



GHOST GIRL



The Ghost Girl Series Omnibus

SINCLAIR KELLY

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Cover: Brittany Franks for Chaotic Creatives

Editor: Michelle Oberleiton

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Dedication

I need to apologize to my husband. I promised in that very first dedication to add 'throbbing-cock' (with that incorrect hyphen) into the next book just for him, and I never did.

I owe you one, babe. So here it goes...

Looking for hard, throbbing-cocks that fill a girl up just right? Fate and her men are here to lend a ghostly helping hand, and hopefully a laugh or two along the way. Enjoy!



GHOST

GIRL



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A *Fate*
UNKNOWNS

Prologue

Somewhere in Austin,
TX... Fifty Years Ago

What. In. The. Ever-loving. Fuck.

I must've had one helluva time last night if the pounding in my head is any indication. My entire body aches like I went one too many rounds with a boxer - and lost. Taking stock of every ache and pain, I'm startled to realize everything feels...heightened. More intense somehow. It's like all of my senses are misfiring, making every breath, every throb and sting, every small movement send tiny pulses of electricity zinging across my body. That can't be good, can it?

I try to swallow, but it's a struggle. My mouth is dry and gritty and tastes like ass. Sweaty, dirty ass. Not that I've ever licked dirty ass. Though I wouldn't be opposed to licking a curvy, *clean* ass. The image of an alluring heart-shaped mole on a nicely sculpted ass cheek pops into my head.

Wait, what? That's it. I'm never drinking again. Ever.

Bringing my arm up, I run my hand down my face, and even my skin feels hypersensitive. Brushing my fingers over my eyelid, it's like I can feel every ridge and groove and detail of my fingertip. I can suddenly distinguish

each individual blade of grass as it tickles the back of my neck. A wetness pools around my feet, along with the distinct grittiness of sand and the coolness of damp pebbles.

Where in the hell did I pass out?

My hands drop to tangle in the long grass beside me, and I use that simple touch to ground myself before opening my eyes, concerned about what sort of shit I might have gotten into.

As everything slowly begins to come into focus, my gaze locks on the stars twinkling in the clear night sky. Each one seems brighter than it should, closer and clearer. I look to my left, and the lights on the bridge above me are almost blinding in their intensity. Quickly shutting my eyes again, I take a deep breath to calm myself. It could be worse, right? I could be staring at a set of gleaming silver gates nestled in soft, fluffy whiteness, just beyond which are isles of clouds with a river of light flowing between them. Or a land full of screams, where every surface is made from black rock and the only light is from the lava that oozes upwards with a reddish glow from the ground to the ceiling high above.

Ok, that is oddly specific. What in the actual hell?

Opening my eyes again, I scan my surroundings. The roaring rapids I hear are actually just a wide, slowly flowing creek, its water gently trickling over the rocks at the shore...and my feet, apparently. There's an owl hooting and car horns blaring somewhere off in the distance, but they all sound like they're right next to me.

I release another breath and instantly regret it. My mouth *smells* like ass too. Other scents begin to filter in. The smell of earth - dirt and grass and flowers. Bluebonnets, maybe? How the hell I know that, I have no idea, but it's so strong I hold my breath to avoid the overwhelming assault of odors.

Deciding I need to figure this shit out, I sit up. My head pounds, and I reluctantly take a few more deep breaths to get the world to stop tilting on its axis. At least I'm wearing clothes - a blue, button-down shirt that's shockingly unrumpled despite my apparent fun last night, a pair of black trousers with the hems slightly damp from the water at my feet, and tan suspenders.

Where are my shoes and socks?

Nothing around me looks familiar, but I feel like I've been here before. Each side of the creek is heavily lined with trees. The grass slowly giving way to rocky banks edging the water. Sitting next to a large pedestrian

bridge, I'm flooded with this feeling of peace and love. Which doesn't make one damn bit of sense.

"Where the fuck am I?" I ask the night, my voice hoarse like it hasn't been used in years. Unsurprisingly, I get no response.

Then I'm struck with another thought. *Who* the hell am I?

My heart starts to pound, panic rising.

"Knox. That's my name. I'm Knox..." I trail off, coming up blank. I don't know my last name.

As I attempt to keep the ensuing dread at bay, I sift through my memories only to realize I have none. Nothing. I don't know how old I am, where I came from, or what happened to me.

Bringing my hand up, I slowly rub the center of my chest. There's a pounding there that I thought was my heart's erratic beating thanks to the panic attack I'm somehow managing to stave off, but it's more than that. I flatten my hand, feeling the thump thump of my heartbeat, but somewhere deeper there's a tug, this invisible pull telling me I need to get up. I need to go...somewhere.

I should probably be worried about finding food, and maybe some shoes, but the tug is growing in intensity the longer I sit here. Those heightened senses I was experiencing seem to be lessening somewhat, the power pooling somewhere inside me instead. Gathering strength and morphing into a powerful draw that is insisting I follow it. But where? And why?

Standing up slowly, the world spins for only a second before I'm steady enough to turn around. I stumble up the embankment, through the trees, over rocks and roots, until I'm stepping out onto a sidewalk next to an empty street. I glance left and see nothing but trees and a dark road leading to God only knows where. To my right, I see a well-lit area a few blocks down along with more traffic, both people and cars, and I'm suddenly overwhelmed with feelings. Happiness, excitement, jealousy, sadness. So many emotions slam into me it's almost crippling. I stagger slightly and look down to find my palm resting on my chest again, the tug there starting to physically ache. I should head toward the people, someone who could help me, but the tether linking me to some mysterious pull is adamant that I go left, into the uncertainty that lies down that desolate road.

I glance right again, my belly rumbling and feet throbbing after walking through rough rocks and sticks. A thought strikes, and I quickly check my pockets but find no wallet or identification. I have no idea who I am or where

I'll go, and I've got no money to get me there.

Deciding to listen to my stomach rather than some weird *feeling* I don't know if I can trust, I head toward the sounds of life. As I approach the busy street up ahead, I slow my pace and pause in the shadow of the nearest tree, suddenly realizing something is seriously wrong here. There's a large crowd on the corner and music filtering out the door which is open to allow the long line of people inside.

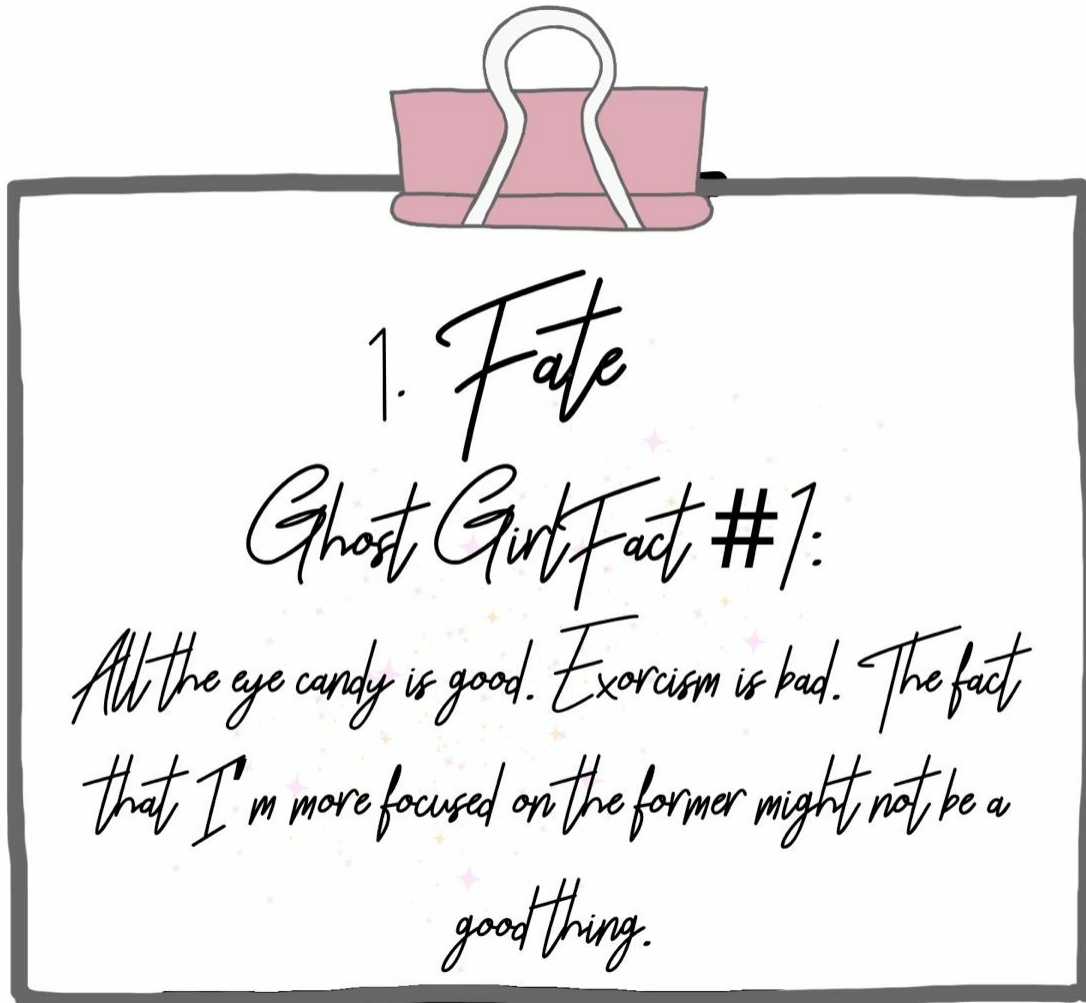
Women dressed in short dresses and thigh-high, heeled boots laugh and talk while waiting outside. The men are in pants that flare out widely at the bottom and tight button-down shirts which are unbuttoned down to their chests. Their hair is as long as the women's, and they run their fingers through it while they stand by, smoking cigarettes and scanning the growing line. But why is everyone surrounded by this hazy fog? Everyone is encased in colors, muted pinks and purples and yellows, shades of blue, and hints of red. It's like someone placed a rainbow over the crowd, and they're all swimming in it, causing the colors to swirl and mix.

Those feelings I've been experiencing have only grown stronger with every step I take toward the group in front of me. Throw in some frustration and anger, desire and despair, and it's too much for my fragile mind right now. I can feel it all, and no matter what I do, I can't seem to shut it off. I grab my head with both hands, trying to get it all to stop, but it simply grows stronger with each person that walks up to get in line.

Risking another look at the crowd of people then down at my own outfit that seems drastically out of place, I know with a curious certainty that I don't belong here. I belong...somewhere else. Somewhen else.

I glance behind me again, down the quiet darkness of the road, and my feet slowly turn me around, directing me back the way I had come. An almost involuntary action that I don't fight. Because at this point, I have nothing left to lose. I can only hope that whatever I find is worth the struggles I sense are waiting for me.

"Here goes nothing," I mutter to myself as my feet start moving. What I'll find down this road is unclear. I only know I'm heading toward some mysterious unknown...fate.



My life, or lack thereof, is a total shit-show at the moment. I am neither here nor there. Stuck somewhere in between life and death. I ramble around this monstrosity of a house with its beautiful wood floors, winding staircase, antique fixtures, and covered furnishings with no real reason for being. Nothing about this place seems familiar, yet here I am. I can't leave the property. Trust me, I've tried. I wander day in and day out because – let's face it – ghost girls don't exactly sleep, hold jobs, or have active social lives. I'm assuming I'm a ghost because...what else could I possibly be?

Walk through walls? Check. Slam random doors? Check. Make lights and other electronics go bat-shit crazy, scaring the crap out of unsuspecting people? Check and check.

I guess I'm just your average, everyday poltergeist. I can manipulate my environment but little else. No one can see me or hear me. I can't touch

anyone either, much to my very real disappointment. It gets lonely being a ghost girl.

My penchant for putting on a show - aka my boredom - has made this place a revolving door for the paranormal community. The Most Haunted Home in the Midwest. Yup. That's right. I turned this otherwise normal home in the middle of Nowhereville, Illinois, into a regular circus sideshow. It's been on the market since the day I appeared, and my performances have scared off every potential buyer or renter that has stepped through those double front doors, with their gorgeous, antique iron scrollwork and frosted glass.

What can I say? I'm a badass. Albeit one that doesn't seem to know much about who she is, where she came from, or what she did that could have resulted in her current predicament.

So what *do* I know? I know that my name is Fate. Ironic, right? How I know that, I can't be sure. Just like I can't be sure how I know that there are three things I miss more than life itself. Yes, I mean that quite literally.

First – coffee. I mean, the sight of it alone practically sends me into an immediate orgasm these days - if ghost girls could have orgasms, that is. Every time a real estate agent sets up for an open house with a pot of the steaming, yummy goodness, my mouth waters, figuratively, of course, because ghost girls do *not* drool.

Second – wine. Something tells me that wine and I used to have an ongoing love-hate relationship. I bet it was my kryptonite. Cheap, expensive, dry, sweet. I don't even care. If I concentrate hard enough, I swear I can taste the bountiful flavor rolling around on my tongue. Again, immediate almost-orgasm.

Which leads me to the third – sex. I know, obvious, right? I'll admit that there have been a few times throughout the years where thrill-seeking couples have broken in and gotten down and dirty right in the front living room or shagged it up in one of the upstairs bedrooms that still has a dusty ass bed... and...I may have stayed to watch with unabashed longing, wishing I could at least touch myself to take care of the ache that seems to be perpetually present.

What? There's nothing wrong with a little voyeurism when your life is no longer yours to live. Instead, you live vicariously through those around you. If there's anything I've learned in my time here, it's that I must have been a very sexual being in my past life as every fiber of my phantom body aches

for the touch of another.

Life – or rather death – just isn't fair, dammit!

Pouting over all of the things I'll never get to experience again is pointless, but what else do I have to do? Dramatically draping my wrist across my forehead, I sip from an imaginary wine glass with the other. Anything to give some depth to my little self-indulgent pity party. Just when I'm really getting into my spectral sobfest, the sound of approaching cars hits my ears. I roll my eyes, cross my arms over my chest like a stubborn toddler, and refuse to give in to my curiosity. Considering the randy locals prefer the dark when they want to sneak in and defile the property, it's either a real estate agent bringing yet another client that will inevitably piss themselves when they get a taste of my renowned paranormal experience, or another group of those pesky ghost hunters that think they can get rid of me. I simply do not like to share what I perceive as my own personal space. I may be lonely, but I'm not stupid. The living do not like to co-exist with the dead, and ain't nobody got time to deal with cleansings or exorcisms to rid the home of my presence. This place is mine, and it's going to stay that way.

The slamming of car doors is my signal that it's time to get off my ass and evaluate my next move. With a huff of annoyance, I lift my head from the covered arm of the chair I'm sprawled across and fling my legs to the ground. How my transparent self doesn't sink right through the furniture or floors is a mystery, but one simply does not look a gift horse in the mouth. As I amble over to the nearest window, I try to remember the last time I felt a plush cushion sinking beneath my weight or the velvety softness of it beneath my fingertips, and I come up empty. Always empty.

Spotting the black convertible Mustang of my nemesis – the current agent who handles the listing for the property – I fake a gag with one finger down my throat. Immature? Maybe. Let's blame it on my rusty social skills considering it's been just me, myself, and I for way too damn long.

She steps out, her long blonde hair pulled back into a sleek ponytail. Black stiletto heels add another four inches to her already tall figure. Her red dress is excessively tight over her slender body, while her fake boobs are almost popping out of the low-cut neckline.

Oh, I'm not judging. Just stating facts. Trust me when I say she's not at all shy about the work she's had done. I can't even begin to count the number of phone conversations I've had to listen to where she gushed about how awesome they looked post-recovery and how she likes to fondle them herself.

Ugh. TMI, am I right?

She and her whole outfit are just a little too inappropriate to be considered professional, but that doesn't matter to Agent Barbie. No, that is not her real name, and no, I've never really cared enough to figure out what it is. Why would I when she'll be just another in a long line of fools that have attempted to sell this property - and failed.

I scan the driveway, trying to seek out the poor souls unlucky enough to stumble into my lair – *insert evil villain laugh here* - but my eyes snag on the logo-covered doors of the two black SUVs parked in the circular drive. The company name stands out in large, white lettering outlined with silver.

V.I.P.S. Valley Investigations & Paranormal Society.

“Oh my ghost! Really?” I groan aloud while also giving in to another eye roll because - ego, much?

These groups always fall into one of two categories. First, the fame whores who want to make a name for themselves at the Most Haunted Home in the Midwest, hoping to earn their own TV show. Like there aren't already a million other YouTube and TikTok users out there looking for their fifteen minutes in the spotlight.

Then there's the second group. The genuine researchers who are trying to discover answers to the unexplainable - whether that means proving the existence of the paranormal or debunking all the reported activity by chalking it up to swamp gas or drafty windows.

My guess is this group is of the former variety. I mean, V.I.P.S.? Really?

I could ignore them and let them think the rumors of paranormal activity are just that - rumors and highly exaggerated, leaving them disappointed and dejected. Or, I could give them the experience of a lifetime. It's been a while since I've put on a good show, and this may be just the distraction I need to avoid tumbling even further into the depths of my despair.

Just add melodramatic to my long list of ghostly sins.

Movement below grabs my attention, and I watch as a man glances toward the window where I'm standing. My breath catches, and a sudden tingle tickles my belly with a strange sense of familiarity. It doesn't make any sense, and unease begins to slither through me. He's tall – well over six feet. His sandy blond hair brushes the collar of his shirt, with a stray piece falling in front of his face. A large, masculine hand comes up to run through the offending strands, pushing them out of the way, then drops to run over his scruffy blond facial hair. His bicep flexes under his tight black t-shirt bearing

the company logo, and his low-slung jeans hug his long, lean legs. He has a sort of Thor thing going on, and my sex-deprived self just wants to get a peek at his - ahem - hammer.

His brows narrow slightly as he stares my way before his attention is dragged to the man walking up to him.

My gaze slides to the new guy, and the tingles I was feeling before turn into a full-blown riot of sensation in my nether region. Pretty sure I'd be soaking my panties if ghost girls could do that sort of thing. Then something else slithers along with the arousal coursing through me. Something that is gut-wrenching and makes me want to wrap my arms around myself in comfort.

Alpha - as I decide to call the new guy - is just as tall as his friend, but where Thor is lean, athletic grace, Alpha is six-feet-plus of utter badass. Broad shoulders nearly stretch his black logo t-shirt to its limit, and tattoos cover muscular arms that flex as they carry two steel gray cases. His jet black hair is cut into a faux hawk that totally suits the whole bad boy vibe he has going on. Aviator sunglasses cover his eyes from view, but the tightness in his mouth is unmistakable even from a distance. My thumb itches to run along his lips soothing the tension there, offering a reassurance only I can give.

Oh my ghost! Where the hell did that thought come from?

The two have a quick conversation I can't make out, which is cut off by the approach of Agent Barbie. She sashays up to the duo, and I fully expect them to ogle her and her fake tatas. What is it about a pair of boobs that reduces most guys to simpering puddles of mush? Men...so predictable.

Much to my surprise, her attempt fails, and after a few brief words from Alpha, Agent Barbie turns and heads toward the front doors. She purposely sways her hips to catch their attention, and I wait for their eyes to snag on her ass. It's an unspoken test. Will they pass, ignoring Agent Barbie's second attempt at seduction, or will they fail like so many others before them? I'm shocked when their gazes turn in sync to the window where I stand, and for a brief moment, I'm frozen. Unable to move or think or even breathe - if my lungs could actually do that sort of thing. Then they turn and head toward the house without another glance, and the moment is over.

The sound of the front door opening barely registers as I'm lost inside my own mind, taking a step back as I try to figure out what the hell just happened. Throughout the years I've been stuck in this afterlife limbo, this is

the closest I've come to feeling alive. Dormant emotions are beginning to resurface along with a strange sense of awareness. I swear my fingertips are tingling with power, and long dead nerve endings are sparking to life. I don't know what's going on, but I'm definitely going to have to figure it out. Being caught unaware is annoying.

A deep and husky voice coming from below pulls me from my introspection.

"Guys. I'm picking up a strong feeling of irritation."

Eyes widening as confusion wars with curiosity, I quickly make my way down the hall to the top of the staircase that descends into the middle of the foyer. My translucent hand grips the beautiful mahogany banister, and I stop myself from taking another step as I stare down at my new visitors.

Agent Barbie has planted herself at the base of the stairs with Alpha and Thor standing off to one side. Three other guys are standing just inside the front doors, their feet surrounded by silver cases. As my gaze scans over the crew, I'm momentarily stunned by all of the eye candy currently taking up space in the foyer. Until this moment, I thought the hot, paranormal researcher was mostly a myth like Big Foot or aliens. Although Zak and Aaron from the GAC could come research me up any time they'd like.

Suddenly, Thor looks up at the spot where I'm standing.

"What is it, Knox?" asks Alpha in a low, rich voice that sends shivers down my spine.

"I don't know. Now I'm feeling curiosity, or maybe confusion." Thor seems to ponder this for a moment, falling silent in a brief pause. "It's hard to tell."

"What do you mean 'it's hard to tell'? What color is the aura?" demands Alpha.

"That's just it. I can't see an aura. It's like I'm experiencing the feelings myself. I've never felt anything like this," muses Thor. "I could swear it's coming from the top of the stairs."

The group turns as one toward the staircase, each of them looking around as though they can find the source of his unexplainable feelings. It's silent as they listen for any sound that could point them in the right direction.

I stand as still as a statue. Afraid that if I move, I'll shatter whatever the hell this bond is with Thor, or Knox, or whoever the hell he is, and I'll go back to being utterly alone. For the first time in too many years, I feel a connection with another being. I can't fuck this up. His eyes, that I can now

discern are a beautiful hazel, seem to stare right into mine.

“Are you picking up any other vibes? Male or female? Young or old?” one of the newcomers asks.

He’s slightly shorter than Alpha and Thor but still taller than average. Same black logo shirt that’s hiding what has to be an impressive chest if the muscular arms are any indication. His dark brown hair is messy like he just rolled out of bed. It’s long enough that my fingers itch to run through the silky strands. His black square glasses are super sexy on him, pushing buttons I wasn’t even aware I had.

Thor looks around and shrugs, his brows furrowed in thought. The guy who I decide to name Sexy Nerd pulls out a gadget from one of the silver cases and attempts to turn it on.

A sense of excitement fills the air as the others all wait expectantly. Well, except for Barbie. She’s checking her phone and twirling her hair around one of her fingers, looking slightly bored by it all.

Sexy Nerd smiles, revealing an adorable pair of dimples, and says, “Maybe this will help. I’ve got the digital EMF Meter set up. Let’s see if it wants to play.”

It? Oh, hell no! I am definitely *not* an it, dammit! I’m five feet, nine inches of curvy, ghostly woman. That’s what the hell I am. Of course, they can’t see me, but that’s beside the point.

“I’m experiencing irritation again. A lot of it. Definitely coming from the direction of the stairs. I’m guessing female if the mood swings are any indication,” mutters Thor.

Well, that’s just demeaning. Though I’m also honest enough with myself that I can acknowledge the validity of that statement, letting it go with a shrug.

Sexy Nerd starts moving around the room with the EMF meter. It’s the tool of choice for most ghost hunters these days. It measures the level of electromagnetic energy in an area, spiking when it gets close to things that give off an electric current. Ghost hunters believe it can prove or disprove the presence of paranormal activity. Assuming the person knows what they’re doing. If the user is standing in the middle of a room, far away from anything electrical, and receives a spike, it could indicate ghostly phenomena as ghosts are supposedly known for emitting their own current. Yeah, this isn’t my first paranormal rodeo.

It stays silent until he gets closer to the bottom of the staircase.

“We’ve got a spike right here – almost five milligauss. Looks like a temperature dip here too. Almost five degrees cooler in seconds.”

His excitement is obvious and has me smiling a bit. Just as he prepares to head up the stairs, Agent Barbie lays a hand on his arm. The smile falls, and I experience a stab of emotions that pass so quickly I can’t even recognize them all. Just as I’m reeling from whatever the hell that was, the EMF meter starts beeping frantically, and Sexy Nerd’s eyebrows furrow deeply. I want nothing more than to kiss him there to smooth out those lines.

What the fuck?

Apparently my libido and I need to have a little sit-me-down. I’m all for sexy times, but this feels like so much more than simple desire. There’s a level of intimacy here I can’t even begin to fathom.

“Come on, guys. Y’all can’t really believe there are like...ghosts living here, right?” she asks with a nervous little laugh at the end. She grabs a chunk of her blonde ponytail and twirls it around the fingers of her left hand, the other still clinging to Sexy Nerd’s arm. The contact is making me feel a little slap happy.

Dammit! What I wouldn’t give for a set of solid hands right about now.

He seems to suddenly realize that she’s touching him and quickly drops his arm before looking to the top of the stairs once again. Obviously reluctant to stop researching the cause of the activity, he turns to Alpha who gives him a simple nod. He shuts off the EMF meter which is still beeping wildly.

“Come on. Let’s get these lease contracts signed, and then I can give y’all the keys to the place...and a personal tour if you’d like,” Agent Barbie offers with a little wink.

She walks over to her bag sitting on the table in the middle of the foyer and pulls out a stack of papers and a pen. With a little come-hither gesture, she motions for Alpha to meet her at the table. He steps up to her right, with Thor moving up to her left. They begin going over the terms, and only then do her words register.

Lease contracts? They’re moving in? Well, fuck me sideways!



My hands land on my hips, and my head falls back with a dramatic sigh that no one can appreciate because no one can hear it. This can't happen. These guys, no matter how drool-worthy, absolutely *cannot* take up residence in my house. I'll be facing months of spirit box sessions, and video cameras always recording, and digital recorders placed in random locations, and...yeah, okay...loads of inevitable sexual frustration.

Dammit!

How did I find myself here? I've spent years in relative peace. Now, in a matter of minutes, I'm witnessing my solitude go up in flames. And not just a cozy little fire that warms you up while you roast marshmallows and sing camp songs. This is a full-on inferno engulfing every last scrap of my sanity. Kumba-fucking-ya!

New voices draw my attention back to the present and the maddening

situation I have found myself in.

“Ouch! What the hell was that for?” says a blond giant near the door, rubbing his shoulder and scowling at the man next to him.

“Come on, dipshit! Let’s grab the rest of the gear,” replies an identical blond giant standing next to him.

These two guys are mirror images of each other. Taller than the other three by at least a couple inches, their shoulders probably struggle to fit through a door frame. I’m honestly astounded by the elasticity of those black logo tees. *Someone should definitely leave the manufacturer some five-star reviews on Amazon.*

They’re both in black jeans that encase their long legs, black boots, and matching aviator sunglasses. Their long hair hangs in luxurious waves past their shoulders, and I feel a twinge of hair envy. Even their full beards match. *Does their underwear match too? Boxers? Maybe boxer briefs?* It seems imperative that I find out.

“Fine. Let’s go, wankstain,” mutters Dipshit.

They turn and head out the door. From the back, the only noticeable distinction between the two would be the tattoos covering opposite arms and hands. Their asses are most certainly identical. I had to double check that little detail - all in the name of research, of course.

As if my overactive imagination needed anymore stimuli, now my mind is swirling with all sorts of naughty thoughts about being the female meat to their twin sandwich. Yup. I’m headed straight down the one way road to Frustration Central. *Ugh! #GhostGirlProblems.*

I plop down on the top step, my elbows finding my knees, and look down on the chaos that was once my peaceful foyer.

“Ok, Fate,” I say out loud, which helps me think. “They’re intrigued now. This damn connection with Thor and that little fiasco with the EMF meter have given them ammunition for their research. They won’t leave.” I let my mind skim over all of my potential plans. “Maybe I’ll just ignore them. Let them think it was all just a fluke. If I can manage to stay far away from Thor, he’ll have to assume it was a fluke or something, right? They’ll get bored and hightail it out of here. It might be a half-assed plan at best, but at this point it’s all I’ve got.”

No one responds, of course, because no one can hear my ramblings.

But is that really what I want? For them to abandon this place and leave me alone. I may appreciate having the space to myself, but the loneliness has

grown to become an insistent, gnawing despondency. For the first time in my recent existence, there's a flicker of hope that I might be able to find some answers to my situation. These guys are key. I can feel it every time one of those damn hints of familiarity brushes against that empty space inside my soul. It would suck them in and keep them if it could, but they bounce right off, leaving me feeling emptier than ever. If I can somehow figure this out, maybe I'll finally get some resolution.

What that means, I'm not sure. Head off into the light? Yes, please. Get sucked down into the fiery depths below? An image suddenly pops into my mind of embers and screams and bleakness, all in terrifyingly vivid detail. My eyes widen, and I swear I can smell wisps of sulfur. Then it's all gone, and I'm left trying to figure out, once again, what the hell just happened.

A girlish giggle draws my focus back to the chaos of my unlife, and I look down to find Barbie packing up her paperwork while stealing glances at Alpha. The other guys have finished unloading the equipment and are surrounded by so many cases there's barely enough floor space to walk.

"Well, you boys are all set. I could give you that tour now if you'd like? Maybe I can come back another night and make you all a welcome home dinner?" she simpers, turning to look at Alpha and not so subtly pushing her chest out.

Something starts to slither through my body as I stand, my hands clenching into fists from the power coming to life inside me. I look down at them, momentarily confused at my body's sudden involuntary responses, but my focus is drawn back to the group below when I hear his voice.

