have the power to do what needs to be done.”

I sigh heavily, afraid she would say something like that. I don’t want to be burdened with this task. It makes me physically ill. I break out into a cold sweat just thinking about it, and my stomach churns.

I push Mama away and run to the bathroom, falling to the ground and puking in the toilet. She follows me slowly, watching over me.

“Something has its claws in you deeply,” she whispers, grabbing a washcloth from the counter and wetting it in the sink. She brings it to me and places it on the back of my neck to cool me down.

“Mama, why is this happening?” I ask, tears stinging my eyes.

The bathroom tile is cold, and I feel the grooves pressing into my knees. I’m too aware of everything, too sensitive to the natural and spirit world. She simply rubs my back and keeps singing her lullaby.

“You need rest,” she says when my stomach is completely empty. “The herbs should protect your mind for now, so no one can bother you in your sleep. Keep an onion under your pillow to draw out the evil spirits in your mind.”

I nod, wipe my miserable face, stand up on shaky legs, and look at her small frame.

“I will help you however I can, but this journey is yours to walk.”



It's been a hell of a day. A new gang is trying to come up in the south of the city, and they want to start a turf war. Seer and I spent the day scoping them out, and we don't like what we found. With all our troubles, trying to stop a young gang was not on my agenda.

Neither was coming to a seedy nightclub, but Seer clearly needs the time off. He's been extra silent and moody today, and I know it has something to do with Tory. He won't talk about it, and I won't force him. He'll bring it up if he feels he needs to. My only job tonight is to drink and ignore the leers coming my way.

"You're good to come," Seer shouts over the music. "I know this isn't your scene."

I shrug as we push through drunk bodies to reach the bar. He owes me a drink and he knows it. He orders two whiskey sours and tells the bartender to keep them coming. Once he's downed his first glass, he picks his way across the dance floor to take a leak. I stay by the bar, surveying the crowd.

A familiar sound catches my attention, and I whip my head around to see a woman leaving the other side of the bar, a large glass in hand. It's filled with something pink, and I'm sure it's one of those stupid girly drinks Abigail loves so much. But it isn't the drink that keeps my attention. It's the jet-black, shiny hair.

Something sparks inside of me. I stand up, pushing past drunk patrons to approach her, but when I reach the spot where I last saw her, she's nowhere to be found. Why does this feel so familiar? I stand a good head above the girls dancing around me, but I can't spot the black hair anywhere. I curse and turn back to my place at the bar.

Naturally, some yuppy prick has taken my place. After one intimidating

look from me, he grabs his drink and walks away. I reclaim my seat and scowl at the crowd, frustrated that I lost the woman with the dark hair and annoyed to be here. The alcohol isn't kicking in as quickly as I need it to.

Seer comes back and orders another drink. When he sees my face, he questions me. Rather than answering him, I ask him something that clearly catches him off guard.

"What does it feel like when you have a vision?" I ask. "Because I think I just had one."

Seer stares at me in shock but quickly shakes it away. "Tell me more, mona mi," he prompts. "What did you see? What did it feel like?"

I shrug. "There was this woman just now. I'm sure I've met her before, but I have no idea where. I have this strange sense of déjà vu."

Seer tosses his head back and laughs good-naturedly. Despite the fact he's laughing at my expense, I'm glad he's happy. He needs the release of laughter as much as I need to find that woman.

"I don't mean to laugh," Seer tells me. "It's just that visions are more complex. I feel them with my entire body. The atmosphere around me shifts, and I can tell when one is coming."

I nod, taking a sip of my drink before sighing. It was a bad idea to bring it up, and I knew it the moment the words left my mouth. Seer can see the future, but this is something different. It's like I'm experiencing someone from my past, but I've never seen this woman in my life.

"If I see ghosts, I'll be sure to consult you." He laughs, taking another long swig of his drink.

As he sets his glass on the table, a loud bang echoes through the club. Screams follow. Before I can process what's happening, Seer grabs my arm and pulls me down.

Another round of shots has the club in pandemonium. Bodies run everywhere, but I can't identify where the shooting is coming from. Seer holds my arm firmly, preventing me from investigating.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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**W**e stay hidden under the bar for what feels like an eternity. The shooting finally stops and the club falls eerily quiet. I shudder to imagine the scene that awaits us. Seer slowly stands and I follow him. People cower under tables and their cries fill the room.

Bodies lay everywhere, some clinging to life, some passed to the other side. Their spirits watch over their bodies, and I mourn for them. What a violent end. Seer shouts something, but my ears are ringing and my blood is boiling. Whoever did this was a monster.

I immediately think back to the woman, and I scan the crowd, looking for her. Once people see us standing, they realize the immediate danger has passed. More pandemonium breaks out. People are frantic, getting up and running to the nearest exit. They trample over the dead and those clinging to life, and there's no way for me to find the woman in this madness.

“Call Pocus,” Seer instructs over the noise, his phone out and pressed to his ear.

I do as I'm told. Within fifteen minutes, Pocus shows up with half the MC. They survey the scene, horrified by the sight. I don't blame them. I'm horrified as well, but I was here when the carnage began. I've had more time to process it.

Graveyard runs in, his medical bag in hand, and Evanesce follows quickly behind him. I realize Seer must have called him when I was on the phone with Pocus. He and Evanesce quickly assess the victims on the ground, checking pulses and asking about injuries. If they're conscious, Graveyard does what he can to make them comfortable. If they aren't, Evanesce gently lays her hands on them to take away their pain.

I've seen Evanesce in action before, but never to this scale. She flits between bodies, soothing anyone who's alive. She has the ability to heal them, and she does what she can to take away their pain. She can't undo the gunshots, though. That's what Graveyard is here to help with.

Pocus instructs Bones, Knix, Hemlock, and Gator to fan out and find the shooter. The police haven't arrived yet, and he'll make sure to bring swift justice to the murderer if he can find him. Pocus doesn't trust the police to do what's right. None of us do.

# Pocus

Of course the pigs show up ten minutes after we do. That's NOLA's finest for you. They're always a day late and a few brain cells short. They eye me and my men suspiciously. I glare back, daring them to make an accusation. It wouldn't be the first I was falsely accused of a crime and it certainly won't be the last.

We would never do something so senseless, and that's what makes the beast inside me claw out for freedom. He wants to kill the person that inflicted so much pain on innocents who just wanted to enjoy a night on the town. Some of the victims look like mere children. I wouldn't be surprised if there were youngsters who snuck in, thinking they would find a good time tonight. How wrong they were.

The policemen walk around carefully, trying not to step on bodies, but it's difficult. They're everywhere. It turns my stomach to see so many in pain, some grasping to life by the skin of their teeth. Evanesce helps with the pain, and Graveyard will save as many as he can. Hopefully the pigs will see we've only come to help.

Many are unconscious, and the able-bodied have already fled for their lives. The cops won't get many statements tonight, except from us. I won't be surprised if they try to haul us all away for something we had no hand in. That would be typical of them.

A young officer approaches me, looking mighty full of himself. I hate



him instantly.

“I know you,” he says. “You’re Pocus. You’re legendary around the station.”

By *legendary*, he means *untouchable*. Try as they might, the police haven’t pinned any crimes on me in years. That’s mostly because the crimes they accuse me of were perpetrated by someone else. Also because Snake constantly monitors the situation and lets me know when the police are making inquiries.

We couldn’t have predicted tonight, though. I look warily at Seer, remembering what he told me this morning. He literally couldn’t predict tonight, despite the fact it directly involved him. His visions don’t come at will but in a situation like this... they must be even worse than he’s letting on. A chill runs through me, and I worry for my friend and vice president.

“Can I help you?” I ask the man in a bored tone, indicating this has nothing to do with me.

“For starters, you can tell me what the hell you’re doing at this nightclub moments after someone opened fire.”

I notice a glint in his eye. He thinks he has me. I have an alibi, though, and a perfectly legitimate excuse for being here. I tell him my men were here enjoying their night like everyone else. I show the man my phone, and he can see that Hex called me after the shooting had already occurred.

“As you can see, Officer,” I tell him in a tone so saccharine it makes me feel sick, “I had nothing to do with what occurred tonight. I’ve only come to offer my help.”

The officer eyes me warily and tells me not to wander off. He’s out of his depth and he knows it, but he wants to believe he has any control over the situation. That’s how these pigs are.

I hear the ambulances arriving outside, and paramedics immediately rush in to put bodies on the stretchers. I scan the room and see Evanesce and Graveyard are nowhere to be found. They don’t want to be thanked or recognized for the work they’ve done tonight. But I saw, and I’ll thank them properly when we’re back home. They deserve the praise.

The scene inside is mass confusion. Outside is no better. I walk out to catch my breath and see dozens of news reporters held back by a makeshift blockade. Hundreds of onlookers wait, watching for any news. They’ll be waiting for a long time.

Bones and Gator meet me outside in the back alley, informing me that the

shooter got away. They combed the place, but there was no trace of him anywhere. The police will use that as an excuse to pin it on us, I'm sure, saying Hex or Seer was responsible. Evidence will prove them wrong, but it won't stop them from trying. That's just the way things work.

"Hey," the officer from earlier calls to me gruffly from the entrance of the alleyway. "I told you not to wander."

"I'm literally standing ten feet from the door," I tell him in a cold tone. "I've followed your instructions as commanded. As you can see, my story lines up. If you've finished questioning my friends who were at risk of losing their lives tonight, I would very much like to leave."

The man glares at me, but he knows I have a point. Unless they're going to bring Hex and Seer in for questioning, they can't hold us here. They've secured the scene, and it looks like the majority of the victims have been pulled out of the club.

The officer approaches me, his hand fiddling with his gun, when someone calls out over the radio. They've found something inside and they need all available officers inside. He glares at me and turns on his heel. I can see his frustration as if it steams out of him. He'll remain disappointed, though.

My men join me outside, and Evanesce appears at my side. She tells me that Graveyard slipped away to be at the hospital when the victims arrive. He wants to finish the job he started here and save as many people as possible.

Seer and Hex both look shaken and pale, but they'll be okay. We've seen more violence than this. It was unexpected, but it's nothing we can't handle. We stand there waiting for the police to clear us, showing that we're willing to obey their authority.

An older officer sticks his head out of the back door and smiles at me. It isn't a vicious, accusing smile like his junior colleague, but one of relief.

"Mr. Pocus, I'm glad I found you," he says in a tone much too chipper for the situation. "You and your men are free to go. We found a calling card for the Cuatro Locos." He turns his head back inside and motions at someone. "You owe him an apology," the officer whispers to someone we can't see.

Out comes the officer from earlier, his face colored with anger. He looks at me quickly, then down at his shoes, apologizing for falsely accusing us. It's a rare thing to be apologized to by a cop, and I revel in his discomfort.

My men disperse, ready to go back to the club, but I stop them.

"This isn't over. I know the leader of the Cuatro Locos, and he would never allow his men to do something like this."

“You think it was a setup, Prez?” Hex asks, looking concerned.

“Something’s not right,” I confirm. “Get back to the clubhouse ASAP. I’m calling church.”

The men nod and walk out of the alley, but Hex holds back.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can, Prez, but there’s something I have to do.”

This is unusual. He’s usually the first to follow orders, but I’ll allow it. After what he’s been through tonight, I don’t blame him for needing a few minutes to compose himself.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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# Pocus

A way from the club, the empty streets feel eerie. It's late, but it's like the whole city has locked down. I wonder if news of the shooting has reached the general public. If so, they're probably fortifying their homes, sure the shooter will come for them next.

People are so self-absorbed. An alleged gang shooter who opened fire in a crowded club isn't looking to interrupt ma and pa's quiet evening. Whoever the shooter was, he was looking for maximum destruction. Now that he's completed his objective, he'll likely be hiding in the swamps to avoid capture.

Knix and Hemlock are already in the yard when I arrive, staring up at the trees. It's an odd scene, but the moment I take off my helmet, I see what they're looking at. Strwn through the trees are hundreds of pieces of toilet paper, flapping in the breeze.

"Who the fuck would do this?" Knix asks as I approach him.

It's not unusual in this area for kids to pull stupid pranks like this. We've ridden past hundreds of TP'd houses in this area over the years, but everyone in town knows who we are and what the clubhouse is. No idiot children would dare mess with the clubhouse, not on a dare.

Another cold chill runs through me, and the wheels in my mind spin wildly. We left the house no more than an hour and a half ago. That means someone was watching and waiting for us to leave. Who has that kind of time?

Unless they knew that a shooting would happen to pull us away. Who would know that unless they were the ones to orchestrate it? TP'ing our house is a harmless and stupid thing at the end of the day, but it's a message.

We're being watched and someone has the balls to fuck with us.



I circle the streets surrounding the club, hoping to find the woman again. It's a fruitless errand, but I'm drawn to her somehow. I've seen her before, but I can't work out where. I won't sleep until I know. Or I won't sleep well.

My brain tingles with an awareness around the edges, trying to tell me why I know her, but nothing happens. I wonder if this is how Seer feels when his visions don't come through. It's like waiting in purgatory for a word to come to mind. It's the worst sensation in the world. After another circle around the block, I realize I won't find her.

We were in the club for a long time after the cops arrived, and she was long gone by then. Whoever she is, she vanished, and it will be a miracle if I ever find her again. I turn my bike toward home and drive away, feeling defeated.

When I arrive, a few of the men are outside, pulling things out of the trees. What the hell? Is that toilet paper? My blood boils, wondering who would have the audacity to do such a thing. I should help them clean, but I'm too tired and frustrated. I'm no good to anybody tonight.

I open my bedroom door, ready to jump into bed and crash, but I immediately sense something is wrong. The room is too muggy, and the door sticks before I shove it open. When I step inside, I notice that the window is open. No, not open. Broken.

What the fuck?

I fiddle with the light switch, but nothing happens. I growl in frustration and walk to my bedside lamp, which does turn on. When I survey the room, I roar out in anger. The place is trashed. Not only is the window shattered, but

my things are upended all over the floor. Someone was in here.

I go to the door and call for Pocus to come. He's there in a minute, surveying the scene. His face is whiter than normal and the look in his eye is absolutely murderous.

"What's going on?"

"That's what I would like to fucking know," I growl, carefully stepping over the broken glass and assessing the damage.

He looks up at me in fear, which isn't an emotion I'm used to seeing on his face. Worry, sure, anger, almost constantly, but fear is a rare occurrence. He never lets his guard slip like that. He leaves the room, rounding up whoever isn't working outside, and I hear the sounds of them tearing through the house.

I clean up the glass while my brothers from go room to room, careful not to wake up Daisy. I hear the sounds of doors being carefully opened and closed, and the sound of the all-clear after half an hour. In that time, I manage to clean up the glass and find a tarp to tape over the window. It isn't much, but it'll do for now.

Pocus returns to my room and asks if anything is missing. I truthfully haven't checked, but it doesn't look like anything is gone. I don't keep much in my room. I don't have anything of real value to my name.

I simply shake my head, letting him know that as far as I can tell, my belongings are there. They're just all over the floor. Pocus nods, though he doesn't seem relieved by this news.

"No other rooms were vandalized," he tells me. "There was the TP out front, but nothing else in the house has been bothered."

He sighs heavily and sits on the edge of my bed. Then he drops his head into his hands. I've never seen him this weary. It's about more than Anderson and fatherhood. He's been carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders for a long time.

"I don't understand it," he says quietly. "First there's the shooting, then there's the vandalism. They're related somehow, but who has the means to do that?"

"I can only think of one person," I tell him. "But it can't be him. He's dead."

He looks up at me seriously, and I feel the tension dripping off him.

"Could a ghost do something like this?"

I shake my head, knowing where he's going with this.

“Ghosts can mess with electricity, Wi-Fi, stupid shit like that. Their spirits can interact with energy, but they can’t physically touch anything. Cassandra can blow out the lights in the clubhouse, but she can’t unscrew a lightbulb and throw it at someone.”

He nods, but his demeanor doesn’t relax. He’s thinking Anderson is somehow behind all of this, and maybe his loyal followers are messing with us, but there’s no way he’s a ghost. He would have haunted us by now. But I have an idea.

“I’ll find Cassandra. She must have seen something. She’s always creeping around my room. If she didn’t, one of the other ghosts did. They’re as good as any security cameras.”

He nods and stands, looking like a stiff wind could blow him over. I’m worried about my friend because I never have had to worry about him before. He’s always been the strongest among us, and always kept a cool demeanor. He built this club from the ground up, and he’s always been our constant source of reassurance.

If he’s starting to crack, we’re all in trouble.

Without another word, he walks out the door, leaving me to finish cleaning. Once my room is sufficiently put back together, I go downstairs to look for Cassandra. Her favorite places to hang out beside my room are the room where we have church—because she knows she’s not supposed to be in there—and the bar.

I check in the meeting room first, aware Pocus will call church any minute now. Ghosts are forbidden from attending church, but Cassandra throws a fit and ends up sneaking in anyway. Oddly, she’s not there.

She isn’t in the bar either, but I sense that she’s near. The neon sign above the bar flickers, alerting me that she’s in the room. Cassandra loves hide-and-seek, but I don’t have the patience.

“Get out here,” I demand. “Cassandra, this isn’t funny, I need to talk to you.”

She doesn’t come out, so I search for her. The tricky thing about a ghost is they can hide in absolutely anything. That’s why she loves hide-and-seek so much—she always wins. When I see her cowering behind the bar, on top of a pallet of soda water, I know something is wrong. She isn’t hiding from me, but she’s hiding from something else.

She’s terrified. I see it in her face and the way she can’t look at me. She stares blankly ahead.

“Cassandra?” I ask more gently, stooping down on the ground so I’m at her eye level. “Did you see who broke into my room?”

She shakes her head furiously, and I see a ghostly tear spring to her eye.

“I’m not mad at you. I know you had nothing to do with it, but you have to talk to me.”

She remains stubbornly silent, staring forward and wringing her little hands. This isn’t a side of Cassandra I’ve ever experienced, and it freaks me out. Ghosts aren’t scared of anything. They’re the ones who do the scaring. They delight in scaring others.

After a few minutes, I give up. I hear the sound of the men coming down the stairs. We’re having another late-night church, something no one is looking forward to.



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## CHAPTER SIX

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# Pocus

“**Y**ou know why we’re here,” I tell the men assembled in front of me. “Tonight, two of our own were put in harm’s way. When we returned to the clubhouse, we found it vandalized. I don’t believe in coincidence. The two events are related somehow.”

Gator puts up his hand, and I nod to him, yielding the floor.

“Prez, do you really think someone shot up a bar to play a childish prank? It doesn’t make any sense. Why put other lives in danger to mess with us?”

I sigh heavily because I haven’t been able to work that out myself. It could have been much worse. Whoever vandalized the house club could have set it on fire or gone on a killing rampage inside. Only Tory, Abigail, and Daisy were here when we left. The thought haunts me and reminds me that I can’t let my guard down for a second.

“I can’t answer that, Gator,” I tell him. “Which is why we need to up our security for the next few days. This may have been a harmless prank, but I can’t believe that when my family could have been put in harm’s way. I need a situation report. Snake, what did the cameras pick up?”

For the last hour, Snake has been combing through our security footage to find who might have vandalized the front yard and broken into Hex’s room. Snake looks at me with a hesitant expression, and I immediately know he has nothing to give me. There’s nothing to bring this nightmare to an end.

“I’m sorry, Prez, the footage was scrubbed.”

I look at Gator and hold up my hand. “Does that sound like someone messing with us, Gator?”

He hangs his head in surrender.

“If some idiot teenagers vandalized our property, they wouldn’t have

scrubbed the footage. They wouldn't know how."

"There's more," Snake interjects. "I was looking at the footage from the nightclub, and there's no good view of the shooter. The club was packed, and whoever did it knew exactly where to stand to avoid the cameras. I can't get a view of him entering or exiting the building. He's like a phantom."

I look at Hex helplessly. "Speaking of phantoms. Hex, what did you learn from the ghosts?"

Hex seems as wary as Snake. Shit.

"They aren't talking," he tells me simply. "I found Cassandra hiding behind the bar, and she wouldn't even look at me. I didn't have time to hunt down the other ghosts before you called church. Sorry, Prez."

I growl in frustration and look at each of my men. Their faces are drawn and tired. It's been a long day, and they need to rest. If we're going to stop any further attacks, we need to be at our sharpest.

"We're under attack," I tell the group seriously. "I know it all goes back to Anderson. You'll think I'm paranoid, but look at what's happened less than twenty-four hours after his murder. We're vulnerable right now, and this is no time to lower our guards. Go get some sleep. Tomorrow, we work on a battle plan."



I try to sneak into my room quietly, but I see that Abigail is awake, feeding Daisy. She looks at me happily, expectantly, and I can tell by her face that she never knew anything was amiss. Thank all the gods for that. She's simply awake to feed our daughter.

"I haven't seen you all day," she complains.

I walk over to place a chaste kiss on her lips. I want to deepen it, to bury myself inside of her, but that will have to wait until our daughter knocks out again.

I move to the bed and undress, pulling off my shoes and putting them under the bed, the way she likes it. Abigail has certain habits and chores that help her manage her PTSD. Keeping a tidy room is one of them, and it's a sacrifice I'm more than willing to make for her.

"It's been a long day." I sigh heavily. "It's been a long year. I feel like we can't catch a break."

She nods and stands, walking over to the bed with Daisy in her arms. Daisy is close to sleep now, her belly full of her mother's milk. Her little eyelids can barely stay open, and they flutter against her mother's chest.

"Tell me what's going on," she whispers. "You don't have to hide things from me."

I pull her against my chest and breathe in her scent. Since Abigail came into my life, I feel like I have a real partner. Someone to share my burdens with. But also another person for me to lose.

"Anderson is dead," I tell her simply.

She gasps, and Daisy moves in her arms, agitated. She rocks our daughter until her eyes flutter again, then she stands and walks her over to her crib.

Daisy fusses for a moment before sleep overtakes her and her breathing changes. These quiet, peaceful moments are the only times Abigail and I have together lately, and we're usually too tired to do anything about it. Tonight, the news of Anderson hangs over us like a dark cloud.

Abigail walks over to the bed, shrugging off her robe as she goes. She stands before me completely bare and wraps me in her arms, pulling my face against her naked chest. Her hands scratch against my scalp, and I groan appreciatively against her.

"This should be a good thing," she whispers. "That monster is finally gone. Why are you so tense?"

I pull her down so she's straddling me, and I already feel my dick growing hard against her. She's ready for me, open and naked, but I can't take her like this. Not when I'm too tense to even breathe.

"He's messing with us," I whisper into her hair. "Even in death, he's still finding ways to keep us on our toes. I feel like we will never be free of him."

She shakes her head and looks up at me. "Because of you, I am free of him. I have been for a long time. So I know you will do whatever needs to be done to handle this. But tonight, let someone else take care of you."

She pushes me down so I'm lying flat on the bed, then moves down to the floor so she's on her knees in front of me. I feel her reach for the button of my jeans, and I could come right there at her touch. Our times together are so few and far between these days. I'm desperate for her.

I'm careful not to cry out as she pulls me into her mouth. The last thing I want to do right now is wake up our sleeping daughter.

# Tory

Seer will fill me in on everything later, but he's been too careful with me since my dream last night. He's been walking on eggshells all day and wouldn't come home for dinner. Any other woman would be pissed, but I'm more worried than anything. Seer thinks I'm fragile, which isn't something I've ever wanted.

But I do feel fragile. My energy has been low for weeks, and I feel the spirit world draining me. I'm constantly nauseous, whether I'm worried about my husband coming home to me or about the potential threat looming around the corner.

There's too much going on in the club, and the worry drips from the men. They say women are emotional, but they're consciously blocking out their fear, causing it to leak out into the atmosphere. This house is a powder keg that will explode under too much pressure.

But that's not my main concern right now. My main concern is Hex. He was in my dreams tonight, which is never a good sign. I go down to the kitchen, hoping I might catch him coming out of church. I make a sandwich for us to share and wait patiently for him to barrel through.

"How did you know?" he asks gratefully when he sees me at the table with the sandwich split between two plates. "I'm fucking starving. Are you sure you aren't psychic?"

"You're always hungry," I say with a small smile. "It wasn't too hard to guess you'd need some sustenance after tonight."

He eyes me warily, and I eye him back, testing him. Something big did happen tonight, even if Seer hasn't told me about it yet. But Hex can't know that. He'll spill all the beans without much coaxing.

"I'm surprised you're so calm," he tells me. "It's not every day your husband is caught in a mass shooting."

I compose my face, not giving away that this is brand-new information. But he fucking what? Now I'm angry, and I plan to show Seer when we're alone in bed. He's been home for hours now. How could he not mention

anything to me?

“Well, that’s the nice thing about me. I keep my composure in tough situations.”

Technically, this isn’t a lie, since that’s exactly what I’m doing. I hide my anger so Hex will tell me more.

“It must have been scary,” I say casually. “He didn’t have time to tell me much, just that he was okay.”

Hex nods and swallows a large bite of his sandwich. “There’s really not much to say,” he replies. “We didn’t see the shooter, and by the time everyone else showed up, the bastard had fled. The police think it was the Cuatro Locos, but Pocus isn’t so sure.”

I nod, processing this information. My best friend is singing like a canary.

“In fact, Pocus thinks the shooting was just a distraction to get everyone out of the house. Did you see the front lawn?”

This time, I show my surprise.

“What happened to the front lawn?” I ask.

“Someone TP’d it. And the same son of a bitch threw a rock through my window and trashed my room.”

I sit up sharply and examine him. The darkness hovers at the edges of my consciousness, and I see now that it obscures his aura. Whatever monster I saw in my dreams, it has set its sights on Hex specifically. I put my hand on his arm and force him to look at me.

“Tell me everything,” I whisper urgently. “What was missing?”

He shrugs and tells me he has nothing to take. The room was trashed, but he didn’t find anything missing. That worries me more because it means whoever trashed his room wasn’t looking for anything. They were trying to intimidate him.

Hex isn’t easily intimidated. No one here is. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn’t give it a second thought, but his aura is wrong. It’s dark and negative.

“Are you okay?” I ask him, thinking perhaps the negativity can be attributed to the current situation. But in his Hex-like fashion, he simply shrugs and tells me he’s fine.

“It’s not the first time I’ve found my room trashed. I mean, it’s the first time here, but this shit happened to me a lot as a kid. I’m not that worried about it.”

“Is there anything you are worried about?” I ask him seriously, but he

only shrugs again.

Perhaps it's good that he isn't worried. I'll worry enough for the both of us. He finishes his sandwich and tells me he's beat. He sulks off to bed, and I watch him go, fearful for my friend's future.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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**A**s exhausted as I am from two days of interrupted sleep, it takes me a long time to settle down. Everyone is worried about these new developments, and the ghosts hiding is a huge concern for me. The ghosts never cower, not even from Pocus's occasional angry outbursts.

I consider this for a long time before I sink into a dark place. I look around and realize I'm back in the cemetery searching for ghosts. It's probably a better use of my time than sleeping anyway. Pocus won't be happy until I get to the bottom of the attacks and find out what spooked the ghosts.

A fog coils around my feet, and I call out for the ghosts to knock it off. They like to scare people, but I know all their tricks. I simply roll my eyes, bored with their games. If this is how they're going to act when I need their help, I don't want it. We'll figure out what's going on without them.

I sit down against a headstone, letting my tired body rest, when I hear laughter. It's not uncommon to hear laughter in a graveyard. It's another one of the ghosts' tricks. Except I know this laughter. I've heard it before. I stand and look around, trying to identify the source of the sound. I catch the streak of raven hair again, and I chase after her.

No matter how fast and far I run, though, she remains out of my reach. Who is she and why do I feel like I've known her all of my life? I won't get any answers until I find her. I trip over a root, but rather than hit the ground, I keep falling down, down, down in an endless loop.

I finally sit up in bed, my sheets drenched. It was a dream, but I realize the woman at the club is the woman in my dreams. How can I be dreaming about someone I've never even met before? How do I already know the

sound of her laughter?

I look at my phone and realize I've been asleep for several hours. I don't feel rested at all, but there's no way I'll be able to get back to sleep. I'm jittery and agitated, too wired to try to sleep again. It's 6:00 AM, and the sun is weakly filtering through the window. I need to get to the bottom of this.

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The nightclub looks worse in the daylight, though that's true of most clubs. Police tape is hung everywhere. A patrol car is posted at the end of the street. I easily evade him, parking my bike down the same alley we gathered in last night. The backdoor is wide open, and I spot piles of trash bags lining the alley that weren't there before.

I step inside the club and see the broken chairs and tables, likely trampled by the people trying to escape, blood covering the floor. Someone's been working in here, though. I hear the sound of footsteps.

A man walks in from behind the bar and freezes when he sees me standing there.

"Who the fuck are you?" He grabs an empty bottle and throws it at me.

I narrowly dodge it and hold my hands up to him to show him I mean no harm.

"I was here last night," I explain. "I lost my friend in the crowd. I was hoping if I came back, I could retrace our steps."

The lie falls easily off my tongue, and his face changes briefly to a look of pity, before his guard goes back up.

"I'm sorry about your friend," he answers. "But this is a crime scene. You shouldn't be here. I thought you were the shooter, coming back to finish the job."

I look at him curiously. "Did you get a good look at the guy?"

He shakes his head. "No, but you look like the kind of guy that could handle firepower. No offense."

I smile. "None taken."

"Look, I've got a lot of cleaning to get done, so if you wouldn't mind getting the fuck out of here..."

I nod and turn for the door, but I stop before stepping out onto the street.

"My friend—she has long black hair. I don't suppose you saw her?"



The man fixes me with a hard, annoyed stare. “Fifty people were shot in my establishment last night,” he answers coldly. “I’ve got a little more on my mind than helping you chase ass.”

I shrug and walk out, not offended by the man’s tone. It was a long shot, but I had to try. The only thing I know about the woman is that she was here last night. It’s nothing to go on.

But this city is crawling with ghosts, and they are huge gossips. How hard can it be to find one girl when I have access to the largest network of surveillance in the state of Louisiana? I find an abandoned apartment complex a block down from the club and enter.

The lights flicker ominously, a sure sign ghosts are here. I realize quickly, though, that they aren’t trying to scare me for the sake of their own entertainment. Because I can’t find them. Like Cassandra, these ghosts are hiding from me.

Ghosts don’t usually hide from the living because they don’t have to. Their favorite thing to do is appear to the living in ominous, terrifying ways. Something is off if they’re trying to scare me away.

I search through a few empty apartments to be safe but find nothing. I call out to them, letting them know I’m a friend. This usually works because ghosts never get to interact with the living. They love to unburden themselves and complain about the afterlife to me, but they aren’t enticed.

I give up on the apartment building and head across the street to a rundown crack den. Ghosts love watching the living throw away their lives for stupid shit. It’s their second favorite activity. As I carefully navigate over the smelly husks of drug addicts, I have the same experience. No one is around. Or, if they are around, they aren’t showing themselves to me.

It’s a frustrating experience. Whenever I want peace and quiet, at least a hundred ghosts are barreling down my door to get to me. Now that I need them, they’re nowhere to be found. So fucking unhelpful. If I ever become a ghost, I’ll be sure to spend my days making the other ghosts miserable.

It’s nearly eight, now, and Pocus wants to meet this morning so we can talk about our increased security. I have to try one more place because I refuse to return to the clubhouse empty-handed. The last few days have been frustrating, and I won’t tell Pocus that I’ve struck out with every ghost in New Orleans.

A small cemetery is situated a mile down the road. I pull my bike up and walk among the tombstones. Some people find cemeteries terrifying while

others consider them peaceful. The truth is somewhere in the middle. Ghosts love hanging around cemeteries to frighten mourners and dumb teenagers who break in at night.

If you come at the right time, though, the light filters in through the hanging moss, and the whole area is transformed into a beautiful oasis. Even a few ghost tricks can't scare people away from this kind of beauty. I've only seen graveyards like this in New Orleans.

I call out to the ghosts, offering my help. Finally, someone pokes his head out from behind a tombstone.

"I've heard of you," he says ominously. "You're the one who communes with the dead."

"You can drop the formalities. Where is everyone?"

The ghost is an older man dressed in a Civil War uniform. Many of those wait around here. They're all a little unhinged, but it's better to get information from him than to go home empty-handed.

"You don't know?" he scoffs. "We're being hunted by an evil spirit. It wants to drag us down to hell with it."

"I tend to think hell is better than being tied to earth for centuries," I tell him nonchalantly. "Every ghost I've met complains that they can't move on."

"But we deserve the choice," the man yells.

"I just want to help you. We're on the same team. Tell your friends that there's a safe space they can go to if they need it."

He scoffs again. "As long as the spirit roams free, there's nowhere safe for us. The others have been whispering about you. They say you could save us all, but I don't believe them. Look at you. You're a great big oaf who can't do anything for us. You talk to us and pretend to care, but you'll never be able to stop what's coming after us. You aren't strong enough."

I shrug. Maybe he's right. That doesn't mean I won't try.

"Spread the word," I tell him. "Or get dragged down to hell. See if I care."

A twig snaps, and the ghost disappears immediately. He's seriously spooked if a branch cracking scares him away. That's one of the first tricks the ghosts learn.

I turn to see what made the noise, and my heart stops. Because there, in the flesh, is the woman of my dreams. She's walking through the graveyard, clutching a book to her chest and looking at the ground. Whatever she's focused on, she hasn't seen me standing here.

Now that I can see her face, I'm stunned by her beauty. Her jet-black hair cascades down her shoulders and back, straight as a pin. It's blowing in the early morning breeze, swirling around her face. Her skin is a dark-olive color, and she has long, thick eyelashes. She's taller than I imagined, though she's a shrimp compared to me. Her limbs are long and lithe.

I call out to her, but she doesn't hear me. She has a pair of headphones in her ears, and I can tell as I get closer that she's singing. It's a sweet sound, better than the laughter that's been haunting my consciousness for days. I chase after her, knowing there's nowhere for her to go.

She turns on her heel to look at me, and I stop dead in my tracks. Her eyes are a dark-honey hue, and her lips are twisted in an angry scowl. Even in her anger, she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I—" Words don't form, because what can I possibly say to her? When I got out of bed this morning, my whole purpose was to find her. Now that she's in front of me, I feel like a fucking idiot.

