

Witches of Palmetto Point Book 10

ENDURING SPIRITS



WENDY WANG

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OceanofPDF.com

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CHAPTER 1

Charlie watched the specter glide through the front screen door and across the living room floor like it owned the place. She made sure not to look it in the eye as she chopped onions in her little kitchen. If the spirit knew she had Charlie's attention, she'd never get supper finished, and she was already behind.

Female in form, the apparition wore her long flaxen hair rolled away from her ashen, heart-shaped face. The soft waves rippled gently around her shoulders as if a breeze blew through the tiny two-bedroom cottage. Her pale blue shirtwaist-style dress undulated in the same unseen wind, and the spirit floated above the hardwood floor on barely visible legs. She wasn't sexy enough to be a forties pin-up girl, but Charlie thought she had probably lived (and died) during that decade. But she was in no mood to find out more tonight.

"Mom," Evan said from his place at the small bistro table where he worked on his homework. Charlie gave him a quick glance.

"Yeah, I see it," Charlie said, still not meeting the apparition's eyes.

"Do you want me to—"

"No. If she has something to say, she'll say it. Otherwise, if we leave her alone, she'll go away on her own," Charlie said. This was the third time in three days a spirit had just pushed through her front door like it belonged here.

"Mom, the pan's smoking." Evan pointed to the stove.

“Oh. Sweet goddess.” Charlie quickly turned the burner off and moved the pan to the side. She waved the smoke toward the back of the stove for the ventilation hood to suck it up. The breaded chicken breasts looked nice and golden on the top, but she flipped one of them over in the pan and inspected it.

“Looks burned,” Evan said, looking over her shoulder. He’d had a growth spurt recently, and she could almost look him in the eyes. Sometimes when he spoke, she heard the deep timbre of his voice trying to break through. It wouldn’t be too long before his little boy’s voice disappeared completely.

“It’s not burned,” she insisted and scraped off the blackened breading around the edges. “It’s just a little extra brown, and it will be fine under sauce and cheese.” She took the two breasts and nestled them into the layer of jarred sauce she’d spread across the bottom of a baking dish.

Evan leaned his backside against the counter and looked on with curiosity. His blond wavy hair hung down and covered one eye. It was almost time for a haircut. Sometimes when she looked at him, she could see the man he would become. Tall like her, lean and angular like his father. One day soon, he’d have to learn how to shave that thickening peach fuzz on his face.

“What’re we having for supper anyway?”

“Chicken Parmesan.” Charlie returned the pan to the original burner, turned it on and waited for the oil to heat again. “Are you almost done with your homework?”

“Almost. Well, with Mr. Myers’ anyway. I still have math to do for Mrs. Carville.” He sighed and returned to his seat. “I really hate math.”

“Me too, sweetie. Do you want to call your dad? He’s pretty good at math.”

“No. He gets mad too easily when I don’t get it.”

Charlie turned her back so Evan wouldn’t see her roll her eyes. Figured. Her ex-husband Scott didn’t have much

patience when things didn't go his way. "What about Cousin Lisa? She's a whiz at math and very patient."

"Maybe later," he said. "So, is Tom going to eat with us?"

"Why do you ask?" Charlie pivoted so she could see her son and avoid the ghostly woman standing at the edge of the kitchen listening in on their conversation. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell the spirit to take a hike, that eavesdropping was rude, but that would mean acknowledging her.

Evan glanced up from beneath his blond eyebrows at the spirit. "You know why."

"Right." Charlie nodded. "Yes, he is. Is that okay?"

"Sure. He's nice. Plus, she'll go away when he shows up." Evan didn't take his eyes off the translucent woman.

The spirits seemed to come and go on a whim these days, regardless of how much salt she put down, or what crystals she carried, or how much sage she burned. But as soon as her boyfriend and reaper Tom Sharon showed up, the spirits fled almost immediately with one exception. The ghost of a chicken named Penny had haunted the cottage since the poor creature's demise over a year ago. For a long time, Penny disappeared anytime Tom visited. But she seemed to have gotten used to him. Sometimes, she even perched on the back of the rocking chair in the living room when Charlie and Tom snuggled on the couch.

"Is that the only reason that you like Tom? Because he scares away the ghosts?" Charlie plopped two more breaded chicken breasts into the frying pan and watched them more carefully this time.

"Nah, I like him okay. He's nice to you. That's all I care about," Evan said.

"Yes, he is."

Evan bent his head and began scribbling away again. "You deserve somebody who'll be nice to you."

A pebble of emotion formed in Charlie's throat, and she blinked back sudden tears. Evan had witnessed so much

acrimony between her and Scott, and it killed her just a little that he had internalized any of it. That he took her side. No child should have to pick sides. But Scott Carver didn't make that easy.

"Your dad deserves to be happy too." Charlie flipped over the chicken breasts. They were a much better color this time.

"Yeah. He just needs to stop picking bimbos," Evan said.

"Evan!" Charlie tried to hide her laugh behind a shocked exclamation, but the look on her son's face told her he wasn't buying it.

"What? You know it's true," he said. "Even Grandma calls 'em bimbos. And she's his mother."

It was hard to argue with that logic. "Yes, but it's not nice. And I'm sure it would hurt your dad's feelings if he heard you say such a thing."

"Fine. I won't say it to his face then."

"Evan Michael Carver. I can't believe you said that."

"Hmm hmmm." The spirit cleared her throat. Charlie had almost forgotten she was there. Without thinking, she glanced toward the ghostly woman. An immediate pang of regret made her wince.

"I was told you can see me." The woman spoke, her voice high and demanding.

"Don't do it," Evan mumbled from the table, his head still bowed over his homework.

Charlie opened her mouth to respond, but a knock on the door stopped her. She met the specter's pale gray eyes.

"Hello to the house," Tom Sharon's warm, silky voice called through the screen door.

Charlie looked through the spirit and saw Tom standing outside on the porch. His ebony hair glinted with shades of brown and red in the late afternoon sun, and her heart leaped a little at the sight of him. She motioned to him with her hand. "Come in."

The hinges squeaked, and Tom stepped inside. His gaze shifted from Charlie to the spirit standing between them.

“Hello there. What’s your name?” He crossed the room.

Slowly, the spirit turned toward him. A terrible hissing sound ushered from her throat. “Reaper.”

“Yes, I am. I don’t know who you belong to,” Tom said. “Maybe my brother or my sister. Regardless, I know you don’t belong here. If you need some assistance, though, I’m happy to fetch one of them.”

A tiny cry escaped the spirit’s lips. She threw a glance over her shoulder at Charlie.

“Please don’t let him take me. I need you to help me with my Nathan.”

“I’m sorry, but...” Charlie started. Tom took a step closer, and the spirit disappeared.

“Well, this is fun. I never know what I’ll encounter when I come over these days.” He leaned in and kissed Charlie on the cheek.

Charlie laughed. “Neither do I.”

“Something smells delicious. If not a little...browned?”

“Oh, sweet goddess, I did it again,” Charlie griped and turned back to the stove. She hurried the pan off the burner and flipped over the chicken breasts to inspect them. Tom came up behind her and put his hand on one of her hips and his chin on her shoulder.

“It’s not burned. It’s just a little extra brown,” he said, trying to be supportive. “It’s still edible.”

“It’ll have to be. I only bought one package of breasts.” Charlie turned the chicken over to finish browning on the other side. When she was satisfied, she lifted the two breasts from the pan and nestled them into the sauce next to the others. She added more sauce on top and several handfuls of grated mozzarella cheese, then covered the dish with foil before she put it in the oven to bake. She moved on to finishing up chopping the purple onions for the salad.

Tom slipped his suit jacket off and folded it over a chair before he kissed the back of her neck. "I'll pour us a glass of wine."

"That would be lovely. Thank you."

Tom loosened his tie and rolled up the sleeves of his pale purple button down, then retrieved the wine glasses from the cabinet. He took a bottle of wine from the refrigerator and poured the glasses half full. He handed one to Charlie, and she took a sip of the dry chardonnay, relishing the taste. She turned to Evan.

"Sweetie, it's almost time for supper. Why don't you go put your books in your room for now and wash up, please?"

"Okay." Evan closed his math book and hopped up from his chair. He eyed his mother and Tom for a second before he put his books into his backpack one by one. When he had cleared his stuff away, Charlie took three plates from the cabinet and put them on the small table.

"Here, let me do that," Tom said. He pulled the tall bistro table away from the wall and fetched the extra chair from the living room. Then he went about setting the table. Charlie leaned against the counter and watched while she sipped her wine.

"So, I was wondering what your week's like at work?" Tom asked and retrieved the silverware from the drawer by the fridge.

"What do you have in mind?" Charlie grinned. "Are you planning on sweeping me off my feet and taking me away to some exotic beach somewhere?"

Tom stopped what he was doing. A quizzical look came over his face, as if he might be thinking about taking her away for the week. It was a delicious thought, but she knew it was impractical since it was her week to have custody of Evan. "I had *not* thought of that, but that is a very intriguing prospect. Maybe for another week."

"Great," Charlie said. "Let's put a pin in it then."

“Yes. Good idea. In the meantime, I was wondering if you might have time to help me out at the funeral home this week.”

“What do you mean, help you out at the funeral home?”

“Joy has had to take a short sabbatical for a few weeks. And William is busy with the branch in Charleston. I have a man who helps me out with certain things, but I could use someone to answer phones, set up appointments. That sort of thing. I could hire a temp but—”

“But then you’d have to dodge strange stares and speculation about why you never go to an apartment or house of your own?”

“Something like that,” Tom said.

“My duties are light this week. Could I do my Defenders of Light work in between calls? I’ve got some files I need to go through for a case I’m working on.”

“Of course.”

“And the job’s not going to include...” She made a waving gesture with her hand. “You know.”

“Touching the dead bodies?” Evan said from behind them.

“It absolutely won’t include anything to do with embalming or readying the bodies for funerals. Like I said. I have someone to help me with that.”

“Good,” Charlie said.

“Well, that sucks,” Evan said.

Charlie gave him a pointed look. “Did you wash your hands?”

“No, ma’am,” Evan said.

“Please go wash your hands then,” Charlie said, trying not to sound irritated. Evan made a face and rolled his eyes before he left for the bathroom.

Charlie turned to Tom and gave him a weary look. “I swear, some days I just want to send him to his room and make him stay there till he goes off to college.”

Tom laughed. “So, you’ll do it then? Fill in for Joy this week?”

“Sure. I’m happy to help if I can.”

“Wonderful.” Tom wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her. “You’re saving my bacon. I appreciate it.”

“Just keep in mind, I don’t work cheap,” she teased.

“I’ll remember that,” he said and kissed her again.

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CHAPTER 2

“**H**elp me.” A voice filtered through Charlie’s consciousness. Her eyes fluttered open, and she turned her head to glance at the clock. It read 2:14 a.m. She listened for the sound of the voice; when it didn’t come, she closed her eyes and snuggled deeper beneath the quilt.

“Mom! Help me!”

Charlie’s eyes flew open at the second plea, and she sat up straight in her bed. Her feet were already on the floor when the voice called again, this time high-pitched and hoarse as if it had been screaming for hours.

“Help! Let me out. Please.”

The sound of crying made her heart pound against her ribs.

“I’m coming, Evan. Hang on,” Charlie called to the darkened room. She’d turned off the heat at the beginning of the month, and she shivered when her feet hit the cold of the hardwood floor. She ignored the sensation and rushed to Evan’s room next door.

The switch clicked when she flipped on the overhead light. It only took three paces of her long legs to cross the room to his bed. Evan lay on his side, facing her. He had the simple navy plaid quilt hitched up around his neck, and his feet and half of his shins stuck out at the bottom. Poe, her solid black kitten, raised up behind Evan’s head and glared at the intrusion. Roosted on the footboard, the ghostly chicken Penny snored. Charlie shook her head at the silly bird. Ghosts didn’t

sleep, but they did sometimes keep certain habits from their lives.

Evan threw his arm across his eyes and moaned. “Mom, it’s the middle of the night.”

“I know what time it is. Did you call me?”

“No.” He drew out the word in a half-whining tone that normally would’ve gotten him a disapproving look. “I was sleeping.”

Charlie glanced around the room. “I could’ve sworn it was you.”

“Well, it wasn’t.” Evan peeked out from beneath his arm at his nightstand. “Come on, Mom, it’s two o’clock in the morning. Go back to bed. We have to get up in three hours.”

“I know.” Charlie sighed and resisted the urge to lean over and kiss him on the head like when he was a little boy. But he had already rolled over onto his other side and pulled his pillow up around his face. Poe walked across the bed and stretched her back before hopping onto the floor.

Evan lifted his pillow away. “Go to bed, Mom. I’m fine. Sheesh.”

Charlie frowned. “Fine. But you call me if you need me. Okay?”

“I will call you if I need you.” He pulled the pillow tight around his head again. “Now go to bed,” he said in a muffled voice.

Just before she flipped off the light, Charlie glanced over her shoulder to make sure her son was safe, and no spirits lingered about in his room.

* * *

“IT WAS JUST A STRANGE THING.” CHARLIE WRAPPED HER hands around the cup of coffee and rested her elbows on the lunch counter of her cousin Jen’s Kitchen Witch Café. Jen, on

the opposite side of the counter, wiped up a spill and cleared away the dishes next to Charlie.

“Sounds like it.” Jen placed the dishes into a bus tub she kept nearby and set a fresh place. “And you’re sure it wasn’t Evan calling you?”

“I woke him up. And trust me, there’s nothing ornerier than a teenager who didn’t get enough sleep. He complained throughout breakfast this morning.”

“Do you think it was a spirit? It wouldn’t be the first time one has interrupted your dream sleep,” Jen said.

Charlie shook her head. “I’ve thought about that a lot. It just... didn’t feel like a spirit. Usually, if one of them is trying to communicate with me, they just show up in the dream. This felt real. Like someone calling to me in the next room.”

“It is strange.” Jen hefted the bus tub and put it next to the sink. “Maybe you should bring it up to Esperanza when you talk to her tomorrow. Maybe she’ll know what it is.”

Charlie thought it over. For almost two months, Charlie had been working with high priestess Esperanza Guzman to heal the psychic wounds that occurred when she’d died briefly a few months before. She sighed.

“Yeah, I can do that. I just hate to bother her with stuff that’s not related to my healing.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re not bothering her. And who says it isn’t part of your healing? I’m sure she’ll be happy to help.”

“You’re right,” Charlie said, pushing her cup toward Jen for a refill. “She will be.”

Jen waved at a couple entering the café. The woman waved in return, then she and her companion waited near the door, studying the menu on the wall behind the counter. “Good, then you can bring it up tomorrow and tell me what she says about it on Friday.”

One of the waitresses on the floor showed the couple to a table. Jen leaned over and propped her chin on her hand. She stared Charlie in the eye and plastered an enormous smile on

her face. “What I want to hear about is working for Tom. That sounds very intriguing.”

“I’m just helping him out while Joy is doing whatever...” Charlie twirled her hand in the air, “it is, she needs to do.”

“And he didn’t tell you what that was exactly?” Jen’s blue eyes lit up as if she were going through different possibilities.

“No, he didn’t. Just said that she had to go away for a little while.”

“So...are you gonna have to help him with...you know?” Jen’s lips twisted with repulsion.

“No. No. You’re as bad as Evan. I don’t have to touch any of the dead people.” Charlie lowered her voice on the last part of her sentence, then glanced around to see if anyone was paying attention. The breakfast crowd had mostly died down, and the lunch crowd wouldn’t be in for at least another thirty or forty minutes. Charlie had come for the free Wi-Fi and a little comforting conversation.

“What? I’m just curious, that’s all.” Jenn straightened up. “You know, if you went to work for him, you wouldn’t have to travel as much. And you can go back to working cases with Jason like you did before.”

“I like working for the DOL most of the time. It brings me in contact with interesting people.”

“I know, but it takes you away from us. More than I like, if I’m being honest,” Jen said.

“I know. And if I were more of a nomadic person like Ben is—”

“Ben’s not as nomadic as he used to be,” Jen said.

“I guess. Especially now, since he’s managing people instead of working cases,” Charlie said. She took a sip of her almost-cold cup of coffee. “He’s an excellent manager. But I’m not sure that it makes him happy. Can you warm this up for me?”

“Sure thing.” Jen grabbed the coffee pot from the machine and topped off Charlie’s cup. “If Ben and I are ever going to

be serious about each other, he knows I need him to be more stable,” she said and put the coffee pot back in its place.

“Wait. What?” Charlie put her cup in the saucer and leaned forward. She instinctively glanced at Jen’s hands. “Did something happen that I’m not aware of? Should I be looking at that finger of yours for a ring sometime soon?”

“Good goddess,” Jen said, pushing her pixie bangs off her forehead. “Calm down. Nobody is getting engaged. I mean, we’re already pretty committed to each other, and Ben knows I’m not keen on the idea of marriage.”

“Does he know why?” Charlie asked.

Jen frowned and said, “No. Not exactly. And if everything goes my way, he won’t ever have to know.”

“What does that mean?” Charlie asked.

“It means it will all be handled long before Ben even suggests we move in together.”

“And what if Mark just shows up here one day?”

The light in Jen’s face went dark when she said, “Trust me. Mark Stonehill made it very clear he didn’t want any part of Ruby’s life. He will never show up here. I would almost bet my life on it.”

Charlie quirked an eyebrow. “Almost.”

Jen rolled her eyes. “Do you want something to eat?”

Charlie glanced up at the day’s lunch specials written on the large blackboard menu above the back counter. “I’d love that pork chop sandwich and a cup of tomato soup.”

Jen pulled her pad from the front pocket of her black bistro apron and wrote it down. “A little comfort food, coming right up.”

CHAPTER 3

The wretched scent of chrysanthemums and the cold, slightly damp air slapped Charlie in the face when she entered the Sharon Brothers Funeral Home. She quickly identified the culprit, a large, slightly wilted floral arrangement to her left that flanked one side of carved double doors leading to the main chapel. An empty ornate gold easel standing directly across from the flowers stated: No funeral today.

Charlie breathed through her mouth to block the musty, earthy odor that always made her think of wet bark. The large lobby of the horseshoe-shaped building led to a receptionist's desk and a hallway of offices and the embalming room at the back of the building on the right side, and another hallway with two chapels and two viewing rooms on the left. Charlie made a beeline to the right side of the lobby and the reception desk. Behind a tall counter with a white marble top, two heavy antique desks formed a large L with a flat screen computer monitor facing front and center. The keyboard rested on top of a large desk calendar pad, and Charlie could see Joy's fancy handwriting on some of the squares.

For the first time in all her visits to Tom's office, she noticed Joy kept pictures on her desk. The one that intrigued her most was of a little boy with a crew cut and a snaggletooth grin. He couldn't have been over five or six in the black-and-white photo. It reminded Charlie of photos she had seen of her dad when he was in elementary school in the 60s. The warm hand that touched the center of her back made her jump. She

pressed her hand against her heart and rounded on Tom Sharon.

“Oh, my goddess, you scared the life out of me,” she said.

“I’m sorry, love.” He smiled with a hint of mischief.

“You could at least clear your throat.”

“Maybe I’ll just whistle or make lewd remarks. Would that be better?”

“It’s a maybe on the whistles and a hard pass on the comments.” She shook her head. “I would never have pegged you for a cat caller.”

“You never knew me when I was young and stupid,” he said.

“No, I guess I didn’t,” she said, giving him a sly look. “One of these days, though, I will get you to tell me the whole story.”

“One of these days, love, I will be happy to. Just not today. We’ve got a busy day ahead,” he said. “So how are you with answering phones?”

She grinned. “I think I have a little experience in that area.”

“Wonderful. You’ll find instructions in the top desk drawer on how to log into Joy’s computer. I’ve written out a few cheat sheets of what to do.”

“Wonderful. I hope you won’t mind that I brought my laptop, so I can work for the DOL too.”

“No, absolutely. Do you need an Internet link? I think that’s what they call it,” he said.

“It’s not really what they call it, but yes, I’ll need to access your Internet. Do you have Wi-Fi or an ethernet plug I can use?”

“I have no idea. Joy handles all of that.”

“All right. Don’t worry, I’ll figure it out.” Charlie patted him on the shoulder. The phone rang behind her, and she

reached over the top of the reception desk and picked up the handset. In her most soothing customer service voice, she said, “Sharon Brothers Funeral Home, this is Charlie. How may I help you?”

Tom gave her arm a squeeze, turned, and headed back to his office.

* * *

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG FOR CHARLIE TO FIGURE OUT THE FILING system, or how to speak to bereaved people calling for information. Strangely, it felt natural to listen and advise. In the first hour alone, she set up four appointments for people to come in to talk about arrangements either for their loved one or to discuss setting up future arrangements for themselves.

In between calls, she finished up the filing in Joy's inbox next to the printer on the other desk, and then opened her laptop. She opened the messaging app she used to chat with her co-worker Athena Whitley and quickly jotted off a message.

Just wanted to let you know I'm still working through that spreadsheet you sent me.

It only took seconds for Athena to respond.

No worries. It may be a dead end, anyway.

Do you want me to continue?

For now, yeah. Will reassess tomorrow. I'm running the database searches right now and hope to have some new data. How's the rest of your day going?

It's going OK. I'm helping my boyfriend out at his funeral home. Answering phones for him while I'm looking over the spreadsheet.

Interesting. He's a reaper, right?

Yep.

They're the only reapers I know who run a funeral home.

He and his sister run this one. And his brother runs another branch on the Charleston peninsula.

Fascinating. I had no idea that reapers had family connections.

They're not technically family. I'm not sure exactly how it works. I just know she's not his actual sister. It's not like they had a reaper mother.

Still. I thought reapers were solitary creatures. Very interesting to see them...I don't even know what to call it. Congregating?

LOL. I hadn't thought of that.

Are they like a murder of reapers? Like crows?

The visual image of William, Joy, and Tom in their reaper form gathering like crows sent a chill through her.

Maybe a Congress of reapers? Athena continued. A covey? A colony? A parliament of reapers? LOL

LOL. I'll be sure to ask him if there's an official name.

I can't wait to hear if there is. Back to work for me.

Me too. Talk later.

TTYL

Charlie smiled at the screen for a moment before opening her spreadsheet. It had the names of every witch that had died under mysterious circumstances in the last ten years. The numbers were a little disconcerting. Over a thousand names, and Charlie had to open every single case file, go through the investigator's reports plus any reports from outside law-enforcement or medical examiners. She was looking for anything suspicious. Anything that might lead to the mole feeding information to the group calling themselves witchfinders.

So far, she had a list of about twenty different witches that died and fit the victimology that Athena, Ben, and she had worked up. Athena was looking for suspects in the databases she could access by cross-referencing anyone who had

connections with more than one victim. Every suspect so far had led to a dead end. They needed to narrow things down with interviews. That would take travel. Something she couldn't do right now since it was her week with Evan.

Charlie straightened her back and stretched out her arms above her head. The chill in the air that started around her shoulders wrapped around her neck, causing the little hairs to rise. She glanced around for a source. When no apparent culprit appeared, she stood up and peered over the counter between Joy's office and the lobby. No strange light, or fog, or shadows appeared. Her fingertips pricked like she'd touched something charged with static electricity, and she took a step back.

"How did I get here?"

A little scream ushered from her mouth, and she pivoted toward the sound of the voice behind her. She tried to back away from the man standing too close for comfort, not from any fear, but because he was naked.

"Where did you come from?" Charlie asked. She didn't mean to look him up and down, but somehow, she couldn't stop herself. Her cheeks burst into flames, and she quickly glanced away, but it was too late. The image of him burned into her brain wouldn't go away any time soon. His bulbous red nose and hound dog face reminded her of a cartoon dog whose name escaped her. She'd already seen too much of his enormous beer belly and saggy private parts. "And why are you naked?"

"Where am I?" he asked, seeming to ignore her last question. Maybe he had no modesty. He took a step toward her.

Charlie's backside met with the hard counter, and she held up her hand.

"You stay right where you are," she warned, and made a quick assessment of tools on the desk she could use as a weapon. When she realized she could see through his legs and feet and most of his lower body, all the tension she held in her shoulders deflated.

“What’s your name?”

A look of confusion contorted his heavy features for a moment, as if he couldn’t remember. After what seemed like a long while he said, “George Allen Cofield.”

“Stay right there. I mean it.” Charlie held up one scolding finger. She sidestepped him and looked at the large calendar and found the name George Allen Cofield written in the square for today’s date. Below it Joy had written the words: Pick up time - 1:45 p.m. Charlie glanced at the wall clock. It read 2:53 p.m.

Charlie took a deep breath. “What’s the last thing you remember, George?”

He scratched his sausage-like fingers into his thick mane of silver hair and shook his head.

“I poured my glass of bourbon like I do every night.” His droopy eyes glazed over with memory. “I took off my robe and then got into the hot tub. The last thing I remember is my wife Phyllis coming out to the back deck with a refill.”

“Okay.” Charlie nodded and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but you’re dead.”

“What?” George stepped closer. His hands balled into fists.

“I told you to stay put.” Charlie quickly reached into her bag sitting on top of the now empty inbox and grabbed an old medicine bottle filled with salt. She fought the urge to throw it at him and instead popped the top and sprinkled a line between them.

“What’s that for?” George stepped back. “It stings a little.”

“It’s salt, and it’s for both our protection. Take a step back and you’ll be fine.”

George stayed where he was and hung his head. “I can’t be dead. I just can’t be.”

“I’m sorry. I know it’s hard to hear, but you are definitely dead.”

“But I don’t want to be dead. I still have a lot of livin’ to do.” He looked up at her. The overhead lights flickered. The last thing Charlie wanted today was to deal with an upset spirit and a blackout in this almost windowless building.

“I know. I totally understand.” Charlie used her most soothing voice, hoping to calm him. “I actually have died myself,” she said. “It was brief, but I know it’s very, very hard to accept.” Charlie tried to look anywhere but at the man’s nakedness. “May I offer you a suggestion?”

“What?” he sniffled.

“As a spirit, you can do all sorts of things, including wearing your favorite outfit.”

The ghost of the man finally looked down at himself. “Oh Mylanta! Why didn’t you say something before now?”

“I did,” Charlie said, feeling herself become defensive.

George covered his privates with his wide hands. “Exactly what do I do?”

“Close your eyes,” she said. He did as she instructed. “Now picture yourself wearing your favorite outfit.”

“That’s it?”

“Pretty much.”

Within a few seconds a pair of khaki shorts, and a graphic T-shirt with the words *It’s Beer O’clock Somewhere* printed on it around a cartoon beer mug with a head of foam covered his sizable belly.

“Thank you,” she said.

George looked up at her with his hound dog eyes. “So, what am I supposed to do now?”

“Um... well, when you look around, do you see or feel a light?”

He squinted and then shook his head. “Nope. Nothing. Is that bad?”

“No. Not necessarily. I have a friend here who could help you if you let him.”

“Help me? Help me how?”

“He can lead you to the other side.”

“Why can’t I just get there on my own?”

“You may, but there are a lot of reasons you could still be here.”

“Like what?”

“Maybe you have a message you want conveyed. To a loved one. Your wife maybe?”

He moved his jaw as if he were chewing on the inside of his mouth as he considered her words. “Yeah. Now that I think about it, I would like you to give her a message, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind at all. I’ll need her name and some way to contact her.”

“Her name is Phyllis Cofield, and she lives at 1913 Amaryllis Street in Palmetto Point.”

“All righty.” Charlie grabbed a sticky note from the desk along with a pen and made a note. “Shoot.”

“You tell Phyllis that I know all about her and Jim Bob Morrow. Tell her I didn’t give a flying fuck about them. They deserve each other. And that if she poisoned me because I wouldn’t give her a divorce, you tell her I’m gonna haunt her till the day she dies. And if I have my way, that will be sooner, rather than later.”

Charlie stared at him. It was not exactly the after death message she had expected.

“Are you saying you think your wife poisoned you?” Charlie asked.

“I wouldn’t put it past her. She’s been trying for six months to get me to divorce her, and I wouldn’t do it. If she wanted to leave, fine, but it would be over my dead body before she got the house!”

A little ghostly spittle flew into the air and disappeared.

“Um...”

“She thinks she deserves my money and my house? Well, the joke’s on her because I changed my will last month and didn’t leave her one red cent. If she wants to stay in the house, she’s gonna have to go ask our son ‘cause it’s his now. And I can guarantee you, he’ll turn her out into the street.”

“All right,” Charlie said, trying to keep as much judgement as she could out of her voice. “Is there anything else?”

“No. Nothing I can think of,” he said.

“Do you see a light now?”

He squinted again. “Nope, still don’t see nothing. Looks like I’m gonna have to make good on that promise.”

“Wait, a minute. I’m not—”

But it was too late. George Allen Cofield disappeared.

“Dammit,” Charlie said.

“Is everything all right?” Tom asked and approached the reception desk.

“Are you working on somebody named George Allen Cofield?”

“Yes, I am. I picked him up at the medical examiner’s office about an hour ago. Why?”

“I just had a conversation with him.”

“You did? Why didn’t you call me? Did he pass over?” Tom glanced around the room.

“He’s not interested in the slightest in passing on.”

“Why not?”

“He’s evidently planning to haunt his wife till the day she dies, which may be sooner than she expects from the sound of it.”

“Do I want to know why?”

Charlie looked at the clock. “Why don’t I tell you over dinner tonight. I need to go pick up Evan. Meet you later at my house?”

“Sure. Text me when you get there.”

“I will.” Charlie pecked him on the lips, quickly packed up her things and left.

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CHAPTER 4

Charlie checked her blind spot, saw a sheriff's deputy cruiser, and immediately her old partner's face popped into her head. Maybe she would call Jason Tate later and tell him about her encounter with George Cofield. If George's wife murdered him, then maybe Jason would want to investigate, since Palmetto Point fell into his jurisdiction.

She waited for the cruiser to pass and then merged into the right lane and took the exit to I-526 heading toward Daniel Island. When she arrived at her ex-husband's house, it was almost 4:30. Scott's car was in the driveway which she thought was strange. He rarely got home from work until well after 6 p.m. Charlie parked next to Scott's shiny new Mercedes and shook her head. The man changed cars like he changed pants.

She pulled her phone from her purse and quickly jotted off a text to Evan letting him know she was outside waiting on him.

Her gut turned over when he didn't respond, and then the heat from her temper rose from her chest to her face. If Scott Carver caused this, she would give him a piece of her mind. After the day she'd had, she was in no mood for his shenanigans. He was always yelling at her about not following their agreement. Charlie grabbed the keys from the ignition, got out of her car, and marched up to the front door. She raised her hand, preparing to knock as hard as she could, but the door opened before she got the chance.

"Charlie, I was about to call you," Scott said.

The worry lines on his forehead looked deep. Charlie lowered her hand but wasn't ready to back down just yet. "We agreed that Evan would be on the front porch ready to go when I picked him up. I texted him to let him know I was on my way—"

"I know and I swear, I'm not trying to give you a hard time. Evan didn't come home right after school."

"Oh, my goddess. Why didn't you call me? Have you called his friends?"

"Cora's been calling around," Scott said. Charlie rolled her eyes. Of course, Scott would make his housekeeper Cora do the work.

"What the hell? Are your fingers broken?" Charlie asked, casting a quick glance at his hands.

"No. Of course not," Scott said with an exasperated snap to his voice.

"Then why is Cora calling around? You're his father."

"Cora has all the numbers. I don't."

"That is a conversation for another day." Charlie's eyebrows rose, and she pursed her lips. She folded her arms across her chest. "Well? Did she find him?"

"Evidently, he went home with that girl he likes."

"Rachel?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"So... he's with Rachel?"

"Yes. I think so. He's not answering my texts or my calls."

"Great," Charlie muttered, and retrieved her phone from her bag to check her last text to Evan. There was no response from him so far.

"I really don't like that girl."

Charlie tightened her grip on her phone. "Have you even met her?"

“No. But as you can see,” Scott gestured to the empty porch, “she’s leading him astray.”

“Just stop it. Right now. You’re being ridiculous. And I hate that implied Eve bullshit. Evan is making poor choices all on his own here. And Rachel’s a peach. She’s been friends with Evan for a long time. Now, she doesn’t have the most attentive parents in the world, but that’s not her fault.”

“We should just nip this whole relationship in the bud.”

“Right. Because that’ll stop them.” Charlie rolled her eyes. “He’s just testing his boundaries. That’s all. Rebellion is part of growing up.”

Scott’s square jaw tightened. “I never rebelled.”

“Oh, I’m sure you were perfect,” Charlie sniped.

“Obviously, he gets those genes from your side of the family,” he muttered.

“What did you just say?”

“What? Nothing. We need to stay focused here. Cora talked to Jacob Lindley’s mother, and Jacob told her that Evan and Rachel have been getting together after school to make out. This has evidently been going on for weeks.”

“Of course, that’s what Jacob would say. He’s a thirteen-year-old boy who envies his friend. It hasn’t been going on for weeks. I’ve picked up Evan twice this week already.” Charlie rolled her eyes. “And I know my son. He’s mature, but nowhere near that mature. They barely hold hands, and I think he’s only kissed her twice.”

“That you know of,” Scott grumbled. “I know what it’s like to be a boy. You don’t. Have you even noticed that he’s going through puberty?”

“Of course, I’ve noticed. His voice changes from day to day, and I’m the one who buys him deodorant and washes his stinky clothes. I’m sure Cora’s noticed too.”

Scott shrugged her off without responding to that last dig. “Maybe we should have the talk with him.”

“We had the talk with him when he was seven. He knows how penises and vaginas work and where babies come from.”

“Maybe we should remind him that his actions have consequences. Are you ready to be a Granny? Because I’m not ready to be a Pop Pop.”

“Wait. You’ve already picked out our grandparent names? Why do you get to choose? I am not a Granny. A Gigi or a Mimi, maybe even a Gammy. But not—”

“You’re getting off subject here. This is serious, Charlie.”

“It is, but it’s not the end of the world.” Charlie sighed. “Do you think he skipped his last class?”

“I didn’t get a call from the school. Did you?”

“No.” The phone in Charlie’s hand rang and sent a jolt through her arm. Before she could turn it over, Jason Tate’s face popped into her head. She glanced at the screen, her intuition affirmed by the goofy picture above the phone number showing Jason pretending to kiss a pecan pie at Thanksgiving.

“Hang on. I have to take this.” She held the phone to her ear. “Hey Jason. What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Does something have to be going on for me to call you?”

“Yeah, usually it does.” She chuckled. “What’s up?”

He made a half-strangled laugh. “I was wondering if maybe you had some time tomorrow to swing by the station.”

“Sure. I was gonna call you, anyway. I have a potential case that might interest you,” she said.

“What kind of case?” he asked.

“Oh, you know. The usual.” Charlie glanced over her shoulder at Scott, who appeared to be watching her closely.

“So, I take it there’s a ghost.”

“Uh huh. Listen, can I call you back? I’m at my ex’s picking up my son, and we have some parental issues that we

need to deal with.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Oh yeah. I’ll fill you in later, okay?”

“All right. Later.”

Charlie hung up the phone and tucked it back into her bag.

“Sorry about that. So, Cora said Evan is at Rachel’s?”

“Not anymore.” Scott pointed towards the street in front of the house. A small black sedan stopped, and Evan hopped out with his backpack slung over his shoulder. From the look on his face, he wasn’t expecting to see his parents standing on the porch waiting for him. He grimaced and raised his hand in a brief wave.

Charlie folded her arms across her chest. Evan slowly trudged across the yard and up the walkway to the three-story Victorian-style house. His feet clomped one step at a time until he stood on the porch facing his parents.

“Hi, Mom.” His voice cracked. Just one more reminder that he wasn’t a little boy anymore.

“Evan, whose car was that?” Scott said.

“It’s just... you know. A JoyRyde. That’s all.” Evan shrugged and glanced back at the empty street where the car had let him out.

“A JoyRyde?” Charlie said, not hiding the alarm in her voice. She gritted her teeth and fought the urge to spew statistics about missing children at him. To march him down to the sheriff’s department to look at photos of kids, just like him, whose families had never seen them again. To grab him and hold on to him so tight that he would stay thirteen forever. “How many times have we talked about getting into a stranger’s car?”

“Mom, it’s not a stranger. It was a JoyRyde. They’re a company.”

“Sweetie, it was a stranger. I know these ride-share companies pay people to pick the public up, but anybody can

drive for them. Or worse, they could buy one of those JoyRyde stickers off the Internet and pretend to drive for them. You didn't know the driver, did you?"

"No, but—" Evan began.

"Where did you get money to pay for a JoyRyde?" Scott interjected.

"Rachel has the app. She paid for it." Evan dropped his backpack on the floor in front of him.

"Rachel." Scott put his hands on his hips. His lips twisted with disapproval, causing the hair on Charlie's neck to rise. This scene felt all too familiar, and for a second, she just wanted to grab Evan and run. She pushed that feeling away for now. Scott continued, though, not noticing the physical response he could elicit just with his body language. "I won't stand for this behavior, Evan. Rachel is proving to be a terrible influence on you."

"No, she's not! She's wonderful. She's my girlfriend." Evan's face turned red, and his eyes and nose crinkled the same way his father's did when he got angry. An ominous shadow crossed his crystal blue eyes.

"You are too young and immature to have a girlfriend. I forbid it. Do you hear me?" Scott's words made Charlie wince. This was exactly what she didn't want to happen.

"At least my relationships last. You can't even make it work with Mom or any other woman you bring home," Evan said.

"Evan!" Charlie said. From the corner of her eye she saw Scott take a step forward, and she put her body in between Scott and Evan. "Do not talk to your father like that. Do you understand me?" Charlie called up her most authoritative mom voice and gave Evan a stare that could make most men shrink. Evan took a step back and shut his mouth.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Do you have all your stuff with you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

“Go get in the car,” Charlie said, and gestured toward the driveway. Evan’s eyes widened. His gaze bounced from Charlie to Scott, but he didn’t move.

Scott turned on Charlie, his hand held out, expectant. “I want his phone. And his tablet, and his laptop.”

“No way. I did nothing wrong,” Evan protested. “How am I supposed to do my homework without my laptop?”

“Stop it. Just stop. Both of you!” Charlie’s chest tightened and her hand flew up in front of her, palm toward Scott. A blue spark crackled from her fingertips, and a whiff of ozone stung her nostrils.

“Dammit,” she whispered. Her emotions were controlling her instead of the other way around. She folded her hand into a loose fist and drew it down to her side. Then she took a breath and softened her tone.

“Evan, go on. Your dad and I have some things to talk about.”

Evan swallowed hard but didn’t linger. He grabbed his backpack, slung it over his shoulder, and held the strap close to his chest, almost tripping when he ran down the steps.

“What the hell was that?” Scott asked. Most of the anger had drained out of his face, replaced by shock, but Charlie sensed something else. Fear maybe?

“That was me getting control of my energy,” she breathed and relaxed her hand. “I don’t think we should punish him.”

“Good Lord, give me strength.” Scott threw his hands up in the air. “Why the hell not? He didn’t have permission and this... this girl is gonna end up pregnant if we’re not careful.”

“He is only thirteen.”

“Exactly,” Scott snapped. “His life would be over.”

“I can’t believe that’s where your mind goes. I can guarantee you that sex has not entered the equation.”

“You can’t know that?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Why? Because of some psychic power you have?” Scott scoffed.

Charlie tamped down the urge to cast a spell to stop his lips from moving. “No. Because I know my son. And I talk *to* him instead of talking *at* him. All we have to do is talk to him. Calmly and reasonably. If we appeal to his empathy, he will listen.”

“No. There have to be consequences.” Scott squared his shoulders with hers.

“And there will be. Next time he does something like this. How many times has he gone to a friend’s house without texting you? Would you be this mad if he’d gone to Jacob’s or Tyler’s after school?”

“No, of course not! This is different.”

“No, it’s not. Or at least it doesn’t have to be. He’s pushed a boundary. Now it’s up to us to set that boundary back about ten feet. Tell him the rules and then apply consequences if he breaks them.”

“He should have enough sense to know what the rules are.”

“Oh, really? Why is that?”

“Because...” his face flushed again, flustered by her challenges. “Because he’s old enough!”

“He’s thirteen. Not twenty-five. And while he is exceptionally intuitive in a lot of ways, he is still just a little kid in a lot of others. It’s not fair for you to ask him to just know the rules.”

“Well he should,” Scott grumbled, but the fight seemed to have gone out of him for now.

“Seriously? Let it go. Personally, I’m more upset about him getting into a car with a perfect stranger than him spending time with Rachel unchaperoned after school.” Charlie put her hands on her hips. She chewed on the idea of Evan and Rachel exploring a more intimate relationship for a

second, then cast it aside. “That part we will definitely have a talk about.”

The hard lines of Scott’s face softened a little. “I can’t believe I’m going to ask this, but is there some spell you could do?”

“No. Absolutely not. That kind of spell is just trouble, and it’s dangerous.”

“What about your aunt?”

“What about her?”

“I’m sure raising Daphne was no walk in the park. I’d be interested to know exactly how she handled it.”

“Oh, my goddess,” Charlie said.

“What? She’s a self-proclaimed wild child if I remember correctly.”

“All right, we’re done here. I will have a talk with him tonight.” Charlie started toward the steps. “And just for the record, I was never a wild teenager.”

“I know. I mean, I didn’t know you then, but I could see that you weren’t.”

“You have Bunny to thank for that,” Charlie said. “She’s the one who raised me.”

“It’s too bad she’s not around.”

Charlie tilted her head, her lips tugging into a smile. Maybe she would give Bunny a call. It couldn’t hurt to get a little ancestral wisdom.

“What’s that weird look on your face for?”

“Nothing,” Charlie lied.

“Did you ever think it was gonna be this hard?” Scott asked.

“What?”

“Raising a kid.”

“Yeah. I kind of did.”

“Right.” Scott scowled. “Because you’re psychic?”

“No. Because dealing with other human beings is always hard. Even when you love ‘em to bits. I’ll call you later.” Charlie turned and walked away, ignoring Scott and his disapproving look.

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CHAPTER 5

“G rilled cheese and tomato soup?” Evan stared down at the plate and steaming mug in front of him.

“Yep, it’s your favorite,” Charlie said. She sat across from Evan at the bistro table with her own plate and mug.

“Yeah, I know.” Evan’s shoulders slumped a little, and he hung his head.

Charlie lifted her mug to her lips and blew on the hot creamy soup. “Why do you look like I just served you gruel then?”

“What’s gruel?”

“It’s sort of like watered-down oatmeal. People used to eat it when they were poor and had nothing else,” Charlie said.