"I don't think that will be necessary, but thank you for getting everything set up here for us," Alpha says, taking a step back.

She smirks. "Oh, it was nothing."

Obviously not put off by his easy dismissal, she steps toward him and lifts her right hand to his chest. She lets it drag down slowly until it stops on the waistband of his jeans. "I'd be happy to give you a...private tour...if you'd prefer?"

Before he can respond, a sudden blinding rage sweeps over me. A red haze covers my vision, and my entire body begins to tremble in response to the overwhelming level of power, the likes of which I've never experienced. I try to calm myself down but have no control over the tide of emotions assaulting me - one of which feels a lot like jealousy.

"Guys. I'm not sure what's happening, but I'm feeling some serious anger

building,” Thor states with a worried look on his face just as all the lights start to flicker wildly. “I can actually feel the fury growing stronger by the second.”

Alpha looks his way, only to swing his gaze back to the blonde leech who has suddenly attached herself to him with both hands on his chest, taking fistfuls of his shirt.

She looks afraid, and that only brings a sinister grin to my face.

Placing my foot on the first step, I start to make my way down the stairs.

“Shit! I can feel it getting closer. Everybody move away from the stairs.”

Thor slowly backs up, attempting to avoid the clutter on the floor around him.

Again with this ‘it’ business. Another rush of frustration and anger floods me.

I take one more ridiculously slow step, wanting to draw it out. For the first time in years, I feel powerful, as though I’m in control of something other than a shitty pity party. I’m in control of my surroundings. Of my own fate. The fear permeating the air makes something inside me come to life. It wants to revel in the chaos I’m creating. Wants to rejoice over the growing panic in the room. I lift my hands, glancing down at the pretty pink sparks of electricity pulsing off my fingertips. That’s new. So is the desperate need for release from this riot of feelings consuming me, which is as intoxicating as it is alarming. I know I should be terrified of what it all means, and a part of me definitely is, but not enough to give a damn at the moment.

As I descend another step, the power leaking from my hands suddenly shoots out. A pair of light bulbs burst inside the light fixtures in the foyer, directly below where I stand. All six people in the foyer drop down, covering their heads at the sudden explosion of noise and glass.

Well, that was...unexpected.

I must have powered up in the poltergeist world because this shit has never happened so effortlessly. I’ve always had to work my ass off to demonstrate my paranormal proclivities. A ghost girl could get used to this.

Alpha jumps up, grabbing Agent Barbie’s arm and tugging her away from the stairs. The action sends another wave of rage crashing over me, and any curiosity I had about my newfound abilities is washed away. In its wake, I feel nothing but the intense desire to make her pay for touching what’s mine. The thought has me pausing momentarily, but the emotions roaring through my body insist that I keep moving - my sudden possessiveness all but forgotten.

The others follow Alpha and rush back toward the door.

The stairs beneath my feet pass one by one, the progression of bursting bulbs following me as I descend. The sound of feminine whimpering brings a manic smile to my face.

I keep moving. Bulbs keep exploding in my wake.

Alpha pushes the now crying agent behind him. “Knox, what do you feel?”

“Still feeling this extreme rage. Maybe some jealousy and satisfaction mixed in. Something set her off, and we need to figure out a way to get her to calm down!”

“*Her?* You’re sure about that now?”

“Definitely a female. She feels threatened. And pissed. Really, really pissed!”

“Macklin. Any ideas?”

I see the thoughtful look on Sexy Nerd’s face just as I reach the bottom of the stairs. A table and a shit load of equipment are all that stand between me and the group of people that have royally destroyed my peace. A wicked smirk still tilts my lips as I tip my head and wait to see what he comes up with before I make another move, my curiosity temporarily getting the upper hand on the plethora of emotions rolling through me.

“I have a theory,” Sexy Nerd, or Macklin, mumbles. Clearly lost in his own musings. “Cole, put your arm around Mandy.”

Alpha’s eyebrows go up questioningly.

“Just...bear with me and let’s see what happens.”

My eyes narrow as I watch Alpha, or Cole, grab Agent Barbie’s hand and pull her alongside him. His left arm wraps protectively around her shoulder, and she buries her tearstained face into his side. His other arm comes up reflexively, wrapping her in an embrace.

I’d like to say that I saw the act for what it was. A way to goad a response. That I am a mature, adult ghost and could ignore the emotions creating a tsunami inside me. I’d like to. Really, I would. But I can’t. Nope. This ghost girl can apparently be just as immature and irrational as any other living, breathing, warm-blooded female on the planet that’s had a run in with the green-eyed monster, otherwise known as jealousy.

A low growl startles me for a second until I realize it’s coming from me.

Huh. That’s interesting.

“What the hell, Macklin?” mutters Knox. “Not a good idea, guys,” he

warns, shaking his head.

Smart guy, that one. They really should listen to him. Especially considering the sheer level of energy coursing through the room. Maybe it's time to throw in something special from my ghostly repertoire.

Doors slam shut throughout the house, and the clatter has everyone looking around, waiting for what will happen next.

"That theory, Macklin. Now," Alpha shouts.

"It's just as I thought. The few times we've been able to get a reaction from the entity were always when Mandy was touching one of us. If I had to guess, this entity really does not take kindly to that."

Oh, just peachy. First, I was an *it*. Now, I'm an *entity*. What's a ghost girl gotta do to get a little respect up in here?

Aretha really had the right idea.

My mind zings back to Macklin's words. Why *don't* I like Agent Barbie touching these guys? I don't know them. I certainly shouldn't feel so possessive of them.

Fuck!

What the hell is happening to me? The panic I've been keeping at bay begins to creep back in. The power, though diminished, is still buzzing at my fingertips.

Just as I'm about to turn around and find a place where I can calm down and work through all of the craziness, I hear Cole hushing Agent Barbie – because no way in hell am I calling her by her real name – and whispering to her just low enough I can't make out the words. Her head tilts up, and she stares into his eyes, his shirt once again clutched between her perfectly manicured fingers. For a split second, I think they're going to kiss and am hit with the strongest sense of *déjà vu*, like I've seen this play out before.

The fire in my veins is instantly reignited, all rational thought disappears, and the growl has returned. All of a sudden, the built-in sound system throughout the house starts blaring a popular pop song.

Barbie screams while the guys all cover their ears. I stand there, with a death glare aimed at the blonde interloper. If looks could kill, she'd be nothing but ash right now. Lucky for her, I don't even have a solid body let alone super-death-powers. But I do have enough energy zipping through me to add a little extra oomph to my usual bag of tricks.

I concentrate on my power. Holding my hands out in front of me, I wave my right hand to the side, and a portion of the silver cases on the floor start to

slide toward the far wall. Doing the opposite with my left hand, the remaining cases slide to the other wall. With each step I take toward the door, I spread the sea of cases.

“Shit!” Cole exclaims over the loud music.

His gaze follows the cases that are seemingly moving by themselves across the beautiful hardwood floor. “Thad. Levi. Get Mandy outside. Now! We’ll follow in a minute.”

Dipshit or Wankstain – not sure which is which – tries to pry Barbie’s fingers from the front of Cole’s shirt. When she’s finally detached, she struggles to stay with Cole and ends up over one of the twin’s shoulders, crying hysterically. I don’t even have time to react to the contact before they rush her outside, shutting the door behind them.

The effect is immediate. The angry haze that has been consuming my vision clears, and the addicting power running through my body slowly diminishes. I’m left standing in the middle of the foyer, shattered glass around my feet, with the music still belting out a last warning that everyone will get what’s coming to them - before suddenly cutting out.

Talk about perfect timing on my part. *Yes! #GhostGirlFTW*

And...silence.

No one makes a move or says a word, too stunned to come up with anything coherent. Or at least that’s my excuse. Not sure what the guys are thinking.

It’s Macklin that breaks the standoff.

“Holy shit! That was epic!”

Cole turns to scowl at him and then faces Knox.

“Knox?”

“Nothing. It’s like all the intense anger and irritation just disappeared. I sense a little bit of confusion, maybe, but that’s it. She’s still really close. Not sure where exactly, but definitely close.”

“Any ideas what the hell that was all about, Mack?” Cole asks.

“For whatever reason, it...” Macklin starts.

Back to *it* now, am I? My fingers spark in response.

“Whoa! She doesn’t like that at all,” Knox states with a light chuckle.

Why is he amused? I’m sure as hell not.

“Um. Ok. Sorry! Uh. For whatever reason, *she...*” he pauses, looking at Knox who surveys the room for a second, gauging my reaction.

Satisfied, I give them two thumbs up. Like they can see it. Which they

definitely can't so I just look ridiculous. *Ugh. #GhostGirlProblems*

Knox nods to Macklin, giving him the all clear. This whole thing is just too weird for words.

"Right. So she definitely has an issue with us being touched. Why that is, I can't say. Maybe it has something to do with why she's stuck here? Some sort of incident from her past that's stirring up all of these feelings. We'll have to dig deeper for answers," Macklin finishes.

"Okay," Cole starts, "let's work on getting everything set up as soon as we can. We need to start documenting our experiences and digging into the history of the house. Mack, walk Mandy's bag out to her and make sure she's ok to drive home. If not, drive her car and I'll have one of the boys follow you."

My temper flares at that, but before it can escalate, Knox cuts in.

"Yeah. She doesn't like that either. Apparently it's more than just the touching she has an issue with. How about we get Mandy a taxi if she's still shaken up?" Then he proceeds to look around as if he's waiting for my approval.

A warmth spreads through me at his words. For the first time in too long, I can communicate with someone else, even if it's indirectly. His thoughtfulness causes a pang in the region where my heart would be, if ghost girls had beating hearts that is, and a small smile finds my lips.

"Uh. Yeah. Okay. I think she likes that idea," he says, then clears his throat.

No doubt he's feeling all of these mushy feelings coursing through me and doesn't have any idea what they're about. I suppose that's for the best. Because right now, I don't have any idea either.

3. KNOX

EMPATHY FACT #1:

HARD ONS SHOULD NOT BE A
PROBLEM IN THIS LINE OF
WORK. EVER.

To say tonight was a clusterfuck is an understatement. I'm exhausted, both mentally and physically. After the chaos of earlier, there is nothing I need more than the drink in my hand and the surprisingly comfortable leather seat under my ass. We're all trying to settle down now that the house is somewhat in order – the broken glass cleaned up, furniture uncovered, and the bedrooms situated enough for one night.

Macklin was able to get a fire started in the large, ornate fireplace in the study, and its crackling warmth is enough to calm even the most restless soul. The room is massive, with bookshelves on the far wall, a woven rug that covers a majority of the dark wooden floor, and leather sofas that are arranged in a U-shape in the center of the room facing the large window seat overlooking the front lawn and circular drive. Most of our equipment is still sitting just outside the study door. Untouched after being moved by an unseen

hand.

Once the glass stopped exploding, slamming doors quieted, and the music went silent, it was as if she just vanished. The onslaught of emotions diminished with the distance, and I was left feeling oddly...hollow. It may have been mere moments out of this long life I've lived, but the connection was more powerful than any I had encountered before. It was as if I experienced every nuance of what she felt, when she felt it.

Most don't understand my unique abilities. They don't believe that I can see the aura of those around me, both the living and the dead still on this plane. They can't fathom that I hold the power to see the essence of who a person or spirit is on the inside. Whether that's because they're naturally skeptical or they don't want to accept the fact that I may be able to see the real person beneath all the lies, I can't be sure.

A person's aura is like a misty haze that surrounds their body, changing with their emotions, but also with a core of stable color based mostly on their inner self. A yellow haze, for instance, usually represents happiness or a friendly nature. Red can signify anger or strength. Green is health or jealousy. Every color has its own meaning, and I use that to my advantage when meeting new people.

She didn't have an aura, unlike every other entity I've encountered. The spirit that seems to reside in this house just exists, and I can feel her in the very center of my soul.

I take another drink of the dark amber liquid, the ice cubes clanking against the glass. The warmth flows through me and smooths out the concern that wants to rise again.

Who is she? Why is she here? What is she doing to me?

Cole walks in with a tower of pizzas that he unceremoniously drops onto the coffee table. Thad follows with a stack of paper plates and napkins, and his twin, Levi, with the bottle of Jack I helped myself to earlier.

"Dig in," Cole says. "Then we can work through the plan for setting up our gear and where we want to begin."

"Is no one going to ask the obvious question here?" Levi mumbles around a mouthful of pizza. "What the fuck was all that earlier?"

Most people have trouble telling the twins apart even though they tattooed opposite sides of their bodies. I don't have that issue, of course. Their auras are enough for me to differentiate between the two.

"The entity..." Macklin pauses as if he's waiting for her to smite him

where he sits. “Uh...sorry...the *female spirit*...seems to be more powerful than anything we have previously come up against. Shattering light bulbs and slamming doors are one thing. Moving multiple cases and turning on a sound system with a totally relevant song is another. It should be interesting to see if she can manifest in other ways,” Macklin responds excitedly.

Leave it to our resident nerd to get excited about shattered glass and Taylor Swift.

“Mack,” Cole starts, and I already know what he’s going to ask before the words leave his mouth. “Do you think she could be the reason we were drawn here?”

The five of us are...different. Unusual in ways the world would deem impossible. We have no history. We were never born. We have no families. Don’t know our last names, if we even have any. We’ve lived for fifty years but don’t age.

Waking up one day under a bridge in Austin, TX with no idea who I was or what had happened to me, I had this overwhelming sense that I needed to find something. I journeyed across the country, following an unseen tether that constantly tugged at my soul.

In a crowded diner outside of Chattanooga, TN, I found Macklin. He had woken up in New York City and, like me, couldn’t resist the pull to hunt for something unknown. The second he pushed open the glass door of the diner, two missing pieces in the puzzle of our lives clicked into place. His aura was a bright blue, with a haze of yellow around it - telling me he was loyal, friendly, and held an intelligence that went beyond what was normal. This deep sense of brotherhood formed, and we spent hours talking about our journeys.

But the tug didn’t disappear. It was still there, insistent that we keep searching, but for what, neither of us knew.

We used his innate knowledge of anything and everything, a gift that is as useful as it is annoying, to our advantage. We scouted out routes and potential locations as we set off to follow our instincts.

Together, we found the twins in Chicago a couple months later. They hadn’t wandered like we had. Instead, they’d ignored the pull, following their guts, and stayed put, which is probably a good thing where they’re concerned. Their tendency to wreak havoc has caused us a number of close encounters with law enforcement throughout the years.

Where Thad’s aura was a deep red, tinged with a blackness in the middle,

telling me he was strong and passionate with a hint of darkness somehow mixed in, Levi's was a surprising indigo, slightly white at the center, an indication he was intuitive and benevolent, with a level of purity mixed in. Which all made sense once we got to understand them and their powers.

Not long after they came into consciousness, they had a run in with an aggressive spirit. When one of them attempted to bitch slap the thing, something only Thad or Levi would think was a good idea, they discovered they could force the spirit to cross over into whichever realm they were destined for. Seeing an opportunity, they quickly began offering their ghost exterminating services to those wanting or needing to get rid of undesirable guests. Their ingenuity and enterprising spirit, which we've come to understand is their default way of thinking, was much appreciated as they were able to fund our continued search while we criss-crossed the country. That was the start of our paranormal team and our cover for our supernatural abilities that would later become known as Valley Investigations & Paranormal Society.

Our rag tag group scoured locations for close to six months before we found Cole outside a poorly lit bar in Phoenix, Arizona. He was drunk, his clothes a tattered, bloody mess. His knuckles were shredded and bruised, obvious signs he had been in a fight. The twins managed to get him back to our hotel, where we forced him to sleep off the alcohol. When he came to, he was confused and angry with a cloud of unexplainable depression drowning him in his own misery. It all matched his aura which was a dark gray, with swirls of angry red. Determined to keep the urge to hunt buried under liquor and fighting, it had taken us several weeks to convince him to sober up and join us.

Even though we were no longer being pulled toward the unknown – the puzzle pieces all in their rightful places - there was still this sense of something missing. Something that would keep the puzzle from breaking apart ever again. Forty years went by until one day, the tug was back. The pull was diluted, different from the others, but persistent nonetheless.

After years of searching, we may have just found our glue.

“She *could* be the reason we were drawn here,” Macklin muses, his thoughts mirroring mine and drawing me back to the present. “I’ll start researching the estate as well as the surrounding areas tomorrow and see what I can come up with.”

“Make sure you tell the twins where you’d like to see the video and

infrared cameras set up,” Cole states. “I want answers, so let’s make sure we document and log anything that could help us solve this mystery.”

I take another large swig from my glass. It’s coming. I can feel it. The question I don’t have any answers to. Uncertainty has my stomach in a vise grip, and I’m wondering if another glass of Jack will help or hinder the situation.

“Knox,” he says, eyeing me like he knows where my mind has gone. He probably does. He always seems to. “Tell us about what you experienced earlier. You said there was no aura. Explain.”

Jackass. He knew if he asked me, I’d skirt around the question with half answers and small truths. Instead, he simply demanded I explain. An innate part of me is unable to deny the command. Sometimes his power sucks ass.

“It started outside,” I begin, remembering the unnerving sensation that inundated me as I stood in the driveway. “All of a sudden, I was hit with this intense flood of emotions. It was live action, as if I was experiencing them as they were happening. And not just a general sense of the emotion. It was the real deal. Like they were my own.”

“And this has never happened before, right?” he asks, already knowing the answer but wanting me to acknowledge it.

“Never. Emotions are like rain. Normally, I have a figurative umbrella which shelters me from getting drenched. The rain could be pouring down, but it flows right off that layer of protection. I know the rain is there. I can see it. Hear it. Feel the pressure of it somewhat, but I remain mostly unaffected. With her, it’s like stepping straight out into the downpour without an umbrella. The rain drenches me in seconds. Invades every sense, leaving me vulnerable. And even when it’s dried and gone, I can still feel the aftermath throughout my body.”

“Damn. That’s deep, bro,” Thad snarks from his seat on the sofa next to his twin.

“Shut the fuck up, Thad.”

“Alright. That’s enough,” Cole commands. “We need to figure out what’s happening here and what this all means.”

“This is definitely an intelligent haunting, not a residual one,” Macklin states as he grabs his own slice of pizza. “She’s responding to our actions directly, not just reenacting her last moments over and over again. Her level of power is astounding.”

“Bro, you sound way too excited about that,” Levi mutters as he tips back

his glass and downs his Jack, which he immediately refills.

“Of course he does. Dude practically creams his pants when he’s got a new mystery to solve,” Thad chuckles.

“For fuck’s sake, you two. Knock that shit off,” Cole orders. He’s the only one the twins will listen to, with or without his power. He has this domineering quality to his personality and naturally gravitated toward the leadership position once he pulled himself out from the bottom of the bottle. “We’ve got a lot of work to get done, and something tells me this could be it. This could be where we finally get some answers. Knox, can you still feel her?”

I finish off my glass and hold it out for Levi to refill while I expand my sense of the room and beyond. Instantly, I feel her. This warm presence that’s surprisingly stronger than it was before. Her emotions swarm my own, and it feels like coming home, a thought that alarms me on a primitive level. It takes me a second to gather myself enough to describe what I’m experiencing.

“She’s just as confused as we are, and that seems to irritate her. But she’s excited too. She can sense that I’m linked to her,” I murmur, lost in my own thoughts and wondering why this all feels so damn familiar.

Her nearness puts me suddenly on alert, as if our conversation has summoned her. Curiosity, annoyance, and something else I can’t quite pin down swirl through me - each battling to be the victor of some emotional war.

How the hell do women handle this shit? Emotional roller coaster, my ass. It’s more like an emotional tsunami.

“Knox, what is it?” Cole demands.

“She’s here,” I reply quietly, “and she’s close.”

“Mack,” Cole snaps, “get an EMF meter in here now, along with a digital recorder.”

Macklin jumps off the sofa and rushes into the foyer, the opening and closing of cases accompanied by mumbled curses as he’s trying to find what he’s looking for. The rest of us remain silent - not wanting to scare her off.

Her amusement catches me off guard. As does her level of satisfaction – which I’m sure stems from the fact that she can get a rise out of us simply by being in the room. I put a stop to the smile that’s tempting my lips as her emotions mingle with my own. It’s becoming harder to distinguish the two.

Then I feel it. That unnamed emotion from earlier.

Attraction.

She knows I'm tuned into her, and she likes it. Suddenly, it feels like she's right in front of me. Like if I reached out, I could touch her. A wave of longing that is not my own assaults me. Not just lust or desire, but this deep need to connect to another person. To touch and be touched. I'm practically frozen in place, my knees spread wide as I lounge on the sofa. My arm is slung over the side with the glass of Jack in my right hand. I tilt my chin up slightly, as if I can look her right in the eyes.

"Knox? What's happening?" Cole asks from the sofa across from me, but I don't look his way.

"She's right here," is all I manage to say.

There's suddenly rustling around the room. People moving and shuffling about, but I don't see any of them. My focus is on the space in front of me – on the woman who has captured my complete attention when I can't even see her. A hint of vanilla and cinnamon settles low in my belly, stirring an arousal I wasn't expecting.

A tingling starts on my left cheek, trailing down my chin and over the front of my throat. I swallow reflexively. It continues across my collar bone and over my left shoulder before flowing down my arm and pausing slightly on my inner elbow, swirling around in a small circle - which I find both playful and sexy as hell. It moves down my left forearm to my hand that is resting on my left thigh.

My gaze follows the movement as I let her explore, because that's what this is. An exploration. Her reaching out to someone on the most physical level she's capable of and I'll be damned if I don't like it and want more. My jaw clenches as I struggle to get a handle on my desire. Thank fuck for my jeans which are hiding the evidence of just how excited she's got me.

"Dude. What's going on over there? You look like you're a little tense," Levi questions.

"Bro, from the looks of things, bet those jeans are becoming damn uncomfortable," Thad jokes.

So much for hiding anything.

The touch that had paused on my hand at Levi's words starts up again. Whispering over my knuckles and down to my fingertips where she stops. My hand is pretty damn close to my cock, and I'm slightly ashamed to admit that I want nothing more than for her to explore that area a little further.

I look up and stare into the nothingness in front of me, and whatever she sees when she looks at me must give her the answer she needs. I release the

breath I wasn't even aware I'd been holding as the tingles move up my inner thigh and right over my erection, lingering there. Even over my jeans it feels as though small bursts of current are being sent straight to my dick, and I'm dangerously close to embarrassing myself right in front of my brothers.

"Fuck!" I moan out, dropping my head onto the back of the sofa. Her touch ghosts up and down over my shaft, and it takes all of my self-control to not buck my hips up into the invisible hand that I can all but see.

This is definitely a first for me. A fully clothed hand job given by an invisible woman. The guys will never let me live this down.

Right as I sense her amusement that is heavily laced with a desire of her own, a blast of those damn tingles courses through my dick, down and around my balls, and doesn't let up. My hips jerk, my body taking over, while my left hand grabs hold of the cushion to give me leverage. I curse and groan loudly as I come – unable to stop myself.

The tingles slowly begin to fade away as my body recovers from one of the hottest – and fastest - damn orgasms of my life. I'm left breathing like I just ran a marathon, staring up at the ceiling wondering what in the actual hell just happened.

"I feel like I need a cigarette after watching that little show," muses Levi.

Raising my head, I glance around the room, seeing all of my brothers standing in a loose semi-circle around the coffee table in front of me.

"Can she do me next?" Thad snickers.

Only a few seconds pass before his whole body suddenly jolts, followed by a bellowed, "Fucking hell, woman! You do *not* zap a man's junk like that. I want the good shit Knox got."

The rest of the guys chuckle as he rubs his hand over his scorched crotch.

"She's highly amused right now," I manage through my own laughter. I can practically feel her grinning in satisfaction.

"A woman with a dark sense of humor. I like it," Levi proclaims.

Followed by Thad's barely contained, "That's so fucking hot!"

Bringing the glass of Jack up to my lips, I notice my hand shaking ever so slightly. Quickly, I finish off the drink, needing the alcohol to calm my rioting system. I'm relaxed yet wound tight at the same time. I'm not sure what to make of our ghostly woman or the fact that it seems I'm becoming as possessive of her as she is of us.

Our ghostly woman, Knox? Really?

"You care to explain what the hell just happened?" Cole asks, his raised

eyebrow the only indication he's not only interested but also amused, which is a rarity for him.

"Thought that was already evident?" I smirk lazily, knowing my non-answer is going to bug the shit out of him until he demands that I give him the details.

It's then I notice the guys all have a piece of equipment aimed my way. So that's what all the commotion was. Macklin has the EMF meter. Cole with the digital voice recorder. Levi has a thermal imaging camera, and Thad has a video camera.

Just fucking fantastic. This moment will be replayed and re-lived just to torment me for years to come.

"I've got to say," Mack starts, "that was one hell of a show of power. She drained every single one of our batteries. And she's got control too."

"I would agree with that statement. Her control was phenomenal," I respond, sending the twins into simultaneous groans of envy.

"Knox, what did you feel?" Cole asks, a hint of his power in the question.

I release a long sigh.

"She's lonely. Almost desperately so. She knew I could see her, figuratively, of course, and took advantage of the unique connection we seem to have. It was like..." I trail off, trying to come up with the words to describe the feeling of her ghostly hand on me in words that won't make me sound as desperate for a repeat as I am. "Like all of her desire and need coalesced into this electrifying sensation, but there was no pain. Just really, really intense pleasure. I couldn't stop my body from reacting. It's like it recognized the feeling and welcomed it."

That last part is what worries me the most.

"Now I need to get cleaned up."

I feel her presence slowly fade away, satisfaction and a hint of sadness both trailing in her wake.

"She's gone," I murmur.

Her departure leaves me with an emptiness that doesn't make sense. A lingering hint of vanilla and cinnamon remains, reminding me of my favorite snickerdoodle cookies, stirring up a longing somewhere deep inside me. I just want to eat her up. Which is beyond weird since she's a fucking ghost.

"We should probably all head to bed and get some rest. Something tells me we'll need to stay sharp around here," Macklin suggests.

"Agreed," Cole mutters. "Head to bed. That's an order. We'll figure out

the rest in the morning after a good night's sleep.”

The chill in the night air has me slowly coming awake, and for a second, I can't remember where I am. After years of traveling and not having a home base, places start to blur together.

I'm in a fairly comfortable bed. Sheets and comforter must have been kicked off at some point as they're tangled around my feet. I manage to open my eyes, though my body protests. Lying on my right side, I'm facing the only window in the room - which I confirm is closed - and can just make out the leaves from the ivy plant growing around the outside window.

That's right. Illinois. Haunted house. Coming in my pants. A ghost who is quickly taking over most of my thoughts. Good times.

It's 3:15 in the morning, and the illumination from the alarm app on my phone is the only light in the room. *What in the hell woke me up?* I close my eyes, roll over, and get comfortable, fully intending to go back to sleep.

The faintest shift of air in front of my face has my eyes flying open this time. For a moment, I'm frozen - my body refusing to move. I force my heart rate to slow down and my breathing to calm, even as panic grips me.

Because a few inches from my face, she sleeps. A slender nose, turned up just slightly at the tip. Her almond-shaped eyes are closed with long lashes brushing her transparent cheeks. Her lips are large and full, completely kissable, though they're relaxed in sleep. With one arm bent under her head, the other is stretched out and halfway through my body.

I've found my wake up call.

Trying not to make a sound, I take in the rest of our little ghost, as there's no doubt that this is she. I can sense her somewhere deep inside of me. Something urging me to close the gap between us.

Her long hair is in messy waves, flowing over her shoulder and spread out on the pillow behind her, the exact color lost in shades of darkness. She's wearing a t-shirt with short shorts, but the simplicity of that does nothing to cool my rush of desire. This time I can't even blame it on her. I feel nothing from her but a sense of peace as she sleeps, unaware of my inspection.

I slowly lift my right hand, wanting to know if I can touch her. Feel her. Is she responsible for the sudden drop in temperature, as ghosts have been known to be? Is she made up of mist or just shadow and light?

Just before my fingers brush over her arm, her eyes open. I can't discern the color, as transparency doesn't allow that, but they're strangely beautiful

in a haunting sort of way. She starts to pull her arm back, her gaze catching on my hand frozen in midair. Her eyes fly to mine, and I watch as they widen in surprise. Her lips part, and I should be ashamed of all of the ways my brain tells me I could put those pouty lips to use...but I'm not. Not one fucking bit. Because she wants it too.

She quickly shoots up to her knees, and I rush to follow, freezing when we both find ourselves kneeling on the bed, facing each other. I tower over her by at least a few inches. The fact that I can see the outline of the door through her hazy form is a little disconcerting, but now I've got a clear view of her spectacular ghostly body. My eyes roam. From the hair that lays in sexy waves down to the middle of her back, to the short shorts that stop at the bottom of her ass cheeks. Her t-shirt is tight, hugging ethereal curves that are starting to make morning wood become a reality, definitely something I never thought would be an issue in this line of work.

She's younger than I would have expected. Maybe mid-twenties. The slogan across her shirt reads *#GhostGirlProblems*, and I can't stop the tilt of my lips at her apparent sense of humor. Who is this delicious anomaly?

A small pang of sadness hits me when I realize that whoever she once was, those days have passed. She won't get to leave this place unless it's to find peace on the other side and will never get to experience the life she could have had.

She tilts her head as though she senses the sudden shift of my thoughts. She's nervous and unsure, but I can also sense her surprise and a heavy dose of anticipation.

"I'm Knox," I whisper, not wanting to startle her.