"I come in peace," I finally say. "I'm surprised to see someone else at the cemetery this early."

"Do you work here or something?" she asks, eyeing me up and down.

"No, I—" I start, but she cuts me off.

"I'm trained in jiu-jitsu," she says coldly, her voice a warning to back off. "I'll snap off your balls before you realize I've touched you."

I smile at her in what I hope is a completely non-threatening way. I happen to like my balls. "I'm not trying to hurt you. Let's start over. My name is Hex."

I hold my hand out to her and she eyes it suspiciously, clutching her book even closer to her.

"Juliana," she says, without taking my hand. "Are you going to tell me what the hell you're doing in the cemetery?"

"I could ask you the same question."

She rolls her eyes and walks away. I follow her down two rows of headstones and take a sharp turn to a bench.

"My parents died," she says brusquely. "Are you happy?"

I can't help the chuckle that escapes from my chest. Of course I'm not happy her parents are dead, but I find her demeanor so hysterical. She's not even remotely what I expected.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I tell her genuinely. "I didn't mean to pry."

I realize this woman, Juliana, has come to speak to her own ghosts, and that intrigues me in a way I can't explain. Besides the insane attraction I feel toward her, I want to know her more. It's a vital need inside of me.

My phone buzzes, then, and I know now isn't the time. But I've found her. Now that I've done it once, I know I can do it again.

"I'm sorry I've disturbed your morning," I tell her. "But I do hope we'll meet again under better circumstances."

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Pocus eyes me suspiciously as I slip through the back door of the house. It's only nine, which is too early for me to be returning from anywhere. Most mornings, this is when I crawl out of bed.

"Ghost hunting," I explain casually, which eases his concern. Pocus knows I frequently look for ghosts.

"I was worried someone tried to finish you off," he grunts into his coffee mug, and I chuckle nervously.

Pocus looks much more refreshed today than he has in a while. There's a spark in his eye that puts me at ease. He's back in a fighting spirit. Seer, on the other hand, looks like absolute shit. He slumps into the kitchen, eyes red and a scowl marring his face.

"Don't," he says before either of us can say a word. "Tory was upset about the shooting. We had a fight last night."

This is news to me. She was so calm when we spoke last night. I wonder what changed. Of course, it was no surprise she'd be calm with me. I wasn't the one who vowed to love her in sickness and health.

"That's probably my fault," I wince. He glares at me. I throw my hands up in surrender. "How was I supposed to know you hadn't told her?"

"You aren't supposed to be talking to my wife about anything," he answers defensively. "You two are too chummy."

Pocus looks between us and laughs. "You and Tory do have a strange relationship."

I flip them both the bird. Seer is just tired and Pocus is starting shit for no reason.

"Well, the next time your life needs saving, Seer, I'll be sure not to bond

with your wife while we're saving you. In fact, I'll leave you to die."

"Okay, okay. We're only fucking with you, Seer," Pocus says, catching the murderous look on Seer's face. "Have some coffee, mon frere, and take a load off."

"Why are you so happy?" Seer grumbled. "Did Abigail blow you last night?"

Pocus's lips form a hard line, and he takes a sip of his coffee, ignoring Seer's dig. "So, Hex," he addresses me. "What did you learn from the ghosts?"

I run my hands through my hair, frustrated because there wasn't much to learn. I hate when I can't give Pocus the information he wants.

"Not much to tell, Prez. I searched for two hours and only found one ghost who would talk to me. The rest are in hiding."

Seer drops his mug on the counter and looks at me with wide eyes. "We should call Mama," he says, sounding worried.

Pocus makes the call, and the older woman is at the front door in less than half an hour, unsurprised she was summoned. She carries a grim expression and tells Seer to get his wife.

Seer brings Tory down, and the two women sit in the middle of the living room, hands joined. Seer seems concerned, but I've seen Tory in action before. I know the makings of a ritual when I see one. Mama pours a fine powder on the floor in a complex design, and the two women chant together.

All we can do is stand there uselessly while the women do their thing. Tory cries out in pain. Seer does all he can not to go to her. Pulling her out of a ritual before it's finished could cause her harm. We both know that's the last thing he wants to do.

I place my hand on his shoulder and he stands as still as a statue, his face ashen. Tory screams again, and I have to physically restrain him from going to her. The lights in the room flicker and a loud crack of thunder follows, but I can see through the window that it's sunny outside. The noise came from inside their sigil.

Air circles us and I hear the voices of the damned whispering frantically. They repeat one word: poltergeist.

Tory screams again and the wind stops, the ritual over. She looks at Seer, who immediately runs to her and pulls him into his arms.

"I told you," she whispers. "I told you it wasn't a dream."

Pocus looks at all of us, confused, but goes to Mama's side to help her off

the ground. I stand there, stock still, shocked by what I've heard. Could they hear it too?

"What happened?" Pocus asks.

I immediately realize he didn't hear the spirits. Mama looks at me and nods.

"It's a poltergeist," I tell them, feeling the blood drain from my face. "The thing that's messing with us and upsetting the spirit world. The ghosts are hiding from it."

Tory sobs, and Mama looks at me to keep going.

"Like the fucking movie?" Pocus growls in frustration. "We're being haunted by a ghost that makes other fucking ghosts afraid?"

I take a deep breath and blow it out slowly. "Poltergeists aren't exactly ghosts," I explain. "They're very rare, actually. They're evil spirits that still have a tie to the world. Unlike ghosts, they can interact with the natural world."

"Cassandra blows out the lights all the time," Seer interjects, sounding confused.

"That's just energy," Pocus says, remembering our conversation from last night. "You're telling me this thing can harm the living?"

I nod, and he bounds out of the room. I hear his feet padding up the stairs, and I know that he's going to pack up his wife and daughter and send them away. It's his MO. When there's danger lurking, he makes sure his family is safe above all else. He did the same with Evanesce.

"You should rest, child," Mama says to Tory, who looks weak. She clutches at her stomach and moans.

Seer walks her out to the porch and Mama leaves the room, heading toward the kitchen. I'm alone in the living room, lost in my thoughts. I've never encountered a poltergeist before, but I've heard terrible stories. If this monster is after us, no one is safe.

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The five of us reconvene on the front porch a few minutes later. Mama has made Tory a tea that has already revived her. She looks much more herself. Pocus paces the length of the porch, waiting for Abigail to come downstairs with Daisy. He's already brought their suitcases down.

We're in a holding pattern, unsure of how to proceed. Nothing good can come of this creature, but until we know more, we can't do anything.

"We should fortify the clubhouse against the ghosts," Seer says authoritatively. "It may not be a ghost, but salt should still work on it, right?"

Pocus stops his pacing and glares at Seer. "We can't do that to the other ghosts. It's not right. If Hex is right, they're terrified. They need somewhere safe to go."

"What about us?" Seer shouts "Don't we deserve to be safe too?"

"You have to help them," Tory tells him gently. "I feel their anxiety, Nicholas. They're all terrified of this thing. We all should be."

Mama nods and eyes Pocus meaningfully.

"It's good that you're getting your girls out of the city. It can't hurt them as long as they're away."

"Then what do we do?" Seer asks desperately. "How are we supposed to stop a spirit?"

"It's not impossible," Mama tells him. "There's an old spell to trap them. But I will need Tory's help." She glances at Tory, who's sitting in a rocking chair, still looking small. "Are you up for it, child?"

Tory nods despite Seer's protest. His worry for her is evident on his face, but she won't do anything she doesn't want to do. If she thinks she's strong enough, she'll help Mama. She stands slowly and the two women go back into the house.

Seer glares at me, as if it's somehow my fault. I glare right back at him. I don't understand why he's angry at me, but two can play that game. If he's mad for no reason, then I'll be mad right back. Pocus steps between us and tells us to stop acting like children.

"Tory is sick," Seer tells us, his voice low. "I don't know what's wrong with her, but for the last two days, she hasn't been herself. I don't want her to get hurt because of this."

"You think I don't know what's at stake?" Pocus growls. "I'm waiting for Knix to bring the car around and take my wife and daughter to a safe house. You are not the only one worried about your family."

"I think we should fortify the clubhouse," Seer grumbles. "What harm could it do?"

"It won't help," I tell him darkly. "Salt isn't going to stop a poltergeist. It'll just leave the ghosts more susceptible to its attacks."

"And what exactly hurts ghosts?" he accuses. "Because it seems to me



that Pocus and I are both making sacrifices for your precious, invisible friends.”

The porch light flickers, and I know Cassandra must be in the rafters, listening. If not her, then one of the other ghosts who rely on us to keep them safe from this evil spirit.

“We can’t stop it if we’re fighting with each other,” Pocus warns. “I know you’re upset, Seer, but you have to pull it together. It isn’t Hex’s fault this is happening.”

The screen door slams, and Abigail stands there with Daisy, looking afraid. They’re dressed for travel, and little Daisy holds her hands out for Pocus. She doesn’t understand what’s happening. She’s too young. She just wants her dad to hold her.

Seer and I go inside, giving them the privacy to say goodbye. We find Tory and Mama in the kitchen, making a strange concoction. I miss when our kitchen was used for making food and not as a witch’s laboratory.

“What are you guys making over there?” Seer asks warily.

Tory smiles at him reassuringly, letting him know she’s okay. But I see it now. I see how her skin has a paler complexion, and sweat beads on her forehead. I see how tired her eyes look, and I realize I’ve been a bad friend to her. If Seer is right, and something is wrong with Tory, this all might be too much for her.

“We’re creating a trap for the spirit,” Mama tells him. “We can’t see it, but he can,” she says, pointing to me. “Hex, it’s up to you to find the poltergeist. You’ll use this to paralyze it.”

She hands me a bundle of herbs that looks like a small grenade. She tells me that if I scatter the herbs over the ghost it will immobilize the spirit long enough for me to bring it here.

“You want to bring it to our home?” Seer asks skeptically, anger coloring his tone.

Tory walks over and wraps her arms around his neck, giving him a quick kiss. “Mon Coeur, don’t worry. We’re creating a prison for it.”

He looks at her so tenderly that I have to look away. Mama watches them carefully, like she knows a secret they don’t.

“Are you sure you’re up for that?” he whispers to her.

I go over to the fridge and pull out a beer, just to have something to do to ignore the intimate moment unfolding between them.

“It doesn’t matter,” she tells him. “I won’t let anything or anyone ruin our

happiness.”

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## CHAPTER NINE

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I feel as if ice has been poured over my head, and I sit up quickly, turning on the light.

“Cassandra, what the hell?” I ask, seeing the little girl watching me as I sleep. “We’ve talked about this! I need personal space.”

“I know,” she says, ashamed. “But I was tired of hiding in the bar.”

I look at her with compassion, knowing things haven’t been easy for her since the poltergeist showed up.

“Why are you hiding at all?” I ask her seriously. “Why won’t you talk to me and tell me what’s going on?”

“You already know,” she whispers ominously. “I saw you and the witches figure it out.”

“Don’t call them that,” I chastise her.

She ignores me. “It’s coming after us one by one. You don’t know what it’s like over here.”

“So tell me,” I say. “Explain to me what it’s like for you.”

She nods slowly and tells me that no one has seen the spirit, they can only feel it. But it’s already caught several ghosts in the community and tortured them. It has the power to drag them to hell, even if they don’t deserve it.

“I can’t go to hell,” she whispers, horrified. “I’m just a little girl.”

Her fear stabs me in the heart like a knife, and I know that even though she’s been roaming this earth for decades, she is still a little girl. Even as a ghost, she has the capacity to be afraid of things that live in the darkness.

“You’re so afraid of what it can do to you in the living world, but you’re lucky. All it can do is hurt you, maybe even kill you. But it has the power to corrupt our souls and turn even the friendliest ghost evil. When it gets us in

its clutches, we're powerless to stop it from corrupting us, trapping us in a hellish prison."

"We'll find a way to stop it," I promise her.

"How?" she asks petulantly. "Have you ever even seen a poltergeist? Do you have any idea what the hell you're doing?"

"Language, Cassandra," I chide. "Have I ever abandoned you?"

"You don't have a choice. I live in your house and you're the only living person who can see me."

"And who cleans up all your messes and explains away your temper tantrums?" I ask. "If it weren't for me, the club would have expelled the ghosts ages ago. I'm on your side, Cassandra, you have to trust me."

She sighs and nods, though she doesn't seem confident in my ability. I suppose I can't blame her. I am so far out of my depth right now. All I know about poltergeists, I've learned from ghost stories. Literal stories told by ancient ghosts who brought me up as a child.

I've never dealt with one firsthand, and I always hoped I wouldn't have to. Maybe it was a pipe dream, but I could have gone my whole life without having to experience the evil this spirit is causing. My only comfort is that perhaps this will be the only poltergeist I ever have to exorcise. Unless I'm cursed, which is a distinct possibility.

"Can you tell me anything about the spirit?" I ask her. "What does it look like?"

Her eyes widen and she shakes her head. "We can't see it, you donkey." She giggles at her insult to me. "Don't you know anything?"

I fume, annoyed that she's back to being completely unhelpful.

"What do you mean you can't see it?" I ask her. "It's not so unlike a ghost. You can see other ghosts. Why can't you see the poltergeist?"

She sighs heavily, rolling her eyes. She paces the room, looking for the words to explain it to me. "Poltergeists are cunning and clever. They are only seen when they want to be seen. They're like secret agents or ninjas."

"What do you know about ninjas?" I interject.

"Keep up," she yells, snapping her little fingers at me. "These spirits like to play with us, trap us. Like we're all little mice and it's a big cat, chasing us around."

"And this is the thing that got into my room?" I confirm.

She looks at me with wide eyes and nods. "You're just another mouse to it, Hex. It knows all about you. It wants to destroy you."

“How do you know this if you can’t see it?” I growl, annoyed.

“Because it’s been after you from the moment it entered the spirit world. We’ve all felt it. Didn’t that ghost in the graveyard tell you that we think you’re our only hope?”

I scratch my head, vaguely remembering him. I was a lot more distracted by meeting Juliana. Listening to the diatribe of an old ghost wasn’t my highest priority.

“Either you trap the poltergeist and expel it from the earth, or it will kill you. We feel its pull toward you.”

“Why me?” I ask, feeling a chill that has nothing to do with her presence.

“Because you can see it. You’re the only one that can stop it. It wants to end you before you end it.”

With that ominous warning, she disappears, sinking down into the floorboards. In her wake, I look around my room with new eyes. The spirit was here and it was after me, so why didn’t it take anything? Or set a trap for me?

Just like last night, I find nothing amiss, besides the rock that broke my window. I’ve been keeping it by my bedside, a weapon if I need it in the middle of the night. But now that I know the poltergeist is after me, specifically, I think I’d better replace it with Mama’s paralytic ghost grenade.

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## CHAPTER TEN

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A week has gone by and nothing exciting has happened. No more attacks, no more warnings from the ghost. It's as if the poltergeist has vanished, but I know better. It's like Cassandra said, we're all mice waiting for the cat to get us.

I tried to explain that to Pocus the morning after Cassandra came to me, but he was too wrapped up in his misery. He hadn't been away from Daisy since the day she was born. Without her, he's mopey and constantly agitated. He's like a junkie looking for his next fix.

Seer is equally engrossed in his own problems, and I can't help but notice how Tory seems to be wasting away to nothing before our eyes. Her face gets thinner and she looks more tired each morning. She's stopped drinking coffee altogether, saying it's making her too on edge.

Our morning routine has been hijacked by daily sitreps with Pocus, who's too drawn and distracted to care what any of us finds. Which has been a big fat load of nothing. The police haven't identified the shooter from the club, and there's a tri-statewide manhunt to find him. They have no leads and beg the public for their help.

No more attacks have happened on the house, which is theoretically a good thing, but it leaves the men more on edge and afraid they'll miss the next thing. No one has slept well since finding out Anderson died, and it's taking a toll on us.

Pocus didn't tell anyone else about the poltergeist, choosing to leave it between the five of us in the room. Even Snake doesn't know what to look for when Pocus asks him to search for unusual activity. It's New Orleans, there's always unusual activity happening.

And the ghosts remain silent. Cassandra hasn't come to see me again, hiding in the walls again. They're all hiding these days. I used to fight through dozens of ghosts every time I left the house, but the yard has been deadly quiet since the vandalism. I'm running out of options.

In seven days, I've walked through every abandoned home, cemetery, and bayou. They're eerily quiet, devoid of the social scene the ghosts are usually so proud of. It isn't only our house ghosts, it's every ghost throughout the city. They're staying away at the risk of being caught by the poltergeist.

If I do find a stray ghost here or there, it's always the same kind. One of the old guards, a stubborn male ghost who thinks his compatriots are being sissies. These spirits have fought in battles dating back to the wars with Native Americans, and they say they will not be intimidated by some "young buck who just showed up on the scene."

Still, as the only spirits I can find, I ask them to carry my message. If the ghosts are hiding, they need to know they'll be safe at the club. Theoretically, there's power in numbers. They'll be safer congregated than spread out across the city, ready to be picked apart by the poltergeist.

I'm exhausted and frustrated, tired of only finding the orneriest ghosts in the city. I slink into a bar near the clubhouse to drown my sorrows. I can't go home yet. Pocus has asked me every day what I've found, and every day I tell him I've gotten nothing but cow shit. I'm angry with the ghosts, though they deserve my pity. They're scared too.

I down two shots of bourbon when I hear an angelic voice speaking to me.

"Are you stalking me?" she asks.

I turn to find Juliana pulling out the stool next to me to sit.

My heart hammers in my chest as I take in her beauty. I haven't seen her in my dreams over the last few days because I haven't slept long enough or soundly enough to dream at all.

"I believe I was here first." I indicate my empty shot glass.

"*Touché.*" She laughs. "I didn't think I'd see you again."

"I promised you would," I remind her. "And I always keep my promises."

The bartender pours me another shot, and she takes it from me, downing it with a single gulp. She sighs in contentment.

"I wouldn't peg you for a bourbon man," she says, eyeing me with interest.

"No? And how exactly would you peg me?"

I let the double entendre hang in the air between us and she smirks. I'm so turned on by this woman, and it's only our second interaction.

"If I must, I'd say you like it rough and rowdy. Something that will make you regret it the next day."

"Are we talking booze or fucking?" I murmur.

She throws her head back and laughs. "Why not both? In that case, I'd expect you to drink tequila."

I wrinkle my nose, bad memories of my youth filling my brain. She isn't wrong about it being rough and causing regrets, but I've matured past my tequila days.

"What about you?" I ask. "What's your poison?"

She smiles at me seductively. "Anything I can get these days."

I look at her curiously and her gaze drops to her hands. I notice the silver chain around her wrist and don't miss the way she clings to it like it's her life vest.

"Since my parents died, I'm a frequent patron of dive bars. Whatever will get me drunk the fastest is my drink of choice."

I nod sadly, realizing Juliana is buried under the weight of her sadness. It's the same face I've seen on Pocus every day this week. I've never loved anyone enough to be destroyed by their absence.

"How's that bourbon workin'?" I ask her, and she shrugs sadly.

"Not quick enough. I'll strike it from the list."

"I'm not judging at all," I tell her truthfully. "I'm the last person in the world to care what you do in your free time. I'm just wondering—does it help?"

She shakes her head slowly, and I see her tough mask come off. Maybe it's the alcohol, or maybe it's the instant connection we've created. She must feel it too.

"All I ever feel is empty," she answers in a small voice. "My parents were my whole world. They brought me over from Brazil when I was a baby and did everything they could to give me the American Dream. I never expected it would mean losing them."

I order another round of shots for us, this time switching to vodka, noticing the bartender's already poured me another bourbon shot. Vodka's not my usual order, but it'll help her lose herself quicker, and it sounds like she needs to. It's a small sacrifice I can make to stay in her presence.

"I don't have any siblings," she tells me. "It was just us, the Three



Musketeers. They were so proud of everything I did, and then there was no one to be proud of me anymore. I've been a little lost."

"How long ago did they die?" I ask her, not sure what else I can say.

She downs the shot and answers quickly. "It feels like it was yesterday," she tells me, her voice angry. "Irony of ironies, they were killed by a drunk driver, a head-on collision."

I nod slowly, knowing how common those occur in this area. Thanks to the millions of tourists who flood the city every year to get drunk off their asses and party their worries away, our roads are treacherous.

"But enough about me," she says, slamming her glass down and shaking her head. "Let me talk long enough and I become a real bummer. What are your parents like?"

I order one more round of shots, but the bartender is already on it. I'm not sure how drunk I'll have to be for that conversation. Pocus knows more about my childhood than anyone else because I can't bring myself to talk about it often. When we met, we realized we both raised ourselves. It was the first thing that bonded us.

I never knew my dad, and I've come to the conclusion my mom didn't know him either. He was likely a one-night stand she met while partying with her girlfriends. When I look back on it now, I'm surprised she chose to keep me, considering she had to give up her youth and her partying to work two full-time jobs to keep us fed and sheltered.

She left me alone a lot when she worked, and that's when I saw my first ghost. She was a kind, elderly woman who fussed over me and made sure I stayed out of trouble. I was only five at the time and assumed she was my babysitter. When I asked my mom about her, though, she thought I had an imaginary friend.

As I got older, though, more and more people appeared. There was always a carousel of kind adults watching me and keeping me safe while my mother was gone. It wasn't until I was eight and my mother slapped me for making up stories that I realized she didn't see them. She didn't know they were there.

The older I got, the more unstable my mother became, thinking she could leave me to fend for myself while she got high with her friends or found a new man to fuck. Sometimes she would leave me for days at a time, and it was the ghosts who would wake me up for school and help me get ready.

Many of them hated my mother, haunting her when she was home. I was

young enough to think it was funny, but now I realize they were being cruel. They'd mess with her lights, waking her up at all hours of the night until she had a bit of a psychotic break. I was thirteen then, and she was institutionalized, leaving me on my own.

But there were the ghosts, caring for me and helping me steal and find shelter all on my own. They protected me until I was old enough to protect myself, and led me to Pocus when I was sixteen.

But I can't tell Juliana any of this. She wouldn't believe me, even though she's already drunk off her ass. I remember how Abigail responded to learning about ghosts, and I won't tell this woman, who's basically a stranger, that I was raised by dead people.

So I tell her the truncated version, that I was abandoned for most of my childhood, homeless by thirteen, and in a gang by sixteen. This is a less shocking story, though not by much. She looks at me with wide, tearful eyes and whispers her apologies.

"What kind of mother would do that?" she asks. "I hate her!"

I shrug and smile because I don't care about my mother enough to hate her anymore. She's worse than a ghost to me now. I'm not even sure that she's alive.

"You didn't deserve that, Hex," she says sincerely. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that. You're a sweet man, and you should have grown up knowing you were loved and cared for."

Her words get to me in an unexpected way, and I feel warmth spreading through my chest. No one has ever shared such a kind sentiment with me before, and I'm overwhelmed by her kindness. For the first time in my life, I believe I deserved more. I still deserve more.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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# Pocus

I don't miss the way Hex floats down the stairs looking almost dreamy. He's been in a good mood the last few days, and I can't deny that I resent him for it. What the fuck does he have to be so cheerful about? Everything in the world is going to shit.

He's supposed to be out looking for the poltergeist and bringing it back here so Mama and Tory can exorcise it. I can't bring my family home until the bastard is gone. This fucking poltergeist is at the very top of my shit list.

"What are you so happy about?" I grumble at him from the bar. "Did some poor woman crawl into bed with you?"

He gives me the finger and tells me to fuck off, but I can tell by his glance a woman is involved. Seriously?

"Please tell me you aren't getting pussy while the rest of us are worried about our fucking children."

"You're the only one with a child," he points out. "And I'm not getting pussy, you ass. I did meet someone, but it's not a big deal."

"It is a fucking big deal," I growl, throwing a glass in his direction. He easily catches it and brings it back to the bar. "I'm not paying you to gallivant around town with some whore. I need you to be focused on finding the poltergeist."

"I am," he growls, his own anger rising. I feel it growing between us, and my inner demon is screaming, clawing at me to be released. No one else is around. No one would know if I beat the shit out of him for the hell of it.

"Don't even think about it," he says, reading my expression. "You haven't had any outbursts since Daisy was born. Don't start now."

"Then help me bring my fucking family home!" I yell, loud enough that

I'm sure others in the house have heard me. So much for beating him up.

He sighs heavily and sits down a few barstools away from me. He's smart enough to stay out of hitting distance.

"I promise she's not interfering with my search. I know you're stressed, but you have to trust me. You owe me that much."

The logical side of my brain knows he's right, but I don't want to listen to logic. I want to let my anger consume me in a way I haven't been able to in over a year. With Abigail and Daisy gone, it might be time for me to tear up my room for old time's sake.

"Then why haven't you found anything?" I ask lowly, clutching a bottle of whiskey in my hand so hard that the neck breaks.

"I've told you before and I'll tell you again," he answers, annoyed. "The ghosts are withholding. They're more terrified of the poltergeist than we are, and they don't believe we have any power to help them. Maybe they're right, but I swear I'm doing everything I can to try."

Snake walks into the bar with his laptop in hand, but stops short, assessing the distance between us. He senses my mood too, and he's seen what happens when I get into a state. They all have. I take a deep breath and count to ten, knowing this is no time or place to release my frustration.

"Everything okay, Prez?" he asks warily, and Hex throws his hands up in annoyance. "If it's a bad time, I can come back," he says hesitantly.

"There's never going to be a good time, Snake. What is it?"

He sets the laptop between me and Hex so we can see what's on the screen. Multiple windows are open, each with a different image of a rival gang's hideout, each vandalized in some way.

"When did this happen?" I ask, recognizing at least three different gang-affiliated locations.

"The same night as ours," Snake answers ominously. "I missed it before because their security footage had been scrubbed too. These images have been uploaded into the police database."

"Why did it take so long?" I ask, though we both know the answer to that. The police only give a shit about us when the public is in danger. They don't care if someone is attacking us.

"They only found them because each location called in a dead body. Every gang in the city lost someone that night."

"Even the Cuatro Locos?" I ask, my interest piqued.

"Believe it or not, no. They're being blamed for all of it."

It doesn't make any sense. We have no beef with them, and as far as I know, neither do any of the other gangs. If they do, it's a recent development. But then it hits me. Of course, the Cuatro Locos had nothing to do with it.

I look over the screen at Hex, who's staring back at me with the same expression. Could this all be because of the poltergeist? There's no reason for it to be targeting the gangs of the city, unless it was a cop when it was alive.

"Is that all?" I ask Snake.

He eyes my hand curiously and I look down to see that I'm bleeding from where I broke the glass earlier. I hadn't even noticed.

"Should I call Graveyard?" he asks, looking between us carefully.

I shake my head and walk behind the bar to wash my hand off in the sink. I know Buffy keeps a first-aid kit somewhere back here. Snake still watches me, waiting to be dismissed.

"Don't call Graveyard," I tell him. "He has enough on his plate."

"We all do," Hex interjects. "You especially."

Snake agrees, and they both tell me I should take a break.

"You could go see Abigail," Hex suggests. "I think a little nookie would calm you down."

I glare at him, but he knows there's nothing I'll do to him with Snake in the room. I could tell him to leave and deal with Hex the way I want to, but I don't. Part of me knows that even if I murder Hex with my bare hands, it won't take away any of my anxiety. And I'd lose one of my closest friends.

"I'm not leaving New Orleans until this is settled," I tell them both, and my word is final.

## Seer

Tory's been preoccupied all week, out of bed before I wake up and not returning until I'm long asleep. When I manage to glimpse her, she looks better. Radiant in some way I can't put my finger on. But she doesn't sit still long enough to let me near her.

I walk up the stairs to the attic to find her doing just that—sitting still—

but she's in the middle of a salt circle. She meditating and I'm not allowed to go near her until she's out of her trance.

Her back is to the door, so I walk carefully around the room until I can see her face. She looks serene, peaceful for the first time in days. Every now and then she'll flinch or mutter something, but it's almost as if she's dreaming. She probably hasn't sensed that I'm in the room.

My thoughts swirl as I watch her, wondering what's caused her to come up here. There are a million places she could meditate in this house, but this is where she goes to reach darker places. Where is she now, that I can't reach her?

I sit on an old trunk and wait patiently until she's finished. Several minutes go by, and I almost give up, but then I see her put her finger up to tell me to wait. Another moment goes by, and she opens her eyes, smiling at me.

"Hello, mon coeur," she whispers sweetly. "Have you been here long?"

I smile and walk to her, holding out my hands for her to grab. She stands up gracefully and shakes out her skirt. The attic is notoriously full of dust bunnies. Among other creatures.

"Only a few minutes," I tell her, pulling her into a tight embrace and placing a soft kiss on her forehead. "I've missed you."

"Aren't you sweet?" She giggles, reaching up on her toes to kiss me firmly on the lips. "But I haven't gone anywhere. I'm right here."

"Are you though?" I ask her seriously. We descend the stairs together, arm in arm. "I've barely seen you in days."

A look clouds her face, but she shakes it away. Not fast enough for me to miss it. She's been hiding something from me. I can't help but wonder if she's still punishing me for not telling her about the shooting right away.

Pettiness isn't in her nature. If she's withholding information, it's because she thinks she's doing it for my own good. That doesn't mean I like it any better.

"I've been searching the spirit world," she finally tells me when we reach our bedroom. "I didn't want you to worry. I haven't done anything dangerous, but I'm trying to find the poltergeist."

I let out a long breath because I am worried about her. I don't like her putting herself in danger to help us. I almost lost her once, and I don't want to come close to that again. But I trust her, and I don't want her to feel like I don't.

“Have you had any luck?” I ask, genuinely curious.

She sighs and shakes her head, throwing herself onto our bed and groaning into the mattress.

“No,” she says, sitting up to look at me. “Hex told me the ghosts have been hiding, but I didn’t think they could hide there too. They’re crafty.”

“And the poltergeist?” I ask her.

She simply shakes her head and lets out a labored breath. “When I found your brother, I had a connection with him. I don’t even know who the poltergeist is. How can I possibly find him?”

I sit next to her and pull her to me, relishing in her warmth. One side effect of Tory’s autism is her hyper-fixation. When she sets her mind to something, she can’t let it go. Unless she can find something else to focus on, she’ll never let this go.

“Please promise me you won’t go too far,” I plead. “I need you, baby. Don’t do anything that will endanger your life.”

She looks up at me with sincerity and kisses my cheek.

“You know I can’t guarantee that any more than you can.”

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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# Pocus

Someone bangs on my door, pulling me out of a great dream. The beast inside me screams to be let out and murder whoever it is, but that's just my tiredness speaking. I roll out of bed and stumble to the door, not bothering to turn on the light.

A police pig stands at my door, shining a bright light in my face. The fuck? Who let him in?

"Mr. Pocus, we need you to come downstairs right now for questioning."

I've literally been asleep all night. What could they possibly think I've done? With the pigs, it doesn't matter. If anything is remotely amiss in town, the hammer comes down on one of the gangs. They probably roll a pair of dice to decide which one they'll investigate.

I walk down the stairs in nothing but my boxers and find my men in a similar state. There are half a dozen cops in the room, with more milling around the house, and dozens of lights shine outside the window.

I see the officer from the nightclub watching me with a gleeful expression. He thinks he's caught me somehow, but I have no idea what this is about. I'm completely in the dark, and I can tell that the guys are too. No one knows exactly what to do.

"We finally got you, you spooky piece of shit," the officer hisses at me as I sit down on the couch.

An older man takes charge of the situation, telling us they're going to take us each into a room to interrogate us. He gives no indication about what we're being interrogated about, but I assume this is a method of dividing and conquering. If we don't have time to corroborate our stories, they can catch us in a lie.



The problem they don't seem to realize is there is no story to corroborate. We're all equally in the dark about why we're here. I'm furious that these pigs have infiltrated our home.

Each officer escorts one of my men out until it's just me and the man from the club. He sits in a chair opposite me, and questions me about my whereabouts this evening. I tell him the truth. I've been home all day, and multiple people can testify to that.

"What about your men?" he growls. "Where did you send them out tonight?"

They've all had various assignments over the last few days, but no one's had anything very specific. Our method since the attack has been to stay vigilant and acquire as much information as possible. As far as I know, they've been riding around the city, keeping their eyes peeled.

"So, you didn't command one of your men to blow up the Cuatro Locos hideout?" he asks, a sneer on his face.

I hope he sees my shock as genuine because it is.

"Was anyone hurt?" I ask, thinking of our home. This is exactly why I sent my wife away.

"Half the men are dead. The other half are in the ICU," he tells me, but I don't miss the glint in his eye. As much as he wants to nail me to the wall for a crime I haven't committed, he's happy to see a notorious gang taken down.

"Why would you assume my men had anything to do with it? We were attacked recently, too."

"Yes, I do find that curious," he says. "Every gang in this city was vandalized on the night of the club shooting, and every gang buried at least one man. Except for you. You had two men at the club during the shooting, and you lost no one."

"Are you accusing me of keeping my men alive?" I laugh hollowly. "I didn't realize that was a crime."

"Why did you murder those men?" he screams in my face.

His tactics won't work on me. Besides the fact that I'm innocent, this is hardly the first time I've been questioned by the police. They could waterboard me and I wouldn't crack. I've done nothing wrong, and he knows it.

"I haven't murdered anyone," I tell him calmly. "I have not ordered my men to murder. Furthermore, your head is stuck so far up your own ass, you don't realize the gangs are not to blame for the violence in this city."

It's his turn to laugh, and he does for a long time. "That's the best joke I've heard all year," he says, catching his breath. "And who exactly is to blame, then?"

"Perhaps your corrupt office," I suggest. "Or the powerful elite who think they can control the fate of this city with their money. I bet you're in their pocket. You could haul every gang member to jail and you'd realize we are not the problem."

"Enough!" he shouts, and I see I've gotten to him. He's losing his shit because he knows I'm right.

"Ward," another man shouts, entering the room. He's clearly a more senior officer as his uniform is more decorated. "What have I told you about getting agitated with the witness? Take a lap."

Ward grumbles as he walks out of the room, purposely bumping into the other officer as he goes.

"The man is obviously unhinged," I tell the officer with a smirk. "Are you sure he's the kind of man who should be representing NOLA's finest?"