Evan wrinkled his nose. “Doesn’t sound very appetizing.”

“It’s not. Which is why I’m confused about the look on your face.” Charlie bit back the grin that kept trying to emerge.

Evan shrugged and picked up one of the sandwich triangles. Cheddar oozed from the sides of the toasty dark golden-brown bread. Just the way she knew he liked it.

“I’m just surprised, that’s all. I thought we were going to the café to meet Tom.”

“I texted Tom and let him know that you and I needed some alone time. To talk.”

“Because you’re mad at me?”

Charlie picked up one of her sandwich triangles and took a bite, considering the best way to handle this talk that her ex-husband so desperately wanted them to have. She swallowed and put the sandwich back on the plate, then leaned forward with her elbows on the table.

“I’m not mad at you, honey. I *am* disappointed. But not mad.”

Evan’s lips puckered into a pout. He pushed his plate away and crossed his arms. “I think I’d rather you be mad.”

“Evan, my big concern is that you didn’t sense any possible danger.”

“Mom, they’re just people trying to make a living.”

“I know, honey. But that doesn’t mean every driver follows the rules.”

“I wish you would just trust me. I know what I’m doing.”

“I know that you’re thirteen going on thirty-five, but the world is still a scary, dangerous place, especially after everything I’ve seen happen to kids your age and even younger. Honestly, I don’t know what I would do if something happened to you. The thought of it makes me so sick inside that I can’t entertain it because it would paralyze me. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, I guess.” He picked at the crust of his grilled cheese. “I felt that way about you before. You know. When you were so... sick.”

Sick. The word stabbed through her chest. It was the word that Scott had used. A word that eight-year-old Evan could understand. Not depression or sadness, and certainly not suicidal. It broke her heart that he still remembered those things about her.

Charlie swallowed back her guilt. “Then you understand how scary it is to me you got into a stranger’s car, even if it was a JoyRyde.”

Evan looked up at her through his thick dark blond eyelashes that she would’ve killed for and shrugged. It was all

she'd get, but at least he'd heard her.

“You know, if it were up to your dad, you would never see Rachel again, and you would probably lose your phone and tablet until you were thirty.”

Evan sat up straight and stared across the table at her. A little defiance twinkled in his eyes. Defiance that he'd inherited from her.

“He can't do that. He can't stop me from seeing someone that I go to school with.”

“He could try. But if you ask me, this isn't Rachel's fault. It's yours.”

“What do you mean, mine?”

“You're the one who went to her house instead of getting on the school bus and going to your dad's like you're supposed to.”

“You guys never said I couldn't go to Rachel's.”

“Not Rachel specifically. But we have had discussions about asking for permission before you go to a friend's house after school. Did you do that? Did you ask me or your dad or even Cora for permission?”

He rolled his eyes and looked away.

“Evan? Are you going to answer me?”

“What?” he huffed. “What do you want me to say?”

“I want you to answer my question. Otherwise, I might just agree with your father's assessment,” Charlie said, her voice full of warning.

“Fine. No. I did not ask for permission.”

“You know, normally you'd be punished for that. You'd lose your phone and tablet and whatever gaming thing you have at your dad's house for at least a week.”

“But you haven't even heard why—” Evan argued.

Charlie held up a hand, and he stopped talking. “I didn't say I would punish you that way. I just wanted to remind you

that when you break the rules, there will be some sort of consequence.”

Evan squirmed in his seat and furrowed his brow. “Oh-kay.”

“Today, your consequence is sitting here and discussing what you did with Rachel at her house.”

“What do you mean? What did we do?”

“I mean, tell me what y’all did. Everything. And you know I can tell when you lie.” She quirked her eyebrow.

“Gah, Mom.” He kicked the table.

“Hey!” Charlie tapped her hand on the table. “I understand you being frustrated, but kicking things is not an acceptable way to deal with it. Do you understand?”

Evan glanced away and wouldn’t look at her.

“Evan Michael, answer me.”

“Fine. I understand,” he mumbled.

“So? What did you and Rachel do today after soccer practice?”

“Nothing, really. We talked. And we played games on her PlayStation Pro.” He shrugged. “She’s an excellent gamer, which is kind of shocking since she’s a girl.”

“Evan, you and I both know that girls are capable of anything they set their mind to. Which includes beating your butt at video games.”

“It’s not like that, Mom. You don’t win. You get to different levels.”

“Whatever. You sound like your father when you say stuff like that, and I don’t like it.”

“Fine.” He let out an exaggerated sigh.

“So, is that all you did?”

“Yeah. What else would we do?” He looked at her, his blue eyes wide with innocence.

“Well... um...” She tried to be delicate, but sometimes her son could be thick. “Did y’all maybe... kiss?”

“Mom! Oh, my god. Stop. I can’t believe you’re asking me this.”

“Listen, it’s okay if you kiss. I just want to make sure you understand there are consequences when it comes to kissing.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know where babies come from, right? We’ve discussed it before?”

“Mom, you can’t have a baby from kissing. You’ve told me that yourself,” Evan said.

“Not kissing in and of itself, no. But it can lead to other things. Like sex.”

“Oh my god. Mom. Please stop talking.” Evan covered his face with his hand.

Charlie chuckled. Was it so wrong that she was kind of enjoying watching her son squirm? Maybe he would remember this feeling the next time something like this came up. And unfortunately, she knew at some point Evan would want to have sex with a girl.

“Listen. There’s nothing wrong with sex. You shouldn’t be embarrassed to talk about it with me or your dad. Okay? Sex is wonderful in the right context.”

“Please,” he begged. “For the love of the great goddess, please stop talking.”

“No. Evan, we need to discuss this.”

“Fine. I know you’re supposed to get married before you have sex. Is that what you want to hear?”

Charlie let out a laugh, then stifled it. “Is that what your dad told you?”

“Yeah. And I think I’ve heard Grandma say it at least a hundred times.”

“To you?”

“No. Of course, not. Usually to Dad or Uncle Todd.”

“What do you mean? Uncle Todd and Aunt Kim are still married.” Charlie couldn’t remember the last time she’d thought about Scott’s brother Todd and his long-suffering wife.

“Oh. Um. They’re getting divorced.”

“Oh, my gosh. I’m sure that’s not sitting well with your grandma.” Charlie bit the inside of her cheek to keep from saying anything she might regret. “Poor Marilyn. I can just imagine what those country club friends of hers are saying about having two divorced sons.”

“Grandma made me promise that I would never get divorced.”

“Of course, she did.” Charlie’s frown turned into a look of concern. Was more drama coming because events in Scott’s family might blow up? Great goddess above, she hoped not. It was the last thing she needed.

“I told her not to worry about it because I would never get married,” Evan said.

“Never say never, honey,” Charlie said. “Someday you’ll meet someone who will turn your world inside out. And all those thoughts you had about staying single will fly out the window. Trust me on this.”

“Is that what happened with you and Dad? He turned your world inside out?” As Evan eyed her, she could hear the cautious curiosity in his voice.

“Not exactly. Don’t get me wrong, I loved your dad, but he never turned my world around so much that I couldn’t live without him.” Charlie shrugged. “Which is why we’re divorced now.”

“I never want to get divorced. And if I don’t get married, I won’t have to worry about it,” Evan said.

Charlie stared at her son, a little uncertain how to proceed. The last thing she wanted was for him to shape his life based on decisions that she and Scott had made.

“Listen. You may not get married, but don’t close yourself off to it, sweetie.”

“Why? Because you think I’m too young?”

“No, because I think by saying you’re never going to do something, you put that energy out into the universe. Your words, especially as a witch, have power. If you say something often enough, the universe will hand you the experiences that go along with the words, and you may be very unhappy with how things come back to you. Does that make sense?”

“I guess,” he said.

“There are a lot of wonderful things that can happen in the right marriage. Your dad and I, we weren’t right for each other, but we still had some good times together.”

Charlie wiggled her fingers, gesturing for Evan to give her his hand. After a moment, he complied, and she felt the warmth of his palm against hers.

“If I had never married your dad, we would never have had you, and you, my love, are the best thing I have ever done in my life.”

She squeezed his hand tight. “Do you understand?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Evan said. A smile tugged at the corners of his lips, and his cheeks turned a deep shade of pink.

“Good. Now finish up your supper. Once you’re done with your homework, you can watch some TV, okay? I’ve got some work I need to do.”

Evan picked up the remains of his sandwich and took a large bite out of it before taking a sip of his soup. He grimaced. “They’re both cold.”

“Well, it’s a wonderful thing that we have a microwave, isn’t it?” She chuckled and handed him her mug.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, sounding weary as he rose from his chair to heat their soup.

CHAPTER 6

It was only Tuesday, but this week already felt long and stressful. When Charlie tried to picture Friday, the days stretched out before her. She decided a hot bath would cure everything. She grabbed a clean nightgown and her short terry-cloth robe, a fresh towel and washcloth before she headed into her small bathroom. It was just large enough for the toilet, pedestal sink, and the iron clawfoot tub her uncle had found in a junkyard and had restored when he redid the house. The cheery periwinkle paint and white beadboard siding that extended halfway up the walls made it feel inviting.

She tied the shower curtain out of the way, plugged the drain of the clawfoot tub, and filled the tub with hot water. She reached for a large glass sundry jar on the top shelf above the toilet containing Epsom salts and a small box of her essential oils. After a quick scan of the labels, she plucked her two favorites for relaxing and inducing sleep — lavender and marjoram. She carefully measured out two cups of the Epsom salts and poured them into the tub beneath the flow of water, then added three to four drops of each of the oils to disperse across the surface. She quickly washed her face in the sink, with two pumps of her facial cleanser. The remnants of the day's makeup melted away, and the fresh scent of the cleanser soothed her.

The small bathroom quickly filled with steam. She stripped out of her clothes and left them in a pile next to the door. Then she carefully stepped into the tub, and the muscles in her back and neck relaxed once she immersed her body into the hot, fragrant bath. Her foot found the old-fashioned chrome cross-

handled knobs, and she turned off the water with her toes. The sound of music filled her head, music she hadn't heard since before her grandmother died. For a few moments, she floated to the nostalgic sounds of Benny Goodman playing one of Bunny's favorite songs, *Where or When*. Her eyes grew heavier as she breathed in the calming steam and mindlessly hummed the tune.

The shower curtain rustled, and her eyes fluttered open. The music faded, and she listened hard for a second. A swishing sound that reminded her of fabric filled the space. Her heart hammered in her throat as she sat up, sloshing water onto the floor. Someone was in the bathroom with her.

"Evan? Is that you?" she said, even though she knew he wouldn't walk in on her while she was in the bath. Besides, the television was still on. She leaned over the edge of the tub and tried to find the source of the sound. Even though steam hung thick in the air, it would be impossible not to see someone in such a small space, and no one was there. Maybe it was just her imagination. She calmed herself and settled back into the tub, taking deep breaths. The scents of lavender and marjoram soothed her frayed nerves. Her eyes felt heavy again.

The sound of a youthful woman clearing her throat made Charlie's eyes fly open. The ghost hovered in the cloud of steam. For a second, Charlie wasn't sure where the spirit began, and the steam ended. The ghost raised her hand and gave Charlie a shy, girlish wave.

"Oh, my goddess." Charlie rolled her eyes and submerged her head beneath the water. She had no patience tonight and no interest in hearing her story. She was tired and just wanted to go to bed early. When her lungs burned, Charlie came up for air and found the young spirit hovering over the tub.

Charlie grabbed the washcloth and held it over her chest. "Get out!" she ordered, wiping the salty water out of her eyes with her hand.

"But—" the spirit started.

"No buts. I'm in my bathroom. Get out!"

“Please, can I just—”

“No. Not while I’m taking a bath. Not while I’m eating a meal. Not while my son is here. Do you understand? Now go, or I can call the reaper.”

The spirit jutted out her lip like a pouting teenager and made a noise of disgust before she drifted up and disappeared into the steam hanging in the air.

“Mom?” Evan banged on the door. “Are you okay in there?”

“Yes, honey, I’m fine. I’ll be out in a little while.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure, sweetie. I’ll be out soon.”

“Okay. Call me if you need me,” Evan said.

How could he be such a terrible teen and her sweet boy at the same time?

“I will.” She found the bath stopper with her foot and yanked it up to drain the water. The bath was getting cold, anyway. She quickly rinsed off the salty residue of her bath in a shower of warm water, then shampooed her hair. It seemed like the only relaxation she would get today would be some sleep, and she wasn’t certain how restful that would be.

* * *

SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD LOTTIE BARRYMORE BOUNDED DOWN THE front stairs and hopped onto the landing, her blue A-line skirt flouncing around her.

“Lottie! How many times have I told you not to jump off the stairs like that?” her mother said from the sofa in the living room. Her mother sat with her legs crossed, a magazine draped across her lap. Every hair in place and just a touch of pink lipstick blushed her mother’s mouth.

Lottie’s white blouse had come loose, and she tucked it into the waistband of her favorite skirt. It was one of the few

pieces of clothing she owned with pockets. Pockets were for hiding things—like stolen cookies from the kitchen, borrowed jewelry from her mother’s top drawer, but especially for letters from her boyfriend Nathan who was fighting the Nazis in Europe. When she put her hands inside the pockets of the skirt, the crisply starched fabric made a delightful sound when she walked. Swish, swish, swish.

“Come in here and let me look at you,” her mother said. Lottie rolled her eyes. All her mother cared about was looks, that she was a presentable young lady, marriageable. Ready for her upcoming debut. Lottie dragged her feet as she walked into the room.

She stood on the other side of the coffee table so her mother wouldn’t grab her by the wrist and push her to and fro to inspect her like a doll.

“I see the mailman,” Lottie said. She glanced past her mother’s head through the enormous picture window, looking out over the tidy front yard. Mr. Hinton stopped at their house to shove letters into their ornate iron mailbox. Her heart skipped circles in her chest. *Please God, let there be a letter from Nathan today.*

“Lottie, listen to me when I’m talking to you!” her mother said.

“Yes, Mama,” Lottie said, startled back to reality. What had her mother just said? She wasn’t sure. She bounced on her toes. She hadn’t accidentally mentioned Nathan’s name, had she? “I promise I’ll act more like a lady. I’m sorry. May I go?”

“It looks like I may have to let you today. You can barely stand still.”

“Please? May I go?” Lottie asked again, this time forcing herself to sound more compliant. If she disrespected her mother, it could mean something worse, like having to deal with her father. Having to tell him why she was so excited to see the mailman. No, that was too risky. If they found out about Nathan—even worse, if they read any of his letters—well, Lottie couldn’t bear even thinking about what that would mean.

“You may go,” her mother said, sounding put upon. “But walk, Lottie. Don’t run. Ladies don’t run.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Lottie said. She sashayed across the floor to the foyer and let herself take a brief look at her mother. She’d gone back to reading her Ladies Home Journal. Lottie picked up the mailbox key from the hook by the door and calmly took the steps of the wide front porch of their three-story house. She half-walked, half-skipped across their lush yard to the mailbox. The iron fence that used to surround the house had gone the way of a scrap metal drive to help the war effort. Her father had replaced it with white wooden pickets. He had magnanimously donated the old scroll iron fence and gate to do his part.

“There’s a war on,” he’d told her mother after she’d complained. “Metal is in short supply, and it’s the least we can do. I’ll replace the iron once this war has run its course.”

Run its course. As if it were a fever or a cold. Something with no cure but that lingered in the chest. How she hated the war and what it was doing to her life.

Lottie opened the gate and slipped the key into the mailbox. Mr. Hinton was already across the street, delivering her neighbor’s mail. He raised his hand and waved. She smiled and waved back. It was only polite. She waited until he had gone on to the Caraway’s house before she let herself open the mailbox and pull out the stack of letters.

“Please be here, please,” she whispered to herself as she thumbed through each envelope. Buried in the middle was a letter with French stamps, but the postmark was from somewhere in Africa. She held the letter to her chest and tried to imagine Nathan sitting in a tent writing to her while desert winds whipped the sand outside.

A car drove by, shaking her from her reverie. Her father. She quickly closed the mailbox and shoved the letter from her love into her front pocket. She was halfway up the walkway by the time her father reached the gate to the covered carport on the side of the house. She raised the mail in her left hand to wave at him.

“Hi, Daddy,” she chirped, happy to see him. “You’re home early.”

“Hi, baby girl,” he said. He entered the yard, a wide smile on his rugged face. “Don’t you look pretty as a picture.”

“Thank you, Daddy,” she said. He met her at the bottom step, and she handed him the stack of mail.

“Anything interesting?” he asked, tucking the letters under one arm.

“No, sir. I’m afraid it’s just bills and advertisements.” She frowned away the lie hiding the treasure in her pocket. It was her love for Nathan that gave her the courage to hide things from her parents.

“Well, that is a shame. I was hoping to get one of those sweepstakes checks.” He laughed, a warm sound she loved, that she would normally let wrap around her like a blanket, to keep her safe.

“Is supper almost ready?”

“No, sir. Mama was in the front room reading a magazine. I’m not sure exactly what happened to Aurelia.”

Her father stopped on the top step and gave her a concerned look. Aurelia Jenkins had cooked and cleaned for the Barrymore family for almost twenty years. Lottie couldn’t remember a time when Aurelia’s strong black hands weren’t there to hold hers, to comfort her, to scold her or even to dole out a quick swat on her backside if she misbehaved.

“What happened, baby girl?”

“Well, the Parker’s maid, Mary Belle, knocked on the back door two hours ago, and Aurelia said she’d be back soon. There was something she had to do.”

“I hope it’s not serious. If we have to count on your mother to cook, we’re all going to starve,” he joked. But she knew it wasn’t a joke. Even throughout the depression, her family had fared better than most. Her father was a lawyer and never trusted the stock market, or even the banks. His money was safe in the vault in her parent’s closet. So, when most people

lost their shirts, her father kept them all clothed, sheltered, and well-fed compared to everyone else.

“Hello to the house,” her father shouted from the foyer. He opened the closet door beneath the steps and hung his gray felt fedora on one of the hooks on the back of the door. He loosened his tie and shed his suit jacket.

“What’s in your pocket?” her mother asked.

“My pocket?” her father started.

“No. Lottie’s pocket.” Her mother gestured toward Lottie. “I saw her put something from the mailbox in her pocket, and I want to know what it is.” Her mother stared a hole through her. Didn’t even blink. Lottie shrank away, tucking herself partially behind her father.

Her mother held her hand out and snapped her fingers. “Hand it over, Lottie.”

“Sylvia, what is this all about?”

“Lottie knows exactly what this is about.” Her mother had a hardness about her sometimes. It surfaced like a sharp rock hidden beneath the ocean when the tide changed and receded. And just like waves that beat against that rock, her mother would gladly beat her daughter’s desires against all her sharp edges if it kept the world, her world, the way she wanted.

Sylvia Barrymore did not like change. She liked the idea of her daughter coming out into society and marrying an appropriate boy. Some old southern family with money, or at least a suitable name. The money her husband could provide if the boy were respectable. A boy who wasn’t named Nathan Weintraub and old enough to serve in the army.

“Lottie? Do you have something in your pocket?” her father asked.

Heat crept into her cheeks, and she took a step backward. She wished for a second that she was still a little girl, that she could escape to the kitchen and hide behind Aurelia’s skirt. “It’s just a letter.”

“It’s from that Weintraub boy, isn’t it?” Her mother’s lips twisted as if she’d tasted something bad.

“So, what if it is?” Lottie said. “He’s a nice boy. And he’s patriotic. As soon as he turned eighteen, he joined the Army. And I don’t care what you say, I will marry him.”

“Over my dead body, and you’re coming out is in a month.” Her mother stepped forward and grabbed Lottie by the wrist. “Now hand me that letter.”

“Daddy, please. Please try to understand,” Lottie begged. She tried to pull her arm out of her mother’s vise-like grip.

“I know you think you love him,” her father began, “but you can’t marry him. I’m sorry, sweetie, but that’s just the way it’s gonna have to be.”

“Because he’s not rich?” Lottie spat the words at her parents. It was the most defiant she’d ever been in her life, but she didn’t care. They would not keep her from Nathan.

“Give me the letter!” Her mother shoved her hand into Lottie’s skirt pocket and pulled out the envelope addressed to her in Nathan’s neat script.

“It’s not about him being rich,” her father said.

Heat flashed across her chest. She knew exactly why. She just wanted them to say it. “It’s because he’s Jewish, isn’t it?”

“Now, Lottie,” her father started.

“Don’t coddle her, Frank. Tell her the truth.” Her mother ripped open the envelope.

“It’s 1942, Mother. There are lots of people who have mixed marriages, and they do just fine.”

“It’s more complicated than that, Lottie,” her father said. “I’m sorry honey, but you can’t marry him, and that’s that.”

“Give it back!” Lottie grabbed for the letter, tearing it away from her mother’s hand. She almost couldn’t believe her actions. This was not the way they raised her.

Sylvia Barrymore’s chest heaved, and her blue eyes darkened. Before Lottie knew what was happening, her mother

charged her and pushed Lottie against the closet. Her mother held her against the door with her forearm. The shock that her mother had launched on her this way paralyzed her for a moment. Her mother grabbed the letter from her hand again and stepped back. Lottie almost fell forward, off-balance.

Her mother tore the letter out of the envelope. Lottie snatched the pieces of paper from the floor, holding the tattered stamps and postmark over her heart. Her father stared at them both with disbelief.

The letter was only one page, front and back, and Lottie could see the words *love you* through her mother's fingers. Lottie grabbed for the letter and her mother jerked away.

"Oh, my sweet mother Mary." Her mother covered her mouth in horror. "She gave herself to him."

"What?" Her father took the letter and read it. His face turned to stone. His voice flattened with disgust. "Charlotte Sylvia, go upstairs to your room."

"But Daddy—"

"You do as I say, young lady. You hear me?" He didn't hold back his anger. His gigantic hand wrapped around the top of her arm so tightly she could almost feel the bruises forming. Her father pushed her forward, marching her to the bottom step. He gave her a shove without looking her in the face. He just stared at the space right in front of him, willfully not seeing her pain. She had never seen her father so hard before. But there was something else on his face. Something in the sweaty sheen of his forehead. Something that stank like cold fear. This was not her father. He was sweet to her, loving, and she could count on one hand the times he'd raised his voice to her.

Lottie tripped and fell onto the steps. Pain shot through her hands and shins as they connected with the hardwood staircase.

"Fine." Her voice shook as she spoke. "I'll go, but this is not the end of this discussion. I love Nathan Weintraub with all my heart and soul. And he loves me. And as soon as this war

is over and he comes home, we will get married. And there's nothing you can do to stop that."

"Lottie, you are only sixteen years old," her mother said.

"I'll be seventeen in a month." Lottie spat the words at her mother. "By the time Nathan gets back, I'll be eighteen, and I can do whatever I want."

"Not if he can't find you," her father said. "Now get upstairs."

Lottie opened her mouth to argue, but something on her father's face made her shrink away. She had never seen him so angry and so calm at the same time.

She grunted and got to her feet, then scrambled up the stairs to the second-floor landing. She walked to her room, opened the door and closed it, but she didn't go inside. Instead, she crouched next to the banister, listening to her parents still standing in the foyer.

"She's ruined herself," her mother said, ripping the letter in her hands to bits. "If she marries that boy, she'll ruin us."

"Nothing is ruined yet," her father said. "We'll send her away if we have to."

"None of the boys we picked out are gonna want to marry her now." Her mother sniffled. Was she crying? Lottie couldn't recall one time in her entire life that she'd seen her mother cry. Not even when her grandmother had died.

"No one will find out anything. I promise. We'll send her away to school somewhere. In a year's time, she'll have forgotten all about this boy."

"And what if she keeps writing him?"

"We'll make sure she doesn't."

"She doesn't understand what's at stake here."

"No, she doesn't," her father muttered. "Don't worry. It's all going to be all right."

Lottie sat back on her heels, tears streaking down her face. She would run away, but where would she go? It's not as if she

had any money of her own. And she feared that any friends of hers might disapprove and call her parents. Did her father intend to hold her captive until she came to her senses at some boarding school? How was she supposed to bear that? And how would she ever get in touch with Nathan to let him know?

She imagined her mother or her father counting the stamps and envelopes, monitoring every single letter that she mailed. All so she would not marry the wrong boy. She hated her parents. Hated their ignorance and bigotry. Oh, they could claim it had nothing to do with his being Jewish, but she knew better. She had to let him know what her parents were doing to them.

“Lottie, get yourself together,” her father called up the stairs. “We’re going out for dinner.”

Lottie went to the bathroom down the hall and splashed water on her face. She hurried her fingers across her hair and put a little pink lipstick on her lips. She would write to Nathan Weintraub every day. And she would find a way to get her letters to him. Even if it killed her.

CHAPTER 7

Charlie's eyes fluttered open, and she stared at the ceiling. The face of the young woman she'd just dreamed about filled her mind. Lottie had brazenly slipped past every line of salt and every crystal Charlie had put out to stop her. When Charlie sat up in bed, a pang of guilt bloomed in her chest.

"Lottie?" Charlie whispered. "I don't know if you can hear this. I hope you can. I'll help you find him. I don't know how long it will take or if he's even still alive. But I'll do what I can."

She glanced around the emptiness of her room. She felt no frigid blast of air. No mist. Or full-on apparition present. Just the sound of crickets chirping in the darkness. Charlie fell back down on her pillow.

"I'm sorry I didn't help earlier," she whispered to the quiet room and closed her eyes. "When you visited me in the bath."

* * *

THE MAN STOOD AT THE EDGE OF THE WATER, WATCHING THE pink dolphin float make its way across the inlet. The signs posted nearby all warned of the dangers of swimming here. The powerful currents converged from the tidal marsh, flowing out into the ocean. They could drown a man in minutes. Even a powerful swimmer like himself. But that damned pink dolphin float had blown across the beach into the

water before he could catch it. And his daughter wailed inconsolably.

“What if Pinky drowns?” his daughter had sobbed through nearly shut eyes and barely coherent words.

“Honey, we can get you another float,” his wife had said, trying to comfort the child. “That little general store had an octopus if I remember correctly. You love octopuses!”

“Daddy, please save Pinky,” his daughter had begged. Fat, pitiful tears had filled her eyes and tugged on his heart. He hated more than anything to see his baby girl cry. So, against his better judgment, here he was at the end of the beach where the island jutted out into Breach Inlet.

It looked peaceful enough. He could see the damn dolphin. It seemed to have gotten partway across the inlet and stopped, as if it were waiting for him to come get it. Or maybe it was just taunting him. It wouldn't take much to swim out and grab the stupid thing and swim back. Still, something in his gut knotted tight. Maybe it was the signs that warned of dangerous riptides. Beware. He looked back over his shoulder at his wife and daughter, sitting beneath an umbrella on the beach. He waved. Then he waded into the water and began to swim.

He got halfway across before he could feel the current swirling like a vortex below the surface, threatening to suck him down and pull him out to sea. For almost half an hour, he fought valiantly against it. He tried to remember his swimming training, but his mind blanked. He could barely see the beach and that stupid pink dolphin had disappeared. A stitch in his side made it impossible for him to go on, and he cursed himself for not listening to his gut just before the current yanked him beneath the surface for the last time.

* * *

CHARLIE AWOKE WITH A START, THE FEELING OF PRESSURE from being fifteen feet beneath the water with seawater caught in her lungs, the air burning in her chest. She coughed,

halfway expecting to hack up water and sand from Breach Inlet.

“What the hell was that?” she muttered.

The sky had lightened outside, and she glanced at the clock. It read 4:44 a.m. She reached for her phone to do a quick Internet search, trying to determine if the dream was real or just some anxiety manifesting itself. Recent drownings at Breach Inlet came up empty, and she squeezed her eyes shut, remembering the feeling of stale air burning in the man’s lungs. Maybe it had happened and just didn’t make the news yet. Or maybe it would happen. She didn’t get any sense of who the man was. No name. No sense of time.

This could’ve happened some time ago, or it could happen in the future. She cradled her head in her hands until her alarm clock went off. There was no point in trying to figure it out, but she still could not shake the uneasy feeling of seeing this man’s death and knowing she could do nothing about it.

“Get up,” she told herself and rose from the bed. There were too many other things to do. First, she had to make Evan’s lunch and then get him up and to school on time. Jason had asked her to lunch today, and she would work at the funeral home again. She didn’t want to admit it to anyone else, but she was enjoying working with Tom.

As she spread mustard on two pieces of bread for Evan’s ham and swiss sandwich, she thought of discussing the dreams with Tom. Maybe it would make her feel better. Maybe he’d have a solution for finding a random stranger about to die, so she could stop it from happening. She heard Evan’s alarm clock go off, and within a few minutes, things got busy, and she almost forgot the dream. Almost.

* * *

“GOOD MORNING.” TOM GREETED CHARLIE AT THE FUNERAL home’s reception desk with a kiss and a blueberry streusel muffin from the Kitchen Witch Café.

“You know, I could get used to this.” Charlie returned the kiss, dropped her tote bag on the desk and accepted his gift of breakfast. She opened the bag and breathed in the comforting scent of blueberries, cinnamon, and sugar.

“Are you saying there’s a chance I could steal you away from the DOL for the price of a latte and a muffin? I could almost guarantee you it would be much safer.”

“I don’t know about that,” Charlie said. “But I like seeing your smiling face first thing in the morning.”

Tom stroked her cheek and gave her face a good long look. “You look a little tired. Bad dreams?”

“Just constant dreams, really. I don’t feel like I rested at all.” She took a sip of the latte, made exactly the way she liked it with lots of sugar.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Do you remember the ghost of the young woman from Sunday night? The one you chased away?” Charlie said.

“Yes, I remember her,” he said.

“She showed up last night while I was taking a bath, and I wasn’t very nice.”

“Charlie, there’s nothing wrong with setting boundaries,” Tom said. “It’s not like you don’t deserve time to yourself.”

“I know,” she said. “It’s just once she left, and I went to bed, I had a dream about her. I’m not sure exactly how I’m supposed to help her. She keeps talking about someone named Nathan. Turns out it was a boy her father and mother didn’t approve of. I have no idea if he’s dead or alive or if he even existed.”

“That should be easy enough to find out if you have a name,” Tom said.

“Yes, I plan on searching the Veteran’s Affairs database, although I feel very guilty about it. It’s not exactly DOL business, is it?”

Tom shrugged. “They knew you were psychic when they hired you. Was that the only dream you had?”

“No, I had one about a man drowning off Breach Inlet. I searched for recent drownings but came up empty. I just get the feeling that no matter what I do, there’s no way I could save him. And it’s just a horrible feeling.”

“I see,” Tom said. His expression became somber. “Have you had many dreams like this recently?”

“A few. I dreamed about a man who slipped in his bathtub and hit his head. It was too late for me to do a damn thing by the time I found his obituary online.”

“Do you think it’s related to your healing?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll ask Esperanza about it.”

“Sure.” Tom smiled, but it looked forced to her. He leaned in and kissed her forehead. “Why don’t you finish up your coffee and muffin. We’ve got the Cofield funeral coming up, and, if you don’t mind, I’d like to discuss how you can help.”

“Sure thing, boss,” she said and gave him a wink.

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CHAPTER 8

Charlie sat at the receptionist desk near Tom's office, trying to keep her eyes open. She blinked slowly while she continued to scroll through the spreadsheet on her screen. When a name came up that she felt needed further investigation, she wrote it down on the legal pad she kept next to the computer. The funeral home's phone hadn't rung in almost an hour, and with each flutter of her eyes, weariness set into her body, weighing her down. If she could just get a few minutes of dreamless, uninterrupted sleep, maybe she could focus better. Just a quick nap.

She propped her chin on her hand and closed her eyes. Images flashed through her mind. George Allen Cofield appeared and then faded. Lottie showed up next, twirling in her full skirt. How had she died so young? The question floated in the darkness and then dissipated like a cloud. After a few minutes, Charlie's mind settled down, and she slipped into a foggy place of peace.

The sound of quiet crying started somewhere in the gray ether surrounding her. It tugged at her heart, pulled her forward as if it had hooked into her sternum. She drifted toward the sound until she found herself in an old attic. The pitched roof formed a sharp reversed V, with just enough room for a short adult to walk down the middle of the space. On the walls at either end, small, slatted windows filtered dim light into the building.

The blindfolded boy was duct-taped to a hard, wooden chair. She could see his arms bound behind him.

“Please let me go,” the boy whimpered to the darkened room. His voice sounded familiar, and she knew he had to be younger than Evan, prepubescent. Maybe twelve at the most? The milky gray light made it hard to see his face, so she moved closer.

“Please. Please just let me go. I want my mom,” he sniffled.

“Only babies cry. I thought you were a big boy,” a man’s voice said from the darkest corner of the attic. He rose to his feet, emerging from the shadows as if he’d been formed of clouds.

Charlie tried to see the man. Tried to memorize every detail about him. His height, his slim build, the dirty work clothes he wore. She could vaguely make out his features, a long, narrow face, with a slim, pointed nose to match. Thin lips formed a strange, brief smile beneath a thin mustache.

“You’ll be home as soon as your mama and daddy pay me to get you back. And if they don’t pay, I’ll make sure you get a new family. One that knows what a treasure you really are. One that knows what you’re worth.”

The man gently ran his hand over the boy’s head, but the kid flinched away.

“I don’t want a new family. I want my mom.” The boy’s shoulders shook, and he hung his head. The man continued to stroke the boy’s hair. Something about it made Charlie’s skin crawl.

The man leaned over and kissed the boy on the top of the head. “I gotta go to work now. You stay quiet. I’ll get you some food and let you go to the bathroom after I get back.”

“Don’t go!” the boy cried out. “Please, don’t leave me alone.” But it was too late. The man had gone.

Charlie floated around the boy, trying to get a better sense of him, who he was and where he was. His dark wavy hair flopped over his forehead. At the base of his neck he had a dark oval-shaped birthmark the size of a thumbprint.

“What’s your name?” she whispered. “Tell me how to find you.” She knew he couldn’t hear her. This was just a dream. The sound of a door slamming made her jump and something warm touched her back.

“Charlie?” It was Tom. His warm voice drifted through her consciousness.

Her eyes flew open, and she sat up straight. She wiped the drool away from the corner of her mouth and glanced around at the phone on the desk, Joy’s business cards in a holder, her spreadsheet. How long had she been out?

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry. I… guess I fell asleep,” she said. Her cheeks flushed with heat.

“It’s all right, love,” he said.

She glanced at the clock on the wall. “Is it really almost lunchtime?”

“It is.” Tom nodded. “I wanted to see if you’d like to eat at the café.”

“Oh, sweetie,” she said, gathering her purse and smoothing back her hair. “I’m sorry. I told Jason I’d have lunch with him. He wants to discuss something.”

“No problem. How long do you think you’ll be?” Tom asked.

“I don’t know. He said he had case files. Maybe two hours. Is that okay?”

“Of course. Can the three of us have dinner tonight? You, me, and Evan?”

“I would love that, but I’ve got my bi-weekly meeting with Esperanza tonight. Maybe we can go out tomorrow?”

“Sounds good.” Tom glanced at the expensive watch on his wrist. “You’d better get going if you want to meet Jason on time.”

“Oh, right. Thank you.” Charlie quickly gathered her things and rose to her feet. She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. “I’ll be back later.”

“See you then. Drive safe and be careful.” Tom grabbed her hand, gave it a squeeze, then brought it to his lips. Charlie smiled at the sweet gesture, but she got the distinct feeling there was something more ominous in his words. She quickly brushed the thought aside and hurried to her car.

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CHAPTER 9

“**F**or the record, I’d just like to say I feel like I’m cheating on my cousin.” Charlie perused the lunch menu for Crabby Mike’s Bar and Grill. The small restaurant overlooked a marshy creek that fed into the Stono River. They sat out on the deck for the view and marsh breeze. A cafe umbrella offered shade from the April sun, while the rest of the oversized deck bustled with tables of early tourists and locals on their lunch hour.

“It’s not like you don’t eat here sometimes,” Jason said.

“I know it’s just...” She lowered her voice and leaned in close. “What if one of these people mentions to Jen they saw us here?”

“I’m sure Jen won’t care. You can’t live and breathe café food.” Jason flipped to the specials on the back of the menu.

“Yeah. You tell Jen that. I dare you.”

“Afternoon y’all. You ready to order?” The chipper waitress wearing a red t-shirt with Crabby Mike’s logo on it appeared at the table. The ponytail she wore pulled her straight chestnut hair high on the back of her head and revealed her shiny, prominent forehead. The white nametag pinned to her chest said Traci, and an image of the waitress signing her name and dotting the i with a heart flashed through Charlie’s head. Charlie glanced away from her to Jason, but he didn’t look up.

“Can I just have the soft-shell crab sandwich, please?” Charlie asked.

“Sure, hon. With fries and coleslaw?” The waitress scribbled onto her order pad without looking at the pad or Charlie.

“Yes, please, and plenty of tartar sauce.”

“Will do.” The waitress nodded, her gaze firmly on Jason. “How about you, hon?”

Charlie sipped from her frosty glass of iced tea, watching Jason read over the menu, an undecided expression on his face.

“I guess I’ll just have the fried shrimp and flounder combo basket. Can I get a green salad with oil and vinegar dressing on the side as well?”

“I’ve got a balsamic vinaigrette. Is that okay?” Traci asked.

“That would be perfect.” Jason looked up at her and smiled.

“You got it.” The waitress’s face lit up, and she held his gaze for a beat too long. So long it made Charlie squirm in her seat. “I’m Traci. If you need anything... just let me know.”

“All righty. I will, Traci. Thanks.” Jason gave her a nod and shifted his attention back to Charlie.

The disappointment in the lines of Traci’s face at Jason’s oblivious rebuff made Charlie almost feel sorry for the young woman. Traci spun quickly and took off to put the order into the kitchen. Charlie waited until the waitress was out of earshot. “She was flirting with you.”

“What? No. No, she wasn’t. She was just being nice. She’s probably fishing for a big tip.”

“I don’t know about that.” Charlie tucked the menus back into the holder on the table connected to a basket holding napkins, ketchup, salt, and pepper. “So, what’s all this secrecy about? I thought you had cases for me to look at.”

“I do, but there’s something else I want your help with.”

“Sure.” Charlie folded her hands together and propped her chin on top of her knuckles. “Anything.”

Jason let out a breathy laugh. “Good. I’m glad you said that because I’m gonna ask Lisa to marry me. There’s this ring I’d like to show you. To see what you think.”

“Oh.” Charlie sat back and stared at him, unsure how to feel. Jen and Ben, she could see them married with no problem. It surprised her Ben hadn’t asked yet. But Jason and Lisa? She wasn’t sure they were ready. Wasn’t sure how honest her cousin had been with him about her past or her brushes with marriage. Or her feelings about love. Lisa sometimes locked away her deepest emotions in a little box inside her heart and would defend it like a wounded animal than give anyone the key. “Married? I didn’t know y’all were to that point yet.”

“Well, we are. I am, and with a little luck, she is too.”

“Right. And you want me to help you find a ring for her? Shouldn’t you be asking her to pick out her ring?” Charlie asked. “That’s normally how these things go.”

“Um, yeah, I just... I want it to be a surprise. That’s all.”

“Ohhh-kay.” Charlie blew out a deep breath and debated what she needed to say to stop this without giving away Lisa’s past. She wished she knew exactly how much Lisa had shared about her experiences. “So why suddenly are you so hot to get married?”

“I’m not hot to get married,” he protested, but it fell flat. “Lisa and I aren’t getting any younger. She turns thirty-seven next month. If we’re going to have kids...”

“So, your biological clock is ticking?” Charlie chuckled and didn’t bother to hide her amusement.

“Men don’t have biological clocks. We can have babies until we’re dead.” He took a sip of his iced tea. “And sometimes even after.”

“Not without help,” Charlie muttered. “So, let me get this straight. You think Lisa’s biological clock is ticking? And so,

you want to marry her because of that, and you want *me* to help you find the right ring?”

“I don’t think that exactly, but you know women sometimes have problems getting pregnant when they’re older.”

“Okay, assuming she wants to get pregnant. And that’s a big assumption. Have you ever talked to her about marriage? Because she has opinions about marriage. Strong opinions. And that may throw a monkey wrench into whatever fantasy you’ve got going on in your head.”

“We talk about stuff like this all the time. Just ‘cause you’re not there doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen.”

“So, Lisa’s told you she wants to get married and have kids?”

“Sure... maybe. Someday.”

Charlie sat back and made a humpfing sound. “Really?”

“Yes, really. Why?”

“I’m just surprised. That’s all. Lisa swore after...” Charlie stopped herself. It wasn’t her place to tell him anything about Lisa’s past, was it? No. That would hurt her cousin.

“After what?”

Charlie chose her words carefully. “After her last failed relationship, that she would never get married. Usually, that stuff doesn’t change easily. Maybe y’all should sit down and discuss a little more before you jump into the deep end and buy a ring.”

“Here you go.” Traci returned and plopped a full pitcher of iced tea on the table with one hand and placed a basket of freshly fried hush puppies on the table between them.

Inside the basket, nestled in between the crispy golden orbs of cornmeal and onion, were two plastic cups filled with whipped honey butter. Charlie grabbed one of the hot hush puppies and dipped it into the butter and honey concoction before she took a bite. Traci quickly refilled their tea glasses.

“Your orders should be out any minute now.” Traci didn’t take her eyes off Jason.

Jason shifted in his chair and gave Traci an awkward smile. “Thank you.”

“Anytime,” Traci said and walked away.

“Seriously flirting,” Charlie said. “It’s like I’m not even here.”

“You’re crazy,” Jason said.

“I’ve been called worse.” Charlie chuckled and took a sip of tea.

“Let’s not talk about this anymore for now if that’s okay.”

“Sure. What do you want to talk about?”

“Tell me what’s going on with you. I feel like I never see you anymore,” Jason said.

Charlie shrugged. “I’m helping Tom out this week, so I’m doing okay.”

“Just okay?”

“Yeah. I’m a little overrun with spirits at the moment, and I’ve had a few disturbing dreams lately. It makes me feel a little helpless.”

“Anything I can do?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have a lot of information to share.”

“Why don’t you run it by me?” He continued to dip hush puppies into the butter and pop them in his mouth while he listened.

Charlie quickly explained the dream about the boy. “I texted Athena before I came over to see if she could do a preliminary search of kidnapped boys. But it’s not witch related, so she can’t make it a priority. Plus, I’m dealing with two other ghosts, one that might interest you. He claims his wife killed him.”