Her lips move, but I hear nothing.

"Wait. I can't hear you. Say it again, slower."

I watch those luscious lips intently as they form what must be her name.

"One more time."

I receive a quick flash of frustration, but she tries again.

"Fay?"

She shakes her head and rolls her eyes. The irritation level in the room isn't the only thing skyrocketing; my dick is rising with every movement of her perfect fucking mouth.

I watch as she tries one more time, putting so much emphasis on the last part that my face is hit with a blast of cold air.

"Did you just ghost spit on me?" I ask with obvious amusement.

Her eyes widen, and she throws her head back in soundless laughter. I desperately wish I could hear every noise this gorgeous creature makes.

Once her laughter stops, she starts to do something with her hands. Is she... signing?

I bring my hand up to run through my bed tousled hair because...shit! I don't know what the hell she's trying to tell me. I could yell for Macklin, but a part of me doesn't want to have to share her with someone else - even one of my brothers - when I've just found her.

"I don't know sign language."

Her hands drop to her sides, and she just glares at me like this is all my fault. With another roll of her eyes, she uses both hands, maneuvering them until they're in the shape of a letter.

"F. Got it!"

Her hands come back up in an awkwardly shaped A. Then a T. Then with one hand in the shape of some sort of squared-shaped C, she holds up one finger from the other hand in the middle forming an E.

"Fate?" I ask, thinking that there's no way her name is a coincidence.

She nods enthusiastically, a beautiful smile appearing on her face.

"What are you doing here, Fate?"

She simply shrugs, shaking her head. The smile disappears, and wisps of sadness filter through our connection. So she doesn't know much about her own situation either. Interesting.

"Is anyone here with you?"

Another shake of her head, along with a wave of total sorrow that damn near has me grimacing from its intensity.

"Maybe there's something my brothers and I could do to help you. Would you like that?"

Again, more enthusiastic nodding.

"Let's go see if the guys..." But I'm cut off by the bedroom door slamming open.

Suddenly, she disappears, leaving nothing but a trace of her scent behind.

"Dammit, Cole!" I growl. "She was right here in front of me."

"What the fuck do you mean, she was right in front of you?" he snaps back.

"I could see her. She was so fucking close. What the fuck, man?"

"Well, shit! The EMF meter outside your door started lighting up and beeping wildly, so Macklin thought we should check on you."

It's only then I notice Macklin behind him, shouldering his way into my room.

"Did she do anything to you? What did she look like? Did you talk to her? Why is she here?" His barrage of questions comes faster than I can even keep up with, and I run my hand through my hair, tamping down on my irritation born of disappointment from her disappearance.

"She didn't do anything. She was...stunning. Much younger than I expected. But when I asked her name, she had no voice. She literally signed the letters of her name. Which is Fate – honest to God. And if that's not intriguing enough, get this. She has no idea why she's here."

"That can't be a coincidence," Macklin remarks.

"No. I'm pretty sure it's not. I was just getting ready to lead her to all of you since she said she'd like our help, but then asshole over there had to scare her off."

Cole looks slightly chagrined at his rookie mistake, but rather than apologize, he immediately orders, "Let's go get some of our equipment and scout the room. See if we can find anything unusual. Do you still sense her?"

I take a moment and reach my senses out to her. I'm still on my knees in the middle of the bed, surrounded by her scent and the memory of her smile. She's no longer close by, but I'm slightly relieved when I feel that she's just as disappointed as I am. When I lift my hand to push hair out of my face, I notice something on the inside of my left wrist. It's a solid line broken only by two small dots in the center. A tattoo that I most certainly didn't have just moments ago.

"What the fuck?" I ask no one in particular, staring at the offending appendage like it can give me an explanation.

"What is it?" Macklin strides over, grabbing my left hand and pulling it toward him. "When did you get a new tattoo?"

"I didn't. This wasn't here before."

"She marked you?" Cole exclaims.

"I'm not sure what this is or who did it, but there's only one person who might be able to give us some answers," I respond thoughtfully. "Now we just have to convince her to show herself again."

"We'll need to find a way to communicate with her since she won't be able to just answer the questions outright. Maybe we keep it simple for this first attempt. A yes or no interrogation," Macklin rambles, already creating a list of questions in his head for the lovely little ghost.

“What, Mack, no Ouija board?”

“Hardy har har. Aren’t you hilarious,” he mutters, rolling his eyes. Then he yawns. “I’m a tech genius, Knox. Not a teenage girl. I’ll figure something out.”

“Okay. We all need some sleep if we’re going to draw her out again. I want everyone ready and alert at all times,” Cole demands.

“You got it, boss.” What I don’t say is that my soul is already restless, wanting to reestablish the connection with her. The tug I felt earlier has nothing on the deep-seated need to see her again that courses through my veins like an unrelenting wildfire. Hot and dangerous. Ready to consume me if I’m not careful.

What the fuck has she done to me?



Figures. You sleep with a guy one time, and he gets all possessive and shit, marking his territory. Want to know the real kicker? We didn't even have sex! No orgasms for this ghost girl. What the hell? Come on, universe...can't a ghost girl get some action? I've got to say, I feel a little cheated. I mean, he got an orgasm thanks to my generosity. It's only fair that he share the love, right? Sharing is caring after all.

The dark line broken by two small dots in the center is staring at me from my left bicep. This strange voodoo stuff has me all sorts of weirded out. My fingers trace over the line again and again as if it can tell me how it got there. Who knew ghost girls could get tattoos? I sure as hell didn't, and something tells me this one isn't your average ink. *More mysteries to solve. Fantastic.*

With my finger still trailing over the heavy black line, I'm suddenly hit with a sensation I barely recognize. Skin on skin contact. Touching my other

hand, I hope for a miracle but sadly feel nothing. Yet when I touch the tattoo again, I *feel* it. It's a warmth where there was only coldness for so long. It's the most amazing feeling ever. Maybe this tattoo isn't so bad after all. I may not know what's happening to me, but it's about time I get some perks.

When I cozied up next to Knox, I hadn't intended on falling asleep. Honestly, I didn't even know I could. I just wanted to be close to him, this man who's the first to sense more than my mere haunted existence, the first to sense *me* in over ten years. *Huh, ten years. How do I suddenly know that when time has always been an abstract concept for me?* We have a connection, him and me. He gets me, which I know, I know, sounds like some cheesy rom-com cliché, but this is the real deal. He knows what I'm feeling almost before I do. And on some strange level, I get him too. A soul-deep familiarity touches the very core of my being every time he's near.

As I lounge on the covered, antique Chesterfield settee in my little attic hideaway, I wonder for the umpteenth time what it is about these guys that calls to me. Hundreds of people have passed through this house, and I haven't spared them so much as a second glance. These guys though. There's just something about them. As if they're my first drink of water after being stranded in the desert...and no way am I going to share.

Then why the hell are you sitting up here when you should be down there? a little voice in my head asks. Honestly, I'm not sure how to answer that. Being near them soothes my soul, but it also freaks me the fuck out. These dueling emotions of want and wariness are driving me a little crazy, to be honest.

Just as I'm really getting introspective, the tattoo on my arm starts to burn, then itch. What the fuck? Did he give me some weird STD? Though I guess it couldn't be an STD because again - no sex. Maybe GTD – ghostly transmitted disease? Ew!

My body goes hazy, or at least, hazier than usual, and I feel like I'm being sucked into a vortex. The next thing I know, I'm standing in the middle of the coffee table in the study, staring right into Knox's beautiful hazel eyes. He doesn't seem to see me at the moment, which I'm slightly grateful for considering he isn't alone. The other four are with him, and that's just a tad bit intimidating.

He's rubbing his wrist like crazy, and I notice a dark line that looks suspiciously like mine. Oh! Matching couple's tattoos. Isn't that sweet? I mean, a little premature considering we just met, but hey...ghost girls can't be

picky, right?

Then I remember my tattoo burning like someone was trying to scrub it off with sandpaper. Coincidence? I think not.

Wait a damn minute! Is this some sort of ghostly summoning device? Can he force me to appear with a quick touch of his tattoo? Is that what his hand was doing when I woke up next to him? Here I was thinking he was trying to cop a feel, which I totally would've been okay with, but *this*? Oh hell no! I definitely didn't agree to this shit, and he's going to need to reverse it. *Now*.

I take a step out of the coffee table, because that's just weird, throw my hands on my hips, and take in the room around me. The study has always been one of my favorite places in the house, with its window seat where I could watch the living world go by. Now, it's even more homey. The covers are off the furniture, and a small fire is lighting up the room, plus the amount of eye candy doesn't hurt either.

The clock on the wall shows that it's barely past five in the morning. I do a quick scan over the guys, noting early mornings don't look bad on any of them. Each is holding a mug, and I'm hella pissed that they get to enjoy coffee when I'm stuck here in the ether with nothing but some weird ghostly voodoo on my arm.

"Here we go again, guys," I hear Knox murmur.

Oh yeah. He knows I'm pissed off. See? He gets me.

"Let me guess, the temperamental little ghost is gracing us with her presence?" questions the one with black hair and ice blue eyes - Cole, if I remember correctly.

He's dressed all in black again, but damn does he make monochrome look good.

"Can you see if you can get her to appear for all of us? It's time we get some answers."

What is his problem, anyway? If he's not making demands, he's asking questions. Demands, questions, more demands. Is he conversationally illiterate or something? Are those the only two forms of speech he's capable of?

When I stop staring at those pretty blues, because at least those eyes make up for his serious personality flaws, I realize everyone is quiet and looking around the room.

"All right, guys. I know you can't hear a damn thing I'm saying, but we need to get a few things straight here." I pause and take a deep breath, ready

to go into a rant that will ultimately lead nowhere since, you know, invisibility is kind of my thing.

“Can anyone feel anything?” Macklin interrupts. “The EMF meter is showing some significant spikes and a temperature drop, but are there any physical manifestations?”

I can tell from the look on his face that this guy gets super excited about his research. His hair is still tousled, and his button-down baby blue dress shirt is misbuttoned, with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He’s an adorably hunky mess - from his glasses down to his bare feet. I didn’t know forearms could entice, but watching his muscles flex as he messes with his gadgets is seriously doing something for me.

“Come on! Seriously?” Knox asks the room, his arms thrown in the air like he’s exasperated with me. “Your sex drive is higher than the twins’, and that’s damn near impossible.”

Thank fuck they can’t see me because my blush has probably got me as red as a tomato. One word. Horny. I just can’t seem to help myself around these guys.

“Our ghost woman is a little dirty, is she?” quips one of the twins.

“I can make her a little dirtier,” offers the other.

Oh yeah. These two are trouble with their matching white tees and jeans that fit just a little too well. The three of us together...

“For fuck’s sake. We’re never going to get anything accomplished here. Fate’s as easily distracted as they are,” mutters Knox.

I turn to glare in his direction. It’s not nearly as effective as I’d like considering he can’t see me, which pisses me off more.

“Fine. You want to get something accomplished? Then hell, let’s get something accomplished,” I sneer, really starting to get into this. I’m pacing in front of the window seat now, and I swear, if I could crack my knuckles, I sure as hell would. Arms start flailing around, hands gesturing wildly, let the rant begin.

“I’m here, living my best ghost girl life until the five of you come along and totally destroy my peace and quiet. Then you,” I point directly at Knox, “form some sort of connection with me - *without* my permission, I might add. Make me feel like I’m not alone for the first time in way too long. And when I come down later to find you, you’re lounging on the sofa looking all delectable and shit. How the hell am I supposed to pass that up? So what do I do? I give you an orgasm knowing damn well I won’t get one in return, but

I'm generous like that. It was basically torture. You get the happy ending, and I get zilch. But do you give that a second thought? No. Then I accidentally fall asleep in your bed because I can't help but be near you, and when I wake up, you can actually see me..." My voice trails off, though that's lost on everyone but me.

Pausing just long enough to relive that moment, I continue on, softer now. "You can't even begin to imagine what that felt like. To be seen. For the first time in years, I felt like I was alive again."

I stop for a second, turning to stare out the window, trying to get a handle on my emotions. If I could cry, tears would be streaming down my cheeks. But I can't, so I stand there and let the emotions roll through me. The room is silent, but they're probably just waiting for Knox to give them the play-by-play. I take a deep breath and exhale. Then I do it again. I glance down and notice the tattoo, and suddenly I remember what pissed me off in the first place.

I spin around, pointing right at the dark line on my arm.

"And then I see *this*. What the fuck? You put some sort of goddamn summoning device on me? What am I? Some sort of suped up science experiment to you? Think you can play around with me and make me appear at your beck and call? Well, I've got news for you. I don't jump for anyone. I'm my own damn woman, and you *will* reverse whatever the hell this is right the fuck now! Do you hear me?"

By this point my chest is heaving with anger, and I've managed to reappear right in front of Knox. I'm staring at him with my finger damn near poking through his chest, our noses just an inch apart.

And he's staring right back with wide eyes.

I risk a glance around the room, suddenly realizing I'm the center of attention.

They. Can. All. See. Me.

Fuck!

My own eyes widen, and my mouth opens, but I close it quickly, not knowing what to do or say. My hand drops to my side, and I do a quick scan to make sure I'm not standing here naked. What can I say? Attire or lack thereof isn't always a huge priority when one is invisible. Luckily, I'm in a pair of skinny jeans and another white slogan t-shirt. This one says *Ghost Girls Don't Get Mad. They Get Even*.

One of the few perks of my current situation. I can manifest whatever

clothing I want. It's pretty cool, actually, but even that lost its excitement years ago.

They're all still staring at me, so I take a small step back and do something completely embarrassing.

"Um...hi!" I say and give an awkward little wave. Like I'm a damn beauty queen in some sort of fucking pageant. I grimace slightly.

Quite the first impression, Fate.

And cue eye roll because I'm just hopeless. Socially inept. Eh, solitude does strange things to people.

Knox is the first to break the silence. He shoves his hands into the back pockets of his blue jeans, the move stretching his black long-sleeved shirt tight across his chest. And what a nice chest it is too. I kind of want to run my hands down it to feel up the eight pack I know is also hiding there after last night.

"Focus, little ghost," he murmurs, a smirk tilting those full lips of his.

This time, all the guys chuckle because...they can see me, and they just watched me eye fuck Knox. Fabulous. All of them except Cole, that is. What's his malfunction anyways? Do I even care?

"Brothers, this is Fate. Fate, my brothers," Knox says as he begins to point to each one. "This fucker to my right is Cole. Self-proclaimed leader of our merry band of misfits."

Cole nods his head, and I do another awkward hand wave because what else can I do?

"This hot mess to my left is Macklin, resident genius."

"Hello! We have so many questions for you. Like how long have you..."

"Dude, we're not going there yet. Hold your damn horses," Knox mutters.

"Sorry," Macklin apologizes, an adorable blush staining his cheeks.

"Nice to meet you," I sound out slowly, hoping he can read my lips and understand what I'm saying. I'm graced with a small smile in return.

"And finally those two numbnuts next to Mack. Thing One and Thing Two - otherwise known as Thad and Levi. Since they're almost impossible to tell apart, just look for the tats. Right arm, Thad. Left arm, Levi."

"Damn, woman! You're smokin' hot. You and I could have some fun together for su—" He's cut off by a smack to the back of the head. "What the hell? I didn't do shit that time!"

"Nice to meet you, Fate! I apologize for my uncouth brother. We really do have manners. He just forgets his most of the time," Levi says.

I laugh, because the twins are like my spirit animals. Lots of fun to be had there, I'm sure.

In the quiet that follows, Macklin looks at Cole, who gives him a small nod. The man really is in charge. Wonder if that applies in all circumstances...like the bedroom. Before I can let my mind wander down that rabbit hole, Macklin starts the inquiry.

"Fate, I've got to be honest and admit that we've never done this before - communicate with a spirit in real time, I mean. You're a first for us. Most of the time, spirits can't manifest enough to make talking a possibility. And of course, the twins have a tendency to act first and ask questions later."

"Hey now, we always give them a chance to do things the easy way," Thad grumbles.

"Most of the time," Levi quips.

"Some of the time," Thad retorts.

"None of the time, if it were up to you," Levi chuckles.

"Seriously, what is wrong with you two? Ignore them. We're going to do our best to help you. Since we can't hear you, we're going to stick to yes and no questions to make it easy, though I have a digital voice recorder on. It could pick up anything you try to say that falls outside our normal hearing range. Is that ok?"

I nod.

"Ok, good. I guess the first thing we'd like to know is if you know why you're here?"

I shake my head since I have no idea.

"Ok. Do you know how long you've been here?"

I nod, holding up all ten fingers.

"Ten...months?" he asks.

Another shake of the head.

"Years?"

A nod.

"Wow. You've been here a long time." He shares a quick look with Knox that I can't decipher, before turning back to me. "Your level of awareness is extraordinary."

Extraordinary is not the word I would use to describe my time here. Though I guess it's pretty accurate when you consider the fact that I didn't know it had been ten years until these guys showed up and my powers kicked up a notch.

I walk back through the coffee table, admittedly a little weird now that I have a whole room watching me, and plop my ass down on the window seat. My expression must give my thoughts away because he quickly back tracks.

“I’m sure it’s been hard for you. All that time alone. Hasn’t there been anyone else that’s come along? Other spirits, even?”

A quick shake of my head is all I can manage. The sadness inside me wells up, close to overflowing. My head drops, and I study the pattern of the cushion beneath me through my transparent legs. Anything to distract myself from the reality of being utterly alone.

“Easy, Mack,” Knox says softly. “This is hard for her. Her anguish is damn near drowning me.”

“I’m so sorry, Fate. I can’t imagine what you’ve been going through. Is this place familiar?”

I shake my head.

“You just appeared here, ten years ago.”

I simply nod. He’s not asking. More like confirming the information he’s already piecing together.

One glance at my arm and my determination pushes aside my sorrow. I raise my hand, like I’m in school or something, needing answers to some questions myself.

“You have a question?” he asks, seemingly surprised.

Slowly, I say, “What. The. Fuck. Is. This?” I punctuate each word with a jab at my damn bicep.

“Bro, the way those lips say fuck is damn hot. Can I keep her?” Thad begs.

“Shut up, dipshit!” replies Levi, with a punch to Thad’s arm.

“So you have a mark as well,” ponders Macklin, apparently not noticing my rising temper.

“It’s his fault!” I growl, jumping to my feet and pointing at Knox angrily. Walking closer, I continue, “And he needs to fix it, right now!”

“Little ghost, we can’t hear you, so aim that righteous anger somewhere else. *You* did this to *me*,” Knox asserts, pointing first at me, then himself.

Staring up at those hazel eyes, I order myself not to be distracted and pulled into their depths, and quickly look to Macklin, willing him to understand.

I point to Knox. Point to the tattoo on my arm. Rub my wrist in an imitation of Knox’s gesture. Then fling both hands down toward the floor

where I stand.

“Wait. So you didn’t put that mark on him,” Macklin states rather than asks, like he’s starting to see where this is going.

I furiously shake my head side to side and once again point an angry finger in Knox’s direction, really hammering this point in.

“Hmm,” Macklin murmurs. “He didn’t do this. Something must have happened when the two of you saw each other. Did either of you feel anything?”

Both of us shake our heads this time.

“Interesting. We need to figure out what this means. But wait, you motioned to your wrist,” he says as if he’s having an epiphany. Looking at Knox, he continues, “You were rubbing your wrist as if you could wipe the mark off.” He looks back at me. “Then suddenly you were here?”

I nod with a purse of my lips, throwing my hands to my hips in what I hope illustrates my level of indignation. There is no way this was all just an accident.

“Is she trying to say that Knox called her here by rubbing on his mark? The one she swears she didn’t have anything to do with?” Cole asks doubtfully, aiming a glare in my direction.

I’ve opened my mouth, ready to show him just where he can shove that doubt he’s throwing my way, when Knox cuts me off.

“Whoa. Calm down, little ghost. This is all just a little confusing. He didn’t mean anything by it. Plus, he’s naturally a prick, so you might as well get used to it.”

“Hmph!” I release the pent up breath I had been holding in and cross my arms over my chest. I hate when a well-deserved tantrum is interrupted.

“Let’s give it a try,” Macklin invites eagerly. “Fate, you go...wherever it is you go when you’re not here with us. Let’s see if Knox can call you back.”

I look at him for a moment, trying to discern his angle here. Is he really trying to help, or is this all some sort of game? Can I trust him? Can I trust them? That little wary voice in my head says I need to be careful, that I could get hurt, but my heart wants me to throw myself at them and never let go. When did I become so damn fickle?

Macklin is watching me patiently, waiting for me to make a decision. He isn’t pushy or demanding. He looks a little curious, almost hopeful, and a lot excited.

I’m starting to think maybe they know as little as I do. Decision made, I

nod before poofing myself back into my little attic space. Poofing isn't the technical term for it, but cut a ghost girl some slack. It's been quite an eventful morning already.

I'm not waiting long before I feel the burn, followed by a sort of itch. As I begin to go hazy again, I try to fight it, try to stay locked in place, but it doesn't work. Before I know it, I'm once again standing in front of Knox. Like I'm a damn genie or something.

I glare up at him, not at all happy that he has this power over me.

"Well, obviously that worked," Macklin exclaims, way more excited about this than I am.

Knox leans down near my face and whispers loudly, "Don't worry, little ghost. I won't make you do anything you don't want to do." Then he winks.

His nearness, along with that easy charm of his, sets all my nerves a buzz. I can't even respond as I'm held captive by his hazel eyes.

"What the hell does all of this mean, Macklin?" Cole snaps.

Macklin glances my way. He takes me in, his brown eyes considering all of the details we've just learned and formulating a hypothesis. I wish he was using his uber smarts to somehow formulate a plan to make me real again because damn, these guys have me worked up something fierce. *What? This ghost girl can dream.*

"We've seen firsthand her level of power and heard about the history of the house, the stories of people experiencing all sorts of phenomena. It's what brought us here in the first place." He pauses for a moment. When he continues, though his response is aimed at Cole, his eyes never leave mine. "I honestly believe we were drawn here for *her*, not the house or the area."

Then he speaks directly to me. "Don't worry, Fate. We're here now. You're not alone anymore."

And I melt, the rightness of those words settling somewhere deep inside me. They're here...for *me*. My soul wants to weep at the thought.

My eyes are holding his like they're my lifeline. There's a softness there but also a hidden strength he doesn't let many see. He doesn't pity me. He simply understands and wants to help.

I mouth a simple, "Thank you."

He whispers back, "You're welcome."



5. MACKLIN

TECHIE FACT #1:

NERDS NEED LOVE TOO.

The laptop screen is starting to blur. I rub the heels of my hands over my weary eyes, exhausted after analyzing the data we've collected over the last few days. The voice recorder was a bust, and that is highly disappointing. I expected to capture at least a few solid EVP - electronic voice phenomena - considering her level of power and the fact that she tends to rant and ramble to herself a lot. That much we've all noticed. Honestly, though, I really just want to *hear* her. Talk, laugh, something. A part of me is desperate for that connection to her, and that thought is a little disconcerting. Lack of evidence usually doesn't cause a pit of sadness in my chest. I make a mental note to think more on that later. I'm not usually one for avoidance, but this seems as good as time as any to start.

I've been sifting through the video evidence for so long now that I feel like my body has melded with the chair I've been sitting on. And still no sign

of our beautiful spectral resident. Sure, she's been manifesting in front of the group fairly often over the last few days, almost like she knows when we're talking about her and refuses to be left out of the discussion, but I was hoping to catch a glimpse of her unaware. Learn more of what makes her tick when she's not putting on a face for our benefit.

She still doesn't trust us, not that I blame her. I'm sure spending ten years isolated and alone has really affected her ability to open herself up to anyone new - people and spirits alike. I have to remember this is all uncharted territory for her as well.

"Any luck with the video?" Cole asks from the doorway to our command center.

It's really just a storage room that I claimed early on as a place to set up the numerous computers, charging stations, and other spare equipment we'll use during our time here. As one of the only empty rooms on the main level, it gives us plenty of space to work with. No windows means no light or sounds from the outside to distract or interrupt us when we're reviewing all the material we've recorded. It's also an ideal place to watch the live video feed from the cameras we have set up around the house.

I pick up my glasses and put them on before turning to Cole. "Nothing on the voice recorder. Video is coming up empty so far as well."

"Any luck with the research on the property?"

"I'm expecting a call from the local library any time now. They were hunting down some old news articles for me that were only available on microfiche. They expected it to take a few days to get it all together."

"Has she dropped in on you at all? I know she's been showing up to all of our group meetings, and she's spending a lot of alone time with Knox. I swear, if he's giving her confidential information, I'm going to throat punch him."

"I haven't seen her outside of the group meetings."

"Okay. Keep me posted if she starts coming around. There's something about her that makes me uneasy. If you find anything about the property that's worth discussing, send a text to the group so we know we'll need to meet up. I'm going to do a more thorough search of the attic and see if I find anything there. Thad and Levi have the basement. I'll check back in later."

With that, Cole walks out. No goodbye or see you later. His mind is already on his next task, leaving little room for small talk. He's visibly irritated, or maybe distracted is a better word, and I'm not sure what to make

of that. He's normally so self-assured and confident that seeing him off his game is a little disconcerting. But hasn't she done that to all of us? Thrown us off and forced us into circumstances we aren't exactly used to or comfortable with?

I'd meant it when I told her that we're here for her now. Her predicament is enough to send my mind into a million different directions, all of them wanting to solve the mystery of her existence. But there's also something about *her* that draws me in just as much, if not more. For the first time, I don't need a puzzle to piece together or a riddle to decode to capture my interest. She's done that all on her own without even trying. The fact that she's a ghost rather than a living, breathing woman simply makes it less intimidating and takes the pressure off. I don't have to try to be someone I'm not.

The other guys have never suffered from lack of female companionship. Women have come and gone throughout the years, none of them sticking around for more than a night or two. When you move around as much as we do, long-term relationships just aren't in the cards.

As the resident and self-admitted nerd of the group, I've always been too busy to bother with dalliances. Honestly, I'm much more comfortable in the background, working out our next steps once Cole has decided on a path and making sure we'll have what we need to get us there. My ability, this endless well of information that I can pull from at any given moment, has gotten us to where we are today but isn't really a highly sought after trait with women.

Need a map of the area? I can help with that, no Google Maps required. Need to know what the average temperature of Nebraska is in the middle of June? Roughly seventy-two degrees - in case anyone was wondering. If it's factual information you seek, I'm your guy. Our team definitely utilizes that fount of knowledge on a daily basis. There are plenty of other things, though, that I can't answer. Things about an individual's life or circumstances, for instance. I could have saved us years of useless searching otherwise. Though I suppose all of our seemingly meaningless wandering has brought us here, to her.

Until now, women have never really held my attention long enough to pull me away from my instinctive quest for answers.

Until her.

It might be the sense of familiarity we've all admitted we feel when we're around her. It might be the way her eyes light up when she's worked up into a

fury. It could be the sheer mass of power she somehow contains within that lithe ghostly body of hers. Or it could just be the simple yet stunning smiles she's graced me with that have made me a bundle of nervous mush where she's concerned.

And I know it's not just me.

Knox is borderline obsessed, seeming to seek her out on an hourly basis. Something about their linked emotions has formed a strong and immediate connection between the two. He may use his looks and skills to get what we need when we're out hunting down information for our research, or on the rare occasions we go out for entertainment, but I know it's really all for show. Down deep, he's as desperate for a real connection as I am.

Meanwhile, the twins are jealous of the attention she gives Knox. They're doing their damndest to tempt her away, and I'm sure they'll succeed eventually. Apparently, the whole twin thing is a big draw, and girls just swoon over the chance to be with two guys at once. I mean, they share everything else, why not women too? Personally, I don't get it, not that I have much experience, but to each their own.

Cole, on the other hand, is openly hostile toward her, practically snarling in her direction any time she's close by. His attitude is something I can't explain. He's never been the social butterfly of the group, hell, he's almost more closed off than I am, but his obvious contempt seems unwarranted and is starting to grate on everyone's nerves - including my own.

The Mario theme song starts playing somewhere in the room, startling me.

Dun dun dun - dun dun da dun.

I search the tops of both desks and under the table on the far wall before I find my cell. Unfortunately, I've missed the call, but I recognize the number as the library. Looks like it's time to get some answers.

"What the hell am I doing here, mate?" asks Knox, for what seems like the millionth time. I'm seriously questioning my logic in bringing him along on my library adventure at this point.

"Mate? Really? Have you been watching the Crocodile Hunter again?"

"What? I'm trying out something new. I mean, it's your fault for telling me that mate actually derives from the German word *gemate* which means to share a meal at the same table. That makes us mates. It's kinda catchy."

"Remind me to never share knowledge with you again. It gives you crazy

ideas.”

He just rolls his eyes.

“Anyway, you’re here to help me sift through this mountain of information. The others are busy scouring the house for clues.”

“Who are we? The gang from Mystery, Inc?”

I just cut a glare in his direction.

“Fine,” he sighs, “and what are we looking for exactly?”

“Anything unusual that might give us a lead on Fate’s background. I’ve requested all records from the last hundred years or so.”

“Dude, that’s a lot of data. You’ll never get through it all.”

“Hence the reason you’re here with me. You can sort out the irrelevant information, so I can focus on the important details. This should help me later since once I’ve been exposed to it, I’ll be able to recall all of the facts and can piece together a theory a lot faster.”

“Lucky me,” Knox mumbles as he bites into an apple.