"Don't do yourself any favors," he says sarcastically. "Keep talking shit about my men. I'd love to know your thoughts on the type of men running my department."

I realize this man is the new police chief, recently installed after we exposed Anderson's corruption. This man is tough on crime, especially gang violence, but he has no water to hold. I explain to him, as I did to the junior pig, that we aren't responsible for the violence.

"I believe you," he says, "but that doesn't make you innocent. Your hands are covered in blood, Mr. Pocus, and they always will be. Maybe it isn't the blood of the Cuatro Locos gang, but one day you will have to atone for your sins."

My stomach churns and my inner beast claws at my throat. This man needs to get away from me and soon.

"Have you found anything on my men?" I ask as calmly as I can. "Have you found any reason to continue your search, or have you realized you're chasing your own ass?"

"You're clean," he admits. "For now. But we're keeping a close eye on your organization."

"I'd expect nothing less," I growl back.

I wait for the police to leave, watching closely to ensure they take nothing with them. They've found no evidence of wrongdoing, and they aren't

entitled to take any of our belongings. Snake watches them with slitted eyes as they pack up the work they were doing on his computers. Thankfully, he has a failsafe on each device to wipe them for such an occasion.

When they're finally gone, I tell the men to get back to sleep. I'm too angry to do anything else, nor do I have any desire to call church tonight. We've been through enough. I storm up to my room and let the beast free, reveling in the feeling of being free. This is long overdue.

# Seer

As I start to fall back asleep, I feel a familiar tingling on the edges of my brain. I'm sucked into the first vision I've had in weeks. All I can see is Hex's face, and I sense danger. There's nothing else, only darkness and the feeling of being trapped.

My visions have been like this since my encounter with Edward last year. They're hazier and make much less sense. There's no narrative or rhyme or reason. I see glimpses and feel emotions that don't belong to me. The overwhelming emotion from this vision is fear.

I sit up in bed, sensing Tory stirring next to me.

"Did you just have a vision?" she asks, excitedly. She knows how difficult they've been for me.

"I did," I confirm. "But I don't understand."

She sits up and turns to me, crossing her legs as she faces me. She indicates I should do the same, so I mirror her pose. She grabs my hand and leads me through a breathing meditation, helping me to focus my thoughts.

"Now tell me about the vision," she prompts gently. "Even if there are glimpses, tell me what you saw."

"I just saw Hex," I tell her. "And darkness. There was so much darkness surrounding him."

She squeezes my hands encouragingly, giving me the freedom to either continue or stop there. I can't say for sure if I have anything else to tell her, except the overwhelming fear I felt.

“He’s terrified,” I tell her. “He’s walking into a trap he can’t get out of, and he can’t be reached. What do we do?”

She squeezes again and tells me gently to open my eyes. When I do, I see her dark eyes staring back at me with love and compassion.

“I feel it too,” she whispers. “Something in his aura has been dark for days. It’s like he’s hidden from me.”

I nod and pull her close. We embrace, both worried about our friend. I feel bad for the way I spoke to him the other day, especially because I know how much Tory loves him. He’s like the brother she never had, and I don’t want to get in the way of their bond. I love that my wife loves my friends.

But that brings us back to the problem at hand. I’ve just seen a horrible vision of him, and she’s been sensing a deep darkness surrounding him. Our friend is in trouble, and we have to find a way to help him.

# Pocus

The summer morning dawns muggy and gray. It reflects my mood perfectly. After last night, I feel purged of my rage, but that says nothing of the anxiety raging inside of me. I decide to go for a run, something I haven’t done in years. It’s the only thing I can think to do to shake these feelings.

My heart beats in time with my feet hitting the pavement, and I relish the burning that starts in my lungs. I take it hard, shallow breaths, trying to find a rhythm after all this time. My legs scream at me, but I push them forward, showing no mercy on my aching muscles. I run a mile before turning back toward the house, my body screaming at me.

When I return, I see a package sitting on the front porch. As I get closer, I see it’s addressed to me, and the return address is Anderson’s lawyer’s office. Great. I tear the box open to find a hideous vase wrapped in bubble wrap. I walk it to the outside trash can and don’t give it another thought.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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The booming bass of the music fills my veins. Since the police raided our home last night, I've needed to get out. As much as I hate clubs, I need this. I need to not feel anything for a while and not look for the undead.

I go up to the bar, easily pushing my way through the crowd. The recent shooting has done nothing to lessen the attendance. That's New Orleans in a nutshell. It keeps carrying on. When I get to the bar, I wave down the bartender with a fifty, which immediately gets his attention.

He pours me a shot of Patron, which I only order because I have Juliana on my mind. As if I've conjured her, I turn around and spill my drink on her. She yells at first, but when she sees it's me, she smiles.

"I thought you grew out of tequila," she says over the music.

I laugh, remembering our conversation the other night. "Honestly, I only got it because I was thinking of you?"

"What?" she asks, cupping her ear. She can't hear me over the noise.

"I was thinking of you," I shout again.

She shakes her head and points toward the door. "Let's go somewhere quieter."

I put my glass back down on the sticky bar and follow her out toward the door. We leave the club and I follow her down the street toward a broken-down playground. The gate is broken, and though there's a sign clearly stating it's closed after sundown, we sneak inside anyway.

In the glow of the streetlight, I realize my memory can't remotely do her justice. When she smiles, it's like she's telling me a secret, her whole face lighting up from the effort. I follow her to the swings and she challenges me to a competition.

We each take a swing and walk ourselves backward, ready to launch into the air. I'm taller and heavier, so I start much higher, but she pumps her legs back and forth quickly, easily catching up to me. She throws her whole body into the effort, serious about beating me.

I can't help but laugh wildly as I watch her. I feel like a kid again, trying to prove to the pretty girl on the playground that I can keep up with her. The truth is, I'm not sure I can. She gets higher and higher, but my early weight advantage slows me down. I watch in slight horror as she soars several feet into the air, then launches herself off the swing, landing in a heap on the ground.

I stop swinging immediately, dragging my feet through the gravel to stop myself. I run over to her, worried, ready to call Graveyard, but I hear her laughing hard. It's fuller and sweeter than the sound that's been ringing in my ears. She laughs hysterically and sits up, looking at me with pure joy on her face. Tears stream down her face, and I realize they're from laughter, not pain.

"I haven't done that since I was a kid," she says joyfully, clutching her sides. "That was fucking glorious!"

I laugh with her, caught up in her joy. My body is lighter and freer than it's ever been. We sit on the ground, laughing for a long time. Every time we begin to catch our breath, we realize we're on the ground and laugh again. I don't think I've ever laughed so hard in my entire life.

She finally stands, wiping herself off, and I stand with her.

"Christ, I haven't laughed like that in ages," she says, and a dark expression flits over her face. It's gone just as quickly, though. "Thank you," she says earnestly. "Thank you for giving me that gift."

I shrug. "It was your idea. I never would have thought to do that. It's not exactly a manly thing to do."

"Oh, I disagree." She giggles. "I think it's very manly."

"Maybe if I'd jumped off like you." I laugh, more controlled this time. "That would've been a very manly thing to do."

She puts her hands on her hips and glares at me. I instantly realize my mistake.

"No, no, no, fuck no!" I say, backtracking. "I didn't mean that you're manly. You aren't, you're gorgeous and so fucking wonderful, and—"

"You're cute when you're nervous," she tells me, cutting off my inane chattering. Thank God, because I probably would have admitted I've been

dreaming about her.

A fog rolls in, covering our feet, and the lights flicker. I would blame the ghosts, but I don't see any around. This could just be some good, old-fashioned New Orleans creepiness. The city likes to surprise me on nights like this.

I look at the ground, then at her face. The change in the atmosphere doesn't seem to affect her, but I have to ask anyway. "Would you like to go somewhere else? Maybe somewhere less spooky?"

She throws her head back and laughs at me. "Afraid, Hex?" she teases. "I wouldn't think a manly man like you would be intimidated by a little fog."

"I'm not," I defend, once again surprised by her candor. "I just want to make sure you're comfortable."

"I'm a big girl, Hex. Believe it or not, I'm perfectly capable to let you know when I am and am not comfortable."

She keeps catching me off guard in unexpected ways. She's witty and bold, whip-smart, and unafraid to call me out on my bullshit. Every time I'm with her, I can't help but wonder how she'd fit in with Abigail, Tory, and Evanesce.

Abigail and Evanesce would probably bring her into their fold immediately because that's just who they were. Tory would likely be more skeptical at first, but she'd eventually come around. As much as she wants me to find love and settle down, she's very particular about who she envisions me with.

We've had long talks over breakfast about her ideal partner for me. She's always told me I deserve to be with someone who makes me feel loved and cared for, and I feel a portion of that when I'm around Juliana. It's obviously too soon to even consider love.

Sure, she is literally the girl of my dreams, but she's been through a lot of pain recently. I wouldn't blame her if she wants to take things slowly and see how things unfold. That's what I want too.

But I do feel like it's my turn for love. I've sat back while Pocus and Seer have found their dream girls. I don't envy them their happiness with Abigail and Tory, but I'm tired of waiting around while their lives move on and mine stays stagnant. It's time we all grow up and stop sleeping around with random women all the time.

Juliana pulls me back from my thoughts, and I realize she's watching me carefully. "Everything okay in there?" she jokes. "Did I say something so

controversial you can't believe it came out of my mouth?"

I laugh. "Not at all. I find you refreshing."

"Well, find this refreshing." She laughs, taking off toward the jungle gym. "I bet I can get up the jungle gym faster than you can."

She climbs up it quickly, like she's a monkey. She's at the top before I realize she's gone. I race after her, but it's fruitless. She's won this battle, just like the last one.

"You cheat!" I accuse her from the ground. She turns to sit on the top of the structure and blows a raspberry at me. Saucy little minx.

"So what?" she calls down. "Life is a cheat. We might as well bend the rules to our favor."

I climb up and sit next to her, taking in the view from the top. The fog has settled onto the ground and a slight breeze picks up, swirling her hair around her face. I'm careful not to touch her, worried I'll scare her away. That's the last thing I want.

"Tell me the best thing that's ever happened to you," she tells me, not a request, but a demand.

"Meeting you had been pretty great," I say, and she fixes me with an annoyed look.

"Too cheesy," she says. "Something that happened before you met me."

I think back over my life and the years of misery it held. My awful mother and realizing I was a freak for seeing the ghosts. The best thing that ever happened to me was...

"Meeting my friend Pocus. He saved me from the shithole that was my life."

She smiles and nods, considering my answer.

"I think coming to America was the best for me," she tells me. "Obviously there have been struggles, but I'm glad my parents loved me enough to bring me. Now tell me the worst."

I bristle at her frankness, knowing her answer is at the tip of her tongue. The best thing in her life became the worst in one fell swoop. But there have been so many bad things in my life. Where to even begin?

"I could argue that being born was where it all went to shit for me." I laugh. "I was imprisoned about a year ago by a rival gang. That wasn't a riot."

She looks at me in surprise, but I shrug it off. There's a lot we need to learn about each other, and we have all the time in the world to do it.



“The police showed up at my house last night and accused me and all of my friends of blowing up someone’s home. And there was this thing where my best friend almost died.”

“Shit,” she breathes out. “I’m sorry I asked.”

“Life is full of good and bad things, but every day a new thing can happen that’s the worst or the best.”

She mulls over this for a long while before climbing down the jungle gym. “I’m glad I met you. You make life more interesting.”

I smile at her, as I slide off the structure. I feel the same way about her.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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# Pocus

Hex strolls into the house with the biggest shit-eating grin, and I immediately want to punch him in the balls. How can he be so happy with everything that's happening? He's usually the most obedient soldier, never stepping a toe out of line, but I don't recognize him lately. He's hiding things. I feel the familiar clawing at my chest and try to tamp it down.

"Where the fuck have you been?" I growl, slamming my glass of whiskey on the bar.

It's late. Nearly two AM, but he looks more rested and refreshed than I've been in over a year. A few men are up, drowning their sorrows with concoctions Buffy tirelessly made all night. They look between us with apprehension. I'm sure Snake mentioned the mounting tension from a few days ago.

Hex eyes the glass sitting next to me and draws a deep breath.

"Looks like I was doing the same thing as you, Prez. I was drowning my sorrows at a bar."

"Does Buffy not provide you adequate choices?" I ask, an edge to my voice. "Do you need to throw your hard-earned money at some schmuck downtown?"

Buffy, for his part, shrinks behind the bar, his hands raised in a defensive position. He doesn't want to get involved in this fight, and no one blames him. He's forgiven me from the time I almost beat him dead, but he twitches at the slightest conflict.

"I had to get out of the house." Hex shrugs nonchalantly. "The drinks here are great, but I needed a new atmosphere."

His answer rubs me the wrong way. At this point, anything anyone says

would. They know how miserable I've been since Abigail left. It would do Hex well to remember and not piss me off. Which is all that he's done lately.

I pick up my drink and take another fortifying sip. "Did you see that woman again?"

I stare straight ahead at the bar, but in my periphery, he shifts his weight. He's nervous. That's all the answer I need.

"With everything going on right now, do you really think it's wise to trust some random woman? How do you know she's not involved in the recent attacks?"

He sighs heavily, turning to leave the room. He's extricating himself from an impending argument, but I've already chosen violence. He won't get away that easily. I leave my stool and run after him, cutting him off before he reaches the door.

"I trust her," he tells me evenly, his tone not rising one decibel. He's calm against my current of rage.

"You barely know her." I push him gently. "Can you tell me with certainty that she has nothing to do with the attacks on the other gangs? Or the pol—"

"Don't start with me," Hex replies darkly, stepping back so he's out of reach. "After everything I've done for you, you don't get to question me."

"The hell I don't!" I scream into his face. He doesn't flinch. "You work for me, you live in my house, you—"

"Pocus," Knix interjects, gently pulling me away from Hex. His voice is gentle and careful. "Hex has been working harder than any of us lately. You're blowing this out of proportion."

I turn on him, a murderous look in my eye. He stares at me, not flinching from my gaze. He knows better than to get in the middle of me and a punching bag, but he doesn't back down. One disadvantage of him dating my sister is that she's shared tips on how to handle me.

"Why don't you go sit back down and finish your drink?" he suggests, guiding me back to the stool.

He infantilizes me, but I let him, knowing the other option is beating the shit out of one of my best friends. I can't say why I'm defensive about this woman, but I don't trust anyone right now. Until we've solved the mystery of who's behind all these attacks, and until I can bring my family home, everyone is a suspect.

I sit back down on my stool, my hand shaking. I can't steady it long

enough to take another drink of my whiskey. I need sleep, and I need Abigail, but they will both allude me until this problem is solved.

Hex slips out of the room, leaving a vacant spot by the doorway. I can't blame him, honestly. In the same position, I'd walk away too. He doesn't deserve my ire. None of us deserve this shit.

I drain the glass and slump away from the bar, dragging myself up the stairs to my room. When I step inside, Nesce is sitting on my bed, observing me curiously.

"What are you doing here, Coco?" I ask gruffly, wanting to collapse on the bed and let the alcohol wash over me.

She smiles sadly and stands up, walking to me and placing her fingers under my eyes, pressing lightly. I feel a pressure release, one I've been carrying so long I've grown used to it.

"You aren't sleeping," she says simply. "You're grouchy with everyone, and you're barely holding yourself together. Am I right?"

I shrug, carelessly taking off my shoes and throwing them in the closet. There's no Abigail here to impress.

"They don't understand," I grumble. "They aren't sacrificing everything for an enemy they can't see. Hex can see the fucking thing, he's just too big of an oaf to find it."

"You don't mean that," she chastises. "Hex is doing the best he can. Probably better than his best. He can't control what he can't control, and neither can you. Stop blaming everyone for your misery."

"My daughter is gone." My voice is strangled as the anger rises inside me. "She should be asleep in her crib, but she's not here."

I walk to the crib and cling to the railing like it's a life vest. Its emptiness matches the ache in my chest. Nesce sighs heavily behind me, frustrated.

"Would you feel better if I went to stay with them? I'll call you every night and you can let Daisy hear your voice."

I shake my head despite how much I want to know they're with someone I trust. Evanesce has proven her ability to take care of herself a million times over, and she and Abigail are close. It would be good for them, but she would be making another sacrifice for me.

"I really don't mind," she says, as if she's reading my mind. "And you'll sleep better at night knowing we're together. You need sleep, Pocus."

I nod and swallow hard, unable to tear my eyes away from Daisy's mattress. "Go tomorrow. Call me as soon as you're there."

She steps up behind me and places her hands on my forearms. She leans up on her toes to kiss my cheek before resting hers on my shoulder blade.

“It will get better,” she promises. “It always does.”

# Tory

Another wave of nausea rolls over me, but I’m too tired to get out of bed. I lie there, curled in the fetal position, and wait for it to pass. The nausea comes and goes constantly now. There’s no rhyme or reason. Sometimes it hits out of nowhere.

Nicholas has noticed how much I’ve been puking, and he’s a wreck. He thinks the rituals are making me sick. Such a man. Now he lies next to me, rubbing my back through the covers wrapped around me.

“Can I get you anything, mon amour?” he asks, a hint of desperation in his voice. He needs to feel useful, but there’s nothing he can do to take away the pain. It will eventually pass on its own.

“I’m fine,” I whisper weakly, concentrating on keeping the room in one place. Nausea brings dizziness, and dizziness makes the room feel like it’s upside down. As long as I squeeze my eyes shut, I can keep it in place.

“What about an herbal remedy? Is there anything you can make to take the pain away? I’m worried about you.”

“It’s stress,” I lie. “Everyone is stressed right now, I’m surprised this house hasn’t imploded from the weight of it all.”

I want him to laugh, to chuckle at my joke, but he doesn’t. He sighs heavily and collapses against his side of the bed. His stress is directed at me and my well-being. He won’t be happy until I’m well, but he’ll be waiting a long time.

“Maybe it would be a good idea for you to get out of town like Abigail did,” he whispers in the dark. “It would be good for you to take a load off and relax.”

I squeeze my eyes tighter because that’s the last thing I want right now. He’s trying his best, but it’s a horrible idea. Pocus and Abigail had to

consider Daisy's safety. I have to consider everyone else's.

"It's fine," I tell him, though at this moment I feel like I might die if I move my body an inch. The nausea will pass. It's what comes later that scares me. "Besides, who's going to take care of you if I'm gone?"

The bed shifts, and I'm sure he's staring down at me.

"I can take care of myself. But I won't feel better until you're better."

I sigh and carefully turn so to look at him. I weakly reach up my hand to touch his face and feel his eyes close at the contact.

"I'm needed here," I whisper. "The Ruthless Kings need me right now, I can't run away and hide. Abigail doesn't have a gift and she has Daisy to think about. But these spirits have been reaching out to me. I have to help them."

"That's bullshit," he growls, moving off the bed and pacing around the dark room. "You can't put yourself at risk to help some damn spirits who won't thank you. Your life is worth more than that."

His anger blinds him. He forgets that a year ago I was sent to help him. If I abandoned the people who needed my help, I never would have ended up here.

"My decision is final," I tell him, my voice weak but firm. "I won't abandon the people who need me. Now come back to bed and stop being so stubborn."

He curses again, but the mattress dips as he sits back down.

"I don't like this," he says to the wall. "It isn't right for you to put yourself in danger for us. I'm supposed to be protecting you."

"What a backward, misogynistic view." I giggle. "We are partners, Nicholas Abner. For better or worse. That means I will always fight for you as hard as you fight for me."

He lies down and rolls over to my side of the bed, pulling me to him. "Please be careful," he whispers in my ear. "I can't lose you."

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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**A**nother clusterfuck of a week has gone by with more random attacks on other gangs in the city. The police keep a very close eye on us, and we've been watching everyone else. Snake brings us leads to follow that ultimately lead nowhere. It's like someone is purposely leading us on, making us chase our asses.

Meanwhile, the police lack leads on the shooter. Now that most of the Cuatro Locos gang is dead, they've released a statement that the shooter was likely killed in the blast. It's bullshit, and we know it. The leader of the Cuatro Locos maintained their innocence until his untimely death. While we're all being attacked, who's the one doing the attacking?

Pocus volleys between believing it's the poltergeist and being suspicious of the cops. He's finally gotten some rest and gotten his head on straight, but the stress still gets to him. He's thinner, if that was possible. I always thought he was a skinny motherfucker, but now he's wasting away to nothing,

Then there's Tory, who's stubbornly denying anything is wrong with her. We hear her throwing up night and day, and she's constantly pushing herself to help. Seer's begged me to talk to her, but she won't listen. We're worried about her, more than she seems to worry about herself. It's frustrating as shit to watch someone you love hurt. She keeps telling me I'm sweet to worry, but I'm sick over her wellbeing.

My only solace in this has been the idea of seeing Juliana again. There's something about her that makes me feel more alive and more hopeful about the future that's been so fucking bleak.

Tonight, I find her at the same park, looking as radiant as ever. Her long, dark hair is pulled back in a ponytail, making her face look sharper and more

ethereal. She's the most stunning woman I've ever seen, and every time I meet her she gets more beautiful.

"Hey, you." She smiles at my approach. "I was wondering when I'd see you again."

"Any fucking time you want." I chuckle. "Christ, it's good to see you."

She blushes shyly and looks down at her shoes. I want to sweep her in my arms and take her away from this place, to somewhere more private where we'd be less likely to get caught. I've been dying to get my hands on her, but we haven't gotten that far yet. We've spent so much time talking, I've fallen for her mind more than her body.

It's some fucking lame, girly shit, but I like it. I'd never admit it to the guys, but getting to know her has been infinitely better than some quick, random fuck. She's someone I could see myself with in the long term, and I never imagined I'd consider that.

"So, are you ready to have your ass whooped on the swings again?" she jokes, changing the subject. She's so fucking adorable.

"I had some different ideas." I step closer until she's a breath away. "Shit, Juliana," I whisper. "I hope I'm not off base here, but I can't stop thinking about you. Every time I leave you, all I can think about is seeing you again. Life's been rough lately, but you make it worth it."

Her eyes grow wet, something I didn't expect from her. She has such a tough exterior, but underneath, she's soft and vulnerable. We're not so different in that sense.

"Thank God. I thought it was just me." Her voice hitches. "You're the best thing that's happened since my parents died. Maybe the only good thing."

She leans into me, grabbing my shirt and pulling me down to her for a kiss. I want to get lost in it, to let her consume me, but when she touches me, it feels wrong. It's like she isn't there, no more tangible than a stiff breeze or water from a spout. I pull away, looking at her in horror, and it all crashes down on me.

The first time I dreamed about her was the night Anderson Grey died. The first time I saw her in person was the night of the shooting. We met in a fucking graveyard. The ghosts have hidden from me, the poltergeist has directly attacked me, and it all began with visions of her. How could I have been so stupid?

Pocus was right, I shouldn't have trusted her.



She stares at me in confusion, wide-eyed and innocent, and my stomach turns. Can she be so manipulative to continue the charade even now? She reaches out and touches me, but she knows I can barely feel her. She's more solid than a ghost, but she clearly isn't alive.

"Who the fuck are you?" I ask, my voice as cold as stone.

Her face is a mixture of hurt and confusion, another tool to make me feel weak around her. It won't work.

"Hex, you're scaring me." She steps further away. "If I'm a bad kisser, just say so," she tries to joke lightly, but her voice betrays her panic.

"Did you think I wouldn't realize what you are?" I growl at her. "Have you been planning this from the beginning? You knew I'd be able to see you. I can fucking see ghosts, but you hedged your bets."

She looks afraid now, only enraging me further. I feel betrayed and idiotic. I finally fall for someone and she's a fucking poltergeist.

"No one sent me," she answers in a high-pitched voice. Tears shine in her eyes and her voice is strangled. "I don't know what you're talking about, Hex. Why are you saying that? What do you mean you can see ghosts?"

"Don't," I warn. "Don't fucking try to act like I'm stupid. You've been playing me from the beginning, just admit it! When did you die?"

She takes in a sharp breath of air, surely trying to distract me.

"I'm not," she whispers, horrified. "Hex, I'm not dead. What the fuck are you talking about?"

Her face pales as tears stream down her face in earnest. She deserves an Oscar for this performance. An aching pain burns in the center of my chest, and I wonder if this is how Pocus feels before his outburst. Anger claws at me, tearing into every fiber of my being.

I don't know if I'm angrier with her or with myself. She fooled me, but I let myself be fooled. I was warned not to trust her, but I let my pride get in the way. Pocus was only ever looking out for me, and I've betrayed his trust. There's only one way to fix this.

She's clearly not going to give up the ghost. Ironically. I have no other option. I can't risk her vanishing into the night. I'll never get this chance again. I reach into my back pocket and pull out the small bag of herbs Tory and Mama prepared for me. I've kept them on me at all times, despite the fact I've barely seen a ghost in weeks. Well, I thought I hadn't anyway.

Before she can react, I pull the herbs out of the bag and throw them at her, paralyzing her instantly. She can't move or speak, but her eyes look at

me in fear. Her mouth is frozen in an unheard scream, probably in anger that I've figured her out. Maybe she thought I was an easy target, and she's angry I'm not that dense.

Whatever the case, I have to get her home quickly before the effects wear off. Pocus will never forgive me if I lose her. Trapping ghosts is tricky, but she's a challenge since she's more corporeal. My only option is to call Mama to help. If nothing else, she can bring more herbs to keep Juliana paralyzed.

She shows up within half an hour, driving her old, beat-up truck and wearing a grim expression. "Tell me everything, child," she says, getting out of the cab of the truck and running into the fenced area.

There's no time, though. I tell her that I've paralyzed the poltergeist, but she looks in Juliana's direction curiously.

"This little slip of a girl has been causing all this trouble?"

I look at her suspiciously. "Mama, since when do you see ghosts?"

"I see her aura," Mama explains. "You're sure she's not just a garden-variety ghost?"

Something about her tone upsets me. I'm tired of being doubted and questioned. I've found the poltergeist, and I won't stand around waiting for her to come to and disappear before we can lock her up.

"It's not important, but I felt her. Ghosts can't touch the living."

Mama nods but continues to stare at Juliana's "aura" curiously. There's no time for this. I growl in frustration and grab Juliana by her waist, her body feeling a little more solid, and drag her to the back of the truck. I slide her in, sprinkling more of the herbs Mama's brought just to be safe. It isn't a long drive back to the house, but I won't take any chances.

A ridiculous thought comes, to cover her with a tarp so no one will see her, but I'm the only one who can. My head still reels from tonight's events, and my heart aches. I will have time to process that later, though.

Mama and I race back home, with me riding behind to make sure Juliana stays put. When we arrive at the house, Mama opens the door without knocking. Why not? She basically lives here anyway.

A few men eye us curiously as we move through the front of the house to the basement stairs. Mama leads me to the room she and Tory fortified, and I lay Juliana on the ground. Her face is frozen in shock, but I won't be pulled in by her fear. She's fooled me long enough.

"Stay and keep an eye on her, would you?" I ask Mama, and she nods.

I take the stairs two at a time. When I reach the top, Pocus is standing

there, looking at me in surprise. Just the man I'm looking for.

"I found it," I tell him breathlessly. "I trapped the poltergeist."

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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# Pocus

“Not to state the obvious, Hex,” I say softly. “But I can’t see it.”

We stand in front of the fortified room, shoulder to shoulder. It looks like an ordinary, empty room, but Hex and Mama both assure me the spirit is in there. Hex is cagey about the details, but I trust his instincts. I owe him that after how harsh I’ve been with him lately.

“The paralytic is wearing off,” Hex tells me. “It’ll be confused, but likely chatty. It’ll try to bargain with us for its freedom.”

I don’t miss the way he’s purposely not using pronouns. I guess for him, it’s easier to see the spirit as a thing, rather than a former person, but he’s never talked about a ghost that way before. He’s not telling me something, but I won’t push him right now. He’s been moody since the second he found me.

“What do I ask a spirit I can’t see?” I wonder aloud, though my first instinct is to ask it what the hell it thinks it’s doing messing with my family. I can’t see the spirit, but I’m furious it’s caused so much trouble and is making me relocate my family.

“Be gentle,” Mama says, popping up at my left.

I jump in surprise, unaware she was there. I notice a humorous gleam in her eye. She did it on purpose. Mama knows how I feel about spirits, and I’d wager she’s trying to make me jumpier around them.

“I don’t think the girl meant to hurt anyone,” she continues. “She’s a lost spirit. She probably has no idea what she’s done.”

I look at Hex with a raised eyebrow, curious why he didn’t tell me the spirit was a woman. He seems sheepish and pale, and it dawns on me. It’s the girl he’s been seeing. The very one I accused of being involved. Vindication

swells through me, but victory isn't as sweet as I imagined. The look on Hex's face speaks to his deep devastation. I won't gloat about it.

"She's awake," he mutters. "Ask her whatever you want." His tone is different now that Mama's put the pieces together. He's more resigned and surlier. This must be hard for him. He'd been so annoyingly happy for the last few weeks. I can only imagine how he feels.

"Ask her who she is," I tell him.

He does, then answers. "Her name was Juliana Fontes," he says darkly. "She claims we're all crazy and she isn't dead."

I'm surprised to hear this. I assumed the whole point of being a poltergeist was to exact revenge on the living. Then again, it would hardly be the first time a spirit didn't realize they'd died. Hex has told me hundreds of stories over the years.

"What does she have to do with us?" I ask him. "Why has she been targeting us?"

He sighs heavily and looks at me hesitantly. "She says she doesn't know what the fuck you're talking about, and we're going to rot in hell for kidnapping her."

For some reason, I laugh. She sounds feisty, which is probably why Hex fell for her in the first place. Still, I can't help but wonder. "Hex, how could you not tell she was dead?"

He shakes his head and stares at the room, a murderous look on his face. I've clearly hit a nerve.

"We're getting nowhere." I sigh. "The poltergeist is trapped. I suppose that matters the most. We'll finally be able to sleep in peace."

Something tells me, though, that this is the beginning of Hex's problems.



When I can finally move my body, I scream bloody murder, but the man with Hex stares into the room blankly. These men are psychopaths, playing a sick, twisted game with me. Things are not what they seem.

How could I have fallen for someone so insane? Hex told me I'm dead, but that's the most ridiculous thing I've heard. He's using his friend to gaslight me into believing this stupid lie. They're good actors, I'll give them that.

Then there's the woman. She's an elderly black woman with a strong Caribbean accent, and she looks at me with pity. How can she allow these men to go along with this? There's a special place in hell for women who don't help other women. I hope she rots there for letting them do this to me.

The tall, thin man asks Hex to communicate with me, keeping up the ridiculous charade. I go to the doorframe and scream in his face, but he doesn't flinch. He's a better actor than I would've guessed. He pretends he doesn't hear me, laughing when Hex tells him I've told them both to rot in hell.

The tall man leaves, and the woman follows behind, leaving me alone with Hex who glares at me. He has no right to be angry. He drugged me and brought me to this hellhole. They'll torture me and murder me, most likely. I won't go down without a fight, though.

"There's no use screaming," Hex tells me coldly, his eyes vacant. "No one can hear you. No one else can see you. There's just me, and I won't let you get away with this."

"You fucking idiot," I scream at him. "I'm not dead. You and your psychotic friends won't convince me otherwise." I try to run at him through the open door, but the second I hit the entrance, I'm thrown back by an invisible force. What the fuck?

"The room has been fortified," he tells me, making my head swim. "You're never leaving. At least not until Mama can exorcise you. Then you're going straight to hell where you belong. I hope all the souls you tortured are there to greet you."

Nothing he says makes any sense. He's the one who belongs in hell, not me.

"Leave me the fuck alone, you monster," I tell him in a soft, dangerous tone. Screaming has no effect on him.

He turns to go, shutting off the light and leaving me alone in deep, pitch blackness. I grope in the dark for a solid wall and slide to the floor, curling

into a ball. I haven't had a drink in hours, and the hangover gets to me. I want to close my eyes and sleep, but I'm so terrified of what they'll do to me.

I wait for hours in agony, but no one returns. In the dark, I have nothing but memories to keep me sane. I think about my parents and their smiling faces. I remember how proud they were when I got my college acceptance letter. I can hear my mother telling me how excited she was for me to be the first in my family to attend university.

I think about the endless hours in the kitchen we spent making brigadeiros, carefully rolling the chocolate into balls and setting them on a pan before popping them in the refrigerator. Mom loved cooking, and Dad loved eating. Our lives were so full of joy. Then one day it was all taken away.

I close my eyes and lay my head against the wall. Mixed in with all the memories is a vivid image of headlights. I'm in the backseat of my parents' car. We're just leaving a celebratory dinner for my father, who's just retired from his job. We're driving through the city, blasting our favorite samba music, when my mother screams.

The headlights are clearer. They're approaching the car, and I can see my parents' horrified looks as my father tries to swerve to miss the car. He isn't fast enough, and then there's the loud sound of metal scraping against metal and we roll over and over. I feel sick to my stomach and cough up blood. I scream for my parents, but they can't hear me. They're gone already.

I wake with a start and realize it isn't a nightmare. This happened. I'm remembering the car accident as if I was there. I was there. How could I have been there? The wall behind me is solid, the floor cold. How can I be dead if I can feel things?

I stand up quickly and pace the room. My footsteps make no sound, but how could they? I was in the car when my parents died. I died. The horrible realization washes over me, and I sink back to the floor in a heap, sobs ripping through me. I. Died.

Someone pulled me out of the car, though. I remember now. My parents didn't answer me, and I knew they were gone already. The pain in my head was so sharp, and there was a bright light. I wanted to run toward it and find my parents there, but before I could, someone pulled me from the car. A dark figure stood over me and...

That's all I remember. That's the last memory I have before showing up in a bar three weeks ago, grabbing a pink cocktail, and drinking it down

quickly. The bar was too crowded and I was uncomfortable, so I left. The next morning, I saw on a newsstand that there'd been a shooting.

Was Hex right? Had I caused all these bad things to happen? That was impossible. I would know. I would know!

Sunlight streams through a window high up in the room. It's too small for me to crawl through, but what would it matter? I can't call the police. I'm not alive. There's probably no law against kidnapping a ghost. I laugh hysterically, the absurdity of this getting to me.

Footsteps sound on the stairs, and I look up to see Hex standing in the doorway, looking at me curiously.