“Okay,” Jason said. “Great.” He leaned in, his elbows on the table. “I can run a search when I get back to the office. You

can come with me if you'd like. I've got a couple case files I'd love for you to look over."

"I can't today. I've got to get back to the funeral home. I promised Tom I'd only be a couple of hours."

"So, what's that all about? I thought it was a family business."

"It is, but his sister is off doing... something. I'm not sure what all exactly. Tom was a little vague, but I've been answering phones for him this week. Let's just say it's been interesting."

"Right. Like your ghost that said his wife murdered him." Jason bit into another a hush puppy.

"Yes. Do you think you could find the medical examiner's report on him?"

Jason shrugged. "Sure. Does that mean you have time to go look at the ring with me?"

"Yeah, as long as I'm back by two. If you can bring your files to Friday night dinner, I'll be happy to look them over," Charlie said.

"Deal," Jason said. "And I'll run a search for missing boys based on your description."

"You're the best." Charlie grinned. "And for what it's worth, Lisa'd be crazy not to say yes."

"Thanks." Jason met her eyes and smiled. "That means a lot."

"Food's here." Charlie pointed to the waitress approaching their table with a tray.

"Great," Jason looked up and gave the waitress an awkward nod.

CHAPTER 10

Charlie's mouth gaped when Jason pulled his black Dodge Charger into the parking lot of Island Palms Pawn and Gold Brokers. The compact brick building didn't stand out much beyond its garish lighted yellow sign. Bright yellow lettering that matched the sign, covered the window and listed everything they'd buy: Laptops. Instruments. Watches. Tools. Electronics. Cell phones. Guns. Gold. Silver. Diamonds. A pink neon sign declared Pay Day Loans and Titles for Cash available no credit needed, and it glowed so brightly, drivers couldn't miss it from the road at night. Next door, an almost identical building shared the silver-gray asphalt parking lot. Its sign read, Island Palms Bail Bonds.

Charlie got out of the car and stared at the building. "This is where you want to buy her a ring?"

"Yeah. Well. Maybe. What? Do you know how overpriced diamonds are? It's a racket." Jason walked to the front of his car.

"I guess I can't argue with that. But a pawnshop?" Charlie shook her head.

"There's nothing wrong with buying at a pawnshop. You know, as long as they're on the up and up. Which this one is."

"Oh-kay. It's probably better that you don't bring her here," Charlie said as the two of them approached the front doors.

"I know. That's why I called you." Jason grinned.

Charlie let out a deep sigh. This whole excursion seemed like Jason was just setting himself up for a broken heart.

“This place is owned by my cousin, Dennis. He’ll give me a good deal, no matter what,” Jason said.

“Your cousin?”

“Yep. Kenny’s younger brother. He’s also a bail bondsman.” Jason pointed to the building next door. “His daughter Kyra runs that for him.”

“Well, that’s convenient. A pawnshop to hock what you’ve got so you can pay the bail bondsman to get you out of jail. You know, your family is almost as interesting as mine,” Charlie teased.

“Go ahead. Make fun,” Jason said. “At least they’re not a coven of witches.”

“True. But that doesn’t seem to stop you from wanting to marry into it.” Charlie nudged him with her elbow as they approached the front door. Jason rolled his eyes at her and pulled the door open.

A doorbell rang when they entered the building, and a familiar chill assaulted Charlie’s senses. Goosebumps broke out all over her body and she shivered. She didn’t bother looking for an air-conditioning vent, despite the frigid temperature of the place. Only one thing caused this sensation.

Charlie stopped in her tracks and glanced around at all the stuff neatly lining the walls or safely protected by the glass cases that traced the footprint of the building’s interior. Stuff people had brought in out of desperation, or anger, or heartbreak. Some of that emotion swirled through the air like dust motes looking for a place to land. Usually, she could ignore it, but since she’d lost her gifts and had been working to restore them through healing her energy, places like this left her raw and jittery.

Spirits haunted everything in this store. From the shiny red drum set in the corner to the guitars hanging on the wall, to the electronics and the glittering jewelry locked up tight beneath glass.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Charlie whispered.

“Yes. Why?”

“No reason, I guess,” Charlie muttered.

“Come on.” Jason motioned for her to follow him down the middle aisle that led to a long glass case.

Jason was halfway to the register before he seemed to realize Charlie wasn’t behind him. He stopped and glanced back at her. “What’s wrong?”

She stared at him, hoping he would just get it, but his excitement about buying a ring seemed to render him insensitive. His brows drew together, and a deep line formed, punctuated only by the confusion in his hazel eyes.

She shook her head. “I don’t think I can do this.”

Jason stalked back toward her, and for a second, she thought he might yell at her. Instead, he leaned in close and whispered, “What’s the problem?”

“There’s just some bad energy in this place, that’s all.”

“What do you mean?”

Charlie frowned and tipped her head. “You know what I mean.”

Jason’s eyes narrowed and then widened before shifting from side to side. “Do you see ghosts here?” he whispered.

“I don’t see them. But I can feel them, and I’m sure they can feel me.”

“All right.” Jason nodded. “Do you wanna leave?”

The disappointment on his face made her feel worse than the energy surrounding her. She folded her arms across her chest. Some part of her wanted to scream *Yes! Let’s get the hell out of here.* One wrong move and every soul in this place could overwhelm her. Beg her to see them. Beg to have their story told. She took a deep breath and shook her head.

“No. I know this is important to you. I just won’t...” From her peripheral vision, she could see the specter of a seventeen-

year-old boy seated at the drum set, shimmering in and out. What had happened to him? How had he ended up here? She swallowed hard.

“I just won’t touch anything.”

“You sure?” Jason softened his tone. He rubbed one hand up and down her upper arm, and she was grateful for the human contact. She could feel that, even though it was disappointing to him, he would totally understand if she needed to leave. He would figure it out on his own. And somehow that heartened her.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” She offered a weak smile. “Let’s go look at this ring.”

“Great.” Jason grinned. He placed a protective hand in the center of Charlie’s back and guided her toward the man sitting behind the glass counter next to a fancy computer set up. “Hey, Denny!”

“Denny and Kenny?” Charlie muttered. Jason flashed her a be-quiet look. She bit her lips together to keep from saying anything else. The familiar-looking man sat on a stool, staring at the cell phone in his hand. He was heavier than his brother, but just as sweaty. His thinning red hair plastered to his head and pulled tight into a ponytail running down his back.

Denny cleared his throat, sniffing back phlegm, then he looked up at them. His sharp blue eyes were set in thick folds of skin, and a wide grin lifted the man’s jowls.

“Hey, Cuz,” Denny said, standing up from the stool he’d been sitting on. “I see you finally brought your lady in.”

Jason’s hand dropped to his side, and he laughed a little, embarrassment staining his cheeks.

“I’m not his lady,” Charlie corrected. “I’m his lady’s cousin.”

“Oh, right,” Denny said. “One of those you need to get approval from.”

“I don’t need anybody’s approval to ask Lisa to marry me,” Jason griped.

Denny held his hands up in surrender. “Right, right, right. That comes later. After you’ve married her. Then you’ll have to ask for permission for everything. Trust me on that. I’ve been married three times.”

“I guess you like to ask for permission a lot, then don’t you?” Charlie quipped.

Denny laughed, his bulldog face full of good humor. “More like I never learn my lesson.”

“You still got the ring?” Jason asked.

“Yep. I got a couple new ones too that came in over the weekend. Do you wanna look at those? They’re real nice. I’ll give you a good deal.”

“Sure. I’ll look at them,” Jason said.

Charlie and Jason drew closer to the glass case. On the wall behind Denny, an array of shotguns and rifles hung in neat rows organized by barrel length. Some heavy metal cabinets were behind the glass case, with doors held closed by padlocks. A nearby shelf held old stereo equipment and more surround sound-sized speakers than Charlie had ever seen.

“Y’all come on down here.” Denny waved them over to another glass case that ran perpendicular to the one he’d been sitting behind. Beneath the glass, jewelry of every type glittered—gold, silver, and even some marked as platinum. Rows of expensive-looking gold watches gave way to rows of earrings, chains, and pendants with gemstones alongside long lines of rings from simple gold bands to intricate wedding sets studded with diamonds. The abandoned wedding rings left a cold pang in Charlie’s chest.

Kenny unclipped a jangling bunch of keys from his belt, then riffled through them to find the right one. When he found it, he slipped it into the lock. He opened the panel from behind, then pulled out a black velvet jeweler’s tray along with an array of rings.

“Here we are,” Denny said. “These are some of the nicest rings I’ve had in quite a while.”

Three diamond rings sparkled under the bright lights suspended over the counter. There was one large solitaire that Charlie judged to be at least a carat and a half. It reminded her of the engagement ring Scott had given her. She had left it and her wedding ring sitting on top of Scott's dresser the day she left him. Had it ended up in a place like this? She tried to imagine Scott walking into a pawn shop to sell her old jewelry and tokens from a life they would never have, but she just couldn't. Knowing Scott, he'd probably held onto the ring so he could have the diamond put into another setting if he ever got engaged again.

Jason touched the ring with a half-carat diamond flanked by two sparkly green emeralds.

"Emerald's her birthstone. I thought that might be important to her."

Charlie leaned over to get a better look. Something bright gold winked at her from inside the case, and she looked past the diamond rings in front of her. Below them inside the case was a line of men's rings. Some were simple thick gold wedding bands, and some were gaudy gold pinky rings with stones that looked too large to be real. A polished gold signet ring with a small diamond chip and the letter P inscribed on it drew her attention, and she suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to touch it.

"Denny, can I see that ring?" She tapped her fingernail on the glass, pointing to the ring beneath.

Denny grinned so wide his eyes almost disappeared into the folds of his face. "Sure thing." He pulled out the foam ring holder and placed it on top of his black velvet jeweler's display.

"That's a nice ring there. Very classy. Does your man like jewelry? I can give you a deal on it, seeing as you're kin to Jason's girl and all."

"No, he doesn't wear jewelry."

Charlie leaned in close, not wanting to touch the gold ring but unable to shake the feeling that she needed to touch it.

Needed to know what it wanted to show her.

“Can I hold it?”

“Oh, yeah, sure. I can hold it for you for forty-eight hours if you’d like. You can bring your fella back. He might surprise you. Some men say they don’t like jewelry until they find the right piece.”

“No, thank you,” Charlie said. She took a deep breath and brushed her finger lightly to the flat top of the gold ring.

The vision rolled inside her head like a film. A lanky man walked into the shop. His jet-black hair glistened beneath the lights, and the pinched look on his face emanated a cruelty that made Charlie want to let go. But she couldn’t. She had to keep watching the scene unfold.

The man walked with the determination of someone who knew exactly what he was after. He leaned over the counter and pointed at this ring, just as she had done. The white string tag attached to it read \$500, three hundred more than what it was now. Denny pulled the glass open and fetched the ring. The same hungry grin stretched across his jowly face. The man slipped it onto the pinky of his right hand. He held up his hand. After a moment of admiration, he retrieved his wallet and slapped down five hundred bills without a word.

Charlie pulled her hand away. “Is this the first time this ring has been here?”

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure it is, but I’d have to check my computer to be sure.” Denny bristled. “It’s not stolen, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“No, that’s not it at all.” Charlie put the ring back into the spongy velvet-covered holder, trying to avoid all the other rings. She gave him a smile. “You will sell that ring. And you’ll get more than that \$200 price tag.”

“Yeah, right,” Denny laughed. “You wanna tell me when this alleged sale will happen?”

Charlie shrugged. “I can’t tell that. Sorry. Only that your gonna sell it for five hundred.”

“Is she for real?” Denny looked to Jason.

“If she says it’s gonna sell for five hundred, then I’d believe her.” Jason and his cousin exchanged a glance.

Denny’s face lit up. “I’ll mark it up right this minute.” Denny grinned at Charlie. “Anything else I should mark up?”

Charlie glanced around. The seventeen-year-old drummer came into form. He beat his sticks on his old drum set, his head rocking back and forth to some song only he could hear.

“No. Not that I can tell. But you’ll definitely sell that ring.”

“I’ll take that,” Denny reached for a pen and a blank tag. He scrawled \$500 onto it before he ripped off the old tag and replaced it. “So, what’s it gonna be, Cuz?”

Jason stood frozen like they had caught him outside in his underwear. “Um...”

“You’re not chickening out, are you?” Denny taunted.

“What do you think, Charlie?” Jason asked.

“I think the one with the emeralds is beautiful. And I think she would love that you put so much thought into it. And she’s definitely fond of her birthstone, so I can’t see how it’d go wrong,” Charlie said.

“Really?” An excited grin spread across Jason’s face, and he turned to Denny. “I’ll take it.”

“I’ll wrap it up,” Denny said. He slid everything off the counter and placed it back into the case. He tucked the ring into a blue knock-off Tiffany ring box before he dropped it into a bright yellow bag with his logo printed on it. A few minutes later, the ring sat on Charlie’s lap as Jason drove her back to the restaurant to retrieve her car.

“You know before you give this to her, you need to cleanse it,” Charlie said.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure it sparkles,” he said.

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Oh-kay?”

“You need to let Jen and me do a ritual cleansing to make sure there’s no dangerous energy clinging to it before you ever show it to Lisa.”

“Can you do it by yourself? I love Jen, but she’s got a big mouth.”

“She won’t say anything. At least not to Lisa.”

Jason scowled. “So much for surprising her.”

“Hey. Have a little faith in us, okay?” Charlie said.

“Fine.”

“Bring the ring to Friday night dinner and leave it with us.”

“I swear if she finds out before I can ask her...”

“She won’t. I swear.”

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CHAPTER 11

“**M**om, it’s not like she’s actually coming to the house.” Evan looked up from his phone. He sat in the middle of the cushy couch with his legs stretched out in front of him.

“No, but she can still see the house.” Charlie ran a dust cloth over the trunk she used as a coffee table and knocked Evan’s feet off their perch. “I could use a little help here. Why don’t you get the vacuum out and just do a quick once over of the living room for me?”

“Seriously?” His gaze went back to the phone in his hands. “The floors aren’t even dirty.”

“Please don’t sass me. Get the vacuum out. It will take you two shakes of a lamb’s tail.”

Evan made a face, put his phone down on the couch, then dramatically rose to his feet.

“And put your stuff away, please.”

“Gah, Mom,” Evan said.

“Keep it up, and I will take that phone away from you, and you won’t be able to text Rachel.”

Evan made a face. He didn’t complain anymore, but it didn’t stop him from sulking the entire time he pushed the cordless stick vacuum over the floor. Charlie fluffed the pillows on the pale, yellow overstuffed couch and straightened the lacy curtains of the windows behind it. When the tidiness

of the house satisfied her, she sent Evan to his room to study while she made her call.

Charlie took a seat on the couch. In one hand, she held a string of beads made from crystals and gemstones. Tied to one end was a silver charm stamped with the triple moon goddess, and at the other end dangled a silver pentagram charm.

Charlie ran her thumb over the beads to calm herself and opened the video chat app on her phone. High Priestess Esperanza Guzman's name was at the top of the brief list of calls she'd made with the app. She took a deep breath and pressed the icon to place the bi-weekly call for guidance as she regained her abilities after her near-death experience a few months earlier. A few seconds later, Esperanza's kind face appeared on Charlie's phone screen, and Charlie's anxieties melted away. How Esperanza could do that from nearly three hundred miles away always astonished Charlie. Someday she hoped to have that calming power.

"Charlie," Esperanza said. A wide smile softened the sharp angles of her tanned face. "It's so good to see you."

"It's good to see you, too, Esperanza."

"Your energy looks so much brighter this week."

"You can tell that through the phone?"

"I can. The aura isn't as strong as it would be in person, but I can definitely see more of a glow about you. Have you been taking the herbs I suggested?"

"Yes. Every day. I've been drinking them as a tea."

"Good. Good. Good. And have you finished your prayer beads?"

"I have." Charlie held up the string of beads she carried with her everywhere these days.

"I've also got black tourmaline and salt in my bag. Although, I'll be honest, I'm not sure they're working very well. I have spirits showing up day and night. More than I've ever had to deal with before. It's like I have a giant neon sign over my head that says, 'I can see you dead people. Come on

over.' I even had one burst into my bathroom last night while I was taking a bath."

"Believe it or not, that's actually a good sign," Esperanza said in a soothing voice. "Have you set up boundaries around your house?"

"Yes, but every time I put some jars out, they get broken. Even lines of salt inside my house end up broken. The spirits are trying very hard to get to me. The only thing that's helped so far is just to tell them to go away." Charlie sighed. "It's not that I don't want to help but..."

"But you need some peace too. And time to recharge. Psychic energy is draining," Esperanza said. "How about your emotions? How are you feeling?"

"Most of the time I'm fine, but some days..." Charlie sighed. "Some days I feel like I'm all of over the place. Like I will never be on an even keel again. I get mad easily and minor things test my patience in ways they never did before."

"Healing takes time. Be gentle with yourself."

"I'm trying." Charlie shrugged. "I've also had some very disturbing dreams this week. I've seen more death and humans being horrible to each other than usual."

"And how does that make you feel?"

Charlie shifted her gaze from the screen to her lap. Her thumb stroked the smooth beads as she searched for the right words. "Less... broken?"

"Less broken." Esperanza nodded. "That is progress, my friend."

"I guess," Charlie said.

"Trust me. It is. What did you tell the spirit when it invaded your bathroom?"

"I told her to get out. Although she showed up in my dreams later."

"Setting boundaries is important. It will help you reset your innate boundaries within. In time, you will get to choose

what you see and don't see. What did the spirit do when you told her to leave?"

"She protested a little, but eventually, she did what I asked."

"See? That's very good."

"I had another experience this week that was a bit overwhelming. I went to a pawnshop with a friend of mine to look at a ring. Just walking into that building felt like every nerve in my body was on fire. At least in the beginning."

"I know this is hard to believe, but that's good. Sometimes progress is painful. Like the way a bone aches when it's mending, and then it itches as it heals. You will become desensitized over time. But we can't skip the pain along the way. It's part of the process."

"I know. I just wish I could go back to the way I was before."

"I know. Unfortunately, you'll never be that woman again. You've experienced too much to return to being who you were before." Esperanza sat back in her office chair. On the wall behind her was a stylized painting of a tree in muted, earthy colors. "Maybe you should write down these feelings. Writing always gives me clarity in a situation."

"You mean keep a journal?"

"Yes. You have a book of shadows, correct?"

"Sure, but that's for spell work."

"It's all connected. Your feelings affect your magic. It will help your craft and your journey as a witch. I encourage all the witches in my covens to keep a journal and a book of shadows. It might help you deal with your challenges. To find balance."

"What if I can't find that balance? I'm having some very dark dreams," Charlie said.

"Because of your line of work, you'll probably have to face the darkness more often than most."

“I was afraid you were gonna say that.” Charlie let out a sigh, a little deflated now.

“We are both dark and light, and we must never forget that they are interdependent. One cannot exist without the other. Finding the balance between the two is the only way to keep one from growing stronger than the other.”

“Why wouldn’t you want light to win over darkness?” Charlie asked.

“Because while light may be beautiful and illuminating, it can also be blinding. It can also be smug and self-righteous and even weaponized.”

“Then that’s what I’ll strive for. Balance.”

“Excellent. Do you have any selenite and green agate crystals by any chance? The larger, the better.”

“I’m not sure. But if I don’t, one of my cousins will, I’m sure.”

“Good. Perhaps you should also rely on your coven to help you find a balance.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Charlie said.

“Goddess, keep you safe until we meet again.”

“Goddess, keep you safe until we meet again. I’ll call you in two weeks,” Charlie said. “Blessed be.”

“Blessed be.” Esperanza said. The screen went dark for a second, and then Charlie’s contacts appeared. She put the phone down on the couch next to her.

“You can come out now,” she called.

She shifted the books and Evan’s laptop off the trunk and opened it. Evan’s door opened and he popped his head out. “What are you looking for?”

“I’m checking to see if I have any selenite or green agate.” Charlie found two velvet pouches heavy with stones and crystals. “Do you want to help me look?”

“Sure,” Evan said, excitement spiking his voice. “What do you want me to do?”

Charlie opened the drawstring of the first bag and dumped the crystals onto the couch cushion. “Do you know what selenite looks like?”

“No. What does it look like?” He kneeled in front of the couch and watched as she picked through the crystals. She frowned when she didn’t find either crystal and went back into the trunk for a book of crystals. She quickly scanned the index and found what she was looking for, then opened the book to the page.

“It looks like this.” She pointed to a cloudy, white crystal. She found the page with the green and white crystal she needed and tapped the picture. “This is green agate.”

“Kewl.” Evan nodded and opened the drawstring of the second pouch. He poured the crystals out onto the couch cushion in front of him, while his mother cleaned up the crystals from the other cushion.

“Is this one?” He held up a green crystal with little red flecks in it.

“No, that’s bloodstone.” She tied up the drawstring of the pouch on her lap and put the crystals back into the trunk.

“I could’ve sworn I had both crystals.” She frowned. “Let me text Jen and see what she’s got.” Charlie quickly jotted off a text to her cousin.

I’m sure I have it, Jen texted back.

Great

Have y’all had supper?

Not yet. I was just getting ready to start cooking.

Why don’t y’all just come over and eat dinner with us? I made plenty. It’s almost on the table. You can pick up what you need. I need to ask you something, too.

Are you sure you don’t mind?

Of course not! We'd love to have you. It's settled. I'll set two extra plates. Unless Tom is coming too?

No, Tom isn't joining us tonight. We'll be over in a jiffy.

“Come on, let's get this stuff put away. We're going to Jen's for dinner, and I'm gonna get what we need.”

“Great,” Evan said. “I love Jen's cooking.”

“Yes. You've told me that. Many, many times.”

“She's a kitchen witch,” he said as if it explained everything.

“I'm aware.”

“I mean you're a good cook too. You're just...”

“You don't have to say anything. I'm not a good cook. But I am a good psychic. And I believe you have a test tomorrow.”

Evan's face fell. “I was hoping you wouldn't say anything about that.”

“Get your book. You can study while Jen and I talk after dinner.”

“Great.” Evan scowled and gathered the crystals together. “I hoped that I could sit in.”

“Study first.” Charlie rose to her feet. “Witchcraft later.”

* * *

CHARLIE WALKED INTO THE KITCHEN OF HER UNCLE'S HOUSE and the divine smells of cornbread and something smoky greeted her.

“Y'all come on in,” Jen said, ushering them inside. “You're just in time.”

“Hey, Charlie,” her uncle said. He walked into the kitchen with Ruby trailing behind.

“Hey, Uncle Jack.” Charlie peeled off her jacket and hung it up on one of the hooks near the door. “Smells so good in here, Jen, I could practically eat the air.”

“I’ve got red rice with shrimp and smoked sausage, green beans, red potatoes, and cornbread. I also have macaroni and cheese in the oven for Ruby, but there’s enough for everyone.”

Jen donned oven mitts before she pulled out the cheesy casserole out of the oven.

“Here, let me help you with that,” Charlie said and grabbed a rope trivet from the stack on the counter and placed it on the kitchen table. She reached inside the silverware drawer and grabbed a few serving spoons and laid them on the table.

Jen pulled another pan from the oven and placed it on the two trivets Charlie had set out. Steam rose from the red rice with smoked sausage and shrimp, filling the 9 x 13 glass baking dish. Charlie took the spoons and placed one in each dish. Jen finished scooping green beans and potatoes from a pot on the stove into a large white bowl. After Jen served up the last item, she let out a satisfied sigh and clapped her hands together. “Let’s eat.”

After setting five plates with silver and blue checked cotton napkins. Charlie took a seat between Evan and Uncle Jack. Jen and Ruby sat in the seats directly across from her.

“So, what’s been going on with you?” Jen asked. She scooped some macaroni and cheese, green beans, and potatoes onto Ruby’s dish, then she dug out two shrimps and two pieces of smoked sausage, carefully scraping off every grain of rice. A look of preoccupied determination filled Ruby’s cherubic face. With her elbow propped on the table and two fingers holding one of her front teeth, she wiggled the tooth back and forth.

“Come on, honey. Let’s leave your tooth alone for now. It’s time to eat.”

Ruby frowned and looked at her plate. “There’s tomato on the shrimp.”

“I know, honey. It came out of the red rice. You love tomatoes.”

Charlie watched the exchange, a little amused at the mother/daughter back-and-forth. It seemed like a lifetime ago, but she remembered having a similar conversation with Evan when he went through a picky phase.

“It looks like you’re about to lose that tooth, huh, Ruby?” Charlie reached for Evan’s plate to scoop rice onto it, and he grabbed it from her.

“Mom,” he said, protesting. “I can do it. I’m not a little kid anymore.”

Jack snickered at the end of the table, a smug grin on his weathered face.

“All right.” Charlie held her hands up in surrender. “Just don’t take more than your share. Okay?”

“There’s plenty,” Jen said.

“I know, and he’s growing and all that. But he would sit and eat this whole pan by himself,” Charlie said.

“Gah, Mom, you make me sound like a pig.”

“No. I’m just reminding you we’re guests here, that’s all.”

Evan rolled his eyes and took two large scoops of rice, a scoop of macaroni and cheese, and two pieces of cornbread.

“Please add some green beans to that plate,” Charlie said.

“I don’t like green beans that much.”

“Come on, Evan, just try a small scoop. I promise you will love my green beans,” Jen said.

Evan rolled his eyes but didn’t protest. He scooped three beans and half a potato onto his plate.

“So, back to your earlier question.” Charlie finished filling her plate and speared her fork into a fat shrimp. “I’ve been working at the funeral home this week with Tom.”

“Thinking about making a career switch?” Jack asked.

“Nothing like that. I’m just helping. They’re a little shorthanded right now.”

“That’s nice of you,” Jen said. “How can they be shorthanded? Doesn’t his sister and brother work with him?”

“William runs their downtown branch, and Joy had something else to do this week. I know this will sound a little morbid, but the place is hopping. In more ways than one,” Charlie said. “I’ve already picked up a potential case for Jason to look into.”

“Is that why you had lunch with him at Crabby Mike’s?” Jen asked with a coy look on her face.

“Really? How did you hear about that already?”

Jen shrugged and looked up from her plate, wearing a smirk. “It’s a small town.”

“Ugh.” Charlie pushed her beans around. “I knew we should’ve gone to West Ashley.”

“Mike Martinez swung by the café for some coffee and a piece of pie this afternoon and mentioned he saw you.”

“Oh, he did?” Charlie asked.

“Yeah,” Jen said. “What’d you have?”

“I just had a soft-shell crab sandwich. You know, something different, that’s all.”

“They have an excellent soft-shell crab sandwich. I don’t blame you there. So how is Jason?”

“He’s good. He has a few cases he wants me to look at. And like I said, I brought something to him,” Charlie said, as if it was natural for her and Jason to still have lunch.

“I think it’s good that y’all are working together again. I’m sure he misses you,” Jack said, as he lifted his plate and pointed to the beans. Jen took his cue and gave him another serving.

“I miss him too,” Charlie said, taking a bite of rice and shrimp. The delicious savory flavors danced on her tongue. “Oh, my goddess, Jen, this is so good. So much better than the frozen lasagna I was going to bake.”

“Yeah, it is,” Evan piped up.

“Hey!” Charlie said.

“What? You’re the one that said it. I’m just agreeing with you,” Evan said.

“So, what is it you need my help with, Jen?” Charlie asked.

“Well, it’s almost Beltane. I’m having a potluck picnic in the backyard, and Ben will help me put up a Maypole. I could use some help with the food, decorations, and gathering wood for the bonfire.”

“I can help gather wood for the bonfire and the decorating,” Charlie said. “Best to leave making the honey cakes to you and Evangeline.”

“I told you I’d cut down some brush, honey,” Jack said.

“You’re not doing any such thing until that wound on your leg looks better,” Jen said.

“What wound?” Charlie asked.

“It’s nothing,” Jack said. “It’s just a scratch.”

“It’s not a scratch, and it’s not getting better,” Jen argued. “If you don’t stop doctoring it yourself, you will end up in the hospital.”

“Did you forget I am a doctor?” Jack said.

“No, I didn’t. Have you been checking your blood sugar like you’re supposed to?” Jen said. Jack scowled at her but didn’t answer. “Exactly. It won’t get better till you get your sugar under control.”

“How about we take the chainsaw out and clear out some brush in the woods on Saturday,” Charlie suggested. “Evan can help.”

“Wait. You know how to run a chainsaw?” Evan’s mouth gaped.

“I know how to do lots of things.” Charlie leaned in close and nudged her elbow against his arm.

“But, isn’t that kind of a guy thing?”

“You better not let your great-grandma Bunny hear that,” Jen said. “She’s the one that taught us all how to do those sorts of *guy things*.” Jen put her fork down and made air-quotes with her fingers.

Evan’s eyes widened. “Are you serious?”

“Yep. Bunny always told us there’s nothing a man can do that a woman shouldn’t know how to do,” Charlie said.

“Like what?” Evan asked.

“Change a flat without help,” Jen said.

“Check and change the oil in your car,” Charlie said.

“And your spark plugs too,” Jen chimed in.

“Shoot a gun at a moving target.” Charlie grinned.

“What?” Evan said. “That sounds a little weird. Why would the target need to be moving?”

“Bunny was a big believer in self-sufficiency. She taught all of us how to shoot and dress a squirrel and how to snare rabbits,” Jen said.

“Yep, if you’re trying to hunt something to eat, it will probably try to outrun you,” Charlie said. “You gotta remember Grandma Bunny was a teenager in the Great Depression. It wasn’t unusual to have to hunt for your food.”

“And she thought every woman should know how to run a chainsaw too?” Evan asked.

“I doubt she meant it should only be women. But I can tell you that knowing how to handle a chainsaw is an excellent skill to have. Especially after a hurricane,” Jen said.

“Oh.” A thoughtful expression crossed Evan’s handsome features. “Hadn’t thought about that. I mean, Dad just hired somebody to come out to cut up and haul off a couple of old tree branches that fell in the last storm.”

“Yep,” Charlie said. “When we were married, I used to do that.”

“Really? I don’t remember that.” Evan said.

“You were little the last time I did it.” Charlie finished the last bite of her rice. “Is there anything we can do for you, Uncle Jack?”

“I don’t need any essential oils, poultices, or spells cast in my direction. I’ll just stick with good old-fashioned medicine.” Jack spooned a forkful of rice into his mouth. Charlie nodded.

“How about you, Ben, and I go out Saturday morning?” Jen said.

“It’s been a while since I used a chainsaw, so I could definitely use the practice. You never know when it’ll come in handy.” She grinned and gave her son a wink.

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CHAPTER 12

Charlie closed the file on her screen and attached it to an email.

“Athena, can you search through your databases and see if you get any hits on these cases?”

Let's hope, she thought as she sent the message off to the DOL investigator. Athena had more resources at her fingertips than Charlie had in her entire toolbox. The frustrating part of this mole investigation was the poor or even nonexistent documentation of certain cases. Maybe that was a clue. She pulled out a little notebook she kept on her active cases and wrote the date in the page's corner, then wrote a note to herself.

Check other poorly documented cases to see if there's a correlation.

Do they have the same investigator?

A ding coming from her screen startled her out of her ruminations. A pop-up reminder appeared at the corner of her screen for one appointment she'd set the other day.

Charlie glanced at her watch. 10:25 a.m. She and Tom had to finalize details for the Cofield funeral scheduled for eleven. She'd finally get a look at Mrs. Cofield in the flesh. So far, she'd only talked to the son on the phone, and since George Allen Cofield had prepaid for his funeral well in advance, and made most of the arrangements himself, she'd had no reason to contact Mrs. Cofield.

Charlie hovered her finger over the intercom button. Tom had shown her how to use it before he disappeared into his office. But then she closed her fingers into a fist and shook her head. It seemed silly to use the intercom when she could just call for Tom by saying his name. She pictured him down the hall in the embalming room, dressed in green scrubs, carefully reconstructing the face of a man who'd died in a car accident. She tried not to connect too deeply with his thoughts. She had no interest in "seeing" too much graphic detail of the body he was working on, but she also wanted to make sure he had enough time to change back into his suit.

"Tom," Charlie whispered. "Don't forget, we have the Cofield's coming in at eleven to complete arrangements."

"Thank you, love. I'll be up in just a minute." Tom's silky voice flowed through her head.

Charlie tapped her finger on the Cofield name written on the desk calendar, then quickly jotted off a text to Jason.

Any chance you've looked at the Cofield ME report?

She waited for a response, but the soft chimes of the doorbell announced that someone entered the building. Charlie looked up, but she saw no one coming toward reception.

"Hello?" she called warily. No answer. She rose to her feet and brushed her hands over her black trousers to straighten them. Her sleeveless silvery gray chiffon blouse offered her no protection. The temperature in the lobby and reception area seemed to plummet. The hairs on her arms stood up, and a shiver went through her.

Charlie slipped from behind the tall counter into the lobby. Music drifted from the hall leading to the chapels. The same familiar tune that had haunted her dreams the night before. Charlie followed the sound to the last chapel on the left. When she stepped inside the room, she could hardly believe what she saw. Gone was the soft gray carpet, rows of pews and pulpit at the front of the chapel. The colorful stain-glassed window had disappeared. It was not truly a window, but a back-lit piece of art that lent the windowless chapel a more authentic feel. What was going on?

Charlie's black pumps clacked against the wooden floor that materialized in place of the carpeting. The room now reminded her of an old gymnasium. A mirror ball came on and spun, sparkling beneath a bright, shining light. Flecks like diamonds danced over the ceiling, walls, and floor. Music crackled like the old vinyl records that Bunny used to listen to. It was so loud Charlie could feel the notes thrumming against her skin, against her face, pounding against the back of her skull, making it ache a little.

The odor of cigarettes and stale beer seeped into her consciousness. Empty tables surrounded a dance floor, where a lone couple swayed. The words of the song drifted around them. Red, white and blue bunting hung along the walls and rippled in some invisible breeze, keeping time with the couple.

Charlie drew closer to get a better look at the boyish man in the iconic Army greens. There was something likable about his long thin face, framed by short inky hair and dark eyebrows. Something trustworthy. Something safe. He held his girl in his arms so gently, so tenderly, it caused a sweet pang in Charlie's heart. The girl rested her head against his shoulder, tucked under his chin as close to him as a second skin. Her slim shoulders shook just a little, and when she raised her head to look him in the eye, Charlie could see the reflection of tears on her cheeks.

"I wish you didn't have to go," she said, sniffing as she spoke. He lifted a hand and stroked her face, wiping away tears with his thumb.

"I swear as soon as I come back, I will convince your father how much I love you, Lottie. I swear it." He couldn't have been over eighteen. Just a babe. But here he was getting ready to fight a war. "I will write you every day."

"And I'll write you. Every day. I swear it. You just... you better come home to me."

"I will. I promise. Chucky Burrows, he's a guy in my outfit, he says we'll have Hitler licked by New Year's."

Her lips trembled a little, but despite her watery eyes, she managed a smile. "New Year's," she whispered.

“Until then...” He shifted one of his hands into his pocket and retrieved a small velvet box. He flipped open the top and the small diamond glinted in the spotlight, its sparkles joining the light of the mirror ball.

“You’re my girl now. But when I come home, I want you to be my wife.”

Her eyes widened at the sight of the ring, and she took a quick breath before she covered her mouth.

“I know it’s not much... but—”

“No, it’s perfect,” she whispered. A grin showing his relief crossed his lips, and he gently lifted her left hand to his mouth and kissed it before he kneeled before her.

“Charlotte Sylvia Barrymore, will you marry me?”

Tears flowed across her cheeks, wetting the floor as she nodded her head, unable to speak. He slipped the ring on her finger and she held it up to admire it.

“My father will never approve. No matter how hard you try to convince him.” The joy she’d had on her face a few moments before faded, replaced by a sadness that leaked out of her, and spread across the room like a fog.

“Do you love me, Lottie?” he asked.

“More than anything.”

“Then it won’t matter what your father says, will it? We can wait until you’re eighteen. Then you can do whatever you want. I promise I will take care of you as well as your daddy does. Now, are you going to marry me or not?”

Her eyes glistened in the mirror ball’s light and she mouthed the word, yes. She pulled him to his feet, wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him deeply.

“I will love you forever, Nathan Weintraub,” she said as she drew her lips away.

“And I will love you forever, too. Not even death could stop me.”

A shrill stutter of a laugh escaped her lips. “Not even my father could stop me.” Lottie hugged him tight, and they swayed to the notes of the dissonant music.

“Charlie? What are you doing in here?” Tom’s voice cut through the music in her head, bringing her out of the vision. She turned to face him.

“Are you... are you crying?” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a linen handkerchief, then pressed it into her hand.

Charlie sniffled and touched the warm wetness of her cheek. “I guess I am.”

“What happened?”

“Just a vision... a strange, bittersweet vision. I feel like my entire life is being overrun by ghosts these days.” She wiped her eyes with the handkerchief. She examined it before giving it back to him; the texture of the fine cloth felt good in her palm. “You’re the only man I know who still carries a handkerchief, you know.”

“It’s a hazard of being so old.” He smiled.

“You’re not old. Just old school. And I love you for it.” She leaned in and kissed him on the lips. The doorbell rang in the lobby announcing someone had entered the building. “That’s probably the Cofields.”

“Are you going to be all right?” Tom asked. “I can handle the meeting by myself if you need some time to clear your head.”

Charlie adjusted her blouse and painted a smile on her face. “I’m fine. Wild horses couldn’t keep me from meeting George Allen Cofield’s wife.”

CHAPTER 13

Charlie followed Tom to the lobby to find a handsome older woman and a man who was nearly the image of George Allen Cofield, only younger, and without the beer belly. Tom stepped forward to greet them, and Charlie noted the way the younger man moved, the timbre of his voice, how he exuded calm, comfort, and refinement just in the way he smiled and offered his hand.

“Good morning. You must be Mrs. Cofield,” Tom said. “I’m so sorry for your loss. This is my colleague, Charlie Payne. She and I are here to help guide you through this most difficult time. Whatever you need.”

Mrs. Cofield, a petite woman dressed in a navy pantsuit, gave Tom a sour look and touched her hand to her short, silver hair. She looked Tom up and down with her sharp brown eyes, magnified by her stylish frameless glasses. “We’re just here to get this over with.”

“Yes ma’am,” Tom said, unruffled.

“I’m Allen Cofield,” the man with Mrs. Cofield offered. “You must excuse my mother. She’s been through a lot in the last few days.”

Mrs. Cofield rolled her eyes but said nothing to dispute her son. Tom shook the man’s hand.

“I have no doubt, which is why we’re here to help you get through the service.”

“We really appreciate it. It’s good to know that y’all will take good care of my dad.” Allen’s voice caught in his throat,

and he paused just a minute, tightening his jaw. He sniffled and cleared his throat.

“Rest assured.” Tom touched the man’s arm. “We will take excellent care of your father. Why don’t we go to one of our conference rooms? We can sit down and discuss what happens next.”

“Sounds good. Thank you,” Allen said. Mrs. Cofield gripped the thin strap of her purse and didn’t look at Tom. The four of them entered one of the small conference rooms off the hall of offices. An enormous walnut table dominated the space, surrounded by six burgundy leather swivel chairs. Artwork of local wildlife hung on three of the pale gray walls, and on the far wall, a stained glass mural was lit from behind. Green and yellow glass reflected a lifelike scene of one of the nearby marshes, with a tidal creek snaking through it, the sun setting low in the sky.

Tom and Charlie took seats across from the Cofields, and Tom laid a folder he’d brought with him on the table.

“Your father had contacted us over a year ago to make arrangements for himself and for you, Mrs. Cofield. We have a prepaid plan that covers all the expenses. He gave us specific directions on how he wanted everything handled.”

Tom opened the folder and slid it across the table.

“As you can see, your husband wanted to be cremated and had already picked out this urn.” Tom tapped on a brochure with pictures of different urn options. “It will be inscribed with his initials and the dates of his life and death. Is there anything you’d like to add to it? There is some space available.”

Mrs. Cofield leaned back in her chair and stared Tom directly in the eye. “What if I don’t want that?” Her whole body stiffened with the challenge. “What if I want, what do they call it?” She snapped her fingers. “A green burial? Just wrap him up in a burlap sack, dig a hole and call it good.”

“Mom. Stop it,” Allen said, his voice full of warning. “Dad already paid for all of this. We should follow his wishes.”

“He didn’t consult me. It’s not what I want,” she snapped. “And he’s dead, so it doesn’t matter what happens to his body.”

“If he didn’t care, he wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of arranging all of this, so you and I didn’t have to worry about it.” Allen flipped to an invoice at the bottom of the pile of papers. “So that you didn’t have to figure out how to come up with fifteen thousand dollars.”

“It’s too damn expensive,” Mrs. Cofield said. “Seriously? Fifteen thousand dollars to cremate a body? We should’ve just built a big bonfire in the backyard and thrown him on it. We could’ve roasted marshmallows and kept that fifteen thousand for ourselves.”

Allen’s eyes widened at his mother’s response, and his face flooded with color. “I’m so sorry. Please excuse my mother. She is obviously out of her mind with grief.”

“I’d have to be out of my mind to pay fifteen grand for your father’s funeral. And why does it cost so much to have the memorial here?”

“I know the expenses seem high. But there are certain laws we must follow, and these are the plans your husband picked out. He wanted a memorial service that included all of our services. This total also includes services for you in the future.”

“Well, what if I don’t want all of those services?” Her eye’s narrowed to slits and her mouth twisted. Charlie could feel the challenge pouring off the woman in a wave of hot rage.

“It doesn’t matter what you want, Mom,” Allen said with a long-suffering sigh. “Dad already planned all this. He already paid for it. We’re just here to finalize it.”

Mrs. Cofield pushed the folder back at Tom, the paper snapping like firecrackers. “I don’t want any of this.”

“Mom, you said Dad didn’t consult you? On any of it? Not even your service?” Allen said.

“He may have said something about it, but I told him I didn’t care what he did with my body after I was dead ‘cause it wouldn’t matter. It’s not like I’d be here to take part in any of it.”

An awkward energy permeated the room and became even more awkward when George Allen Cofield appeared behind his wife’s chair. Charlie straightened up and couldn’t take her eyes off the spirit. Tom seemed not to notice, or at least not to acknowledge George Allen.

“How would you like to proceed then?”

“We should go with what my father paid for. He obviously knew exactly what he wanted,” Allen said, giving his mother a pointed look. “I, for one, am relieved he didn’t want us to be burdened with the cost during this difficult time.”

Mrs. Cofield snorted. “He didn’t do it for us. He did it for himself.”

The lights overhead flickered, and the fluorescent bulbs began to buzz.