“You know there’s no food allowed in here, right?”

“Does it look like I give a damn? You want me here, this is what you get. Do you want me hangry, or do you want me helping?”

“Helping. Definitely helping. I’ve seen you hangry, and it’s worse than a mogwai fed after midnight.”

“Then you’re safe from the gremlin. For now. So, where do I start?”

Debate settled, we finally get down to business. Sitting at a table deep within the library where they have their microfiche machines, I get him set up. The librarian provided everything she could find. News articles for the surrounding area dating back a hundred years. Title transfers and tax documentation on the house from the time it was built back in 1865. Any and all photographs taken at or near the property.

There is a real possibility we’ll be here all night.

“What do you think happened to her?”

Before answering, I take a moment to contemplate his question while flipping through the first article.

“We know so little about her and her situation, but I know it can’t be a coincidence that her story so closely resembles ours. The only difference is that we aren’t spirits. Hopefully we find something here that will help us unravel both mysteries.”

“Do you think...” he trails off, and I notice him running his fingers over her mark on his wrist.

“Do I think...?”

He hesitates, obviously reluctant to say what’s on his mind.

“Do you think she’s really a ghost?”

“I think the activity we’ve witnessed so far leads to her being a spirit stuck in the mortal realm as the most likely explanation. She must have something left unresolved, or the circumstances surrounding her death were so violent that she can’t find her way to the other side.”

“You don’t think her abilities - the fact that they far exceed the average poltergeist - or her incredible self-awareness might indicate she’s something...*more*?”

“I suppose anything is possible. Look at us, after all. The evidence, however, doesn’t necessarily fit with that theory.”

“I just...” He pauses, running his hand through his hair, his tell. He’s unsure, and that frustrates him. He angrily chucks the apple core into the garbage can at the end of the table. “She *feels* so much more than any spirit we’ve ever encountered. The emotions I get from her are more like what I get from you guys or other living beings. The fact that hers seem so intimately tied to mine...I don’t fucking know.”

I study him for a moment. Knox has always been more sensitive than the rest of us. Which is only logical considering he’s bombarded by emotions twenty-four hours a day seven days a week. His line of questioning, though, has me wondering if this obsession is far more serious than I even anticipated. The answer is obvious.

“You’ve developed feelings for her.”

“What? No. Of course not,” he denies quickly, absently rubbing his wrist.

“Knox, I’ve known you for fifty years, and I’ve never seen you like this. Constantly wanting to be near a woman. Worried about her. Caring about her. I get it. You formed a deep bond with her rather quickly. It would make sense if you feel deeply for her, but I have to suggest proceeding with caution. At the end of the day, she’s still an apparition. She’s not alive. Her future ended the day she died, and a relationship can’t go anywhere.”

Somewhere, deep in the recesses of my mind, I repeat that mantra to myself. More than once.

“Obviously I know that. I just can’t help feeling like she’s meant to be here. Not just with me. With all of us. I can’t explain it, but it feels like it’s always just been this way.” He pauses for a moment, then releases a deep sigh. “But you’re right. Maybe I need to back off for a while. Give myself

some space. Maybe it's just the fast connection and close confines of the house that are making this connection seem like more than it is."

"I think that's a smart idea. Take some time. Clear your head."

He nods and turns back to the machine. I can tell he isn't happy with my suggestion, but I know Knox will do what needs to be done. Though I'm sure it won't be easy given that Fate isn't held by the same earthly confines we are. Locked doors are no match for her.

It feels like we've been sitting at these machines for hours when Knox's sudden exclamation has me almost knocking my coffee right off the side of the table.

"Crikey, mate! I think I've got something! Look at this."

I narrow my tired eyes at him.

"Sorry. I couldn't resist. Seriously though, I found something." He points to an old photograph showing the back portion of the property.

"Ok. What am I looking at?"

"It's what you're *not* looking at."

I scan the photo again, noting the large yard with lots of green grass and a bit of the stone patio in the corner. As the resident know-it-all, I'm a little ashamed to admit that whatever he's seeing, I haven't found it yet.

"Look to the left. What's missing?" he helpfully suggests.

I look again, and then I see it. Well, actually, I *don't* see it. That's his point.

"There's no willow tree. When was the photo taken?"

"October 5, 1920. Right before a big party celebrating some dude whose name they mentioned at the beginning of the article, but I can't remember now. Figured it wasn't important."

"Ok, but what does this tell us?"

"Now look at this photo. It was taken two years later."

I look at the new photo and realize what he's getting at. A willow tree can reach full growth in roughly fifteen years. At only two years old, this willow tree looks as though it's fully grown already. This is an anomaly worth looking into.

I quickly do a mental scan of anything else I know about the willow on the property and come up remarkably short. I know it sits toward the far back corner and has an old swing that sways in the breeze. Not very technical, but it is what it is.

"That's not normal, right? I'm no tree expert, but even I know a tree takes

a while to grow. What do you think it means?” he asks. Again, I notice him touching the tattoo, as if being away from her for this long is starting to get to him.

His obsessive need for her is concerning. I make a mental note to ensure he’s putting some real space between the two of them starting as soon as possible. Maybe I’ll have a talk with Fate, though that brings about some dangers of its own - mostly to my diminishing self-control.

“I’m not sure. It’s definitely suspicious since there’s a huge gap in the timeline. We didn’t appear until 1970, forty-eight years after this last photo. Forty years after that, so 2010, Fate appeared but spent another ten years on her own here. Not to mention, willow trees typically only live an average of fifty to seventy-five years if given the right conditions. That tree is roughly a hundred years old. How does this all tie together?”

“Mate, that’s on you. I’m just the manual labor. You’re the architect behind this little operation.”

“Hmmm...that’s starting to grow on me. So, what does that make Cole?”

“He’s the foreman - keeping all the working parts in order.”

“And the twins?”

“They’re the green guys. The newbies. They get the shit work - like fetching us water and cleaning the tools.”

I chuckle at that. Pretty sure neither Thad or Levi would approve of his analogy.

“Let’s see if we can get this evidence in a to-go package so we can get back.”

We quickly print off the photos and any other supporting documentation we can find and pack it up to head home. Odd that I would refer to the old house as home when we’ve lived there less than a week. Makes me wonder if it’s not so much the house but the occupant that has prompted that noun to be replaced for the first time in our existence. She’s affecting change within our group, and she has absolutely no idea. That thought is as troubling as it is exciting.

6. MACKLIN

TECHIE FACT #2:

TALK NERDY TO US. IT DOESN'T
TAKE MUCH MORE THAN THAT.

The moment she enters the command center, the aroma of freshly baked cookies fills the room and my senses are on high alert. She's never sought me out before. Then again, maybe she's looking for one of my brothers. Knox, most likely. I throw the hint of disappointment that sneaks through my shield right back where it belongs - in the box labeled *Don't Go There*.

I turn away from the evidence I've been organizing to see her hazy form wandering around, her fingers drifting over the numerous pieces of equipment stacked on the tables. She's not looking my way, and I use the opportunity to catalog every detail.

She's only a few inches shorter than my own six feet, putting her roughly around five-eight, give or take an inch. She's slender, but with delectable curves my eyes can't help but trace over. Her hair is a mass of dark waves tumbling down her back, and I wonder what it would look like spread across

my pillow.

The way she holds one arm behind her, while her other hand whispers over each piece like it's a priceless treasure, alludes to simple sophistication. She's a walking contradiction. Her inherent grace is something I haven't seen in someone as young as she appears to be, yet her style is that of someone that could blend in with today's twenty-somethings with no problem.

The dark-colored shirt she's wearing reads *#GhostGirlGoals* in white letters. Her sense of humor I can appreciate, as it resonates with the nerd in me. Simple jeans and light-colored Converse complete her look. The blend of the modern elegance she wields so effortlessly and the street style she pulls off with ease somehow makes her that much more interesting.

When my eyes come back up, I realize she's been watching me, watching her. I blush a little, feeling like a fourteen-year-old boy caught ogling his crush.

"Hi," I say awkwardly then grimace slightly. Now I sound like a teenage girl. Great.

I watch as she waves, a small grin on her gorgeous face. She knows she unnerves me, and she likes that. And I like that she likes that. *What is wrong with me?*

"Are you looking for Knox?"

She shakes her head then points one beautifully manicured fingertip at me. Do ghosts get manicures? I mentally add that to my growing list of questions to ask her.

My pulse is racing. I adjust my glasses, though they were already as straight as can be, but it helps me feel in control. What can I say? I'm living up to the quintessential nerd stereotype - minus the suspenders.

"You're here...for me?"

She nods, a hint of her tongue peeking out before biting her bottom lip.

That small action awakens a need in me that's so strong I have to clench my hands into fists to stop myself from reaching for her.

"Oh. Well...sure." I clear my throat before mumbling, "Um...what can I help you with?"

With one finger, she points to me, then taps her lips.

For a brief moment, I think she wants me to kiss her, and my eyes widen and meet hers. They're beautiful in an ethereal sort of way.

She simply smiles, her lips quirking up on one side. I'm amusing her. Usually, the embarrassment I'm feeling would be enough to have me

hightailing it in the opposite direction, but with her, it feels like this is something that's completely normal for us. Second nature. Me being awkward and her loving my awkwardness.

Whoa! Love? Slow down, buddy.

She points to me again, then brings her finger up to her eye, then down to tap her lips again.

"Oh! You want to talk?"

Right. Lip reading because we can't hear her. Get your shit together, Mack!

She nods again.

A mixture of relief and disappointment whirl through me before I can tamp it down.

"That I can do. I'm ready when you are."

I watch her lips form the first word.

"Do."

A quick nod before she's moving on to the next word.

"You."

Nod.

"Have."

Nod.

She signs the letter A.

"A."

The next word is a little trickier. The distraction of her pouty lips getting the better of me.

"Goat?"

She laughs silently while shaking her head. Watching her lips forming the word again is the sweetest kind of torture - my jeans suddenly a little tight. My imagination, which I didn't even know still functioned, is suddenly running wild with all the other things those lips could be doing.

I must have been staring a little too intently, as she starts waving her hand in front of my face to get my attention.

She tries the word again.

"Ghost?"

She nods, then she holds up her hands in the shape of a square and mouths the next word.

"Box? Do I have a Ghost Box?" Surprised, I ask, "You know what that is?"

She nods, excited now, and moves a little closer.

“I do. Just let me find it.”

Her sexiness just increased ten-fold. Beautiful *and* smart? *Yes, please!*

I head over to the far wall and begin to hunt through the cases we have yet to open, quickly finding what she’s asking for. I have a system. Everything is put into groups by use - sound, video, tools, accessories - and then placed alphabetically by name. The guys say I’m OCD, but I think it’s called organization. A Ghost Box Ovilus III is a small handheld device that has a built-in database of over two thousand words. In theory, a spirit can manipulate the environment, selecting the words needed to answer questions which are displayed on a small, simple screen. Sort of a high-tech ouija board, minus all the demon summoning. It could be a tremendous help in communicating with her, and I should have thought of this before. I’m blaming the sweet little ghost for my inability to think straight. That’s the only possible explanation.

“Found it. Just let me get it fired up.”

Walking over to the table with the chargers and spare batteries, I feel her come up next to me, watching me intently. I spare a sideways glance and note that she’s focused on each step, each part of the process, taking it all in. The academic in me appreciates that, and the man in me appreciates the way her chest gets pushed out when she moves her arms behind her back so she can lean in. Her hair falls forward, and if she weren’t an apparition, it would be brushing my arm right now. Would it feel like silk against my skin?

“Uh...it’s ready. Want to give it a try?”

She gives me a thumbs up.

“Okay, let’s see...” I pause and try to think of innocuous questions I could ask, but my mind keeps circling back to her.

Are your lips as soft as I’ve imagined they are?

What would your body feel like against mine?

What sounds do you make when you...

Jesus, Mack! Get your head out of the gutter!

“So...uh...” I clear my throat again, my face probably beet red. “Let’s start with, where are we right now?”

I watch as she looks at the Ghost Box intently, and then a word crosses the screen.

Room.

She claps excitedly and motions for more.

“What color is your hair?”

She grabs a hold of the long locks and then looks at the box.

Dark crosses the screen, followed closely by *Brown*.

“Do you know what day it is?”

She appears to think for a second.

June.

Sixth.

“Wow! That’s impressive. For a spirit, you’re very aware of your surroundings. Hmm...how about this one. Where do you go when you’re not here with us?”

Attic.

“What do you do all day?”

Her head tilts to the side, and her eyes wander around the room. Her pouty lips are pursed in thought, and I’ve never wanted to kiss someone so badly in my life.

Wander. She shrugs. Then a mischievous grin lights up her face.

Spy.

“Spy? On us?”

She holds her thumb and index finger just a bit apart, scrunches up her adorable nose, and shrugs again.

“A little?” I laugh. She is the most intriguing woman I’ve ever come across, and I find myself wanting to learn everything about her. Her likes and dislikes. Her fears. Her desires. What she wants for her future.

Then I remember that she doesn’t have one. Her time for hopes and dreams has ended. She’s not meant to be on this plane, and there can never be anything more between us. The laughter slowly dies off, leaving us caught in each other’s gaze.

I’m the first to break the silent stand off.

“I’m sorry you’ve been alone for so long,” I practically whisper.

The light leaves her beautiful eyes, and she looks at the floor as if the hideous gold and burgundy pattern of the carpet is of significant interest.

“But you have us now, and I promise we’ll help you. I know that’s probably not enough...” I trail off. What does a man say to a stunning, ghostly female standing right in front of him looking so damn sad that his own heart is just seconds away from breaking?

“So sorry we can’t give you your life back?”

Or maybe, “At least you’ll be in a better place.”

There's always, "*Hopefully you'll end up in Heaven, not Hell!*"
Dammit, pull it together man.

Then an idea strikes. Wanting to do something that will take that sad expression off her beautiful face, I'm opening my mouth before I can think it through.

"I know you want answers, but there *is* another option. Thad and Levi have these...abilities. They could help you cross over, and you wouldn't have to be stuck here anymore."

The minute the words leave my mouth, I regret them and want to take them back. I don't want her to choose that option; I want her to stay with us for as long as she can. The guys will hand me my ass when they hear what I've offered. Except Cole. He might actually approve.

She looks up at me then, her heart in her eyes. She takes a step closer, so we're almost chest to chest. The lights in the room begin to flicker a little, and my heart starts to pound. I briefly wonder if Knox is going to come flying through the door but remember he ran out to grab dinner. She lifts her right hand and places it over my chest, right on top of my heart. It sort of hovers there, not exactly touching, but it's as close as she's able to get without putting her hand right through me. I feel a tingle at the connection. Like that feeling you get when you shake someone's hand, and there's a jolt from the static electricity, except this is all pleasure and no pain and doesn't disappear. The longer her hand rests there, the more the sensation starts to slowly expand across my chest. It feels *amazing*, and I totally understand Knox's obsession now.

She starts to talk, but she's going too fast for me to make out what she's saying. I'm watching her lips move until sound abruptly breaks the silence like someone just unmuted a TV.

"...a good man. I've been alone for so long that I've forgotten how nice it is to be noticed. To be seen. Thank you for giving that to me again and for offering to help me, but I can't leave without knowing why I'm here in the first place. I need answers."

I'm still staring into her eyes, but the sudden sound has rendered me incapable of speech. Her voice. It's...like the sweetest honey or the richest whiskey. Smoky, mysterious, alluring, and the hottest damn thing I've ever heard. Before I can find my own voice again, she's stepping away, wandering back through the room while she continues on.

"You guys were so unexpected. I had accepted this solitary life I've been

forced to live, and then you guys came barreling in and shattered it all to hell. I was confused. On one hand, I was excited that this might be my one opportunity to figure everything out. But on the other hand, I wasn't exactly thrilled that I'd have to share my space with a group of hot guys. I'm not gonna lie, ghost girls have needs too, ya know. Imagine watching the hottest porn and not being able to jack off to relieve the pressure. Yeah, one word. Torture. Right?"

She spares a glance in my direction before continuing on, not waiting for my reply. Completely unknowing.

"This thing with Knox. Matching tattoos? Seems a little much if you ask me. I mean, I just met the guy. Then he rubs his damn wrist and *BAM*, I'm sucked through some vortex and placed right in front of him. What the hell is up with that, anyways? Then you have to go and be all sweet and stuff. Offering me help and telling me I'm not alone. You have this whole sexy nerd thing going for you. That was my nickname for you that first day, by the way. The twins...well, Jesus. They're just as dirty as I am. Or, at least that I assume I am, because let me tell you, my mind is a scary place to be. And Cole, what is that dude's problem?"

I watch as she paces in front of the table full of cameras and REM-pods. Her heartfelt words quickly turning into a ghostly rant that is, admittedly, as adorable as it is amusing. This isn't the first rant I've witnessed, but it is the first one I've had the pleasure of watching up close and personal, so I lean back against the table behind me and cross my arms over my chest. Just taking in all of her ghostly glory. She doesn't realize I can hear every word out of that gorgeous mouth now, and I'm not about to tell her yet.

"Oh. And what the hell was that while you were at the library? I kept feeling the tug of Knox summoning me, which, by the way, I absolutely abhor, but since he wasn't here, I would get sucked into the vortex and spit out in random locations throughout the house. Face first against a wall. On my back, out on the front lawn staring up at the sky. Once, I even appeared right in front of Levi on the toilet. Can you say *awkward*? Was Knox doing that on purpose? Did he forget I'm confined to this damn place?"

She releases a heavy sigh like she just can't deal with it before turning and facing me head on, placing her small, elegant hands on her hips.

"One more thing. What is this about abilities? Do you all have one? That's not normal, right? I mean, I've seen a lot of people come through this house, but none of them could do what you guys apparently can. So, let me

guess. Knox feels or senses emotions; *that* one is obvious. You said the twins have some sort of power that could send me to the afterlife. What about you? You seem to be the techie of the group. Is there more to that? And what's Cole's super power? Being an asshole?"

She chuckles at that, and the sound is like nothing else.

"Fate..."

She throws her hands up and her head back in obvious frustration.

"Ugh! I know. You can't hear a damn word I'm saying. What the fuck does a ghost girl gotta do to be heard around here?"

I let the silence linger, wanting to draw out the moment for just a second longer.

"So...sexy nerd, huh?"

Her head snaps back down, and her eyes go wide.

"You heard me?" she whispers.

"Almost every word."

"You can really hear me?" she asks, a little more enthusiastic now.

"I can," I reply around a grin of my own.

The flickering lights flare brightly. Before I can stop her, she's launching herself in my direction and, since she's not solid, flies right through me. I feel a blast of cold air and a rush of tingles. When I turn around, she's sitting on the ground, legs spread out in front of her, her head partially through the table and computer along the wall.

"You forgot, eh?"

"Yup. Totally forgot about the whole spectral body thing there for a second."

"I'd offer you a hand up, but..."

"Well, aren't you just a gentleman!"

"Most of the time."

At that, she turns and looks at me. Her eyes do a quick scan of my body before meeting mine.

"Is that right? And the rest of the time?"

"Guess you'll have to find out."

"I knew I liked you, Sexy Nerd," she says as she manages to get to her feet. She's still standing in the middle of the table, but that doesn't seem to bother her.

"Come on, let's go tell the others that you got your voice back. I have some other interesting news that turned up during our library search today to

discuss with everyone as well.”

“Ready when you are. Plus, I say we have some fun with the guys before we let them in on our secret. Bring the Ghost Box.”

I follow her out of the room, or at least I do once I open the door that she just glided through. I’m not sure what she has in mind, but I’d bet money the guys aren’t ready for whatever she has planned. And to be honest, I’m not sure I am either.



Poor Macklin. He has no idea what he's in for.

I strut into the room like I own the place. I mean, in my own way of thinking, I do. It's mine. I don't particularly care if I've never made a single payment, or if I have no proof of how the house came into my possession. Isn't common law home ownership a thing? If not, it really should be.

Most of the guys are waiting in the study, drinks in hand, discussing their apparently fruitless searches. I could've told them it would be pointless, but until a few moments ago, I was as silent as the women in Cole's bed. There's no way his grumpy ass can get any sane woman to the point of screaming his name.

I know. Bitter doesn't look very attractive on me, right? Guy's always a jerk to me though, so he can bite me. Hmm...that doesn't sound like a bad thing at all actually.

Thad is the first to see me as he sits sprawled out on the sofa facing the door.

“Get that fine ghostly ass over here, woman! I’ve missed you.”

I playfully sashay my way over, walking through the sofa, facing him. It just so happens to also be right where Cole is sitting. Slowing down, I accidentally on purpose pause slightly when my ghostly form is aligned with his fully alive body, then continue on. Risking a glance over my shoulder, I see him fighting to contain a shiver in reaction.

“Fucking temperamental ghost,” he mutters under his breath as he takes a drink of the amber liquid in his glass.

I smile and wink at Thad who has a front row seat to my childish but highly satisfying behavior. What can I say? Cole and his cranky ass bring out the worst in me. I take a seat between Thad and Levi like I have every right to be there. Like I’ve always been involved in these meetings.

Fake it ‘til you make it, right?

Thad leans in and whispers in my ear, “Oh, you and I are going to have some fun together, aren’t we, woman? Why don’t we skip this little get together and go make some plans of our own?”

I smirk in his direction and waggle my eyebrows at him.

“Bro, what about me?” asks Levi, leaning in on my other side. “You’re not going to let him leave me out, are you, sweets?”

“Knock it off,” Macklin barks from across the room. “Fate’s got enough on her plate without having to deal with the two of you. Where’s Knox?”

“Right here, fucker! Dinner is served,” Knox says as he enters the room carrying two large white bags full of takeout. He sets them down on the coffee table and starts to pull out the foam containers.

“Who ordered the Kung Pao Chicken, extra spicy?”

“That’s mine.” Thad raises his hand. “I like it spicy - just how I like my women,” he finishes with a wink in my direction.

This guy is like a male version of me. If that isn’t a frightening thought, I don’t know what is.

As they continue to divvy out the food and begin to eat, I find myself wishing that I had a sense of smell and could take in the aromas around me. That I could enjoy the simple act of eating a meal. That I could savor every bite and actually feel full. Who knew one could miss something as basic as chewing? Hell, even the bloating that will most likely follow the fried rice and egg rolls seems appealing when you’ve felt nothing but emptiness for far

too long.

I shake myself out of my sullen mood and observe their interactions just as I have over the last few days. They're comfortable with each other in a way that only siblings can be. They may call each other brothers, but I highly doubt there's any blood relation happening here, aside from the twins obviously. They joke and laugh, rib each other over stupid shit, and support each other when it's needed. I envy that closeness and their camaraderie.

Looking up, I notice Macklin watching me intently. He's sitting on the sofa opposite us looking as disheveled and adorable as usual. He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose, and the muscles in his forearm flex with the movement. Damn, he doesn't even know what that does to me. His gray button-down is rolled at the sleeves, untucked, with his undershirt hanging out. His jeans fit nicely over his toned legs, and his practical work boots are like new. Pretty sure he spends more of his time behind a computer screen than he does out in the field. His brown eyes remind me of the most scrumptious chocolate, and I would love nothing more than to devour him whole.

Knox must pick up on my ever increasing desire because a loud throat clearing comes from his direction.

"Are you two done eye-fucking each other yet?" Knox taunts.

I've never seen a grown man blush as much as Macklin does. It's totes adorbs. No, I don't care if that phrase went out of style years ago. I'm a ghost, dammit - basically timeless - which gives me the right to say whatever hellishly ridiculous slang I want.

"What? She's eye-fucking Mack?" Thad cries. "The fuck? When did that happen? What about me, woman?"

"I wasn't even sure he liked women," ponders Levi.

"Fucking right? Never seen him with one. Yet here he is, making moves on my woman before I can get more than a little zap to my dick!" exclaims Thad.

Knox smirks. "As if either of you have a chance."

"Shut the fuck up, pretty boy," Thad retorts. "She likes us more than you. She just feels guilty because you have to deal with her crazy ass emotions."

Crazy ass emotions? Who? Me? Yeah, okay. I'll give him that one, but it's totally their fault.

I try to get Mack's attention as he watches the play-by-play with amusement. Sensing my ghostly stare, he looks over at me, and I motion to

the Ghost Box sitting on the floor next to his feet. Somehow, some way, he knows what I'm thinking and gets this mischievous look in his eye. He picks up the device just as Cole interjects himself into the conversation.

"What the fuck is wrong with all of you? She's a goddamn ghost, for Christ's sake. None of you can have her."

"I think I may have a way to solve this problem," Macklin declares, maintaining eye contact with me. I mash my lips together to avoid letting out an excited squeal and giving myself away. "Why don't we let Fate choose which one of us is the best?"

In this moment, I fall head over heels for my adorably nerdy gentleman. He's willingly offering himself up as my accomplice in a prank against his brothers, and that is better than pretty flowers or a box of chocolates any day. Not that a ghost girl can enjoy or appreciate either of those things.

"Let her choose? Mack, have you lost your damn mind right along with these other fools?" Cole snaps.

Macklin ignores Cole and continues, "Fate came to me earlier today and gave me the idea to use the Ghost Box to communicate. It will allow her to answer our questions within the limited scope of words that are available in its database. So, Fate. Who is it? Which one of us is the best?"

All five sets of eyes find me. I slowly stand up and eye Levi. Trailing a finger across his shoulder, I hear Macklin read the word from the screen in his hands.

"Big."

"I'm big all over, sweets," Levi croons.

I consider him and all of his significant bulk, wondering just how big he's talking. My mind is pulled out of the gutter I find it lodged in on the regular with these guys around when Thad tries to touch my ass, his hand passing through it instead. I run my fingers through his hair, using a trickle of my power to brush the strands back.

Macklin chuckles. "Dirty. Boy."

"Hell yes, I am, woman," Thad proclaims, trying to reach for me but swiping his arm through my waist instead. "Dammit!"

I walk over to Knox and lean in like I'm going to kiss him but trail my finger along his scruffy jaw instead. Then I hear Macklin.

"Saw." He pauses. "First."

I shift my head to look at Cole without moving my body an inch. He just glowers at me.

“Ass. Hole,” Mack chokes out. The other guys chuckle, and the muscles in Cole’s jaw clench. He obviously doesn’t find it as amusing as the rest of us.

I slowly straighten and look at Macklin as I walk through the coffee table. *What is it with me and this damn table?* Then stop when I’m mere inches away from him, pushing my body as close as it can get with the device between us. I look up and his eyes meet mine.

“Sexy. Nerd.” He grins.

I place my hand on top of the one holding the Ghost Box and let it rest there for a moment, speaking without saying words, and totally ignore the fact that all of his brothers are looking on.

“But really, why choose?” I suddenly say out loud, turning around to look at all of their stunned faces. A moment later, chaos ensues, the brothers all talking at once.

“What the fuck?”

“Wait, we can hear her!”

“Why the hell didn’t you tell us we could hear her?”

“Fuck! Her voice is like angels singing!”

“Okay, okay,” Macklin shouts over the noise. “It happened just before we walked in, and we knew we had to let you all know.”

“Then why all the theatrics?” Knox retorts.

“Um...because it’s hella funny?” I scoff with a roll of my eyes.

“Who the fuck uses the word *hella* anymore?” he quips back.

“This ghost girl. That’s who.”

“Do you always refer to yourself as *ghost girl*?” He snickers.

“Hmmm.” I tap my bottom lip with my finger, thinking. “Actually, I do. Weird, right? But it seems familiar like everything else lately.” I shrug.

“So you feel it too?” Mack asks. “The familiarity?”

“Totally. Since that first day. You guys too?” I look around the room and see them all nod - except Cole. Macklin raises his hand to push his glasses up, and my eyes snag on his wrist.

“Holy shit!” I point at the offending mark. “You have one too!”

He pulls his hand back, and right there on the underside of his wrist is a solid black line broken only by three small dots in the middle.

“Wait. Yours has three dots,” Knox says, eyeing Macklin’s hand. Then he looks at me. “What about you? Got anything?”

Damn. Didn’t even think about that. I turn my head to look at my left

bicep and sure enough, just above Knox's line, is a replica of Mack's.

"Dude! What the fuck?" I whine.

I mean, I like these guys, but permanently marking my body is not something I would agree to at this point in our relationships.

Relationships. Heavy emphasis on the S. *Huh. Plural. Ghost girl's got game.* I mentally high-five myself.

"What is so damn amusing over there?" Knox complains.

"Oh. Nothing."

"Do you think yours works the same way mine does?" Knox asks Macklin.

There's a joke in there somewhere, I just know it, but Mack interrupts before I can work it out.

"We should test it!" Mack beams.

"Whoa! Wait a minute there, Sexy Nerd. I didn't sign up for another round of *Let's summon the ghost girl.*"

"If you're all done ogling the new marks she's going to deny having any involvement with, can we start to discuss what Mack and Knox found at the library today?" Cole snaps.

"Oh right." Suddenly all business, Macklin walks over to the desk by the bookshelves and pulls a file from his bag. As he walks back to the group, he eyes the twins. "So, here's the summary since I know you guys have short attention spans."

"Thank Christ!" Thad mutters under his breath.

I walk over and perch my ghostly ass on the arm of the sofa next to Cole. He may be a douche canoe, but the guy is super pretty to look at, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't find myself drawn to him more often than not. Like two magnets, constantly being pulled together but fighting it.

"Knox found an old photo that dates back one hundred years, and he noticed the willow tree was missing."