"I remember," I tell him sadly. "I remember dying."

His expression changes to one of pity, and he comes into the room to sit next to me. The action surprises me, given his anger at me last night. "I couldn't sleep at all," he tells me. "It doesn't make any sense, but I don't think you're the reason all these bad things have been happening to us."

I shake my head because I do have feelings for him despite everything. I could never do anything to hurt him.

"I meant what I said," I whisper. "You're the best thing that's happened to me, Hex. But I have to update the worst."

He nods sadly, understanding my meaning. Realizing I'm dead is definitely the worst thing that ever has or ever will happen to me. I suppose nothing ever will happen to me now. How unfair to finally meet a guy I can see a future with when I have no future.

"Why am I still here?" I croak, my throat thick with tears. "How can I be here when my parents are gone?"

He wraps his arms around his knees, pulling them to his chest. He's so much more approachable in that position. He sighs heavily and fixes me with a serious look.

"There's not always a reason why spirits stick around. A lot have unfinished business, but sometimes they're tethered to the world for no reason at all. I'm sorry they left you here alone. I'm sorry you're stuck here."

I nod and swallow, remembering what he said last night.

"You said that woman would exorcise me. Like I'm a demon or something."

He sighs again and rests his head against the wall, looking at the ceiling. I mimic his position, this conversation too weighty and strange to take seriously.



“It’s complicated. But if you want, she can set your spirit free. You can be with your parents. You can let go.”

“How can I?” I ask sadly. “Since I met you, I feel more alive than I did when... well when I was alive.”

He turns to smile at me, his eyes wet. “Don’t let your feelings for me cloud your decision. You aren’t alive, so it doesn’t matter how either of us feels. It’s not fair to continue this.”

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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**H**ex has been gone for hours, and I fear he isn't coming back. He has no reason to. He's made it very clear he doesn't want me anymore. I don't blame him. If I were in his position, I'd make the same decision. After all, I'm dead. Something I still grapple with.

Hex is sweet and charming, with a playful quality. He also gets deep and says the most wonderful, beautiful things. He deserves someone amazing, but more importantly, someone alive.

The pain rips through me, and I'm struck again by the absurdity of this situation. A few hours ago, I thought the emptiness I felt was due to sadness and depression. Now I know this empty, numb sensation I've carried inside is death. Ghosts can't feel. But I do feel. It makes no sense.

Someone comes down the stairs, but it isn't him. The steps are lighter, more strained. I'm not surprised when the old woman enters the room and sits down next to me. She looks right at me, the way Hex does. She probably sees ghosts too.

"I'm sure you have a lot of questions, child," she says kindly. "I may not have all the answers, but I'll tell you all I can."

"You can see me?" I ask dumbly. Even though she's clearly speaking to me, I notice a distance in her eyes.

She nods, but clarifies. "I sense your spirit. I only see your aura, but I've opened my mind so we can communicate. This all must sound so strange."

I nod but realize she probably can't see that. "Yes," I whisper weakly. "Until last night, I didn't believe in ghosts. I didn't believe in anything. But everyone here is acting like it's common."

"To these boys, it is," she tells me with a small smile. "This is a safe

place for the outcasts of society, and ghosts are part of that. I'm surprised none have come down to see you."

I'm instantly glad they haven't. I'm struggling to process my own death, and I don't think I could handle seeing another dead person.

"What is this place?" I want to move our conversation to safer territory. I can only take so much.

The woman smiles again and reaches for my leg. She pats me gently, and I feel it. She looks at me knowingly, as if she feels me, too.

"You're a curious one. Can I tell you a secret? I don't think you are really dead."

Excitement courses through me at her words.

"You aren't exactly alive either, though," she goes on.

All the hope slips away from me. "What does that mean?" I ask her, feeling stupid. Maybe ghosts make sense to these people, but they've always been a myth to me. Now she's saying I might not be a ghost after all? "Is it normal for ghosts to not be dead?"

She laughs, a bright, joyous sound. It fills the small space, making it instantly feel more cheerful. Despite my previous apprehension, I like this woman. She's kind and warm.

"Darling, there's nothing normal about you at all. You're on a journey few have walked."

"What sort of journey am I on? Is there any way to come back from this?"

"That's what you have to decide," she tells me cryptically. "Only you can choose how the journey will end."

"How did I get on this journey?" I ask her.

She fixes me with a serious look and sighs deeply. Her lips form into a thin line, her expression apprehensive.

"That's a question I don't have the answer to," she tells me honestly. "I don't know why, but it's clear someone has ripped your soul out of your body before it was ready. Somewhere out there, your body still lives, to accept you back when you're ready. Or, you can choose to let go and move on. In that case, your body will die on its own."

"I don't want to be dead!" I answer desperately. "How do I get back to my body? Where is it?"

She sighs deeply again. This must be another question she can't answer. Of course not. I try something else. "You said you can sense my aura. What does it look like?"

A bright smile breaks over her entire face. She squeezes my knee, and I feel the pinch of it. Her touch feels like a whisper. Like the way my mom would rub my back as a child with only her fingertips. I felt it, but it was barely there, causing goosebumps to break out on my flesh. I look down to see the woman is the one who has goosebumps now.

“You, my dear, have a pure, bright aura. You are pure light, pure joy. Which is why I know you aren’t the person they’re after.”

“Why would they think I am?” I wonder. I’ve done nothing wrong. Before I met Hex, I had no idea this place existed. I don’t know what they think I’ve done, but I’m innocent.

“There’s another spirit like you out there. Sort of. The spirit isn’t alive the way you are, but it’s clinging to the earth so desperately, it has a foothold. It feels as you feel, and it can interact with the living as well as you do. Ghosts cannot feel, but both you and this other spirit do. While you feel love, it feels anger.”

“How do you know I feel love?” I ask her.

“Your aura is full of it. There’s a deep love overflowing out of your spirit. It’s a mixture of a deep love that’s existed for your whole life and new love. You’re experiencing it in a new way, aren’t you?”

I blush deeply because we both know she means, Hex. I’ve known him for such a short amount of time but she’s right. I do love him. Maybe he’s keeping my soul tethered to the earth.

“This other spirit, though, its aura is as black as night. It is pure evil. Its only purpose on this earth is to wreak havoc and chaos. It’s been doing that for the men upstairs.”

A chill runs through me, and I wrap my arms around myself. I pray I never have to run into that spirit.

*Tory*

“How long has she been like this?” a voice asks. It’s a familiar voice, but I haven’t heard it in a while.

“I’m not sure,” Nicholas answers. My beloved. He’s so good to me. “She seemed okay when we went to bed, but when I tried to wake her up this morning, she wouldn’t budge. She was sweaty and paler than usual. She’s so weak.”

His voice sounds strangled, like he’s been crying. Who’s he so worried about? I try to call out to him, but I can’t speak.

“It’s the ritual,” Mama says as she enters the room. Why is she here?

“We’ve bound a spirit to the house, and it’s draining her of her energy.”

“I need to look her over,” the first voice says authoritatively. “Seer, you can stay, but otherwise, we need to clear the room.”

“That girl is like a daughter to me,” Mama protests, but the man is firm.

“She can still be like a daughter to you from the kitchen. Go brew a tea to revitalize her.”

Mama cluck’s her tongue, she doesn’t like being ordered around. I imagine her fixing the man with a cold stare, but I can’t see her. Why can’t I see anything? Everything is so dark. The voices are the only thing keeping me in the present.

“Graveyard, what’s wrong with her?” Seer asks helplessly.

My heart breaks at his voice. He sounds so afraid, though I don’t know why. I’m right here. I just can’t open my eyes.

I feel Graveyard moving around me, realizing that’s why his voice sounds so familiar. I haven’t had to deal with Graveyard much, apart from Abigail’s sickness last year. He doesn’t come around the club much these days. If he’s here, though, I must be really sick. That probably explains why I can’t open my eyes.

Something slides over my arm, and I feel the pressure of it, squeezing and pinching me. I’d wince if I had enough energy. The pressure releases, and I hear the scribble of a pen against paper. Something cold is attached to my finger, and something sharp goes under my tongue. I wish Graveyard would stop poking and prodding. I just want to sleep.

More scribbling comes before I feel something sharp prick my arm. It hurts briefly, but then the pain is gone. Seer asks Graveyard what he wants to do with my blood, and coldness rushes through me. If Graveyard does a blood test, he’ll find out. He’ll tell Nicolas. I was going to do it eventually, but it hasn’t been the right time.

“Water,” I moan, my throat suddenly feeling parched.

Nicholas rushes to my side. His cool hand presses against my forehead.

“What is it, mon couer? What can I do for you?”

“Thirsty,” I whisper. “Need water.”

He pulls away and I hear the quick succession of his steps as he leaves the room, presumably to go to the kitchen and get me water. I only have a few minutes. It’ll take all my energy to get this out.

“Graveyard,” I whisper as my strength dwindles. Sleep pulls me under. “I’m pregnant.”

# Seer

“By my estimate, she’s about eight weeks along,” Graveyard tells me, a grim look on his face. “She barely had the strength to tell me, let alone give me permission to tell you.”

My whole world spins out of control. My wife is pregnant, lying in our bed and clinging to life.

“I recommend bringing her to the hospital. We can better monitor her there,” Graveyard says. All I can process is the buzz in my ears.

I shake my head and take a deep breath. “Do what you can from here. She doesn’t like hospitals, and she’ll kill me if she wakes up in one.”

Graveyard’s expression grows even grimmer. “Seer, without the proper care, she won’t wake up at all. I don’t know if it’s the ritual Mama mentioned or the pregnancy, but she’s not well. Her vitals are concerning.”

“Then you better do what you can to make her better,” I tell him darkly, my voice so low it’s barely a whisper. “Because I will not lose my wife.”

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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I've shuffled around the house all morning, feeling like a ghost myself. Maybe it's stupid to be so sad about breaking up with a woman who isn't even alive, but I can't help the way my heart hurts. Though I know she isn't the poltergeist, it doesn't change the fact she's dead.

Pocus finds me at the bar, drinking my sorrows away though it's only 9 AM. He nods at me and grabs the bottle of vodka I've pulled out, taking a swig from the neck without hesitation.

"Tough go of it, brother," he says darkly. "I'm sorry about your friend. But it's good we have her now."

"Pocus, she isn't—" I try to explain there's no way she can be the poltergeist when Seer marches in looking furious.

A gray-looking Graveyard slips behind him, leaving the house without a word. I didn't know he was here.

Something is wrong though by the look on his face.

"Where is that bitch?" Seer asks, his entire body shaking. He fiddles with a lighter in one hand. This isn't good.

"Seer, calm down," Pocus says. "What's going on?"

"Tory is unconscious," he seethes. "That's what the fuck is going on. So you tell me where that fucking bitch of a spirit is so I can put an end to this."

I stand up in a panic, walking over to him to grab the lighter, but he's too quick for me. He moves out of my grasp and swerves so he's now behind me. I turn to face him, and when I do, he lands a punch on my face. It stings, and I can tell it will bruise.

"What the fuck, Seer?" I shout and push him back hard. He stumbles but catches himself. Once he's righted himself, he lunges at me, tackling me to

the ground. He tries to punch me again, but I evade his grasp.

“Enough,” Pocus tells him, holding him back.

“Tory is pregnant,” Seer spits. “She’s fucking pregnant, and she put herself in danger to help catch that spirit.”

The news hits me like a Mack truck. Tory’s having a baby. No wonder she’s been so ill and withdrawn lately. But how is that my fault?

“He didn’t know,” Pocus tells Seer, holding him tightly around his chest. “Calm down, Seer. Or I’ll make you calm down.”

“Why are you angry with me?” I ask, fury rising up in my chest. Not everything in this fucking house is my fault. “It’s not like I’m the one who knocked Tory up.”

Seer struggles against Pocus to get to me.

“But you should have found this spirit weeks ago,” he growls. “Why has it taken you so long to trap it? Tory may have been okay before—”

“He didn’t know,” Pocus cuts him off, repeating his earlier words. “He was fooled by the spirit. He didn’t know she was attacking us.”

“She’s not.”

Seer escapes from Pocus’s grasp, the anger more evident on his face than before. He tries to tackle me again, but I anticipate it. I plant my feet, making myself a brick wall against his fists.

“You’re fucking kidding,” Seer screams. “Tell me my wife isn’t lying up there defenseless because you wanted some ghost pussy.”

“She isn’t the poltergeist.” I push against him and avoid his swinging arms. “She can’t be.”

This gets Pocus’s attention. He stands straight and eyes me with ire.

“Come on, Hex,” he says darkly. “You can’t believe this woman is anything but a demon from hell. She fooled you, and you’re embarrassed.”

I shake off Seer and assess Pocus. He looks at me with pity and condescension. He doesn’t trust my judgment, and I don’t know why I’m surprised. He always treats me like a child when he’s upset with me. Juliana didn’t fool me. She didn’t know she was dead. There’s a difference.

“The woman sitting in that cell is a lost spirit, but she isn’t the poltergeist,” I tell him. “She can’t be, she’s too good. She didn’t know she was dead until I told her.”

“That’s rich,” Seer mutters, composing himself. “Hex gets taken in by a pretty face, and he can’t see reason. Your pride is hurting all of us, asshole. Tory is on the brink of death. Pocus hasn’t seen his wife and kid in weeks.



The police are looking at us for attacks we didn't commit all because you trust a fucking poltergeist. Wake up! You're being played."

"She isn't the poltergeist!" I roar again, lunging at him this time. He goes down, and I hold him there with my fists.

He tries to shake me off, but I'm bigger. I'll make them understand. They're both too blinded by their own issues to understand.

Pocus tries to grab at me, but I elbow him hard in the ribs, causing him to rear back in pain. It's a bad move, considering what he's capable of, but I won't stand here and be berated for something that's not my fault.

"She's terrified down there," I yell in Seer's face. "I care about her, and I won't let you hurt her."

This time, Pocus pulls me off, and I struggle against him. He holds me in a headlock, cutting off my air supply, and I try desperately to maneuver out of his grasp. Seer takes advantage of the moment, punching me squarely in my stomach. I lose my breath.

I go down, and Pocus releases me. I gasp for air, curled up to defend myself from more attacks. I'm beat and I know it, but I'll protect Juliana with my life. I don't fully understand what's going on, but she's the innocent party. Whatever is happening, she's being used as a pawn in someone's game.

"Stop it," Mama shouts from the entryway.

I lift my head to see her standing there, looking between Pocus and Seer with a disappointed expression. It's a chastising look, the kind that a mother would use to punish her rowdy children. None of us have good experiences with our mothers, but that look from Mama is guaranteed to level us.

"Hex," she says softly, walking over to me. "Stand up. No one is going to hurt you again."

She holds her hand to me, and I flinch at her touch. I look up at her, but she's glaring at Pocus and Seer, shame on their faces. I do as Mama says, but I won't be anywhere near them. I stand apart and glower at them.

"I accepted your wives in this club without question," I say lowly. "Abigail was an assassin sent to hurt you, Pocus, and look at her now."

Pocus looks down at his feet and sighs.

I turn my attention to Seer. "And Tory just showed up one day while you were on the brink of death, and I had no choice but to trust her. But I did, Seer. And now she's my best friend.

"Don't you dare act like I don't love her too. I know it isn't the same, but

I would never intentionally do anything to put Tory in harm's way. So fuck off with your bullshit."

"Well said," Mama affirms. She turns back to pat my arm. "Now I think we all need to sit down and talk about this spirit."

She turns and walks out of the room, and we instinctively know to follow. I start out first, Pocus and Seer on my heels. I'm furious with them, but that will have to be dealt with later. Whatever Mama wants to share with us is our top priority.

We follow her out to the front porch, where she sinks into a rocking chair and indicates for us to do the same. She doesn't want to talk inside the house, likely worried we'll be overheard.

"Hex is right," she finally says. "Whatever that girl is, she's not your poltergeist. So you will leave him alone about her."

It shocks me how Mama is so sure about it. Then again, nothing Mama says and does makes sense to me. For the moment, I appreciate she's on my side and that she sees what I do.

"Tell me about the girl, child," she says to me. "How did you meet her? I need to understand how she came into your life."

It's a complicated answer, but Mama needs the absolute truth.

"I dreamt about her first. Before I ever saw her, she was coming to me in dreams."

Mama stiffens in her chair, and her mouth opens in silent shock. Despite the humid air, her expression sends a chill through me.

"What's been brought into this house lately?" she whispers mysteriously. "What's changed?"

Pocus rolls his eyes and groans. "You want to hear every single thing we've brought into the house over the last few weeks, Mama? That would take us hours."

She fixes him with another chastising stare, causing him to shrink back.

"Don't get smart with me, boy. You know what I'm asking. What artifacts have entered this house that are out of the ordinary? Think hard, it could be anything."

"Well, Anderson's lawyer sent me this ugly fucking vase a few days ago," Pocus answers petulantly. "I threw it away immediately. It didn't even come in the house."

"What did the vase look like?"

"I don't know," he hedges. "It was kind of brown and ugly with these

old-fashioned handles and inscriptions everywhere. And there was this green stone inlaid in the neck. It looked like something my aunt used to keep at her home.”

His description piques my interest. I’m suddenly reminded of the green stone sitting by my bedside.

“Someone threw a green rock into my window,” I tell them suddenly. “When they vandalized my room. I kept it because it looked interesting.”

Everyone stares at me like I’m an idiot.

“Go get it,” Mama instructs me.

I worry she’s playing a trick, though she isn’t the type. I stare at her, though, waiting for the punchline.

“What are you waiting for, child? A written invitation from the Queen? Go!” she commands authoritatively.

I immediately go into the house. When I reach my room, I look at the bedside table, but the rock isn’t there. I was sure I saw it this morning. I was staring at it when I couldn’t sleep. But it vanished. I check under the bed and my chest of drawers, but it isn’t anywhere to be found. This is just fucking perfect.

I walk slowly back out to the porch, once again feeling useless. I’m at my wit’s end with things not working out for me.

“You should have called me,” I hear Mama telling Pocus in a patronizing tone. “You know better than to get rid of magical objects. It could be the key to this.”

“Am I supposed to call you every time something ugly comes through our door?”

“You’d have to call her every time a new member wants to join,” Seer jokes, and I hear the sound of two grown men being hit over the head.

I walk out in time to see them rubbing their skulls, but I’ll be joining them in their pain soon. I defensively run my hand through my hair.

“The rock is gone,” I tell Mama hesitantly. “I don’t know what happened to it. I swear it was there this morning.”

She sighs heavily and shakes her head, standing up slowly. We hear her bones crack with every inch she straightens. “You men are useless,” she tells us exasperated. “You need to find that vase,” she says, pointing at Pocus. “You need to find that rock,” she tells me. “And you,” she says, turning to Seer. “You need to take care of your wife and child.”

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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# Pocus

When I woke up this morning, I did not picture myself standing in the middle of a dump, combing through bags of trash. It smells like shit and my stomach turns as I imagine what things must have been discarded in this godforsaken place. I'm wearing my rattiest clothes and they feel too clean for this place. I'll have to burn them when I get home.

"I don't understand why you needed me here for this," Hex grumbles from a few feet away. "I'm not the one who threw the thing out."

"Keep complaining, and I'll leave you here to search by yourself," I call to him, a familiar gnawing starting in my chest. This isn't the time or place to lose my temper, but I can't help but be angry.

I vent my frustration on a particularly thick trash bag, ripping it open with my bare hands. The contents spill onto me and I want to vomit. I haven't felt this disgusting since I was homeless as a child.

"What do you hope to accomplish here?" Hex asks petulantly. "There's no way you'll find one vase in this sea of shit. It's probably buried under thousands of pounds of trash.

"It's that unimaginative thinking that proves to me you'll never excel in a position of power," I tell him.

"If this is what power looks like, Pocus, I don't fucking want it. Why don't you have one of the Prospects do this?"

"Because it's too fucking important!" I yell in frustration. "If Mama is right, this vase could help us figure out what's been going on. If there's a chance she's right, it's something I have to do myself."

"Which brings me back to the question," he answered sarcastically. "Why the fuck do I have to be here?"

I drop the bag of trash in my hands and run at him, pushing him down.

“Because I don’t fucking trust you right now,” I scream from above him. “Seer is right. You’ve compromised us. And you still believe this girl has nothing to do with any of it. How can that be when this started with her arrival in your life?”

He glares at me, breathing hard. The sun beats down on us, and the heat isn’t helping right now. I don’t care, though. I’d gladly melt on the spot if it means the attacks will stop.

“You don’t understand,” Hex snarls at me. “You fell in love with someone who’s alive at least. And you never would be put in this situation because you can’t fucking see ghosts. Do you know how exhausting this gift gets? I don’t pick and choose when I see the dead, they’re always fucking there. I don’t like this poltergeist any more than you do, but at least it’s given me a fucking break.”

“So you admit she’s the poltergeist. Otherwise, why would she be the only spirit you’ve seen lately?”

He shakes his head and stands slowly, rubbing the trash off of his clothes. “Juliana isn’t the poltergeist,” he says in a low voice. “I’d bet my entire life on it. So if I’m wrong, fucking put me out of my misery and put a bullet in my head. But I’m not wrong, Pocus. I thought she was at first because she’s not like the other ghosts. I can touch her and feel her. But the more I think about it, the more I’m sure it can’t be her.”

I feel his sincerity. He truly believes this woman isn’t the demon spirit that’s been after us, and he’s willing to vouch for her. I feel the emotions rolling off him. He loves this woman even though she’s dead. He’s conflicted about his feelings, but that’s the most prominent.

“You know, when I found out who Abigail really was, I was devastated,” I tell him. “She’d been haunting my mind from the moment I saw her, but when I knew what she did to Bones and who she worked for, I didn’t know what to think.”

He nods, turning away from me to get back to work. This isn’t a conversation he wants to have, but he needs to hear me out.

I sigh. “Hex, Abigail had no idea what Anderson made her do. What if this girl is the same?”

“She’s not hexed, Pocus, she’s dead. Not even the strongest shaman can influence the mind of a dead person.”

“Then have you considered she could be helping the poltergeist? Possibly

of her own free will?” He doesn’t want to hear it, but he needs to consider that as pure as he thinks she is, she could be a threat.

“Absolutely not,” he tells me. If he’s wrong, he’s incredibly stubborn about it.

“Well then,” I breathe out. “You have to talk to her. If you’re sure down to your core that she isn’t trying to harm us intentionally, then you need to help her figure out what’s happened.”

He looks at me, shocked, and I understand his apprehension. Only, I’ve been where he’s been. I know what it’s like to love someone the others don’t trust, and for good reason. But Abigail is the best part of my life, and things would have been a lot different for me if I hadn’t believed her.

“I’m not going to tell you again,” I warn. “Get the hell out of here. I’ll find the vase.”

He drops the trash in his hands and runs to his bike without a backwards glance.



After an extended shower, then a second shower just to be safe, I hesitantly approach the room in the basement. I hate to think of it as a dungeon, but that’s what it is for Juliana. I feel terrible we’ve had to trap her in there, and even worse when I remember our last conversation. She’d been so devastated when I told her we couldn’t be together.

She probably hates me, but I have to talk to her. If we can figure out what happened to her, maybe we can work together to understand how this is related to the poltergeist. At the very least, I owe her an apology for my behavior.

When I look inside the room, I see that she’s curled up in a corner, her

legs pulled to her chest and her face pressed against her knees. My heart lurches at the sight, and I go to her, pulling her into my arms. She sobs against my neck, but I can't feel the wetness of it. It's such an odd sensation touching her.

"Mama doesn't think I'm really dead," she whispers against my chest. "She says I'm probably out there somewhere, clinging to life."

This is news to me, but it makes sense. I can touch her because she isn't dead. She isn't a ghost at all. She's a wandering spirit, separated from her body. It happens often with coma patients. But they usually don't wander so far from their bodies.

"Do you remember anything after the accident?" I ask, hoping to help her figure out where her body could be.

She shakes her head and pulls back, wiping her eyes.

"I saw my parents die, and then someone pulled me from the car. I don't remember anything else until that night in the club. I remember seeing you there and being drawn to you, but I was too sad to do anything about it. I grabbed a drink and left."

"How did you get the drink?" I wonder, remembering that very night and seeing the pink drink in her hand.

She giggles at this, and I can't help but join her in her laughter.

"I'm not sure," she says shrugging. "I think if I concentrate I can move things. I can touch and I can feel. I can feel you, Hex. Can you feel me?"

I look in her eyes and see the spark of hope there. Despite everything, she still wants me. She wants to try.

"When I touch you, it feels like I'm trying to hold water," I explain. "Or like I'm pressing against a gust of air. You're there, but you aren't there. It's why I thought you were..." I realize I can't explain to her about the poltergeist. It's too much information given everything else.

"Mama told me there's a dark spirit trying to hurt you," she whispers. "You thought it was me."

I nod, and she looks down, tears trickling down her face.

"I don't want to hurt you," she tells me. "When I'm with you, I want to drown in you. I couldn't wait to kiss you, but that went so well," she mutters sarcastically and rolls her eyes.

"What did it feel like for you? The kiss, I mean."

She shrugs and looks at me miserably. "It was a good kiss. Too short, of course, and it ended horribly, but it was a really good kiss."

I lean into her, feeling that odd pressure again. She's there, but she isn't. But I wonder.

"You feel this?" I ask her, running my hand through her hair. She closes her eyes in pleasure and nods.

I lean in closer, gently placing my lips against hers. Hers are cold, but I sense them faintly. It isn't entirely unpleasant. Her hand moves into my hair, and it feels like a strong breeze washing over me.

"I feel that," I tell her, pulling away slightly. "It isn't strong, but it's there."

She nods and moves over me, straddling my lap. It's like wearing a weighted blanket, but not what I would expect from a grown woman. I can't help the groan that escapes from my mouth. I'll take whatever I can get with her. I move my hands to her waist and hold her there.

"I want you," she says against my mouth. "You may not feel this, but I do. I feel all of you, and you're so warm, Hex. Your touch electrifies me. Please," she whispers desperately.

"Take off your clothes," I tell her, because I'm truly not sure how this will work.

She strips off her top, throwing it to the ground. Then she stands, discarding her pants and underwear. She reaches back to release her breasts from her bra, and I stare at her in awe. She's more stunning naked.

"We should probably shut the door," I manage in a quick grunt, taking my clothes off. "Because this is going to look really fucking weird if someone comes down."

She giggles and walks seductively to the door, shutting it. A ghost definitely couldn't do that. She walks back, lowering herself over my naked frame. Against her cold touch, I can't help the way my body reacts to her.

"You have to take control, baby. Touching you is like a whisper. You're in the driver's seat here."

She smiles at me wickedly and takes me in her hands. "You're bigger than I thought," she says into my ear, causing me to shudder. It's the strangest experience, but I'm so hard.

She positions me at her entrance and slides down over me, causing me to moan. It makes no sense to my brain, but we're doing it. She's moving up and down, crying out my name as she holds onto my shoulder. I'm not much good, bracing myself against the wall as she rides me.

"Fuck," she cries. "I'm so sorry you can't feel this because it's fucking



fantastic.”

I suppose the advantage to this situation is she'll get off first. She's enjoying herself and that's what counts, and the sight of her coming undone is enough for me. She throws her head back in pleasure, and her tits bounce at the movement. It's fucking hot to watch.

She climaxes within minutes, and I feel her weight concentrated around my dick. It's enough pressure to get me off, and I groan against her, cursing in every language I know. She tries to get up, but I ask her to stay, enjoying her against me. It's unlike anything I've ever experienced in my life.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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# Tory

I open my eyes to see Graveyard staring over me. It must be the same day, I think, but it's dark outside. It's not morning anymore.

"Where's Nicholas?" I whisper hoarsely.

"Seer has been in and out all day," Graveyard tells me. "I had to sneak a few things out of the hospital to help you, but I think you'll be okay. You were severely dehydrated, Tory. That isn't good for the baby."

I nod weakly under his gaze. He's disappointed I didn't call him the moment I knew I was pregnant, but I wasn't ready to tell my husband. I certainly wasn't going to tell his doctor friend first.

"What time is it?" I look toward the window, but the blackness there tells me nothing.

"It's nearly eight," he tells me. "You've been out of it all day. Seer's been very worried about you."

I try to move my head, but it hurts. There's a stabbing pain in my temple, so I stay still and look at him. The rest of my body feels heavy and numb.

"The baby?" I ask.

"Perfectly healthy," he tells me with a smile. "You're about eight weeks, so there isn't much to see, but it's forming normally. It has a strong heartbeat."

My hands move over my stomach, and I rest them there, as if I'll be able to feel the baby. I feel it in my spirit, though. A joy in my chest that I haven't been able to fully process amidst all the terror and confusion of the last few weeks.

"You can't do any more rituals," he tells me. "Not until the baby is born, at the very least. The last one took a real toll on your body."

This news cuts deep. I have to be able to help the club. If I can't do my rituals to protect them, the spirit will come for them when they aren't prepared. Their defenses will be low. I open my mouth to protest, but Nicholas comes in at that moment. When he sees my eyes open, tears fill his.

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Oh, my God," he repeats, coming to me and laying his head on my chest.

I run my fingers through his hair as he cries softly against me.

"I thought I'd lost you," he tells me feebly. "You scared the shit out of me, mon coeur."

He looks as bad as I feel, which compounds my guilt. His eyes are filled with concern and his whole body is heavy with fear.

"I had to help," I whisper. "I have to keep you safe."

He sits up and shakes his head, grabbing my hands and pulling them to his lips to cover them in kisses. Graveyard excuses himself as we have a private moment. I realize an IV is in my arm, and I gingerly turn my head to see the bag of fluids hanging over my head.

"You have to keep yourself safe," Nicholas says in a strangled voice. "You wouldn't wake up this morning. And you have more than yourself to think of right now."

He looks down at my stomach with admiration, and my hand moves back to it, feeling for the little child growing inside. His hand covers mine, and we sit there for a moment, taking in the fact our family is growing.

He exhales, and his warm breath covers my face. In this moment, there is only us, no other crises, or fires to put out. But the awareness is at the edge of my brain. Whatever evil is after us still looms. I have to protect my husband and my friends.

"I know what you're thinking," he whispers. "You're already worrying about us, but I swear to God, Victoria. If you die trying to take care of everyone else, I'll never forgive you."

I kiss his forehead and hold him. He's right, of course, but who am I if I can't help? Is that the kind of mother I want to be? The kind of wife? If I help, I could sacrifice my life for my family. If I don't help, I'm sacrificing my principles. I can't win.

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he next morning, when Nicholas is gone, Hex comes to see me. He looks  
T burdened but happy somehow. I can't put my finger on it.

"So I hear Seer knocked you up," he jokes, sitting on the corner of the bed by my feet.

I smile brightly and pat my stomach again, a habit that's quickly becoming my favorite. It's the closest thing I can get to holding my little one right now.

"You heard right," I tell him, my smile so wide I think my face might split in two.

If it weren't for the meds, I wouldn't have been able to sleep last night because of the war waging inside me. Sacrificing myself for everyone also means sacrificing this life growing inside me, and I could never do that. Not only would Nicholas not forgive me, but I'd also spend the afterlife unable to forgive myself. I have to find a different solution.

"Well, it's about damn time." Hex smiles. "Seer's been talking about putting a baby in you for a year. I'm glad to see he finally succeeded."

I shift in bed, uncomfortable from lying down for so long. Hex stands and looks at me in concern, but I wave him off. I'm not a convalescent, no matter how they treat me. I'm just a pregnant woman who's been under too much stress. They need to calm down.

"Stop looking at me like that," I command, pulling myself into a sitting position. "Sit back down and tell me about your new girlfriend!"

His face grows dark, and I realize this is the subject he wants to avoid. But he won't get off the hook that easily.

"Nicholas told me about the woman in the basement. She's the girl who's been making you so happy, yes? But she's a ghost or something. You know how he is, he never gets the details quite right."

I smile at him reassuringly, but he takes a moment to collect himself and formulate his response. Hex is rarely so thoughtful when choosing his words. Whoever this woman is, she must mean a lot to him. Nicholas is getting a severe reprimand when he comes back. He's been very unkind about Hex's friend.

"It's complicated." He sighs. "She's a spirit, but she's been ripped from her body. She's alive somewhere, but I've never known of a spirit to travel so far. They usually like to stay close so they can figure out how to get back to the land of the living."

I nod, understanding dawning on me. No wonder Nicholas hates her.

She's able to interact with the living world. He thinks she's the poltergeist. Stupid, stupid man.

"What has Mama said about her?" Surely she's shared with him some insight.

He shrugs. "She came to the same conclusion, I think, but she's more worried about some stupid rock I lost."

"A rock?" I ask in surprise. "Why would she be worried about that?"

"It's the same one that broke my window," he tells me, and it all makes sense.

"It's a Lazarus stone," I breathe out. "Of course! Hex, she's not bound to her body because she's bound to the stone."

"What the hell is a Lazarus stone?" he asks, grumpy. "I'm so tired of you witches and your goddamned elements."

I roll my eyes and laugh. That's more like the Hex I know.

"It's a stone meant to raise souls from the dead. You can bind a soul to a stone when it's on the brink of death, essentially saving it from passing on. If the body heals, the soul can be put back in the body but..." The rest is too horrible. I can't say it out loud.

He looks at me curiously, but I shake my head. That poor girl. She has no idea someone is using her as a pawn.

"Hex, I think this woman's been sent to distract you. Tell me about the rock. When did it appear?"

He shrugs again. "It was the night of the vandalism. It was the rock that broke my window."

"And you kept it?" I shout at him, feeling my blood pressure rise. "No wonder she keeps cropping up in your life, Hex. Someone sent her soul to you. They want you to be focused on her while they're wreaking havoc on us. Whoever it is has to know about your gift."

"You sound like your husband," he says darkly. "And I don't mean that in a good way."

I can see he's agitated, and he starts to leave, but I force myself up far enough to grab his arm and stop him.

"Hex, you're in danger," I tell him urgently. "I've sensed it since the night of the vandalism. I don't think she's the reason. I think she's the bait. You have to find that stone so we can help her find her way back to her body."

His face softens and he looks at me gratefully. "I love you, Tory," he

whispers. “But we are not doing anything. You look paler just from sitting up. I know you want to help me, but there’s nothing you can do right now. You have to rest.”