George Allen Cofield’s cheeks filled with air, and he blew out his breath and gritted his teeth. He wrapped his hands around his wife’s neck as if to choke her. Charlie stood up and the chair she’d been sitting in hit the wall behind her. The pictures shook a little from the force. The lights flickered again. Her cheeks flooded with heat and she could feel the bewildered stares of Allen Cofield and his mother.

“I’m so sorry,” Charlie muttered. “I thought we had the maintenance crew change these lights recently. I’m sure I can *stop it*,” Charlie said, emphasizing the command while she glared at George Allen Cofield.

“I’m just gonna flip this light off and back on, and I’m sure everything will be back to normal.”

“It’s all right, Charlie,” Tom said in his soothing voice. “I’ll take care of it.”

“It’s awfully chilly in here,” Mrs. Cofield said. “Can you fix that too?”

“You see what I have to put up with?” George Allen said. “Nothing is ever good enough for her. All I wanted was for things to be easy for her, and she doesn’t even care.”

“George Allen.” Tom’s voice drifted through Charlie’s head. “Remove your hands from your wife’s neck.”

George Allen yanked his hands away fast, as though he’d been shocked with a cattle prod. “How are you doing that?”

“You’re wasting your energy. You cannot physically affect her yet,” Tom’s voice said, but his face remained calm, neutral.

“Yet?” George asked. The lights flickered overhead again, and a buzzing sound emitted from the bulbs.

“Should I flip the switch off?” Charlie asked.

“No,” Tom said. “I’m sure things will calm down in a moment.”

“Maybe we should move to the other conference room,” Charlie said.

“I don’t think that will help,” Tom said.

“I don’t know what kind of operation you people are running here, but this is ridiculous.” Mrs. Cofield rose from her chair. George Allen let out a scream that made every hair on Charlie’s body stand up. He wrapped his hands around his wife’s throat, squeezing and shaking. His lips curled into a snarl and his jaw tightened. Mrs. Cofield began to cough as if she had a tickle in her throat.

“Charlie, can you get her some water, please?” Tom asked.

“Of course.” Charlie made her way to the large credenza beneath the stained glass. Inside the first door was a mini-fridge filled with small bottles of water. Charlie grabbed two bottles and passed them to the Cofields.

“Here, drink this,” she said as the lights flickered again.

“If you’ll excuse me for just a moment,” Tom said. “I’m going to check the breaker.”

Mrs. Cofield continued to cough as she waved him off. Her son reached over and cracked open her bottle of water. She drank it down quickly.

Tom stepped out of the room, closing the door behind him. The buzz of the fluorescent lights grew louder. Charlie glanced up at them, afraid they might burst and rain down tiny shards of glass on their heads.

“Stop that!” Tom’s voice slid through Charlie’s head at the same time he drifted into the room through the door in his full reaper form. His dark robes rustled around him, the large scythe he carried in one bony hand glinted in the light. Charlie’s heart sped up, and her gaze bounced to Mrs. Cofield and her son. They showed no signs they could see Tom. George Allen tightened his grip on his wife’s neck, his face even more determined than before. Mrs. Cofield continued to cough into her hand.

Her son patted her on the back. “You okay, Mama?”

“I’m all right,” she said between coughs. “It’s like I’ve got something caught in my throat.”

“You are not gonna stop me, reaper!” George Allen said.

“Yes, I am. Now let her go and come with me quietly.” Tom lifted his scythe up and reared his arm back with ease. “I don’t want to have to strike you down. But I will.”

George Allen let go of his wife’s neck and stepped back. His chest still heaved.

Tom lowered his scythe and held out his empty hand. “Good. Letting go of that emotion is the first step. Take my hand. Let me guide you to your final resting place.”

“No.” George shook his head. “No way. I’m not done here yet.” George Allen disappeared through the wall behind him.

Tom let out a little grunt of irritation and followed the spirit through the wall. Mrs. Cofield cleared her throat.

“Are you feeling any better?” Charlie asked. She touched the woman’s shoulder, and an image flashed through her head. Mrs. Cofield and another man sitting in a hot tub—the same

hot tub Charlie assumed that George Allen had died in—laughing, and kissing and clinking glasses of bubbly. Charlie let her hand fall to her side.

“I’m fine,” Mrs. Cofield said and cleared her throat. “I guess if he’s already paid for it, there’s not much I can do about it now.”

The door opened, and Tom walked through in his human form. “You know, Mrs. Cofield, if you are that unhappy, I can always refund the money for the arrangements your husband made for you.”

“How much would that be?” Mrs. Cofield asked.

“Approximately half,” Tom said.

“I don’t think you should do that, Mom.”

“I don’t think it’s up to you, Allen,” Mrs. Cofield said.

“Okay, fine, but it would actually help me out if all this is taken care of now. So, I don’t have to make any decisions, you know...later. I’m actually relieved that Dad did all this for us.”

Mrs. Cofield’s hard face softened, and she patted her son’s hands. Her lips curved up in the first show of empathy for her son’s feelings. “All right, if it makes you feel better, we’ll honor his wishes. It is already paid for, so I guess that’s a blessing. Just promise me one thing.”

“Anything?” Allen said.

“Promise me you will not put me in the same crypt as your father.”

“You don’t have to worry about that, Mrs. Cofield. Your husband ensured that you would have your own space,” Tom said. “The mausoleum your husband selected has individual interments for the urns. You can also decide later, Allen, whether you’d rather keep your mother’s urn with you. In which case, we can release the space and refund the money for the mausoleum.”

“That sounds good to me. What about you, Mom?” Allen said.

Mrs. Cofield shrugged her shoulders. “Fine. What do I have to sign?”

“There are a few more things we should go over before you sign anything.”

“Can I get some more water, please?” Mrs. Cofield said.

“Of course.” Charlie smiled and retrieved another bottle of water.

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CHAPTER 14

“So, what can you tell me?” Charlie asked. She sat at the table in her little kitchen with her head propped on one hand and her phone pressed against her ear. Evan sat across from her with his laptop open and a notebook next to it. Charlie glanced at Tom, standing at the counter chopping lemons and herbs to coat the chicken pieces that he’d salted and peppered. The pungent scent of onions hung in the air.

“There’s nothing about his death that looks suspicious,” Jason said.

“I know. You said that already. You should’ve seen this woman.” Charlie rose from the bistro chair. She touched Evan’s shoulder as she passed him, but he didn’t look up. The cool hardwood floor of the living room felt good against her bare feet. A moment later, she opened the door and stepped onto the front porch for a little privacy.

“She was just so angry and petulant. She didn’t want to spend any money or time talking about her husband’s funeral. And she didn’t shed one tear while she was there.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Charlie. People grieve in their own way. It doesn’t mean she killed him.”

“This wasn’t grief. Trust me. This was pure spite.”

“Well, I don’t know how you spitefully kill somebody from dehydration and heatstroke. The truth is, he drank too much, passed out in his hot tub, and it killed him. It’s tragic. But I’m sorry, it’s not murder. The ME will probably rule it an

accident on the final report, so there's not much I can do," Jason said.

"I touched her, and I saw her and some other man sitting in that hot tub drinking and carrying on."

"That proves nothing other than she might be having an affair which last time I checked isn't a crime."

"She killed him, Jason. I can't prove it, but I know it."

"Listen, it'll be a few weeks before the ME has the full toxicology report. If there is anything hinky, I'll check into it. But just keep this in mind. Based on his blood alcohol level and how the body presented, nobody held him down in the hot tub, Charlie."

"Did anybody even look at her?"

"Yeah, of course, we took her statement. She went to bed, and when she woke up around five, she realized her husband wasn't in bed with her. She got up and checked on him. She found him dead and promptly called 911. She didn't wait, and it wasn't suspicious. The officer that took her statement said that she was appropriate in her responses."

"Well, she sure wasn't appropriate today."

"Maybe she's pissed at her husband for dying. I know it's not rational, but it is one stage of grief. People get mad when they get left."

"Yeah, especially if they get cut out of their husband's will," Charlie said.

"Wills are a matter of public record, and I'm having that pulled too, so I'll have more info about that later. But unless you come up with some hard evidence that she purposefully caused his death, you're gonna have to let it go. I can't take the word of a ghost."

"It's just so frustrating." Charlie scrubbed her fingers across her scalp.

Tom opened the front door and stuck his head out. "Dinner's almost ready." She held up one finger to let him

know she needed another minute. He nodded and closed the door behind her.

“Listen, I’ve gotta go. I’m meeting Lisa for dinner,” Jason said.

“All right. Remember, don’t ask her until we can cleanse that ring,” Charlie said.

“Yes, mother.”

“Go ahead and joke. But if that ring’s not clean, you may regret it for the rest of your life.”

“Damn, you’re dramatic sometimes,” Jason scoffed.

“Jewelry is notorious for holding onto energy. You don’t want it bringing you bad luck, do you?”

“Are you serious?” Jason chuckled. “I’ve heard you talk about a lot of things, but bad luck isn’t one of them.”

“It’s not luck exactly. It’s more like bad energy. And if it’s got bad energy, Lisa won’t touch it. She has way more sensitivity for reading the energy of things than I do.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Jason said, but Charlie got the feeling he didn’t believe her.

It’s just a ring.

His thought came across loud and clear. Arguing with him further would be pointless. Charlie frowned. “Fine. Have a good dinner. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Charlie said and ended the call before he could respond.

When she returned to the kitchen, she found Tom wiping down the counter. He put the cutting board into the sink. “He didn’t believe you?”

“It’s hard to say. His hands are tied. What I need is some evidence. Hard evidence.”

Charlie crossed the kitchen and kissed Tom on the cheek. “Thank you for cooking dinner.” She wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned her head against his shoulder. He enveloped her with his arms and kissed her forehead.

“I am happy to do it,” Tom said. “You had a hard day.”

“Not any harder than yours,” she said.

“Yes, but I’m used to it. And you did two jobs today. You helped me out, and you did your work for the DOL. How did that go?”

“Not very well, I’m afraid. We’ve run into brick wall after brick wall with finding this mole. The only real clue I have at this point is that the case files with the least detail stand out because of their lack of information. So, I’ll check all those case files again and see if I can find a correlation.”

“They know you’re onto them now,” Tom said. “Just be careful. Okay?”

“Of course.” Charlie tilted her head up and pressed her lips to his.

Evan made a disgusted grunt. “Please. I’m trying to work here.”

Charlie and Tom laughed. He hugged her tighter. “You know, I’ve enjoyed having you work at the funeral home this week,” Tom whispered.

“I have too. Which reminds me…” She pulled out of his arms and unlocked her phone. “I need to call Palmetto Point Florist tomorrow morning and order the flowers for the Dugan funeral on Monday. It’s on Joy’s list, and I figure I should just do it.”

“That’d be wonderful. Thank you. I didn’t have a chance to do it today.”

Charlie typed a quick reminder into her phone and set up an alarm. “I’ll do it first thing in the morning.”

“I don’t know what we’re gonna do when Palmetto Point Florist closes.”

“Closes? What’re you talking about?” Charlie asked. “They’re the biggest florist in town and the only one I could find that does large funeral sprays at a reasonable price.”

“I know.” Tom shrugged. “But rumor on the street is Mr. Gannon has decided to close. Evidently, his son isn’t interested in taking over the business, and he hasn’t had a buyer interested in paying what he’s asking.”

“Well, that’s a shame. They’ve been a fixture in Palmetto Point for as long as I can remember.”

“I know. Now I’ll have to go off the island for flowers, which means I’ll have to raise my prices, and I hate that,” Tom said.

“You’re much more reasonably priced than Ludlow and Sons, and you have a wider variety of options. So even if you have to raise your prices a little to cover the flowers, you will still be a better choice for somebody who’s budget-minded.”

“I appreciate you saying that,” Tom said.

“Evan, honey,” Charlie said. “Why don’t you put your laptop and books away and get ready for dinner, okay?”

“Sure.” Evan closed his computer and unplugged it from the wall. “You know, it’s too bad you couldn’t just go work for Tom full time, Mom.”

Charlie chuckled. “I’m sure Tom doesn’t want me around 24/7.”

Evan shrugged and packed his laptop into his bag along with his notebook. “It’s been a good week. You’ve been a lot less stressed. That’s all.” He swung his backpack over his shoulder and walked away toward his room.

“A lot less stressed, huh?” Charlie shook her head. She turned to find Tom with his hands resting on the counter. “Do you think that’s true?”

“I think this is one of those times where that adage, ‘From the mouth of babes’ applies.”

“Do you think I’m stressed? I mean in a normal week.”

“I think your job at the DOL can be stressful. That doesn’t mean you don’t enjoy it. But you put a lot of pressure on yourself, and then you feel very guilty when you’re there and not here.”

“The long commute doesn’t help either,” Charlie admitted.

“It’s almost three hours one way. You leave at 6 o’clock in the morning, and most days you don’t get home until seven or eight. Then you have just enough time to sleep and turn around and do it all again. And that’s assuming that you aren’t traveling to some other place.”

“I know, but,” Charlie shook her head, “it’s not like I can just up and quit a job. I need a paycheck. And health benefits.”

“I know,” Tom said. “I sometimes wonder if Ben isn’t taking advantage of you.”

“What? That’s crazy.”

“Maybe not consciously. But he knows that you want to do a good job. That you’re driven to help people. Maybe that’s why he counts on you so much. So far, Will Tucker has not turned out to be the most reliable person on the planet.”

“I know.” Charlie sighed and shook her head. Will had almost gotten her, and himself killed a few months back when he’d pissed off a vampire by killing most of its nest. It still grieved her how much danger she put herself and her family in by getting involved in Will’s extra-curricular vampire hunt. Since his recovery, he didn’t seem all that interested in solving cases with her. “I don’t have to figure anything out tonight. Not even what happened to George Allen Cofield?”

“Honestly, you don’t have to figure that out. We could set a trap for him, and I could just take him. Be done with it,” Tom said.

“I can’t believe he got away from you,” Charlie said.

“He is a crafty devil.”

“I suspect that even if you took him, he’d haunt me until I prove that his wife killed him.”

“Confront him then and put the onus on him. If he believes she murdered him, then he’s the one who has to prove it.”

“Sure, like that would stop him.” She chuckled. “

“You never know,” Tom said, waggling his eyebrows. “It just might.”

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CHAPTER 15

Charlie salivated at the aroma of smoked pig hanging in the air when she and Evan arrived home after work. The smell of burning hickory wood wafted across the expansive green lawn between Charlie's little cottage and her uncle's house. The comforting odor reminded her of red-checked tablecloths, warm saucy barbecue on soft freshly baked buns with all the fixings: coleslaw, Evangeline's dill pickle potato salad, deviled eggs with just a little paprika sprinkled over them, and a scoop of blackberry cobbler with vanilla ice cream for dessert.

Her stomach growled at the thought, and she pulled into her parking space and turned off the engine. "I am starving. How about you, honey?"

"Uh, sure," Evan said, his eyes glued to the phone in his hand.

"Come on, hon. We've got to change and get over there. They're waiting for us."

"Okay," he said, but didn't move.

Charlie reached over and took the phone out of his hands.

"Hey!"

"Move. Now, please."

Evan rolled his eyes and muttered something she couldn't hear. Charlie got out of the car and waved at Uncle Jack standing around with a beer in one hand talking to Ben. Last night she'd seen her him come out of the house around eleven

to tend to the smokers. She'd climbed into bed not long after she saw him check the propane tanks and feed more woodchips into the smokers, one for pork butt, another for chicken.

Jen had already moved the extra-long picnic table from beneath the shed roof covering her father's mower to a more prominent location in the yard.

From her front porch, Charlie saw most of her family milling around the table, running back and forth from the house to the yard, or standing near the smokers drinking beer. Brightly colored ribbons fluttered from tall maypole erected for next week's Beltane festivities. Just the thought of fresh barbecue made her stomach growl with anticipation.

Evan waited on the porch, sulking. She handed his phone back to him and unlocked the door.

"Do not get into another conversation. Go change your clothes, please, and if you do it without complaining, I might let you take your phone with you."

Evan opened his mouth as if to argue.

"But if you say one word, the phone stays here. Are we clear?"

Evan rolled his eyes and disappeared into his room without a response. She was thankful he didn't put up a fight.

She kicked off her heels and left them in a pile by the front door before heading to her bedroom. It took only a minute to shed the silky pink blouse and stiff navy dress pants she'd worn to work. She returned them to their hangers and hung them on the doorknob of the closet to remind herself to take them to the dry cleaner.

A sleeveless chambray button-up dress with a tie at the waist caught her eye, and she ran her hand over the soft fabric. She held it up by the hanger and brought it to her nose. Even though it had been months since it'd been warm enough to wear the short dress, it still smelled of lavender. She slipped her arms into it and quickly buttoned it up, then cinched the tie

around her waist. A pair of woven navy polka dot flip-flops completed her outfit, and she closed the closet.

A few minutes later, Evan dragged himself out of his room, phone in hand, held close to his chest.

Charlie retrieved the seven-layer salad out of the fridge and put the dish on the counter. She peeled back the plastic wrap and sprinkled a little more cheese on top.

“Jen’s having you cook something?” Evan asked, with a little too much snark in his tone for Charlie’s liking.

“It’s more like arranging ingredients. And it’s delicious. You love my seven-layer salad.”

“Sure,” he shrugged, “if you say so.”

“Hey! Just for that, you get to carry it.” Charlie picked up the 9 x 13 Pyrex dish and put it into his hands. Then she grabbed the three big bags of corn chips off the counter and dropped them into a large tote, along with her purse.

Tom waited for them at the bottom of the steps. He’d changed into something more appropriate for a late afternoon picnic, donning a pair of khaki shorts and a coral-colored polo shirt.

“Can I help you with that?” he asked.

“Sure, that be great.” Evan handed the dish to Tom.

“Evan, don’t you dare,” Charlie scolded. “I asked you to carry that over to Uncle Jack’s. Not Tom.” Evan’s face deflated, and he walked ahead of his mother.

Tom kissed her on the cheek, and she pressed two of the bags of corn chips into his hands.

“You look wonderful,” he breathed. “I like that dress.”

“I enjoy being home by five so I can put on a dress like this.” Charlie smoothed the blue fabric.

“I like that you’re home by five, too,” he said. “It means I get to see you more often.”

“It’ll be back to the grind next week.” She sighed and started across the yard. Jen looked up from spreading a blue and white checked tablecloth across the old wooden picnic table.

“Is that for me?” Jen asked Evan.

“Sure is,” he said and handed the dish off to her. He threw a glance over his shoulder at his mother before walking away to gather with the men, their Uncle Jack, her boss and cousin’s boyfriend Ben Sutton, and Jason Tate.

Jen took the seven-layer salad and placed it on a second nearby table along with all the other side dishes. “This looks delicious, Charlie,” Jen said.

“Thanks.” Charlie put one of the bags of chips on the table next to her salad and took the two bags out of Tom’s hands. A couple of paper shopping bags held potato chips, and Charlie put the corn chips on top.

“I didn’t think the Beltane feast was until next Friday,” Tom said.

“Oh, I’m taking four of the pork butts to the restaurant tomorrow for the Barbecue Sandwich Special. The rest I’ll wrap up and freeze till next week’s celebration,” Jen said. Her pale skin practically glowed as she spoke. “Beltane is my second favorite holiday. Lots to rejoice about. Summer is coming. It’s my favorite time of year.”

“Where’s Daphne?” Charlie asked.

“It’s Darius’s grandmother’s birthday today,” Lisa said, coming up behind Charlie. A long braid of her strawberry blond hair rested over one shoulder against the green V-necked T-shirt she wore. She grabbed a potato chip from the tray, scooped out a generous amount of the onion dip, and popped it in her mouth.

“Yeah, unfortunately, she couldn’t join us today,” Evangeline said as she approached the table carrying an oversized bowl.

“Here, Miss Evangeline, let me get that for you,” Tom said. He took the heavy bowl and placed it on the table next to

another sizable bowl full of a tasty-looking green salad mix.

“This looks delicious,” Tom said. “What is it?”

“It’s my famous potato salad.” Evangeline gave him a wink. “How are you doing, Charlie?”

“I’m good.”

Evangeline patted her on her upper arm. “I’m glad to hear that. You look happy. It suits you.”

“Thanks.” Charlie threw Tom a befuddled look. Had she looked unhappy before? Tom shrugged as if he wasn’t sure what her aunt was talking about.

“Hey, Charlie,” Jason said, as he approached her. The heathered orange T-shirt with the Clemson Tigers insignia he wore showed off his tanned arms.

“Hey,” she said.

“Can I talk to you for a second?” He jerked his thumb away from the crowd.

“Sure, just let me check one thing,” Charlie said. “Evangeline, do you need any help with anything?”

“No. I think I have everything under control. You go talk to Jason if you need to. I get the funny feeling that he needs to talk to you,” she said and winked at Jason. How much had Evangeline figured out? In a lot of ways, her intuition rivaled Charlie’s.

Jason’s tanned cheeks flushed dark pink, and he offered an awkward smile. “Yes, ma’am.”

Charlie followed Jason across the yard toward the steps leading to her uncle’s dock. He stood back and let her go first, and she glanced over her shoulder before descending the steep stairs and found Tom staring at her.

Is everything okay? Tom’s silky voice drifted through her head.

Just fine. She gave him a brief wave and descended the steps. “What’s this all about, Jason?”

“I’m gonna ask her tonight.”

Charlie stepped onto the dock and rounded on him. “I think you’re being hasty. Please, just leave the ring with me and Jen.”

Jason shook his head and walked to the end of the dock. The green marsh grass rippled in the breeze and stretched out before them. The last rays of sunshine dipped below the trees that hugged the curves of the river, painting the sky with deep pinks and oranges. The only thing that hinted at the presence of other humans were docks dotting the river’s edge, overlooking the water. Charlie joined him and took in the view.

“I think this is a bad idea,” Charlie said.

“It’s just a ring, Charlie,” he protested. He turned to face her. “Maybe you don’t want me to ask her at all. Is that it?” The defensiveness in his voice threw her a little.

“No. That’s not it,” she said. Her stomach coiled into a knot. Lisa loved him; Charlie knew, but she had no idea if Lisa had ever told Jason why marriage frightened her so badly. His persistence either meant she had, and he was convinced he could change things, or that she hadn’t, and he was working toward something blindly.

“What then? Is it the ring? When she says yes, you and Jen can do your ritual thing on it.”

“What happens if she says no?” Charlie said the words so quietly she wasn’t sure if he heard her or not. He shifted his gaze to the horizon.

Jason shook his head. “There’s no way that’s gonna happen.”

“Has she specifically said, ‘Jason, let’s get married someday?’” Charlie said, over-animating her impression of her cousin’s voice.

“No, but she hasn’t said that she didn’t want to get married either. And every time I’ve talked about it, she’s been open to the idea. The only way I know I will know for sure is if I ask her.”

“Fair enough. I just love you both, and I don’t want to see either of you hurt.”

“Awww. You love me?” he teased.

“Shut up.” She nudged his arm with her elbow and laughed. “You know I do. I want you to be prepared for either a yes or a no. That’s all.” Charlie forced a smile

“So, I need your help,” he said.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Help me find an opening. You know how these dinners go. Everybody’s talking and laughing.”

“All right,” she sighed. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you,” Jason grinned and kissed her on the cheek.

“So, did you bring the case files you want me to look at?”

“I did.”

“Good, I wanted to talk to you about another dream I’ve been having. About a kidnapped boy. I got a good look at him and his kidnapper. But I don’t know when this happened. I did a scan of the state papers and couldn’t find anything.”

“Okay. I can run it through my database and see what comes up.”

“Great. The kidnapper said if the parents didn’t pay the ransom, he would traffic the kid. I want to stop that from happening if I can.”

“Me, too.”

In the distance, the laughter of her family drifted across the yard. Charlie nodded her head toward the noise. “We better get back there. Sounds like we’re missing out on all the fun.”

“Well, we don’t want that, do we?”

“Nope.” Charlie climbed the steps to join the others.

CHAPTER 16

“Charlie,” Lisa said and filled her fork with potato salad. “Jen said you’ve been working at the funeral home this week. How’d that go?”

“Pretty well, I guess. I mean, I’ve been able to perform my DOL duties.” Charlie glanced at Ben, sitting across the table next to Jen. “And answer phones and meet with clients.”

“That’s great. So, Tom, who do y’all use as your florist?” Lisa asked out of the blue.

“I’m very partial to Palmetto Point Florist. Although Peter Gannon is retiring soon, so I’m not sure what we’re gonna do. His son isn’t interested in taking over the business, and so far he’s had no buyers,” Tom said.

“That’s what I’ve heard. I do his taxes. It’s a successful business. And it’s been in the community forever.”

“You should buy it,” Jen said.

“Lisa?” Jason said. “She already has a career.”

“I know that,” Jen said, undeterred. “Lisa, you’re so good with plants and floral arrangements. You could buy it as an investment. Hire a manager. Maybe get your hands dirty working Valentine’s Day or Mother’s Day. I bet you’d love it.”

Lisa grew quiet, as if she were thinking over her sister’s suggestion.

“You know, it’s funny you say that because Mr. Gannon said almost the exact same thing to me when I met with him

this week.” She put her fork down on her plate. “I have some money saved.”

“Wait. Are you serious?” Jason asked.

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “I’d need to run the numbers and see what kind of rate of return I’d get, but it sounds interesting to me.”

“Don’t you think we should discuss it first?” Jason asked.

“What’s there to discuss? It wouldn’t affect us.”

“But it could. I mean, you’re already busy with your job...” Jason flashed a quick help-me glance at Charlie.

Charlie’s eyes widened, and she mouthed the words, Don’t do it.

He slid off the end of the bench, pulled a small velvet-covered box from his front pocket and kneeled beside Lisa.

“Oh my,” Jen muttered and covered her mouth with her hand, her blue eyes wide. Ben Sutton, who sat next to Jen, squirmed a little on the bench and gave Jen a side-eyed glance. Uncle Jack had his fork halfway to his mouth and made a face before he set it down on his plate. Evangeline pressed her hands together in front of her breasts and grinned with approval.

But none of the joy going around the table seemed to include Lisa. The turmoil rolled off her cousin like a small tsunami that only Charlie could feel.

“What are you doing?” Lisa leaned close and asked quietly.

“Lisa Marie Holloway,” Jason began, his voice shaking. “You are the love of my life. And I cannot imagine my future without you.”

In one movement, he pulled the top of the box open and revealed the half-carat diamond ring flanked by two emerald gemstones. All the color drained from Lisa’s face, and her hand drifted to her throat.

“Will you marry me?”

Lisa swallowed hard. “It’s beautiful. It’s my birthstone.”

“I know.” Jason chuckled.

Lisa took the box and gently brushed her hand over the stones. “This is... beautiful and thoughtful. But...”

“But?” Jason said.

“Can we talk about this in private?” She closed the box with a loud snap that echoed across the table and handed it back to him.

“What?” Jason said, looking as if she had slapped him across the face.

“Please?” Lisa gave her family a side-eyed glance.

Looking away, pretending they weren’t watching, probably would’ve been the right thing to do, but no one at the table shifted. No one moved or breathed.

“Okay,” Jason whispered. He looked thrown as if he’d prepared for every outcome except this one.

Jason rose to his feet. His cheeks turned red and splotchy. He looked at the table, meeting no one’s eyes, then followed Lisa up to the house.

“I wonder what she’s gonna say,” Evan said. “It doesn’t look good, whatever it is.”

Charlie turned her head and fixed her gaze on her son. “Hush. It’s not nice to talk about people when they’re not present.”

“Oh-kay. But y’all do it all the time,” Evan argued.

Charlie’s face flushed with heat and she tried not to lose her temper. “Honey, just do as I say please.”

Evan rolled his eyes and pulled his phone out of his pocket. A moment later the back door slammed, and Jason rushed down the steps. He stopped at the bottom and gathered his composure before approaching the table.

“Dinner was delicious, Jen and Evangeline. But... um... there’s something I forgot to do.” He jerked his thumb toward

his car and stepped away from the table. “So, I’ve gotta go.”

“Of course, honey,” Evangeline said. “You drive carefully, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, his voice gruff with emotion. He pivoted and headed for his car. Charlie was on her feet and across the yard by the time he unlocked his doors.

“Jason, wait,” Charlie said. He let out a heavy sigh.

“Just let me go.”

“Are you okay?”

“You tried to warn me. I should’ve listened.” He shoved the box with the diamond and emerald ring into her hand and got into his car. Charlie stared down at the box, and he pulled out of the driveway, his tires spitting gravel as he fled the scene.

Charlie went back to the table. “She said no.”

“Dammit,” Jen muttered and threw her napkin on her plate. She hopped to her feet and headed inside. No one seemed to take a breath until the screen door slammed.

“Holy shit,” Ben muttered.

“Ben,” Charlie scolded.

“Sorry, it’s just, did anybody know that he was gonna do that tonight?”

“Charlie?” Uncle Jack said, looking directly at her.

“Yeah, I knew. I tried to stop him, but I don’t know what they’ve talked about privately. And I couldn’t very well ask.”

“Ask what?” Ben asked.

“If she told him about her previous engagements.”

“Wait. Engagements? As in more than one?”

“Yeah.” Charlie took a seat on the end of the bench.

“What happened there?” Ben asked.

Charlie looked to her uncle for guidance.

“I think you can tell him. It’s not like it’s a big secret,” Jack said.

“They died.”

“What?” Ben and Tom said at the same time.

“Yeah. She’s thinks she cursed now. But I couldn’t very well tell Jason that. God, this is all my fault. I should’ve just told him flat out not to buy that ring.”

“So... is she cursed?” Ben asked.

“No, she is not cursed.” Evangeline aimed her comments at Ben. “She’s made some mistakes and had some tragedy in her life. But it’s not a curse.”

“Are you sure?” Ben asked. “I mean, two dead fiancés sounds like a curse to me.”

“Technically, it kind of is,” Charlie said. “It happened when we were teenagers. A fight over a boy ended up with one of our friends saying some ugly words.”

“So, a curse,” Ben said. “You know, we have a ton of resources at the DOL. I’m sure we could break it.”

“That’s the thing about this curse. It only exists in her mind. The only thing that could break it is the realization she’s not actually cursed.” Evangeline patted Ben on the shoulder.

“So true love’s kiss couldn’t fix it?” Evan asked. “I know they fight and everything, but even I can see they love each other. And I’ve seen them kiss.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that, honey.” Charlie wrapped her arm around Evan’s shoulder and touched her head to his. The screen door opened, and Jen descended the stairs.

“Listen, y’all.” Evangeline clapped her hands together. “They will work things out. I have great faith in the two of them. They’re meant to be.”

“Evangeline’s right. All we can do is be there for them when they’re ready. So, let’s finish up our dinner. There’s still a lot to do for Beltane next week,” Jen said.

“Sure.” Charlie took one last bite of her barbecue sandwich but pushed the rest of it away.

“I’d like to get the fire ring set up tonight if possible since I’ve got some strapping men here to lift stones,” Jen said.

“No problem, honey.” Ben picked up his sandwich and took another bite.

“Anything we can do to help,” Tom said.

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CHAPTER 17

Charlie awoke to the sound of the television in the living room. A couple having angry words filtered into her consciousness. She groaned and glanced at the clock. The numbers glowed red: 2:26 a.m. Why was Evan up watching television at this hour? And why was he watching something as horrible as a fight between a man and a woman? She pushed her light quilt aside and got to her feet.

“Evan Michael,” she began and entered the living room. “Do you know what time it is?”

The quiet darkness of the room stopped her cold. A black television screen stared back at her. She walked over to the television and touched it, to ferret out any sign that it had been on recently. Nothing. The heavy plastic casing was cool to the touch. Maybe it had been a dream.

Her parched throat caused a tickle, and she went to the kitchen for a drink. She took the Brita pitcher from the fridge and poured herself a half glass of water, then gulped it. The sound of loud white noise drifted from the living room, and a ghostly blue glow lit the space. Charlie put her empty glass on the counter and cautiously approached the living room. The screen switched from the noisy snow of a channel without a signal to a couple she’d never seen together. George Allen and Phyllis Cofield filled the 42-inch flat screen. The black and white images reminded her of security camera footage, and the quality of the video impressed her. She’d seen much worse.

The couple stood almost nose to nose, screaming at each other. Before Charlie could figure out what they were fighting

about, Phyllis threw a dishtowel at George Allen, turned, and left the room. The towel fell to the floor, and George Allen bent over to pick it up, grunting and cursing her under his breath.

Charlie noted the spacious kitchen where he now stood. He opened a cabinet and pulled down a highball glass, then took a bottle of whiskey from another cabinet. He added a few cubes of ice and poured himself a generous amount of the golden amber liquid before he retrieved a beach towel from the back of a barstool at the long kitchen island. He took a sip of his whiskey, and the scene flickered and switched angles and location.

A large back deck filled the screen, and she watched as George Allen Cofield walked through the sliding glass door. With his towel slung over one shoulder, and his whiskey in hand, he put the glass—now half-empty—on the edge of the hot tub on one corner of the deck. He draped the towel over the back of a chair belonging to the nearby patio dining table set. Then he leaned over as if to check something on the side of the hot tub. A moment later, he stood up, wearing a satisfied expression on his face. In one quick motion, he slipped off his bathing suit, and it fell around his ankles. Charlie tried not to grimace at the sight of a naked man that she didn't know very well. She knew he died naked. Still, it wasn't the most comfortable thing to watch. He carefully lowered himself into the hot tub and downed the rest of his drink.

The screen flickered again with snow, and Phyllis Cofield appeared at the screen door of the patio. She opened it and poked her head out.

“How about we make up,” she said. “I don't like to go to bed angry.”

George Allen drew one arm from his side and held it out, sloshing heated water onto the deck. He opened and closed his fingers, gesturing for her to approach. She stepped out onto the deck, and judging from the sheen of the fabric, she wore a long silky robe over silky pajamas, accessorized by a sly smile. She held a bottle of whiskey and took his wet hand in hers and let him kiss the back of her fingers. She put the bottle

down on the edge of the hot tub next to the glass, and the two of them conversed for a few moments, the words garbled and unintelligible to her ears.

“Dammit,” Charlie whispered. She wished she could’ve heard their conversation. Instead, she concentrated on their body language. They seemed easier with each other than they had during their argument. All the hostility she’d seen when she first saw them on screen had disappeared into the warm night. He kissed the back of her hand again, even more tenderly than before. Charlie felt a little guilty for spying on them this way. Maybe things weren’t as bad as George had let on. Maybe he was jumping to conclusions because he just didn’t want to be dead.

The screen jumped again, and Charlie noticed the whiskey bottle was almost empty. George leaned back in the hot tub, his eyes closed, his body too relaxed. It looked like the ME’s report was right. Poor George Allen Cofield drank until he passed out. The heat of the water mixed with alcohol had caused him to become dehydrated, and his unconscious state caused him to suffer a heatstroke.

“Oh, George Allen,” Charlie muttered. She grabbed the remote to the television, pointed it at the screen and pressed the power button, but the television didn’t respond.

“Dammit,” she said again. She edged the dresser holding the television out from the wall and yanked the power cord from the outlet. The television went dark for a second, but then it turned back on. Her heart sank to her gut and then bounced against her ribcage like a rubber ball. Sometimes she hated being at the mercy of the spirits.

“I don’t want to watch you die, George Allen,” she said. “And I’m not going to. Sorry.” She put the remote down next to the television and started for her room. But her feet wouldn’t move. She pulled on her legs, her heart beating faster and faster. She fought against invisible hands holding her in place. Some force she couldn’t see twisted her body to face the television. “George Allen Cofield, you better let me go, or so help me, I’ll call the reaper right this second.”

The video of George in the hot tub appeared again on the screen, only it had jumped forward in time. She noticed a timestamp in the corner. It read 3:21 a.m. The hands on her shoulders loosened their grip. Charlie saw Phyllis Cofield's shadow at the sliding door, just before the petite woman walked onto the deck.

"G.A.?" Phyllis asked and moved tentatively toward him. He didn't answer. Her small hands reached for his shoulder, and his head lolled to one side when she touched him. She jumped back a step and covered her mouth with her hands as if she didn't know what to do next. After several moments, she tried to wake him again. When he didn't respond, she pressed two fingers to the side of his neck, as if she were looking for his pulse. Then she pressed her hand to her flat belly and leaned over to look at something on the side of the hot tub.

Charlie moved closer to the screen to make out what Phyllis was doing, but it was impossible to say for sure. She seemed to reach for a control, but it was too shadowy for Charlie to see. She watched Phyllis pull a thermometer hanging over the side in the water after she'd fiddled with the hot tub.

When Phyllis Cofield turned and went back inside the house, Charlie's body broke into a cold sweat, and the television clicked off, leaving her in the darkness of the living room.

* * *

AFTER CHARLIE GATHERED HER WITS, SHE WENT BACK TO HER bedroom for her cell phone. The clock on her bedside table read 2:34 a.m. Had all that only taken less than ten minutes? Her heart still thudded in her throat while she jotted off a text to Jason.

I had a strange experience regarding George Allen Cofield.

She fluffed two pillows behind her back and pulled her knees to her chest while she stared at the phone, waiting for a

response. She clicked her teeth together, and after a few moments, he rewarded her patience. Three dots appeared on the screen. He'd woken up and read it.

Nothing new about you and strange experiences. What happened?

I had a vision of his death. It played like a video on my television.

Was it a video? Does this guy have security cameras on his property?

Charlie blinked hard at the question. Had George Allen showed her actual video footage? The idea intrigued her.

I have no idea. I know that based on what I watched, the wife definitely lied. And may have even contributed to his death.

I hate to break it to you, but it's still not evidence of anything.

Was he tested for poison?

I don't know, I'd have to double-check the report.

I think she turned up the temperature of the hot tub.

Can you prove that?

Charlie's mind raced, trying to find something that would allow her to say yes. If there were cameras at George Allen's house, maybe there was evidence. But they'd need a search warrant to know for sure. How were they going to get that?

Maybe. But I probably need a warrant.

You're an investigator for a secret, federally funded, law enforcement agency. Last time I checked, y'all weren't all that concerned about warrants.

Charlie sighed and ran her fingers through her hair.

Phyllis isn't a witch. I don't have any jurisdiction over her.

When has that ever stopped you? If you want to figure this out, you should probably get a better look at that hot tub.

I don't know how I will do that legally.

I'm sure you'll think of something.

How are you doing, btw? You left my uncle's in such a hurry. We didn't really get to talk.

I'm fine. I'll get over it. Just whatever you do, don't say I told you so.

What if I said, I'm so sorry she hurt you instead?

I appreciate that. She's made it clear how she feels, and now I just need to figure out how I feel.

Please don't give up on her. I know she loves you, and there is more to this story than what she's telling you.

I don't think she's interested in telling me anything, which is the problem, isn't it? Is that all you needed?

It is. I'm sorry I woke you.

No problem. Just do me a favor.

Anything.

Whatever you do about the Cofield case, don't get your ass arrested, okay?

Don't worry. I have a spell for that.

Good. I'm going back to sleep now.

Night.

Charlie stared at the screen a few minutes more before she placed it on her nightstand facedown. She forgot how much she loved working with Jason. How much she loved eating at the café during the week and seeing her cousins outside of Friday night dinners. She dreaded the thought of Monday when she'd have to return to the grind of driving to Charlotte. Ben had dealt with it by being a nomad. And her current partner Will Tucker dealt with it the same way. He didn't care where he laid his head at night.

She stared at the ceiling for a while, debating with herself whether to just get up and start her day, but soft jazzy music filled her head, the same song she'd heard before. Lottie and Nathan's song. Before she knew it, her lids grew heavy again,

and she drifted off to the dulcet tones of a standards singer crooning how she'd met her love before but couldn't remember where or when.

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CHAPTER 18

Charlie opened her eyes to find light creeping across the sky and birds chirping outside her partially open bedroom window. Her phone vibrated on the nightstand. She quickly turned it over and found a text from Jen.

Rise and shine. I'd like to get a jump on the list of to-dos for Beltane. Why don't you and Evan come over for breakfast? I'm making pancakes.

Charlie's stomach grumbled. How could she argue with that?

Give me 15 minutes to rouse my ornery teenager and get dressed. :-)

You got it!

Charlie jumped up, quickly dressed, and made the bed. Satisfied with the tidiness of her room, she woke Evan.

He complained the whole time but dressed by the time she finished feeding the cat and scooping her litter. Charlie didn't bother to lock the door behind her since they were just going across the yard.

"You keep an eye on the place for us, Penny." Charlie said to the chicken nesting in the rocking chair's cushion. She spotted her cat, Poe, sitting in the window behind the sofa. The kitten looked at her with her bright green eyes and gave Charlie a slow blink. "You too, Poe."

“I don’t think Penny can do much since we’re the only ones who can see her,” Evan grumbled.

Charlie gave Evan the once over. His rumpled black T-shirt with the Stanford University logo on it and knee-length khaki shorts would have to do, but the bird’s nest on top of his head was a different matter. She reached over and finger combed his hair.

He jerked his head away. “Mom, stop.”

“You could’ve at least run a brush through your hair,”

“I’ll do it later. Nobody cares about my hair.” He waved her off. “Can we please just go? I’m starving.”

“You’re always starving these days,” Charlie said, and ushered him out the front door.

* * *

AFTER BREAKFAST, CHARLIE NURSED A SECOND CUP OF COFFEE at the long oak table in the kitchen of her uncle’s house. Evan sat between her and Jack, working on his second stack of pancakes.

“My gosh, Jen, those were the most delicious pancakes I think I have ever had,” Charlie mused.

“And they didn’t even have bananas and pecans in them,” Jen quipped and gave Charlie a wide grin.

“Ha, ha, ha.” Charlie rolled her eyes. “Your banana pecan pancakes are my favorite. Sue me.”

“I made these with einkorn wheat. I’m thinking about making them a special next week.”

“Your patrons will sing your praises if you do.” Charlie pushed her empty plate away. “So, who’s coming today?”

“You and Ben for sure. Lisa said she would, but I don’t know. We’ll see,” Jen said, finishing the last bite of her pancakes.

“Can I help, Mama?” Ruby asked.

“Why don’t you stay here with me, Rubes,” Jack said, from his place at the end of the table. “You could help me mow the lawn. I’ll even let you steer.”

“Cool,” Ruby said.

“How’s your tooth this morning, Ruby?” Charlie asked.

“It’s getting looser.” Ruby jutted her bottom jaw and wiggled the tooth with her finger.

“I see,” Charlie said. “It’s almost time for your granddaddy to tie a string around it and pull it out for you.”