"Knox actually helped?" Levi asks, looking at the man in question. Then he chuckles, "Bout damn time, bro!"

"Shut the hell up," Knox grumbles from his seat.

"The next photo, taken only two years later, shows a fully grown tree. That's unheard of. There is no such thing as coincidence. We all know that. One hundred years ago, there was no tree there. Fifty years ago, we came to be. Forty years after that, Fate appeared in this house where that exact tree was planted. I'd hazard a guess it was the same day we all felt that tug spark

up again, which sent us *searching* for something while she spent another ten years *waiting* for something.” Mack looks my way before continuing. “You were waiting on *us*. Our stories are almost identical. Coming from nothing. Remembering nothing. The fact that the second we arrived, we all felt *something*. I don’t think we can deny it anymore. Our histories are intertwined. Now we just need to find out how and why.”

The room is stunned into silence, myself included. Considering I now have a voice for the first time in ten years, that’s an impressive feat.

“So, let me get this straight. You all are fifty years old?”

That earns me a glare from Cole.

“What? I mean, you all look phenomenal for fifty. Just throwing that out there. Haven’t aged a bit.”

Cole rolls his eyes at me, then his face relaxes into the serious expression that’s usually plastered on his gorgeous face. He clears his throat before hesitantly saying, “I think I may have at least a small part of the answer to that.”

The entire room turns to Cole. Something about the way he’s sitting, leaning forward, his muscles tense and ready for flight, tells me I’m not going to like what he’s about to say. No one says a word as he takes a moment to speak. Whatever this is, the fact that his brothers don’t know about it does not bode well for this conversation.

“You guys all know about my nightmares...” He pauses while the guys nod their understanding.

“What nightmares?” I blurt out.

The glare he shoots my way is, yet again, familiar.

For a moment, I don’t think he’s going to respond, but finally he starts again. “I have nightmares quite often, and the sequence of events is always the same. At the end, I shout out ‘Don’t go!’ before I immediately wake up. But there are details I’ve never told you. Things you need to hear.”

He studies his boots intently, his hands clasped together with his elbows on his knees. Before he continues, he takes a deep breath.

“They used to happen once every couple of weeks. Then the moment we started planning our trip here, they started coming every few nights. After that first day in the house, they’ve been happening nightly. Sometimes multiple times a night. If I fall back asleep, it starts all over again.”

“You’ve had the same nightmare for over fifty years?” I ask incredulously.

“No...” He hesitates, looking at me for the first time without a hint of his trademark glare.

Those ice blue eyes pierce my soul, and that gut-wrenching feeling I had the first time I saw him hits again, full force. I wrap my arms around my middle like it will make the hurt go away.

His eyes haven't released mine when he begins to speak again, a softness to his voice that I've never heard before. “They started ten years ago.” I'm once again rendered speechless, but the same cannot be said for the other guys.

“What the fuck do you mean, they started ten years ago?” Levi shouts.

Thad, always ready to back up his twin, fumes, “So it's okay for you to keep secrets, but the rest of us practically get court martialed if we forget to tell you we took a dump? What kind of bullshit is that?”

“You didn't think to tell us this a few days ago when we learned how long Fate has been here?” Knox growls. He gets up and storms over to the window seat. With his left arm straight out, he rests his hand on the wall while he stares outside.

The sky is a beautiful mix of pinks and purples and oranges. Normally, I'd bask in the glorious sight before me. Maybe admire the way the colors blend, the way they shift as the sun moves across the sky. But that beauty is lost on me right now. I almost welcome the night and the way the darkness that follows will be hiding the world beyond. It seems fitting, somehow, like a metaphor for my life. All the color and life being taken over by a void of darkness.

The twins have gone quiet, but I can sense their growing tempers. With their arms crossed over their chests and the scowls on their faces, you don't have to be Knox to figure that out. Macklin seems as intrigued as ever. That brain of his is processing things faster than any of us can comprehend.

“There's more,” Cole says quietly.

“Christ. Here we go. What else have you been keeping from us?” Knox demands angrily.

“The details of the dream have become increasingly clear over the last few days. I'm remembering more than just the last few seconds. I'm in some sort of cavern with a large natural pool built right into the ground. It has the clearest water I've ever seen. I'm desperate to make someone understand something. It's as if...” He trails off for a moment, his eyes tracking some unseen memory in his mind. “It's as if my life depends on it. But I'm also

confused. Whatever has happened, my brain can't seem to figure it out."

He shakes his head, frustrated that he's only getting bits and pieces. He's still staring off into space, lost in his nightmare and a memory of something he can't fully remember.

"She's looking right at me, the girl from my dreams. Tears are streaming from her beautiful gray eyes, down her cheeks. The look on her face is utter devastation, and my heart feels like it's being ripped from my chest. She finally turns and starts to run away from me, back through the cavern entrance. I try to grab her hand to stop her, but she slips out of my hold. I chase after her, but she's suddenly vanishing in front of my eyes. Like smoke that slowly starts to dissipate. That's usually when I shout, 'Don't go!'...but it was slightly different this last time."

"This girl? Who is she? Can you describe her?" Macklin asks.

I'm watching Cole intently. A sick feeling starting to roll through my body as a memory, long since locked away, finally breaks free. I already know the words he's going to say. I can hear them in my head, in his voice, loud and clear.

"You shouted, 'Fate, don't go!'" I whisper. "Didn't you, Cole?"

His eyes are full of despair when they reach mine.

"Yes. It was you. It's *always* been you. That first time we saw you, I knew you were the girl that haunted my dreams, but I don't know what I did. Or what you did. Or what the hell is happening at that moment. That's why I can't trust you. Something happened, and whatever that something is, there's a damn good chance it's the reason we're all here. No memories of who we are or where we came from. No idea who we are to each other." He stops then and stands, his fists clenched at his sides. "Now we're all back together again. And here you are, tempting each of my brothers. Batting those eyes of yours at all of them. Maybe this is your revenge. Your way of getting back at me for all of that pain I caused you. Or maybe this is your way of apologizing for whatever bullshit *you* pulled that day. Hell, for all we know, this has something to do with one of them. I don't know, and I don't really fucking care. All I know is that until we figure this shit out, I. Don't. Trust. You."

By this point, he's in my face, towering over me. My power starts to rise along with my anger. It starts in that empty space inside me and slithers out in all directions, lighting up nerve endings along the way until it reaches my fingertips. The lights start to flicker. The fireplace roars to life.

It's not a surprise there's no love lost between us. I've let his constant

hostility flow through me like water through a sieve since the day he got here. But now this ghost girl's switch has been flipped, and I refuse to stand here any longer and take the brunt of his anger that I've done nothing to provoke. Time to remind this asshole just who he's dealing with.

The sound system once again starts blaring a rather appropriate tune if I do say so myself. *Yeah, fuck you very much, Ass-Cole.*

We're toe to toe, Cole and me. Both breathing heavily, our eyes locked on each other. If I didn't know any better, I'd say this sounds like the start of a very sexy, drool-worthy scene that culminates with his and her pleasure. Unfortunately, as an active participant in the current situation, I can assure you that it is not in the least bit mouthwatering, and there will be no happy endings.

That alone is enough to have me lashing out at him.

"Just who in the hell do you think you are? *You* came to find *me*. Not the other way around. If there is anyone here who should be suspicious right now, it's me!" I shout over the song.

Realizing how ludicrous it is to yell over the music, I use my power to turn the volume down to a reasonable level while keeping the song on repeat because I know it will piss him off.

"What in the hell do you have to be suspicious of? You're dead. A ghost. No one can do shit to hurt you. My brothers and I, on the other hand, have everything to lose, and I'm not trusting our lives to a hot-headed nymphomaniac!"

"Nymphomaniac?" I sputter.

I'm slightly outraged. Slightly in agreement. I mean, it has been god knows how long since I got laid, and I tend to have a one track mind where these guys are concerned. Though that's totally beside the point right now. He thinks that I don't have feelings just because I'm no longer alive? That I can't be hurt? Well, he's wrong. Because right now, that empty space in my soul that's been begging for even the tiniest scrap of their attention, any teensy hint of connection, is shrinking in on itself. Closing itself off when it had only just begun to open itself up again. *Fuck him!*

"Maybe we should all calm down," Macklin says, trying to stem the rising tide of anger and revulsion in the room. Of course, we ignore him.

"You're wrong. I may be powerful, but I'm not invincible. There is one particular weakness you guys can exploit. Mack said the twins can send me to the afterlife. One little touch and boom! Bye bye, Fate."

The room is suddenly in an uproar, the guys all talking over each other.

“What the fuck, Mack?” Knox shouts.

“You told her we’d send her to the afterlife?” Thad demands.

“You told her about our abilities?” Levi asks.

“That was *not* your decision to make!” Cole growls.

“I only offered to help. I didn’t want her to be alone anymore,” Mack snaps, squaring his shoulders, which would be totally sexy if I had time to really appreciate it. Sadly, I don’t. I have to make an asshole remember his place.

I tune them out and focus on Cole.

“Maybe that’s what’s really going on here. You came to eliminate the threat. I mean, you said it yourself. I’ve been haunting your dreams for *years*. Were you tracking me down so you could finally put an end to the nightmares? Or maybe you wanted to rid yourself of whatever guilt you feel every time you look at me? It’s starting to look like I’m the one that shouldn’t trust any of you.”

I punctuate that last statement by stabbing his chest with my pointer finger. Unfortunately, it’s highly ineffective as it just sails right through his body rather than meeting the resistance it so desperately desired.

“Fate, we’re not here to harm you. We want answers, just like you do,” Knox tries to interject on his brother’s behalf, and I don’t pay any attention, but I do note the sense of strain in his voice. Poor guy is probably inundated with all these hostile feelings being slung around the room. I make a mental note to make it up to him later.

There’s a silent stand off as Cole and I glare at one another. The routine has become familiar in the days since the guys showed up, but this time there’s more than just seething anger in those beautiful blues. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think I’d hurt him somehow.

“You know what? I can’t deal with this right now. Why don’t you go give away orgasms like Oprah gives away cars and leave me the hell alone,” Cole snarls as he stomps out of the study, silence following in his wake. A few moments later, the back door opens then slams shut.

I’m staring at the doorway he just walked through, wondering why he gets under my skin so damn bad...and how in the hell he knows so much about Oprah. The man is an enigma I may never get the chance to figure out.

In that hint of a memory I have, the anguish in his voice is undeniable. I never would have expected him to aim that particular emotion at me or tell

me not to go, for that matter. Our current, unspoken *stay the fuck away from me pact* must not have existed then.

He's right about some of what he said, at least. We don't remember who we are to each other, and we don't know what that means for the rest of us.

"Give him time to cool off. One of us will go get him and bring him back in. We'll need to discuss everything we just learned," Macklin soothes as he walks up behind me.

I can't bring myself to turn around and face him, but I have to ask what I know we're all thinking.

"What does this all mean, Mack?"

"I'm not sure, Fate, but we'll figure it out. Together."

"Together..." Drawing out the word, I take a second to gather my spiraling thoughts before I continue. "Funny how only moments ago that word would've had me swooning at your feet."

I look over my shoulder and find him focused on me.

"Is that all it takes to get you on your knees, woman?" Thad asks, earning a smack to the back of the head from his brother.

"Ouch! What the fuck, man?"

Not even the twins' naughty sense of humor can ease the pain that is slowly encompassing my heart like a slow-moving poison through my blood.

"But now," I say slowly, turning to fully face Macklin, "now, I'm not sure together is such a good thing to be."

The hurt I see flash across his face causes a twinge in my heart, and I quickly scan the faces of the others, finding the same. I don't want to be the cause of those looks. Ever.

Hope. It's a dangerous emotion I had always managed to avoid. Until now. Until them. Now look where that's gotten me. Alone in a room full of people. Been there, done that, have the t-shirt.

"I'm going to go. I'll find you later." With that, I poof myself into one of the upstairs bathrooms and throw myself into my second favorite place in the house, the large empty tub where someone, at some point in time, left an empty wine bottle sitting in the corner. That person is someone I would probably get along with. I mean, I'd totally bring a whole bottle of wine to a tub soak...yes, *please!* Getting comfortable, I give in to a much-deserved pity party of one, imagining a full bottle of wine and a tub filled with luxurious bubbles. A ghost girl can dream, right?

8. **LEM**

TWIN FACT #1:

**WE DONT EXPERIENCE EACH
OTHER'S EMOTIONS (THANK FUCK
BECAUSE MY TWIN IS A DIPSHT).**

Lying on this somewhat comfortable twin bed, I think back to the clusterfuck that was this evening. The look on Fate's gorgeous face as Cole broke her spirit down is stuck in my damn head. She was finally starting to trust all of us, to ingratiate herself into our group, filling a spot that seemed to be custom-made just for her. The more time she spends around us, the more I notice the ever-present sadness in those haunted eyes slowly being replaced with a confidence and power that stirs something inside my soul.

Which is a first - for my soul, that is. Normally, it's there in the background of my consciousness, with about as much feeling as a doormat. After meeting Fate, it's as if it's waking up from a long slumber. This intense possessiveness and a growing sense that we need to protect her at all costs, along with a healthy dose of fond affection, are screwing with my mind, and the sexy as fuck ghost is responsible.

Fond affection? She's turning me into another Macklin. Fuck my life.

Except, after tonight, we're back to square one. A loud sigh escapes my lips before I can stop it.

"What the fuck are you pouting about over there?" Thad asks from the twin bed beside me. It's like we're kids again. Except we don't remember ever being kids, which is fucking strange. Even so, given our unique bond, we'd still prefer two small ass beds that barely fit half our bodies over being in separate rooms. When we're apart for too long, we get antsy and irritable, the sense that something is missing making us agitated and more aggressive. We've been lucky we've never had to see what would happen if we were separated indefinitely. Something tells me it wouldn't be good.

"You think she's okay?"

His eyes shutter, and whatever joke he was going to crack is gone like the wind.

We sit there for a moment, our eyes locked onto each other. Sometimes serious talks like this are just easier when you don't have to speak the thoughts out loud. Thank fuck for our twin connection making this one big silent conversation in our heads.

You know she's not okay, bro.

How can we make this right?

His eyes leave mine for a moment to stare at the ceiling, his large hands moving up and under his head. When his head finally tilts toward mine again, the serious look on his face tells me just how much this is bothering him too.

We can't. If we tried, we could end up doing more harm than good.

What do you mean?

Think about it, bro. One small mistake and we could accidentally send her off to the afterlife. We get too close to her, get a little too excited, let one spark fly from our fingers, and she's no more. You want to risk that?

It's my turn to look away. He's right, which is not something I often say. Of the two of us, he's the loose cannon. The one more likely to fuck things up and then smile at you in apology. Then I sweep in to smooth things over. But right now, he's one hundred percent right.

The fact that he's the rational one in this scenario is surprising and actually kind of fucking annoying. That's my usual gig, and I'm not sure how I feel about this role reversal. Is my whole world turning on its axis?

Despite the fact that everything in my being is begging me to go to her, to assure her that we would never hurt her, I can't because that's not a promise I

can make. And that thought tears a new hole in my already tattered soul.

“Dammit!”

“We’ll figure things out tomorrow. Let everyone cool off tonight,” Thad says quietly, like it’s the last thing he wants to do.

As my brain circles back to Fate, the one thing that’s become increasingly obvious is that somehow, in a short amount of time, she’s managed to carve out a place in my heart - a place that’s hers and hers alone. With every frantic beat in my chest, I know that neither my heart nor my soul is happy that we’re so fucking helpless. That there’s nothing we can do to change the fact that our girl is hurting. I can only pray that the next time we see her, we’ll be able to tell her just how important she’s becoming to us. How much we’re here for her and despite what my dipshit brothers do or say, she can always count on us to be in her corner.

9. COLE

ASSHOLE FACT #1:

WE DONT ALWAYS WANT TO BE
ASSHOLES. IT'S JUST PART OF
THE JOB DESCRIPTION.

The dreams have been coming more frequently over the years. With the chaos of the last few days, I fully expected them to get even worse. God, I hate it when I'm right. After seeing Knox and his sudden, almost obsessive connection with this spirit, I have begun to dread the night. I'm not one to believe in coincidences and have finally conceded they have everything to do with the girl. Ghost. Whatever the fuck she is. There's no denying it now anyway - not after seeing her.

Until today, my brothers hadn't known all the details. Guys don't ask a lot of questions. They don't want to discuss feelings - well, except maybe Knox. In true male fashion, most men wait until you're ready to talk about it. I had never reached that point. Until Mack pointed out that our histories are somehow tied together, and I was forced to.

Fuck! I should've told my brothers. Our bond has survived the years

because we're open and honest with each other. It's the very foundation we've built the last fifty years of our brotherhood on. The fact that I'm the one to put the first crack in it adds another bruise to my battered soul.

Sitting in bed, drenched in a cold sweat, I take deep breaths to calm my racing heart. This one was more realistic than any I've had before. The look of despair on her face shattered my heart, and the tears coursing down her cheeks were so real that I swear if I wiped them away, I'd wake up with the dampness still lingering on my fingers.

The sense of impending doom that always follows the nightmare - because, hell, I always call it like it is - leaves me irritable and moody. This time is no different. I take that back; with everything that went down tonight, it's worse than usual.

I throw the covers off and get out of bed. Padding to the en-suite bathroom, I head for the sink, turn on the chrome tap, and splash water on my face. Gripping the edges of the granite countertop so fiercely it's a wonder it doesn't crack beneath my hands, I lift my head and stare at myself in the mirror. I take a good, long look at the features I've seen every day for the last fifty years. The ice blue eyes are the same. Nose is still straight despite numerous attempts to change that. There are no new wrinkles, scars, or marks lining my skin. My hair is styled differently now but is still as black as night. I'm the same man that woke up in Phoenix all those years ago, but how long will that last? Something tells me that my past is catching up to me. With no idea what that means, I'm scared shitless for the first time in this life.

Avoiding the pain and anger and confusion that were building inside me was easy when I could pick fights or drink myself into a stupor every night. I could ignore the itch just under my skin caused by the unease that threatened to devour me whole at the first sign of weakness. Then my brothers saved me. Pulled me out from that pit I had fallen into before I could let the fear consume me, because underneath it all, that's what it was. *Fear*. Channeling my power into keeping them safe helped me stave off this sense of impending doom that follows me around like my own personal rain cloud.

My power, the ability to command those closest to me without question and outsiders by a simple touch, comes with a hefty price tag. I'm always cognizant of each choice that needs to be made, not wanting my brothers to ever feel like I'm making them do something they truly don't want to do, but when push comes to shove, I'm the one that has to make the tough calls. Our survival has always been my burden to bear. I may be an asshole and

naturally take charge, but the weight of responsibility is a load too heavy even for me sometimes.

When we got word of a house that had been haunted by a spirit intent on scaring buyers away, that this spirit was powerful and not to be messed with, my gut tried to warn me. I chose to ignore it. I mean, what were the chances this was in any way related?

Now, after seeing my nightmare manifest right before my very eyes, that fear is slowly clawing its way to the surface again, and neither my power nor my brothers will be enough to stop it. The only thing that can, the only *one* that can, is someone I refuse to get close to.

The moment she appeared in the study, I knew there was no denying it any longer. While the hazy form made it impossible to discern the color of her hair or the exact shade of her eyes, I knew. Her hair was a deep brown, like the dark chocolate I enjoy so much. Those eyes were gray and could pierce you with a single look. The large, pink lips were tilted into something other than an expression of utter sorrow, a rarity that *almost* brought a smile to my face.

That's usually all I ever remember when I wake up. Her beautiful, devastated face. Aside from that, I can recall nothing. No prior memories of her. No prior memories of us. No prior memories of my brothers. Nothing.

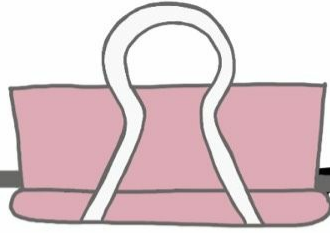
It's for that reason I don't trust her. *Can't* trust her. My brothers' lives are on the line, and an unknown such as our ghost girl, with as much power as she's packing, is a dangerous thing. There are just too many questions. Why am I always screaming for her not to go? Is that look of sorrow from my dream for herself or for all of us? Maybe just one of us? Is it a premonition of things to come or something from our past? Is it caused by guilt or devastation? I'm not the one with the ability to sense emotions, but even I know that I'm missing something important. We need to find answers, fast.

Frustrated, I leave the bathroom and head for the kitchen. It's the middle of the night, and the house is dark and quiet. The stairs under my feet are silent as I follow them down and around, through the foyer, to the back of the house.

The two sets of French doors on the back wall are the first things I see. The moon is high tonight, giving me just enough light to see the spectacular view. A stone patio sits just outside the door. Though it's empty right now after being abandoned for so long, it's big enough for a large patio table and a few lounge chairs. Maybe even a fire pit, though I doubt we'll be here long

enough to get to enjoy that. A massive yard with green grass that seems endless lies just beyond the stone pavers. The old weeping willow, the tree that is somehow linked to *her*, is off in the distance, the branches nearly sweeping the ground beneath. An old swing still hangs, ready to be put to use. I wonder how many kids have been pushed on that thing? How many families have called this place home?

I stand at the door, looking out into the tranquility of a cloudless night sky. It's calm. Peaceful. I'm not sure I've ever felt that particular emotion. I'm positive I won't any time soon, and that's fine with me. I'll give anything, do anything, to ensure my brothers get to experience it, and that's enough for me. Though something tells me our little spitfire is about to turn our whole world upside down, and there's nothing I can do to stop it.



10. Fate

Ghost Girl Fact #5:

We do not lose our tempers. Only when provoked, or faced with assholes, or so damn turned on we can't think straight. See also Fact #4.

Crying is highly underestimated in my opinion. The release is so utterly invaluable, but no one realizes that until the tears can no longer flow. I wonder how many people out there are physically incapable of crying. Chances are probably less than one percent, kind of like the chances of a smile on Cole's kissable lips. Guess that leaves little old me. The ghost girl whose tension slowly builds up like water inside a water balloon without the ability to cry it out. How much can it hold before it simply bursts? When that pain can't break free through tears, how else does it escape?

I was once a relatively happy ghost girl. I had my own space. My own sense of self. My own unlife - pathetic, though it may have been. Now, for the first time since I appeared here, I'm lost. This connection to the guys is taking a turn in a direction I hadn't anticipated. I wanted answers, but I only got more questions.

Are they really the reason I'm stuck in this afterlife limbo?

What does this mean for me moving forward?

Who am I, or maybe more accurately, who *was* I?

If Cole's nightmares are actually memories, then I wasn't exactly human, right? Humans don't disappear in clouds of smoke. I already know the guys are something *more*, though they haven't had time to explain to me what that entails.

Maybe it's time I demand some answers from the one person who will give it to me straight regardless of whether the truth hurts like a bitch.

I sit up and harden my resolve. They aren't the only ones whose past is coming back to haunt them, and I deserve answers just as much as they do. If they didn't want to share, they shouldn't have sought me out, right?

Damn straight!

I repeat a new mantra in my head.

I will not lose my temper. I will not lose my temper.

Oh...who am I kidding? I'm totally going to lose my temper. He and I go together like gasoline and fire.

I poof myself to the kitchen and look out the doors at the blackness of the night. The grounds are beautiful in the daytime, but I stopped enjoying them years ago when I realized the sun no longer warmed me, and the yard was more like a set of iron bars than a relaxing haven.

I spot a shadowy figure that can only be Cole out by the willow.

Before I can change my mind, I'm standing next to him. He's staring the tree down like its very existence pisses him off, and it probably does. Everything does. So I stare down the damn willow like it's personally aggrieved me too.

"What did this tree ever do to you?" I blurt out, and Cole startles slightly. That makes me smile, feeling a tad bit triumphant. The man is normally as unshakeable as a damn stone statue. I mean, I would've loved to see him jump and scream like a girl, but I'll take what I can get.

"What the fuck do you want?"

"Straight to business. I like it."

"Didn't I tell you to leave me the hell alone?"

"Did you actually expect me to listen to you?"

He turns to face me then, anger and frustration and something else flashing in those pretty blues. For a second, I just stare at him. I know this man. Maybe not the man standing before me, but the man he used to be. I can

feel it in my soul; a little spark of a connection flares brightly every time he's around. It feels like passion and pain, love and sorrow. It so badly wants to break free from the confines it's been placed in.

I ignore the damn thing.

We're obviously not the same people we once were. Hell, even if we did remember each other, I'm not so sure new me would like new him. Letting that teensy connection grow once again could be our final demise.

I let my gaze drift back to the tree, refusing to let those eyes draw me in.

"It's frightening, isn't it?" I murmur.

"What is?" he practically growls.

"Not knowing who you are or where you came from."

There's a brief pause while he takes me in and releases a long sigh, turning back to the tree. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him put his hands in his back pockets.

The silence drags out until I can barely stand it. He drops his head back for a second and mutters something just low enough that I can't make it out. Then he's staring at the tree once more with a determined look on his face.

"I never actually had a problem with that until the nightmares started," he finally responds. The reluctance to converse with me is evident in his tone. Still, he continues. "I knew they were more than just dreams after the third or fourth time, which meant nothing good could have happened. Why else would I be forced to relive that moment over and over? Makes it hard to keep going when you're not sure what you did so wrong to get you to where you are."

He takes a deep breath. His shoulders straighten ever so slightly, and his biceps tense up with his agitation.

"There's a lot you don't know, Fate. About us. About what we've seen and experienced over the last fifty years. About what we're capable of. If you did, I'm not sure you'd be as eager for answers as you think you are."

The Cole I had grown to know would rather stick hot pokers in his eyes than give me even a tiny hint of vulnerability, so to say his response surprises me is an understatement. I want to keep him talking. Need him to give me the answers he seems to think I shouldn't want.

"So why don't you tell me? Help me understand."

"I can't. My responsibility is to my brothers. To keep them safe. Alive. Until we know more about who you are and what happened, I can't risk it. I won't."

While I understand and respect his loyalty to his brothers, my frustration begins to grow. Once more, I'm an outsider looking in. Except this time, I'm not just watching frivolous activities and playing games with unsuspecting people. This is my very existence on the line, and I'll be damned if he just brushes me off.

With impatience clawing at me, I repeat my *I will not lose my temper* mantra until I'm reasonably sure I won't bite his head off - figuratively, of course, because this ghost girl isn't a fan of blood.

Once I'm fairly confident I have myself under control, I ask, "What do you think happened to us, Cole?"

He's silent for a moment, and I'm totally fine with that. It gives me a chance to appreciate the darkness although I'm almost sad I missed the sunset casting gorgeous colors across the sky. The creatures of the night are starting to quiet down in preparation for the day ahead. How long has it been since I've purposefully stepped a foot outside the house? I may be a ghost, and I may be stuck here indefinitely, but there are still experiences to be had in this afterlife, right?

Breaking me out of my reverie, his voice is soft again when he replies, "We hurt each other somehow. Badly. Now we're here, like this, because of that."

Even though I knew that already, I consider his words and take a moment to search inside myself. There are memories there that are just beyond my reach. That pain I experience that I can't quite name might give me some answers, but it's buried so deep that I can't get a good grasp on it no matter how hard I try.

"Don't you think it would be better if we worked together to try to figure it out?" I plead.

He turns to look at me again, his gaze searching for something when our eyes meet in the shadows.

"No. I don't."

A little shocked despite myself, I'm sure my brows have hit my hairline, and my frustration surges to dangerous levels.

"Why do you hate me so much? I'm here with a damn olive branch, and you just slapped me in the face with it." My voice wavers slightly, mostly from the anger building within me, but also from the hurt I'm trying desperately to ignore.

"I don't hate you. I hate how you make me feel."

I take in that seemingly innocent statement and let it roll around in my brain. There's a challenge in his eyes I haven't seen before. Like he's begging me to prove him wrong. I want to - desperately. If I only knew why he seems to think he's so right.

"How do I make you feel, Cole? Other than pissed off, that is."

His eyes are still locked on mine, a myriad of emotions in their depths.

When his gaze moves to the ground, I think our conversation is over. Then his low, rich voice is rushing out into the night, the words spat out gruffly like his mouth took control before his brain could figure out what was happening.

"Like I'm on fire every time you're near me. Like my skin is too tight. Like there's something inside me just begging to be free so I can consume you whole. Like my very soul recognizes its other half."

I'm speechless. These weren't flowery compliments or tender declarations of love. Just a few harshly spoken sentences, yet he has melted my ice. Broken down my walls. Drained the poison right from my veins, leaving me open and exposed and so damned shocked I can't think straight.

I should've known it wasn't that simple though.

"But you also make me feel like my heart is being broken in two every time my eyes catch yours. Like the very soul that belongs to you is being shredded into pieces and laid at your feet. Like I will burst into flames the second I get too close. I trust my gut, and that's why this," his finger moves between the two of us, "whatever *this* is...can't happen. Won't happen. Maybe Macklin was right. Maybe the twins should give you a personal demonstration of their powers. The temptation you offer on an open platter is likely to get us all killed, and I'd rather see you gone than to see my brothers suffer any more than they already have."

A slap across the face would've been less harsh than those words. He lured me in. Hooked me. Then dragged me out into the open, gutted me, and threw me on the fire.

If this is what my existence is to consist of, if I only have two options in this ridiculous afterlife, perpetual loneliness or emotional battery, then I think I'm ready to wave the white flag and surrender. I realize I'm tired, a soul-deep sense of exhaustion stemming from the fact that I live day in and day out but don't really live at all. I simply exist, barely. There will never be more for me than this, and a ghost girl can only take so much before she simply gives up.