I huff in frustration although I know he’s right. I feel dizzy now and carefully navigate my body back into a lying position. Dark spots show, rivaling the darkness surrounding his aura. I suddenly feel very cold and afraid.

“Tory?” he screams as my eyes shut and I shake.

I can feel him next to me, but I’m suddenly trapped in a dark room, with no windows or doors. I try to open my mouth to scream, but no sound comes out. It feels like a nightmare, but I’m not asleep. I hear everything happening in my bedroom, even as I’m trapped in this dark place.

I hear Hex rushing to the door, calling for Seer. Nicholas is gone, out on some mission for Pocus. I hear another man come to the door, maybe Bones, and Hex tells him to call for Graveyard. I feel Hex near me again, his hands on my shoulders, shaking gently.

“Tory, please wake up,” he says softly. “You have to wake up!”

I want to. I really do, but there’s only darkness. My eyes aren’t listening. I’m losing connection to my body.

Hex calls for me, but his voice gets fainter like he’s moving away from me. Somehow, I don’t think he’s the one fading away.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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Graveyard was already on his way to check on Tory, so thankfully he quickly took over from me. I hate seeing my friend like that. It's fucking terrifying, and I already know Seer will be a mess when he returns. I only hope he doesn't find a way to pin Tory's illness on me. The tension between us hasn't lessened one bit since he tried to beat me up yesterday.

Graveyard orders me out of the room. There's nowhere for me to go except down to the basement to see Juliana. My heart races as I see Tory's body seizing in my mind. It was like something attacked her the moment she warned me. What if the same spirit has come for Juliana?

I call out her name when I get to the bottom of the stairs and expect her to answer. After our sexual experience last night, I hardly wanted to leave her, but she insisted I go back to bed. She told me I was the one who needed to sleep, and I couldn't argue with her.

She doesn't answer me, though. I get to the doorway to find it's wide open. No one is inside. That isn't possible. Juliana can't leave the room. Tory and Mama made sure of that. A proper ghost wouldn't be able to leave this room. They've enchanted it to shit. But it's empty.

She can't be fucking gone. It's not possible. If she is gone, everything Seer and Pocus said during our fight is true and she's tricked me again. I refuse to believe it. She's too pure to be in league with whatever or whoever has been fucking with us over these last few weeks.

I walk around the room three times as if that will make any difference. It's a bare room. It's not like she could hide anywhere. We'd purposely removed everything so the spirit wouldn't have any weapons when it was

trapped. Mama will know what to do. She'll know where to find Juliana's spirit.

I look up to the window when I see it. It's the fucking rock from my room, lying on the windowsill. The Lazarus stone, Tory had called it. I reach up and grab it, but the second my fingers make contact, it burns my hand, searing my flesh. I let go and watch as it falls from the sill to the floor, glowing a bright green. When it hits the floor, the glowing stops.

Panic rises in me. Juliana could be trapped in that stone. What if I've fucked it up somehow? Dropping it might have harmed her. I curse and pick up the rock gently. It isn't burning anymore, and I put it in my pocket. I won't make the same mistake twice. I'll find Mama and get to the bottom of this.

# Seer

My wife lies perfectly in bed, serene as if she's dreaming, but she's far away from me. When Bones called me, I knew something was wrong. I heard Hex frantically screaming in the background, and I immediately turned back toward the house. I never should have left her. This is my fault.

I sit in a chair by our bed, not wanting to accidentally disturb the wires and tubes surrounding her. Graveyard treats this like a normal coma, but something much more nefarious and supernatural is going on. It's why I called Mama.

When she steps into the room, I instantly feel at ease. She'll know how to fix this, she has to. She'll do some incantation or brew some kind of witchy tea and bring my wife back to consciousness. She has to bring her back to me.

"Your soul is heavy," she says to me, gently patting my shoulder as she walks to Tory's side. "You don't have to stay and watch this."

"I'm not leaving my wife," I growl at her. She means no harm, but the idea that I would possibly go anywhere else is absurd.

Tory might be in a coma, but I know she can feel me. She never left me



last year, and she never would if I was in that situation again. There's nowhere I'll go where I can't instantly get to her. I have to be here when she wakes up, to be the first thing she sees when she opens her eyes. She has to open her eyes.

Mama looks at Graveyard, who yields the floor to her with some apprehension. The two have a tentative relationship, mostly because he doesn't trust "Witch Doctors." He says he had to suffer through years of medical school, so he shouldn't be usurped by non-licensed women who rely on spirits to heal them.

He's out of his depth here, though. I see it in his face. Everything he's done for Tory has been for my benefit. He's trying to make her comfortable, but nothing is medically wrong with her. Her vital signs are normal, especially compared to where they were yesterday morning. She's been on fluids since then, so she isn't dehydrated.

No, this is an illness that requires a shaman, and we both know it. I appreciate him no less. I nod at him as he excuses himself, promising to be back in a few hours.

Mama takes out her bag and removes random odds and ends. There are more herbs and jars. She makes quick work of surrounding Tory's body with a plant, then seems to strategically place the jars around the room. To me, it looks like nonsense, but I won't get in her way. She's the only person in the world I trust to help my beloved right now.

When she's satisfied with the setup, she pulls out sage and a match and burns it. She waves it over Tory's body, chanting an incantation over and over again. Then she walks the sage around the room.

"I hope you aren't harboring an evil spirit, Seer," she jokes. "All darkness has been purged from this room."

I want her words to ease my spirits and cheer me up, but I watch her dumbly. My throat is heavy and sore. I don't think I could form words if I wanted to. Just a silent prayer repeating in my head.

*Please wake up. Please wake up. Please wake up.*

Mama sets the burning sage in a bowl and puts the bowl on our nightstand in front of our wedding picture. The smoke from the sage catches my attention, and it's all I can look at for a long time, the steady stream soothing my nerves. Mama continues moving around and chanting things, but I only see the smoke.

"What did Graveyard say, child?" she asks me, snapping me back to

focus.

I swallow hard and clear my throat. When I speak, my voice sounds weak even to my ears, but I'm not surprised. It's raw from unshed tears. I will not cry when my wife is perfectly healthy, lying in front of me. She will be okay. She has to be okay.

"Her vitals are fine," I croak. "The baby's heartbeat is strong. Physically, there's nothing wrong with her."

She nods and places her hands on Tory's temple, chanting again. "I see," she says after a few minutes. She doesn't expand on what she sees, just keeps humming and nodding at some unknown entity. Her bedside manner could use some improvement. I hear someone approach the door and see Hex standing there, seeming helpless and lost.

Mama glances up at him, perturbed.

"One crisis at a time," she hisses at him. "I'll come deal with you when I've ensured my sweet Victoria is safe."

Her words cause my heart to pound in my chest. What does she mean Tory isn't safe? I want to grab the small woman and shake her, but it will do no good. I also know she can decimate me with a single look. It isn't worth messing with a powerful shaman like her.

Hex remains in the doorway, watching Mama as I do. Finally, she stops her chanting and collects things from around the room, seeming satisfied. I have no fucking clue what she's done besides say some nonsense words, and I try very hard to choose my words carefully.

"Will she be okay?" I manage to ask as calmly as I can.

"Don't think I can't hear your mind, child. You think I've performed nonsense to put you at ease. I'm not your friend, Graveyard. I actually know what I'm doing."

Despite myself, I smile. She's never been one to mince words.

"But I cannot lie to you, Seer. Tory is locked into a place I cannot reach. Her mind has been attacked by an evil force that is trying to keep her from helping us. It is reaching out from the beyond, keeping her trapped."

I immediately snap my eyes to Hex, who looks at me with wide eyes. He shakes his head, already reading my thoughts. I'm about to get up and go another round with him when Mama once again anticipates my movement.

"Leave the boy alone," she reprimands me. "Stay by your wife and hold her hand."

That's one directive I'm happy to follow. I sit back in the chair and reach

for Tory's hand. It's cold and dry, almost lifeless. I try not to think the word, afraid that it will make the worst come true.

"She's protected," Mama answers my thoughts softly. "She's fighting a battle I can't help her with, but I have fortified her body and spirit. The force will not drain one ounce of her life now because I have protected her body and soul. But I can't anticipate what will happen. She has to make her way back on her own."

"Make her way back?" Hex asks from the door. "Please don't tell me her soul is detached from her body too."

I glare at him, but Mama looks at him carefully.

"She was already in a coma when I got here, Hex," she tells him. "You know what that means for her. I've done what I can to make the journey as easy as possible. Now let's deal with your problem."

She grabs him by the arm and leads him out of the room, leaving Tory and me in the quiet room. As curious as I am to follow, I know this is where I belong.

# Pocus

I drag my feet as I approach the house from the driveway. I can't breathe through my nose, too afraid of what I'd smell. After half a day and an entire night spent at the dump, I feel like I've become the very junk I was sifting through. And the damn vase was nowhere to be found.

I feel defeated and disgusted, not least by how I smell. Anderson fucking Grey can rot in hell for what I've endured. And for absolutely no good reason. I drag my feet up the steps of the porch when my eyes are drawn to the ugly thing sitting on the deck as if it's been there all along.

*You have to be fucking kidding me.*

I approach the vase like it's cursed. For all I know, it is. I gingerly pick it up and see the green stones inlaid in the clay are glowing. My instinct is to smash the vase on the porch and be done with it, but I didn't endure all of this to destroy the one thing I need. Mama would murder me, and she'd make it

slow.

I strip out of my clothes and shoes, throwing them on the lawn. I fully intend to set them on fire later. I enter the house with the vase in hand, still feeling disgusted, though for a new reason. If I wasn't sure before, I am now. Anderson is fucking with us from beyond the grave.

I pop my head into the bar to see Hex sitting there looking miserable. Next to him is Mama, a glass of lemonade in front of her and a green stone in her hands.

“Why the fuck are you in your boxers?” Hex asks.

“Why do you look like someone shot your puppy?” I quip back.

“We have bigger problems, boys,” Mama interjects, not looking up from the stone.

Great. I was hoping to come home to more problems.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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# Pocus

**I**t takes three showers to get the stink of the dump off, and I curse Anderson Grey's spirit the entire time. I hope he can hear every word. He continues to be the bane of my fucking existence.

I step out of the shower into the steamy bathroom. If this were a normal day and not the middle of a crisis, my Abigail would be sitting on the counter, bare-ass naked and legs open for me. She tells me she loves getting me dirty when I've been in the shower. Even now my dick grows hard, thinking about her green eyes. I need to finish this so I can have her back in my arms.

I dress in my best suit, all black of course. I'm going to the funeral of someone I hate, but I'm not going in anything less than my absolute best. I exit my room and go down to the bar where Seer and Hex are waiting for me. Seer looks like shit, his eyes red. I told him multiple times he didn't have to come, but he was out for blood.

When I returned to the house, Hex filled me in on Tory's condition. If I were Seer, I wouldn't be able to leave her side, but I understand why he has to do this. If Anderson's spirit has anything to do with her coma, we have to get rid of it quickly.

Hex looks no less distraught. Not only does he deeply love Tory like a sister, but his paramour has disappeared into something called a Lazarus stone. Mama has been examining it all morning, but Hex refuses to let her keep it. He told her if there was any chance Juliana's spirit lingers inside, he won't let it out of his sight for one second.

We make quite the fucked-up trio. We're miserable about the current state of our love lives, and we need someone to punish for it. I can't prove

Anderson is behind it, but I would bet the entire club on it. I don't believe in coincidence, and everything seemed to start with his death. I don't know how to rid the world of his spirit, but I'll try.

I had Snake do some digging, and it turns out the funeral was planned for this afternoon. It kept getting postponed due to "unforeseen circumstances." Like I said, I don't believe in coincidence. That vase reappeared on our porch this morning. He's absolutely fucking with us, and he wants us at his funeral for some reason.

We opt to take a car to the funeral, not wanting to appear out of place. The police will be there in force, and we'll be easier targets on our bikes. The moment we get to the old church and step out of the car, I have my eyes peeled for any sign of trouble. Protesters wait outside the church, enraged by the way a monster like Anderson is being celebrated by the community. Their presence almost makes me smile.

The beast inside me rears its ugly head, reminded of what Anderson did to so many girls for so long. I wonder if any of his perverted buddies decided to show up. It would be a nice treat to "accidentally" run into them in a secluded corner of the church. But that isn't at the top of my priority list.

"What exactly are we looking for?" Seer murmurs to me.

I don't have an answer for him. "Just keep your eyes peeled. We'll know it when we see it."

"There's not a single ghost here, Pocus," Hex whispers. "This church is famously haunted. They're purposely avoiding this place."

That's good intel. Hex told us the ghosts have been terrified of the spirit. If it is Anderson, their absence is a good indication. It isn't concrete proof, but it convinces me of what I've suspected.

As we enter the church, I scan the faces of the mourners. Not a single person here looks particularly sad that Anderson is gone. In fact, I catch no less than five business deals happening in different pews of the church. This funeral has brought out the seediest men in New Orleans. This room is a hotbed for crime, and the police are worried about us. Typical.

The only difference between the Ruthless Kings and the men in this room is that we don't have the money to make the police turn the other way. Oh, and also we aren't rapists and human traffickers. The faces of these men make me sick. They've probably shown up to ensure Anderson is really dead and he's taken their secrets to his grave.



We find a pew in the back and sit down. Pocus's face is whiter than usual, a sure sign of his rising fury. He hated Anderson more than any of us, and for good reason. His fists clench and unclench as he surveys the men in the room. Seer yawns beside him, exhausted with worry about Tory and likely bored with the theatrics. This is not his scene.

I'm unsettled by the lack of ghosts. They love crowding in funerals, especially in old churches like this. Many of the affluent ghosts in the city had their own funerals here. They have a strange sense of nostalgia. As I scan the room, I'm sure there are none here. There are no tell-tale signs of their presence either.

If I didn't know better, I would think my gift is waning, but this has been happening for weeks. They're all afraid, and if Pocus is right, Anderson is the reason why. It would be just like that son of a bitch to come back as a poltergeist. He's viler in death than in life, if that's possible.

People shove in past us, a strange energy palpable in the room. No one here is trying to pretend they're mourning. There's excitement in the air, laughter ringing out from all around. This is another spectacle for the NOLA elite. A circus, and we're the monkeys.

"Hex," someone calls out, and I turn to see who would possibly be calling for me here.

No one stands out. People are going out of their way to not look at us. Pocus looks at me strangely, but I shake my head. I must have misheard.

But I hear my name again, more clearly this time. The person isn't yelling, they're screaming out in pain. No one else reacts to the sound. I feel like I'm losing my mind. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to block everything out. There are no ghosts here, and no one is trying to call me for help.

But I hear my name screamed for a third time. This time, I'm sure the voice is Juliana's. I stand and look around. Logically she can't be here, but I heard her as clear as day. I'm not crazy. She's in trouble.

Pocus calls after me as I exit the pew and go after her, but I ignore him. I don't know where to start, but I'm sure she's nearby. Someone has lured me here, and they're using her to trap me. I don't care. I'll stop at nothing to rescue her.

# Seer

Hex misses the beginning of the service, but it's such a farce. A minister at the front of the room tells the crowd what a great loss Anderson's death is to our community. If I believed in God, I would expect him to strike down the man on the spot. Anderson's death is the best thing that's ever happened to this community.

His so-called loved ones get up to the pulpit and extoll his character, and I can't take it anymore. This whole ceremony is a sham, and everyone knows it. Nobody's come to mourn Anderson. They've come to cover their own asses. I excuse myself to the bathroom, unable to sit there for one more second.

When I'm safe in the confines of the small bathroom, I splash water on my face and clutch the sink. The only thing that matters right now is Tory. I pull out my phone to text Graveyard for an update. I shouldn't have left her, but I felt useless. I needed to get out of the house to clear my head, but coming here has been a colossal mistake.

I'm typing out the message when my vision goes hazy, and I drop my phone. In front of me is a beautiful woman with sleek, raven hair. She's begging for her life, looking at a man in desperation. The man's face comes into view and I see it's Hex. The woman is tied up and crying, and Hex's expression is blank. This doesn't make any sense. Hex would never hurt a woman.

My vision clears, and I'm back in the bathroom, clutching at the sink. It



takes a moment to catch my breath. The vision was one of the most powerful I've had in over a year, and it's left me feeling breathless. I stumble back and stare at myself, confused by what I saw. Who was that woman?

I pick up my phone and finish my text, anxiously awaiting a reply. If Tory were here, she'd know what to do and say. I don't know how to navigate life anymore without her by my side. As soon as Graveyard texts back that she's stable, I feel like I can breathe.

I head back to the pew and see that Hex is still gone. He left well before I did. I look at Pocus who is busy scanning the crowd. He usually avoids funerals, too overwhelmed by the palpable grief, but he isn't feeling any grief today. No one is sad to say goodbye to this asshole.

I elbow Pocus and ask him where Hex is. He shrugs, hardly stopping his scan of the crowd. He's too focused to notice something is wrong, but my vision has me shaken. If Hex is gone, there's a possibility that my vision is about to come true, and I can't let that happen.

"Pocus," I hiss at him. "We need to go right now. Something is wrong."

Pocus fixes me with a sarcastic look, and I know what he's thinking. Of course something is wrong, look where we are. But he doesn't understand my meaning.

"It's Hex," I whisper. "We have to go, he's in trouble. Or he will be soon."

Pocus finally listens, looking at me in horror. He looks around, suddenly very aware of our friend's absence.

"This is a trap," he whispers darkly.

We slip out of the pew and silently exit the church, looking for our friend.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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I scream, but no one hears me. Of course, they don't, I'm dead. Or half-dead at least. Without Hex around, no one can hear or see me. It doesn't matter how loudly I scream. It will only fall on deaf ears. I'm lost in a dark room with the silence hanging around me in a dense fog. I fear the weight of it will crush me.

My ears ring and my eyes try to catch the faintest glimpse of light, but there's only darkness. This must be what hell feels like. I scream and scream for Hex, but he can't get to me. He's not coming to save me. No one is.

I run in all directions, but my feet make no sound. I expect to run into something, anything, but the room is an endless nothing. I can't feel the ground beneath my feet. I can't feel anything. Before, I was aware of my surroundings. I felt the air on my skin and the cold floor beneath me. This place, though, this prison is the absence of everything.

I'm crying, but I can't feel the tears against my face. I can't sense the familiar pressure of weight on my legs. It's like this room has no ceiling or floor. I'm weightless with nothing tethering me to earth. The horrific thought occurs that someone has probably killed my body. This must be what death feels like.

It shouldn't surprise me. Death was always coming for me. I should have died that night with my parents. This time I've had with Hex has been a gift, and I refuse to see it as anything else. Even if someone has been using me as a pawn, I have to thank them for bringing Hex to me. I would've died without ever feeling that kind of love.

In the dark, I think back to the night on the playground when we played like children. I think of the way his cheeks flushed as he chased after me. I

remember the way his eyes lit up and a weight seemed to visibly lift off him. I have to believe he was as grateful for me as I was for him.

And now I'm truly dead. I should feel sad or afraid, but I'm ready to get it over with. I'm tired of being stuck with no hope of being set free. I'm ready to be with my parents in whatever afterlife exists. A small light comes from somewhere in the room, and I feel hysterical. It's a literal light at the end of the tunnel.

This is the choice Mama was talking about. I can choose to run toward that light and be free from this miserable existence. I've been living as an untethered spirit for who knows how long, unaware that I wasn't alive at all. It was an unfair and cruel curse placed on me, but now is the moment I can take my life back. I can run toward the light and be free of this darkness.

Then another, sharper light overtakes my senses, causing my head to seer in pain. What was nothingness is now an overwhelming feeling in every fiber of my being. I scream, the pain ripping through me like nothing I've experienced in my life. It's like a fire set ablaze in every cell. My lungs burn from the screaming, and my throat is raw.

I feel it so sharply, so suddenly that it nearly incapacitates me. I'm not lucky to pass out. Why should anything good happen to me now? I feel like I'm being dragged through hell.

When the pain subsides, I'm sitting in a bright, sterile-looking room. My hands are tied behind my back, and the rope against them hurts. It digs into my skin, and I'm so aware of each strand of material. I haven't had such physical awareness in who knows how long. Not since the accident.

I'm experiencing everything so sharply and deeply. The light is too bright, the air too cold. I briefly wonder if this is how newborns feel when they're born. As terrifying as the darkness was, it was more comforting than this place. It was a safe cocoon, a place to finally rest my soul.

This place is a stark reminder that I'm not in control of my fate. It feels like I've been reborn somehow, but there's no welcoming doctor to greet me. There's something pressed up against my throat, and I lift my eyes to see an unnaturally beautiful woman standing over me. She sneers at me, her hand against my throat. Not her hand, something colder and sharper.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, sweetheart." She laughs wickedly. I instantly dislike her. My eyes sting with tears, and I feel them fall against my cheeks, hot and wet. In all the times I've cried in the last few weeks, it hasn't felt like this. This is real. My mind finally catches up to my

reality.

I'm alive. I'm somehow back in my body.

"We've been waiting for you to wake up," the woman says with a sick glee. "Your boyfriend will be so happy to see you in the flesh."

Is she talking about Hex? I may not remember much about the night my spirit was ripped from my body, but I do know for a fact I didn't have a boyfriend. She must mean Hex, and it's clear from her tone that she wants to hurt him. I'm the weapon she plans to use to inflict the most pain.

A deep voice keeps repeating a chant over and over again, and I want to shout at him to shut up, but I realize belatedly I have a gag in my mouth. I'd been too distracted by the other sensations to notice. I look over, past the woman, and notice a dark figure in the corner, a book open in his hands. He's the one talking, repeating the words. There's something familiar about him, and the answer stabs at the corners of my brain, but I can't place him.

Everything is too much. How could I have ever thought I was alive before? As I strain against the rope, I almost want to laugh. I'd thought I was depressed. I thought that accounted for the numbness. I was drunk all the time, I was barely aware of life happening around me.

But that hadn't been the case at all. It wasn't depression or inebriation; I hadn't been fully alive. Because this hurts like hell. There's a pain in my chest, both physical and emotional. My entire body feels stiff and heavy, and I briefly wonder where these people have been keeping it, me, all this time. What have they done to me?

I close my eyes and imagine that dark room. Even with the fear, it was preferable to this. Because now I know without a shadow of a doubt that I'll die here. These people have brought me back to kill me. Mama was right. All this time, I've been a pawn in someone's game. Who could do this? Why me?

A loud, crashing sound breaks through my hopelessness. I startle, opening my eyes in time to see Hex breaking through the door of my prison. My heart aches for him, and I know without a doubt this is a trap for him. I'm the bait, and they'll make him watch as I die.

"Don't come any closer," the woman hisses at him.

He glares at her, so much hatred and fire behind his eyes. There's something else, though. Terror.

"I'll slit her throat if you do," she says, and I realize the object against my neck is a knife.

Hex's expression is marred with confusion. "How can you even see her?" he asks. "What are you? Who are you?"

She laughs a cold, evil laugh. It sends a chill through my bones, and I look at Hex in desperation. I'm not worth his safety. Until a few minutes ago, I was basically dead. I'd rather this woman kill me than hurt Hex. At least I already know how it feels. I try to scream through my gag, but it's hopeless. The woman presses the blade closer and screams at me to shut up.

"I was told you weren't the sharpest tool in the shed," the woman responds to Hex cruelly. "But don't worry, Hex. All things will be revealed soon."



Juliana is alive. She's actually sitting in front of me, her spirit somehow transferred back into her body. It took me a moment to realize it, but now that comprehension has dawned, I can't believe I hadn't realized she wasn't alive when we met.

Because this version of her is stronger and more solid. Her cheeks are flushed, and her hair is wilder than before. Behind her eyes is a stubborn strength, a very human will to survive. I want to go to her, to untie her and carry her away, but the woman looks like she intends to keep her promise. If I go anywhere near her, she'll be dead in seconds.

"Sit down and shut up," the woman snarls at me. "We have big plans for you, Hex."

Something is vaguely familiar about this woman. I can't place it, but I've never seen her. It isn't the same way I was sure I'd seen Juliana in my dreams. There's a nature to this woman, something about the way she carries herself. Somehow, she reminds me of Abigail.

Then the pieces fall into place. Pocus has been right from the beginning. She's one of Anderson Grey's soldiers. I'd heard they'd all been set free after his arrest, but she was bound to him somehow. Anderson's been behind this from the beginning.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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# Pocus

Seer and I spend nearly an hour searching every room of the church, but Hex is nowhere to be found. He's not here, and I feel like the biggest asshole in the world. I barely questioned it when he got up, too busy focused on the crowd. He could be in real danger, and I didn't take the time to notice.

Every unkind thing I've said to him replays in my head. Panic rises to my throat. Hex is one of the few people I would trust with my life, and I've treated him like shit for weeks. I refused him the benefit of the doubt and assumed he wasn't doing his job. All he ever does is work his ass off for me. I've been a total dick.

I hate myself for losing track of him, especially here. I was so sure Anderson's spirit was after me, I'd never considered he might be after Hex. To my knowledge, they'd rarely interacted. But he brought us all to this church for a reason, and now Hex is gone. This was his plan, and I need to find out why.

We call off our search when the funeral ends and the attendees file out of the chapel. We have no good reason to be in the church, and the cops lurk in every corner. Fucking pigs. Today is not the day for them to mess with me.

"We should head back," Seer says quietly. "Maybe he went home."

I sincerely doubt it, but Seer needs to get back to Tory. His anxiety rolls off him in waves. He's already used up his emotional energy to come to this damn thing. Now that Hex is missing, it's too much for him. He may internally combust if he can't return to his wife and unborn child. I can't say I blame him.

When we arrive at the clubhouse, I find Mama sitting on the porch,

examining the stupid vase very carefully. I didn't think she'd stay after we left, but Tory is like a daughter to her. She probably wanted to stay in case she woke up. When she looks up at Seer with a sympathetic frown, it's enough to know there's been no change. Why should anything go right today?

Seer breezes past her, presumably to go sit at Tory's bedside. I follow after him, needing a drink and to confirm with my own eyes that Hex isn't here. Mama stops me.

"Sit down, Pocus," she instructs. I do as she says and she hands the vase to me. "Tell me what you see."

This feels like a trick question, and I don't have the time for this. I turn the thing over in my hands, trying to see it with different eyes. It looks exactly the same as it did before. It's an ugly piece of shit from an even uglier piece of shit. Mama waits patiently for me to answer, so I try to be descriptive in my disdain for it.

"It's an ugly old vase with a weird design and green stones. There's nothing special about it at all. It belongs in a thrift store, and not one of the nicer ones."

She shakes her head, taking it back from me and staring at it reverently.

"These green stones, they come from a special element," she tells me. "It's rare, but pure. Shamans and others have used it for years to bind their spells. Long ago, a dark warlock realized he could tether a soul to the stone so he could live forever. That's why it's called the Lazarus stone. For centuries, it's been used to bring spirits back to this plane."

I see the stone with new eyes now, understanding what she's not saying. Son of a bitch. I take the vase back from her and examine the stones.

"You're telling me that Anderson's soul is tethered to that motherfucking vase, aren't you?" I ask dryly. I try to keep my voice even, but rage drips from my pores.

He would pull some shit like this. He was too evil to die. He has to fuck up my life by sending me his soul trapped in a stone. I look up at Mama, who watches me curiously.

"It must have been hard to come by. I'd heard all the Lazarus stones had been destroyed years ago by the church. They didn't think it was natural for souls to come back. Of course, this isn't your first run-in with one if you remember."

I laugh. Any normal soul would be horrified to see the unnatural mischief



that happens in the clubhouse. Still, the idea terrifies me. If she's right, Anderson's soul is literally in my hands. What the hell am I supposed to do with that information? A thought occurs and I voice it.

"He's dead, though," I tell her. "He was murdered in that prison. I've seen the footage. He was beaten so badly, they had to cremate his body."

I remember watching the footage weeks ago, wanting to cheer for the murderers. But I had to see it happen and confirm he was really gone. Snake tracked down the coroner's records and I spoke to the man. There was no doubt that Anderson Grey's body was gone forever.

Her expression is unimpressed. She eyes me like a teacher would a particularly slow student. I feel small in her presence.

"You idiot boy. I never said the soul has to go back to its original body. Bodies die, but souls live on forever. Anderson doesn't need his body to come back. His soul is safe in this stone. He can take over anyone and keep doing it for as long as he has a shaman to perform the ritual."

She points at the glowing green stone, and I growl in frustration. The summer heat gets to my brain and I want to smash the damn thing to bits. My anger is getting the better of me because I start to put the pieces together.

If Anderson sent me his soul, it means he intends to take me over, or perhaps one of my men. Perhaps Hex. I can't allow him to do that, not as long as I have the power to stop him.

"Can't we just smash the stone and be done with it?" I ask.

She shakes her head because of course it can't be that easy. Fucking magic. "The stone is nearly impossible to destroy not to mention how much worse the situation could become if we release him from the stone. It takes the darkest magic to bind the old soul to a new body. He must have a powerful warlock helping him."

"His old lackey is dead," I tell her. "Besides, Edward stole all his magic with another stupid-ass magical stone."

"You think that man didn't have backups?" she asks with a shudder. "Evil like Anderson Grey doesn't leave fate up to chance. He surely found someone to perform the ritual, and a body to put his soul in. He probably has multiple bodies lined up. If we're going to end this, we must find that warlock to destroy the stone."

"His soul isn't in the stone," a voice calls from the doorway. We look up to see Tory standing there.

Seer stands behind her, concerned but hopeful. Tory walks out onto the

porch slowly and sits down gingerly next to Mama. Mama takes her hand and squeezes it tightly. For just having risen from a coma, Tory seems surprisingly refreshed.

“I knew you’d win,” Mama whispers. Seer and I share a confused look.

Tory looks between us, an apprehensive frown on her face. She glances at Mama, who nods.

“I’m sure you both have questions.”

As if that’s not fucking obvious.

“Mon couer, you should probably sit down for this.”

Seer does as she says, completely pussy whipped. I won’t give him shit for it. She’s awake and out of bed, which is better than she’s been for the last few days. But she still looks like a strong breeze might bowl her over. Seer is beyond susceptible to any request she has right now.

Tory draws a deep breath and pats her knees, preparing herself for whatever she has to tell us. “I’ve been in the spirit world,” she finally says, and I hear Seer’s sharp intake of breath.

“You weren’t supposed to do any more rituals,” Seer says, looking furious. “Graveyard said it could kill you!”

She watches him carefully, her hand rubbing her stomach. I glance at Seer, who’s seething. He may do anything for his wife, but he also has the capacity to be angry with her. I know how much he wants to have this baby with her.

“I promise you, Nicholas, I didn’t do a ritual to get there,” she tells him. “I was dragged there by Anderson Grey. He knows I have the power to stop him, and he wanted to get to me before I got to him.”

Now Seer’s the one looking like he might get blown over. I feel the same. Anderson was to blame for this, but I didn’t think he’d go after Tory. He’s been trying to take us out one by one, but for what purpose?

“He’s been trying to drain my life force for weeks, but he couldn’t have known I was pregnant.” She looks at Seer with admiration. “Our little baby’s soul is so pure, he couldn’t get to me until I was too weak to defend myself.”

“Shit,” I whisper.

Seer looks from Tory’s face to her stomach, pure love radiating off him. “And our baby?” he asks, terrified. “Is it...”

“He’s fine. Thanks to Mama, we both are,” she says, giving Mama an appreciative smile. “It wasn’t the rituals that hurt me, Nicholas, it was Anderson. But I fought him in the spirit world, and I won.”

Her face is triumphant, pride and joy emanating from her. Of course she won, the scrappy little witch. I can't help but feel grateful. But I have so many questions.

"So Anderson is in the spirit world wreaking havoc," I clarify. "He has a foot in the physical world apparently, because he's been fucking with us. What is the point of this fucking stone? What does he need it for?"

"It had to hold his soul before his death," she responds. "He probably had it transferred shortly before his body was murdered. He must have known it was coming."

"Like I said," Mama interjects. "The man isn't leaving his fate to chance."

Tory nods and takes the vase from me. "Now he needs the stone to trap the soul of whoever he possesses. If he doesn't trap their soul, it will spend eternity trying to fight him."

"Why did he send it to me?" I wonder, the question nagging me.

Tory takes a deep breath and looks down at her hands. "It's been a misdirection, Pocus," she says, fear coloring her voice. "Anderson wanted you distracted so he could take Hex."

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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# Pocus

The men file into the meeting room, ready for battle. News travels fast in this place, and there's a palpable excitement as they impatiently wait for me to call church to order. Excitement courses through my veins, though it's mixed with anxiety and fear. We have to play this exactly right if we're going to get our brother back.

Seer shuts the door and nods, indicating everyone is here. I call the meeting to order and explain everything as best as I can. We've purposely kept the poltergeist a need-to-know item, but now it affects all of us. They deserve to know the truth.

I watch their faces change as I deliver the news. I explain how every attack, every unexplained instance over the last few weeks has been the work of Anderson Grey's spirit. A mixture of skepticism and fear comes from my men. Though we're aware of the ghosts in the house, some have a hard time accepting them in practice.

The added news of an evil spirit that can harm the living world is a lot to take in. What's even worse is that we've never had to battle a threat like this. When we took on Anderson before, he was alive and easy to deal with. This is a battle none of us truly understand or know how to prepare for.

When I tell them Anderson has taken Hex, the mood changes. They spring into action, ready to take up arms. We may not know how to fight a spirit, but we will lay our lives down for one of our brothers. It's part of our code.

"Pocus, what do you need from us?" Snake asks, the first to throw his hat in the fight.

"You focus on finding him. The last we saw him, he was at the church.

Seer and I don't know where he went from there. Whether he was taken or coerced. Find him."

Snake nods, and I dismiss him so he can begin his assignment. We have to find Hex to rescue him, and we need to do it as quickly as possible.

"How do we fight a ghost?" Bones asks. "It's not like we can shoot them or beat them with our bare hands."

"We don't think Anderson is working alone," Seer chimes in. "He may have a foot in this world, but there's no way he's carried out these attacks by himself. Even a ghost can't be in multiple places at once. We don't know what kind of situation we're walking into, but we have to prepare for a small army."