Ruby’s eyes grew wide, and she looked to the end of the table at her grandfather. “Is that true, Granddaddy? You can put a string around my tooth and pull it out?”

“Yes, honey, it is.” Jack shot Charlie an irritated glance. “But it’s not very sanitary. When your tooth gets loose enough, I will put on some gloves and take it out for you.”

Ruby sat back and closed her mouth. A worried frown formed in the wrinkles of her brow. “Is it gonna hurt?”

“Not any worse than pulling it out with a string,” he said.

“Don’t worry, sweetie. It will come out.” Jen flashed a pointed look at her father. “When you’re ready and not a minute before.”

The screen door squeaked open, accompanied by Ben Sutton’s voice. “Hello to the house.”

“Come on in,” Jen said and got to her feet. “Are you hungry? I made pancakes.”

“Yeah. That sounds great. Hey, Charlie. Hey, Doc.” Ben walked to the sink and quickly washed his hands. When he was done, Jen handed him a plate with a stack of pancakes and a side of bacon.

“Thanks, babe,” he said and kissed her chastely on the lips.

He took a seat next to Charlie and drenched his pancakes in maple syrup. “So, how’s it going, Charlie? You look a little tired.”

“Thanks?” Charlie said.

“Ben,” Jen said, her tone incredulous.

“What? What did I say?”

“Ben, my boy.” Jack folded his fingers together. “You never tell a woman that she looks tired. It’s the equivalent of telling her she looks like shit.”

“Daddy,” Jen scolded.

“I’ve lived most of my adult life with a houseful of women. I know what your code means,” Jack said matter-of-factly.

Charlie snickered. “It’s all right, Ben. I’m sure I look tired. It’s not like I’m sleeping very well these days.”

“So, Tom’s not trying to steal you away from me, is he?” he joked.

“I don’t know. You’d have to ask him,” Charlie said.

“He’s coming today, right?” Jen asked.

“Yeah.” Charlie glanced at her watch. “He should be here soon.”

“Good. Maybe I’ll ask him myself then,” Ben said, and shoved a fork full of pancakes into his mouth.

“Ask me what?” Tom asked from the door. “I hope it’s all right that I let myself in.”

“Of course,” Jen said. “Are you hungry? There’s plenty.”

Tom pressed his hand to his stomach and smiled. “It smells delicious, but I’m fine. Thank you.” Tom came dressed to work, wearing a pair of black jeans, boots, and a gray polo shirt. His thick ebony hair looked freshly shorn, and his beard neatly trimmed. Tom took a chair across the table from Charlie next to Ruby. “So, what did you want to ask me then?”

“I was just asking Charlie if you plan to steal her away from me?” Ben smiled as he spoke, and his round baby-face was full of good humor, but by the tone of his voice, Charlie knew he meant business.

“As much as I’d love to have her come work with me full time, I fear she’d miss hunting down bad guys too much,” Tom said. He shifted his gaze to Charlie. “But she has a job with me anytime she wants it. Health insurance and all.”

“Tom, would you like a cup of coffee?” Jen said, her voice a little too chirpy, like a nervous bird trapped in a cage.

“No, thank you,” Tom said. “I’m more of a tea drinker.”

“I have tea,” Jen said, opening a cabinet near the stove. “English breakfast, Irish breakfast, rooibos, chamomile, Earl Grey. You name it, I probably have it. It’s no trouble.”

“If you’re sure it’s no trouble,” Tom said.

Jen moved to the sink and filled the kettle before Tom finished his sentence. She reached into a cabinet and pulled out a wooden box and placed it on the table in front of Tom. “Pick your poison,” she said. “I’ve also got loose tea in the pantry if you’d prefer it.”

“No, this is perfect, thank you.” Tom opened the box and picked through the bags of tea. He selected a tea bag with a dark red tag wrapped in paper. Jenn fished out a large mug and placed it in front of him, then stood by the stove while the kettle came to a boil.

The screen door squeaked again.

“Morning,” Lisa said. Daphne trailed in behind her. Lisa’s thin oval face looked pale with no make-up on, and dark blue patches punctuated her eyes. She wore her long strawberry blond hair in a high ponytail. A pair of faded jeans, heavy boots, and a T-shirt with a flannel shirt over it completed her look.

“Good morning,” Daphne said, pushing her bright magenta hair behind one ear. She wore a white T-shirt and black pants, with black Converse sneakers—the closest thing she wore to a uniform at her salon.

“Well, hey!” Jen got up and gave Daphne a hug. “I wasn’t expecting you this morning. It’s good to see you.”

“Lisa called me last night and told me you were preparing for Beltane, and since I don’t have a client until ten-thirty, I figured I could help for an hour or so.” A half dozen stud earrings followed the curve of Daphne’s ear and glinted in the overhead light.

“Where’s Darius?” Jen asked.

“He had a client at eight and wanted to get some other things done before she came in. But he’s looking forward to coming to the festivities this week.”

“Wonderful,” Jen said. “It seems like forever since we’ve seen him. And you.”

“How are you doing, honey?” Jack said to Lisa as she came over to him at the table.

“I’m fine, Daddy. Thank you for asking.” Lisa put her hand on her father’s shoulder. Jack reached up and covered her hand with his.

“So, what exactly is on tap for today?” Ben asked. He finished up the last of his pancakes and crunched on a slice of bacon.

“I’ll take a pancake,” Daphne said.

“Me, too,” Lisa said. “Do you have any bacon left?”

“Sure thing,” Jen said. “Why don’t y’all pour yourselves some coffee, and I’ll put some plates together.”

Daphne took the seat at the other end of the table, across from Jack, while Lisa filled up two coffee mugs to the brim. She put a mug down in front of Daphne.

Tom rose to his feet with his mug in his hand. “Lisa, here, have my chair. I’m not eating.”

“Thanks,” Lisa said, and took a seat.

“So, Jen was just about to go over what needs to get done today, weren’t you, honey?” Ben said.

“Yes. I was. We need to prepare the fire pit for the bonfire. Daddy bought bags of sand and gravel to go inside now that the stone circle is in place. We also need kindling and wood to

burn. We need to pull the lawn furniture out of the shed and clean it up. Lisa, maybe you and Daphne can figure out what kind of games we could play with the kids.”

“I can help with the games,” Evan chimed in.

“You can also help Uncle Jack with the yard work,” Charlie said, nudging Evan’s arm.

“Okay, sure,” Evan said with a reluctant sigh.

“That’d be great, honey, thank you,” Jen said. “I’d like to get as much set up as we can today, so there’s not a much to do this week beyond cooking, eating, and celebrating.”

“All right. That sounds like quite a list,” Ben said. “Who do you want to do what?”

Jen spent the next five minutes doling out duties while Lisa and Daphne ate. After breakfast, they all set out with their chore list to prepare for the week’s festivities.

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CHAPTER 19

Young green leaves filled the trees above Jen's yard, but the canopy was still spare enough to see billowing clouds moving fast across the blue sky. The air smelled sweet. Birds sang to each other, and their chicks cheeped for attention and food. Squirrels raced across branches, stopping every so often to chitter at the group moving through the woods below. Leaves and twigs crunched beneath Charlie's boots.

"Are you sure you don't want me to carry that?" Ben asked. He trailed behind Jen and Charlie.

"Thanks, but I've got it," Charlie said, tightening her grip on the handle of the black nylon bag with a red logo on it for a tool company her uncle favored. In her other hand, she carried a pair of leather gloves. Jen walked next to her, carrying a branch lopper and a pair of gloves.

Spindly dead brush intermixed with saplings and bushes thriving in the shade of the woods that ran between the river and the backyard of her uncle's house.

Jen stopped and looked around. "This is as good a place as any, I guess, to collect firewood. And lots of kindling here, too."

"That pine tree would work, too." Charlie put the bag down and pointed to the tree that had partially blown over in a storm. The root ball had lifted halfway out of the ground and the top of the tree had snapped near the top and hung

precariously against the branches of a tall oak. “We can take that out too.”

“Are you sure you know how to do this?” Ben asked. He cast a wary glance at the tree, then at Charlie.

“Yep,” Charlie said. “I have felled plenty of trees in my life.”

“We used to help Bunny clear off trees from her property when we were teenagers,” Jen said.

“Yeah, and when Scott and I were married, we always used to go chop down our own Christmas trees. I was the one who did most of the chopping.” Charlie patted Ben’s arm. “Don’t worry; we’ve got this.”

“Okay,” Ben said and scrubbed his chin.

“It’ll be fine. Nobody’s gonna get hurt.” Jen handed him the loppers. “If it’s too much to watch, you can cut down some of that brush and start making a pile.”

Charlie knelt next to the bag and unzipped it. Inside was a medium-sized chainsaw. Nothing too unwieldy. She passed two pairs of safety glasses and a box of thick foam earplugs to Jen. Jen opened the box and took out two pairs for herself and Ben. Charlie wrapped a set of protective earmuffs around her neck and put on a pair of safety glasses.

“Hey! You got a pair of those for me?” Lisa waved her gloves at them and approached the group.

“You’re in luck.” Charlie held up the last pair of glasses. Lisa grabbed them and put them on.

“I thought you wanted to help with the lounge furniture,” Jen said.

“Daphne’s got it under control. She’s bossing the kids around like a proper auntie.” Lisa grinned. “Charlie, Tom got a call and had to leave. He wanted me to let you know.”

“Thanks,” Charlie said. “So, are you helping me, or is Jen?”

“I’ll help you,” Lisa said.

“That leaves you and me, honey,” Jen chirped to Ben. “Let’s start over there. Follow me.” Ben and Jen shoved their earplugs into their pockets and headed away from the area where Charlie and Lisa would take down the trees.

“You know, what we need is a cart,” Jen said in the distance.

“That would certainly make hauling all this wood back to the yard easier,” Charlie called after them. Jen turned around and gave her two thumbs up and took off toward the house, leaving Ben with the loppers and instructions on which brush to cut first. Charlie and Lisa exchanged glances and snickered.

“I guess Jen has it all figured out,” Lisa said.

“She always does,” Charlie said and approached the pine tree. She surveyed the crown. It had lodged in the crook of a large branch jutting from the trunk of a nearby oak. The very top of the tree had broken off and hung from a thin strip of bark. It must have cracked when it fell against the other tree. She placed one bare hand against the rough pine bark near the base of the root ball before she scrambled up onto the trunk to test her weight.

“Charlie, what are you doing?” A look of horror crossed Lisa’s face.

“I’m just checking to see how hard this will be,” Charlie said.

The branches of the oak creaked, but the pine didn’t make much noise. Cautiously, she walked up to the first branch of the pine, expecting to hear some resistance or feel some give. But the tree stayed in place.

“This may be trickier than I thought,” Charlie muttered. She carefully turned on her toes to start back down the tree.

“Will you please get down from there? You’re making me as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs,” Lisa said and began chewing on her thumbnail. “What if it breaks?”

“Sorry,” Charlie said and hopped to the ground. She took a few steps away. “I just wanted to test how stuck it is in that

other tree.”

A thunderous crack made Charlie and Lisa jump. They both searched for the source of the sound. They found it together. The crown of the pine tree had finally broken away and fallen into the lower branches of the oak tree.

“Hey,” Charlie said when she spotted the wand in Lisa’s hand. “What’s going on?” She gave Lisa a puzzled look. “I didn’t realize we were casting to topple trees.”

Lisa glanced down at the wand in her hand. Her pale cheeks reddened, and she tucked it into her back pocket. “I don’t know why I brought it. It just made me feel better.”

“Okay,” Charlie nodded. “You want to talk about it?”

Lisa shrugged and shook her head. “Not really.”

“You want to use the chainsaw? Cutting up big stuff always made me feel better when I was married to Scott.”

Lisa rolled her eyes and chuckled. “Sure. Why not?”

* * *

ONCE THEY’D FELLED THE TWO TREES, THEY TOOK TURNS cutting it into logs, and stacking the wood nearby.

“I wonder what’s taking Jen and Ben so long?” Charlie wiped her forearm across her sweaty brow.

“Somebody probably wasn’t doing something the way Jen wants,” Lisa mused and tossed the last of the logs onto the neat wood pile. She stood back and put her hands on her hips. “That should do it.”

Charlie draped her arm around Lisa’s shoulders and held up her hand for a high-five. “We do excellent work.”

“Hell yeah, we do,” Lisa said and clapped her gloved palm against Charlie’s.

Voices from somewhere deeper in the woods drew Charlie’s attention away from their accomplishment. A scream startled Charlie, and she started toward it.

“Charlie,” Lisa said. “Where are you going?”

Charlie stopped in her tracks and turned to look at her cousin. “Did you not hear that?”

“Hear what?” Lisa asked.

The scream pierced the woods again, fraying Charlie’s nerves. It sounded like a child. A child in pain. “You cannot tell me you didn’t hear that!”

Lisa held her hands up in surrender. “Hear what? The only thing I hear is birds.”

The third time, Charlie couldn’t ignore the scream, even if it didn’t reach Lisa’s ears. She started walking toward the sound.

“I’m coming,” she muttered.

Her heart pounded in her ears, and her vision grayed at the edges. Dizziness swirled through her consciousness, and she reached for a nearby sapling to steady herself. She squeezed her eyes shut. The earth tilted and for a moment she seemed to pitch forward. Was she falling? She waited for the feeling to stop. When she opened her eyes again, she was no longer in the woods. At least not these woods.

She turned in a circle, taking in the place she now found herself—a gravel parking lot of what appeared to be one of the many parks in the area. She knew this park. She and Scott used to bring Evan here when he was little so he could run off some of his little boy energy. They would hike the trail around what used to be a rice field. Most of it had turned into wetlands. The only thing the park conservancy had salvaged were the old locks that controlled the water flow into the rice paddies. A car sped past her, kicking up dust, its wheels spitting gravel. Suddenly the sky darkened, and a big fat bright moon shone brightly overhead in place of the sun.

Charlie moved closer to the car but stopped when the car door opened, and a man emerged. He was tall and skinny, and even in the light of the moon, she recognized his pinched, cruel face. Another man got out of the passenger side of the car.

“I’m sorry. Please don’t be mad at me,” the second man said. She recognized him too but couldn’t place from where. He hunched over, submissive to the other man. Where did she know him from?

“Just shut up,” the cruel-faced man said. He clicked a remote in his hand and the trunk popped open. He grabbed a shovel and shoved it into the other man’s arms. “This is your mess, so you’re the one who gets to do all the digging. You hear me?”

“Of course. Of course. Just... please don’t be mad at me,” he begged. “I’ll get us another one. I promise. I’ll make this up to you.”

“You can’t make up three million dollars to me, you idiot. I swear to God, if you weren’t my brother, Carl, I’d fucking bash your head in and bury you, too.” The cruel-faced man raised the shovel as if to hit Carl.

Carl whimpered and shielded his head. “Don’t! Please, Hugh. You promised Granny you’d take care of me.”

Hugh ground his teeth and stopped himself from striking. He dropped the shovel to his side. Carl straightened up, still not looking his brother in the face.

“We still might salvage this thing, I guess. They don’t know you killed their kid yet. They still might drop the ransom,” Hugh said.

“Exactly. We could still get the money,” Carl said.

“Here, you’re doing the digging.” Hugh pushed the shovel at Carl. Charlie moved closer to the open trunk to get a look. Her heart caught in her throat at the sight of the boy, lying on his side, bleeding from his head. The movement in his chest was almost imperceptible.

“He’s still alive!” she screamed. “He’s still alive, you bastards!”

“Charlie! Charlie, can you hear me?”

Someone’s heavy hands grabbed her by the wrists, and she struggled to get free. Her fingers sparked, and she blinked at

the sharp odor of ozone in the air. Her vision cleared, and she found herself surrounded by Lisa, Ben, and Jen.

“Charlie, are you okay?” Jen asked.

“I’m fine. I’m sorry.”

“You had a vision.”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Was it about one of your cases?” Ben asked.

“No.” She quickly explained the dreams she’d had about the kidnapped boy. When she finished, she pressed her lips together and shifted her gaze to Lisa. “Sorry, Lisa, but I need to talk to Jason.”

“Hey, there’s nothing to be sorry about. Go. Call him. Save this kid if you can.”

“Thanks,” Charlie said and glanced at Ben. “You wanna tag along? I might need you.”

“Sure,” Ben said. “You don’t mind, do you, Jen?”

“Of course not. Y’all go do what you need to do.”

Ben leaned down and pecked her on the lips. “Thanks, babe.”

“Hey, Charlie,” Lisa said. “If you need us, we’re here. It doesn’t matter what’s happening between me and Jason. Don’t let that stop you from calling us. Okay?”

“Thank you.” Charlie reached for Lisa’s hand and gave it a squeeze. Charlie dropped her cousin’s hand, and she and Ben set off for the house.

CHAPTER 20

“**T**he spirits sure are keeping you busy these days.”

Jason looked to Charlie and then Ben for an answer, leaning back in his desk chair, an arm propped up on his elbow, his chin between the crook of his thumb and forefinger.

“You could say that again,” Charlie said. “Thanks for coming into your office on your day off to talk to us.”

The bags beneath Jason’s eyes gave away his lack of sleep, but Charlie said nothing.

The investigative unit of the sheriff’s station was quiet, with two other detectives working the bullpen on Saturday afternoon, taking calls. The other three desks were vacant, the occupants off for the weekend.

“I don’t know what I can do for you.” Jason glanced at his co-workers and lowered his voice. “I mean, I don’t have evidence of a crime yet.”

“I know,” Charlie said. “I’m hoping more than anything I’m wrong about this entire thing.”

“So, you didn’t get a license plate or anything, did you?”

“Just the first three letters.” Charlie tightened her hand on the strap of the crossbody bag on her lap. “The mean one was standing in front of the plate through most of the vision, and honestly, I was concentrating more on what they were saying. Sorry.”

“That’s all right.” Jason reached for a pad and pen. “I’ll take it.”

“M.A.C. Oh, and it was an old Buick. I don’t know the model, but it looked to be in decent shape. And even though it was dark—”

“Dark? I thought you had this vision this morning?” Jason gave her a quizzical look.

“It was dark in my vision. Anyway, it was champagne-colored or maybe silver.”

“All right. Anything else?”

“The boy was still alive. I mean, barely, but still breathing.”

“I hate to interrupt, but I’m gonna be that guy.” Ben sat in the chair next to her with his elbows on his knees. Charlie braced herself for Ben to play devil’s advocate. Jason shifted his attention to Ben. “How do we know this has already happened?”

“We don’t. It might not have happened yet. Or it might be happening right now. If it hasn’t happened already, maybe we can stop it.” Charlie closed her eyes and tried to recall every detail about the scene. The smell of the air. The amount of light cast by the moon.

“Oh, my goddess, the moon.”

“The moon?” Jason asked.

Charlie dug into her bag for her phone. She thumbed through all the apps looking for her Moon Calendar. She could feel both men staring at her. “In my vision, the moon was full.”

“It was full on the eighth.” Ben furrowed his brow.

“Dammit. You’re right.” Charlie sat back in her chair, her phone still in her hand.

“You have a calendar for the moon?” Jason peered at her.

“Yes, I do,” Charlie snapped.

“Why?” Jason asked. Charlie scowled at him. “What? I’m just asking.”

“For a few reasons,” she began. “Some women track their cycle by the moon.” Jason made a face, but Charlie ignored it.

“We, as witches,” Ben dropped his voice, “also use moon phases for rituals, recharging crystals, plus, some magic is just more powerful under a full moon.”

“Right.” Jason clucked his tongue. “I guess I’d know that if I paid better attention.” His gaze grew distant, as if he were thinking of all the things he’d done wrong in his relationships with the witches in his life—one witch in particular.

Charlie leaned forward. “You okay?”

Jason glanced toward her and shook off whatever thought had taken him away. “I’m fine. Anyway, what do you want to do?”

“Is there any way to search for two brothers named Carl and Hugh? They’d own a Buick.”

“I’m not as gifted as your DOL friend, and I don’t have access to all the databases in the country, but I’ll see what I can do.” He sat up straight in his chair and turned to the computer on his desk. “Is there anything else you remember?”

“Do you remember when we were in the pawnshop, and I saw the guy buy the ring, the one Denny marked up?”

“The one you saw with the \$500 price tag?” Jason’s fingers kept moving across the keyboard as he listened.

“That was the guy. The one called Hugh. I saw him pay with five hundred-dollar bills, which I didn’t think much about because Scott always carries at least a thousand dollars in his wallet. Even Tom carries five hundred bucks on him.”

“I had no idea that reaping was so lucrative,” Jason muttered.

“You’re hilarious, you know that? You take that show on the road?” Charlie quipped. “I just figured men carry that kind of money.”

“Not all of us,” Jason said.

“Agreed. I’m lucky if I’ve got fifty bucks in cash on me. I pay with a credit card for everything,” Ben said.

“Well, sure. You have to expense everything. I do the same thing.” Charlie thought back to the vision of the man slapping those hundred-dollar bills down. “You know, I think maybe the bills were marked.”

“Marked? How?” Jason asked.

“There was red ink on them,” she said. “It soaked the corners.”

“You mean red dye?” Jason perked up. “Like from a dye pack?”

“Yeah, exactly. Like one of those exploding packs that banks slip into a stack of money robbers are stealing. It’s triggered electronically when they leave the bank and covers the robbers and the money they’re trying to steal.”

“It could be whoever was advising the family told them to put dye packs in the money,” Jason mused.

“Why would they do that? It’s not like they’re a bank and the money’s insured,” Ben said. “Doesn’t it ruin the money?”

“If they’re rich enough to be paying a ransom of three million, they or their company may have an insurance policy that covers kidnapping and ransom. The dye is really to mark the kidnapper’s clothes and skin,” Jason said. “And to make the money unusable.”

“It didn’t stop him from using it. At least not based on what I saw in my head.” Charlie chewed on her thumbnail. “Hey, do you think your cousin has sold that ring yet?”

“I don’t know. It might be worth calling him to find out. Could give us more of a timeline, especially since it sounds like our kidnappers aren’t exactly the brightest bulbs in the box.”

“Could the money be traced back to them?” Ben asked.

Jason stopped typing. “It’s not an easy trace. But if we picked them up for some other offense and they had marked money with them, it would be evidence against them. Whoever paid the ransom probably recorded all the serial numbers.”

“Hey, Jace,” Charlie said, “when you call Denny, ask him what the letter is on the ring. I think it was a P, but it could’ve been an F. It was in fancy script.”

“Okay.” Jason’s brows tugged together. “What difference does it make?”

“He had his eye on it. Probably for a while. It meant something to him. I mean, it’s a long shot, but it could be the first letter of his last name. Isn’t that why you wear a signet ring?”

Jason chuckled. “You know, I like the way you think.”

“It’s not much, but — ”

Jason finished her sentence. “It’s better than nothing.” He picked up his cell phone from his desk and started thumbing through his contacts.

“Give me a couple minutes. I’m gonna call Denny. See if we can really nail down whether we actually have a crime.”

“Great. Thank you. Is there any coffee in the break room?” Charlie asked, jerking her thumb toward the door.

“Yeah. I put on a fresh pot when I got here. I figured it was gonna be a long day. Go on. Help yourselves.”

“Come on, Ben, let’s go get some coffee.” Ben nodded, and they got to their feet.

Several minutes later, Jason poked his head into the break room. Charlie sat in a metal and plastic chair, a Styrofoam cup in her hand. Ben leaned against a counter, facing her with his arms crossed.

“It’s a P.” Jason grinned. “Denny still has it. And I just searched on Buicks owned by Carl P or Hugh P with the partial plate you gave me, and I came up with a 1999 Buick Century owned by a Carl James Pritchett.”

Charlie perked up. “Does he have a rap sheet?”

“Nothing more than some parking tickets and a moving violation. He ran a red light last month.” Jason glanced at the printout in his hand. “His brother, one Donald Hugh Pritchett, has a rap sheet as long as my arm. He’s done some time for vandalism, assault, and robbery.”

“So, kidnapping’s not a big stretch then,” Ben said.

“Nope, it’s not,” Jason said.

“Maybe Carl’s not as innocent as he looks. He’s the one who said he’d get another boy, right?” Ben said.

“Yes.” Charlie nodded. “He did.”

“Do you have his work info? He’d have to have access to rich kids, right?” Ben asked.

Jason flipped through the printout. “It’s not here. Let me check the computer.” He headed back to his desk, and Charlie and Ben followed. Jason sat down and read through the electronic file on his screen.

“Holy shit.”

“What is it?” Charlie leaned in and looked over his shoulder.

“He works at Daniel Island Academy. That’s your kid’s school, isn’t it?” Jason met her eyes with an intense gaze.

“Oh, my goddess.” Charlie reread the screen, just to be sure. Her heart thudded in her throat. “We need to find these guys and pray they have done nothing yet.”

“Yep.” Jason scribbled something on a sticky note and pulled it off the stack. He closed the file and shut down his computer, then hopped to his feet. “I’ve got his last known address. Do you want to take a ride?”

“You sure you don’t mind?” Charlie asked.

“It doesn’t bother me. Did you bring your wand by any chance?”

“I didn’t.” Charlie’s fingertips tingled, and she opened and closed her hand. “But honestly, I don’t think it matters.”

“It doesn’t, if what I witnessed earlier is any indication,” Ben said. “You’ve been holding out on me.”

“No, I haven’t. I just figured things are screwy since I got my magic back.” She shrugged. “I figured it would go away.”

“If you hone it and own it, it definitely won’t go away.” Ben’s lips curved into a half-grin. “But it takes practice.”

“Well, let’s go practice on Carl Pritchett then,” Charlie said, and got to her feet.

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CHAPTER 21

Jason stopped in front of the two-story house in North Charleston. The neighborhood looked run down now, but Charlie knew that in its day, the house was probably beautiful. Two stories with a wide front porch. In her head, she saw it as it had been — painted white with Charleston green shutters, and a green lawn hidden behind a white picket fence set between brick posts. Large azaleas flanked the steps, covered in pink and white blooms.

She blinked and brought back the peeling white paint. The shutters disappeared, and the overgrown azaleas concealed parts of the sagging front porch that Charlie questioned if it was safe to walk on. The picket fence had vanished, and only crumbling brick posts acted as sentries to shield the long walkway from the street.

“This is the house?” Charlie asked.

“Yep,” Jason said. “1260 Amelia Place. Why?”

“I don’t know. There’s just something about this place that I can’t seem to shake.” Charlie unbuckled her seatbelt. “And weirdly, I keep seeing it how it was. Like from a long time ago when somebody could afford to maintain it.”

“Yeah, it’s a shame. Some neighborhoods around here have been going through a revitalization. They’re worth a small fortune now.”

“Yeah? How do you know?” Charlie asked.

“I looked at houses here before I bought my condo. At the time, I was hoping to find something that would take more

sweat equity than money, but prices were already on the rise from investors buying and flipping houses. Though, sometimes I wish I'd gotten something with a yard."

"Sure," Charlie said. "Yards are nice to have when you have kids."

"Yeah, well, looks like that's something I'm not gonna have to worry about now, isn't it?" Jason looked away.

"You don't know that," she said.

"Yeah, I do. Come on, let's go see what this guy's all about, okay? Forget my love life."

Jason got out of the car and waited for her and Ben to exit, then he locked up, and the three of them walked up to the house.

Jason crossed the front porch and unclipped his badge from his belt. He held it in his palm and rapped on the glass front of the door. They waited a few minutes before Ben scoped out the front of the house. Jason knocked again and then rang the doorbell.

"Maybe he's not home," Charlie said.

"Somebody's home." Ben pointed to the front window. The curtains rustled as if someone had just peeked outside. Charlie saw shadows of movement through the frosted glass and could hear shuffling behind the door.

The lock clicked, and the door opened a crack. A man with blue eyes and heavy bags beneath them peered out at them from behind a brass chain. Salt and pepper stubble that matched his thinning hair covered his hollow cheeks.

"Whatever it is, I'm not interested in buying," the man said, his southern accent thick. His yellow, tar-stained teeth looked like he hadn't brushed them in years. Charlie recognized the man immediately as the brother, Carl, from her vision.

Jason held up his badge. "I'm not selling anything. We had a tip come in that you might know something about a missing boy."

“Me? Naw. I don’t know nothing about no missing boy. Whoever said I did is a liar, and you can tell ‘em I said that.” The man shook his head and wouldn’t look Jason in the eye. He shifted from foot to foot.

“Maybe you didn’t. It’s just, it came in on our tip line, and we have to follow up on every single tip, even though most of them turn out to be nothing.” Jason clipped his badge to his belt again. “You look like an agreeable man. Maybe you saw something and didn’t even realize you saw it. You’d really be helping me out if you answered a couple of questions.”

The man eyed Jason.

“I’m just trying to do my job. You can understand that, right? I’m sure you’ve got a job, and you have to do stuff that you don’t really wanna do.”

“Course. It’s part of earning a paycheck, I guess.” The man looked behind him and hesitated.

“Something wrong?” Jason asked.

“No,” the man insisted. “Nothing’s wrong. I’m not exactly ready for company if you know what I mean.”

“I swear this is just gonna take a minute. It doesn’t matter what your house looks like to me. I just want to fill out on my report that I followed up on this tip, and that you were cooperative. That’s all.”

“Cooperative?” the man asked.

“Yeah, it’s just something we have to put down,” Jason said. “In case we ever have to come back. It’s good to know who’ll work with us, who won’t.”

Carl tapped his fingers to his lips. “My brother’s not home right now. He doesn’t like visitors.”

“Sure. I understand. Maybe I should come back and talk to him when he’s home. Maybe he’s the one who knows something. The tip just said the man who lived in this house knew something. I just assumed it was you, but since your brother lives here too...”

“No. No, my brother’s at work, and like I said, he doesn’t like visitors. He’d get real upset if you came back.”

Carl rocked back and forth on his feet as if he were thinking this over.

“I understand. Sounds like he’s the one who rules the roost around here. So, if you don’t want to talk—”

“He doesn’t rule anything. I can do what I want.” Carl straightened his spine. He shut the door, and Charlie heard the chain rattle. A moment later, the door opened wide, and he stepped back and gestured for them to enter the house. “Y’all come on in. Sorry about the mess.”

The house reeked of beer and cigarettes and sweaty men. Charlie swallowed and breathed as shallow as she could to keep from gagging. Once she entered the foyer, another flash of what the house had looked like once upon a time flashed through her head. The dull wooden staircase now gleamed, and to her right in the living room, the ragged plaid sofa disappeared, replaced by a soft rose-colored sofa in front of the picture window overlooking the yard with a delicate gold and white painted coffee table in front.

“Oh, my goddess,” Charlie muttered. “Do you mind me asking how long y’all have lived in this house?”

“My whole life,” he said. “Me and my brother both have. My granny raised us here. This was her house.”

“Who was your granny?” Jason threw a what-the-hell look her way.

“I mean... I’m sorry,” Charlie stammered. “I didn’t mean to pry. This house just seems so familiar. It’s almost like I’ve been here before.”

“I don’t see how that’s possible. I’ve never seen you before in my life. And my granny’s been dead about fifteen years. You don’t look old enough to have even known her,” he said.

“You’re right. It’s ridiculous. I’m not sure why I think I’ve seen this house before.”

“Although, I guess you could’ve seen it in the papers or something.”

“Why is that?” Jason asked.

“This house belonged to a lawyer that used to represent the moonshiners back in the depression and throughout World War Two.” He sounded almost proud. “There was an article about the Hell Hole Swamp a few years back. Some reporter wanted to look at the bullet holes in the walls upstairs.”

“Bullet holes?” Jason asked.

“Yep. According to my grandpa, they gunned the lawyer and his entire family down as payback when the moonshiners realized he was skimming money for himself. Grandpa got this house for a song because nobody wanted to live in a house where people were murdered, I guess.”

“That’s fascinating.” Charlie ignored Jason’s shut-up look and smiled. “I’m a bit of a crime buff, you know, especially for local crimes. I’ve never heard of that one. I’ll have to look it up sometime.”

“Sure thing,” Carl said.

“So, anyway, I’m Lieutenant Jason Tate,” Jason said and pulled his card from his wallet. “Like I said, I got this tip, and I just wanted to ask you a couple questions. If you don’t mind.”

“All right.” The man took the card.

“What was your name again?”

“Carl Pritchett.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Carl. These are my associates, Charlie Payne and Ben Sutton. They’re...” Jason struggled to find the right words.

“We are forensic investigators,” Charlie said.

“Oh, that’s interesting.” Carl scratched the back of his head. “My brother wanted to be a cop, but he could never get into the academy.”

“Really?” Jason said.

“He couldn’t pass the tests,” Carl said. “So, what kind of tip did you get?”

“Somebody said they saw what looked like a blindfolded adolescent boy with his hands bound taken from a car into this house,” Jason said.

“This house? Really?” Carl said. “I can’t imagine why they would say that.” Carl brushed his hand across his forehead, pushing his thinning hair out of his face and wiping the sweaty sheen away. He swiped his hands on his pants. “Did they say when they saw this?”

“Last couple of days.” Jason’s gaze held steady on him.

Carl chuckled, but it sounded more like a titter to Charlie. “Well, I don’t know why they would say something like that. I don’t have any boy here.”

“I figured you didn’t, but like I said, I’ve got to ask. Is there any chance you’d let me just look around?” Jason asked.

“Look around?” Carl licked his lips. “I don’t know. My brother might get real mad if I let you do that.”

“Sure.” Jason nodded. “If you feel better, I could just go get a warrant, then you’d have to let us look around.”

“A warrant? Hugh would definitely know y’all were here if you go get a warrant.”

“Yes, sir, he would,” Jason said. “But if you just let us look around, he won’t know we were here, unless you tell him.”

Charlie watched the banter back-and-forth, trying to stay focused. Trying to ignore the music playing in her head. Benny Goodman’s clarinet music floated through her mind, taking her away from the conversation, and she only caught bits and pieces.

“All right, I guess.” Carl scrubbed his chin. “I ain’t got nothing to hide.”

“Of course, you don’t,” Jason said. “Like I said, it’s just a formality. I really appreciate you doing this.”

“Okay. Just don’t tell my brother I did this. It would make him mad, and he’s mean when he’s mad,” Carl said.

“Don’t you worry,” Jason said. “I’m sure that he’ll never find out.”

“Is there any chance I could see those bullet holes while we’re at it?” Charlie ignored another exasperated look from Jason.

“Sure. I can show them to you. Some plaster cracked away a long time ago, but there’s some in my room and it’s clear what they are. My grandpa said that’s where the daughter of the lawyer stayed.”

“He did?” Charlie said.

“Yeah, he used to say she’d come haunt me if I was a bad boy.”

“Did she?”

“Nah, ‘course not. Ghosts aren’t real. Although my brother used to scare me with stories about her bloody corpse in the closet, but I knew better. He liked joking around like that when we were kids.”

“Sure,” Charlie said, almost disappointed that the ghost she suspected hadn’t been able to cross into Carl’s consciousness.

CHAPTER 22

“G randpa said they chased her in here.” Carl pointed out several of the old bullet holes that led to the small closet. In places the plaster had cracked and peeled away, revealing the slats behind it.

The distant rat-ta-tat-tat of Tommy guns rushed through Charlie’s mind, and two men dressed in gray trousers with suspenders flashed across the room, like a scene from an old movie playing before her eyes. They killed indiscriminately, shooting every human they found. Charlie wanted to close her eyes. Wanted to shut out the choked whimpering coming from inside the closet. But she couldn’t look away. She’d come too far.

“Is it okay if I look in here?” she asked with her hand already on the grimy brass knob.

“Uh, there’s not really any bullet holes you can see in there,” Carl said, but he sounded far away as if he were talking to her from another room.

The dissonant notes of Benny Goodman’s song played in the background. And she had the sensation of floating when she opened the door, suspended in the air, looking down on a horrific scene. Lottie Barrymore’s spirit pressed against the back wall of the closet, her blue shirtdress riddled with holes, seeping blood. She struggled to breathe, choking on the blood that had filled her lungs when the lead slugs hit her chest. She raised her hand, reaching for Charlie, then disappeared. A warm hand on Charlie’s back brought her out of the vision, and she jumped a little.

“Are you okay?” Jason whispered. “You have an intense look on your face.”

“I’m fine.” She looked him in the eye and forced a smile. “I’m just sorry this whole thing has been so fruitless. I swear, I thought he would be here.”

Jason leaned in close. “I know.”

“What is that?” Charlie said, pointing to a ladder built into the wall that led to a door in the ceiling. She turned to Carl. “What’s up there?”

“Nothing, really. Just the attic.” Carl’s expression shifted from proud to worried.

“Great. I’ll need to see that, too,” Jason said, using his nonsense face.

Carl massaged the back of his head. “Sorry. I don’t have the key anymore, so—”

“That’s no problem,” Charlie said. “Forensic investigator, remember?” She patted the large black bag hanging across her body. “I’ve got tools that can open any lock.”

“Oh, right,” Carl said.

Charlie didn’t wait for permission and started up the ladder. When she reached the small door, she held her hand over the knob and concentrated on the locking mechanism as she whispered, “Unlock, unlock, unlock.”

Then she heard a click, turned the knob, and pushed up. The door opened and fell back, leaving enough space for Charlie to crawl through. A string hung from the ceiling and she pulled it. A single bare bulb flickered on. It made a crackling sound and popped, taking the light with it. She dug into her purse for her cell phone or a quartz crystal in her small arsenal of tools but came up empty.

“Do you have your flashlight on you?” Jason asked, poking his head inside the attic.

“I thought I did.” She sighed.

Jason patted his breast pocket and then his pants pockets. “Dammit. I left mine in the glove box. What about your cell phone?”

“I’ve got a light,” Ben said. He reached inside the messenger bag he always carried with him and handed it to Jason.

“What’s this?” Jason asked.

“It’s a light. Just give it to her; she knows how to use,” Ben said.

Jason held the three-inch clear quartz point out to her, and Charlie gladly took it. She wrapped her fingers around it, holding her thumb and forefinger against the smooth sides with the point extending into the attic. She closed her eyes and set an intention to cast a light that surrounded her.

Her fingers twitched with electricity and power. Little blue sparks from her skin connected with the crystal, and it glowed. Within seconds, enough light emerged from the stone to drive back the darkness to the corners of the attic space that ran the length of the roof. Jason climbed into the attic with her.

“You see anything?” he asked.

She lifted her hand to the right, then left, scanning the place for something familiar. The metal folding chair she’d seen the boy tied to leaned against the eaves and a shelf sat next to it with an old fruit crate on top of it. Charlie moved closer to get a better look. The crate held a roll of duct tape, a coil of rope, and a dark blue bandana, like the one used to blindfold the boy.

“I saw all of this in my dream.” She pointed to the box’s contents and glanced around.

“I don’t know what to do with any of this information, Charlie. If they had him here, there’s no sign of it now.”

“I know,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

“Maybe we’ve gotten lucky. Maybe they haven’t done anything yet, and maybe, just maybe, us showing up here will be enough to make them think twice about taking the boy.”

“Yeah. Maybe. Unless he’s dead already,” Charlie whispered.

“We don’t have any proof of that, and your vision isn’t enough to arrest anybody without something concrete to back it up.”

“I know.” Charlie glanced around the attic for any sign of the boy.

“In the meantime, we need to go. We don’t really have any right to be here.”

Charlie found Lottie standing in the middle of the attic. Black holes splattered across her bloodied blue shirtdress. She waved at Charlie to follow her.

“You’re right,” Charlie said to Jason and walked toward Lottie.

“What are you doing?” Jason asked, but she barely heard him. All she could hear was that damn music growing louder the closer she got to Lottie. A stack of boxes marked Xmas in black lettering, and an old fake silver tree, almost obscured a brick chimney at one end of the attic. Lottie pointed past the boxes.

“What do you want me to do?” Charlie asked. Lottie pointed frantically at the chimney, and Charlie moved the boxes away. Once she’d cleared some space, she glanced back for further instructions from Lottie, but the spirit had disappeared.

“Crystal clear, crystal bright, reveal the secret with your light,” Charlie muttered. The crystal’s light grew brighter, and she held it up and down the chimney looking for something, anything that would show her what Lottie needed her to see. Her hand brushed against one of the bricks; it moved slightly. She pressed against it with one finger and skewed it out of place.

“Hey, can you help me?”

“Charlie, we’ve got to get out of here.”

“I know, and we will, but first I’ve got to figure out what this spirit wants.”

“What?” All the color drained from Jason’s tanned face. “There’s a ghost up here?”

“Yeah, she’s been haunting me for a couple of weeks . And I saw her again in the bedroom closet. I think this used to be her house. Help me with these bricks.” Charlie lifted the loose corner brick out of place. Jason found two more loose bricks above and below the first one.

“I think I see something,” Jason said and pulled an old cigar box from inside the chimney. “What the hell?” Jason whispered.

“Open it,” Charlie said and hovered the light above the box so they could get a better look. Jason flipped up the top.

“The letters,” she said, recognizing them from the dream. Written in a loopy, girlish handwriting, they were all addressed to Nathan Weintraub. There were no stamps or postmarks on the envelopes. They had never been mailed. Never reached their recipient. Next to the stack for safekeeping sat a small velvet box. Charlie took the cigar box out of Jason’s hands, closed it, and opened the flap of her purse.

“What are you doing? That doesn’t belong to you,” Jason said, looking over his shoulder as if someone might see her stealing the box.

“It doesn’t belong to the Pritchett boys either,” Charlie said. “Listen, don’t be alarmed, but her spirit’s here. This was her house. She was killed here.”

“Shit, I hate this part,” Jason murmured.

“I should’ve stood up to my parents,” Lottie said. Charlie turned and faced the girl. Lottie looked almost exactly as she had the first time Charlie had spoken to her in her house, the night her ghost appeared in Charlie’s bathroom. Her crisp blue shirtdress flowed around her, her hair was impeccably groomed, and her lips were stained pink like the petals of a rose.

“I hid the ring because I didn’t want them to find it. I need him to know that I loved him. That I still love him and that I’m waiting for him,” Lottie said.

“Why did they kill you?” Charlie asked. “You were just a kid.”

“They were after my father. They didn’t expect my mother and me to be home. They couldn’t leave any witnesses. They murdered all of us. Even Aurelia, our housekeeper. She didn’t deserve that.”

“You didn’t deserve it either, honey,” Charlie said.

“Is everything all right up there?” Ben called up the ladder.

“Yeah. We’ll be down in a minute,” Jason said, then turned back to Charlie. “What are we doing here?”

“We’re getting the hell out of here, that’s what we’re doing,” Charlie said and fastened the flap of her bag so that no one could see the box.