“You win,” I say simply, and his stunned look holds no satisfaction for me.

“What do you mean, I win?”

“You win. I give up. I surrender. Call the twins and have them do their thing.”

“Fate...”

“No. You don’t get to backtrack now. You’ve thrown it all out there, and I’ve listened. Come to terms with the fact that this is all there will ever be for me. I choose my own fate.” I take a deep breath and release a self-deprecating chuckle. “Ironic, right? But I won’t let anyone else decide what happens to me. So, call them. Let’s get this thing done.”

“Come on. You don’t actually mean that.”

“Oh, but I do. I’m one hundred percent dead-fucking serious right now. Call. Them.”

“I’m not going to...”

“Since when did you grow a pussy? A few seconds ago, your balls were so big they wouldn’t fit through a door. You got what you wanted. Take it. Call them. End me. You. Fucking. Win!”

By the end I’m shouting at him.

The look on his face would be comical if I wasn’t practically vibrating with anger. My power, which had been fairly dormant until now, is blazing inside of me. Rolling just under my skin, looking for an escape. My fingertips tingle and my toes curl as my body attempts to keep the beast inside of me contained.

“Well? Go on. Do it!” I snarl.

“Just calm down and let’s...”

Calm down? He wants me to calm down after he just swung a damn sledgehammer through what was left of my non-existent heart? As if.

Another surge of power has my knees almost buckling, but I keep my balance. Aware that he’s now the one in imminent danger if I can’t release some of this power that’s inside of me, I stumble back a few steps. I frantically look around, seeking something to aim all of this anger and frustration and energy at.

My eyes land on the willow tree, and something inside of me snaps free. Whether it’s a snippet of a memory or a figment of my imagination caused by the stress I’m currently under, I can’t be sure. But suddenly I know this willow tree and I really do have a history. We have a connection, the two of

us. One forged in death.

Before I can even think about what I'm doing, I'm stalking up to the tree. Something is calling to me, like to like. Power to power. A connection that is awakening from a long slumber.

"Fate? What are you doing?"

I ignore Cole and keep walking through the hanging branches and over the uneven ground with sections of roots sticking out until I can lay my palm against the rough bark. The second contact is made, I feel it. The power. So much like my own that the two forces surge forward, needing to reunite.

"Fate? What the fuck is going on?"

So he sees it too. The glow that has started to spread out from where my hand is joined to the trunk. I move to pull away but can't. My hand is locked into place, my fingertips digging into the bark until it's almost painful. *Wait a minute. I can feel pain. What the hell is happening?* Panic starts seeping through the anger without lessening the power inside me.

"I don't know. I can't move my hand."

"Here. Let me help..."

"No! Don't get too close. My power is growing. I won't be able to keep it contained much longer. Just go."

"I'm not leaving you here like this."

"You have to. You've got your brothers. Keep them safe. Tell them..." I pause, coming to terms with the fact that this is probably where my existence ends. I take a shuddering breath. "Tell them I said thank you for making sure my last days weren't spent alone."

"Fate..."

"I'm sorry, Cole, for whatever happened in the past. And just in case sorry isn't what's needed, I forgive you. Hopefully one of those is enough to stop the nightmares and help you move forward."

The glow is now a large, ghostly flame, illuminating the entire space under the willow's hanging branches. There's no heat, just an intense light that's growing by the second. The ground begins to shake, causing the branches to sway which throws a beautiful light pattern out into the yard beyond. It would be a stunning sight to take in if it wasn't so damn terrifying.

"Don't do this."

"I don't have a choice. Now hurry."

Just as I say that, bolts of lightning start shooting out from between my hand and the tree. The power in my body has recognized the power within the

tree, and nothing is going to stop the two from having a happy little reunion.

“Now, Cole! Run!”

I watch as his hands fist and his jaw clenches when the realization hits that there’s nothing he can do. The emotion in his eyes is one I am intimately familiar with. Regret.

“It’s okay. Go. Please,” I whisper desperately.

With one last look and a simple nod, he runs off into the night.

I hold on with all my might for as long as I can. Praying he’s a safe distance away, I let my head drop forward and take a deep breath. On the exhale, I release the tight hold I have on my power, setting it free.

There’s a blast of bright light and a sudden surge of power like I’ve never felt, then the world goes black.

11. Somewhere in the Gateway... Present day

Personal Assistant Fact #1: Do your job even when there's no one around to appreciate your hard work. But seriously...where the fuck is everyone?

If I have to dust another damn piece of furniture, I'm going to lose my shit. Dusting has never been in my job description. I am 'Assistant to the Queen.' This sort of menial labor is beneath me. Or at least it *was* until all hell broke loose.

One second, we're all going about our daily duties, and then wham! The queen goes AWOL, ghosts start to panic and flood the chambers, and then...double wham! Her crew appears - laid out on the floor - unconscious. Before I can so much as blink, a highly unexpected shockwave blasts through the room. The riff raff disappears in wisps of smoke, and I'm left standing in the center of it all, staring in stunned disbelief.

I'm a little embarrassed to say that it took me a few moments to get my shit together. I've always been unshakeable; that's why the queen chose me. Well, that and she needed some estrogen and serious sarcasm appreciation around here - kindred spirits, she and I - but this was something I'd never experienced in all my years on this plane.

So, I did the only thing I could do. I made sure my friends were kept as

comfortable as possible. She would've expected nothing less. For years, I watched over their prone forms, making sure no one and nothing got to them. Not that there was a lot of activity here. For the first time in centuries, the place was as silent as a tomb. Which is pretty ironic considering we deal with death on the daily around here. Or at least we did.

It's simple, really. This is the Gateway. The plane the deceased must pass through before judgment. Think of it like a very busy processing center. Hundreds of thousands of spirits walk through here, all awaiting their turn to be sent off to their final destination. That's our queen's job, to oversee it all with her handpicked crew by her side.

Except now, they're all gone, and I'm left here to wonder what that means for the surface world. Without this place in operation, those spirits we saw day in and day out are trapped. Stuck somewhere between planes, unable to cross over. That means the surface world is probably all sorts of crazy right now. Like a clogged drain, the backup has to go somewhere.

Just when I thought things couldn't possibly get any worse, one day, many decades ago now, the crew simply disappeared. And when I say disappeared, I mean *vanished*. Poof. Gone. Right in front of my very eyes.

My link went silent and has stayed that way, and that is highly disconcerting.

I know they'll all be back one day. She wouldn't let anything keep her away from this place or from them. Which leaves me here, cleaning, to make sure that when they show up, it's as immaculate as the day they all left. I'm such a good little assistant. See, that's some high-quality sarcasm right there.

The rag floats through the air, clearing the dust that has gathered on the queen's chair. She hates the word throne, and to be honest, she hates the fact that I call her queen. In her eyes, she is merely a woman with an extraordinary and highly satisfying day job.

Highly satisfying - hell, I'd be satisfied too with all that eye candy surrounding me. I think they like to see who can get the biggest shock out of me with their damn near pornographic public displays of affection. Horny bastards. And though my preferences don't run along the same lines, a girl can still appreciate an attractive man when she sees one. Of course, I can't enjoy that particular pleasure either way. Assistant to the queen I might be, that doesn't change the fact that I'm still as dead as a doorknob.

With another swipe of the rag and a very dramatic sigh, I move around the chamber. It's a large room; the raised dais sits at the back with a deep red

runner that flows from her throne - I mean, her *chair* - down the steps, across the sparkly white-tiled floor, all the way to the doorway. All of the doors throughout the entire compound have remained closed and locked down tight since the shockwave slammed them shut. Doesn't stop me, of course, but any unspelled spirits out there can't get in.

The once stylish, white and black damask walls have taken on a gray hue - actually, the whole damn place has. It's like the Gateway senses its queen's absence and demonstrates its grief by bathing the entire plane in tones of gray. It would be utterly depressing if not for the hundreds of portraits that cover nearly every available inch of wall space. Some in black and white. Some in muted color. All memories from centuries gone by. I make sure each is gleaming, just like the day they were hung with love and care. They are the only reminder that this place was once lively and bright, or at least as lively as a place that temporarily houses death's occupants can be. The colors here were once more vibrant and richer than the surface world.

I pass by the door off to the left of the dais that leads to her office. I cleaned in there yesterday. Or maybe it was last week? Time works differently here. Her desk is exactly as she left it, papers and writing utensils neatly placed on the dark wood's surface. The comfy, burgundy sofa and chairs that sit in the center provide a cozy seating area; they're ready for more of the conversations and laughter that used to fill this room. The fireplace is cold but stocked with everything needed to fill this place with warmth once again.

For now, I continue to clean and straighten things that aren't really untidy in the main room, but it keeps my mind from going completely batshit crazy. A hundred years will do that to even the strongest of spirits.

Suddenly, a zap of current sparks through the room, lighting the sconces along the wall and sending fresh air throughout the chamber. Didn't realize how musty the place had gotten. Not that I can smell it or anything. It's more the feel of the air as it moves through me. It isn't as dense. If that makes any sense. Which it probably doesn't, but such is life. Or death. Whatever.

My link that has been dormant for longer than I care to contemplate unexpectedly goes live again, and I'm flooded with an overflow of information coming so fast that I can't keep up with it all. My head spins, figuratively, of course, because hello, I've seen the *Exorcist*, and I'd never do something so uncouth as to let my head rotate 360 degrees. Off-balance, I fall right through the wall and into the hallway outside the main chamber,

stumbling a bit before dropping to my knees.

Reeling from the re-established link, I grab my head in my hands and try to work out what it's trying to tell me.

It's hard to explain this link, this tether between us, when I don't fully understand it myself. It's more than a simple means of communicating. Not alive, per se, but somewhat sentient. It's like the telephone, GPS, and an alarm system had a magical baby, and each one of the queen's crew cares for and responds to the baby in our own ways.

What? Weird explanation? Sometimes my mind works in mysterious ways. Another reason the queen chose me. Kindred spirits, remember?

Right now, the link is flooded with stuttered voices and garbled shouts. It sounds like one hell of a bad cell phone connection, and that's never a good sign. When it's overwhelmed, the link can be a bastard to understand. I wait it out, knowing that once it calms down, I should be able to get a location on the queen or at least one of the others. That's all I should need to find them and figure out what the hell is going on.

I've got a century worth of bitching and moaning just bottled up and waiting to rant on about. And they have some explaining to do.



My head is pounding like I've had one too many whiskeys, except I'm pretty damn sure I haven't had so much as a sip in years. I slowly open my eyes and take stock of my surroundings.

The moon is still high in the sky, the yard shrouded in darkness, but I can make out the house, which is somehow tilted on its side, up ahead. The grass beneath my face starts to tickle my nose, and I realize I'm actually the one who's sideways, sprawled out on the back lawn, just shy of the patio.

Taking a quick inventory of the rest of my body - fingers and toes, hands and feet all move with no pain - I tentatively push myself up off the ground, getting to my feet. I'm covered in dirt and grass but otherwise seem unharmed, all things considered.

Running my hands over my face, the fingers on my right hand sink into something wet and sticky. Gently, I prod around above my cheekbone and,

with an embarrassing wince, discover a ragged cut at my temple. It's small but bleeding like a son of a bitch.

Guess this could've been a helluva lot worse if I had made it a few more steps onto the stone patio. At least the grass acted as a cushion. I have it to thank for keeping my skull mostly intact.

Bright light is suddenly flooding the area from the numerous backyard lights, and I shield my eyes from the glare. The back door flies open, and I look over to see all four of my brothers rush out. When they get a good look at me, they come to such an abrupt stop I imagine their feet squealing and smoking like tires, all four of them doing a pretty awesome impression of that cliched cartoon moment. It would be comical if it weren't for the bass drum thumping out a rhythm inside my skull. Maybe I hit my head a little harder than I thought.

"What the fuck happened to you?" Levi asks. His total lack of concern has me rolling my eyes, which my head does not appreciate.

Macklin is the first to recover from his shock and makes his way over to inspect me. "Looks like it's just a scratch. I don't think you need stitches."

Knox interrupts Macklin's check up. "What in the hell happened out here? The whole house started shaking." His voice is full of impatience and something else I can't quite name as he scans the yard and beyond. "Then we heard a loud blast, almost like a grenade or bomb had gone off. Woke us all up."

"I just woke up face first in the dirt. Haven't had time to figure out exactly what happened yet."

"Tell us what you remember," Macklin says gently.

"I woke up after another nightmare, and I came out here to calm down. I was standing at the willow tree, looking for anything unusual, and berating headstrong, beautiful ghosts when Fate..." I trail off as the last few moments hit me with all the force of a mack truck.

Us arguing. The tree. The light. The look in her eyes. Her apology. Her saving my life.

Without saying a word, I turn and sprint in the direction of the willow, the last place I saw Fate. As I approach the spot, it takes a moment for the sight in front of me to register.

I can hear my brothers close on my heels, someone shouting my name, and I stop just shy of where the tree once stood, my brothers' voices cutting off as soon as they've reached me. All of us are in a line, staring at what was

once a large, ancient willow tree. Now, it's nothing more than scrap wood spread out in all directions. Leaves and some larger tree limbs that somehow managed to avoid being decimated are scattered about. Clumps of dirt and grass are tossed amongst it all, leaving divots in the ground from where they were violently ripped up. The swing is upside down, its ropes mangled and twisted.

It does, indeed, look like a bomb has gone off with the tree at the epicenter. But it wasn't a bomb or a grenade. It was the ghost girl. *Our* ghost girl.

"Seriously, what the fuck happened?" Levi snaps again.

I can't answer him. My heart, which could rival the Grinch's in size, is now shriveling to nothing more than a minute speck. I had been a total dick, and what did she do? She saved me. She held on and ensured I walked away from this with my life intact. That woman made sure I could spend another day with my brothers. Doesn't it figure that I'd stop thinking of her as a ghost now that she's gone, but even I have to admit that what she made me feel was as real as anything I've ever known. How will I ever forgive myself after this? It's my nightmare all over again, except this time it's much, much worse.

"Cole, man, were you out here when that thing exploded?" Macklin asks quietly.

It doesn't escape my attention that Knox has gone eerily still and silent. No doubt, he's feeling something, but I'm too afraid to ask what.

"She told me to run," I whisper.

"Who told you to run?" Thad demands, a warning in his tone.

"Fate."

He's on me in a second, his hands wrapping themselves in my shirt. He lifts me off the ground, my toes just barely touching. Rage is simmering in his eyes, and I've known him long enough to recognize the danger there.

"What did you do to her?" he asks menacingly.

"Bro, calm down. We don't..." Levi begins.

"No! He just said he was out here with her. Look at that tree! Look at *him*," Thad shouts at his twin, then to me asks, "Where is she, Cole?"

The look on my perpetually playful brother's face is a new one. It registers that he's deadly serious, possibly for the first time in his life. I didn't even think the word was in his vocabulary.

I knew Knox had grown fond of Fate, obsessed really, but it wasn't until

this moment and the look in Thad's eyes, that I realize he wasn't alone in his feelings.

Thad doesn't take his eyes off of mine when he asks, "Knox, do you feel her?"

No response. Knox has yet to utter a single word, and his silence is telling. His eyes are locked onto the debris like it can tell him what happened.

"Dammit! Someone tell me where the fuck Fate is, or I swear to God you won't like what happens next," Thad growls, his fury close to boiling over.

"Thad, let go of Cole. He'll talk. Just give him a minute," Mack soothes.

Thad's still staring me down, and I give him a small nod. As much an acknowledgement of the terms as a promise to abide by them. I could simply command him to release me, but I understand his worry. I also know things are about to get worse before they get better, and I don't need my powers to compound the problem.

Slowly, he lowers me to my feet and yanks his hands free. "Start talking," he demands.

I run those last few moments around in my mind.

She fucking saved me, and I didn't deserve it.

"Last warning," Thad growls impatiently.

His twin comes up to his side and places a hand on his shoulder. Recognizing how short Thad's fuse currently is, I know I need to start explaining myself.

"We were talking, and things got pretty heated," I begin.

"She came to you?" Macklin asks.

"Yes. She wanted answers, but I wouldn't give them to her."

Dammit, why didn't I just give her something? Anything. What harm could it have done? Why did I let my damn pride get in the way? Fuck!

"And then what?" Thad barks.

Shifting my gaze to the ground, unable to meet their eyes, my shoulders slump from the intense weight of my regret. "I said...some things I shouldn't have said."

"Some things like what?" Levi jumps in, placing a hand on his twin's chest to stop him from coming at me again. They share a heated look, doing their damn twin speak, and I watch as Levi's jaw clenches and he shakes his head, giving his brother a warning. *Fuck, hope he's got a good leash on Thad because he's really not going to like this. None of them are.*

"I told her you guys should give her a personal demonstration of your

powers. That I'd rather see her gone than for you guys to be hurt."

"You said *what?*" Thad explodes.

With great power, comes great responsibility. I fully understand the wisdom behind those words. My brothers don't realize the burden I bear. They don't understand it's my duty to keep each and every one of them safe - or the effect the potential consequences have on my decision-making.

"Look, I can't let anything happen to you guys. You're my priority. You were all so wrapped up in her and her ass that you were blind to the very real danger she represented."

"How could we have possibly realized there was danger if you didn't fill us in?" Levi mutters, clearly exasperated.

His twin barks out, "News flash, dickweed. None of us are mind readers."

"I realize I was wrong to keep the details of my nightmares from you, especially after Fate came into our world. I'm sorry," I murmur, my hand snaking up to run through my hair, messing it up even more than it already was. I'm frustrated and pissed. Not at them, at myself.

"Sorry isn't worth jack shit. Not when one of our lives could have been in danger. Not that I think they ever were. And if I find out you harmed one hair on her ghostly head because of some perceived risk, I'm gonna..."

I shake my head, annoyed despite myself.

"Are you even listening to the words coming out of your mouth? She's a goddamn ghost. How could I harm a hair on her head when my hand would just pass right through it?"

"Oh, so you've got jokes now, do you? Let's see how funny it is when my fist rearranges your teeth!"

And with that, Thad's big ass fist comes flying at my face. Anyone else would've been knocked out, or possibly worse. Lucky for me, I've lived with these fuckers much too long, and they're predictable. Even so, I barely manage to duck and dive, narrowly missing a punch that would've hurt like hell.

By the time I've righted myself, his twin has him in a headlock.

"She better be okay, bro, or you and I are going to have problems," he mutters, half out of breath.

"She didn't..." I pause, knowing there are no words that will make this any easier on them.

"She didn't, what?" Macklin asks, an urgency in his tone that tells me things are about to go from bad to worse.

I hesitate, growing just as frustrated as they are at my inability to find the right way to say this. I know they need to hear it, but I'm unable to form the words. Knox is the empath of the group, able to discern and deal with high emotion. Macklin is the resident peacekeeper, knowing how to handle tricky situations in the most calm yet effective way possible. Either one of them would be more capable of handling this than me. Chalk it up to one more thing that falls on my heavy list of thankless duties.

"She said to tell you guys thank you for making sure she didn't spend these last few days alone."

The blood drains from Mack's face. It's at that moment, I know I've made a huge miscalculation. This *thing* between them all goes a lot deeper than a simple fondness. Even for Macklin. It's also in this moment that I know this could very well break them. It's already broken me, and I didn't think I could be broken any more than I already am.

Shit. How did I not see this sooner?

"Why can't she tell us that herself?" Levi asks, obviously confused.

"Because she's not here anymore," Mack falters, his voice quivering slightly at the end. The look on his face is one of disbelief and denial.

Fuck! This is worse than I thought.

Levi drops his hold on Thad, and as if that's all he's been waiting for, Thad lunges, taking advantage of my distraction.

"You son of a bitch! I'll kill you!"

He's on me before I can outmaneuver him, knocking me to the ground and landing a solid punch to my jaw. I block the next one and manage to buck the big fucker off me. Rolling quickly to the side, I jump to my feet. He's slower to stand, so I'm ready for him, but I don't want to fight. I need to explain what happened.

"Just hold on a damn minute!" I shout, holding out both hands with the hope that my giant of a brother recognizes the universal symbol for stop. "I didn't do anything to her! Her power went crazy when she touched the willow tree's trunk, and she couldn't move away. There was light everywhere and this humming power that made my ears ring. She knew she wasn't going to be able to hold on to it much longer, and she told me to run. She fucking saved my life."

It hits me again, the sacrifice she made for me. All of the sorrow and guilt and regret that has been building up inside me for years suddenly assaults me. Overwhelms my senses and shatters my control.

“She saved my life, but I couldn’t save her,” I rasp as I let my head drop to my chest and close my eyes so I don’t have to look at the slivers of wood and clumps of dirt. My voice wavers as I whisper, “I had just found her, and now I’ve lost her all over again.”

No one speaks. The soft chirping of crickets and a toad’s croak out in the distance are the only sounds breaking the silence.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Mack asks gently.

“I remember seeing lightning start to streak out of the connection between her and the tree. That’s when she begged me to go. There was nothing I could do, so I ran as fast as I could back toward the house to get you guys. I heard the blast and got hit from behind with a punch of power, and then it was lights out.”

“Do you think there’s a chance she survived it? I mean, she’s a ghost. Maybe she just got blasted back to the house. Like a reset or something?” he asks hopefully.

“She knew, Mack. She knew whatever the hell was happening was the end. I could see it in her eyes.”

“But we have to check. Thad, Levi. Run back to the house and...”

“She’s not there,” Knox cuts in, his voice flat, without a hint of the emotions he has to be overwhelmed with.

“What do you mean? Is she out here somewhere? Can you sense her?” Mack questions.

“I feel her. It’s like she’s...everywhere. The ground, the sky, the air surrounding us all.”

Mack and I share a quick look of concern. Knox was closest to Fate, and this has surely hit him the hardest.

“Knox, that doesn’t make any sense. She can’t be...”

“I think her essence engulfed everything when the blast went off. Her power soaked into the surroundings when she wasn’t there to contain it any longer,” he says quietly.

The entire group goes silent again at his words, reality sinking in. Our potential missing piece, the one we had only just found, is gone. I have another nightmare to add to my collection, except this time I won’t be suffering it alone.

I’m not sure how long we sit there, silently processing all that’s happened while the moonlight plays with the remains of what was once a large beautiful tree. When I finally snap out of the internal battle raging inside my

mind, I take a deep breath before slowly lifting my head. I look around at my brothers, all grieving in their own way.

Levi has a hand on the back of his twin's neck, while Thad stands with his fists and jaw clenching, staring angrily at where the willow once stood tall.

Knox has both hands on his head, his fingers tightly gripping his hair. His face is etched with agony. Not only is he dealing with his own emotions, but all of ours as well.

When I look at poor Macklin, my heart breaks all over again. For the first time in our fifty years together, his attention had been captured by something other than his research. Wait. Not something. *Someone*. Knox may be the empath of the group, but Mack is the heart, and now, that heart has been broken. A single tear leaks from his eye, which he quickly wipes away with the back of his hand.

Setting my own feelings aside to be dealt with later, I figuratively put my leader hat back on, though it's sitting slightly askew now. Not exactly comfortable, but that suits me just fine at the moment.

"Come on. Let's get back to the house. I need a shower, and you all could use some rest."

Levi wraps his arm around his twin's shoulder and leads Thad away, murmuring softly.

I walk over to Macklin, asking a silent question when our eyes meet.

"I'll be fine," he manages before turning and heading toward the house.

I watch the three of them go, wishing there was more I could do to help them. Glancing at my remaining brother, the despair that's rolling off him is so thick I can practically grab it with both hands.

"Knox, you too."

"I'll be just a minute. I need...space."

I know he means from the emotions we're all projecting, so I give him a nod.

"Don't be long or I'll be back to drag you in."

I slowly make my way toward the house, the night's events playing in a continuous loop in my mind like a movie on repeat. My head is still pounding, but that pain has nothing on the regret pooling in what remains of my heart, eating away at it like a flesh-eating disease.

Levi is holding the door, waiting for Mack and me. When my boot hits the stone patio, I hear Knox's shout.

“Wait! Something’s happening!”

Mack looks back at me, and we both turn and race back to the tree where Knox still stands. Levi yells for Thad, his voice desperate, and I know they won’t be far behind.

“What is it?” I ask.

Knox is still staring at the debris like it holds all the answers, and I have to tamp down my impatience. Just as I’m about ready to lose it, Thad and Levi come running up.

“I don’t know. All of a sudden, that feeling of her being everywhere slowly started to recede, almost like it was being sucked down a drain. Power is growing again, somewhere in this rubble, but I just can’t pinpoint where with everything else going on.”

“What does that mean?” Thad rasps.

“Everyone quiet,” I command. “Let’s give Knox a minute so he can figure out what’s what.”

The seconds tick by while we all wait. My hope is soaring even though I try to tamp it back down. Hope is a dangerous thing.

A soft moan echoes through the night.

“Did you hear that!” Mack says excitedly. “Which direction did it come from?”

“Everyone split up,” I command, ready to put my restlessness into something productive. “Search everywhere. It’s not like we can find her by touch, so we’ll have to use our other senses in the dark.”

Everyone but Knox takes off. I know he’s seconds away from emotional overload. It’s only happened one other time, and he was unconscious for three days. We can’t afford to have him out of commission right now, and I don’t have time to talk him through the worst of it. Walking over to him, I put my hand on his shoulder.

“Brother, can you hang in there just a little bit longer? If it’s really her, you might be the only one able to find her. We have to know for sure. We need you. *Fate* needs you.”

His head slowly turns my way, and I see how desperate and on edge he is.

“Please?” I murmur.

He takes a deep breath, knowing I don’t use that term often, and releases it as he straightens his shoulders. A small nod is all he manages before he walks away to join the others.

“Grid formation, everyone. We don’t want to leave a single inch

unchecked.”

As we all get into position and start the search, I make a promise to myself that if we find her, I’ll do everything I can to make up for my behavior. She may never be a fan of mine, and that’ll have to be okay. As long as she sticks with us and makes my brothers happy, I’ll learn to be content with that.

As the minutes pass, the little sliver of hope that had worked its way past my defenses is starting to waver. Doubts fill my thoughts, souring my already dark mood. Maybe it wasn’t a moan. Maybe it was an animal or the creak of the wood after the blast. Maybe it was simply the wind.

Then I hear Knox shout, “Guys! Over here!”

We all turn and run toward him, all the way to the far back corner of the blast site. Not even the moonlight is enough to break through the darkness here.

“Is it her?” Macklin asks as we run up.

Knox is facing away from us, his shoulders hunched and his head down. He has something in his arms, but it’s so dark it’s hard to make it out.

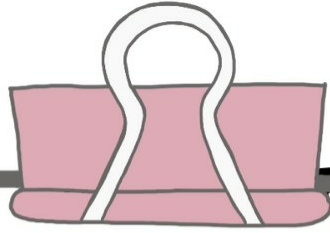
“Knox, man, come on,” Thad grates out.

Knox turns around, and I hear a swift intake of breath. It may have been one of my brother’s, but it very well could’ve been my own.

We all watch in stunned disbelief, our eyes glued to the sight in front of us.

A few feet from where we stand, Knox is staring down at the face of the flesh and blood woman passed out in his arms. When his eyes come up and meet mine, I see the shock and relief and confusion there.

“It’s her,” he whispers. “She’s alive.”



13. Fate

Ghost Girl Fact #6:

Being alive is way harder than it looks

Warmth surrounds me. Like I'm nestled into the world's most amazing bed, and I never want to leave. Whispered conversations full of urgency and confusion seem to bounce around the room, or wherever the hell I am, but I can't quite make out the words. I'd love to see what all the fuss is about, but opening my eyes seems like an awful lot of work at the moment. Honestly, my whole body feels sluggish and heavy, as if the entire force of Earth's gravity is pushing down on me. But that's not possible. Gravity doesn't even know I exist.

I'm not going to complain though. This is quite possibly the best first dream ever, because...I *feel*...so many things. Solid. Whole. Alive. I'm hoping it lasts just a little bit longer. I want to soak up as much feeling as I can.

As I slowly pull myself out of the mental fog I found myself in, the muddled voices gain clarity.

“How did this happen?”

The voice is low, rich, and masculine. Cole. He’s close enough that his words shoot a spark of heat through my already sensitive body. Apparently even in dreamland my body is a traitorous bitch where he’s concerned.

A ghost of a touch slowly brushes hair off my face. The slight roughness of skin trailing across my forehead and the silky softness of hair sliding across my cheek sending tingles throughout my body. No way in hell the blue-eyed asshole would touch me that reverently. My money’s on Macklin.

The wonderfully comfy bed shifts beneath me, and I suddenly realize that it’s not a bed at all. I’m on someone’s lap.

Fuck. This dream just gets better and better. Pretty sure I’d moan from the pure pleasure of a hard male body beneath me if it didn’t require energy I just don’t seem to have.

“I honestly have no idea. This shouldn’t be possible.”

The soft rumble of uncertainty somewhere in front of me is most definitely Macklin. I want to give him a giant hug to make that hint of vulnerability go away, but my body is still not cooperating, which is beyond inconvenient. I’m apparently a real girl in this dream, and I want to take full advantage of my change in circumstances while I can. There are so many things I want to do in my dream body. These guys are at the top of that list.

A male chuckle rumbles beneath me.

“What is it?” Cole questions.