I nod in his direction, grateful for his help. Now that Tory's better, he's more himself, able to jump in when I'm at a loss.

"We need to follow Tory and Mama's lead," I tell them.

A little grumbling comes from the younger men. Despite club loyalty, not everyone is thrilled to be taking orders from women.

"If you have a problem with that, feel free to sit out of this fight," I tell them seriously. "Our brother needs us. Get your heads out of your asses and put your pride aside."



I feel my heart racing, thrumming against my ribcage. I don't care what this crazy lady does to me, but she can't hurt Juliana. She's alive. I don't know how or why, or what this bitch did, but she can't take that away from her. Not with everything she's come through.

The room is in shades of white and stainless steel, the perfect place to torture and murder someone and quickly clean up. I wonder if that's its true

purpose. I wonder if Anderson used his soldiers to torture information out of people here. The thought turns my stomach. Abigail was hexed and trained for that work against her will. This woman probably is too.

“Anderson doesn’t love you, you know,” I goad her.

She smiles at me coldly, pulling Juliana’s head back further and pressing the blade closer against her flesh. Juliana grunts in pain. The woman sneers, satisfied with her work.

“I thought I told you to shut up,” she hisses. “Unless you want your pretty little woman to die.”

“She has nothing to do with this,” I answer evenly. “She’s a normal girl with no special skills. Let her go and I’ll do whatever you want.”

I must sound desperate, as much as I’d like to seem strong. From the way the woman laughs at me, she probably agrees. She likes seeing me beg. That’s exactly why Juliana has to be here. They want to break me. Well, I won’t go down without a fight.

“Just like you’ll do whatever Anderson wants,” I spit. “Do you have a choice, or did Spooky Spice over there hex you? That’s Anderson’s move, right? He has to hex women to help him because they wouldn’t come near him with a ten-foot pole otherwise.”

The woman lets go of Juliana and rushes at me, pointing the knife at my face. That worked better than I expected.

“You know nothing, you insolent piece of shit. No one had to hex me. I’ll serve Anderson until he makes the world burn.”

Up close, I see the insanity in her eyes, but they’re crystal clear. She isn’t under a hex. She truly believes in what she’s saying. She’s completely sold on Anderson, even after death.

“That just makes you stupid and crazy. No one in their right mind could truly love him.”

“I said shut up!” she screams, holding the knife inches from my eye. Then something stops her and she straightens, dropping the knife on the ground. “Go sit in that chair,” she says, pointing to a chair that reminds me of old-school electric chairs.

“There’s no chance in hell—” I start.

“Sit in it or I’ll have my friend here cut your girlfriend’s pinkie off and feed it to you,” she screams, the crazy in her becoming more palpable. I believe she’d really do it.

I do as I’m told, walking over to the chair and then sitting. I stare at

Juliana, who watches me, tears streaming down her face. The woman comes to me and buckles straps around my wrists and ankles to restrain me in the chair. Definitely a torture chamber.

Juliana tries to scream for me, but the gag in her mouth prevents her from forming words. She struggles against it but can't shake it free.

"I'm so sorry, baby," I tell her, holding her gaze. "They're not going to lay one more finger on you, or I swear to God I will set this place on fire."

The woman laughs from behind me as she ties something around my neck to keep my head up straight. Juliana's eyes go wide as she watches the process. Tears fall down her face. I desperately want to pull her in my arms and tell her everything will be okay, but, I can't say for certain that it will.

"I'm serious, bitch," I growl at the woman. "You think you know what love is? Anderson Gray has manipulated you into serving him, but I love Juliana and I will do anything for her."

"I'm counting on that," she hisses in my ear. "She's really come in handy hasn't she?"

My blood boils at her words. "What the hell have you done to her? What does she have to do with any of this?"

The woman giggles, a high-pitched, chaotic sound. It reminds me of nails being dragged across a chalkboard. The sound reverberates around the room, causing my head to ache.

"Your precious little Juliana was nothing more than an experiment for us," the woman explains, coming around to kneel in front of me so we're at eye level. "See, my friend over there needed to make sure we could save Anderson's soul. But you can't trap a soul on your first go and hope you won't fuck up."

A nasty smile spreads across her face, and she licks her lips. She stands up and walks behind Juliana, patting her head.

"Don't touch her!" I scream, but she only laughs.

"Don't worry, Hex," she responds in a sickly sweet voice. "Juliana's my pretty little pet. She was the first soul we were able to successfully trap in a Lazarus stone. We had to kill an awful lot of innocent people to find the way to make it stick but what can you do."

Juliana struggles against her bindings. The woman laughs as she undoes Juliana's gag.

"Oh, you poor, sweet thing," she says condescendingly. "You really thought your parents died in a random hit and run? I'm sorry to tell you, that

was me.”

“You fucking bitch!” Juliana screams at her. “I’ll kill you. I’ll fucking kill you!”

“Well, it seems I have the upper hand, sweetheart. You’re welcome to try, but I don’t think you’ll get far with your hands tied behind your back. Besides, you should be careful with your body. It’s been in a coma for what is it now two months. You don’t want to strain it.”

“Why would you do this?” she cries desperately. “Why did you kill them? They did nothing to you!”

The woman chuckles as she continues stroking Juliana’s hair as if she’s a cat or a child. Juliana tries furiously to shake her off but has no luck.

“That’s the best part,” the woman coos at her. “Your parents meant absolutely nothing to me. You meant absolutely nothing to me until your soul was trapped in my stone. And I knew how much Hex likes a pretty face. It worked out great.”

“You put her in my dreams,” I whisper. “You made me search for her.”

The woman embraces Juliana from behind and smiles at me. “You’re welcome, Hex.” She laughs. “After all, you’ve watched your closest friends fall in love. You probably thought it was your turn. Then this woman appears in your dreams and you think, ‘maybe it’s my turn.’ It worked out better than I could have planned. You never did find the little sachet we planted on you. None of your little ghost friends told you.”

“How do you know so much about my gift?” I growl at her. “How did you know I’d be able to see her spirit?”

“My master’s had his eye on you for a long time, Hex,” she tells me ominously. “You’ve always been of particular interest to him. Controlling the living is fun for him, but he’s become obsessed with controlling the dead.”

“I don’t control them,” I yell at her. “I just see them, that’s all. They speak to me, but I have no influence over them.”

“Yes, but he does. He’s learned quite a few tricks over these last few weeks. The ghosts fear him, but they trust you. Once he takes over your body, they’ll flock to him for help, and he’ll be able to bend them to his will.”

Anderson is the sickest motherfucker. What could he possibly want with an army of ghosts?

A cold chill falls over the room, and Anderson Grey’s spirit waltzes in through the door I’d broken down. He smiles and tips an imaginary hat toward me.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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“He’s here,” the woman whispers excitedly. She drops to her knees and bows to Anderson, though she can’t see him.

He walks over to her and lifts her head up. Though she can’t see his face, she looks toward his direction with such unhinged love it makes me physically ill. She will do anything for him.

“What do you think of my slave?” Anderson asks me with a sick smile. “She’s quite crafty, isn’t she?”

“That’s one word for her,” I mutter, watching the woman in disdain.

“Are you pleased, master?” the woman asks in a reverent voice.

“Tell her I’m very pleased,” he instructs me.

He can rot in hell if he thinks I’ll do anything for him. “He says you’re an ungrateful bitch. He’s going to murder you the second he gets back in my body.”

Anderson glares at me and walks over to Juliana, wrapping his hands around her throat. She gasps for air, and I’m helpless to help her.

“Stop,” I beg. “I’m sorry. He says he’s very pleased.”

Anderson lets go of Juliana and she sputters, coughing and taking labored breaths.

“What the hell was that?” she chokes out.

“Tell her,” Anderson commands me. “Tell her the story of the big, bad wolf. Tell her how I’m going to destroy you and everyone you love, including her.”

“His name is Anderson Grey,” I tell her slowly, keeping an eye on him. He smiles and motions for me to continue. “He was a big business tycoon for years, and he became obsessed with my friends. He wanted to destroy us. But

we figured out how evil he was and turned him in to the feds.”

“Oh, don’t leave out the good parts.” Anderson claps gleefully. “Tell her about my women. When I rebuild my army, I think I might start with her. She has fire.”

“Don’t you fucking touch her!” I scream at him. “You’ve done enough to her. Just let her go.”

“But what good would that be?” He laughs. “I won’t waste a pretty body like that. Men will pay thousands for a night with her. I’ll corrupt that pure aura of hers.”

“You won’t have the chance,” I tell him. “The Ruthless Kings won’t let you get away with this. They’ll destroy my body to be rid of you. They’ll burn this city down to rid it of you.”

Juliana lets out a sharp breath. “Hex, what are you talking about?” she asks, only able to hear one side of the conversation. “Hex, you can’t die! Please, I need you.”

Anderson laughs and walks back over to her, kissing her gently on her forehead. She shudders at the contact. Now that she’s back in her body, she can’t see him, but she can feel him.

“Yes, Hex,” he mimics her. “She needs you. And she’ll still have you. Your body at least. Under my spell, she won’t know the difference. I bet she’s as much of a spitfire under the sheets.”

If he weren’t dead, I’d kill him. He can’t get away with speaking about her like that. But there’s nothing I can do at the moment.

“That’s your plan?” I ask, trying to distract him. “You’re going to use me to fuck your way around the city and trap more young girls to do your bidding? Sounds like a pretty low-stakes plan.”

He laughs again and walks back toward me, fixing me with a malicious stare. “Oh, I have much bigger plans. Those are the things I’ll do when I need to blow off steam. The first thing I’m going to do is destroy your friends. Frankly, I’m surprised the police haven’t nailed them yet for the attacks.”

“And let me guess,” I say sardonically. “That was all you.”

He smiles slowly. “It was certainly all part of my plans. I have a handful of faithful followers, Hex. Not just Vanessa, here, but a dozen or so people who are happy to do my bidding. Unfortunately, the NOLA PD have been too busy chasing their asses to make any charges stick to Pocus. I’ve handed them everything they need to haul his ass to prison.”

“You were behind the shooter,” I guess. “You left the calling card for the

Cuatro Locos, then blew up their club to make it look like Pocus wanted revenge for putting Seer and me in danger.”

Anderson smirks. “I wasn’t thorough enough. This new department needs more help than they used to.”

“It probably doesn’t help that they aren’t in your pocket anymore,” I spit at him. “There’s a new administration cleaning up the mess you made.”

“And once we’re done tonight, they’ll keep cleaning up my messes,” he whispers gleefully. “Now, if you don’t want me to rip out your dear Juliana’s heart, I need you to tell Vanessa to start the ritual.”

I swallow hard, knowing I’m in an impossible situation. He can kill Juliana, and she’ll literally not see it coming. But if he takes over my body, he’ll do unspeakable things to her and force her to do his bidding against her will. She’ll be one of his slaves, like Abigail was. I’d rather he kill her.

If there’s any chance we’re going to get out of this, I can’t risk it.

“Vanessa,” I call hoarsely.

The woman stands and looks at me expectantly.

“Anderson says it’s time to start the ritual,” I say through gritted teeth.

She smiles brightly, and the man in the corner comes forward, book in hand. He looks at her carefully, they have a silent conversation and then he starts chanting.

“It’s done,” he says, which confuses me. I’m obviously still in my body.

But then I look at Juliana and realize he’s been doing a spell to put her soul back in her body this whole time. She’s fully alive again, just in time to be used as Anderson’s puppet. My anger burns inside of me, but I’m useless and helpless.

Vanessa walks over to me and sticks her hand in my pocket, producing the Lazarus stone I’d brought with me.

“You were right, master,” she says gleefully. “He brought the stone. Everything is ready.”



As the chanting man steps forward, I realize with sharp clarity why I know him. He was the man who pulled me out of the car the night my parents were killed. He was the one who stole my soul from my body.

And now he put it back. When he's done chanting, I know I'm fully restored. The earlier pain finally subsides, and all that's left is the stiffness in my body. The woman, Vanessa, did say I'd been kept in a coma for two months. No wonder my limbs feel so useless.

Hex watches me, panic on his face. For the last few minutes, he's been talking to this spirit, this Anderson person, and he's been saying horrific things. I vaguely remember hearing about Anderson Grey being arrested, but it didn't matter to me at the time. He was just some rich bastard who'd been carted off to jail for extortion. That was nothing very exciting at the time.

As I examine Hex's face, I see that he's truly afraid of this man. From the sound of it, we all should be. He's pure evil and he has to be stopped. There's no way in hell I'll let him touch me. There's no way I'll let him hurt Hex. It's taken me this long to find him. I'm not losing him now.

"Anderson," I call out, though I can't see the man. All the eyes I can see in the room turn to me in surprise. "I remember you," I lie. "I read about you in the papers a few years ago. I so admired what you stood for."

"Juliana," Hex pleads weakly. "Please don't do this."

I feel something rub against my face and push my hair behind my ear. This must be Anderson. The touch is cold and so light that it's barely there. This must be how Hex felt when I touched him. I lean into the touch, pretending to enjoy it.

"It sounds like you want to use Hex's body, but I think that's a mistake," I say with false confidence. "Men aren't trusted anymore in our society. You

should know that. You were probably in prison with a lot of creeps.”

“What are you doing?” Hex hisses at me.

I look at him with hateful eyes, showing the emotion I feel toward this Anderson person. I don’t want to look at Hex this way, but I have to sell this.

“No one is talking to you, Hex,” I tell him coldly.

“Anderson is,” he seethes back. “He says you’re different than what he expected. He’s intrigued by you.”

“Really?” I ask in a breathy tone. “I’m flattered, Anderson, I really am. I never thought I’d be able to catch the eye of a man as powerful as you. But you were a businessman, and I know you can’t walk away from a good deal.”

“He can’t,” Hex growls. “He wants to know what you’re offering him.”

I feel pressure on my face, as if something is squeezing me from both sides. Anderson must have his hands on my face. I look up, where I imagine his eyes might be, and smile seductively.

“I’m offering you my body,” I whisper, double meaning oozing off my tongue.

The feeling vanishes. He must have let go.

“He says he has every intention of having your body,” Hex growls viciously, a murderous look on his face. Anderson is getting to him, and I need him to calm down.

“That’s not what I mean, you dirty boy,” I whisper flirtatiously, trying to get the spirit’s attention. “What I mean is, you should possess me. Because who will suspect me of trapping women? Who will question me for any crimes when I’m so innocent and blameless? I’ve never even had a traffic ticket.”

Vanessa and the chanting man look between Hex and me, confused. I’m sure they’re waiting on instructions from their master, but Hex stares at me with pain. He looks betrayed and hurt, but I have to pretend it doesn’t affect me.

“Don’t look at me like that, Hex,” I tell him condescendingly. “Did you really think you’d be enough for me? I’ve been dead for months, and I miss my parents every day. This way, Anderson and I both win. He gets a body no one will ever suspect, and I get to move on.”

“He didn’t think you’d be so ruthless,” Hex says. “He appreciates the irony of this situation. He likes the idea of hurting me by possessing you, but you can’t give him what I can. You can’t see the ghosts.”

“So what?” I laugh cruelly. “When you have my body, curse Hex. He’ll

be a much more useful soldier to you than I ever could be. The ghosts will trust him, and it will really be him they're trusting. Or at least that's what they'll believe. But you'll be able to use him to do your bidding. You can have everything you want. My soul is of no use to you."

I feel the chill sweeping over my arms, and I feel a cold, wet pressure against my neck.

"I told you not to touch her," Hex yells wildly. He looks like a caged animal ready to break free. "I don't care, I'll fucking end you!" he screams, clearly responding to something Anderson has said.

The pressure leaves, and I feel my bindings come undone.

"I'm not going to do that," Hex whispers lowly, desperately.

I feel the pressure around my neck again, more forceful this time. It hurts.

"Stop!" Hex screams. "Fine. Start the ritual," he says, his voice resigned.

Vanessa smiles and walks toward me, placing a green stone in my now free hand.

"You said you'd let her soul go, you fucking bastard!" Hex screams, thrashing desperately against his bindings. "Don't trap her in there!"

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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**F**ear courses through my body as Hex's words break through my consciousness. Anderson is going to take my body and trap my soul. He won't let my soul go. My heart sinks, and tears fall from my eyes. It's better than the alternative of watching him steal Hex's body. I hate Anderson Grey, without ever setting eyes on him.

The weird man approaches and puts his hand on my forehead, chanting once more. The pain resumes, and I know he's ripping my soul from my body for the second time. He'll send me to that dark place. At least Hex is safe. Before I'm trapped again, I have to tell him how I feel.

I push past the pain searing in my head and the pressure around my waist. My senses are overwhelmed, and every cell screams to die, but I can't let go until he knows.

"I'm sorry, Hex," I cry out in a strangled voice. "It was all a trick, I didn't mean a word of it. I love you. I—"

The woman glares at me and stuffs the gag back into my mouth. I can feel the pressure move from my waist to my neck. It squeezes me hard, trying to incapacitate me, but he won't get the satisfaction.

"You stupid bitch," Vanessa seethes. "The ritual has begun, we can't stop now. But my master will punish your soul now. You're going straight to hell, you liar."

She didn't secure the gag, though, so I spit it out at her with all the force I can. She rears back, clutching at her face where the gag hit her.

"I'll see you there, bitch." I kick her with all my strength. She falls back and hits her head. "You should be ashamed of yourself," I scream at her. "I hope all the souls you've hurt spend an eternity torturing you."

The pressure around my neck tightens, but I force my head back quickly, hoping to inflict some pain on Anderson. He forgets that I was in his position. He can feel me more sharply than I can feel him. I hit against something relatively solid, and then it's gone. The pressure releases immediately and I scramble out of the chair, to Hex.

"Where is he?" I ask, desperately pulling at the buckle around his neck.

My hands shake as I fumble with the tethers. The ties around my wrists were easy to loosen, they must have thought I wouldn't have the strength to escape. But with every passing second, what little strength I do have wanes. The ritual is working. I don't have much time, Anderson will overtake me soon, whether physically or spiritually. I quickly undo one of the wrist tethers when Hex shouts.

"He's behind you," Hex warns urgently.

I turn on my heel to face Anderson's spirit. I point at him harshly, though I can't see him. "You can't hurt this body," I remind him. "Your little minion said it. The ritual has already started. If you kill me, you'll have nowhere to go."

"Duck," Hex yells, and I do.

I feel something hard roll over me, and Hex cries out in pain.

"You stupid fucker." Hex laughs, using the one hand I'd managed to free to grab at something I can't see. He must be holding on to Anderson. I hope the bastard feels the pain down to his toes.

I try to get up so I can unbuckle the rest of Hex's restraints, but Vanessa comes up behind me and pulls at my hair, dragging me back. I cry out in pain and desperately thrash against her. With every passing second, my soul gets further and further away from my body. I have to fight as long as I can to stay in my body.

Through my stinging eyes, I see Hex rearing back and blocking his face. Anderson must have managed to get out of his grasp. With only one hand free, Hex is defenseless. I watch with horror as the knife Vanessa dropped earlier floats in the air. It nears Hex, who tries to dodge it, but he can only do so much. He grabs at something and manages to keep the knife away with some effort.

The knife pulls back sharply. Anderson intends to stab him. Hex doesn't react quickly enough, and I see him staring up in horror. He knows he's going to die. The last thing I'm going to see before my soul gets trapped is Hex getting murdered. I scream out in anguish, begging for Anderson to stop.



Then the lights flicker. I breathe a sigh of relief as I see the knife stop short of Hex's chest. Vanessa lets me go, and I turn back to see her looking up in fear. The man doesn't stop chanting, though, and I'm too weak to move. I lie where I am.

The lights blink off and on in a complicated pattern, dizzying me. There isn't much time left.

"I can't hold on, Hex," I moan weakly. "I'm so sorry."

"I love you, Juliana," he cries. "Please, don't leave me. We'll fix this. I'll bring you back!"

Before I close my eyes, the lights in the room explode, and glass shatters around me.



After a surge of light, the room is thrust into darkness. The glass from the lightbulbs shatters everywhere, but it doesn't fall on me. I would recognize that move anywhere. I've seen it a hundred times.

"We've come to save you, Hex," Cassandra's sweet voice whispers somewhere near my ear.

"You can't be here," I tell her urgently. I can't see anything, but Anderson is still here. He can hurt her. I feel in the dark to undo the strap on my left arm, then quickly undo the bindings on my legs.

"Cassandra, you have to leave. He'll trap your soul."

"You silly man." Cassandra giggles her girly, high-pitched laugh. "Do you really think I came alone? Everything will be okay."

A powerful, bright light fills the room, and I realize there are hundreds of ghosts in the room. I recognize many frequent visitors of the clubhouse, but there are some I've never seen before. They march on Anderson, who

releases dark shadows to fight them. They're too strong for him though. There are so many of them. He can't possibly take them all out.

"The ghosts are grateful to you," Cassandra tells me. "You've been searching for them for weeks, offering to help them. It's our turn to help you."

I lose track of Anderson in the sea of ghosts. His shadows move across the walls and the floors, but the light permeating the room burns them as they try to spread. I hear him crying out in pain, as if the light burns him as well.

I turn toward the light and see Tory running into the room, casting the light all around her. Behind her are Pocus, Seer, Bones, Gator, Snake, Mama, and a dozen or so other men from the MC. They've brought the cavalry to save me. I'd be touched if there wasn't so much chaos happening around me.

Anderson screams, but I can hardly hear him over the mob of ghosts yelling at him. They can't touch him, but they can overwhelm his senses. They shout curses and threats, angry for how he's made them cower in fear.

I try to block out the sound so I can focus on getting to Juliana. She's crumpled on the ground in a heap. The Lazarus stone lies next to her body, growing bright green. The sorcerer stalks slowly, bending down to grab the stone, but Mama knocks him out with a powder she blows in his face. He crumples a few feet away from Juliana.

I sink to the floor and crawl to Juliana, pulling her soulless body into my arms. Her body is alive, her heart beating faintly, but without a soul, it's just a husk. I grab the stone and slip it into my pocket, not wanting it to get lost in the chaos. Mama and Tory will know how to fix this. They have to.

"You have to wake up, baby," I whisper repeatedly in her ear, though I know she's far away from me.

I cling to her and look around the room to get a grasp on what's happening. I see Vanessa scamper off the ground and scurry to where Anderson dropped the knife he'd tried to stab me with. She holds it up defensively toward my brothers, but Bones and Gator neutralize her, carrying her out of the room. She screams the whole way, down the hall, shouting for them to let her go.

"You okay?" Pocus asks, crouching down in front of me, but I can't answer him. I can only hold Juliana's body and rock back and forth.

"We have to go, Hex," he tells me. "We have to end this."

I can't move. I've lost all ability to move. Pocus looks behind him and waves someone over. Two of the newer members gently pull Juliana's body

from my grasp and carry her carefully out of the room with them. I scream for her, but Seer and Pocus hold me back, pulling me to my feet so they can haul me out of the room with them.

I turn back to see Anderson struggling against the ghosts. Tory's there, walking confidently through the hoard to get to him. She can't see ghosts, but she can detect his aura, like Mama can. The crowd parts for her. Anderson is crouched into a defensive pose, cowering. She throws herbs at him, and he collapses completely.

She reaches down and grabs whatever part of him she can sense. She drags him out of the room carelessly. I take pleasure in seeing his immobile body hit against walls and bump into objects discarded on the ground. I hope it hurts like hell.

We're going in the same direction, and I realize when we get outside that even more men wait outside on their bikes, ready for whatever fight may come. Pocus tells them to stand down. There's no army here. Just an unhinged woman and an unconscious warlock.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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# Tory

“Hex,” I yell, dropping Anderson and running to my friend. He looks shell-shocked and panicked, but he holds out his arms and embraces me. “It’s almost over,” I whisper in his ear and squeeze his neck tightly.

He nods, then turns to search for the woman he was clutching. She must be Juliana. She’s absolutely stunning, but she has no aura. The sorcerer has ripped her soul from her body once more and placed it in the Lazarus stone. The poor girl.

He pulls her into his arm and cries silently, stroking her hair and whispering in her ear. I go to him and crouch down. He looks at me desperately. “Fix this,” he begs me. “Please tell me you can fix this!”

Mama approaches us and sinks to the ground behind Juliana’s head. She slips a talisman over her neck, saying a short incantation. Juliana breathes in deeply, as if she’s been given CPR. I look at Mama curiously because we both know this is just a temporary fix. She nods and turns to Hex, who looks at Juliana with all the love he has in his heart.

“Listen to me, child,” Mama tells the two of them urgently. “This talisman will keep the girl’s soul in her body for a little while, but we need him to put it back permanently.”

She points to the crumpled figure of the warlock. Juliana stares at him in horror and clutches Hex’s chest. She’s clearly afraid of the man, and for good reason. The man has literally put her through hell. It’s no small thing to rip a soul from a body, especially twice.

“There’s something else,” I tell them.

I look up to see Pocus and Seer standing over us, listening intently.

“There’s only one way to destroy Anderson’s soul. We’ll have to conjure hellfire to destroy the stone. It will rid the earth of his soul and he’ll be trapped in hell for eternity.”

“Do it,” the men shout in unison.

I look at Mama warily, and she nods at me.

“I don’t have the strength,” I tell them. “Even if I was at my peak strength, it’s a complicated spell, and it could kill me. It could kill anyone who does it.”

Pocus throws his hands in the air and turns on his heel, cursing magic. Seer crouches down to me and pulls me in his arms. “We’ll find another way,” he whispers in my ear. “There’s no way I’d let you attempt it.”

“Well, can he do it?” Pocus growls, pointing to the warlock.

“He can,” Mama confirms.

“But why would he?” Hex asks miserably. “We need him to put Juliana’s soul back in her body and to trap Anderson’s soul. Do you think he’s going to do all that and still willingly agree to risk dying to get rid of Anderson for good?”

Pocus reaches behind his back and pulls a gun out, then cocks it. “We aren’t giving him a choice,” he says darkly. “So wake him up.”

I look at Seer, but he shakes his head. I know what it means to Pocus to have this over with, but threatening the warlock doesn’t guarantee he’ll help us. I sigh heavily and look at Mama. “What are our other options?” I ask her.

She looks at me gravely and meaningfully. “I don’t agree with violence. But I agree with Pocus. This is the only way to end it. He’ll help whether he likes it or not.”

I’m surprised, but I won’t argue with her. If this is their decision, I’ll honor it. If it means bringing Abigail and Daisy back, and keeping everyone safe in the future, it’s worth it.

“Wake him up,” Pocus demands, walking over to the man’s body.

Mama slowly gets off the ground and follows him. I watch her as she says an incantation over the man and sprinkles some powder over his face. He opens his eyes. When he sees Pocus standing above him with a gun pointed in his face, he immediately raises his hands in defense and weeps. Poor idiot.

“I’ll do anything you want,” he cries. “Just don’t shoot me.”

“Hex,” Pocus calls, turning back to us without lowering his gun. “Bring your girl over here and let’s get this over with.”

Hex looks down at Juliana carefully as she sobs against his chest.

“We need a minute,” he calls back.

Pocus raises his gun and shoots it in the air in frustration, causing us all to jump.



I help Juliana stand. She claims she's okay, but she must be hurting after everything she's been through in the last few minutes. She leans into me as I pull her away from the watching crowd. I assess the parking lot to find a place for us to speak privately.

“Where are we?” Juliana groans.

“We're a few miles outside of town,” I tell her. “This is an abandoned warehouse Anderson Gray used to own.”

“What did he use it for?” she asks weakly, though I think she knows. It's too horrible to say out loud.

“It doesn't matter,” I tell her. “The only thing that matters right now is that you're safe. We need to talk.”

She nods and I pull her behind one of the buildings so we're alone and secluded. This is the hardest conversation I'll ever have, but I can't force the warlock to put Juliana's soul back into her body unless I'm sure it's what she wants.

Juliana sits on the sidewalk, holding her knees to her chest as she watches me. I pace, unsure how to even broach the topic.

“I love you,” I finally manage. “I love you so much, and I never expected to find you. Once I found you and knew about your... situation, I never could have imagined I'd have you sitting in front of me in the flesh.”

She nods, and I'm sure this is hard to follow. “Hex, sit down,” she says weakly. “You're making my head spin.”

I chuckle humorlessly and look up at the sky. “I can’t sit down. Because if I sit down, I’ll want to hold you and never let go. If I do that, I won’t be able to say what I need to say.”

“Hex.” She sighs. “Please.”

I plant my feet, stand in front of her and take a deep breath. “You deserve to make this choice. I can’t assume you want to go back to your body.”

“Is this about what I said to Anderson?” she asks, rubbing her head. “I only said that so he wouldn’t hurt you.”

I shake my head and sit down next to her. I can only endure so much temptation. I take her hand in mine and squeeze tightly. It feels strange to hold her hand, yet it fits so perfectly in mine.

“Your parents were taken from you,” I say in a strangled voice. “You had no choice in that. And then that maniac pulled you from the crash and stole your soul. You didn’t have a say in that, either. You finally get a choice, and I can’t take that away from you.”

Tears pool in her eyes, and she leans forward, throwing her arms around my neck. I move my hands to her waist and I pull her against me, savoring the feeling. This might be the last time I ever do.

“I’ll understand,” I whisper, though I can’t stop the tears from falling. “If you choose to let go and be with your parents, I’ll understand. If that’s your decision, I’ll respect it and I’ll let you go.”

She holds me tighter, and I feel her body shaking. She cries against me for several minutes before finally pulling away and grabbing my hands. She looks down at our intertwined fingers and inhales a deep breath.

“I should have died six months ago,” she says in an even voice. “But if I had, I wouldn’t have met you. I didn’t believe in ghosts or spirits or anything before, but somehow, I fell for a man who can see them. And you saw me. It felt like the first time in my life anyone saw me and understood me, and I will never forget that.”

She sighs heavily and leans her head against my chest. This is it, I know it. She’s going to tell me she’s ready to move on. My heart crumbles and I try to control my ragged breathing.

“I love you so much, Hex,” she whispers. “I’m not giving that up when I’ve finally found you. I’ve been given a second chance to live, and I won’t waste it.”

I look down to see her smiling sweetly. No hint of indecision shines in her eyes. She wants to stay with me.

“You can’t change your mind,” I tell her, causing her to laugh through her tears. “This is an all-or-nothing deal.”

“We’re all going to die one day,” she says nonchalantly. “But I’m not dying today. I’m choosing to live.”

She leans into me and wraps her hand in my hair. Then she pulls my head down to hers and captures my lips. She is warm and real next to me, and this is so much better than I could have imagined. Kissing her feels like sliding the final puzzle piece into place. It’s like I’ve been waiting for this my whole life without realizing it.

My tongue traces her bottom lip, and she parts her lips for me, letting me in. Her mouth is warm and inviting, and she puts up no resistance. She lets me explore and taste, memorizing her. I’m immediately addicted to her warmth and the pressure of her lips against mine. She’s soft to the touch with a hardness and strength in her.

She demonstrates this when she lightly nibbles at my lip. She likes to be in control, and she wants to drive me wild. I press myself more firmly against her and moan into her mouth. Her hands slide from my hair down to my chest, and she wraps her arms around me, scratching at my back as I move against her.

“Shit, I’m so, so sorry,” Tory stutters from behind us, and I groan.

We pull away reluctantly, but Juliana grabs my hand and intertwines her fingers in mine. I love the pressure of her hand, the way she grips me like she’s afraid I’ll let go. I never, ever will.

“Pocus is getting antsy,” Tory says apologetically. “If you’re ready.”

Juliana nods and stands, pulling me with her. We walk back to the crowd, hand in hand, and I don’t miss the way the men stare at me in wide-eyed amazement. Yeah, this fucking stunner of a woman is mine. And she’s not going anywhere.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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Juliana sits on the ground, flanked by Mama and Tory. They aren't taking any chances on this warlock double-crossing them. They guide her into a lying position and lean over her, their hands held above her chest. The warlock stands over her head, his spell book in hand. Pocus looms over him, pistol affixed to his skill.

"No funny business," Mama warns. "I have powerful friends on the other side. If you cross Pocus, he'll just kill you. You cross me, I'll be sure your soul never knows peace."

"I have no reason to cross any of you," the man tells her darkly. "Anderson blackmailed me into helping him. With his soul gone, all his leverage against me is too. You're doing me a favor."

Mama harrumphs, and Tory eyes the man skeptically.

"You're telling the truth, or at the very least you believe your lies," she declares. "That doesn't mean we trust you."

He sighs in a bored tone. "I'll need the stone."

I take it out of my pocket and reluctantly hand it to him. I look at Tory for support, and she winks at me conspiratorially. The warlock places the stone on Juliana's chest, then straightens and chants.

Her eyes close and her body trembles. I want to go to her, to hold her, but Tory shakes her head, warning me away. I feel helpless watching her, knowing she's experiencing terrible pain.

Instead, I focus on breathing as steadily as I can through my nose. It occurs to me that no one here has a reason to trust or help Juliana. Pocus could have forced the man to destroy Anderson's spirit, then killed him. He didn't have to help Juliana first.

Of the three of them, Mama is the only one who met Juliana when she was a spirit. They're helping because they trust me. And they love me. Or at least, Tory and Pocus love me. Mama is just Mama.

Juliana cries out in pain, and I have to stop myself from running to her. I don't know anything about this process, but based on Tory's warning look, I'll only be in the way. As much as it kills me to watch, this is a battle Juliana has to fight on her own.

The man chants for several minutes. I watch as the light in the stone fades dimmer and dimmer until there's none at all. I look down at Juliana, who groans in pain but makes no effort to move.

"Is it done?" I ask desperately.

"It's done," Tory confirms, dropping Mama's hands and moving out of the way so I can get to my girl.

"Be careful with her," Mama warns as she removes the talisman around Juliana's neck. "She will be very tender. Get her home as quickly as you can and let her rest. It may be a long healing process."

I nod and thank her profusely. I want to hug her, but that isn't our nature. Instead, I scoop Juliana up carefully and carry her to the car parked at the edge of the parking lot. They can deal with Anderson without me. Juliana is my only priority.

"Hex?" she whispers weakly as I lay her down in the backseat.

"I'm here," I tell her. "You're safe. Just rest now."

"I love you," she whispers before passing out.