“Wait, I can’t believe you’re taking that box.”

“The box belongs to a girl named Lottie. All she wants is for her fiancé to know she loved him, and I’m gonna give her that peace and maybe him too. Who knows?”

“That girl died in the forties, according to Carl down there. What makes you think her fiancé’s even still alive?” Jason asked.

“He’s alive. Trust me. I have an excellent source on that. Now, what do you want to do about Carl Pritchett?”

“There’s not much else we can do here. We can talk to his employer. Find out what he does at that school.”

“We need to find out what Hugh Pritchett does, too. Any chance you’d be up for a ride up to that park. Maybe if the boy’s buried there, he’ll show himself to me.”

“Sure,” Jason said. “But for the record, I don’t like stealing.”

“It doesn’t really belong to them, and I’m wondering if any of this was real,” Charlie said.

“What do you mean?” Jason said.

“I mean, it wouldn’t be the first time a spirit screwed around with my head. For all I know, Lottie’s been sending me the dreams about the boy to get me into this house. So I could find these letters and her ring.”

“I guess no dead boy would be the best-case scenario.”

“Yeah. Let’s get out of here. This place gives me the creeps,” Charlie said and put Ben’s crystal in her pocket.

A quick trip to the park yielded no more than the house had about the boy, and Charlie felt more deflated than ever.

“Y’all wanna get some dinner?” Jason asked as he headed down Highway 52 back toward the sheriff’s station.

“I think Jen’s expecting us,” Ben said from the back seat. “She’s still got a list of stuff for us to do a mile long.”

“Right,” Jason said. “Did... Lisa come?”

“Yeah, she did,” Charlie said. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him to fight for Lisa. That he was part of the family. That he shouldn’t give up. But she didn’t say any of that. First, she wanted to talk to Lisa.

CHAPTER 23

“**W**hat are your plans this evening?” Charlie put her barbecue sandwich down on the paper plate and grabbed a chip and crunched it. Lisa sat next to her at the end of the picnic table. They were the only ones left at the table. All the others had either left to go to work or were busy with their part of Jen’s to-do list for Beltane.

“I don’t know. Probably whatever Jen wants me to do, why?” Lisa asked.

“I was kind of hoping you and I could take a drive. Maybe go to the beach for a walk? Take in the sunset.”

“Okay.” Lisa eyed her warily. “Is that all?”

“No,” Charlie said. “But you know that.”

Lisa sighed and moved a couple of chips around on her plate. “How was he?”

“He was Jason. He doesn’t really let his personal stuff show too much when he’s working,” Charlie said.

“I tried to call him last night, but it kept going to voicemail,” Lisa said.

“Did you ever tell him why you don’t really want to get married?” Charlie asked.

Lisa looked around the yard. Ben and Jen were stacking wood and brush in the center of the fire ring. Jack was on his mower with Ruby perched on the seat in front of him, her

hands on the wheel, steering. Evan had sought refuge in the privacy and shade of the back porch to text Rachel.

Lisa shook her head. “Maybe we should just go to the beach and talk.”

“Okay,” Charlie said. “Let’s finish up our sandwiches, and we’ll head out.”

Lisa nodded, picked up a chip and popped into her mouth.

FORTY MINUTES LATER, CHARLIE PULLED INTO A PARKING LOT at Kiawah Beachwalker Park. The tourists were not out in full force yet, and she found a parking space easily enough. The two of them slipped their boots off and rolled up their pant legs before they left the car, then walked up one of the sandy public entrances to the beach.

They walked side-by-side in comfortable silence, past the soft sand to the wet beach hardened from the weight of the receding tide. A warm breeze blew, and Charlie breathed in the comforting scent of salt air. She closed her eyes and let the negative ions from the surf wash over her, cleanse her.

“You know I don’t know why I don’t come here more often,” Charlie said. “Just being here makes me feel better.”

“I know. It’s the same for me. Even though I’m not a water sign, it still grounds me to stick my toes in the sand and look out over that big blue ocean. Nothing like it—reminds me how small I am.”

“You are not small, Lisa Marie Holloway,” Charlie scolded. “You just had some tragic things happen to you. That’s all, and tragedy takes healing.”

Lisa sat down on the sand and wrapped her arms around her knees. Charlie did the same.

“You know, if there’s something I’ve learned in the last six months, it’s that healing takes talking,” Charlie said.

A cool breeze blew around them. April at the beach was warm in the sun, but the water remained too cool to swim in, and even the sand felt cold on Charlie’s toes. She waited for

Lisa to open up, would wait forever if that's what it took. Lisa's entire body looked like a taut wire ready to snap.

After several minutes, Lisa's chest expanded, and she blurted out, "I never told him. Any of it."

Charlie felt all the tension from her cousin melt away with that admission. Lisa stared off into the distance. Charlie knew if Lisa looked at her, she might break down, and Lisa Marie Holloway hated to cry. Crying was a defeat. Sadness was surrender in her cousin's mind.

"You never told him what?" Charlie asked, prodding her cousin to say the words. Maybe if she said them out loud, it would break the imaginary curse cast on her life. At least where love was concerned.

An older couple holding hands, wrapped up in their warm jackets, walked by them. They had rolled up their long pants to their knees and walked barefoot, teasing the surf. The water pushed in just out of reach of the silver-haired woman's toes. She laughed and jumped out of the way, and her husband laughed with her.

"That's never gonna be me." Lisa's face matched the miserable tone of her voice.

"It could be you if you let it," Charlie said.

Lisa shook her head. "It can't be. If something happened to him because of me, I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

"Oh, my goddess, Lisa. You are not the reason that Brett and Thad died. They didn't die from some curse because they got engaged to you."

"Then explain why they died, because I still don't have a good reason." Lisa rested her forehead against her arms.

"Honey, as much as we want to control it, the world is random. And sometimes people just die, whether or not we think it's their time. It's heartbreaking, and it sucks, but—"

"Then why'd they die? It makes no sense. None," Lisa said.

Charlie took a deep breath. “There’s a ghost who’s been haunting me. She was barely seventeen years old when she died. I don’t have all the details yet because I need to do some research. But she and her family were gunned down in their home in the forties.”

“Oh, my gosh, that’s awful,” Lisa said.

“Yeah, it is, and it’s not fair. But even though her father may have done some shady things that pissed off the wrong people, it wasn’t him who killed her. The more I see of the world, the more I’m convinced that all we have is right now. This moment,” Charlie said. “Brett Phillips was always a speed demon. How many tickets did he get from the time he got his license? Seriously? And then he insisted on riding a motorcycle.”

“I know. I can’t tell you how many times I told him I hated that machine. That no amount of protection would keep him from ending up splattered across the pavement.” Lisa’s voice cracked. “I just wish those hadn’t been my last words to him.”

“I know you have regrets about that,” Charlie said. “But there are ways to communicate with him. To let him know. It might give you some peace.”

Lisa nodded. Her face solemn. “I know. Maybe I’ll do that.”

“There’s also no way that anybody could have known that Thad had an aneurysm waiting to burst. That was tragic, but again it was not your fault.”

“Maybe we could’ve healed him if I’d known.”

“But we didn’t know. That’s the point.” Charlie noticed the tears streaming down her cousin’s face, and she wrapped her arm around Lisa’s shoulders. “Anything could happen to anybody at any time. That’s the realization I have come to, doing what I do with the police, with Jason, with the DOL. You just have to be brave and love people, anyway. And let them love you. That’s kind of the price of love. Knowing that, someday, you’ll lose them. But until that day, you have this moment.”

“I don’t know how to fix this. I’m scared I’ve lost Jason, and I keep thinking over and over if I had just not been stupid in high school. If I’d just left Justin Coyne alone when I was a senior, then Missy LaFleur would never have cursed me and nobody would’ve died.” Lisa swiped at her cheek with her palm. “Nobody.”

“First of all, it takes two to be messing around. And if I recall correctly, Justin Coyne hit on you even though he had a girlfriend.”

“I know. But...”

“But what? Do you honestly, after all this time, believe Missy Lafleur had enough power to curse you for the rest of your life? I mean, come on, we were all baby witches.”

“I do.” Lisa’s lower lip trembled. “She was so mad, and there’s a lot of power that goes with an intention forged from anger. You know that. That’s why we don’t cast when we’re mad.”

“So, you remember what she said to you?” Charlie said.

Lisa scrubbed her face clean of tears. “Only word for word.”

“I remember it, too, but she gave you an out,” Charlie said.

“Only true love can break this curse. Whatever that is,” Lisa said. The bitter words broke Charlie’s heart for her cousin.

“Honey, what do you think true love is?” Charlie asked.

“I don’t know. Someone who sees you for what you are and loves you anyway.” Lisa shrugged. “Somebody who would die for you.”

“Jason Tate sees you for exactly who and what you are. He sees all of us for what we are, and he still wants in this crazy family.” Charlie chuckled. “He feels at home with us. That’s what true love means to me. Someone who feels like home.”

“Yeah,” Lisa whispered.

“And for the record, he would die for you in a skinny minute. Honestly, he’d kill for you if it came down to it, and that says a lot. I think the real question is, do you love him for who he is? Warts and all? And would you die for him?”

Lisa shifted her gaze to meet Charlie’s, and no tears clouded her green eyes. “Yeah. I would.”

“Then that curse you think is hanging over your head is broken.” Charlie made a gesture like she was breaking a stick and then held her hands up.

“How will I know for sure though?” Lisa said.

Charlie nudged her shoulder against Lisa’s and grinned. “You say yes the next time he asks you to marry him. Say yes with all your heart and knowing that curses only have power if you give it to them. It’s been almost twenty years. Stop giving Missy Lafleur your power.” Charlie tipped her head right, then left. “And maybe talk with Jason about plans like investing in a florist business before you make them.”

“I would, but like I said, he won’t take my call,” Lisa said.

“Leave that part to me. I’ll get him to call you, or better yet, I’ll get him to come to Beltane Eve, and y’all can have a long talk there.”

“You really think you can get him to come?”

“Of course,” Charlie said.

“If you can do that, I guess I can believe the stupid curse is broken,” Lisa said.

“Good,” Charlie said. She reached inside her purse, pulled out the small velvet box that Jason had handed to her last night, and pressed it into Lisa’s hand. “I believe this is yours.”

CHAPTER 24

When Charlie arrived at work on Monday morning, she found Will Tucker's desk empty. No sign of his occupation. She put her tote bag, with her laptop and lunch inside, on the floor next to her desk and unpacked the computer and plugged it into the docking station. Her desk looked exactly as she'd left it. Two simple picture frames rested in one corner, one of Evan and one of her and Tom at the beach. A delicate glass globe made a small terrarium of air plants. She pulled her notepad from her bag and made a quick to-do list of the things she needed to tackle first while her computer booted. As soon as she could log in, she sent Athena Whitby a message on their interoffice chat app.

I'm here. I need to look through some case files this morning, then maybe we can meet later to discuss. Do you know where Will is by any chance? His desk looks empty.

Athena replied almost immediately.

Sounds good. You might want to talk to Ben about Will.

A cold pang touched Charlie's heart. The last time something had happened to Will, vampires had almost killed him. She quickly pulled up another chat window and jotted off a quick message to Ben.

Hi. Do you have a few minutes?

Charlie stared at the screen, waiting for a response. When it didn't come, she went back to her list. A few moments later, her computer dinged, and she saw the message from Ben.

Sure. Why don't you drop by? There's something I need to discuss with you, anyway.

Her heart skipped a beat, and a cold cloud of dread filled her chest. She took a deep breath and typed, *On my way*. Charlie took long strides down the hall to Ben's office. As usual, his door was wide open, and she knocked on the heavy wood before she poked her head inside his office. The sight of him at his desk wearing a serious frown made her want to turn around and leave.

"Hi," she called.

Ben glanced up, and his frown melted away. He waved her forward. "Come on in and close the door behind you." Charlie took a deep breath, walked into the office, and did as he asked.

"That's never a good sign." Charlie sank into one of the leather and metal-framed chairs in front of Ben's large, modern, bamboo-topped desk.

"What, a closed-door? It just means I don't want other people to hear us talking, that's all. You're not in trouble or anything."

"Well, that's a relief." Charlie let out a nervous laugh. Ben closed the file he had open, leaned forward with his elbows on his desk and folded his hands together to form a steeple.

"I know you asked for the meeting, but before we get started, I need to let you know that Will has parted ways with the DOL."

Charlie sat up straight. "Is he okay?" A flutter of panic brushed against her sternum. "He's not hurt, or anything, is he?"

"No, nothing like that. He just wasn't happy here. I always knew it was kind of a long shot that he'd stay around. I think he found it too limiting, even though it was steady pay."

Charlie nodded. "Sure. I guess vampire hunting doesn't pay a lot."

Ben shrugged. "He gets by."

“Did he say what he’ll do now? Seriously, he can’t go back to vampire hunting. It almost got him killed last time.”

“I don’t think he really cares. He needs that thrill and the satisfaction of protecting people. What we do here is important, but it’s not always very thrilling.” He gave her a knowing smile.

“You got that right. If you told me six months ago that I’d be combing through spreadsheets of closed files looking for information to build a case, I’d have thought you were crazy.” She chuckled. “It’s really not much different from what Jason does. Good old-fashioned investigative work.”

“Yep. And you’re great at it.” His smile faded a little. “Which is why I wanted to ask you how you’re feeling about working for us. Your six-month review is coming up soon, and I kind of wanted to check in.”

Charlie shrugged. “I like my job. I don’t have any plans to quit if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“See, you say that...” Ben tipped his head, narrowed his eyes, and pointed at her. “But what I hear is that you need this job.”

“Of course, I need it. Who doesn’t need their job? I have bills to pay, just like everybody else. And as much as I get injured because of chasing some ghost, I need good health insurance.”

“Right.” Again, Ben nodded without giving much away.

“Are there things I don’t like? Sure. But I can’t just up and quit.”

Ben leaned forward, his expression thoughtful. “It takes you away from your family a lot. And not just your cousins, but Evan too. He plays sports, right?”

Charlie sighed but wouldn’t meet his eyes. “Yeah, he does. Soccer and basketball. In fact, I think he has a game tomorrow.”

“I just want to make sure you’re happy here, that’s all. You’re a valuable member of our team, whether or not you

realize it.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that. Like I said, I need my job. And we do important work here. Important work, no matter what Will Tucker thinks.”

“We do. But I know you enjoyed working at the funeral home last week with Tom. Jen mentioned that he could use you. Probably even offer you health insurance.”

“You know I love Tom, and don’t get me wrong, I enjoyed working with him. It’s interesting work. But I love investigating. I feel like I can make a difference, and I don’t wanna stop doing that.”

Ben let out a deep breath. “That’s good to hear.” His shoulders relaxed, and relief spread across his face. “I don’t think I could stand to lose two employees this week. So, how’s the mole case going?”

Lines of tension that had tightened across Charlie’s brow when she entered the office, also eased. “Slow at the moment,” she said, shifting more comfortably in her seat. “I noticed several files light on details by the investigator, so I’m gonna pull those case files again.”

“Oh?” Ben said.

“Yeah, to check for some correlation between them.”

Ben smiled in agreement. “That’s great,” he said. “What about the kidnapped boy? Anything new there?”

“No, I haven’t had any more dreams or visions. If you don’t mind, I’m gonna see if Athena can help with the search. See if there’s been any reports filed on a kidnapping. I’m still not convinced the Pritchett brothers aren’t involved.”

Ben shook his head. “I don’t mind at all. We should follow your leads. That’s kinda why we hired you,” he said, smiling.

“Really?” she asked. “It’s not like I’m seeing a demon kidnapping this boy. It’s just a man.”

“I know. But it could prevent him from doing this to other kids. Your psychic abilities are your best asset. You’re a hell of

a witch, but you're the best psychic I've ever met, and I've met a few in my time."

"That means a lot coming from you."

"Listen," Ben said, leaning forward and speaking earnestly now. "I know this job set up isn't ideal. All the traveling back and forth between Palmetto Point and Charlotte on top of traveling for cases. What would you think if you worked from home during the week and only traveled for case investigations?"

"Are you serious?" Charlie asked.

"Yeah. There's no reason you must physically be here, is there? We don't even use paper files anymore, so it's not like you need to go into some archive to find something."

"That would be incredible. I'd have to set up a desk."

"Or, you could use a co-op workspace. Pay a monthly fee and expense it. I'm thinking about doing that myself."

"Really? Does Jen know?"

"No, not yet. I'm clearing it with my bosses, but so far, there has been no push back except for disciplinary stuff, which rarely happens with my group."

"That would be incredible. Maybe we could share office space," Charlie said.

"Maybe so."

"Hey, would you mind if I take tomorrow off? There's a funeral I'd like to go to. A spirit that's been haunting me. He says his wife murdered him, but I need to gather some evidence."

"Yeah, sure. Maybe you can start scoping out space. Who's the spirit?"

"No one you know. If I can't find any evidence, I'm hoping to see him off to the other side. Maybe I'll get a decent night's sleep once he's gone."

"You seem to get hit up a lot by ghosts lately," Ben said.

“You don’t know the half of it.” Charlie chuckled. “My healer Esperanza says it’s just all part of the process. Hopefully, one of these days it will level out again.”

“I’m sure it will,” Ben said.

“Well, I better get back to my investigation.” Charlie rose from her seat and started for the door. Ben took another folder from the stack on his desk as Charlie opened the door and looked over her shoulder.

“For what it’s worth,” she said, “I think it’d be great to work together, close to home. I’m not the only one who misses out by working here during the week.”

“Yeah, I know,” Ben said. “And trust me, I want it to change just as much as you do.”

“Good,” she said and headed back to her office.

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CHAPTER 25

Charlie put the cake box on the front seat of her car. It contained the most popular cake Jen made—a three-layer yellow cake iced with dark chocolate buttercream in a simple but elegant petal pattern. The Kitchen Witch logo stamped on top of the box put dessert lovers on alert that they were in for the most delicious treat of their lives.

Jen's cakes were well-known throughout the community and had graced tables at birthdays, baby showers, wedding showers, and funeral receptions for the last seven years. And it was better than any casserole Charlie could've thrown together. She punched in the directions to George Allen Cofield's house on the map app on her phone and set off to find out whether he really had a security system.

Charlie turned into the expensive neighborhood of Heron's Point. Many of the elegant riverfront homes—with docks and spectacular views — cost more than she could earn in ten lifetimes.

Cars lined the street where George Allen Cofield had lived and died. The largest in the neighborhood, the three-story light gray stucco home had a sweeping staircase that led to an alcove porch and double-stained glass front door. Six-foot pink oleanders studded the front of the house, partially covering the slats between the tall, stucco-covered pilings.

After finally finding a spot to park four houses away, she grabbed only the necessities out of her tote: her keys, her phone, and the small wallet that held her photo ID, credit card, a couple of her business cards, and two twenty-dollar bills for

emergencies. She slipped her phone, keys, and wallet into pockets of the black suit jacket that matched her best black trousers. She wore a silvery gray blouse with pearl buttons and a comfortable pair of black flats, in case she had to make a quick getaway. That thought tickled her, and she laughed to herself as she walked up the street carrying the cake box in both hands.

Despite all the cars on the street, the neighborhood seemed tranquil. As she approached the walk to the front door, she stopped and looked up at the house. George Allen Cofield hovered in one window. He waved frantically, and she glanced around before balancing the box on one palm and raising the other hand in response. Her stomach tied in a knot; this would be tricky. Obviously, he wouldn't be cryptic like some spirits. And while she appreciated that, she knew it could be hard to maneuver through a crowd with a ghost whispering in her ear. She took a deep breath and walked up the brick walkway, ready to face what came next.

Allen Cofield opened the door, a look of surprise on his face.

“Miss Payne? It's nice to see you.”

His gaze shifted to the box in her hands.

“I hope it's all right that I dropped by. I just came to pay my respects to your father.”

“That's so kind of you. I know my mother will really appreciate it.”

“I'm sure,” Charlie said politely but doubted his mother would give two hoots if she came or not. “Where would you like me to put this?”

She held up the box with the cake.

“Here, let me take that. We'll let the caterer sort it out,” Allen said, and took the box from her hands.

“Caterer?” Charlie asked.

“Yes, my mother insisted. I told her it wouldn't be necessary. People would bring food. They have been for days.”

But, well, she's stubborn that way. She didn't want to have to deal with any of it. And I guess I can't blame her."

"No, of course not," Charlie said. "It's a lot to deal with."

"It is." He signaled to a woman with a long, dark ponytail wearing black pants, a white tuxedo shirt and a black apron. She approached quickly, and he handed off the cake. "Can you make sure this gets put out on the food table as soon as possible, please?"

"Yes, sir," the young woman said. She took the box and hurried off into the crowd.

"So how are you holding up, Allen?" Charlie asked.

"I'm doing okay. It's weird being in this house without him here. I know this sounds crazy, but sometimes it feels like he's still here," Allen mused.

"It doesn't sound crazy at all. Have you been experiencing anything particular?" she asked.

"No. Just a feeling. That's all," he said wistfully as they moved into the bustle of the living room.

"My grandmother raised me from the time I was eight," Charlie said, noting the faces of the mourners chatting and sipping beverages. "She died when I was in college and sometimes, I swear to you, I can still smell her perfume."

Charlie hoped the story about Bunny might prompt him to share. He didn't have to know that Charlie could not only see her grandmother but also after Bunny died, she'd wake Charlie up in the middle of the night to give her lists of things to do. Things Bunny had forgotten to take care of before she passed over.

"Yeah, I've heard stories like that. There are only two things that remind me of my dad. Cigars and good bourbon, and I haven't smelled either of those things since..." He left his sentence unfinished but let out a shuddery sigh.

Charlie patted him on the shoulder. "I know it's hard to be here without him. But I'm sure he loved you a lot and that he's watching over you."

“You’re damn right I loved him,” George Allen Cofield said. A cold mist settled around Charlie’s shoulders. “I left him this house and my business. Now he can use that expensive fancy education I paid for to run it.”

“Thanks,” he said. “My dad wasn’t exactly an affectionate man. We mostly bonded over baseball and business.”

“That’s great, you had something to bond with him over. I’m sure he was proud of you.” Charlie ignored the spirit hovering off to her side.

“That bitch. I can’t believe she’s so flagrant at my funeral reception,” George Allen huffed.

Charlie glanced past Allen to Mrs. Cofield on the other side of the living room, sitting on one of the long white couches. She wore a bright pink dress that set off her sleek, silver coiffure. A handsome man with a head of thick white hair sat next to her with his arm stretched behind her across the back of the couch. Charlie recognized him immediately as the man from her vision, who drank champagne with Mrs. Cofield in the same hot tub where George had died.

“Allen, is there a powder room I could use?” Charlie asked.

“Sure.” Allen pivoted as if to get his bearings, then pointed past the grand staircase. “Just go down this hallway, through the kitchen. The bathroom’s on the left. And if it’s occupied, there’s a back staircase off the kitchen. You’ll find a bathroom at the top of the landing.”

“Thanks.” Charlie smiled and took one more look around the elegant living room decorated with pale gray walls and coastal blue accents. It didn’t escape her how cozy Mrs. Cofield and the man looked on the couch, deep in discussion with each other. For a woman who had just lost her husband, Mrs. Cofield didn’t look very grief stricken. It almost shocked Charlie that they didn’t seem to care who saw their open affection for each other. The image of the two of them in the hot tub went through her head again, and she wondered if maybe it had already happened.

“Don’t go that way.” George Allen appeared in front of her in the hallway leading to the kitchen as Allen had instructed. “The room with my computer servers is upstairs.”

“I don’t want to be too conspicuous,” Charlie whispered. She glanced around to see if anyone had noticed her talking to herself. “You sure were liked. This place is packed.”

She chuckled to herself. Compared to the formally dressed mourners, George had donned a blue Hawaiian shirt and a pair of khaki shorts for the occasion.

“Show me where this server room is, so we can get out of here,” she said, keeping her opinions to herself.

* * *

CHARLIE FOLLOWED THE GHOST UP THE STAIRS. “GEORGE, I can’t go in there,” she whispered harshly. “That looks like the master bedroom. What if your wife comes up here?”

“She won’t. She’s downstairs, letting my ex-best friend fawn all over her.”

“He was your best friend?” Charlie asked.

“Yep. Since we were in high school. Over fifty years. But he pissed it all away because he couldn’t keep his hands off my wife.”

“I’m so sorry. That’s horrible,” Charlie said.

“Nah, they deserve each other,” he said. “Maybe she’ll make him as miserable as she made me sometimes. Now come on before someone really comes this way.”

“Fine. But I better not get caught.”

“Don’t worry. I can see where everybody is,” George said.

“Really? I’ve never had a spirit tell me that before.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of amazing, actually. I can see all sorts of stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Like my son’s downstairs in the kitchen flirting with the caterer. I can’t believe Phyllis hired a caterer. Do you know how much that’s costing me?”

“I hate to break this to you, George, but it’s not costing you anything. You’re dead. Remember?”

“How could I forget? But it’s still my money.”

“George, I can tell you from experience, it doesn’t amount to a hill of beans where you’re going, so just let it go,” Charlie said.

Footsteps on the stairs made alarm bells go off in her head, and she quickly pushed open the door to the master suite and closed it behind her. George Allen flickered and disappeared. Her heart hammered in her chest as she put her ear to the door to see if she could tell whether someone was coming.

“Don’t worry.” George Allen reappeared in front of one of three doors in the bedroom. “It’s safe. Now come on.”

Charlie hurried across to George Allen. The airy British Colonial-styled bedroom looked like it belonged on the pages of a magazine.

“George Allen, what did you do for a living?” Charlie asked, admiring the king-size, four-poster bed.

“I was a real estate developer. This is one of my developments.” He gestured to the room. “I’ve got others on Daniel Island, in Mount Pleasant, and in Hanahan. All waterfront properties. Made me a very rich man.”

“Your wife certainly has expensive taste.” Charlie ran her hand over the polished wood of a nearby dresser.

“Expensive is right,” George Allen said, not hiding his disgust.

“Were you contrary with her all the time about money?” Charlie asked.

“The woman can spend money like it’s water,” George Allen said. “She was always hiring people that we didn’t need. A caterer? Who has their funeral catered?”

“Lots of people I expect,” Charlie said. “My cousin Jen caters events like this sometimes.”

“My mother would roll over in her grave,” George Allen said.

“I highly doubt that. Maybe if you’d spent less time nagging your wife about how much money she was spending and more time paying attention to her like that man downstairs, maybe you’d still be alive.”

“She’d still have found a reason to murder me,” George muttered.

“At the moment, I still don’t have any proof that she did that, and the trick you did with the TV the other night isn’t evidence. Maybe if you’d been a little kinder and less obsessed about money, she wouldn’t have had an affair,” Charlie said.

“What? So now it’s my fault she murdered me?” George said. “I can’t believe you’re saying this. I thought you were on my side.”

“I am on your side, George Allen, but you’re on my last nerve, and I’m not even married to you. Now, where is this proof? I’d like to get out of here before someone hears us and calls the cops for trespassing.”

“Hears you, you mean,” George Allen Cofield muttered. “They can’t hear me.”

“Oh, hush, and point,” Charlie snapped.

George Allen scowled and pointed to the closet across from the bed.

“Thank you,” Charlie said, and opened the closet door to the walk-in closet of her dreams. Cherrywood lined the walls, with hanging bars, drawers, shelves for shoes, bags, and whatever else needed storing. On one wall, an array of expensive suits hung in color-coordinated symmetry. On the opposite wall, dress pants, dress shirts, ties, belts, and golf shirts lined up as if in a designer showroom.

A line of brightly colored Hawaiian shirts hung from a bar next to the floor-to-ceiling shoe rack that held every kind of

shoe from construction boots to bespoke, imported, soft leather lace-ups. George appeared next to the rows of Hawaiian shirts and pointed again.

“They’re behind the shirts?” Charlie asked. He nodded, and she pushed the shirts aside and found a half-door that Charlie assumed led to attic space.

“In there,” he whispered. The temperature in the room seemed to plummet, and a shiver skittered across Charlie’s back.

“Of course, it is,” Charlie muttered. “Please tell me it will be spider-free. I really hate spiders.”

“Of course, it’s spider-free. It’s a state-of-the-art server room.”

“Great.” Charlie reached for the doorknob and turned, but it resisted. “It’s locked.”

“What do you mean it’s locked?” George said. “Try it again.”

Charlie twisted the handle back and forth, but it wouldn’t budge. “Maybe your wife knew more than you thought.”

“That bitch,” George Allen muttered.

“Will you please stop saying that? It’s very mean and derogatory.”

“Now you’re offended?” George Allen asked.

“There are just some things I don’t like. And I don’t like the word bitch.”

“Fine,” George said. “I don’t know where the key is. I never used it. It might be downstairs in the kitchen. Look on some hooks on the wall near the stairs leading to the garage.”

“I don’t really need the keys. Where is your wife?” Charlie asked. George Allen stared into space for a second.

“She still downstairs, sitting on the couch like she’s somebody’s queen bee.”

“This is her house and her husband’s funeral. She is the queen bee,” Charlie said. “Now be quiet so I can concentrate.” She took a deep breath and set her intention. Her fingers tingled a little as she imagined the mechanism turning as she whispered the words, “Unlock, unlock, unlock.”

The lock clicked, and Charlie gave the knob a twist with no more resistance.

“Holy shit,” George Allen said. “How did you do that?”

“I’m not just psychic.” She smiled, pleased with herself. “I’m also a witch.”

“Really?” George Allen said. “I had no idea that witches were for real. I thought that was just fairy tale stuff.”

“Oh, yes, we are real. And there are a lot more of us in this community than you think,” Charlie said, and stooped down low enough to walk through the door.

“Makes me wish I knew that when I was alive. Do you put hexes on people? For a fee, I mean.”

“No. Not at all. And I certainly don’t do it for a fee. In fact, I work for an organization that polices that behavior.”

“So, you’re a witch cop?” he said.

“Something like that.” She stood up inside the room and turned in a circle, amazed at what she saw. Several computer monitors hung on the wall in front of a desk with a cushy office chair. Each showed a fresh angle of a camera, either hanging from the exterior of the house or in the rooms of the interior of the house, except for the bedrooms and bathrooms. Hallways, staircases, entrances, and common rooms, such as the kitchen and living room, were all covered. Charlie quickly spotted the monitor for the camera overlooking the back deck and hot tub. A tall metal rack stood next to the desk holding the computer components.

“George Allen, I have to tell you, this is not my area of expertise. I’m not the best with computers.”

“Don’t worry, I can talk you through everything. Just have a seat.”

Charlie sat at the computer and logged in with the credentials George Allen provided. He showed her where to find a thumb drive and where to plug it in on the server that held the video from the last thirty days. She found the files and copied them over to the drive, not paying much attention to the monitors.

“I hope you back all this up to a cloud somewhere,” Charlie said.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got back-up to my back-ups. I’m nothing if not thorough,” George reassured her. “The files are done copying.”

“Great,” Charlie said, and as she pulled the drive from the computer and slipped it into her pocket, a voice from behind her said, “Miss Payne?”

“Oh no,” Charlie whispered and turned to find Allen Cofield peering into the compact room.

“What is this place?” he said, ducking and coming into the server room. “More to the point, what are you doing in here?”

Charlie gave George Allen a side-eyed glance. “I thought you were keeping watch.” George opened his mouth to say something, then flickered and disappeared.

Charlie let out a nervous laugh.

“This is your father’s computer equipment.”

“I can see that,” Allen said with a face full of puzzlement. “Why did he keep it hidden? And how do you know about it? Have you been spying on us?” His tone turned argumentative and then angrier with each question.

Charlie remained riveted to her chair, scrambling for an excuse. Where did George Allen go? He needed to feed her an excuse. But he had taken the coward’s way out and left her to her own devices.

She cleared her throat and put a conciliatory smile on her face. “I can’t even think of a reasonable lie why I’m in here, so I’m just gonna have to tell you the truth.”

Allen wasn't having it. "The truth would be good," he snapped, looking from computer to server to the wires leading to the maze of cameras his father had snaked throughout the house. Anger tinged with sadness flashed across his bulldoggish face. He put his hands on his narrow hips.

"Yes, the truth," he said shakily. "Because I can't think of any reason, you should be breaking into my father's... closet. Or whatever this is."

Charlie saw recognition dawning as the son checked out the father's sophisticated equipment. Allen knew but didn't want to know what his dad had been up to.

He waved his hands in front of Charlie as if erasing the scene. "You know what? I don't want to hear it. I should just call the police." Allen pulled his phone from his front pocket.

"Wait. Don't do that." Charlie held up her hands. "I'm here because your father asked me to come."

"My father?"

"Tell him." George Allen reappeared behind his son. "Tell him the truth. He already knows it somewhere in the back of his head about his mother. Just confirm it."

"Yes, your father. You see, he came to me with a message for you," Charlie said. "You know how we were talking earlier about how you felt like he was still here?"

"Excuse me?" Allen said, his voice cracking with a mixture of grief and anger.

"That's because he is still here."

"Are you insane?" Allen said, color rising in his cheeks along with his impatience with her explanation.

"No. No. I'm not. I'm psychic," Charlie said.

"Right, and I'm the Queen of England," Allen scoffed, his tone now reminding Charlie of Evan when he was in a snit.

"Your father believes that your mother murdered him. And he showed me some security footage that might prove it."

“Are you crazy? That’s the most preposterous thing I have ever heard in my life,” he said. “Not to say, insulting.”

Charlie felt a pang deep in her heart. Allen feeling the loss of not only his father, but deep down, also the betrayal of his mother. Yet, good son that he was, he rallied for her, not yet ready to admit the truth. “My mother is devastated by my father’s death.”

Charlie spoke, despite the grief she knew was reducing Allen to a little boy. It was her job to deliver news that would force him to face ugly truths about his family, facts he could no longer avoid.

“Your father thinks she was having an affair. After meeting her and seeing her downstairs with your dad’s best friend, I know he was right. Which is why he changed his will.”

“How did you know that? My mother didn’t even know that,” Allen snapped.

“Your dad told me,” Charlie said.

Allen blinked in confusion.

“You know she’s not acting the way a grieving person should, right? No tears, right? And then there’s that man downstairs.”

A flash of recognition filled Allen’s eyes for a split second, and his face crumpled with pain. “My parents were married a long time... maybe they weren’t in love anymore, but... she wouldn’t...”

Charlie retrieved the thumb drive from her pocket and pressed it into Allen’s palm. “Take it. Watch it. If she killed him, it’s there.”

“What are you doing?” George Allen tugged at his hair. “That’s the evidence.”

“And if you can live with it, fine. I’ll convince your father to pass over some other way.”

“What do you mean, you’ll convince him?” Allen asked.

“He’s looking for vindication. Which sometimes just isn’t possible,” Charlie said.

George Allen flailed his arms in a ghostly tantrum “Yes, it is. It is absolutely possible. Don’t give that to him. You’re supposed to take it to the police.” George jumped up and down.

“But, for now, let me worry about dealing with your father. It’s part of the reason I’m here. You have enough on your plate with the information on the drive.”

Charlie spoke softly to let Allen absorb his new reality. “If you watch it, and you don’t like what you see, call me.” Charlie took one of her cards from her wallet and gave it to him.

He read the card and looked at her, his eyes glassy with shock. “What’s DOL?”

“We’re a government agency,” she said. “We work with local police. Mainly on cases that don’t fit into one their check boxes.”

“My mother didn’t kill my father,” Allen said firmly.

“I hope you’re right. I’m gonna get out of your hair now.” Charlie started for the door, hoping her revelations had stunned him enough to keep him from calling the police on her.

“You can’t just leave,” George Allen said.

Charlie stopped at the door and glanced back to find Allen staring at the thumb-drive in his palm.

“You should know, your dad loved you a lot, and he had great faith in you. That’s why he left his business to you.”

“How did you know that?” Allen said, looking up at her.

Charlie shrugged. “Psychic, remember? Take care, Allen. You too, George Allen.”

Charlie gave the spirit a pointed look before she ducked out of the server room. “Now don’t you go making mischief, George Allen. I have friends in the cloud who’ll make sure

you get where you're going sooner than you want to if you do.”

George Allen stared at her for a second, then his eyes lit up with understanding. His jowls shook a little with the wide grin that spread across his face before he flickered and disappeared.

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CHAPTER 26

Charlie glanced at the clock on the dashboard of her car. Since she'd come away from the funeral empty-handed, she might as well make good use of her time. She turned out of George Allen Cofield's neighborhood and headed toward Highway 526, toward Daniel Island. If she hurried, she might catch Evan's soccer practice.

The traffic was light. Lighter than she expected. Thirty minutes later, she parked in the visitor section of Daniel Island Academy. She bypassed the carpool line and waved to Evan's homeroom teacher, Mrs. Cargill, then headed into the sleek recent building to ask for the field where Evan's team was practicing.

Her heart stopped in her throat when she noticed Carl Pritchett standing off to the side in front of a door marked Custodian. He had a wide dust mop his hand and watched a sea of faces as the middle schoolers and high schoolers headed out to meet their parents. His thoughts flashed through her head like a movie. Barely a snippet, but enough to send an icy rod through Charlie's heart.

Images of Carl as he followed two boys wearing soccer uniforms out of the building. One boy had blondish hair and clear blue eyes that matched hers. Evan! She could see The Plan (that's how he thought of the idea that his brother Hugh kept harping on when he drank himself to sleep in the living room each night) unfolding in his mind—the boys got into a car with a pretty girl with dark hair that reached the middle of her back. A JoyRyde logo showed in the back window of the

mid-sized sedan, a champagne-colored Buick with Hugh in the driver's seat.

The movie running through Carl's head cut off, and the crowd of children thinned. Carl resumed pushing the mop along the floor, gathering paper and dust, and whatever else these kids tossed aside. Charlie concentrated on his back, trying to ferret out more details about this kidnapping the brothers seemed to have planned. How easy it was for them, with Carl as spotter in the school. It made Charlie's stomach twist into a knot. She closed her eyes and focused on Carl's mind to get more information, but he turned a corner, and she lost the connection.

"Ms. Payne?" a familiar voice asked. Charlie stood in front of the main office door and turned to find Rachel Klein standing next to her. The pretty, fresh-faced brunette smiled, her brown eyes twinkling. "Are you here to see Evan?"

"I am. Rachel, it's so good to see you." Charlie said. "It's been ages."

"Thanks. It's good to see you too. You know he has practice today," she said.

"I do, I was hoping to watch him play. I get to do it so rarely these days," she mused. "And I had some free time this afternoon."

"I was just gonna head down there. Would you like to sit with me?" Rachel pushed her long dark hair behind one ear.

Charlie could see why her son was so enraptured by this girl. She was pretty in an ordinary way, approachable, but confident, and maybe that was the most attractive thing about her. Her confidence. She walked through the world like she belonged.

"I would love to sit with you. Would love to catch up," Charlie said.

"Great. Come with me." Rachel grinned and looped her arm into Charlie's.

* * *

THE TWO OF THEM SAT ON THE BOTTOM ROW OF THE bleachers overlooking the field.

“Evan said that you regularly kick his butt at video games,” Charlie said.

Rachel laughed. “I do. My mom always says that I should let the boys win, but I don’t think they should get off that easily. I mean, everything is so stacked for them already. If I can beat them, why shouldn’t I?”

“I couldn’t agree more. Keep him on his toes. It’s good for him.” Charlie shifted her attention back to the practice. As an eighth-grader, Evan was eligible to play on the junior varsity team for the school. Even though he was almost as tall as Charlie, he looked tiny running down the field when compared to some older boys, freshmen and sophomores that had at least twenty pounds on him. Some had more than just a couple of inches in height, too. It didn’t matter; he was lithe and fast.

One of Evan’s teammates passed him the ball, and he deftly kicked it down the field, maneuvering past the bigger boys trying to take it from him. Charlie watched her beautiful boy approach the net and kick the ball past the goalie.

“Oh my gosh, that was very exciting,” Charlie muttered.

“It is,” Rachel chirped. “Evan’s very good, even against the bigger boys.”

“I can see that. His dad’s real athletic. He doesn’t get that from me,” Charlie mused.

Evan turned and high-fived a boy about his age. A boy Charlie recognized even from this distance. She’d have to get a better look at his neck to be sure if he had the birthmark, but she knew in her gut it was him.

“Rachel, who’s that boy that Evan just clapped hands with?”

“Oh, that’s Michael Summers,” Rachel said.

“What you know about him?” she asked.

“Well, his dad is somebody important. Um... I think he’s like an attorney or something. For the city. I can’t remember what they call it.”

“The Solicitor?” Charlie asked.

“Yeah, I think that’s it,” Rachel said.

“Of course,” Charlie said. “Rachel, would you excuse me for a minute? I need to make a phone call.”

“Sure thing,” Rachel said.

Charlie rose from the bleachers and walked to the end, away from any onlookers. She quickly dialed Jason’s cell phone.

Jason answered the phone. “So, did your harebrained plan work?” She could hear the amusement in his voice. “Did you get the evidence to prove that woman murdered her husband via hot tub? ‘Cause if you did, it gets to go on my wall of weird ways to murder people.”

“As a matter of fact, I did, but that’s not what I’m calling about,” Charlie said. “I’m at Evan’s school. And I saw Carl Pritchett. He’s evidently a janitor here.”

“Okay, so it wasn’t the ghost screwing around with you like you thought?” Jason said. She pictured him sitting at his desk, leaning back in his chair, a smirk on his face.

The sound of cheering and whistling and stomping on the bleachers made Charlie look. Evan was walking away from making another goal. Dammit, she was missing the game.

“No. I don’t think she was. I had another vision, sort of. I saw part of his plan. Carl’s, that is. They’re still planning on taking the boy, but it’s not just one boy. He will take Evan and Rachel, his girlfriend. I don’t know what’s gonna happen to them, but I have a sick feeling that whatever it is, isn’t good.”

“Are you serious?” Jason asked.

“Very serious, I wouldn’t joke about this.”

“Do you have a timeline?” Jason said.

“No, I don’t. Other than I think it will be soon.”

“Why?”

“There’s a full moon that starts on the sixth. That’s less than ten days away.” Charlie said. “If the vision I had the other day is right...”

“Okay. What you want to do?” Jason asked.

“We will have to talk to the other boy’s parents. It turns out he’s the Solicitor for Charleston County.”

“Holy shit. Are you serious?” Jason asked.

“Yep,” Charlie said.

“Dammit. That could make this State Law Enforcement Division’s territory,” Jason said.

“You’re not seriously worried about jurisdiction here, are you? I mean, we’re talking about my kid,” Charlie said, trying to keep control of her voice.