“If I wasn’t sure this was truly her before, I am now. She’s gone through a plethora of emotions in the last few minutes. Desire being the primary one.”

I’d recognize that deep, husky voice anywhere. Knox.

It’s his lap I’m snuggled up on. It’s then I feel his arms wrapped around me, cocooning me in the safety of his embrace.

Hell yes! Now we’re talkin’.

“She must be regaining consciousness slowly. We should dim the lights and keep our voices low. Everything will probably seem amplified when she finally wakes up.”

Aww! My sexy nerd is so thoughtful. He just earned himself some extra lovin’ if I can manage to kick this body into gear.

I attempt to open my eyes, move my fingers, wiggle my toes, but nothing is happening. It’s damn frustrating. I can feel my power moving through my body. Starting at my head, lingering in random areas, then moving on to the next. What it’s doing, I have no idea, but the tingling sensation would

probably make me giggle if my body wasn't on lockdown.

It reaches my pinky toes, and I'd sigh in relief if I could. I'm ready to give this being alive and alert thing another go. I try to open my eyes once more, but my power chooses that moment to kick it up a notch, rolling back up my body like a wave. Just when I think it's finally over, an intense burning flares to life in my mid-section.

What the fuck now? I whine silently.

It slowly expands out to my extremities until there isn't a single centimeter of me that isn't engulfed in fiery pain. The room beyond my eyelids is flickering wildly from bright to dark. Over and over again.

"The fuck? This is her, right?"

Even though my ears are ringing and every sound has a tin can quality to it, I recognize that sexy, naughty voice. Thad.

"It's her. I can feel her power growing. We thought she was strong before, but that was nothing compared to what I feel within her now," Knox answers, sounding worried.

The marks on my bicep pulse twice before I'm suddenly jolted with what feels like a bazillion gigawatts of electricity, causing my back to arch and my jaw, fingers, and toes to clench tight. I would make a puckered asshole joke right now if everything didn't hurt so damn bad. The guys start cursing and shouting, but there's nothing I can do to stop it. I can't breathe, can't see, can't do anything but ride it out. I can't even focus on the panic and fear bubbling up inside because everything just hurts too damn bad. When it finally begins to recede, my body slumps back down into Knox's lap.

Shit! This dream could sure as hell be a lot less painful, thank you very much.

"What in the hell just happened? Is she okay?"

The concerned and reasonable yin to the naughty yang. Levi.

"Don't look at me. This is beyond even my level of knowledge and understanding." Sounds like Macklin isn't all that happy about his power failing him at the moment.

It's then I feel Knox's hand rubbing soothing circles on my upper back with a firm yet gentle touch. His other hand is lightly stroking up and down my outer thigh, sending a different kind of tingle straight to my very real, very excited vagina. And damn, does it feel good.

A moan shatters the quiet in the room, and then I realize it came from me.

"Come on, little ghost. Open those eyes for us."

The rumble from Knox's voice close to my ear adds tingles on top of my tingles.

I can do this. I *will* do this.

Body, do you hear me? Cooperate and I'll make sure these guys take full advantage of you as soon as possible. Deal?

Slowly, I open my eyes. It takes me a second to focus, but when I do, the first thing I see is Macklin's worried face over the shoulder of the gigantic man directly in front of me. I try to lift my hand to soothe him, but my limbs feel like they weigh a ton.

"You're okay. Don't try to move yet," he says quietly.

"What..." I try to speak, but my throat is as dry as the Sahara, and my voice is nothing but a wisp of sound.

"Let me get you some water."

Macklin turns and heads over to the side table to grab one of the bottles there.

When my head drops down a bit - *who knew heads were so damn heavy* - my gaze is caught by eyes the color of the most beautiful seafoam green sea glass I've ever seen, with only hints of gold and brown around the edges. They're staring into mine, and the concern and worry within them takes my breath away. I'm not ashamed to admit I have no idea which blond giant is currently making my heart skip a beat - *wait, it's beating! Oh my ghost, that's heady stuff* - or making my head spin from the emotions I can sense coming from him. But I know the serious look he's giving me is loaded full of things I can't even begin to comprehend right now.

"Here." Mack hands the water bottle to his brother but directs his instruction to me. "Let him hold this up to your mouth for you. Try to take a couple of small sips. Not too much or too fast."

We're still in a staring contest, the twin and me, as he raises the bottle to my lips and slowly tips it up. It's then I notice the tattoos covering his right hand and arm. Thad. I wouldn't have guessed he could be this gentle or this serious. The playfulness I've grown so used to is nowhere to be found. The intensity in its place is potent enough to cause my newly solid lady bits to sit up and take notice.

The moment the cool water hits my tongue, I close my eyes and release another moan as I swallow because it tastes and feels amazing. Which is the absolute craziest thing. It's water, but it could be the finest wine for all I care at this moment. I can *taste*, and I can *feel*.

“You keep making sounds like that, woman, I’m not sure I’ll be able to restrain myself.”

My eyes pop open. I’m relieved, and maybe just a little disappointed, to see the familiar naughty gleam has returned, along with his trademark smirk. With our gazes locked, he slowly reaches up to brush more hair out of my face. So it was him before, that first gentle touch.

Huh. Will wonders never cease.

“Let her have one more sip, and that’s enough for right now,” Macklin asserts, bringing my attention back to him and off the giant wall of sexy man meat in front of me. “We’ll let you have more once you’ve acclimated a little.” His calming voice soothes the restlessness inside me.

“This is the best dream ever,” I whisper shakily.

I see the side of Mack’s mouth quirk up and one of those damn dimples appear. That’s enough to send my freshly beating heart into overdrive.

“Put that dimple away, Sexy Nerd. I’m in no condition to lick it yet.”

His eyes widen, and his cheeks turn a deep shade of pink.

“Yup, definitely her.” Knox chuckles, the vibrations doing pleasant things to my very sensitive, very female body.

“Woman,” Thad growls out, “what are we going to do with you?”

“Oh, I can definitely think of a few things. Just have to wait for this dream body of mine to get with the program, and then we’re golden.”

Groans sound off around me.

“What’d I say?” I ask innocently.

“Fate.”

The sound of his voice saying my name sends another surge to the girly bits. Cole may be an ass, but this body doesn’t seem to give a damn. I glance to my right and see him moving closer. When he sits down in a chair across from Knox, Thad, and me, elbows hitting his knees and stretching that black shirt across his wide shoulders, I take him in. He looks tired, I realize. Those blue eyes of his have lost their angry gleam and are bracketed by worry lines that make me do a double take.

He’s worried? About me? Does this dream take place in the Twilight Zone?

His clothes are dirty and tattered, and his normally pristine faux hawk is a haphazard mess. He has some dried blood above his cheekbone, and some part of me wants to go to him and soothe the pain and guilt and worry I feel emanating from him, but I tamp that down quickly. He’s not interested in a

truce. I know that now. *Wait, I know that? How?* Then it hits me all at once.

He was an ass. We argued. The tree. Blackness. Now I'm here. Solid. *Alive!*

"What the fuck?" I mouth the words because my voice has left me.

Our eyes lock, and I'm sure the look on my face is one of both surprise and horror. Bet that's an attractive mix. Now, normally I might be a little concerned about my appearance, but I just don't have it in me at the moment.

"You remember," he murmurs softly.

I can only nod as the night replays in my mind. It gets a little hazy toward the end, but everything up until I released the tight hold I had on my power is crystal clear. This isn't a dream. This is *real*.

I. Am. Real.

"The tree..." I let the explanation trail off as another realization hits. That hint of a memory I had of the ancient willow has me reeling. I wasn't a ghost at all. I'm something...more. Just like them. And something seriously fucked up happened a long, long time ago. I just need to remember what.

"What about the tree, Fate?" Macklin probes gently like I'm a live wire about to whip around and spark against anyone who comes too close. "Cole mentioned you couldn't move away from the tree. Do you know how or why?"

I'm still looking at Cole when I respond.

"The tree and I. We shared a connection. Our power. It was the same. It was one. I recognized it the second my power started to surge during our argument. It called to me. When I..." I pause briefly to figure out how to explain what I somehow just know, but the situation is too complicated to express or sum up with simple words. "It was like a flashback. I remember being buried, alive but severely injured. The dirt being flung on top of my broken body. I could only lay there as I was slowly covered inch by inch. Dying, I guess, is the closest word that's accurate. My power knew what it needed to do. It harnessed my life force, my soul if you will, and from that energy the willow tree grew. It housed the other half of my power until I was strong enough to take it back."

The room is still and silent. The look on Cole's face is blank, closed off once again. No emotion or hint of what he's feeling is seeping through. I'm sure he doesn't believe me. *I barely believe me.* I mean, I sound like a nutcase, but I know with every fiber of my very real body that it's true. They still haven't uttered a peep, so I continue, verbal diarrhea spewing from my

mouth because I can't seem to stem the flow no matter how hard I clench my jaw.

“When the fragment of memory hit, it was like a portion of my brain was unlocked. The portion with the understanding of what happened to me. My old body was nothing more than a vessel, though I'm not sure what that means exactly. So when the tree took half of my power to sustain my life force, the other half was able to maintain itself. To wait it out in the ether until it was replenished enough to gain form again. Only, it took awhile, and even then it could only manage a fraction of its usual state. Hence...ghost girl. During our fight, my power recognized that I was finally strong enough to rejoin the two halves, but something went wrong. Something is still missing. I just don't know what. There's this...” I pause, bringing my hand up to my chest. “Heaviness that sprang to life when you guys showed up. A pull or draw or whatever the hell you want to call it. Something inside me is pushing me to get close to you. Hell, you're all lucky I wasn't alive until now, or it could've gotten awkward really damn fast. Even sitting here, in Knox's lap, it's somewhat pacified, but I still feel this tug toward the rest of you. I'm probably not making any sense.”

With a deep breath, I take a look around. Cole is silently assessing me, face blank as if he doesn't have a care in the world. No real shock there. Macklin and Levi have found a seat on the sofa next to us and are staring at me with varying levels of concern and uncertainty. Like they think I'm a fruit loop short of a full bowl. One look at Thad's face and I can't tell if he's confused or constipated. Possibly both. I can't see Knox since I'm still in his lap, but I sense a distinct feeling of excitement that surprises me. His body is tense, and his grip on me has tightened, but I don't need those physical signs to tell me what I feel. It's flowing through me. *What the hell?*

We're in the study, their favored meeting room. The blinds are drawn, and the lights are dimmed. Macklin's doing, which I appreciate tremendously.

Cole shares a look with the man over my shoulder, then looks at the others. They're silently communicating in bro-speak, or whatever the fuck it is, and I'll be damn if I'm left out anymore.

As much as I don't want to leave the comfort of Knox's lap, I need to show these guys that I'm okay. I'm here. And I'm strong enough to help them figure this shit storm out. Also, that I'm strong enough for anything else they may be interested in. You know. Like sex. Lots and lots of sex.

Tentatively, I try to sit up, and that's enough to set the guys into motion. Macklin and Levi both jump to their feet, and Knox's arms tighten ever so slightly around me.

"Whoa, little ghost! Where do you think you're going?" Knox murmurs close to my ear.

"I need to move. Stretch. Something. I've got a real damn body, and it needs to start understanding just who's boss around here."

His chuckle is like a zing to my overcharged libido.

"That's not helping," I pout, crossing my arms over my chest.

"What's not helping, little ghost?"

"I think we can stop with the 'little ghost' stuff now, don't you?"

"Nope," he says, adding a little extra emphasis on the 'p' before continuing, "it just feels right."

I contemplate that for a minute, realizing he's onto something. It does feel right. Like he's always called me that. Strange. When I try to grab hold of the sliver of a memory, it slips out of my grasp faster than a heavily lubed up dildo.

"Alright. Help me up if you ever want another Fate-induced orgasm."

"Just take it slow, Knox. Her muscles probably aren't ready to support her weight yet," Macklin interjects.

"Are you saying I'm fat, Sexy Nerd?"

"N-no! I didn't mean...I wasn't implying..." he trails off.

God, I love it when he blushes. It's like a whole body experience, and it's fascinating...and a total turn on.

"I'm kidding, Mack. Relax," I tell him and give him a little wink.

Knox slowly pushes me to a sitting position. I can feel his hard thighs underneath my ass and try really hard not to think about what else might be hard down there...it doesn't work. It's like the mental image I've constructed of his dick is on a mental loop in my brain. The size of him. The heat of him. And that's from a simple touch over his jeans. The real thing is probably a work of art. *I might finally get a look at Thor's hammer after all. Hot Damn!*

"If you don't knock that off, I can't be held responsible for my actions."

The whispered warning is enough to have goosebumps breaking out across my overly sensitive skin.

"Knock what off?"

I turn my head, the action putting us nose to nose. Staring into his hazel eyes, my heartbeat thump-thumps a little harder, and a distinct dampness

gathers in those tingling girly bits I'm so fond of. He leans in slightly, and my newly developed breathing stutters.

"Knox! Back off," Cole orders.

I'm not sure if I should thank him or throw something at his cranky ass. My head may be swirling and my body weaker than a newborn foal, but dammit...he just fucked up my first kiss.

Turning to give him a piece of my mind with a glare in his direction, I stop when I see the worry and need in those blue eyes of his.

He stands and stalks toward me. I'm not sure what to expect, so when he offers his hands to help me up, I stare at them for a moment like they're snakes ready to strike. When I lift my eyes to his, the look he gives me erases any unease I have. *This is his olive branch*, I realize. I can either slap him upside the head with it, like he did me, or I can accept his version of a tentative truce.

I place both of my hands in his, and I swear my soul sighs at the connection. There's a sense of rightness that sparks to life inside me, and I wonder if he feels it too. He slowly pulls me to my feet. Macklin was right, I discover quickly. My muscles aren't quite strong enough to support me yet, and I start to collapse. Cole's arms are suddenly around me, supporting my weight and pulling me back up and into his chest. When my feet are underneath me once again, I risk a glance at the man that is suddenly overwhelming my senses.

His hold on me is strong and sure, our bodies fitting together like they've spent years in this position and are molded to the shape of the other. He's looking at me with a longing in his eyes that seems as familiar as the feel of his heart beating in time with mine.

This. *This* is the man my subconscious remembers. The man my heart longs for and my brain insists I know better than any other. But I need to remember that this man isn't him. He's changed, and despite what my heart and body want, I need to maintain a certain distance where he's concerned.

His blue eyes seem to take in and understand the look on my face. With a resigned sigh, he slowly pulls his arms back, allowing me to stand on my own, albeit a little unsteadily.

"Thank you," he whispers, soft enough only I can hear him.

"For what?"

"For saving my life."

As I look into eyes that, for the first time, seem to hold something other

than total disdain, the ice around my heart melts just a little where he's concerned.

Olive branch, I repeat to myself.

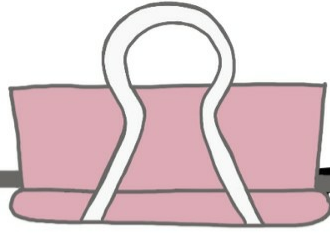
"I'd never let anything happen to you."

His beautiful blue eyes widen ever so slightly before warming with an intensity that is both alluring and terrifying. He leans in just a fraction of an inch.

If he kisses me, I'm not sure if I'll kiss him back or knee him in the balls. My multiple personalities are in a heated debate over the matter.

Just when his lips are a hair's breadth from mine, a new voice has us jolting apart.

"What's up, bitches? Did you miss me?"



14. Fate

Ghost Girl Fact #7:

Give us a real body, and we become horny bitches. Eh,
maybe, hornier bitches. Sorry, not sorry.

“Who the fuck are you?” Cole growls at the apparition staring at us from the doorway while simultaneously shoving me behind him. He pulls out a wicked-looking knife faster than I can blink.

Where the fuck was he hiding that thing?

My legs still don't want to support my gravity-affected body, and I almost crumple to the floor. Luckily for me, Thad reaches out and hauls me up before that becomes a reality.

I peek out from behind Cole, still cuddled up to Thad's side. His warmth infuses me with comfort. He smells like campfire and marshmallows, smoky with a hint of sweetness, which sends my newly developed sense of smell into delirium. Telling myself to behave, I look over at our ghostly visitor.

Her thick eyebrows furrow, almost like she's confused by the question. Her hair is short, hitting just above her jawline. I can't tell exactly what color

it is since she's nothing more than a white-gray mist, but I'm guessing blonde or a really light brown. She has a septum piercing and a labret in her bottom lip. Another on the bridge of her nose. Her ears sport large gauges.

She's dressed in jean shorts with fishnet stockings underneath. Her dark, long-sleeved Slipknot shirt is hanging off one shoulder, her bra straps as much a part of her outfit as her neatly laced combat boots that hit mid-calf.

"You're joking, right?" she asks, her head tilting to the side.

"Does it look like I'm fucking joking?" Cole snarls.

Her eyes jump from Cole to Knox to Macklin and back to Cole.

"That's not funny, Cole. A hundred years is a long time, granted, but c'mon..." She risks a quick glance at the man by his side. "Knox. Help a sister out."

Knox continues to stare at her, not uttering a word.

"What do you mean, a hundred years?" Macklin steps forward, his natural curiosity already engaged.

"And how in the hell do you know our names?" Cole adds.

She rolls her eyes and huffs in frustration.

Yeah, I so feel you, girl.

"What the hell, dudes? You left me by my lonesome, and now you pretend like you don't know me. Am I on *Punk'd* right now?"

Cole's eyes narrow on our new visitor. "How about you tell us who you are and we might not force you into the afterlife...yet."

Her eyes widen, and she takes a nervous step back. The fear I see causes a twinge in my chest, and I bring my hand up like I can rub away the sensation. I somehow know her, just like I know the guys, but I'm not going to tell her that yet.

"You wouldn't," she whispers nervously. Her eyes quickly find Thad and Levi before darting back to Cole. So she knows about their powers. Interesting.

"Oh, but we would. Now start talking," he demands.

"It's me. Reggie. Assistant to the queen."

"Queen? Queen of what?"

Macklin is like a little kid with a new toy. His excitement is contagious, and I find myself leaning forward, totally invested in what she's going to say next.

"Shit, Fate! The fact that you aren't nagging me about the title tells me you don't know who I am either," she mutters to herself. "What the fuck

happened to you all?”

The guys all spare a glance my way. I stand up straight...or at least attempt to. These legs are as wobbly as a young kid on a bike without training wheels for the first time, but I attempt to pull up my big girl panties and be the badass I hope like hell I am.

“You sure look awfully modern for someone over a hundred years old.”

It comes out a little raspy and wavering in a way that doesn't go unnoticed.

Her eyes narrow, and I feel a hint of anger firing up inside her. Her glare finds all of the guys before landing back on me.

“If they did this, whatever *this* is, to you, so help me, I'll find a way to kick all of their asses. I promise.”

Cole growls and takes a step forward, the knife in his hand starting to glow. The move has Reggie's eyes widening, and she jumps back. I don't have time to question him about the seemingly magical weapon because our new ghostly friend starts to ramble.

“Fine. Fine. Um...so, I'm Reggie, the queen's assistant. But I just told you that. Fate pulled me out of the judgment line hundreds of years ago. Being her loyal advisor and trusted friend earned me some perks. Things like being able to adapt my look to the current times.” She pauses and waves a quick hand at her outfit.

When no one speaks, she continues on in a voice so soft I almost don't hear her. “Do you guys remember anything?”

“Knox?”

The single word out of Cole's mouth is a question and command all in one. I can sense the power now like a zing through my already hyperactive body.

“I'm not picking up on any hints of deceit or dishonesty, so she believes what she's saying. She's also confused and really concerned. I don't feel any threat.”

“Awesome. Then I'm gonna sit my shaky ass down. I'd rather not become a heap on the rug in front of our...guest. Kind of ruins the whole badass ghost girl vibe I had going for me.”

“Are you okay?” Reggie starts to take a step forward until the sight of Cole and his knife blocks her path.

The concern lacing her words hits me, along with a distinct sense of protectiveness that isn't at all faked.

“Cole,” I murmur. “Put the knife away. She’s not here to hurt us.”

His eyes land on mine, and there are so many emotions swirling in their depths, but we don’t have time for that right now. She may be our best chance at getting some answers, and her comment about changing her look rings true considering I could do the same thing when I was in my spectral form.

He seems to consider his options before nodding, the knife disappearing as quickly as it came. He doesn’t back away though, keeping his sentry position like the stubborn ass he is.

Watching us, Macklin’s eyebrows go up. Probably as surprised as I am that Cole took an order...from me. Maybe today is the day pigs fly.

Before I can argue, Thad picks me up and walks over to the sofa. He sits, settling me on his lap. I’m tucked into his arms, and since he’s roughly the size of an oversized chair, it’s rather comfy. I discreetly tuck my face into the space between his neck and shoulder and inhale his smoky, campfire scent again. A small moan escapes my lips before I can stop it.

“Well, apparently some things haven’t changed in a hundred years, eh, boss?”

I guess I wasn’t as discreet as I thought. Warmth floods my cheeks, and I briefly wonder what’s wrong with me. *Do I have a fever? Is it getting warm in here?*

Thad’s chuckle rumbles beneath me.

What the hell is so funny?

Clearing my throat, I turn my head toward Reggie and see the laughter in her eyes.

“That blush looks good on you, woman,” Thad whispers in my ear.

Oh my ghost! I’m blushing right now? I choose to ignore him, the warmth spreading down my neck and chest. I’m probably as red as a lobster. *So not attractive, Fate.* “So...um...you must know a lot about these guys and me.”

She hesitates like I’m trying to lure her into a trap.

“Yes. Of course I do.”

I carefully word my next question to avoid giving away the extent of just how damn clueless we are at the moment.

“What do you know about what happened a hundred years ago?”

“Not a whole lot. You went missing. The guys went into a panic trying to find you. Then they showed up at the Gateway, unconscious. I watched over them for about fifty years until one day they just vanished again, but it wasn’t

like there were really any threats. The doors have been sealed shut. Until today, that is.”

“Wait a minute. You mean to tell me that you watched over our unconscious bodies for fifty years?” Cole grounds out.

“That’s some fucking creepy ass shit,” Thad mutters so low only I can hear him, causing me to giggle. That earns me a glare from Cole. I simply stick my tongue out at him, and he rolls his eyes in response, though I swear I see a slight tilt to his lips that wasn’t there before.

“Well, yeah. I mean, Queen B over there would’ve had my ghostly ass on a pike outside the compound if anything happened to you all. Plus, we’re friends, right? That’s what friends do when shit hits the fan,” she ends with a shrug.

A quick glance at Macklin tells me he’s barely containing himself. He’s practically bouncing in his seat. A grin twists my lips, and I give in to the urge to hide my face in Thad’s neck again before he can notice. Thad gives me a squeeze because he knows exactly what I’m doing. My sexy nerd just loves a good Q&A session. When I finally pull my face free again, I see Mack look at Cole who just gives him a quick nod.

“What’s the Gateway?”

Reggie gasps. “Wow! So it’s not just me. You’ve forgotten the whole shebang!”

A growl comes from the direction of the two angry-looking men standing guard. Cole and Knox are both strung tighter than a highwire at the trapeze, vigilantly blocking the path to me. Their protectiveness is absolutely adorable...and admittedly hot as hell.

Behave. There is a time and a place, and this is neither of those. Patience, body. Patience.

“Reggie, is it?”

At her nod, I continue. “How about you pretend we know nothing and tell us everything you can.”

“Ok. Well. You’re Queen of the Gateway Realm. Actually, hell...let’s back up a step. You’re not actually a queen. But I call you queen. Or Queen Bitch. Or Queen B. Or boss. We share a mutual love of sarcasm and busting these guys’ balls.”

“Ooh. You’re my new favorite person already. Please proceed.”

That earns eye rolls from Cole and Knox.

“So...these guys are your handpicked team. Cole was first. He’s your

right hand man. No one gets to you unless they go through him.”

Cole’s heated eyes find mine, and I have to push back the whimper I feel building.

That explains a whole helluva lot, but don’t let those pretty blues distract you!

“Then Knox came along. He’s the Gatekeeper, weeding out the good souls from the bad before they get through your door.”

It’s Knox’s turn to watch me from under heavy-lidded eyes that promise all sorts of things that I get to uncover later.

“Macklin is the info hub or Keeper of Records. He’s your most trusted advisor.”

Mack’s serious expression catches me off guard until a small smile tilts his lips. I smile back. Cue blush.

Eek. He’s adorable. I could just eat him up.

“The twins were the last to be added. They’re the Key Masters.”

“What is this? A bad *Ghostbusters* reboot?” Levi scoffs.

“Actually, they used those terms in the movie because of you guys. Your legend precedes you. Fate would’ve thought it was hilarious. Damn, we would’ve had a good chuckle over that,” Reggie says, a wistful look on her face.

“Zuul was a helluva lot hotter than Knoxie boy over there,” Thad jokes.

“Fuck off, Thad,” Knox grumbles.

“Now, now, boys. Let the girl finish.”

“As I’m guessing you’ve ascertained, there’s more than just the professional side of your relationship with them.”

“Um...care to be a little more specific?”

“She means we fuck, woman.” Thad’s low growl in my ear has me shivering...and not from a chill.

“I mean, you do a helluva lot of that, sure, but it’s more complex too. You support each other, love each other, would die for each other. I’ve never seen a bond like yours in all my years.” Her voice drops to a mere whisper before she adds, “Can’t you feel it?”

I chance a glance at each of the guys and find five hungry looks staring back at me.

“So...we’re in a...relationship? Me and all of them?”

“Yup. Lucky bitch!” she says, but I can sense she isn’t jealous. Just amused.

“Well, thank God. That explains so much.”

“You mean like why you’re always so damn hot and bothered every time you’re near us?” Levi whispers from behind me. When he sat down next to his twin, I’m not sure, but his breath trailing across the back of my neck has my shivers turning into full blown goosebumps. I squirm slightly and feel a distinct wetness between my legs. At least now I know I’m not a total nympho. Only for these guys apparently. That I can live with.

“Better stay still, sweets. Otherwise, you might find yourself in between a rock and a hard place.” I look over my shoulder and see the naughty gleam in Levi’s eyes. Pretty sure I know exactly which rock and which hard place he’s referring to, and my lady bits pulse in full agreement.

“Seriously, guys? Can you three knock that shit off long enough for us to finish getting our answers?” Knox reprimands.

I glare at him briefly, my anger surging. I know he’s right, but everything is new and feels amazing.

Can’t he just let me have my moment?

“Sorry, not sorry, Knox. Can’t let a fairly decent, *alive* body go to waste. Never know when life might take it away from me again.”

“Oh...it’s so much more than decent. Don’t you agree, brother?” Levi croons as his fingers leave a trail from my shoulders, down my spine. Stopping right above the curves of my ass. Every nerve ending I have is on high alert, and that touch was *over* my clothes. Imagine if we were to remove them.

Speaking of, I take a second to glance down my body, noting for the first time that I’m in a pair of gray sweatpants that are definitely too big and a worn black t-shirt with their company logo. Also too big. I don’t have on any shoes, and I’m fairly sure I’m not wearing underwear. This is definitely an interesting development.

“For sure, brother. More like hot. Smokin’. Sexy as sin,” Thad purrs.

“For fuck’s sake. Macklin, get Fate and take her to the other sofa. Out of reach of those two imbeciles,” Cole orders.

I pout slightly, but not for long as I see Mack walking over to me, a blush staining his cheeks. A chance to snuggle with my sexy nerd? Yes, please!

Thad grumbles as he lifts me up and places me in Mack’s arms. Arms that are strong and lean and flexing underneath my body. He walks us over to the opposite sofa and sits down. It’s like a game of pass-the-Fate, and I can’t say I’m all that upset about it. As he gets comfortable, I snuggle into his solid

chest, and his arms tighten around me.

“Whose clothes am I wearing?” I ask low enough the others don’t hear as they continue their discussion.

“They’re mine. Yours were in tatters, and we had to make sure you didn’t have any injuries.”

When he notices my arched brow, he turns a deep shade of red.

“B-but we kept you covered as much as possible once we cut your old stuff off...and it was only for a few moments. Long enough to make sure you didn’t need medical attention. Then I dressed you and gave you back to Knox.”

“Back to Knox?” I question quietly.

“Yeah. He’s the one that found you. He had a hard time letting you go long enough to clean you up.”

I ponder his words. Poor Knox. He had to be overwhelmed with all those emotions. I make a mental note to talk to him alone as soon as I have the chance.

“Ten years?” I hear Reggie ask.

“Look, you don’t need to worry about her. We have it under control. How about you explain the Gateway to us now?”

Knox’s statement brings us all back to the topic at hand but earns him a narrow-eyed glare from Reggie. He’s still standing, his arms crossed over his chest with Cole by his side.

“The Gateway Realm is the plane in which all spirits must pass before judgment. You all are the sole proprietors. For the last hundred years, while the place has been on lockdown in your absence, no spirits have been allowed to cross over through the realm. My guess is...there’s a huge backlog.”

Knox and Cole share a quick look I can’t quite decipher before turning back to our ghostly guest, and I make another mental note to ask them more about that look later. My mental to-do list is getting rather long at this point. I might need to get my Keeper of Records to help me compile a hard copy. Before anyone can ask another question, a loud rumble draws everyone’s eyes to me.

“What was that?” I ask quietly.

“That would be your stomach,” Macklin chuckles. “You must be hungry. Let’s get you some food. That should help build your energy back up.”