# Seer

With Hex and Juliana gone, I go to Tory and stand behind her, wrapping her in my arms. She presses her body against mine and sighs.

"Now comes the hard part," she whispers.

She turns to face me. Her face is clouded with worry and doubt. She presses herself against my chest, and I feel her heart racing. She's done so much already. I just want to whisk her back home and let her rest. Anderson

may not be draining her life force anymore, but she's clearly exhausted. This whole ordeal is taking a lot out of her.

The sun is almost set, and the last weak rays of light cast her in a warm glow. She looks tired and frail, but she possesses an inner strength I can't fathom. What she's done today has been nothing short of incredible. She rallied us all and helped us rescue Hex and Juliana. Now she will ensure Anderson is gone forever.

"Is he still paralyzed?" I ask, staring at the spot she's been guarding for the last few minutes.

She nods against me. "But it won't last much longer. We need to hurry."

"Hear that, wizard man?" Pocus asks the sorcerer. "There isn't much time. So make this quick."

"Pocus," Mama warns. "He gets the point."

Pocus waves his gun in annoyance, and the man's face pales. He turns on Pocus, his eyes panicked. "You don't understand," he says in a scared, panicked voice. "Conjuring hellfire is a tricky, dangerous spell. You know why your friends can't do it? Because it takes an incredible amount of power. And if you aren't perfectly precise, it will consume everything in the vicinity."

Pocus's eyes widen, but he doesn't loosen his grip on his gun. Instead, he turns to the men still assembled, awaiting his instruction.

"We've got it from here," he shouts at them. "Thank you for all you've done here today. Your loyalty won't be forgotten. Go home and get some rest. You've more than earned it."

One by one, the men rev their engines and pull out of the parking lot. The sound is a loud, familiar roar I've long associated with my true family. If Pocus is sending them away, it means he's worried the warlock is right.

"Pocus," I say sharply, letting go of Tory and walking over to him. "Please tell me you aren't doing what I think you're doing. If he's right, we'll find another way."

Tory is at my heels, grabbing at my arm. "He can trap Anderson's soul in the stone," she whispers to me. "But there's always the chance some idiotic, power-hungry lunatic can set him free one day. He has to destroy Anderson's spirit."

I look between my wife and my best friend. Tory's face is sympathetic, and Pocus's is determined. I turn to Mama, who stares at Pocus sadly. She walks over to him and wraps her tiny arms around his waist. He towers over

her, but she manages to make him look small.

“I’ve always been proud of you,” she tells him. “You’re a good boy, even if you regularly raise my blood pressure.”

“Thank you,” he tells her. “Now, for the love of God, please get out of here.”

She nods and turns toward her old, beat-up pickup truck. We watch as she drives away, and I wonder when I’ll see her again. She’s been around a lot these last few weeks. I might start to miss her.

Not as much as I’ll miss Pocus. I turn to him, seething. He can’t do this. He can’t leave us alone.

“Pocus, you don’t have to do this,” I plead with him desperately. “Let the warlock do the spell alone. He said himself he wants Anderson gone.”

Pocus shakes his head and lowers his gun, pulling me into a tight embrace. “I don’t know who I’d be without you, Seer,” he says gruffly, his voice filling with emotion. “You helped me build the Ruthless Kings from the ground up, and you’ve always been the best friend and brother I’ve ever had.”

“What about Abigail?” I ask, my voice breaking. “And Daisy?”

“They’ll never be safe if Anderson’s soul walks the earth. I have to protect my family. They’ll understand. Maybe not at first, but one day, they’ll understand.”

I shake my head and step back, anger and sadness battling in equal measure in my chest. I don’t want to live in a world where Pocus doesn’t, but he isn’t giving me a choice. He looks at Tory and smiles at her.

“I wasn’t sure about you at first, little witch.” He smiles. “But you’ve constantly blown me away since you came into our lives. When Abigail comes back, please tell her how much I love her. And please help her with Daisy. She will need you.”

Tory grabs his forearms and holds him tightly for several long seconds. “You’re the bravest man I’ve ever met,” she whispers. “It won’t be in vain.” She looks sharply at the spot on the ground where Anderson is paralyzed. “And hear me, you sorry piece of shit. Pocus is worth one hundred of you. One day, everyone will forget you, but our family will honor him for generations.”

She spits at the ground and grabs my arm, pulling me toward my bike. My feet drag, and I don’t take my eyes off Pocus for one minute.

“I’m going to be really pissed at you if you don’t come back home

tonight,” I yell to him. “I’ll tell your daughter horrible stories about you.”

He smiles and flips me the bird. Then he lifts his gun toward the warlock, who’s bent over on the ground, presumably trapping Anderson into the stone.

Tory hands me my helmet, and we get on the bike. I’m not sure how I’m able to start the bike or pull away. I’m fighting against every instinct by leaving my best friend behind. With every mile I drive, my stomach turns and my heart hammers. When I finally can’t take it, I pull over and get off, throwing my helmet to the ground and screaming at the trees.

A loud noise echoes in the trees and the ground shakes. I turn back to see a pillar of fire rising to the sky. It has to be a mile wide, and I feel the heat of it from here. I watch in horror as the fire lights up the sky, so bright it’s like the sun. Then, just as quickly, it’s gone. I scream again, releasing all my fear and grief.

He couldn’t have survived that. My best friend is dead. He sacrificed himself to ensure the rest of us could be safe, and I’ll never be okay with that. I’ll have to step up as the leader of the Ruthless Kings and pretend I’m not falling apart at the seams. I won’t survive this.

Tory comes up behind me, pulling me against her tightly. The tears flow out of my eyes freely. My body shakes, and I turn to her, seeking comfort in her embrace. She rubs my back and holds me for several minutes until I can compose myself. When I’m calm enough to see straight, she cups my face in her hands and looks at me triumphantly.

“Pocus is alive,” she tells me, but I don’t believe her. She’s saying that to make me feel better. “When he said goodbye to me, I placed a protection over him. He may be in bad shape, I can’t say for sure. But he’s alive.”

There’s no hint of a lie in her eyes. She’s telling me the truth. She saved him somehow. I pick her up and twirl her around in my arms, screaming out for a different reason. We put our helmets back on and I turn my bike around, going to help my brother.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY

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The first thing I notice is how badly my head hurts. My heart pounds steadily in my chest, but it's like I can hear it echoing around my head. I realize with a start it's been a long time since I've been aware of my heartbeat. It worked.

I open my eyes slowly, but nothing looks familiar. I turn my head carefully to see there's a hospital curtain pulled, but this room doesn't look like a hospital room. It's cozy and warm, and the bed is very comfortable. I turn my head to the other side and see Hex sitting in a chair, his body slumped over the bed.

I smile when I see him there. He's much too big for the chair, but he looks so small and meek. I run my fingers through his hair, and he stirs, yawning widely and sitting up, bleary-eyed. He rubs his eyes lazily and looks at me happily.

"Hi," he whispers.

"Hi," I whisper back. "Come here often?"

He laughs and moves up to kiss me gently on the lips. I love the feeling of his lips against mine. I will never tire of it.

He pulls back and sits down, his body cracking with every movement. He must have been here for a long time.

"How long have I been out?" I ask.

"Four days," he answers with a yawn. "Four very long days."

"Have you been here the whole time?" I ask with a small giggle.

He nods lazily, and my heart swells. He didn't leave my side for a moment. I try to sit up, but my body is so sore and stiff. It will take a while to get used to it again. But there's plenty of time. I have nothing but time.

The curtain pulls back, and a tall man enters the room dressed in a lab coat and wearing a small smile. "It's nice to see you awake, Juliana," he tells me cordially. "How are you feeling? Is there anything I can do for you?"

"My head really hurts," I tell him, assuming he's a doctor and not a random man asking me. "Is there any way I can get some pain meds?"

He pulls out a chart from the foot of my bed and checks it. "I apologize, you are due for your next dose. I'll get that for you now. These people have kept me busy the last few days."

He and Hex share a meaningful look, and he exits as quickly as he entered.

"Was that man really a doctor?" He didn't look like any of the doctors I've ever had.

Hex laughs and nods. "That's Graveyard," he tells me, and it strikes me as a very odd name for a doctor. "He works at the hospital, but he's part of the Ruthless Kings. He's basically always on call for us. He hates it sometimes. But he seems to like you pretty well."

"That'll change if he doesn't bring me pain meds soon," I yell out, sure Graveyard is close by.

"Quiet," he yells back, making me laugh. "We have VIP patients here trying to rest."

*Abigail*

Daisy struggles against my arms, desperately trying to get to her daddy. The moment she saw him lying in the infirmary bed, she didn't care that I existed. She missed him. But I hold her back despite her protests. Pocus is badly injured.

Evanescence and I came back the night of the fire. Mama sent a message to Evanescence that we should get back right away. I didn't need to be told twice. I'd been a wreck since Pocus sent us away. Even having Evanescence with me didn't soothe the anxiety.

I'll never let him do it again. He was a stupid, stubborn man, and he

didn't understand I can take care of myself. I've been through more than he could possibly imagine, and I remembered how to fight. He never should have tried to take on Anderson Grey without me. He almost lost his life in the process.

"Don't worry, he isn't in much pain," Evanesce says beside me. "I took away most of the burning. He'll be sore, but he'll be fine."

"Oh, I'm not worried," I tell her truthfully. "He needs to be worried about what happens when he wakes up. I'm going to kick his ass."

"Good girl." She laughs. "Give him hell."

An odd choice of words, since he'd been burned by literal hellfire. These people never ceased to amaze me. Tory filled us in as soon as we'd arrived, very early the next morning. Pocus held a warlock at gunpoint, ensuring he would do a spell to conjure hellfire to destroy a stone that held Anderson's spirit.

It was a lot of information to process, especially since Pocus had told me nothing about Anderson being the evil spirit haunting him. It was added to the long list of reasons I was angry with him.

In any case, Tory and Mama had secretly cast protection spells on Pocus. He'd been willing to sacrifice himself to save everyone—the very top reason I could throttle him right now. He was badly burned in the fire, but he survived. The warlock wasn't so lucky, and the stone was successfully destroyed.

None of that matters to me, though. All that matters is that my idiotic, stubborn, sacrificial, completely wonderful husband is still here with me. He's been in and out of consciousness since we arrived, but when he was awake, he was so goddamn happy it melted my heart. He's lucky I love him so much.

Now, as I hold our little girl in my arms, he opens his eyes slightly, and she screams out in joy.

*Seer*



Tory stirs next to me, likely having one of her vivid dreams. As long as I've known her, she's been prone to them. They've apparently gotten worse with the pregnancy. Last night, she had such a vivid dream, she accidentally punched me in the stomach.

I pull her against me and wrap my arms around her, mostly for my own safety. But I do love the way our naked bodies feel against each other. A slight sheen of sweat covers her body from our earlier excursions. Pregnancy has also made her incredibly horny, but I have zero complaints about that.

It's hard to remember what life was like before she showed up. I must have been terribly bored. She definitely keeps things interesting. I move my hand down to her stomach, and I leave it there, imagining I can feel our son kicking against her.

She's told me repeatedly that he hasn't developed legs yet. She's early in her pregnancy, but I'm already head over heels for my son. We haven't decided on a name yet, but I'm trying to convince her that his middle name should be Pocus. After all, if it weren't for him, we'd still be dealing with Anderson's evil spirit.

Although, truthfully, Tory laid most of the groundwork. She never ceases to amaze me. She sighs happily and turns into me so we're lying chest to chest. I press a sweet kiss on her nose and bury my fingers in her hair, holding her to me as I drift off to sleep.



"I really feel okay," Juliana tells me as Graveyard unhooks her from the machines. "Even Doctor Death said I can leave."

Graveyard rolls his eyes at her nickname for him, but we find it hysterical. She's already fitting in so well, and she's only been awake for half

an hour. Graveyard tells her to keep up with ibuprofen every few hours, but says that otherwise, she'll be fine.

"So," she says hesitantly. "Technically, I think I'm homeless."

I laugh at her randomness. "That is a dilemma," I agree, grabbing her hand and helping her off the bed. "Maybe a nice man will offer you a safe place to stay."

"I haven't had a lot of luck with nice men," she jokes. "Maybe a dangerous motorcycle gang member will let me share his bed though. It's the least he can do."

She bats her eyes at me and licks her lips. I immediately grow hard, and I need to get us away from the infirmary as quickly as possible. I pick her up bridal style and carry her out and to my bedroom. I don't put her down until I reach my bed.

She looks around the room carefully and curiously.

"Surprisingly clean," she finally assesses. "Wanna dirty it up?"

I do, desperately, but I don't want to push her. After all, she's still readjusting to her body. She was complaining about how stiff and sore she felt. I don't want to make her feel worse.

"You're doing that thing where you overthink," she accuses.

I sigh heavily and lean down, kissing her gently. "I think maybe we should try to take it slow. You're in a fragile state right now."

She fixes me with an annoyed look and pulls me down onto the bed with her. When I'm lying on my back, she climbs on top of me and holds me down with her hands. "I'm not as fragile as you think," she purrs. Then she leans down and places her lips close to my ears. "In fact, I'm going to show you exactly how not fragile I am."

She climbs off me and readjusts so she's positioned near my waist. I'm straining hard against my pants, and I know it's obvious to her. She looks up at me wickedly and unbuttons my jeans, torturously taking her time to free me from the denim.

When she has me bare in front of her, she leans down and takes my tip into her mouth. She swirls her tongue against it in a long, slow circle, causing my eyes to roll back into my head. Her lips are so warm, and her touch is perfect. This is one thousand times better than our moment in the basement.

"Fuck, you taste good," she moans before pulling me as far into her mouth as she can. Her hand plays a lazy pattern against my sac, and I can't help the sounds that escape my lips. She's driving me wild. I curl my hand

into her hair as she carefully sucks and nips.

I look down and watch her as she stares up at me seductively. It's the sexiest fucking thing I've seen in my life. She fucks me hard with her mouth, her tongue doing delicious things to my cock. The world goes black for a moment, and I come inside her mouth, unable to control my orgasm to pull out. She sucks it down hungrily, like it's her favorite drink in the world.

"Okay," I groan out, completely spent. "You aren't fragile. Fuck, you're strong as an ox. Now come here."

I hold my arms out, and she crawls into them, pressing her body to mine. I can't stop touching her, can't stop running my hands through her hair and over every part of her exposed skin. She's real and alive and here. I won't let her go for as long as I live. Or at least for as long as she'll have me.

She presses her lips against mine, and we lie there for a long time, lazily kissing and getting our fill of each other. I'll never be able to get enough of her. Now that I finally have the chance to hold her and touch her and love her the way I want to, I'll never stop finding ways to enjoy her.

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE**

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## Two Weeks Later



“**F**uck, Hex, that feels so good.” Juliana moans as I kiss slowly down her body. We’ve barely left the bed in two weeks, but I keep discovering new ways to bring her pleasure. She pants and cries out as I wrap my arms around her knees and pull them apart.

“Don’t stop,” she commands breathlessly as I kiss her inner thigh, teasing her.

I run my tongue down her soft flesh, creating wet patterns on her skin. I nip and suck on the supple flesh there, marking her. She writhes against me, aching for a deeper touch. I know where she wants me, but I haven’t finished my exploration of her body. I want to leave my mark on every inch of her.

“Please,” she repeats over and over. “Don’t make me beg.”

That’s exactly what I want from her. I want her to beg me to taste her. I want her to crave me so badly that when I finally slip my tongue inside her, she nearly passes out from the pleasure. I want her to repeat my name like a prayer on her lips.

She writhes wildly, but I hold her legs apart, putting pressure on them so she can’t kick me. She growls in frustration. She’s ready. She’s been dripping on the sheets for several minutes, aching for me.

I slowly lower my mouth over her sensitive flesh, hungrily lapping up the juices from her swollen pussy lips. She arches her back and moans, but I’ve barely touched her. Not where she needs me. With my fingers, I slowly part and lick her sensitive flesh. I run my tongue in a slow circuit down her slit, spreading her bare in front of my eyes.

“So good,” she murmurs, one hand draped over her eyes and the other clutching the bedsheets.

We haven't even entered the neighborhood of *good* yet. I move my mouth back up to her sensitive bud, sucking and nipping at her swollen clit. The scream she releases could shatter windows. I see now why Pocus recommended I soundproof my room. I make her desperate and wild.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," she pants underneath me. She's close.

I slip a single finger inside her as deeply as it will go and curve it, massaging her G-spot as I play with her clit. She can barely contain herself, nearly jumping off the bed from the force of the orgasm that rips through her. It was a good one, but I can give her a better one. I can make her last longer.

She comes down slowly, winding her fingers through my hair and pulling at me to meet her at the head of the bed. She kisses me hard, her tongue darting into my mouth to taste herself on my lips. This is her favorite part, exploring me as I've explored her. She always wants a taste after I've gone down on her.

I kiss her back, my hands roaming over her body to squeeze and pinch and tease. She wraps her legs around my waist and presses against me, letting me know she's ready for another round. I'm beyond ready to acquiesce. I need to fuck her like I need air to breathe. I want to bury myself inside of her so deeply until I don't know where she ends and I begin.

She pulls back and grins at me wickedly before pushing me back. Then she turns under me, and I sit on my heels as she positions herself on her hands and knees. She loves it rough. She loves when I pull on her hair and fuck her like a savage. She says it makes her feel wild and alive.

I stand, pulling her hard so she's positioned near the edge of the bed where I can get the most leverage. Without warning, I slam inside her, causing her to throw her head back. I reach forward and grab one of her tits, squeezing and groping as she screams out my name.

She fits me like a glove. When I'm inside her, we fit like puzzle pieces, the perfect mixture of hard and soft. I grip her hair with my free hand, tangling my fingers in the strands and pulling until she's breathless.

"Am I your dirty slut?" she calls out, making me harder.

I've discovered in the last few days that Juliana is a fan of role playing. It turns her on more than anything else. I've been surprised to find how effective it's been for me. Fuck, I love this woman.

"You've been a bad girl," I growl into her ear, pushing in and out of her as quickly as I physically can.

"Punish me, baby," she says seductively, her voice high and sensual.

“Show me what happens when I don’t do what you say.”

I spank her gently, and she screams out in pleasure.

“Harder,” she cries. “Or I might do it again.”

I spank her ass harder this time, pounding into her with all my strength. I’m so close, but I don’t want to go over without her. I trail the hand that’s been massaging her breast down her body and begin drawing fast circles around her clit, making her cry out. Her body shakes and she tenses around me, so tight I can barely move.

This is my favorite part. She likes tasting, but I like the squeezing. I love getting off inside of her as she experiences her pleasure. It’s the hottest fucking thing. She puts her full weight on her knees, leaning into the sensation, and screams my name with a slew of expletives.

I follow her over, coming inside her as she struggles to stay upright. She gasps hard, trying desperately to catch her breath, and it’s all I can do not to collapse on top of her. She’s the only thing that could ever break me.

I pull out of her, missing the contact immediately, and watch as she tiredly crawls up the bed to collapse against the pillows on her stomach. I move beside her, mirroring her position, and turn to look at her.

Her eyes are half-lidded in pleasure. She’s close to sleep. I lift my hand to her face and trace her hairline, watching her relax further at my touch. She’s my undoing and I’m her peace.

“Do you think it will always be that good?” she whispers, her eyes closed now. “Do you think we’ll wake up one day and be tired of each other?”

I reposition myself on my side so I can focus on her. Her eyes are closed and her body must be exhausted, but her mind races and she worries about the future. My silly girl.

I hum thoughtfully, pretending to consider her question. Truthfully, I don’t think we’ve even hit our stride.

“One day we’re going to look back and think, ‘wow, we’ve really improved.’”

She giggles and snuggles into my side, immediately relaxing and letting her body go limp. Her breathing changes as she falls asleep, completely comfortable with me. It’s so strange to think just a few weeks ago, I didn’t know her. Even more recently, her soul was detached from her body. We’ve both had to fight hard for this moment.

And the other approximately thirty-two moments we’ve had over the last two weeks. We have been so ravenous for each other, we’ve barely come up

for air. Seer's been kind enough to send up food. We've had the briefest breaks for showers, but it's like we're magnetized. We can't keep our hands off each other.

I'm the luckiest man in the world, and I don't take it for granted. I cradle Juliana against me and run my fingers down her spine, memorizing the feel of her skin. I don't take it for granted that she's here at all. By all accounts, we never should have met. We were on very different paths in life. Then Anderson Grey, of all people, brought us together.

I hate the man with every fiber of my being, but I love the irony. His mission in life, and death, was to destroy us. He wanted to dismantle the club brick by brick and pin crimes on us that we would never commit. Now, he's gone forever. Pocus and I are both lucky enough to have found love. His plan backfired so miserably, it benefited us.

I hope he's looking up at us from hell, tortured by our happiness. Imagining his eternal misery makes me smile. I fall into a restful sleep, content with my life in a way I never could have imagined.

When I wake up, Juliana is nowhere to be found, and I panic for a moment. I knew I shouldn't have gotten too comfortable. A small part of me has been filled with the anxiety she will disappear into the night with no explanation. Everything was going too well, I was too happy.

I quickly dress and run down the stairs, ready to move heaven and earth to bring her back. As I rush through the kitchen, though, I see four pairs of eyes turn toward me curiously. Abigail, Tory, Daisy, and Juliana are all there eating breakfast. Daisy has a smaller portion of their eggs and bacon, and the women each have a large mug in front of them.

"Something wrong, querido?" Juliana asks with a twinkle in her eye.

I notice Tory and Abigail both watching me with bemused expressions. I've clearly walked in on something I don't want to explore any further. Women aren't allowed in church, and I don't want to be allowed into whatever the fuck this estrogen club is.

"Uh," I fumble stupidly. "Just really needed a glass of water."

Juliana smiles as she goes to a cabinet, pulls out a glass, and fills it with water from the sink. She hands it to me with a wink, and I drink it down quickly, knowing I've been caught in a lie. I sigh contently as I finish then walk over to put the glass back in the sink. They watch me curiously.

"You know, Hex," Abigail starts. "You're setting a very bad example for my daughter."



I glance at her, surprised and clueless about what she's talking about. I raise my eyebrow, indicating she should expand on this thought.

"It's very important to me that Daisy learns to share," she continues with a small laugh. "And you've been keeping Juliana to yourself for weeks."

The women break out into a chorus of giggles, and I groan. This is my life now. I've brought another woman into the house, raising the estrogen levels. It seems they've already become fast friends, and I can't stop the train from going off the track.

"It's been ages since we've had breakfast together," Tory complains from her spot at the kitchen counter. "Who am I supposed to gossip with now, Hex? My husband?"

Abigail snickers, accidentally spitting out her coffee, and Juliana smiles broadly. Even if this is my nightmare, it's so good to see her happy. I want her to feel comfortable here with everyone. We're her family now.

"Well, who says I'm the one with the sharing problem?" I grumble, sitting down next to Tory and stealing a piece of her bacon. She immediately smacks my hand, but I pop the fried meat into my mouth and chew quickly. "For all you know, Juliana's the one holding me captive."

Said woman blushes and takes a small sip of her coffee, but Tory fixes me with a stare.

"Sweet Hex." She sighs. "This is what relationships are, and the sooner you learn, the better it will be for everyone."

"Learn what?" I ask, already nervous about her answer.

"It's never the woman's fault," Abigail chimes in, smiling as she helps Daisy get her eggs to her mouth.

"Right," Tory confirms. "Even when we're wrong, we're right. And that's why we're sure you've been keeping her from us and not the other way around."

I look at Juliana, but she purposely isn't looking at me, instead focusing her attention on Daisy. She holds out a small piece of bacon, which Daisy grabs with her chubby baby hands and chews on listlessly.

"Can I get you anything, querido?" Juliana calls to me from next to the highchair.

"Maybe my dignity," I grumble, causing the women to break out in another chorus of laughter.

"Come on, Hex," Tory says sweetly, squeezing my forearm. "You know it's all good fun. Abigail and I are so happy to have another woman around,

and more importantly, we're happy that you're happy."

"Who's happy?" Evanesce asks, almost floating into the kitchen.

Great. Just what this kitchen needs—more women.

"Well, that's my cue," I tell the women, standing and heading for the door. "The female-to-male ratio in this kitchen is too off-balance. I'm going back to bed."

"I'll be back soon," Juliana promises, coming over and placing a sweet kiss on my lips.

"Take your time," I tell her, rubbing my hand along her arm. "I'm glad you're making friends. Stay down here all day if you want. I'm not going anywhere."

"Me neither," she whispers, placing another sweet kiss on my lips.

The other three women holler, and Daisy adds her voice to the mix. She has no idea what's going on, but she loves using her voice. She giggles with joy, and the women turn to fawn over her.

Soon, there will be another baby crying all night and adding an unnatural level of cuteness to the house. I can see it now—in five years the house will be full of children chasing each other around and playing hide-and-seek with the ghosts. I don't know if the thought horrifies or excites me.

I turn to walk out of the room and immediately run into a grumpy-looking Cassandra. Speaking of ghosts. Her hands are on her hips, and she's glaring at me.

"You've barely played with me at all since that lady got here," she complains, pouting. "I hate her."

I sigh heavily, moving to the stairs and patting the spot next to me for her to sit down. How can I explain to an eight-year-old ghost that I have a girlfriend now?

"You're still my best girl, Cassandra," I tell her. "But Juliana is someone I love, and she'll be around a lot. And she would be jealous if I spent all my time with you."

"That isn't my problem," she answers petulantly. "You've blocked me out of your room. That's mean, Hex." She folds her arms and looks forward, ignoring me. "I got all those other ghosts to come save you, and you haven't played with me once."

I have a feeling that one day, I'll be sitting on these stairs having a similar conversation with Daisy, or maybe even my own daughter. I don't have time to please everyone. But I know one thing that is guaranteed to make

Cassandra feel better.

“I’m sorry I’ve had to block off my room, but now that Juliana’s here, we need a little privacy. To make it up to you, I promise you can come to church whenever you want to. You won’t even have to break the lights anymore.”

She turns to me with wide eyes and an excited grin.

“Really, Hex?” she screams in joy. “I can come whenever I want?”

“I won’t tell a soul,” I promise her, motioning zipping up my lips and throwing away the key. She laughs and skips off, satisfied for now. I really do need to help her make more friends.

I walk up the stairs, intending to go to my room, but find myself outside of Pocus’s room. One downside of being with Juliana for the last two weeks is that I haven’t taken the time to check on him. There’s a lead ball in my stomach, carrying the guilt I’ve been pushing aside.

I knock quietly and hear a grunt to come in. He’s weak, even after all this time. I push the door open carefully and slip inside.

“Look what the cat dragged in.” He smiles sarcastically. “Didn’t think I’d see you for at least another week.”

I smile sheepishly and run my hand through my hair, feeling nervous for some reason. Maybe it’s that I’ve never seen Pocus like this. As long as I’ve known him, he’s always been strong, almost untouchable. Most of his skin is bandaged, and what isn’t looks red and raw.

“Juliana is downstairs with the others,” I explain. “Our kitchen is becoming the set of a female-led sitcom.”

He laughs carefully, trying hard not to move too much. The lead ball in my stomach grows heavier. I shouldn’t have put off visiting.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” I ask him, but he looks at me, annoyed.

“I know I look like shit,” he grumbles. “But I’m still perfectly able to take care of myself.”

“And by that you mean Abigail is tending to your every need, so you don’t need anyone else getting in your space?” I ask him with a small chuckle.

“You get it.” He laughs. “I’m telling you, Hex, having a good woman changes everything. I wasn’t kidding, I genuinely didn’t expect to see you for another week. Enjoy your time with Juliana. We all deserve to enjoy some fucking happiness right now.”

“You sure you’re going to be okay?” I confirm, and he answers by

flipping me the bird.

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# EPILOGUE

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## One Month, 15 Days Later



**T**he bass thumps through the walls of the bathroom, causing the stall to vibrate. It's the perfect rhythm as Hex grinds against me, his cock hard through his jeans. My body is on fire, and my panties are soaked through, ready for him to enter me.

His hand cup my ass, keeping me locked into place. My legs are wrapped around him and my hands are tangled in his hair. I'm glued to him, unable to pull away for a second. His hot kisses fill my mouth and overtake my senses, but I need to feel him closer.

I hold on to him tightly with one hand as I use the other to pull down the waistband of his jeans and boxers. My short skirt gives him easy access, and I already feel his hardness against my satin panties.

"Fuck, you're so wet," he growls in my ear. "I might slide right out of you."

"There's only one way to find out," I whisper seductively as I use my hand to move my underwear aside and pull him into me.

He hisses as he moves, filling me, stretching me. We've been together for nearly two months now, and the initial moment of contact has not ceased to be mind-blowing every single time. There's always a moment when I'm sure he's going to split me open, but then he nestles into me as far as he can go and it's the perfect fit.

He fucks me hard against the wall, his hips moving in time to the quick beat of the song. I hold on to him tightly, grinding myself against him as he sucks at my neck and squeezes my ass. He'll probably leave a bruise, and the knowledge of that excites me.

I love waking up in the morning and finding new places where he's

marked me, claimed me as his own. It's so hot to discover a new place that's just his. I usually spend the whole day fantasizing about where I want him to mark me the next time.

He moans, breathing out quickly as he chases his bliss, his legs growing weak as he starts to come undone. I'm so close, the pleasure building in the pit of my stomach, boiling up like an active volcano. He nips at my neck as he plows into me, and I lose myself in his touch. It feels like I'll have two new markings to find tomorrow. My hips thrust against him more quickly, and the volcano starts to erupt.

He cries out, but even in here it's hard to hear over the music. I feel it in my chest and my pussy, the vibrations rocking through me as I come down from my explosion. He goes limp inside me and carefully pulls out, setting me back on the ground on shaky legs.

Fuck, I love this man. I kiss him hard, my tongue battling his for dominance, but he surrenders, letting me explore his mouth and dive deep inside. He moans. He's already growing hard again, but we've already been in here for too long. The idea of getting caught is sexy as hell, but I love this club. It's not on my agenda to get banned.

I clean myself up and pull up my panties as he buttons his jeans and tries to catch his breath. If sex were an Olympic sport, we'd be taking home the gold. We certainly have been training hard every day. Multiple times.

When we've caught our breaths and checked in the mirror to make sure we're presentable, he grabs my hand and leads me out onto the dance floor. His hands move down to my hips, and he sways against me, losing himself in the beat. My hands are wrapped around his neck, and it might as well be foreplay. Dancing is just as sensual.

Hex has graciously allowed me to pull him out to clubs on multiple occasions over the last few weeks. He hates them. That's evident in the way he tries not to touch anyone as he passes them. But he loves watching me dance, watching me lose myself.

It hasn't been the easiest transition, coming back to the world. I thought it would be like riding a bike, but it turns out that being back in my body has been overwhelming. I can barely drink anymore, the alcohol making me lightheaded after a shot or two. I lost all my tolerance when my body was in a coma.

I also don't like touching other people besides Hex. It's a strange concept, considering how much I love coming to the club. Bodies packed around me

can become too overwhelming. When I was a wandering spirit, I thought I could feel. I thought I was experiencing everything I had before. Now, I realize those feelings were echoes of real life. They didn't compare to reality.

Still, I've tried to reclaim my life. Because I have been given a second chance, I have to actively choose to engage with the living with every moment. It hasn't been an easy feat, and there have been several nights when I've cried in bed, worried I'm wasting this. But then Hex will pull me into his arms and kiss me sweetly, and I know I have a purpose.

Tonight, my purpose is to turn him on in every way imaginable. This particular club has several stripper poles. I pull him over to one as soon as I see it become available. He watches me, slack-jawed, as I climb up on the platform and twirl around the bar. In my previous life, I'd done pole dancing for exercise. I'm excited to put that training to good use.

I climb up to the top of the pole and flip myself over, spreading my legs and slowly lowering myself. I feel my hair swaying under me, and I look out to see him staring, swallowing hard. I smile at the evident bulge in his pants.

I hear the hoots and hollers of other club patrons, but there's no one else in the world but Hex. I'm on display for a crowd of strangers, but this dance is for him. My feet return to the ground, and I hitch my leg around the pole to spin around, giving him a sexy wink. He's reaching his wit's end, so I drop back to the platform and bow.

He holds up his hands and helps me down to the floor. I feel his touch slide up my body as I go, and I need him again, this instant.

"Let's go home," I tell him, grabbing his hand and leading him through the crowd.

A few men whistle and catcall me, despite Hex's hulking frame behind me. Others clap him on the back and tell him he's a lucky man. I don't have to look back at him to know he's smiling, his focus solely on me.

For such a large man, he is gentle, and he tries his best not to get jealous. Lots of men try to hit on me at the bars, but rather than getting angry, he'll slide up behind me and wrap his arms around my waist. He doesn't need to threaten anyone to show them he's claimed me in every way. And he knows I don't have eyes for anyone else.

When we're out in the chilly night air, he hails us a cab, not letting go of my hand for a second. In the cab, his hands move to my waist and up my shirt, groping and teasing, driving me wild. I never liked public displays of affection before him, but now, I'm always willing to put on a show. I grab the



collar of his leather jacket and pull his face to mine, kissing him until we're senseless.

Our cab driver has to cough several times to get us to pull away from one another when we reach the clubhouse. Hex keeps one hand under my shirt and throws a wad of large bills at the drive with his other hand. Then he pulls me out of the car and through the house until we're back in the privacy of his room.

We've screwed in pretty much every club in town, but this is by far our favorite place to be together. For me, it's the only place I feel like I can be myself. It's where I can let go of the pressure of being alive and enjoy my man. For Hex, this is the only place where he doesn't see ghosts.

That's been another interesting adjustment for me, because I know he sees them all the time. Now that Anderson's spirit is gone, they've flocked back into public places in force, or so he tells me. Most are so grateful to him, they don't want to leave him alone, and he's tired of them watching us get intimate.

The first time he told me it was happening, I was horrified. I hated the idea of having someone infringe on our private moments. Now, though, I get excited by the idea. I would never want to have sex in front of a living person, but knowing someone's watching drives me wild. I like knowing someone is witnessing firsthand the kind of pleasure only Hex can give me.

It also helps that I can't see them. I probably wouldn't like it as much if that were the case. Still, in the privacy of our room, there's only us. He's fortified his room against the ghosts, something he says he should have done years ago.