“No, of course not. Not at all. My priority, of course, is the kids. I just need to make some calls, that’s all.”

“Wait. Are you sure you want to do that? I mean, we’re going off of a ten-second snippet of something I gleaned out of his head,” Charlie said.

“Do you think you’re wrong?”

“No. But that doesn’t mean I’m right. The last thing I want to do is turn this into some wild goose chase that makes us both look like fools.” Charlie paced back and forth. “What if the DOL took over the case? I mean, technically we’re federally funded. And we don’t have to follow quite as many rules as all the other law enforcement divisions.”

“We still have to tell his parents about a credible threat.”

“And we will,” Charlie said. “And then we will let him know that we have the feds working on the case. He doesn’t have to know which feds, right?”

Charlie looked back at the game, but she lost Evan in the pack. “I have an idea about how we can catch these guys, Jace.

But it's gonna take your help and some magic.”

“All right. I'm listening.”

“Great,” Charlie said. “Here's what I think we should do.”

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“**A**nd that’s my plan,” Charlie said.

Tom looked up from the cutting board, the spatula in mid-air.

“Jason will call the parents in the morning, and we’ll meet with them. Fill them in on the details. Jason will let me provide three undercover officers, and I’ll have Daphne cast glammers to make them look like the boys and Rachel. Then we’ll use Rachel’s account to call a JoyRyde. Ben helped with that part, of course. But all in all, I think it will work. We’ll keep the kids out of danger, and the bad guys go down.” She shifted in the bistro chair at her kitchen table, barely able to contain her excitement while she watched Tom cook dinner.

“Uh-huh.” He removed two thinly pounded chicken breasts from the pan and placed them on a plate next to the stove, then poured wine into the pan. He plucked a wooden spoon out of the ceramic tool holder on the counter and scraped up the brown bits before he gently placed the breasts back in the pan along with half a jar of capers.

“And you think that’s a good idea?” he asked.

Charlie straightened her spine in the chair and stared at his back. “Do I think it’s a good idea to keep my son and his friends from being kidnapped and possibly murdered? Yeah, it’s an excellent idea. Why would you even ask such a thing?”

Tom shut off the flame and moved the pan to an empty burner. When turned to face her, he wore an icy expression she’d never seen before. His golden-brown eyes fixed on her,

and a power she never felt from him in his human form radiated in icy waves. The power of Death. Charlie's body shivered in response.

"What do you know?"

"I know you shouldn't be interfering in things you don't understand yet."

"Things I don't understand yet. What the hell does that mean?" Charlie said.

"It means there are forces in this world that shouldn't be meddled with. Especially not by someone like you."

"Will you stop talking in riddles? You're starting to freak me out," Charlie said.

"Maybe these kids are supposed to die. Had you thought of that?"

"What? This my son you're talking about," Charlie said. "What do you know that you're not telling me?"

"Nothing. I don't know anything about Evan, or the girl." Tom's face softened, and the iciness melted away.

"But you know something about the other boy? The boy I've been dreaming about?" Tom didn't answer. Her entire body went numb. "How long have you known that he'll die?"

"Since the dream you told me about," Tom said.

"I can't let that happen. He is just a little boy," Charlie said.

"I know," Tom said. "Listen, there's something we need to talk about. I've been trying to find the best way to bring this up, but I could never seem to find the right time or the right circumstances."

Tom dragged the second chair at the bistro table closer to Charlie and sat down.

"The right time for what?"

He took a deep breath and blew it out. "I didn't think this would be so hard. But here goes. You know how you've had

dreams about death recently. Death you couldn't really do anything about?"

"Yeah." Charlie eyed him warily.

"There's a reason you're dreaming these things."

"Oh-kay," Charlie said. "I'm listening." Charlie studied his handsome face, surprised to see worry etched into the lines of his forehead. Tom almost never worried unless it was about her.

He reached for one of her hands. "Do you remember when you killed the vampire? You used my scythe to do it."

"Of course." Charlie's fingers twitched, and she pulled her hand out of his and rubbed her fingertips to stop the little electrical jolts, but blue sparks jumped from her skin.

"You never did that before," Tom said. "Has that been happening a lot?"

"A few times. It happens when I get upset. Esperanza thinks it's just part of my healing. That it will settle down in time."

Tom looked deeply into her eyes but said nothing.

She lowered her eyes, as if to escape his scrutiny. "I've seen some interesting manifestations, but nothing like that." He took her hand again and turned it over as if he were looking for something specific.

"What are you doing?" Charlie watched him traced the curves of her palm.

"Just taking a measurement." He gently put her hand down. "I'm afraid this energy coursing through you won't go away, Charlie."

"How do you know?"

"Because it's growing stronger. The dreams will become more frequent, and I suspect you'll find it easier and easier to drop into someone else's thoughts. If it gets to be too overwhelming, I want you to come to me immediately, okay? I'm here to help. To be your guide."

Dread, cold and snakelike, coiled into her belly and hissed. “Guide? What are you talking about?”

“You’re going through something we call the pre-transformation. You may encounter even more spirits than normal, especially since you’re so empathetic. I’ll teach you techniques, though, to stop the onslaught. So you can have some peace.”

“All right, you’re really scaring me now. What the hell are you talking about?”

Tom shifted his gaze to her face. “When you picked up my scythe to kill that vampire two months ago, and you wielded its power, Death took notice. Death chose you, Charlie.”

Charlie closed her eyes. *Please, oh please, oh please don’t say the words. Don’t ask something you don’t want to know.* Her mouth didn’t comply, and she heard herself speak. “Chose me for what?”

“To be a reaper. When you die, you will transform. You’ll become like me and Joy and William. And it would honor us for you to join our family.”

“No.” Charlie jumped to her feet and shook her head. “No, no, no, no, no. This is not how it’s supposed to happen. I’ve already died once. I know where I am supposed to go when I die. It has taken me months just to deal with me not getting to stay there, and now you’re telling me I’m never gonna go to my afterlife?”

Her voice rose in pitch and volume. Her cheeks burned with ire.

“It won’t be forever. Just until you’re done with your contract.”

“My contract?” Charlie said. “I did not sign a contract with anybody, especially not Death!”

“You connected with Death through my scythe. Only supernatural creatures like reapers may wield this weapon. When you held it, the power of Death flowed through you. And it sealed the deal to be one of his reapers the minute you lopped off the vampire’s head.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?”

“I couldn’t find the words. You were so happy to be healing and with your family and even to be seeing spirits again. I didn’t think you’d start the pre-transformation so soon. I should’ve told you sooner. I should have.”

“This is not happening.” Charlie pushed past him. “There must be some spell. Something to stop this from happening.” She tossed the books and the throw resting on the top of her trunk onto the couch and flipped open the trunk’s lid. After a minute of digging through all the books and supplies, she found what she was looking for, a copy of her grandma Bunny’s Book of Shadows.

“Charlie, there’s nothing in that book that will help you. You can’t stop Death once it has marked you to become a reaper. I’m sorry.”

“I cannot believe this is happening to me.”

“I know it’s hard. I felt the same way when I learned the truth. But there is a bright side.”

“Oh, really?” Charlie threw her hands up in the air. “So, the death visions, the constant spirit intrusions, and my extra special electric hands have a silver lining? Please pray tell.”

“You get to spend forever with me,” Tom said.

“Great, that’s just freaking great.” Charlie sneered. “I bet I get to watch everyone I love die too. This is the gift that keeps on giving.” Tears threatened to choke her, to flow in an unending river of pain and grief.

Tom rose to his feet and pulled her to him. He wrapped his arms around her and whispered, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. This is all my fault. If I had just left you alone, and never contacted you after the first time you summoned me, you would never have to face this.”

Charlie wrapped her arms around him, hugging him close, and wept against his neck.

“I know this is a lot to process, love. But it will get easier, and I promise I will be here to help you through it all. There’s

just one thing you need to understand. As a reaper, you can't interfere. You can't stop someone's death, even if you love them."

"What?" Charlie pulled out of his arms and swiped her cheeks with her hands.

"If Evan and his friend are supposed to be kidnapped and killed, then you, as a reaper, can't interfere."

"I'm not a reaper yet." Charlie cocked her head. "And I'll be damned if I will become one if it means I can't stop my son from dying."

"Charlie, you don't seem to understand."

"I understand perfectly. You have a book of dates. Right? That's what you're thinking about. Your precious book and staying on track."

She stepped back, her body shaking with fury. Her fingers crackled, and she folded them into fists and tucked them beneath her arms to avoid the temptation of striking him.

"Everybody dies, Charlie. There's nothing you can do to stop that."

"I know I can't stop them from dying forever, but I'll do whatever it takes to stop it from happening too soon." She stared him in the eye and jutted her chin in defiance. "You know what? I'm not hungry anymore. I think you should leave."

"Charlie, please. We're not finished talking. There's a lot you need to be aware of."

"Oh, we're finished all right. I don't want to hear anything else you have to say. I need you to go." Charlie's voice trembled. "Now."

Tom sighed. "Fine. You need some time. I understand. But we're not done talking. This will happen whether or not you want it to."

"Get out." She gritted her teeth and swallowed back another round of tears threatening to overwhelm her. She didn't look at him while he gathered his jacket.

When she was sure he was gone, she went to the stove and threw the chicken breasts in the trash. The frying pan clanked against the porcelain after she dumped it in the sink. Her knees buckled, and she sank to the floor. After a few more moments of torrential tears, she retrieved her phone and sent out a group text to her cousins and aunt. It simply read: *Please come. I need you.*

Within minutes, every one of them had replied: *On my way.*

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CHAPTER 28

Charlie sat between Jen and Lisa on the couch, staring at the black television screen across the room.

In the kitchen, she could hear Evangeline pattering around with the teakettle. And a few minutes later, she emerged from the kitchen with two steaming hot mugs of tea.

“Drink this, Charlie,” her aunt said. She grabbed a coaster and set the tea mug down in front of Charlie on the trunk.

Charlie made a face. “I really don’t feel much like having tea, Evangeline,” she said.

“I understand. But drink this anyway. It will help with your nerves and clarity,” Evangeline said. “Daphne, why don’t you help me carry the other mugs in.”

“Sure, Mom,” Daphne said. A few minutes later the two of them emerged again with more mugs of tea to go around. Evangeline took a seat in the rocking chair, and Daphne paced back and forth in front of the television, her bright pink hair reflected in the black glass.

“There has to be a way to get you out of it,” Daphne said.

“I don’t know how,” Charlie said. “I mean, I don’t regret picking up that scythe. The vampire would have killed Evan.”

“Course you don’t,” Jen said, her brows narrowing as if daring anyone to contradict her.

“You know what I want?” Lisa said, flipping her long braid over her shoulder. “I want to read this damned contract.”

“You think it exists?” Evangeline asked.

“It must,” Lisa said. She crossed her legs into a lotus position. “Why else would Tom bring it up?”

“I don’t know, honey.” Evangeline took a sip of the tea and rocked back and forth in the chair. Her usually serene face looked more like a storm was brewing in her eyes. “It seems like he tricked you. I know that’s ridiculous, but it’s just the impression I get. He tricked you into becoming a reaper because you love your son so much.”

“I hate this,” Charlie said. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt more helpless about anything in my life.”

Lisa patted Charlie on the back. “We will get you out of it. If it is the last thing we do.”

“No, don’t say things like that. This is Death we’re talking about, right? Not some witch or vampire or even a reaper. I don’t know how we fight Death.”

“Maybe there’s a loophole,” Daphne said. She had stopped her pacing and now rested against the arm of the plush chair flanking the couch.

“It all sounded pretty rock solid to me,” Charlie said.

“That’s why I want to look at this contract. Maybe Daphne’s right. Maybe there is a loophole.”

“I need to ask a question, and I don’t want you to get upset, Charlie,” Evangeline said.

“Okay.”

“Did Tom say when this would happen? How long before you transition into... a new life form?” Evangeline asked, her demeanor polite and sensitive. Charlie sensed her aunt dancing around the real question. When would Charlie die?

“I didn’t even ask. I was so mad that my afterlife had been co-opted, it didn’t even occur to me it could happen soon. That I could—”

Charlie covered her mouth with her hand and rocked back and forth. This is not what she wanted. She certainly wasn’t

ready to die anytime soon. Jen leaned over and rubbed comforting circles in the center of her back. Daphne took a seat in the overstuffed chair, and the five of them sat quietly for a long time.

Evangeline finally broke the silence. “If this happens,” she said, her gaze drifting from her daughter to her nieces, “are we going to lose you?”

Charlie sucked in a lungful of air and drank some tea, an unconscious move as she pondered the question. “I don’t think so. I mean, one thing Tom said was that I’d be welcome to join their family. So, it sounds like they would keep me in this community.” Charlie looked at the mug in her hand as if wondering how it got there, then put it back on the coaster. “More than likely, what would happen is I would have to—I would have to watch y’all die.”

“Right,” Lisa said. She sat with her spine erect, in full lawyer mode. “I don’t know how to deal with this. And I certainly don’t understand how you can sit here calmly. I’d be losing my mind right about now if it were me.”

“It’s weird,” Charlie said. “It was definitely a shock before, but now it’s like a wave of calm has settled over me. Like, I didn’t even need your tea, Evangeline.”

“Maybe this is part of the transformation he talked about,” Evangeline said. “It could be acceptance is just part of the deal.”

“Maybe,” Charlie muttered. “Maybe it would be easier if I just accepted it. Maybe that would be best for everyone.”

“What? Accept you’ll die?” Jen said. “We’re all going to die. When we’re little old ladies and we’ve wrung out every drop of living, we can.”

“I think she means becoming a reaper.” Evangeline looked from Jen to Charlie and slowly nodded. “Fate can be tricky to fight.”

“Are there any good things about being a reaper?” Daphne asked. “I mean, I like Tom and everything, but it’s kind of

creepy he works in a funeral home. Is that really where you see yourself?"

"You know, it's weird. I almost do. Maybe that's why he asked me to work there last week. I don't know. Maybe it was just one step to prepare me for the news."

"What do you want to do, honey?" Evangeline asked. "I can go to the local council. Ben may have some resources."

"Maybe. It's not exactly like I sold my soul to the devil or anything. It's not like that." Charlie said. "Maybe there are good things that I can do. As a reaper. I always hated that Tom and Joy pulled their scythes out first instead of trying to work with the spirit."

"Charlie Payne, kinder, gentler reaper," Daphne said. She pushed her pink hair behind her ear. "I still don't like it. Don't like it one bit."

"You know, I worry more about Evan than I do about anything else. He's the only thing that brought me back the first time I died," Charlie admitted.

Jen smacked her hand on her knee as if she'd just had a revelation. "That settles it then," she said. "You do not become a reaper until Evan is old and infirm and ready to move on."

"I think that would be impossible," Charlie said. "I don't really become an immortal reaper until after I die."

"Right." Jen's face deflated.

"I think the best thing for me right this minute is to put this out of my head," Charlie said. "There are too many other dire things happening. Things that, no matter what Tom says, I have to prevent. I cannot sit by idly while my son and his friends are kidnapped and possibly killed."

"Of course, you can't. None of us could," Jen said.

"I know Darren Summer's. He would be devastated if something happened. Michael's his only child," Lisa said.

"Exactly," Charlie said.

“How can we help?” Evangeline said. Her sky-blue eyes filled with concern.

“I think the first thing we do is cast a protection spell over all the kids,” Charlie said. “I’m still a witch, dammit, and I will do whatever it takes to keep my son safe.”

“That sounds like a splendid plan,” Jen said, moving to the edge of her seat, her mood suddenly upbeat. “We can do that now. Do you have any candles?”

“I do. I should have everything we need,” Charlie said.

“Do y’all need help with your sting? You know I’m the best glamour casting witch in these parts,” Daphne said.

“And the most modest,” Lisa quipped. Daphne shot Lisa a dirty look.

“I think that’s a great idea, Daphne. I’ll talk to Ben about it when he gets here,” Charlie said.

“When do you think this kidnapping will go down?” Lisa asked.

“I’m not sure,” Charlie said. “I’m hoping I’ll have a dream about it tonight.”

“If you need help with anything.” Lisa shrugged. “You know we’re here.”

“Even if it means working with Jason?” Charlie asked.

“Of course. Evan is like my nephew, and nobody messes with Auntie Lisa’s nieces and nephews,” Lisa said.

“I appreciate that,” Charlie said.

“Sure,” Lisa said. “Blood is, as they say, thicker than water.”

“Agreed,” Jen said.

CHAPTER 29

The band played an old 40s standard. Something about meeting again. Nathan and Lottie swayed in each other's arms on the dance floor, surrounded by other couples. Her diamond ring sparkled beneath the light shining on the mirror ball. Just like in Charlie's vision. But something was off—maybe it was the music that kept going out of tune like a piano left neglected—or maybe it was the two men milling their way through the crowd, leaving plastic wrapped bodies on the floor in their wake. By the time they got to Nathan and Lottie, Nathan disappeared, and Lottie turned into the bullet-ridden ghost Charlie had seen in the attic. Blood stained her blue dress. The brothers couldn't wrap her up in plastic and leave her in a heap on the floor, which seemed to upset Hugh particularly. He paced around the spirit, raging in unintelligible words. Lottie looked right at her. This was just a dream. Wasn't it?

“They're evil men,” Lottie said. “See what they did.” Lottie pointed to all the bodies bound up in plastic and duct tape on the floor. “They're gonna do that to Evan and Rachel. But you have to stop them.”

Charlie wanted to scream at the spirit but couldn't find her voice. She touched her hands to her lips and found them covered in duct tape. Something grabbed her hands and bound them together behind her back with more tape. Then suddenly, she went blind as if something had been thrown over her head and she couldn't see or breathe. She jerked against her bindings, choking and gagging.

“Charlie, Charlie, wake up.”

Charlie sat up in her bed and gulped in fresh air. She reached for her face and throat. Nothing covered her head. She turned her wrists over and open and closed her fingers. She took a few more deep breaths to slow down, her heart hammering against her chest. *It was just a dream.*

“Sorry about that,” the voice said from the corner of her bedroom. The ghost of Lottie Barrymore drifted out of the shadows.

“There isn’t much time,” Lottie said.

Charlie pressed her hand to her chest. “Don’t do that! You just about made me pee my pants, Lottie.”

“Sorry,” Lottie said again. “Nathan’s time is close. I need you to go to him.”

“We’re doing the best we can. I’ve got bigger fish to fry to be honest, Lottie. The men living in your house are planning awful things. I just don’t know when.”

“I do,” Lottie said.

“What do you mean?”

“I heard them talking about taking some kids. From your dream I would say one of them is yours,” Lottie said.

“You were in my dream?”

“Yes, until your worry about those brothers pushed their way in.” Lottie said, sounding put out.

“Lottie, tell me what you heard.”

“Promise me you’ll go see Nathan.”

“I promise you, I will go see Nathan as soon as we find out where he is. Now please tell me what you know.”

“He’ll be dead before then.”

“How do you know?” Charlie asked.

“I can see lots of things here. I can see when he dies.”

Charlie tried to recall when she had died if she had known such things. Some of her experiences were so clear in her head, like the beach in her afterlife that stretched for miles and brought her such peace. But others were just silhouettes in a mist.

“Well, it would be helpful if you could tell us where he was. I have Athena working on it, but she’s just hit dead-end after dead-end.” Charlie scrubbed the sleep out of her eyes.

Lottie took a seat on the foot of the bed. It surprised Charlie a little when she felt the mattress move. Lottie’s spirit was powerful if she was affecting the physical world.

“I can see him. He’s in a hospital bed.” The spirit closed her eyes and concentrated. “There are a lot of other beds and other people like him.”

“Like him how?” Charlie asked.

Lottie opened her eyes. “Dying.”

“He’s in a hospice?” Charlie asked.

“I don’t know what that is.”

“It’s a place where people go to die. Are there nurses there?” Charlie said.

“Maybe. They don’t look like the nurses I remember.”

“No, they probably don’t,” Charlie muttered. “At least that’s something. I’ll give it to Athena tomorrow, and she can search for all the hospices in the area. He is still in the Charleston area, right?”

“Yes. I think so. There’s a window near his bed, and he can see a tall oak with Spanish moss hanging from it. He likes the view, I think.”

“Do you visit him regularly?” Charlie asked.

“Yes. Sometimes when he opens his eyes, it’s like he can see me. One time he even whispered my name.”

“That can happen when people are dying. The veil gets very thin, and they can see spirits.” Charlie reached for her phone on her nightstand and quickly emailed Athena with the

fresh information. “Okay, I have sent a message to my co-worker to search hospices for Nathan Weintraub. Now tell me what you know about the kidnappers.”

A satisfied simper crossed Lottie’s face.

“They were talking tonight. The one called Carl—he saw you at the school,” Lottie said.

“Good. Maybe if I show up enough, it will deter them.”

“You can’t watch them forever.”

“Lottie, did they say anything about when they were planning to take the boys?” Charlie asked.

“The one called Hugh said the plan is still on for Friday.”

“This Friday?” Charlie asked.

“Yes. Directly after school. Hugh said he will make sure he’s the only one in the area, so when the girl calls for... what did he call it?”

“A JoyRyde?” Charlie said.

“Yes, that’s right. When she calls for that, he’ll be the one to pick them up.”

“Dammit. You’re serious, aren’t you?” Charlie asked.

“Why wouldn’t I be serious?” Lottie asked.

“Never mind. It’s just an expression. Friday around 3 p.m. then?” Charlie tried to recall Evan’s soccer schedule. He rarely had practice on Fridays unless they’d lost their last game.

“I guess,” Lottie said.

“You know what? It doesn’t matter. We’ll set up and be there until we catch them. Thank you for letting me know about Carl and Hugh. That helps a lot.” Charlie thumbed through the contacts on her phone.

“Don’t forget about Nathan. He’ll be gone Thursday at 11:04 a.m.”

It was on the tip of Charlie’s tongue to ask Lottie how she knew the exact time of death. It was something she thought

only reapers knew, but maybe she was wrong. Maybe the dead saw more than the reapers ever could.

Lottie rose from the bed and drifted into the shadows and disappeared. Her voice whispered through Charlie's head, "You must go before Thursday."

"Don't worry. I won't let you down," Charlie said, and jotted off a text to Jason.

Meet me at The Kitchen Witch for breakfast at 7. I know when it will happen.

When she finished, she put the phone back on the nightstand and lay down to get a few more hours of shut-eye before the whirlwind of catching the Pritchett brothers began.

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CHAPTER 30

Charlie arrived at The Kitchen Witch Café before Jason and chose the back corner booth so they could talk privately. Charlie slid across the leatherette bench and waved to her cousin Jen at the counter. Jen grabbed a clean cup from the stack behind the counter and filled it with coffee.

“You look a lot better than I thought you would, considering the news yesterday.” Jen put the cup down in front of Charlie and took a seat across the table from her.

“Denial is a powerful thing,” Charlie said. “I’m pulling a Scarlett O’Hara for the moment. I will think about it tomorrow because there is nothing I can do about it today.”

“You have to deal with it at some point,” Jen said.

“I know. But I’ve got too many other things to do before then. Like, stop a kidnapping.” She lowered her voice. “I texted Ben. He should be here soon. And Jason.”

“That’s great,” Jen said. “It sounds like you had a break in your case.”

“I did, thanks to a spirit.” Charlie picked up her phone and glanced down at it.

“Are you expecting a call? Kind of early, isn’t it?”

“You’re right, it is. Athena won’t get to work until at least seven-thirty.” Charlie put the phone face down on the table.

“Are you getting excited about Beltane?” Jen asked.

“I’m excited about the bonfire,” Charlie said. “I’m sorry I didn’t get to do more.”

“You did plenty,” Jen said. “Are you gonna bring Tom?”

Charlie sighed. “I don’t know. I’ve got a lot going on with this kidnapping case, and there’s another spirit that I’m working with. And to be honest, I’m mad at him. I don’t want to see him right now.”

“Sure. That’s understandable.” Jen sighed, her big blue eyes fixed on Charlie. “But I hope you won’t be mad at him for too long. If we can’t find a way to stop this thing from happening to you, you will need him.”

Charlie’s stomach flip-flopped. “I know.” She took a deep breath in through her nose and blew it out. “Scarlett O’Hara, remember?”

“All right, Miss Scarlett,” Jen said. “Tomorrow it is. In the meantime, do you want banana pecan pancakes for breakfast?”

The bell rang over the door, drawing Charlie and Jen’s attention. Ben walked through the door first, followed closely by Jason. Charlie smiled and waved to get their attention.

“You know what,” Charlie said. “I think I’ll have your French toast special instead.”

Jen’s eyebrows raised halfway up her forehead and she chuckled, incredulous. “You always get the banana pecan pancakes. Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m feeling surprisingly well,” Charlie said. “I just feel like a change, that’s all.”

“Change is good.” Jen took her pad from her apron and scribbled Charlie’s order. “And so is my French toast.” Jen got up from the booth just as Ben arrived.

“Fancy meeting you here.” Ben grinned and pecked Jen on the lips. “Hey, Charlie.”

“Hey. I’m glad you made it here safe last night.” Charlie thought of Ben driving three hours after Jen called him and told him of her unwelcome news. Ben was more than just her boss. More than just her friend. He was her family too, and it

heartened that people who loved her surrounded her when she needed it.

“Hey, Charlie,” Jason said, sliding into the booth across from her. “How’re you doing, Jen?”

“I’m good, Jason. How are you?”

“I’d be doing better if I had a cup of your delicious coffee.”

Ben took a seat next to Charlie. “Can you make that two?”

“Of course. Coming right up,” Jen said.

* * *

“THAT’S AN INTERESTING IDEA.” BEN SIPPED HIS COFFEE. “Switching out the kids with DOL agents made to look like them and then using them to bait the kidnappers? I wish I’d thought of it.”

“There’s still a lot of logistics to work out,” Jason said, and finished his ham and cheese omelet. He picked up a piece of toast and slathered it with butter before crunching into it. “I’ll set up a meeting with the Solicitor’s office this morning and call the parents in to inform them of the threat. Do you want to go with me?”

“There’s something I need to do first,” Charlie said.

“I’ll go with you, Jason,” Ben said. “It won’t be the first time I’ve worked with the Solicitor. Hopefully, we won’t have too much trouble convincing him we’re the right agency for the job.”

“Right,” Jason said. “I’m still worried about using decoys. How are you going to make them look exactly like the kids?”

“Don’t worry,” Charlie said. “If Ben’s okay with it, Daphne will help with the glamours.”

“That’s a brilliant idea,” Ben said. “She’s great.”

“What is that again?” Jason asked.

“It’s a spell that makes something look like something else. Daphne uses it to help make her customer’s feel good about themselves by enhancing their beauty,” Charlie explained. “Half the women in this town are walking around wearing one of Daphne’s glammers.”

“So, are you saying she makes them look like somebody else?” Jason sounded almost disgusted.

“No silly, she makes them look like the best version of themselves. She enhances what they have. But in this case, she could totally make me look like Evan, for example. She’s an absolute whiz with glammers.”

“That’s not a bad idea you know,” Ben said. “You’re about the right height, and coloration. You should go undercover as Evan.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah,” Ben nodded.

“That’s amazing. And I’m sure Daphne is as great as you say, but I don’t want anything to mess this up, that’s all.” Jason finished his toast and pushed his plate away. “Lord, that was a good meal. So, Ben, I was surprised to see you here this morning. I thought you were in Charlotte.”

“I was. I came to help Charlie out with this case, that’s all.”

Jason glanced around at the breakfast crowd. The packed café made him choose his words carefully. “Really? I thought our tipster didn’t give Charlie the information till the wee hours this morning.”

“Charlie called me about her plan yesterday, and I wanted to be here for the planning stage, even if we didn’t know when things would go down.” Ben’s face remained neutral. Charlie appreciated that he didn’t share why he was really here. She wasn’t exactly ready to tell the world her fate just yet. And some part of her feared that when Jason learned the truth, he’d be so angry he wouldn’t be able to stop himself from confronting Tom.

“Plus, I wanted to check out some co-working spaces this week.”

“Co-working spaces?” Jason asked.

“You didn’t tell them?” Ben asked.

“I haven’t had a chance. It’s been go, go, go since yesterday morning,” Charlie said.

“Charlie and I will spend more time here in Palmetto Point. We’ll be working remotely from now on, and the only travel Charlie will do will be for cases out of state.”

“Seriously?” Jason said, sitting up straight, almost bouncing in his seat. “Does that mean you can help me out on more cases?”

“Technically, I think so,” Charlie said warily, directing her gaze at Ben.

“Yeah, it does. We both can. We’ll have to make it official, in the spirit of interagency cooperation and all that jazz, but we can help with cases for any police agency if they need us,” Ben said.

“That is the best news I’ve gotten in weeks,” Jason said.

Charlie’s phone chirped and vibrated on the table. She picked it up and glanced at the text from Athena.

I found Nathan Weintraub. He’s at Chelsea Street Hospice.

“Everything okay?” Ben peered over at Charlie’s phone.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. I need to go, though. Sorry to eat and run.”

Charlie gestured for Ben to let her out of the booth and he stood up. She gathered her purse and slung it across her body. “I’ll text y’all when I’m done.”

“Hey, I thought you were buying me breakfast,” Jason said.

“Jason, you know the rules. Family eats free here. Last time I checked, you were still family.”

Charlie grinned and headed for the door.

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CHAPTER 31

Charlie signed into the Chelsea Street hospice and followed a nurse to the ward where Nathan Weintraub lay dying.

“You know, I feel sorry for the old man,” the nurse said. Her mahogany skin glistened against the peach scrubs as she guided Charlie through the maze of corridors reeking of disinfectant and despair. She chatted brightly as though the depressing end-of-life facility were a busy hotel. They turned a corner and ended at Nathan’s room.

“He’s actually a sweetheart,” the friendly nurse admitted, “but none of his family comes to see him. It surprised me to hear he had a visitor.”

“I’m an old friend of his family,” Charlie lied with ease. “So, he’s all alone?”

“I’m afraid so. Here we are.” She gestured to an open door and stepped aside while Charlie squeezed into the slight space.

The sparse, narrow room had four beds. All occupied. Long curtains hung from the ceiling on a track and could be pulled around each bed for privacy.

“He’s at the end next to the window,” the nurse said. “I’m just down the hall if you need me.”

“Thank you,” Charlie said.

“Thank you for coming to see him,” she said. “I have a feeling he won’t be with us much longer. It’s nice to see that somebody still cares about him.”

Charlie nodded. A pebble of emotion sitting in her throat kept her from saying anything else. She passed the other beds, all filled with old men sleeping their way to death. Maybe that was the best way to do it—to die in your sleep. An image flashed through her head of her dressed in black robes, her skeletal hands wrapped around an ebony staff with a sharp silver blade on the end, there to cut down and deliver the soul of the dead to their afterlife.

She shivered and pushed the thought away. If she became a reaper, she would never use the scythe to collect souls the way she had seen Tom do it. There had to be a better way.

She stopped at the end of Nathan Weintraub's hospital bed next to a window overlooking a park-like backyard. The midmorning light shone in through open shades. Nathan looked small compared to the strapping young man she had seen in her visions with Lottie. But of course, time had beaten him down, shriveled him up and left him here to die. Alone. It broke her heart.

"He's not sleeping," Lottie said. She drifted up next to Charlie. A chill wrapped around Charlie's shoulders at the spirit's presence. "Mr. Jackson's daughter won't be here for at least three hours." Lottie pointed to the patient in the adjacent bed. "You can take the chair if you want."

Charlie nodded and dragged the wooden chair with the upholstered seat next to Nathan's bed. She pulled it as close as she could. His hand lay near the edge of the bed. The joints of his gnarled arthritic fingers curled, and the papery skin was so thin she could see the blue of the veins, despite the normal bruises and liver spots of aging hands.

"It's okay. You can hold his hand," Lottie prodded. Charlie slipped her hand into his and felt the warmth.

His eyes fluttered open, revealing cloudy gray eyes. His lips curved into a smile, deepening all the wrinkles around his mouth.

"Lottie? Is that you?" His voice sounded dreamy and weak.

“He thinks I’m you,” Charlie whispered.

“Yes, he does,” she said. “It’s probably the medication they keep giving him.”

“What does he have?”

“Cancer.”

“Okay, I know what to do,” Charlie said. She gently squeezed his hand. “I’m here, Nathan.” She worked hard to keep her voice from cracking.

“They told me you died.” His voice shook.

“They were right,” Charlie said, not sure who ‘they’ were. Maybe it was his parents. Maybe it was the neighbors. She couldn’t be sure. She slipped her hand out of his and reached into her purse. After a little digging, she found the velvet box, opened it, and slipped the ring on her finger. She held up her left hand, unsure he could see it.

“I’m still wearing your ring.”

A smile stretched across his craggy face, and his eyes moistened with tears. “You’re still my girl.”

“I am your girl. It won’t be long now before you join me.”

His eyes squeezed shut, and tears slipped from the corners onto his cheeks. “I figured that’s why you’re here. To take me.”

“Not yet, soldier. But when you come, I’ll be waiting for you. Then you and I can spend forever together. How does that sound?”

“That sounds like heaven,” he whispered. “I never stopped loving you. I know that’s crazy. I was just a boy when we met, but maybe it’s true what they say about your first love. It’s the one you hold up as a measuring stick to all the others.”

“It is,” Lottie said from behind Charlie. “Tell him.” Charlie gave the girl’s spirit a be-quiet stare she’d used on Evan a thousand times.

“The only thing I regret is my kids. I should’ve been there more for them. Maybe they’d be here for me now if I had.”

Charlie blinked back tears. “You’re not alone. You hear me? I am here with you, and I will be until the end.”

“Thank you, Lottie. Thank you so much.” He shut his eyes. “I’m so tired. I just need to rest for a few minutes. Hope you don’t mind.”

“You sleep well, Nathan. I’ll see you soon.” Charlie let go of his hand and wiped the tears that had fallen onto her cheeks.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be here for him,” Lottie said. “Thank you. Thank you so much for helping me.”

“You’re welcome,” Charlie said. “I’m sorry I resisted helping you.”

“It’s okay. You’ve had a lot to deal with.”

“How do you know?”

“See, that’s the thing when you die. You see all sorts of things that you could never see before. People’s thoughts. What they’ve done, what they will do. You’ll make a good reaper. You’re a lot less scary than the other one.”

“Tom?”

“Yes. Him.” She shuddered. “You should get going. I’m not the only one that needs you.”

Charlie’s phone chirped in her purse, and she dug it out along with the velvet box. She glanced at the screen and the text from Jason that simply read:

George Allen Cofield’s son is here saying his mother killed his father. Maybe you and good old George Allen should meet me at the station.

Charlie grinned at the screen, and the sparkle of the engagement ring caught her eye. She turned to ask Lottie what to do with it, but the spirit was gone. She slid the ring off her finger and put it back into the box before setting off for the sheriff’s station.

CHAPTER 32

Arriving at the sheriff's station, Charlie stopped at reception for a visitor's badge. Jason showed up as she was clipping it to her blouse, and she followed him through the double doors to his inner sanctum.

"Allen Cofield walked in about an hour ago and said he wanted to report a crime," he said by way of a greeting. They walked side by side and he filled her in to save time since they had a busy day ahead of them. "Said he had proof that his mother killed his father."

Jason opened the glass door with the Sheriff's insignia above the words Offices of Investigations. "Beck is going through the video now with him," Jason said, referring to his partner. "Come on, we can watch from the AV room."

Jason guided her to a door marked Employees Only, swiped his badge, and ushered her into the room.

The set up looked new and impressive to Charlie. Two large desks with four computer monitors dominated one wall. A rack of servers reminded her of the one she'd seen in George Allen Cofield's secret server room. Jason moved one of the office chairs in front of the monitors next to the AV tech.

"Charlie Payne, this is Sean Gilley. He's our new tech investigations deputy."

"Hi," Sean said and offered up his hand.

"Hi." Charlie shook his hand and took a seat. "I guess it has been a while since I've been back here. Y'all have gone

high-tech.”

“Yep,” Jason said. “Sean, here is a whiz at this stuff. He can also tell when something is real or fake, and why. It’s pretty cool.”

“That’s great,” Charlie said. Her fingers twitched, and she crossed her arms and shoved her fists underneath her armpits to keep from touching anything. The last thing she wanted to do was cause problems with the electrical equipment with her unpredictable sparking hands.

“See?” Allen said to Beck. He was pointing to the flat screen monitor on the cart next to him in Interrogation Room One. “See how she bent down and adjusted the thermostat on the hot tub. I think she turned it up.”

“Well, I see her messing with something,” Beck said, using his best sympathetic voice. He scratched the bald spot on the crown of his head. “I know this is hard to hear, Mr. Cofield, but there’s no way we can prove she turned it up. For all we know, she turned down.”

“Did forensics record the temperature on the hot tub?” Charlie asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “But it was within normal parameters. It wasn’t like she turned it up to two hundred and twenty degrees and boiled him to death or anything.”

“Thank you for that horrible picture in my head. I’m sure it won’t affect my sleep at all tonight.” Charlie gave him a cross look.

“I don’t need it my head either.” George Allen Cofield appeared next to Charlie. The screens flickered, and electronic snow appeared for a few seconds before everything went back to normal.

“Sorry,” Jason said. “Sean, what’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Sean said. “It’s never done that before.”

“Did we lose anything?” Jason asked.

“I don’t think so,” Sean said.

Charlie looked around the room for a second. “Hey, Jason, I’m going to step out for a few minutes. Is there any place where I can have a minute to myself in this place?” She gave George Allen Cofield’s spirit a pointed look.

“Sure,” Jason said. “Everything all right?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine. I just need to check my phone really quick.” She glanced past him to Sean, who seemed to be concentrating on the screens in front of him.

“Sure. You could step into Interrogation Room Two. It’s empty,” Jason said.

“Does it have cameras too?” Charlie asked.

“Yeah, but they’re not on. There’s nobody in there right now,” Sean said.

“Great. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Charlie walked next door to the room marked Interview Room Two and closed the door behind her. She glanced up at the two cameras perched in the corners of the room. The red recording light wasn’t on, but she moved out of their field of vision near the door anyway.

“George Allen Cofield. Come in here right this minute,” Charlie whisper-yelled. A second later, George Allen appeared in front of her.

“That little bitch is gonna get away with it, isn’t she?” George Allen’s face distorted with fury.

“She might,” Charlie said. There didn’t seem to be much point in holding back the truth now. “You heard the detective, right? There’s no way to prove anything.”

“She knew I’d passed out, and she just left me in that hot tub to die,” George lamented. “Isn’t that negligent homicide or something?”

“I don’t really know. It would be up to the Solicitor to charge her with something. I’m really sorry, but short of a confession, I don’t think they’re going to be able to charge her with murder.”

“Dammit, what’s a spirit gotta do to get some justice around here?” George waved his hands in the air. The fluorescent lights overhead glowed brighter and started to buzz too loudly for Charlie’s comfort.

“Please calm down. If those lights explode, I don’t have any way to explain that.” Charlie put her hands on her hips. “If they think she has committed a crime, trust me, they will charge her.”

“Yeah, sure,” George said. He ran his fingers through his ghostly head of hair, and anguish deepened the lines of his jowly face. “Hey, why did you move us out of that room?”

“Because I didn’t need you blowing up their computer equipment with your emotions. You saw what you just did to the light in here, right?”

“Yeah.” George’s eyes widened as if he’d just had some sort of realization. “Yeaaaah. Exactly. Ghost power. Like your boyfriend said.”

“What?” Charlie asked, trying to remember what Tom had said to the spirit.

“When I tried to choke Phyllis, he said I couldn’t because I wasn’t strong enough yet. But I still made the lights flicker.” George Allen waggled his eyebrows and sounded pleased with himself.

“Yeah, George Allen. I think you’re focusing on the wrong thing here. You need to let all this human stuff go. You have an afterlife waiting for you, and trust me, it’s going to be twenty million times better than you ever imagined. But all this earthly stuff, including your cheating and possibly murderous wife, is weighing you down. Just let it go. Let it go and move on. You’ll be so glad you did.”

“Um, sure.” George Allen nodded. “You may be right. There is a light in my peripheral vision. Maybe I should just walk into it.”

“You should. Absolutely you should.” Charlie smiled. “And don’t worry about your wife. Her actions will have consequences. You just probably won’t get to see them.”

“You know, you’re turning me around on this whole thing,” George Allen said. “Thanks. Really, you’ve been great. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.”

“I’m glad I could help. It’s been nice getting to know you. I hope your afterlife is everything you dreamed of.”

“Thanks, kid. So, are you gonna marry that reaper?” George asked.

“What? Am I...what?”

“Going to marry that reaper. I kind of watched you two be all lovey-dovey in the mortuary.”

Charlie let out a nervous laugh. “I don’t know what’s going to happen to us. We’re not exactly on the best terms today.”

“Sure,” George Allen said. “Anyway, y’all would make a cute reaper couple.”

“Excuse me?” Charlie asked. “Does everybody know that I’m going to be a reaper?”

“You have this energy about you, hon. Sorry. It’s a lot like a reaper’s energy. Sort of a death energy, but nicer. Prettier, for sure.”

“Great,” Charlie said. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.” George gave her a little salute. “I’ll see you in the afterlife.”

“Take care, George Allen. I have a good feeling about your son. He’s going to be fine.”

“Yeah, he’s a good kid. A chip off the old block.” George grinned and faded into nothingness.

Charlie sighed. “Good luck, George Allen.”

“Who are you talking to?” Jason asked, poking his head into the interrogation room.

“Geez, Jason.” Charlie clutched her chest. “You just about gave me a heart attack. You could’ve knocked.”

“Sorry,” Jason said. “I thought you’d want to know. We’re going to bring her in for questioning. Do you want to sit in?”

“No, not today. I think my job is done on this case for the day. George Allen passed on. If you can get her to confess to murder, I think that would be fantastic. But I’m not gonna hold my breath.”

“All right,” Jason said. “Ben and the two witches that are going undercover on Friday will be back here around three. So we can go through the plan for tomorrow.”

“That sounds great,” Charlie said. “I’ll be back then. There’s something I need to do in the meantime.”

“Sure,” Jason said and left her alone again. Charlie pulled her phone from her purse and jotted off a quick text to Tom.

Hey, do you have time to talk?

For you? Always.

Great, I’ll be there in thirty minutes.

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CHAPTER 33

Charlie walked through the front door of the Sharon Brothers Funeral Home, determination in her step. The doorbell announced her arrival, and Joy stood up from her desk and walked out into the lobby from the reception area.