He kisses me now, pushing me down against the bed. I immediately spread my legs for him, but he takes his time, trying to torture me. He stands in front of me and strips off his clothes, starting with his jacket and shirt, then seductively removing his belt. He stares at me intently while unbuttoning his jeans and dragging down the zipper.

I'm literally drooling for him, ready to see his naked form in front of me. I don't think I'll ever grow tired of seeing him bare in front of me. I sit up at the edge of the bed, running my hands over his hard abs and holding his gaze. My hand slips down lower, at the same pace he removes his pants. Once he's fully revealed to me, I gently take his cock in my hand and kiss the base.

He lets out a long, low growl and pushes me down again. His pace excites me. He clearly wants something new out of this experience, savoring the

moment in a way we don't usually do. Normally, we're so desperate and hungry for one another, we're racing each other to orgasm.

This is something else, something more thoughtful and completely electrifying. He runs his hands up the sides of my legs, and I relish the stark contrast between his rough, calloused hands and the smooth skin of my legs. When he reaches my hips, he hooks his fingers through the band of my panties, pulling them down.

He repeats this motion, this time removing my skirt. Then, he pulls me up into a sitting position, pulling my tank top from over my head and never breaking that deep, intense eye contact. It's like he fucking me with his eyes, his gaze setting me on fire as if he's using his hands. It's exhilarating.

When we're both naked, he cups my chin in his hand, pulling my face to his for a slow, sensual kiss. It's not desperate and frenzied, but slow and thorough. There's not a single inch of my mouth that he doesn't explore with his tongue, not an inch of my lips he doesn't cover with his own.

He hovers over my body, carefully balancing his weight over me as he trails hot, sloppy kisses down my neck and throat. I moan against him, arching my back off the bed. His hot kisses mix with the cool air of his room. Every inch of me stands at attention, ready to be touched.

His hands wander over my body gently but purposefully, groping and pinching in the areas he knows turn me on the most. He is an artist, and my body is his canvas. He's learned my secrets and he's exposing them to start a fire only he can put out. With each gasp and moan, I grow closer to release, but never quite enough to be satisfied. He's drawing this out.

When he finally, torturously slides inside of me, his movements are so slow I distinctly feel every inch of him. He's planned this, making sure we can both feel and experience one another thoroughly. It's a painful game of self-control, but one I'm determined to excel at. He wants this to be good, and it could not be better.

He pulls out of me slightly before burying himself deeper, eliciting the loudest moan I've ever released. I don't know where he learned this technique, but it deserves an award. All the awards. This unhurried, thoughtful lovemaking causes me to lose my senses more thoroughly than a quickie in a bathroom stall ever could.

All that exists in this space is his body. His skin meets mine with every thrust, his sounds mixing with mine to create a symphony. I'm surrounded by the scent of him, the salty sweat from the club, and the manly musk that

naturally emanates from him. I close my eyes, letting each sensation become heightened. My mind is filled with just one word. *Hex*.

The pleasure he creates in me is so full, so lasting, I don't think I'll come down from it. He took his time bringing me there, each movement better than the next. I'm not sure if there is such a thing as Earth anymore. All I know is the feeling of bliss washing over me, drowning me. Two months together, and every time he gives me the best orgasm of my life. I shudder in anticipation of what the rest of our lives may bring.



She stays pressed against me for several minutes, shaking every now and then from aftershocks. Being so slow and careful was a sweet form of torture, and it paid off tremendously. She can't stop gasping for air, so completely lost in her pleasure. I'll spend the rest of my life trying to relive this moment, to bring her such ecstasy.

"Fuck, baby," she whispers. "Why don't we do that every time?"

I chuckle and kiss the top of her head, lying down and pulling her on top of me. I run my fingers through her hair lazily.

"Because you are too impatient," I tell her. "Sometimes I can barely get my clothes off before you're jumping me."

"Let's be real." She giggles. "Half the time we don't take our clothes off at all."

I laugh, remembering our tryst in the club. I never knew anyone could crave me the way she does. As much as she tells me she loves me, her body is constantly betraying how deeply her need for me is. I'm addicted to the feeling. It occurs to me that of all the people Vanessa could have found, it ended up being the one woman who's my perfect match.

“What are you thinking about so hard?” she murmurs against my chest. “I can practically hear the wheels in your head turning.”

“Do you believe in soulmates?” I ask her, answering her question with a question.

“You think we’re soulmates?” She giggles again. “I don’t know. I’d never really given it much thought. I did always believe that timing mattered and eventually I’d find the right person at the right time. But I don’t know that I ever bought into the notion.”

“It’s strange that nearly half a million people are living in New Orleans, and the person Anderson ends up trapping in that stone is you.”

She sighs and stiffens, clearly uncomfortable with the topic of Anderson. It’s not that I’m particularly eager to talk about him, but I have to process this. Because he couldn’t have possibly known we would fall in love. He couldn’t have known we were puzzle pieces that fit perfectly together.

“Maybe it’s as simple as magic,” she jokes, because we’ve both come to understand how complicated magic is. “But when you put it like that, you have to believe we are soulmates. Because if it hadn’t been me, it might have been someone who wasn’t willing to sacrifice themselves for you. And you would have become his meat puppet.”

“That’s the most disgusting phrase I’ve ever heard.” I laugh. She pushes herself up against my chest and sticks her tongue out at me.

“I guess, if we are soulmates, we would’ve been destined to find each other no matter what,” she says thoughtfully. “If it hadn’t been me, if Vanessa hadn’t killed my parents. If Anderson had never been murdered. Maybe, in another universe, the two of us are living very normal, mundane lives, waiting to find each other.”

“Maybe in another universe, we’re lying in bed and trying to come up with a more interesting story,” I joke.

“In that universe, we probably met at a bar,” she whispers. “So boring and cliché. But I would have seduced you back to a dark corner to have my wicked way with you.”

“And I would leave, thinking about how I had the best sex of my life with someone I’ll never see again.”

“But we’d keep finding each other.” She giggles, resting her head on my chest. “And we’d freak out about the random coincidences.”

“Or you’d accuse me of stalking you,” I joke, remembering when we first met.

“But secretly, I’d be flattered.” She sighs happily. “Because in any universe, I would love having your attention.”

“I probably love you in every universe.”

She snorts and calls me cheesy, but I don’t mind. She makes me stay stupid shit that I’m feeling. I would get the shit kicked out of me if I said it around the guys.

“Well, if we are soulmates, we should probably make it official.”

She sits up and turns to stare at me. I smirk at her palpable excitement.

“Hex, what are you saying?” Her voice is tinged with a joy she can’t contain.

I close my eyes and pretend to sleep, but she shakes me until I can’t pretend any longer. I pull her into my arms and ask her if she’ll marry me. She kisses me hard, straddling and grinding against me until I’m hard again. Like I said, she’s impatient.

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# EPILOGUE

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## Two Days Later



The clock on the wall says it's 2:01. We were supposed to start at 2:00. I chew the inside of my lip, trying to hide my anxiety. Pocus will give me so much shit if he catches me acting like a nervous fool. He wasn't entirely thrilled about us having the wedding in the room where we have church.

"You're the one always complaining about the women congregating in the kitchen," he'd groaned when I broached the subject two days ago. "If we let them into the meeting room, they'll never leave. And then church is going to end up being an hour of them comparing sex positions."

"Is that really what they talk about?" Seer asks, a hint of panic in his eyes. "Do they sit around and compare their sex lives?"

"I can't say for sure," Pocus says darkly. "But Abigail has gotten a lot friskier since she met Juliana. She's either picked up some new tips or she's trying to trick me into having another baby."

"But you want another kid," I point out. "You've been talking about it since your dick started working again."

"For the record, my dick never stopped working," he seethes. "It was the rest of me that was too painful to move."

Now, the three of us stand at the front of the room, waiting for our women to come walking down the aisle. Evanesce and Mama transformed the small space overnight, covering it with fairy lights, flowy fabric, and hundreds of flowers. When Pocus saw it, he nearly choked.

It doesn't matter how he feels about the décor, though. He had his big church wedding. Today is about Juliana and me. Despite the short turnaround, she deserves the most beautiful wedding I can give her.

Knix, in particular, questioned our rush to get down the aisle. He pointed out that if we truly loved one another, waiting for a few months would be no big deal. I secretly think that is why Evanesce threw herself so fully into the decorations. She and Knix have been together for years with no indication they'll ever get married. This wedding is her way of trying to get him to take a hint. It doesn't seem to be working, though.

The two of them sit together, looking cozy, but I notice she's definitely annoyed with him. I point it out to Pocus, who laughs and rolls his eyes. He's not getting involved in his sister's relationship. That's apparently where he draws the line.

Music fills the room, and I realize this is happening. I'm marrying a woman I've only known for a few weeks, and I've never been surer of anything in my life. Tory walks down the aisle to the rhythm of the music, smiling brightly at Seer the whole way. She's barely showing, but she glows the way only a pregnant woman can. Everything about her body language displays her joy.

Abigail walks behind her, winking at Pocus, who visibly swallows. I chuckle under my breath, remembering what he shared about her increased sexual appetite. He is probably in for a wild ride after the reception.

The music stops and the door is closed. The song changes, and the door reopens, showing Juliana on the other side, looking radiant. Next to her is Mama, who happily agreed to walk Juliana down the aisle. Without her parents or any other family in the States, the people she cares about most are all part of this strange little community of ours.

It wasn't a question, though. Mama played such a huge role in bringing her back to life. Without her, Seer and Pocus might never have trusted her. She was the obvious choice to take on such a special task.

I can't help the tears springing to my eyes when I see Juliana. She smiles at me, her whole face bright and open and completely in love. The closer she gets to me, the more I realize I get to spend the rest of my life with her. It's overwhelming to consider how much better my life has become since meeting her.

When she reaches me, she places her hand in mine, and we turned to face Snake. He got ordained online just so he could perform our ceremony. My friends, my brothers, are really something else. They all wanted to play a role in our special day, and we were more than happy to find a way to incorporate them.



Snake guides us through our vows, though we skip the *Till Death Do Us Part* bit. After all, it was her near-death that brought us together. Nothing as silly as that would be able to part us. We'll be together for all of eternity, whether in this universe or another.

I barely comprehend the words Snake asks me to repeat. My entire focus is on Juliana. The way her cheeks brighten or the way she smiles during her vows. Nothing exists apart from her.

"Hex?" Snake asks, and I feel Pocus nudge me.

"Sorry," I say, coming back to myself.

Everyone laughs, and Juliana eyes me impatiently.

"I said you can kiss your bride," Snake repeats, chuckling.

Oh, hell yeah. That I can do. I pull her against me quickly, causing her to gasp. Her arms wrap around my neck as mine encircle her waist, and I lean down to touch my lips sweetly to hers. At the last minute, I dip, her, causing her to squeal in surprise and laugh out loud. She kisses me back with all the love and passion she can muster.

She's my wife. It's official.

We walk out of the meeting room hand in hand and step out to the lawn where a stunning reception area is set up. The guys went all out for this. A two-day engagement has not deterred them from throwing us a proper wedding party. Juliana giggles wildly when she sees it, and I guide her toward the open bar, where Buffy hands us each a cocktail. The base is tequila.

We drink it down and wait for our guests to file out of the house. Then, the party really begins. Knix blasts music from a speaker, and Juliana pulls me out on the dance floor.

We spend hours enjoying our friends and each other. We eat delicious food and repeat our honeymoon plans dozens of times because our friends get too smashed to remember. Tory is the only one not drinking, of course, but she and Pocus arranged the trip.

We're going to Brazil for a few weeks. Juliana has family there that she hasn't seen since her parents' accident. She's eager to show me her family's hometown and introduce me to her extended family, but it scares the shit out of me. What I'm looking forward to is endless days in a hotel room, claiming her over and over again.

At some point in the evening, Pocus and I find ourselves in a secluded corner of the yard, smoking a cigarette and watching our friends dance

around like idiots.

“Did you ever think we’d be married men?” Pocus asks, laughing.

“You’ve been married for years now,” I remind him. “It’s not really a surprise anymore.”

He claps me on the shoulder. “Are you kidding? Every morning I wake up surprised Abigail is still with my sorry ass. Marriage is a gift, my friend. But it’s also a choice we make every day.”

“I think the drinks are getting to you,” I joke, not missing the way his eyes glaze over. He’s definitely a few sheets to the wind.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” he protests, taking a long drag of his cigarette. “But it’s so weird, right? A few years ago we were miserable bastards riding through life with no real purpose. And now we’re married! I’m married, you’re married, Seer’s married.”

He slurs his words, definitely feeling the effects of the tequila. I laugh and lean back in my chair, closing my eyes. “Can you believe we both met our wives because of Anderson Grey?” I ask, voicing my thought from the other night.

He throws his head back and laughs. Then he raises his glass and pours some out on the ground. “Here’s to you, Anderson, may you rot in hell.”

“Here, here,” I shout, raising my own glass.

We sit there for a while longer, not saying anything but enjoying the cool breeze of the night. The guys file back inside, some staggering up the porch stairs, completely wasted. All in all, it’s been the perfect party.

“Can I tell you a secret?” Pocus asks, staring up at the sky.

I look at him slowly, waiting patiently for whatever he has to share.

“I’ve been thinking about retiring,” he whispers, as if he’s testing out the words for himself.

I sit up, the words sobering me like a cold bucket of water.

“Seriously?” I ask, unable to imagine what the club would look like without him.

He nods slowly, his eyes closed and his face turned toward the sky. He’s so deadly serious, he doesn’t even want to look at me. Shit.

“Before Daisy was born, I didn’t think I’d ever want to step down. This is my club, ya know? Then I was willing to die for it and leave my wife and daughter alone. But I didn’t die, and lying in bed for weeks healing reminded me what a colossally stupid fucking decision that would have been.”

He says this all in one breath, as if he’s been rehearsing it. He probably

has, considering all the free time he's had to do nothing but think.

"I wasn't kidding the other day." He chuckles. "Abigail really does want to have another baby soon. It's too much to ask her to make sacrifices for our family if I'm not willing to do the same." He finally opens his eyes to look at me and gauge my reaction. I guess on some level, I've known he would do this eventually. He was such a miserable motherfucker with this family gone, none of us want to go through that again. It leaves a question.

"Who will take your place?" I ask him. "No offense, but most of these guys aren't exactly leadership material."

He laughs at this, and sighs. "Seer is the obvious choice, of course. He's second in command. And Tory has proven that she's as willing to sacrifice for this club as I am. I'm impressed with her dedication."

I laugh.

"So Tory will really be your replacement, but Seer will be the figurehead," I joke.

He closes his eyes again and smiles. "That was sort of my thought process."

I take a long sip of my drink and consider it. I love Seer, but Pocus saved me from a life of misery. He'll always have my loyalty, no matter what.

"Well, retire all you want," I tell him, "but you'll always be my Prez."

He chuckles and takes a long drag of his cigarette before blowing out the smoke slowly. We watch it swirl up toward the sky.

"Querido," Juliana calls to me, approaching us slowly. "Our car is here. Are you ready to go?"

I stand and turn to Pocus, holding out my hand. "There will never be adequate words to thank you for what you've done for me." Emotion rises in my throat.

He grabs my hand and squeezes hard, then drops it and looks at Juliana. "Take care of our boy," he says with a wink.

"Always." She grabs my hand and pulls me away. We climb in, ready to celebrate our forever future.

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**T**he moment the hotel elevator doors close, Juliana jumps on me, kissing me with unbridled passion. I can't help but chuckle, supporting her

weight with my arms. She has no intention of going slow tonight, but why should she? We've said vows and made our promises. We have the rest of our lives to go at whatever pace we want.

The doors open, and I carry her out into the hallway, stumbling toward our room. She doesn't loosen her grip around my waist or stop rubbing herself against me as I walk. My eyes are only open to navigate us to the room, but the second we're safely inside, I close them, enjoying the pressure of her lips against mine.

Her hands move to the sides of my face and she moans, her tongue darting in and out of my mouth as she sucks on my top lip. I press her against the door, unable to move another inch until I can rip her dress off and enter her. I let her down gently so I can pull the long dress over her head and throw it on the floor.

She's wearing the sexiest lingerie, a complicated lacy corset that leaves little to the imagination strapped into a pair of black lace panties that hide nothing. I unfasten the corset quickly and rip the panties off, making her laugh.

"I told Abigail lingerie would be a waste of money," she whispers against my lips. "It gets in the way of the main event."

I chuckle as our lips meet again, more urgent and frantic. Her hands go to my trousers, setting me free from my confinement. She wastes no time, sliding down my body and taking me into her mouth. She's on her knees, sucking and groping until I come undone in her warm mouth. I brace myself against the doorframe, hardly able to keep myself upright.

"Shit," I hiss as she wipes her mouth and smiles.

She stands, rubbing her naked body against me, and I close my eyes in pleasure. I can only stand there, helpless to do anything else as she unbuttons my shirt and pulls it off. She pushes down my pants, and I kick them off with my shoes.

She twists her fingers in my hair and pulls my mouth back down to hers. I pant into her mouth, so consumed by her that I can hardly breathe any longer. There's only her and me, wrapped in this quiet moment, enjoying our wedded bliss.

She lifts her hands to my chest and pushes gently, moving me back as we kiss. It isn't until the back of my knees hit the bed and I fall on top of it that I'm aware we've moved. Time and space mean nothing when she's touching me. She climbs on top of me, straddling my waist as she grinds against me,

desperate to find her pleasure.

It takes hardly any time for my dick to stand at attention, ready to feel her warm, wet pussy slide over it. She smiles seductively as she lowers herself and takes me in as far as I can go. Her head falls back as she gasps in pleasure. Her breasts on full display. I take one in my mouth, lightly nipping at her aroused nub.

She screams, thrusting her hips against mine in a sloppy, violent rhythm. My hands support her back and she clings to my shoulders, her fingers digging hard into my flesh. We are one body, feeling every nerve ending and pleasure point so intensely, we both come undone in a tired, heaping mess.

Her body collapses on mine, and I lie back, holding her there as her breathing slows and she relaxes into me. Somehow, having her ring on my fourth finger makes the entire experience more sensual. I'd never planned to get married before I met her. Now, I can't imagine what my life would be without her.

After a few minutes, she climbs off me and heads to the bathroom for a quick shower. Exhausted, I crawl up the bed and slide under the covers, completely spent from the double pleasure I've received. It occurs to me then why Pocus feels he has to retire. He's probably fucking exhausted all the time.

Juliana emerges from the shower a few minutes later, quickly drying off and slipping into the bed next to me. I'm barely conscious, but I feel her hot, damp skin press against mine and the quick, sweet kiss she places on my forehead. I move my arms around her, pinning her to me, and she sighs happily. This is more than I could have ever hoped for.

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# EPILOGUE

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## Six Months Later



**O**ur car pulls up to the old house with the large wraparound porch, and I sigh wistfully. We left for Brazil six months ago, planning to stay for a few days and come back to start our lives. But a few days turned into a few weeks, and then months had gone by, and we weren't in a rush to return.

Tory's due date approaches, and we couldn't miss the birth of her son. For one thing, she asked if Hex and I would be his godparents. We were both completely overwhelmed by her request, especially since we'd assumed she'd ask Pocus and Abigail. But Hex and Tory have been best friends from the beginning. She told us it wasn't even a consideration.

The idea of having a godchild slightly terrifies me. Nothing will ever happen to Tory and Seer, but it overwhelms me to know that if something did happen, say in a hit-and-run, Hex and I would be responsible for raising him. No one else in the club had good relationships with their parents. I'm the only one who truly misses mine.

It's an honor that she chose us. She's requested that I stay with her in the delivery room. She told me that I had the purest aura of all her friends, and she wanted her son to experience it when he came into the world. She's extra superstitious, but it makes sense. Growing up around magic has taught her that gut instincts are important to adhere to. I'm more than happy to be there for her.

We get out of the car, and Hex goes to the trunk, pulling out our large suitcases. We didn't take much with us, but we had to purchase new suitcases there because my family kept heaping gifts onto us. They loved Hex immediately, accepting him into the family without question. They could see how happy he makes me, even if they struggled to understand his American

accent.

The flight took nearly twenty hours, and we are exhausted. We basically sleepwalk through the house, trying to keep it together as our friends stop us to say hello. When we finally walk through our bedroom door, we collapse on our bed, too tired to move.

“I missed this bed.” I sigh, wiggling around to find the sweet spot on the mattress.

“Mmm,” Hex agrees, already falling asleep. I turn my head to watch him as his breath deepens and he drifts off.

I can’t believe we’ve been married for half a year already. The last six months have been such an exciting adventure as we traveled from one family member’s house to another’s. There were some family members I’d never met before, but they remembered my parents and spoke fondly of them.

My father had six brothers and a sister. My mother was an only child but had dozens of cousins she grew up with like siblings. Every single person who’d ever known them wanted to meet me and have Hex and me stay with them. We hardly paid for a thing while we were there, being fed more delicious Brazilian food than we could handle.

For as large as Hex is, he could hardly keep up with the massive amounts of rice and beans scooped onto his plate at every meal. But he didn’t complain once, eating everything he could and drinking all the sweet caipirinha he could handle. It certainly went down smoother than tequila.

My family was sure I was pregnant when I repeatedly turned down alcohol. There was no way I could explain to them that since I’d spent so much time as a spirit, I couldn’t stand the feeling of numbness anymore. They were open-minded to an extent, but they would never believe Hex and I met when I was in a coma and didn’t know it.

We kept our story simple, telling them we met in a bar and had an instant connection. My grandparents smiled warmly as I told them our fake story, my ava especially pleased to see me in love.

“We didn’t hear from you after your parents passed,” she’d told me sadly. “We were so worried you were lost to us forever.”

My heart ached to think I could have been lost forever. There was every possibility that I would never see my extended family again, and I’d thought it was okay. After my parents died, I felt completely alone and disconnected from my culture. I’d learned from this trip that hordes of people in Brazil loved me.



And there's my husband, passed out soundly next to me, snoring softly. He's promised to bring me back to Brazil at least once a year to visit my family for a few weeks. I think he liked knowing there were living people who love him too. He grew up alone, raised by kind spirits. Now he has a huge Brazilian family who finds him absolutely fascinating.

New Orleans will always be home for us. This house will always be our home. This place is the beginning, middle, and end of our love story. We'll always be bound to it, even if everything in our lives changes. Even if one day we move away and start our own family.

I drift off with this thought, lost in sweet dreams of what our future may hold.

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A sharp knock sounds on our door, and I groan, too tired to respond. I look at my phone and realize we've been sleeping for nearly twelve hours. I turn over to see that Hex is still passed out, blissfully oblivious to whoever is trying to disturb our peace. I blindly reach out and grab him, shaking him to wake up.

The loud rap of knuckles against the door resounds through the room again, and I hit him in earnest. There's no way I'm getting out of bed. He can deal with whatever shenanigans are happening in the clubhouse. I have six months of sleep to catch up on.

"Go away," he shouts grumpily at whoever is at the door, but they knock again, more urgently this time.

He growls, turning over and nearly falling out of the bed as he stumbles toward the door. He pulls it open forcefully, revealing Pocus standing there with a shit-eating grin.

"Sorry to break up the honeymoon," he jokes. "Actually, I'm not sorry at all. It's been six months. Get dressed and get downstairs. Tory's just been taken to the hospital."

His words rouse me, and I sit up, my heart pounding in my chest. The baby is on his way, and we're on duty. I open my suitcase, rifling through to find something clean to wear. I blindly throw something at Hex as he slams the door shut and complains he's too damn tired to deal with a baby.

By the time we're dressed and on his bike, he's come to, animatedly

chatting about his godson.

“Do you think he’ll look more like Seer or Tory?” he asks in a happy tone.

“Hopefully Tory,” I joke, leaning into him as he starts his bike.

More than anything, this is what he’s missed. He didn’t have much opportunity to ride in Brazil, so he’d left his baby here. I’m almost worried he loves his bike more than he loves me, but the love is probably equal. Although his bike can’t possibly make him feel as good as I do.

Then again, if it does, I don’t want to know. I giggle to myself as we fly down the road, heading toward the hospital. When we arrive, we run through the halls, searching for the maternity ward. A mean nurse greets us at the reception desk and tells us that only family are allowed in.

Seer pops his head out and walks toward us, assuring the woman we’re with him, and that our presence was specifically laid out in the birthing plan. I enter the room to find Abigail standing at the head of the bed, wiping sweat off Tory’s brow.

“How’s it going?” I ask, assessing the look of pain on Tory’s face.

“She’s refusing an epidural,” Abigail tells me with an eye roll. “It’s the twenty-first century, Tory. You don’t have to do this on your own.”

“Yes, I do,” she answers through gritted teeth. “Epidurals are horrible for the body, and all manmade pain medicine blocks my energy until it’s out of my system. I’m not putting myself through that.”

I shake my head, impressed by her courage. If I ever have a child, I don’t want to feel a single second of it. Then again, I’ve stopped drinking so I don’t experience numbness. Would I want to be out of it during one of the most important moments of my life? I shake my head again, remembering this moment isn’t about me.

I move to Tory’s side and hold my hand to her. She waves me away, though.

“I’m okay, guys, really,” she exhales heavily. “I need moral support. You don’t have to hold my hand.”

A contraction rips through her body, and she reaches for my outstretched hand without even thinking. I hold in my giggle, mostly because she’s squeezing me so tightly. Then there’s nothing to laugh about anymore. Fuck, that hurts.

“That’s right,” Abigail says calmly. “Just breathe through it.”

Easy for her to say. She’s at Tory’s forehead, out of grabbing distance.

Lucky bitch.

“Wow,” Tory breathes out. “Sorry, Juliana, that was a big one. Is your hand okay?”

“It’s only broken in two places,” I joke. Abigail giggles.

“I’m so sorry,” Tory says, guilt evident on her face. There’s no way I’m letting the pregnant woman in labor feel bad, though.

“I’m totally kidding,” I lie. “It barely hurt at all.”

Abigail winks at me and suggests we call Seer back in so he can provide a larger, stronger hand to hold.

“Be honest,” Tory says, turning to me. “How did he look when he came out and got you? Does he look like he’s freaking out? Because I’m kind of freaking out right now.”

I smile and squeeze her hand gently, assuring her that Seer looked cool as a cucumber. Right now, he and Hex are probably sitting in the waiting room, shooting the shit and catching up on our trip.

“Absolutely not,” Abigail says in a dark tone. She hands me the damp cloth she’s been using. “Juliana, you take over head-wiping duty. I’m going to get the father and drag his ass back in here.”

She storms out of the room, leaving Tory and me giggling in her wake. She’s truly a force to be reckoned with.

“When did you get back?” Tory asks tiredly. “Tell me something to distract me. The only thing that exists right now is this pressure in my uterus.”

Gross.

“We’ve only been back a few hours. But it was stunning. I went to both of my parent’s hometowns and meet all of their family. I have cousins I didn’t even know existed. My family there is at least three times bigger than the club.”

“That’s nice.” She smiles weakly. “It’s nice to know someone in our circle of friends came from a stable family. It gives me hope that Nicholas and I won’t completely fuck up our son.”

I eye her in surprise, and see that she means her words completely. “My mom wasn’t around much, and Nicholas has an extremely complicated family.”

I nod, remembering Hex telling me a little about Seer’s past and his twin brother. I can’t imagine having such a volatile family life.

“For the last few months, I’ve been terrified that neither of us really

knows how to model a normal family,” she admits, tears gathering on her cheeks.

I wipe the tears off her face and run my fingers through her hair in a comforting gesture. She leans into me and snuffles.

“If I’ve learned anything in the last few months, it’s that sometimes you have to create your own family,” I tell her. “My parents were great, but now they’re gone. Now I have Hex and I have you and everyone else. You’re as close to me as my real family ever was.”

She snuffles again and nods.

“Besides, you take care of everyone so well,” I remind her. “Think of everything you did to save me and get rid of Anderson’s spirit last summer. You’re a natural caretaker, and that little baby will be so lucky you’re his mom.”

She starts crying in earnest as Seer walks in. He rushes to her, panicked at the sight of her tears. I move out of the way so he can kiss her and cradle her face in his hands.

“What’s wrong, mon couer?” he whispers.

“Everything is perfect. I’m just so tired. How much longer do I have to do this?”

Abigail smiles sympathetically and goes back to patting her forehead.

As it turns out, Tory’s labor lasts for nearly thirty hours. Her new son is stubborn, reminding me of all the other men in this club. She’ll raise him with kindness and humility. She and Seer will be wonderful parents.

We take turns holding the little boy, so tiny and fragile in our hands. Despite his size, he’s able to scream like a grown man, his lungs perfectly healthy. When he cries, Hex startles and we hand him back to his momma for a feeding.

Hex and I head home, exhausted and excited to welcome Nicholas Pocus Abner, Nicky for short, into the household. He goes to help Pocus set up the new nursery, a room the men have been working on for weeks. They’ve saved a few small jobs for Hex, knowing he’d want to help with the setup. It’s sweet how much they consider one another.

When he finally comes to our bed, he’s smiling and joyful. He’s taking his role as Nicky’s godfather seriously. He eyes me as he walks over to his bed, a hesitant look on his face.

“What’s wrong?” I ask him, suddenly feeling nervous.

“It’s just occurred to me that we’ve never had the kid conversation. And

I've gotta be honest, Jules, I'm not sure if I want this gig full-time."

I giggle because I've been thinking the same thing. I sigh happily, knowing we're on the same page without having discussed it.

"I'm definitely not ready to be a mom. I'm still learning how to enjoy life again, I don't want to give that up to take care of another person full-time."

"When Nicky screamed earlier, I thought I was going to shit myself," he says, his face terrified. "I'd forgotten what it was like when Daisy was a newborn, and we've been gone for so long. I'm so happy for Pocus and Seer, but I don't envy them."

"We're definitely getting more sleep than they are," I agree, snuggling into him.

He closes his eyes and chuckles, aimlessly running his hand up and down my arm. I relax at his touch, thinking that despite my lack of motherly desire at the moment, we would make good parents. Eventually. When the time is right. In the meantime, we'll be the best godparents.

For the next few weeks, we dote over Nicky, babysitting him when Seer and Tory need a break and changing more diapers than we ever thought we would.

"I thought this godfather thing was more of a theoretical," Hex complains one night after a particularly nasty blowout.

I hand him the baby wipes and take the dirty diaper, discarding it in the special diaper trashcan. Sometimes when I'm in the nursery, it overwhelms me to see everything it takes to care for a baby, and I'm reminded of more reasons why I'm not ready to have one. The furniture alone is more than I want to deal with.

Hex hands tiny Nicky to me and I hold him, blowing raspberries in his face to keep him happy. He's too young to laugh or smile, but content is far superior to screaming his lungs out, which he loves to do often.

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**A**bigail, Tory, and I sit in the kitchen one morning eating breakfast. I cook for all of us since they have their hands full with their kids. Tory has taken to motherhood easily, as I knew she would, and she and Abigail sit at the dining room table, laughing that their children will grow up one day and get married.

Pocus and Seer breeze into the room, both of them with their eyes only for their respective children.

“If your son comes near my daughter, I’m going to chop his balls off,” Pocus warns Seer in a teasing but slightly serious tone.

“If you come near my son, I’ll put a curse on you,” Tory warns Pocus without taking her eyes off Nicky.

“You can’t threaten me anymore,” Seer reminds Pocus, grabbing his son from Tory and flinging him up in the air. “You’ve stepped down as President, so you have no power over me anymore.”

“I’m still your best friend, and I know I absolutely scare the shit out of you,” Pocus says in a dark tone.

We ladies all roll our eyes because every conversation with the guys eventually devolves into empty some times childish threats. They’d never do anything to hurt each other, and I think they would be hilarious as in-laws. But, more likely, Nicky and Daisy will grow up like brother and sister, and Nicky will be the one threatening all of Daisy’s future boyfriends.

For now, they’re both sweet, bouncy babies. Daisy is delighted by Nicky’s presence, finally having someone around to speak her language. He can’t sit up on his own yet, but she loves crawling around him and playing with his toys.

Hex walks into the kitchen sleepily and nods at his friends. He pinches Daisy on the cheek, causing her to squeal in laughter. Then he walks over to our godson and kisses him on the forehead. In turn, Nicky looks at him with a grumpy, confused look on his face.

“So, Hex,” Tory says casually.

The atmosphere in the room shifts. Shit.

“When are you and Juliana going to add a baby to this little crowd?”

I roll my eyes and Hex groans. We haven’t been married a year yet, and we’re not in a rush for children.

“If we have a kid, who’s going to watch Nicky when you and Seer sneak off for a nap?” I ask, reminding her of our intense value as godparents.

“We have a whole village here to help,” she says slyly, waving around at the house.

“Weird,” Hex grumbles. “I don’t remember the last time Gator changed a diaper.”

“Or Knix burped him,” I chime in, remembering the last time Nicky spit up on me after a rigorous burping session.

Hex and I smile at each other in solidarity, the perfect, childless team.

“And, you may remember, I have an eight-year-old ghost to keep entertained,” Hex reminds us. Just then, the lights buzz, and a chill goes through me.

“Cassandra,” Hex warns, looking at a blank space next to me. “We’ve talked about you walking through people.”

“It’s okay,” I say to the air, not really sure where Cassandra is presently. “I don’t mind.”

“But she knows she isn’t supposed to do it,” he says, giving an annoyed look. And I know in that moment that he’s right. We kind of are parents already.



I breathe heavily, coming down from the intense orgasm coursing through me. I clutch the sheets, my toes curling underneath me. I haven’t exactly been counting, but I estimate I’ve had approximately 400 orgasms since I met Hex. And that’s a conservative number.

He climbs over me, kissing me sweetly, and I taste myself on his tongue. I feel my skin glowing hot under his touch, already excited for our next encounter. It doesn’t matter how many times he’s inside me, I can never get enough of him. I suddenly remember our conversation before the wedding, and I look over at him, his eyes already closing.

Before I met him, I didn’t believe in soulmates. I didn’t believe in fate, either. Yet here I am, married to a man I can’t imagine living without. We probably are soulmates, bound together by something much greater than us. I fall asleep, assured nothing can ever pull us apart, and nothing ever will.

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