“Hi, Charlie,” Joy said. She wore her ebony hair wrapped in a sleek twist, and a crisp white shirt accented her hip-hugging pencil skirt. Her golden-brown eyes glittered. “My brother wasn’t expecting you today, was he?”

“No, he’s not expecting me,” Charlie said. “Is he available?”

Joy smiled, but her gaze became distant, as if she were no longer present. She blinked. And suddenly she was with Charlie again. “He’s on his way.”

“What did you just do?” Charlie asked.

“I just popped my head into the embalming room. That’s all.” Her slender shoulders straightened. “You know, I never got the chance to thank you for filling in for me last week.”

“I was happy to do it,” Charlie said.

A moment later, Tom appeared, still in his scrubs, something Charlie hadn’t expected.

“Charlie? It’s good to see you,” Tom said, his voice hopeful.

“I need to talk to you,” Charlie said, giving Joy a side-eyed glance. “Privately, if possible.”

“Let’s go to my office.” He stepped back and gestured for her to go first.

A few moments later, Charlie plopped down in the extra chair in front of Tom’s desk, and he closed the door behind them.

“I suppose you have questions.”

“I do. The first of which is why do you even bother putting on scrubs? It’s not like somebody’s down there with you while you’re embalming.”

“Well, actually, that’s not true. I have a part-time assistant. You met him, Dale. Sometimes he helps with embalming and retrieving bodies. He’s studying to be a mortician, so this is an internship for him while he’s in school. I can’t very well have him stumble into the embalming room and find me in all my normal reaper glory, can I?”

“Funny,” Charlie said. She propped her arms on the armrests and laced her fingers together across her body. “I guess it’s good to see that Death doesn’t get to take your sense of humor.”

“No, you’re the same person you were in life.”

“That’s good to know.” Charlie straightened in her chair. “I didn’t really come here to go through a laundry list of questions with you.”

“I’m beginning to see that,” he said.

“I need two things. One of them is kind of big.” She twisted her lips.

“Whatever I can do.” He leaned back in his chair and mirrored her movements.

Charlie cleared her throat and met his gaze. “First, there’s a man named Nathan Weintraub, and he’s dying. I want you to do his funeral.”

“I’m happy to do that.”

“Here’s the problem. He doesn’t have any family that will take care of him.” She shifted in her seat.

“So, no money,” Tom said.

Charlie shrugged. “I don’t really know. I have a feeling there won’t be anyone to care when he dies, so probably not much.”

“That’s not true. You care.”

“I know, but I am not exactly in the financial position to pay for a stranger’s funeral.” She sighed. “I wish I were.”

“Don’t worry about the money, Charlie.” Tom’s lips curved into a sympathetic smile. “We will absolutely take care of him.”

Part of her had expected a fight, maybe even wanted a fight, if she was being truthful. If she had suggested something like this to Scott, he would have spewed harsh words and berated her for taking on other people’s problems. But with Tom, there were no mean words and no accusations involving the word *crazy*. Just pure acceptance and willingness to help. A warmth spread through her chest. This was one reason she loved him so much.

“Thank you. I appreciate that.” Charlie softened. If she would have to spend centuries as a reaper, she’d be lucky to spend it with Tom. “I’ll call the hospice and let them know to call you when he passes. I’ll tell them his arrangements are being taken care of here unless his family steps forward.”

“Sounds good. What was the second thing?” Tom asked.

Charlie hesitated a moment before she said, “I’d like to see the contract.”

“Pardon?”

“You said there was a contract that I made with Death. I would like to see it,” Charlie said matter-of-factly. “Actually, Lisa would like to see it since she’s my lawyer.”

Tom didn’t flinch. “I’ll see what I can do. No one’s ever brought it up before, so it may take some time.”

“No problem. I’ve got time, right?”

“Yes,” Tom whispered. “You have a long, long time.”

“Good.” Charlie straightened in her chair. “I just thought of a third thing.”

“All right.” Tom eyed her with a wary glare.

“Are you... coming to Beltane on Friday night?”

“Am I still invited?”

“Yes, but I need to know one other thing. Did you trick me?”

“Trick you? I don’t follow.” Tom sat back in his chair.

“Did you trick me into becoming a reaper? Will Tucker once said that reapers were as obsessive as vampires, and Daphne posed the same idea last night.” She bit her bottom lip. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it since.”

“Oh, god, no, Charlie. I would never.” His face crumpled, his voice earnest. “How could you even think that? This is not a life I would wish on my enemies, much less someone I love.”

“Good.” Charlie swallowed hard. “I’m never gonna use that scythe to cut someone down the way I’ve seen you do.”

“I know.” The corners of his mouth curved up a little. “And I’m glad you won’t. I expect you’ll be a different type of reaper than William and I are.”

“What about Joy? What kind of reaper is she?”

Tom glanced at the ceiling with a thoughtful look on his face. “She’s fierce when she needs to be. But most of the time she’s like you. Compassionate. Of all of us, she uses her scythe the least. She uses reason more.”

“So, it can be done,” Charlie mused. “Helping someone come to terms with their death before guiding them to the other side.”

“Yes. Absolutely and I think you’ll be brilliant at it,” Tom said.

“Why don’t you try to reason with spirits more often?” Charlie asked.

Tom opened his mouth to answer and then closed it. His chair squeaked a little as he rocked back and forth, and a resigned smile spread across his lips. He shrugged. "I don't know. I guess because I was trained to use my scythe first."

"Huh. Maybe if you try talking first, spirits won't run. Won't fear you."

"It's harder once you become a reaper. They see you for what you are, no matter the glamour you wear."

"George Allen said something about that when he passed on. Said he sensed Death from me. It scared me a little. What if I can't reason with spirits, no matter how much I try?" Her shoulders deflated a little with the confession.

"You, my love, will find a way. You have a reputation among the spirit world as it is, and I think that will make your time as a reaper much easier." He shook his head. "You know, I thought you'd fight this fate more."

"Oh, I'm not done fighting. I still want to see that contract." Charlie gave him a smile, a hint of challenge in her voice. "But ever since you told me, and I started thinking about what it really means, a sense of calm has spread through me instead of panic."

"That's normal. It's part of the pre-transformation. It will help you adjust."

"I still have a million questions for you."

"I'm sure you do. And I'll answer every single one of them if I can." Tom glanced at his watch. "You know, it's almost lunchtime. Any chance I could persuade you to have lunch with me at the restaurant of your choice?"

"It is Wednesday." Charlie waggled her eyebrows and made a silly face to lighten the mood.

Tom chuckled and grinned. "Ah, yes. The Fried Chicken Special at the café, if I'm not mistaken."

"You're not mistaken. It's fried chicken day." Charlie licked her lips. "Need I say more?"

“Give me a minute to put on something more appropriate and we’ll head out.” Tom rose to his feet.

Charlie hopped up, and by the time she picked up her purse and slung it across her body, Tom had changed from his scrubs to a pair of black trousers, a purple button-down, and a multicolored tie that matched.

“I’m glad you’re still coming to Beltane.” Charlie slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow.

Tom gesticulated toward the door and hallway. “I’m very relieved to hear that. I just hope your family isn’t angry with me.”

“They won’t be if I’m not, except maybe Lisa, because she can hold a grudge like nobody’s business.” Charlie winked at him.

“I’ll be extra nice to Lisa, then.”

“I should probably remind you, I’ll be working with the police to stop a kidnapper on Friday afternoon.”

“Huh,” Tom said. “Interesting.”

“You think so?”

“That you’ll stop a kidnapper? Yes, that’s interesting, but I just noticed I’m not anxious.” Tom placed his hand on top of Charlie’s as they walked to the lobby.

“What do you mean?”

“Usually, when you’re about to do something dangerous, I become incredibly worried.”

“But you’re not now?” Charlie asked.

“No. Maybe I’m going through some sort of transformation too. I’ll talk to William about it,” Tom said. “He’s a fount of knowledge.”

Charlie nodded, and it surprised her when Tom kissed her on the cheek. She stopped in the lobby and peered into his handsome, angular face. “What was that for?”

“Those kidnappers are in for one hell of a fight. They don’t know what an indomitable force you are, Charlie Payne.”

“Thank you for saying that,” Charlie said and pressed her lips to his.

“That’s why I fell for you,” he whispered against her mouth. His breath and whiskers tickled her skin, and she laughed.

“Because I stop kidnappers in their tracks?” Charlie teased.

“No, because you see you wrong and you want to right it.”

“Oh,” Charlie said, not sure how to respond. Her face felt too warm suddenly.

“I’m very glad I’m still invited.” He cupped her cheek. “And that you’re not angry with me.”

“There’s not much point in being angry. I made a choice. I’d make it again.” Charlie said.

“I know you would. It’s the thing I love most about you. You would do anything to protect the people you love.”

“I would.” Her stomach grumbled loudly, and she laughed. “Now, let’s go get some fried chicken.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Tom said.

CHAPTER 34

“**T**here you go.” Daphne stepped back and admired her handiwork. Charlie perched on the edge of one of the bistro stools in her kitchen, wearing a loose, white t-shirt like Evan wore beneath his dress shirts.

“So, how does it look?” Charlie touched the back of her hair and fought the alarm of how short it felt.

“Pretty freaking awesome if you want to know the truth.” Daphne grinned as she double-checked Charlie’s look from the back. “I wasn’t sure if I could pull off the woman to boy glamour, but it totally works on you. Here, look.”

Daphne held up a hand mirror that she’d brought from her salon along with a black case where she kept some of her best tools, crystals, herbs, her Book of Shadows, and her wand. Charlie held up the mirror, her mouth agape.

“Holy mother earth. I look just like him.” Charlie turned her head back and forth, astounded by Daphne’s craft. “Can I take it off if I need to?”

“Yes,” Daphne nodded. “Just say ‘glamour be gone’ and it will disappear. But if you take it off, you can’t bring it back, so be sure.”

“I will. Thank you so much.” Charlie grinned and jumped off the stool. “I’m going to look in the mirror behind the door in the bathroom. If someone knocks, can you let them in?”

“Sure thing.” Daphne took the mirror from Charlie and laid it on the table. Then she readied her tools for the next person.

Charlie closed the bathroom door and stood in front of the mirror, turning one way and then the other. Except for maybe an inch in height, there was no way to distinguish her from her son. Daphne's glamour work was, as usual, impeccable.

"So, how long will this last if I don't take it off?" Charlie asked as she exited the bathroom.

Daphne stood at the front door with Ben Sutton, Jason Tate, Athena Whitley, Jason's partner Marshall Beck, and another witch from the DOL that Charlie barely knew—Stefan Swain, who could've easily passed for a twelve-year-old boy. Charlie thought Ben had made the right choice, including him. With his dark brown hair and short stature, Stefan was a close match to Michael Summers, which would make Daphne's job easier.

"Oh, my goddess, Charlie, is that you?" Ben asked, incredulous.

"It's me. Hey, Beck." Charlie threw a quizzical look at Jason, "I didn't realize you were coming."

"Don't worry. Tate here explained everything to me." He winked and patted Jason's shoulder.

"Well, I'm glad you're in the loop now. What do you have there?" She pointed at the black Kevlar vests in Beck's hands.

"Jason and I talked about it, and we thought you all should wear these." He passed them to Charlie, Athena, and Stefan.

"I didn't think we would have to deal with guns." Stefan held the vest in his hands for a moment as if he was unsure what to do with it, then turned it over and inspected it.

"We don't really know what we're dealing with yet," Jason said. "Just because we haven't seen him use a gun doesn't mean he won't. And I'd rather be safe than sorry."

"I agree," Charlie said. She loosened the Velcro.

"Before you do that, I want to put a wire on each of you, too. Just so we can hear what's going on." In one hand, Jason held up a small black transmitter with a long wire on it. A roll of medical tape hung from his thumb.

“Not sure that will work on us.” Athena pushed her long curly red hair behind her ear.

“Why not?” Beck asked.

“Because witches have a tendency to short out electronic things if our emotions run high,” Charlie chimed in.

“I’d feel safer if we at least tried,” Jason said.

“Okay,” Charlie and Athena said at the same time.

After Jason taped the wires to her chest, Charlie slipped the vest over her head, then tightened it over the T-shirt she wore. She completed the transformation by putting on a white Oxford shirt, one of Evan’s ties, and one of his navy school jackets to match the navy pair of chinos she’d dug out of the back of her closet.

“Okay, who’s next?” Daphne said. Athena raised her hand. Daphne grinned. “Great, come on, let me see what I can do to make you look like a fourteen-year-old girl named Rachel.”

* * *

AFTER MEETING WITH THE PRINCIPAL, VICE-PRINCIPAL, AND THE kids’ parents, Jason and Ben had devised a plan to get all three kids out of the way without Carl’s knowledge. The principal would call each child to the office in the last period of the day and make them wait with their parents until Jason had apprehended the perpetrators. Then, Charlie, Athena, and Stefan would go back to the child’s last class and wait for the bell to ring. Charlie had gone over the plan in her head a hundred times on the drive to the school and prayed that the goddess would be on her side.

“Wow,” the principal remarked when Charlie, Athena, and Stefan arrived at the office looking like clones of Evan, Rachel, and Michael Summers. “Those are some incredible masks.” He ushered them behind the closed door of his office and stared in a way that made Charlie look anywhere but at him.

Framed degrees hung on the wall, along with tropical-themed prints. Stacks of folders took up space on the credenza behind his unassuming desk. Charlie waited for him to stop staring, but when he didn't, she gave Ben a nudge.

"Yes, they are," Ben agreed. "My team does impressive work."

"They sure do. It's like something out of a movie," Principal Fritsch said.

Ben had used his finesse and his badge to get the principal on board with their little plan, and Jason and Beck reinforced it. The three of them waited in the principal's office, while the vice-principal Mrs. Edgers ran interference.

"There's no need to upset the kids," Ben had told the principal. "We can do this all discreetly. Their parents are on board and will talk to them about what's about to happen. And the dangers of getting into cars with strangers, even ride-shares, without taking precautions."

Once they sequestered the children in the vice-principal's office, their plan could begin.

"Here, put these in your ears." Jason handed her a pair of what looked like Bluetooth earbuds.

"What are these for?" she asked.

"They're so I can talk to you through this phone." He handed her a phone that looked like any other smartphone. "We've loaded the JoyRyde app on here and signed in with Rachel's account. When the creep picks up the ride on his app, he'll think it's her."

"I hope we're right about this." Charlie slipped the buds into her ears. "Athena, take this. It'll look more authentic if you make the call."

Charlie held out the phone, and Athena grabbed it and held it close to her chest.

"I hope Carl's been feeding Hugh information about the kids, and we're not just going off some crazy vision I had."

“It’s a day that ends in Y, isn’t it? We’re always following some crazy vision or dream you had.” Jason gave her a wry smile. “I have a good feeling about this one.”

“Good. How do I look?” Charlie asked.

Jason stepped back and looked her up and down. “You look great. It’s uncanny.”

“Daphne does outstanding work.” She rocked on her feet and glanced at the door impatiently as they waited for the signal from the vice-principal. “You’re coming tonight, right?”

“What?” Jason asked.

“To my uncle’s house, for Beltane. For the feast and bonfire?”

Jason glanced around at the others. Ben, the other witches, and even Beck pretended not to listen to them. Awkwardness spread throughout the room like a cloud. Jason’s jaw tightened. “I don’t think so.”

“Jason, please come. I promised Lisa that you would.”

“What? Are you... ” He gritted his teeth and yanked her into a corner. “Is this really the best time to be talking about this?”

“Yes. I may not get a chance later.” Charlie met his angry, intense gaze. “I want you to come. In fact, I want all of you to come.” She raised her voice, addressing everyone else. “There’s a feast and a bonfire tonight at my uncle’s celebrating Beltane and the coming of summer. You’re all invited. Especially you, Jason.”

“What’s Beltane?” Beck asked.

Jason rolled his eyes at his partner. “I’ll explain it to you later.”

The vice-principal knocked on the door three times. Ben opened the door and said something to her that Charlie couldn’t hear. A moment later, he closed the door and turned to the group.

“The kids are safely in the Vice Principal’s office with their parents. Everyone knows what they’re supposed to do?” Ben said. A chorus of yeses went around the room. Ben set his gaze on Charlie, Athena, and Stefan. “Okay. Good. Y’all be careful out there.”

“Ben and I’ll be right behind you,” Jason said.

“All right, Charlie, Athena, you’re up,” Ben said and opened the door to the principal’s office.

Charlie and Athena left the office together and headed into the hall, followed closely by Stefan. They all looked the parts with their glammers and navy blazers with the school insignia on them. Charlie and Athena went down the main hall, past a row of brightly colored lockers to Mrs. Mankins’ Spanish class, and Stefan went to the classroom three doors down.

When the last bell rang, Charlie waited for the classroom to clear out before she took Athena’s hand and headed out into the onslaught of kids trying to get out of the school on a Friday afternoon. She scanned the halls, looking for Carl Pritchett. None of this would work if he didn’t see them in the hall.

Stefan had to push his way through the crowd to catch up, and when he did, Charlie stopped in front of the lockers.

“What’s going on?” Athena asked.

“I don’t see Pritchett anywhere, do you?” She glanced up and down the hall.

“Down there,” Athena said. She cocked her head slightly and used her eyes to point Charlie in the right direction. “He’s walking this way. Pretend to laugh.”

“What?” Stefan said.

“Just do it,” Athena whispered and then laughed as hard as she could.

Charlie laughed as if Athena had just told the funniest joke she’d ever heard. Carl Pritchett pushed his dust mop down one side of the hall, heading straight for them. He glared at them without blinking and wore an expression of disdain on his weathered face. The hall had emptied.

Carl stopped a few feet away and continued to stare. “Y’all kids better get out of here. You’ll miss y’all’s bus.”

Athena whipped out the phone Jason had given her and called up the JoyRyde app. “No worries. We’ll just take a JoyRyde home,” Athena said. “Here, we’ll get out of your way. Come on y’all, let’s go back to my house. I’ve got a new video game to play.”

“Cool,” Stefan said.

“Cool,” Charlie said, painfully aware that her voice sounded too high. She held her breath and waited for Carl to notice, but he gestured for them to move along.

When they got outside, the carpool was in full swing. Athena glanced at the app on the phone in her hand. “Wow, that was fast. It says he’ll be here in less than a minute.”

“He’s been waiting for us. Y’all have your wands ready?” Charlie asked.

Athena patted the holster on her outer thigh, hidden beneath her knee-length plaid skirt. “Ready.”

Stefan unzipped the front compartment of his backpack and took out an extra-long pencil with a cute colored eraser on top.

“What is that?” Charlie asked.

“It’s my wand,” he whispered. “I disguised it to look like a pencil.”

“Oh. Good thinking.” Charlie opened and closed her fists a few times. Her fingers prickled with heat and electric current. It wouldn’t take much for her to call up enough energy to cast wandless.

“This is us.” Athena pointed to the champagne-colored Buick that stopped at the end of the carpool line. The three of them stepped off the curb and approached the car. Charlie’s heart hammered in her throat. Athena casually leaned over to speak to the driver through the open passenger window. The man behind the wheel smiled, but it did nothing to soften the hardness of his face.

“Hi,” Athena said.

“Rachel and friends?” Hugh asked.

“Yep, that’s us,” Athena said.

“I’m Hugh. Y’all get in and buckle up,” Hugh said. Stefan got into the front seat, and Athena and Charlie got into the backseat and strapped themselves in.

“Don’t worry,” Jason said into Charlie’s ear. “We’ll be right behind you. Just keep your phone on so you can hear me. Clear your throat if that’s okay.”

Charlie put her hand to her mouth and cleared her throat.

“Great,” Jason said.

The three witches settled into their seats, and Hugh put the car in drive and pulled out of the line of carpool parents picking up their kids.

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CHAPTER 35

Charlie leaned forward in the seat. “I think you’re going the wrong way,” she said to Hugh. Panic flickered in her chest when they passed through the painted blue steel supports of the Don Holt Bridge and the green sign that read North Charleston, City Limit. Charleston County. “Mount Pleasant is the other way, isn’t it, sir?”

Hugh looked into the rearview mirror to meet her eyes. “Don’t worry, I know where I’m going. I’m just taking a shortcut, that’s all. I’ll get you home.”

“You know, my mom will get mad if we’re late,” Athena chimed in. “And trust me, mister, you don’t want to mess around with my mom when she’s mad.”

“Don’t worry, honey, you’re not gonna be late. And your mom, well, I’m sure she’ll be happy just to get you home when it’s all said and done.” He flicked the turn signal lever.

The sound of the blinkers tik-toking filled Charlie’s head. Hugh took an exit and headed into the heart of North Charleston.

“Why are we taking North Rhett?” Charlie asked, not sure if Jason was still listening, or if any of the electrical equipment he’d armed them with was still working. His silence made her more nervous than anything else. What if they’d lost sight of the Buick while they were tailing them?

“Like I said, it’s just a shortcut I know.” Irritation edged into Hugh’s voice. Charlie could feel the disdain he had for them. Could hear one thought ringing through his head.

Arrogant little shits.

“Mister, I don’t think you understand—” Athena started.

“Shut up. All of you just sit back and shut up.” Hugh’s smile disappeared, replaced by an impatient, hardened glare. He pulled the car onto a side street and parked the car. The next thing Charlie knew, he’d reached into the molded pocket on the door and pulled a gun on them.

“Give me your phones,” he ordered.

Athena looked to Charlie. All Charlie could do was nod helplessly. Athena gave the phone over and leaned back in the seat and crossed her arms.

“You, too.” Hugh pointed the gun at Charlie.

“I don’t have a phone. My dad took it away.” Charlie held up her hands.

Hugh’s eyes narrowed. “If you’re lying to me and I find it, you’ll be real sorry.”

“I’m not lying,” Charlie said. She pictured her phone in her purse, stowed in a lockbox in Ben’s truck.

“What about you?” Hugh turned the gun on Stefan.

“My parents won’t let me have a phone,” Stefan said.

“Fine.” Hugh held the gun steady while he reached into the door’s pocket for something else. He threw wide plastic zip ties at Stefan. “Tie up your friends.”

“Whuh-what?” Stefan asked.

“Did I stutter?” Hugh snapped. “Tie up your friends. Now!”

Stefan took the ties and bound up Athena’s hands first. Hugh kept his gaze steady on Charlie as if he were studying her. She hoped the spell Daphne cast for her glamour wasn’t giving out yet.

“What is that in your ear?” Hugh said.

Charlie touched the earbuds. “These? They... they help me hear.”

“Give them to me.” He held out an empty hand.

Charlie clicked her teeth together, took the earbuds out and handed them over. Hugh opened his window and tossed the phone and earbuds into the street. Once Stefan finished tying up Charlie, Hugh tied Stefan’s wrists together, put the car in gear, and continued on his way.

* * *

“WHERE ARE WE?” ATHENA WHISPERED.

“This is his house. Where he took the boy in my original dreams,” Charlie muttered. Hugh turned his Buick into his driveway and pulled into a separate garage building behind the house. He pointed the gun at them and forced them out of the car. Charlie scanned the back of the building, the house where Lottie had died, where she’d had visions of Michael Summers being held. In one of the dirty windows, Charlie saw Lottie. She raised her bound hands and waved. But Lottie disappeared.

“What the hell are you doing?” Hugh said.

“Did you know this house is haunted?” Charlie said. “There’s a ghost in that window.”

“There ain’t no ghosts in this house. Now get inside.” He herded them onto the porch and then in through the back door into a smallish kitchen for a house this size. It looked like it hadn’t been updated since the seventies, with its avocado green appliances and the peeling orange and green plaid wallpaper.

Hugh lined them up in front of the sink, the gun still trained on them. He pulled his phone from his front pocket and scanned the screen, made a growling noise in his throat, and put the phone in his pocket again. A loud crash came from upstairs, and Charlie couldn’t help but smile. Was Lottie trying to create a diversion?

“Move.” Hugh stuck the barrel of the gun in Athena’s ribs. She jumped as if someone had goosed her. Hugh shoved

Charlie and Athena forward, and Stefan followed. Hugh directed them to a small pantry closet with a louvered door just off the kitchen. “Get inside.”

The three of them crowded together. Shelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling and held what little food the men had in the house—jars of pasta sauce, spaghetti noodles, macaroni and cheese dinners, and cans of tuna. Hugh shoved Stefan farther inside and closed the door behind them. The compact space would’ve been dark except for the louvers. Charlie could see Hugh’s shadow and the sound of a chair dragging across the floor. The space heated fast, and every time one of them stirred, they ran into the other two. Hugh’s footsteps faded once he left the kitchen and headed up the stairs in the front hall.

“We don’t have much time,” Charlie said.

Stefan maneuvered his wand from the waistband of his pants and muttered a spell Charlie couldn’t quite make out. The small space filled with the sharp odor of ozone that stung Charlie’s nose. The plastic zip tie binding Stefan’s hands popped and fell to the floor. He held the tip of his wand to Athena’s bindings. Blood rushed through Charlie’s ears like thunder, and she held her wrists up for Stefan to free her next, but the sound of the chair being dragged startled them. Stefan turned and held his wand up. Charlie hadn’t heard Hugh come back down the stairs.

Athena pulled her wand from its holster. “I say we rush him,” Athena whispered. “He can’t shoot all of us.”

“Stefan, aim for his hand,” Charlie whispered. Stefan nodded. “Jason, if you can hear me, we’re at the Pritchett house, and I’m about to fry this wire, so hopefully you got this.”

She balled her hands into fists and concentrated on the tingle deep in her palms. She imagined the electricity popping and crackling. The plastic around her wrists grew hot, pliable, and Charlie pushed her hands apart. The stretched zip tie fell to the floor.

“Okay, when this is all over, you have to tell me how you did that,” Athena whispered.

The door flew open, and the three of them stared down the barrel of the revolver in Hugh’s hand. Stefan raised his wand.

“What the hell is that? A pencil?” Hugh sneered.

Athena raised her wand, and Charlie’s fingertips glowed with blue electricity.

“Put the gun down, Hugh,” Charlie said. Hugh’s gaze shifted to the glow of Charlie’s hands. “Glamour be gone.” The face of Evan Carver melted away, revealing Charlie’s sweaty, red face.

“What the...” Hugh began.

Stefan didn’t wait for Hugh to finish his thought. He flicked his wand and released a burst of yellow energy that sent Hugh flying backward. The three of them rushed out of the pantry. Hugh sat up straight, the gun still in his hand. He took aim and pulled the trigger. The impact caused Stefan to stumble backward. He lost his footing and fell to the floor.

“Oh, my goddess.” Athena kneeled next to him.

Hugh scrambled to his feet and took off for another room. Athena ripped open the white Oxford Stefan wore, sending buttons flying everywhere. She pressed her hands to his chest as if she expected to find blood.

“I’m okay,” Stefan groaned. “Looks like the vest worked. Damn, it hurts, though.”

“There’s a phone on the wall.” Charlie pointed to an ancient green plastic phone. “Call 911, tell them you’re working with the sheriff’s department and that you need a Deputy Sheriff by the name of Jason Tate to come to the Pritchett house on Amelia Place in North Charleston.”

“What are you gonna do? Maybe we should wait for them,” Athena said.

“I’m gonna go catch him.”

“Charlie, he’s shooting bullets, not spells.”

“I know,” she said. “I’ll be okay, I promise. Take care of Stefan.” She rose to her feet and headed in the same direction as Hugh.

Charlie’s hands lit up, and she tried to clear each room, the way Ben taught her to do at the DOL. The stench of stale cigarettes permeated the walls, and the odor clung to the back of her throat.

The downstairs of the Pritchett house flowed around a central rectangle of living room, dining room, butler’s pantry, kitchen, and a room with built-ins that Charlie assumed might have been a study or library at one time. The shelves held only old newspapers and boxes now. A long hallway bisected the downstairs, with a staircase leading to the bedrooms.

Charlie heard Hugh’s heavy footsteps on the stairs to the second floor and raced after him. He stopped at the top of the landing and shot indiscriminately down the stairs before heading toward the room Carl had shown her.

When she got to the second floor, she found all the doors shut. Maybe she should just wait for Jason; it wasn’t like Hugh had many places to escape.

“He’s headed for the attic.” Lottie’s voice whispered across Charlie’s senses. Charlie didn’t see the spirit, wasn’t sure what she was still doing here, but she trusted the information enough to head to the bedroom where Carl had shown her the bullet holes. Charlie opened the door and jumped back, with her hands ready to engage. She peeked around the doorjamb and saw him in the closet. He still had the gun aimed at her. He got off another round, but Charlie pulled back. Splinters of the painted wood molding shattered with the force of the bullets and scattered across the floor.

“Hey,” Athena called from the top of the landing. “Jason’s on his way.” Athena edged closer to the room and held her wand up. “You ready to take this mother down?”

“Yep.” Charlie nodded and stepped into the doorway. “Put the gun down, Hugh. You’re just making it worse for yourself.”

“What are you? Some kind of devil?” he said, fear etched into his features.

“Nope,” Charlie said. “Not a devil, but nice try.”

Hugh took another shot at Charlie and then disappeared into the closet. Charlie swiped at the air, and a blue, electric swirl of energy sailed into the air and engulfed the bullet, giving Charlie a chance to duck. The blue cloud of light whizzed by her head and exploded into a sooty circle with a hole in the center of against the dingy wall across the hall.

Athena squatted low in the doorjamb and fired off a bolt of white energy from the tip of her wand to Hugh’s hand. He dropped the gun as if holding it burned him. He grunted and headed up the ladder inside the closet. Over their heads, a horrible keening sound spread through the room.

Charlie and Athena exchanged glances and scrambled up the stairs to the attic.

The darkness had a weight to it, like a heavy, stifling blanket. Charlie glanced around, inhaling dust. Frigid air seeped over her from close by.

“Lottie?” Charlie called and lifted herself onto the gritty plywood floor. She focused on making the glow of her hands brighter so she could see and be ready if Hugh charged her.

The spirit’s faint light showed only her outline at first, but as Charlie drew closer, there was no mistaking the apparition. Lottie stood over him, her dress bloody and bullet-ridden.

“He fainted,” Lottie said.

“What did you do?” Charlie asked. She kneeled next to him and pressed her finger to his throat, looking for a pulse.

The spirit shrugged. “Nothing, really. I just showed myself to him, that’s all. I’ve been wanting to do it for ages. Turns out he’s not such a tough guy. The big chicken took one look at me, and his eyes rolled back in his head, and he dropped like a rock.” Lottie chuckled, pleased with herself, and her light grew a little brighter.

“To be honest,” Athena said, dragging herself up into the attic, “you are kind of scary.”

“You can see me?” Lottie asked.

“Yeah. I’m psychic like Charlie. Well... not exactly like Charlie, but I can see spirits too.”

“Lottie, what are you still doing here? I thought you said Nathan would pass on yesterday. I figured y’all would be together by now.”

“I convinced to hang on just a little while longer.” Lottie’s voice became distant, and for a second, she faded. A self-satisfied grin crossed her face, and she glowed brightly again. “I thought you might need some help, and I was right.”

“You were. Thank you,” Charlie said. “I appreciate it. You know, I accidentally brought your ring and letters home with me. What would you like me to do with them?”

“When you bury Nathan, can you put it and my letters in the casket with him?”

“Absolutely,” Charlie said.

“Thank you,” Lottie said. Hugh groaned and reached for his head. Athena took her wand and aimed it at his face.

“Good morning, sunshine,” Athena chirped. “Scared of a little ghost, are you?”

Lottie giggled and waved at Hugh, then disappeared.

Charlie hopped to her feet. She needed something to tie his wrists. She remembered the crate she’d seen the other day. Before she could search it, Athena flicked her wrist and a thin yellow beam of light emitted from her wand. The light wrapped around Hugh’s wrists and yanked him to his feet. His arms hung suspended in the air. Terror molded his features, and he struggled against the binding.

“I’ve got him,” Athena said. Downstairs, they heard the door crash open.

“And that would be the cavalry,” Charlie said.

“Charlie!” Jason’s voice resounded through the house.

She walked to the opening in the floor. “We’re up here!
We’ve got him!”

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CHAPTER 36

The bonfire licked at the twilight, crackling and popping. Jen had strung lights over the picnic table and extra folding metal chairs she'd made Ben bring down from the attic. Two long tables draped in blue and white checked cloths overflowed with food.

Charlie milled around from group to group, feeling a little lonely without Tom. He'd gotten a call at the last minute to pick up Nathan Weintraub from the Chelsea Street Hospice, and she wasn't sure he'd make it to the festivities.

Every time the sound of an engine passed the driveway, Charlie glanced up, hoping that Jason had taken her up on her invitation. She noticed Lisa hanging out alone on one of the picnic benches and crossed the yard to join her.

"I'm sorry," Charlie said. "I really thought he'd come."

"Y'all did just stop a kidnapping. Maybe he's got paperwork." Lisa shrugged, her voice hopeful.

"Maybe so," Charlie said. She watched Evan and Rachel talking to Stefan and Athena. A sense of peace spread through her. Her boy was safe, and so was his girlfriend and his soccer mate Michael. Hugh and Carl Pritchett would be put away for a long, long time.

The roar of a familiar engine filled her ears, and Charlie sat up straight when Jason's Dodge Charger parked behind Lisa's BMW.

"Speak of the devil," Charlie said, rising to her feet.

“Where are you going?” Lisa squirmed on the bench and grabbed Charlie’s hand.

“To say hello.” Charlie grinned and gently slipped her hand out of Lisa’s.

“Charlie, wait—,” Lisa started.

Charlie ignored her cousin and waved at Jason as he got out of his car. Jason grinned and waved back, a look of relief on his face.

“Hey,” Jason said.

“I’m so glad you came.”

His chest expanded with a deep breath. “Yeah. I just hope I’m not intruding.”

Charlie glanced over her shoulder at Lisa. Her cousin tugged at the long braid hanging over her shoulder as she watched Charlie and Jason. Charlie gave Lisa a reassuring smile before she turned her attention back to Jason. “Nope. Not intruding at all. Looks like somebody wants to talk to you.”

His gaze shifted to Lisa. He nodded and let out a shuddery breath. “Okay.”

Charlie patted his arm, and as he walked away, Lisa stood up.

Across the yard, Charlie noticed Jen and Daphne had come together and were watching the conversation between Jason and Lisa. She quietly joined them.

“Do you think she’s telling him?” Daphne asked.

“What? That she thinks she’s cursed?” Charlie asked.

“She is not cursed. It’s all in her head,” Jen insisted and folded her arms across her chest.

Daphne wrapped her arms around the waists of Charlie and Jen and leaned her head against Charlie’s shoulder. “I wish I could hear them.”

Charlie closed her eyes and focused for a second to get a peek. “He missed her. And he might believe in spells, but curses are something he’s not so sure about.”

“How do you know?” Daphne asked.

“I can hear his thoughts,” Charlie whispered.

“Charlie, you shouldn’t be doing that,” Jen scolded.

The three of them didn’t bother to hide that they were watching. Jason reached for Lisa’s hand, pulled it to his mouth and kissed it. Charlie grinned.

“Am I too late for dinner?” Tom Sharon said, appearing out of the shadows. He drew close to Charlie and her cousins.

“Nope, I would say you’re here just in time,” Charlie said. Jen gasped at the sight of Lisa kneeling in front of Jason.

“Oh, my goddess.” Daphne squealed and jumped up and down, a wide grin on her face.

Jason pulled Lisa to her feet, enveloped her in his arms, and kissed her deeply.

“I think he said yes.” Tom slipped his arm around Charlie’s waist, pulled her close and kissed her on the temple.

“Good,” Charlie said and leaned her head on Tom’s shoulder.

“Is that something you want?” Tom whispered in her ear. “To get married?”

“Ask me that again later,” Charlie said.

“All right, how much later?”

Charlie grinned and pecked him on the cheek. “Maybe in a hundred years or so.”

“Really? Why—”

Charlie stopped his questions with a kiss, and Tom didn’t protest.

CHAPTER 37

Charlie laid with her head against Tom's bare chest, drifting somewhere between sleeping and waking, drowsy from the exertion of their lovemaking. Laughter coming from the living room invaded her consciousness, and she opened her eyes. She pushed herself up onto one elbow and listened to the sounds of the house. It couldn't be Evan; she'd taken him and Rachel home after the bonfire because he had a soccer game early in the morning.

"Do you hear that, or is it just me?"

"Hear what?" Tom asked. He brushed a strand of her hair behind her ear. She sighed.

"Great," she muttered. "I thought for sure you'd hear it." She hopped out of bed and grabbed the short terry robe hanging over her footboard. She tied the belt around her waist and hurried to the living room.

The blue glow of the television lit the room in eerie shades of gray and cast deep shadows into the corners of the room.

"George Allen, is that you?" she whispered. No reply came. She turned so she could look at the screen.

"Meet her lawyer," George Allen Cofield said from behind her. A cold mist wrapped around her body, and her breath puffed out in a cloud. "And my ex-best friend."

Charlie turned to face the spirit. "George Allen, I thought we talked about this. You were going to let it go, remember? You said you were moving on. Walk into the light, remember?"

“There is no universe that exists where I just let this go. She lied her way out of being charged, and because those idiot deputy friends of yours can’t prove she murdered me, they let her go. And it turns out that changing my will isn’t enough. Since we were still married, turns out I can’t change my will without her knowledge and have it be legally binding. So, she gets my house, she gets my hot tub, and she gets my money.”

“George Allen, you can’t take any of that with you. None of it matters where you’re going.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“George Allen, she will be held accountable,” Tom said from the bedroom door. He wore a pair of blue cotton pajama pants and no shirt. It always surprised her, when she saw him shirtless, how well-defined his body was. His pecs, biceps, and abs looked as if he spent hours in the gym. Sometimes she wondered if he did that for her.

“Yeah, you stay right there, reaper.” George Allen held up one hand, palm out. “I’m not going anywhere with you. And I trust your accountability about as much as I trust him with my wife.” He jerked his thumb toward the television.

“George Allen—” Charlie started.

“Just keep your eye on the screen, honey,” George Allen said and disappeared.

“His ghost is on my last nerve.” Charlie frowned and put her hands on her hips. “I’m tempted to just tell you to move him on.”

“I thought you had opinions about scythe use,” Tom teased.

“I could almost condone it for somebody like George Allen.”

“Charlie, look.” Tom sidled up next to her and pointed to the television. Sitting in the hot tub on the back deck of George Allen Cofield’s home was his wife Phyllis and the white-haired man Charlie had seen at the funeral dotting on her. The ex-best friend. They clinked champagne glasses and cuddled together on one seat. The man turned his head and

kissed Phyllis deeply, then lifted her easily with the buoyancy of the water onto his lap. Charlie made a face and covered her mouth with her hand.

“I really don’t want to watch these people have sex,” she said flatly. Tom moved behind her and kissed the back of her neck. She swiped him away and concentrated on the screen.

The white-haired man untied Phyllis Cofield’s bikini top and tossed it onto the deck. She laughed, and they kissed again, deeper this time.

“That cannot be sanitary,” Charlie said.

George Allen appeared on the screen, standing next to the hot tub. He looked directly into the camera and gave it a thumbs up.

“Oh my goddess,” Charlie muttered. “Tom, stop him.”

“I don’t think I can,” Tom said.

A grin spread across George Allen Cofield’s face when the couple convulsed.

“Oh my goddess, what the—”

“He just electrocuted them, didn’t he?” Tom said.

“I cannot believe this.” Charlie hurried into the bedroom for her phone. She quickly dialed Jason’s phone number.

“Yeah,” Jason said, his voice groggy as if she had just woken him up.

“Jason, I think Phyllis Cofield is dead.”

“Charlie,” Tom called from the living room. “You’d better get in here.”

Charlie rushed into the living room and caught George Allen on the screen, grinning at the camera again, waving goodbye right before he disappeared. His wife and ex-best friend floated face down in the hot tub.

“Charlie, what did you say?” Jason said.

Charlie put the phone to her ear again. “I said Phyllis Cofield’s dead. My guess is electrocution based on what I

saw.”

“Okay.” His voice distorted as if he were rubbing his face. “I’ll send a deputy over to check it out.”

“Tell him not to get too close to the hot tub. It will probably take an electrician to shut it down.”

“Uh-huh.” Jason yawned in her ear.

“Thanks. Sorry I woke you,” Charlie said. She heard the murmur of a female voice in the background and couldn’t help but smile. “Tell Lisa I’m sorry too.”

“Okay, I will. I’ll call you later.”

Charlie pressed the red icon on the phone and looked Tom in the eye. “What happens to a spirit if they commit murder?”

“Charlie, I can’t share that information,” Tom said.

“Dammit, I’m going to be a reaper. You can at least fill me in on these things.” She feigned being cross.

“That’s just it, my love. I can’t tell you. We’re not just sworn to keep such things secret, we’re bound to keep them.” He brushed his knuckles across her cheek. “I couldn’t tell you even if I wanted to. I physically cannot say.”

“Are you serious?” Charlie said.

“Very. But honestly, it’s never been a problem before I got so involved with you and other humans.” Tom smiled. “A concession I’ve been happy to make to have your company.” He leaned down and brushed his lips over hers.

Charlie pulled back and met his gaze, the question still burning in her mind. “But something happens, right? He can’t just kill her and get away with it.”

Tom sighed and chuckled. “You are incorrigible, did you know that, my curious little cat?” She cocked her head and raised an eyebrow. “The most I can tell you is Death will hold him accountable. But I can’t give you specifics.” He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to him. He kissed her on top of the head. “One day, my love, you will know all my secrets. I will happily tell you how I became a reaper and

everything I know about what happens to the souls we guide to the other side. I'll even tell you what happens to us after we have finished serving Death.”

Charlie shifted her head so she could look into his eyes again and found so much love there it warmed her entire body.

“You better,” she scolded with a grin and a kiss before leading him back to the bedroom.

* * *

THANK YOU FOR READING *ENDURING SPIRITS*. I HAD A BLAST writing all the different spirits, George Allen, and Lottie and the revelation for Charlie's afterlife came to me as a surprise. I had a inkling of what was going to happen, but the idea of her becoming a reaper sometime in the future means a whole lot of story possibilities open up, which is exciting to me and hopefully exciting to you too.

In the next book, *The Kitchen Witch*, Charlie takes a back seat and Jen moves to the forefront. There will still be lots of mystery, intrigue, ghostly encounters and family time to keep you entertained, but the focus will be on Jen and how she's going to keep her ex from trying to take her daughter away.

Sign up here to be notified when *The Kitchen Witch* is available for preorder or has launched, <http://eepurl.com/c7-jll>

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