“Mmmm...food. Bring me all the foods. Oh, and coffee. Lots of coffee. Or wine! Wine would be good.”

“How about we start with something simple. Maybe a turkey sandwich and some water?”

My eyes find his, and a whole different type of appetite surges to life.

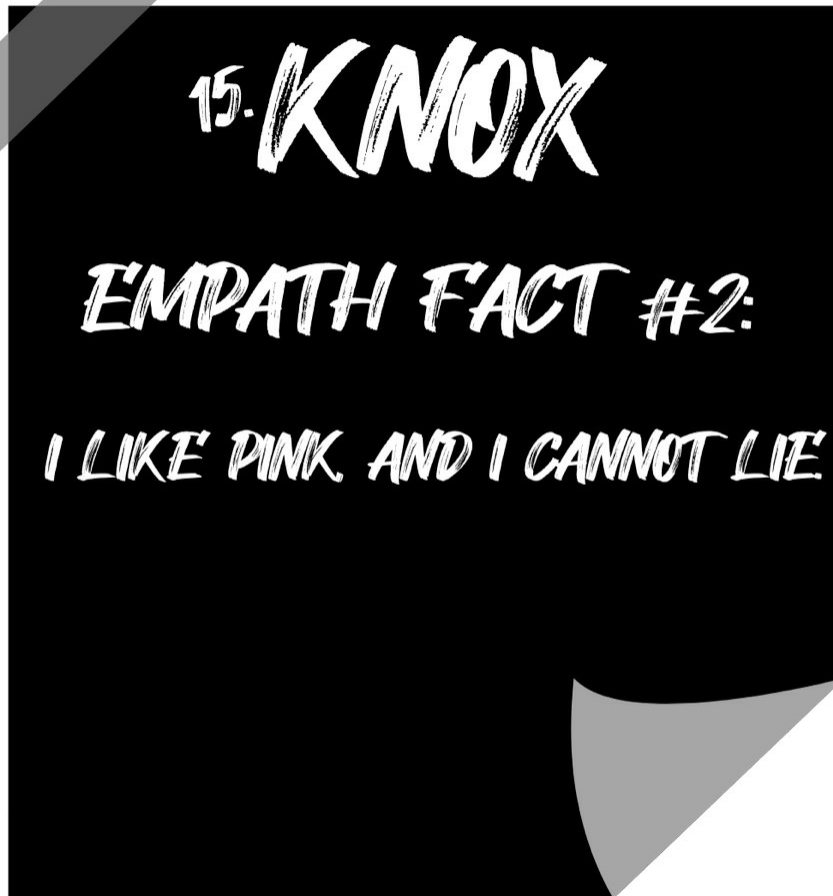
Leaning forward, I whisper in his ear, “Or maybe I could just get a taste of you.”

I expect the blush that stains his cheeks a light pink. What I don't see coming is the look in his eyes that is far from innocent. It's full of longing and fire and promise. My eyes widen as he leans in to me, our lips a mere inch apart when Knox and Cole shout in unison, “Food!”

Mack jerks back and turns as red as a tomato, adjusting his glasses.

I just turn my glare on the two smirking and infuriating yet sexy-as-all-hell men who just fucked up another first kiss.

Fucking cockblocks, the lot of them.



I slice the second turkey sandwich in half and add some cottage cheese to the plate per Macklin's orders. Gotta feed our girl.

And now we know that's exactly what she is. *Our girl*. I knew she felt like she belonged with us. Turns out, it's more than that. We belong with her too.

Putting the finishing touches on lunch, I grab bottled waters out of the fridge.

As a self-proclaimed foodie, I can appreciate a gourmet kitchen, and this one is top notch even if I don't always get the chance to put it to use. Other than throwing together lunches or grabbing some prepackaged garbage out of the pantry, it usually sits empty. Being on the road three hundred and sixty five days a year, give or take a day or two, lends itself to takeout and drive-thru burgers. I'd love to try out the new, state of the art appliances that were

recently installed by the current owner. White cabinets with elaborate crown molding line two of the walls with an eat-in dining area nestled into a cove on the far side of the room with a circular table and six chairs. Yes, if I had the time, I could really whip up some delicious home-cooked meals for us in here.

“Huh. Do we have some place we call home?” I think aloud. Wondering if home-cooked meals maybe used to be a thing for us.

Great. More questions for Reggie.

Picking up both plates, I carry them back to the study. The curtains have been opened, letting more light through, though that does nothing to dispel the tension in the air. It’s so thick, I feel as though I could reach out and slice it with the knife I just used.

“Here you go, little ghost.”

“Thank you, Knox.”

The touch of her fingers against mine as the plate passes between us shoots an instant spark through my body. For the first time, I take her in and notice things about her that weren’t visible in her previous state. Her eyes are a strange shade of silvery gray I’ve never seen before. They stand out against the darkness of her hair, which is a deep, rich brown. Her full lips are an enticing shade of pink. But it’s her aura that’s the most surprising. It’s a shiny silver at the core, lightening as it expands out around her. I’ve never seen anything like it. Silver indicates a strong connection to the spirit realm itself, including the ability to communicate with spirits and traverse other realms. The very edge has a hazy rim of color that shifts faster than I can blink. Though at the moment, it has settled into a soft shade of yellow. She’s happy, and damn, that brings a big smile to my face.

Before I can make a complete fool of myself, I set her water bottle on the table in front of her and head over to the other sofa with my own plate.

“What? You didn’t make me one?” snarks Thad.

“Make your own, you lazy bastard.”

He simply laughs in response.

Crazy dipshit!

The twins and Mack are scattered on the sofas, lounging like they don’t have a care in the world, but I can sense differently. Everyone is coiled tight. Unanswered questions lingering out there - about who we are and what happened to us.

Cole paces in front of the bay window, not acknowledging anyone. His

confusion and anger and sadness are like a battering ram against my subconscious. I push it aside for now, my own emotions already overwhelming me.

“Where did Reggie go?” I ask around a mouthful of deliciousness.

Levi takes a drink of whatever dark liquor he poured into the glass in his hand before responding, “She went to check on the Gateway. Something about wanting to make sure, now that the doors were unsealed, that the chamber wasn’t flooded with misfits. Whatever that means.”

A soft moan echoes through the room, and I glance at Fate. Her eyes are closed while she chews. She swallows and takes another bite, completely unaware that she’s captured the attention of every male in here. It shouldn’t be nearly as erotic as it sounds. She’s only eating for Christ’s sake. Her eyes pop open, and she catches us all staring, but that doesn’t stop her from taking another large bite.

“What?” she asks innocently, her mouth almost overflowing with food.

On anyone else, the look would be borderline disgusting, but with her, it’s somehow both adorable and sexy at the same time.

“You have no idea, do you, little ghost?”

Her cheeks pinken slightly, and the sight makes me wonder what other parts of her would look like covered in that particular shade.

“What? It’s good. Like...really good. You have no idea. My taste buds thank you.”

“I’d rather *you* thank me later,” I say with a wink. Her blush deepens.

“Spirits save me!” comes a voice from behind, damn near giving me a heart attack.

My plate almost tips off my lap before I manage to grab it and save my sandwich.

“What is it, Reggie?” Macklin asks, his sudden concern slamming into me and mixing with my already heightened sensitivities.

“Old Man Summers is back, making his demands again. I was kind of hoping the old coot would be one of the unlucky ones trapped in the ether. No such luck.”

The pout on her face is enough to tell me how she feels about that. She perches her hazy form on the arm of the sofa, the bookshelves clearly visible through her body.

“So the spirits have returned to the Gateway?” Macklin muses.

“Not many, but word is starting to spread.”

I take my last couple of bites, wishing I'd grabbed some cottage cheese for myself, my mind already mentally inspecting the cabinets for my next snack while I chew and consider what Reggie just said.

"That's a good thing, right?" I ask around the mouthful of food.

Before she has a chance to answer, the doorbell rings.

Not one of my brothers makes a move to answer it. Rolling my eyes, I place my plate on the side table and get up to answer the damn thing myself. Lazy bastards, all of them!

The bell rings again just before I open the door. Mandy is standing on the porch in a pair of high-waisted jeans and white button-down cropped shirt that's tied just under her breasts and unbuttoned enough for me to be worried about some form of wardrobe malfunction. With sky high heels on, she's damn near my height.

The aura surrounding her is a light green with an orange center. She's selfish and materialistic with a self-indulgent streak a mile wide. Doesn't take empath skills to figure any of that out. Her boobs are enough to give most of that away.

"Hiya there, Knox. I thought I'd drop by to make sure you all were settling in okay and ask if there was anything you need help with?"

She pushes her chest out and starts twirling her blonde hair around her finger. At one point in time, I may have considered what she is not so subtly hinting at. Now, it doesn't even register on my attention-worthy meter.

"Thanks, Mandy, but I think we've got everything under control."

"That's great! Then I can just make you guys dinner. I've brought everything I need with me," she says as she grabs the bags by her feet and pushes her way through the door.

"Knox, who was at the..." Cole begins, closing the study door slightly behind him, but he's cut off by our new guest.

"Cole. Hey! I was just telling Knox that I wanted to stop by to see if there is anything I could help y'all with, but he says you're all set. I did bring stuff to make dinner though. Hungry?" she asks, her eyes roaming over us both in blatant invitation.

"Thanks, Mandy, for checking on us, but we're pretty busy at the moment," Cole responds in a low voice.

"Nonsense. You boys need to eat, and I brought plenty of food."

She strides past Cole, down the hall into the kitchen. Sharing a panicked glance, Cole and I quickly follow to find her already unloading her bags onto

the granite counter.

A home-cooked meal would be nice, but there's no way Mandy will be the one to cook it. She's gotta go...*now*.

I walk to the front of the large island that takes up a majority of the space, and Cole follows hot on my heels.

"Mandy, really, we were just on our way out to do some research. Rain check?" I practically beg.

"Don't worry, silly. You go do your research, and I'll just get this prepped and cooked, so it's ready for when you get back. Hope you boys like lasagna," she chirps, changing course and heading right for me. "Of course, we could always start with dessert."

I love lasagna...and dessert, but no way in hell am I telling her that, especially not when her breasts are like two heat-seeking missiles aimed directly at my chest. She stops with less than a foot between our bodies. Her fingertips start to trail back and forth along my waistline, pausing only long enough to fumble with the button on my jeans.

My dick refuses to rise to the bait.

Just as I'm about ready to step back, Fate's voice joins us from the doorway.

"Now, boys, you didn't tell me you were expecting company."

I swear I hear a muffled "Uh oh" come from directly behind her, but I don't have time to contemplate that because my eyes are locked on our little ghost. She looks stronger than she has all day, with a kind of fire in her eyes that I haven't seen before, literally. I can see a flame reflected in them.

Even in oversized sweats and a t-shirt three sizes too big, she looks amazing...and pissed.

"Why don't you introduce me to your...guest," she quips.

By this point, she's made her way into the kitchen, the whole time glaring daggers at the blonde who's still standing with her hand nestled awfully close to my cock. As Fate rounds the opposite side of the island, her fingers trail across the surface, leaving sparks in their wake. Those fiery eyes leave Mandy only long enough to send me a warning look. One that very clearly says, if I don't remove Mandy's hand, Fate will.

Sparing a glance at Cole, who admittedly looks more unsure than I've ever seen him before, I swallow nervously before taking a big step back and gently removing Mandy's wandering fingers. I briefly wonder if she noticed the power emanating from Fate, but she seems oblivious.

Mandy isn't looking at me though. Her eyes are locked onto Fate with a challenging gleam in them, obviously unaware of the danger, as Fate stops in front of the stove.

"Hi! I'm Mandy Caldwell. The agent who helped the guys get this rental," Mandy says, walking up to Fate and holding out her hand.

Fate ignores it.

Not the least bit affected by Fate's rudeness, Mandy rambles on. "I was just in the neighborhood and thought maybe they could use a home-cooked meal." She points at the food she's unloaded onto the counter. I silently pray for divine intervention. That's what we're all going to need to get out of this unscathed.

"By all means, just make yourself at home," Fate snarks. "I'm Fate, by the way."

Cole's eyes catch mine again, and a sense of mutual fear and panic floods the room.

"Oh...Macklin, Thad, Levi," Fate sing-songs loudly. "Your *friend* is here to make you dinner. You should really come say hello."

If those boys are smart, they'll hear the underlying danger in that request.

Of course, the numbnuts miss it.

Footsteps and grumbling echo through the foyer. Reggie suddenly appears next to Fate, the counter and cabinets wavering through the haze of her ghostly body, takes one look at our former real estate agent, and chuckles. It's not a happy sound either - more like a *shit's-about-to-hit-the-fan* kind of sound. That doesn't bode well.

When Macklin reaches the doorway, he stops abruptly. The twins, talking amongst themselves instead of paying attention, run into Mack's back causing him to stumble almost comically into the kitchen. Thad and Levi use that distraction to finally take in the room and immediately shoot worried looks at Cole and me.

"Hey, Mack! How's the research coming along?" Mandy simpers before turning to the twins. "Hiya, big guys."

I didn't think it was possible, but Fate's eyes narrow even more. That's when I notice she's standing precariously close to the knives. We're entering very dangerous territory here, folks.

"Uh...hey, Mandy. How are you?" Macklin mumbles.

"Oh, I think I'm doing much better now, Mack," she titters.

From the corner of my eye, I see Reggie whispering in Fate's ear, and I'm

not sure if she's trying to calm the situation or incite violence. I could see it going either way. Luckily, Mandy seems to be oblivious to her presence - as the living tend to be.

The twins are uncharacteristically silent. For once, they're the smart ones here.

"So, Fate, how do you know these boys?" Mandy asks.

The kitchen has become a cesspool of emotions. Anger, jealousy, fear, even arousal - *that has to be the twins*. It's all swirling through the room, and I have to take a few deep breaths to keep myself steady. Cole shoots me a look, making sure I'm holding up against the onslaught. I nod to let him know I'm okay for now.

Fate's arms are crossed over her chest, her fingers drumming at a concerning pace. She's pissed and feeling extremely possessive. There's also a slight sense of irrationality, but I would never tell her that to her face. Nope. Not if I want to keep breathing...or keep my dick intact.

"Hmm...you can say we go way back," Fate responds simply.

Mandy seems to stand up straighter, rising to the challenge in the air, and I know the next thing out of her mouth is going to set all of this tension ablaze.

"An old friend. That's so sweet." Mandy pauses, and I wait for whatever disaster is about to leave her mouth. I'm not left wondering long. "Oh, Cole, darling, remember the *amazing* time we had at that small restaurant in town a couple nights ago? Maybe the guys can take Fate there. I'm sure she'd enjoy it."

Cole looks like he's been caught in the crosshairs, and his eyes lock on mine, both of us looking for a way out of this train wreck.

Fate grins. I'd be relieved if that grin wasn't completely sinister.

"It's so cute you think you can get rid of me that easily. As if you actually stand a chance. It's the boobs, right?" Fate ponders, finger tapping her chin as if she's in serious thought. "I mean, they *are* impossible to miss. I'll give you that. But those jeans gotta go."

Mandy just stands there, mouth wide open, stammering while she tries to think of a comeback. Fate doesn't give her the opportunity.

"Of course, I'm pretty sure the boys prefer something a little more au naturel."

We all watch in rapt fascination as Fate brings both hands up to her own tits, giving them a nice squeeze. Pretty sure I'm not the only one that has to

adjust my junk. We all know she's bare underneath that shirt.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Mandy sputters. "You honestly think you're better than me, standing there looking like you just rolled out of bed in those ratty gray sweats? Why would they want trash when they could have this?" She waves her hand up and down her body.

"Oh, sweetheart, I *know* I'm better than you. That's not even a question," Fate snarls. "You're no better than a blow-up doll. One poke and you'd deflate faster than the Goodyear blimp."

"You bitch!" Mandy shouts before lunging for Fate.

Before I can so much as twitch, Levi grabs Mandy from behind, halting her attack. The second Fate registers the touch, the atmosphere in the room changes, becoming heavier. Darker. Malicious.

Lights start to flicker, and the temperature in the room becomes frigid.

Levi seems to recognize his mistake a second too late and immediately releases Mandy, stepping back with his hands in the air.

"What the hell is happening?" Mandy asks nervously, her words coming out around a puff of air visible in the cold. She wraps her arms around herself and nervously looks around the room. Pretty sure I could feel her fear wafting off her even if I wasn't an empath.

"Mandy, maybe you should leav..." Macklin trails off as his eyes widen in horror.

My eyes find the source of his shock and quickly do a double take at the same time registering Fate's complete fury.

The knives inside the block slowly pull themselves free, hovering briefly in midair before steadily turning their tips toward Mandy.

Movement to my left catches my attention. The silverware drawer slowly opens, the forks and butter knives all ascending into the air.

I risk a glance at Fate, and the fun-loving, sarcastic girl we've all become entranced with is gone. In her place is a powerful, angry woman.

And my dick definitely takes notice.

"Uh oh," Fate whispers menacingly, the sound having a melodious echo to it. "Better run."

With one glance at the floating kitchen utensils, Mandy looks like she's ready to hyperventilate. She rushes past Levi and Thad, tears pouring from her eyes. She stumbles into the wall as she turns the corner but quickly rights herself and runs to the front door, throwing it open and hurrying out to her car.

We all stand, unmoving. A car starts, its tires peeling down the gravel drive. Those are the only sounds disrupting the utter silence of the room. With Mandy gone, the lights stop flickering, and the temperature slowly returns to normal.

“Hmm...guess she didn’t want to make dinner after all. Such a shame,” Fate tsks sarcastically.

“Butter knives? Really, boss?”

“It was effective, wasn’t it?” Fate mutters. “That shit wasn’t easy, you know. Cut a ghost girl some slack as she relearns everything, yeah?”

“Knox explained a few things while you were cuddled up with Macklin. I can’t believe you’ve spent the last ten years as a ghost. Just wait until you get the hang of things again. We’re going to have so much fun!” Reggie claps excitedly. “Damn, I’ve missed you!”

“I honestly expected to have to work a little harder to scare her off. That was kind of disappointing,” she pouts.

“Maybe she has a fear of pointy objects?” Reggie retorts.

Fate smirks. “If she didn’t before, she does now.”

The two burst into laughter like a couple of loons. The rest of us just stand around in shock, not one of us having so much as twitched.

“Oh, c’mon, guys. Lighten up a little, would ya? I wouldn’t have actually hurt her. At least, not a lot.” Fate pauses, and then turns to us with a scowl. “But you all definitely have some explaining to do. Just how much time did you spend with that Barbie wannabe?”

“Um...Fate?” I murmur softly.

“Yes, Knox?” She blinks her innocent gray eyes up at me, and the distinct flame I saw earlier is gone.

“Think you can put all the sharp things away now?”

She looks around, startled for a second, before snapping her fingers. Knives and forks all slowly make their way back to their homes.

Looking a little chagrined, she mutters, “Oops.”

Just like that our little ghost is back, and as she turns to us, the look on her face says it all. We’re in deep shit.

A paddle suddenly appears in her hand. Out. Of. Nowhere. Even she seems momentarily surprised but recovers quickly.

“So...which one of you wants to explain yourself first?” she asks with a wicked glint in her eye, tapping her other hand with the paddle - the sound echoing through the space.

Macklin blushes. Cole pales. Thad and Levi quickly raise their hands. I simply smirk and give her a wink. I want to see someone's skin turn pink, but it sure as hell won't be mine.

16. **MACKLIN**

TECHIE FACT #3:

**IT'S ALWAYS THE QUIET ONES YOU
SHOULD WATCH OUT FOR.**

“How is she?” Cole asks, seemingly calm. He’s seated at the kitchen table, with an honest to god newspaper in his hands, which crinkles when his grip tightens on it. That’s a telltale sign his nerves are getting to him. Bet he cracked his phone screen again, hence the reason he’s going it old school.

“She’s still sleeping. Peacefully.” Walking up to the coffee pot, I pour myself a cup. I’m tired, and just feel off. My hand rubs my chest, like it can ease the weird sensation that’s been forming there.

Knox is at the stove cooking breakfast, making the whole house smell amazing. There’s a small radio on the counter playing some current pop tune, and he’s humming along as he pops a bite of something in his mouth before dumping the rest into what looks like an omelet.

“How long is she going to sleep? That can’t be normal, right?” Cole grumbles from behind the paper.

“The woman just rose from the dead less than forty-eight hours ago, found out she’s tied to the lot of us, and had a confrontation with Mandy. All in the same day. Cut her some slack, mate.”

“When the fuck did you become Australian?”

Knox just chuckles, shooting me a look. “Blame the Keeper of Records. He told me words.”

“Fuck’s sake, Mack. Didn’t I tell you not to give that dumbass useless facts?”

I grunt, which earns me looks from both of them. I’m not normally a grunter. That’s Cole’s thing. But I’m suddenly tired of being the one responsible for keeping the peace between these crazy...fuckers.

Yeah. Crazy fuckers.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Cole demands. Not with his power. With his dad voice. That just grates even more.

“What? Can’t a guy grunt every now and then? You sure do a hell of a lot of that.”

Cole’s eyes narrow, and he sets the paper down.

Knox places the omelet in front of Cole, wiping his hands on the apron he’s wearing, and gives me a look. “Since when do you cuss?”

“Sorry, *Mom*,” I mock, eyeing the apron and the hands he’s just placed on his hips. “Am I not allowed to cuss? Need I remind both of you that I’m an adult and can do whatever the hell I damn well please? Christ. Now I know what it’s like to be a teenager.” I’m working up some righteous, though highly irrational anger, and stalk over to the cabinet with my cup in hand, grab the bottle of irish cream off the shelf, and add a healthy dollop to my coffee mug. I’m not normally a drinker, but this isn’t a normal kind of morning either.

Take that, shitheads!

“Uh oh. The resident nerd is drinking at seven in the morning. Pigs must be flying,” Thad snarks, taking a seat at the table. I didn’t even hear him come in.

What is wrong with me?

Levi chuckles before adding, “Has hell frozen over? Sure would make our jobs a damn bit more difficult.”

Glaring at the lot of them, I grab a donut from the counter and make my way to the table. Cole is still eyeing me while he eats his omelet, and Knox is throwing together food for the twins who are bouncing clichés back and forth

like they're the funniest things they've ever heard.

Dumbasses.

Frustration hits me. Along with a slew of other emotions. I'm not normally the emotional one. I deal in facts. Facts and logic. All of these feelings must be short-circuiting my brain.

"Seriously. What is going on with you?" Cole demands with a little of his power this time.

"I..." Trailing off, I try to come up with an explanation, but I don't have one. "I honestly have no idea. Does anyone else feel...off?"

They look around at each other before their eyes all fall on me.

Surprisingly, it isn't Cole or Knox that respond. It's Thad.

"Yeah, I feel it too, bro. Like something in my chest is fighting to break free."

"Same here," Levi agrees.

"I've felt it since the very first day," Knox adds, setting new plates in front of the twins, with a bagel in his hand for himself.

Cole just stares at all of us like we're a few numbers shy of a full equation.

"Oh, come on, boss. Even you have to admit you feel something," Levi coaxes.

Cole takes a quick drink of his coffee before setting his cup down a little harder than necessary.

"Fine. I feel it too. It's the same feeling I've had for damn near ten years, except it's stronger now."

"So, let's put together the facts, shall we?" This is what I do best, putting the details together to get a glimpse at the full picture. Something inside me starts to settle with the familiarity of the action.

"Fuck, here we go," Thad grumbles around a mouthful of food.

My glare is enough to have him muttering out, "Sorry, bro."

Yes. The sky must be falling if Thad is apologizing. Oh hell, now I'm spouting clichés.

"It's safe to say Fate is the cause of these feelings. We know that before this all happened, she was an important part of our lives. *All* of our lives. How do we feel about that? Aside from the twins, sharing hasn't really been a thing for any of us."

Silence. *Bingo! Score one for the resident nerd, or should I say sexy nerd?*

“For the record, she makes me feel things I’m not sure I’ve ever felt before. Or at least not that I can remember. I’ve...uh...dammit, I’m just going to say it. I haven’t been with anyone since I woke up in New York,” I blurt out.

Their stunned faces lock onto me with looks of disbelief and wonder like I’m some mystical creature they didn’t believe existed. Not sure why they’re surprised. Even Levi noted they’ve never seen me with anyone. It just never felt...right.

“You mean to tell me,” Thad begins, pointing his finger at me like he’s having a hard time comprehending the words that are leaving his mouth, “you haven’t had sex in over fifty years?”

“No fucking way. I call bullshit,” Levi retorts.

“Believe whatever you want. There was just never anyone that excited me enough...if you know what I mean. And in reality, it’s been one hundred years.” *Fuck. I’m blushing again.*

“No, Mack. What do you mean?” Knox asks, a smirk on his face.

Bastard’s going to make me say it!

“Fine. You want me to say it? I’ll say it. I couldn’t get it up for anyone. I tried over the years, but when things would get hot and heavy, it was like my dick just shut down. Now it makes sense why! It wanted her. *Only* her. At least I can proudly say that I never strayed. I stayed true to her without even knowing she existed. Can you all say the same?”

Another round of silence greets my statement, and it’s my turn to throw a smug look around the table. “Now that we’ve found her again, I can definitely say that everything is back in working order. But there are five of us, and I know I’m not the only one that wants her or that she wants in return.”

Cole shifts slightly in his chair. The man doesn’t fidget. Ever.

“Even you, Cole,” I say softly.

There’s a look of hope in his eyes when they meet mine, and I nod in reassurance.

Cole shifts his gaze around the table. “I’m assuming all of us are interested?”

He receives four nods in confirmation.

“And we’re all okay...sharing her?” he asks, a little less certain.

I’m not sure what the past looked like for all of us. If we were confident in our relationship and easily shared ourselves, our *time*, with her, or if we

had some sort of schedule, but something tells me things aren't going to be quite so easy this time.

"I'll take her any way I can get her," Knox confirms. "If that means I have to share her with my brothers, the men I trust above all others, then that's fine with me."

The twins respond in unison, "Agreed!"

"Considering the situation and all of the unknowns still lingering out there, I'm honestly a little relieved to have you all at her back. Between the lot of us, we can better watch out and care for her. Let's not forget that something happened to her one hundred years ago. There's a very real possibility that whatever that was, that threat could still be out there."

The level of seriousness at the table is honestly astounding. I'm not sure I can remember a time when all five of us had a conversation where someone, namely one of the twins, wasn't throwing snark at every opportunity.

"Then it's settled. We'll take things at her pace, obviously, but anything goes." Knox stands, clearing the plates from the table.

"I'm not sure I'd say *anything* goes," Cole mutters, his eyebrows furrowed.

"Oh, come on, so you might see my dick on occasion. There are worse things, right?"

"Knox, your dick isn't high on my list of things to see."

"I don't know. It *is* pretty impressive."

"Not more impressive than mine," Thad challenges.

"Or mine," Levi quips.

"That's not fair. Yours are probably identical, taint biscuits."

Thad eyes me a moment. "What about you, Mack? Want in on this challenge?"

I simply smirk in response. They forget...I know *everything*. Height, weight, shoe size...and other personal stats. As long as it's factual and somewhat static, it's safe to bet it's in my brain.

Thad and Levi's brows raise in surprise.

Knox just chuckles. "Dammit. The nerd has us all beat. I can tell. I'm not betting against him."

The twins share a look, doing that weird twin speak they always do that annoys Cole and Knox. When they look back at me, it's clear they think they've got one up on me. Little do they know.

"Alright then, let's see it. We're confident we've got you beat."

“You’re all fucking *taint biscuits*,” Cole mutters, rolling his eyes, clearly exasperated with the lot of us. “What? Are you going to whip out a tape measure and verify?”

“Good idea. I’ll go grab one from the equipment room,” Knox states before running off down the hall.

“Fuck’s sake. I live with a bunch of imbeciles,” Cole gripes, but there’s a distinct undercurrent of amusement in his tone.

Knox comes running back in. “Alright, boys. Let’s see what you’ve got. Wait, what are we betting?”

The twins walk over, Thad to my left and Levi coming up next to him. Since it’s early, we’re all in jogging shorts or sweats, making this task easy peasy.

“Winner’s choice. No rules, no holds barred. You play, you pay,” I suggest.

“Mack, you’re really going through with this shit show?” Cole asks.

“Maybe it’s time I live a little.”

For the first time in years, I see a hint of a smile tilt his lips. “Fate really has twisted us right the fuck up, hasn’t she?”

“Yup,” Knox says, popping the ‘p.’ “And we all love it. Now stop stalling and drop ‘em.”

Grabbing the waistband of my shorts, I push the material down to my knees, hearing the twins mimicking the movement beside me.

The room is silent for a moment before Thad blurts out, “Bro, where the fuck have you been hiding that thing?”

The room bursts into laughter, and I start plotting my winnings. Sometimes it’s damn good to be the nerd.



17. COLE

TWIN FACT #2:

WE MAY NOT EXPERIENCE EACH
OTHER'S EMOTIONS. BUT I CAN
STILL READ YOUR THOUGHTS.
WANKSTAIN.

If someone asked me to define ‘sexy as fuck,’ I’d show them a picture of Fate.

Even as she sits in the antique settee she had the guys haul down from the attic, curled up with her long, slim legs tucked under her, I can’t help but stare. Her silky hair is up in a messy bun. Wearing a simple white tank and short shorts, her feet are bare. She’s the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen.

It’s been three days since the woman literally rose from the dead. Which, by the way, has me feeling so many fucked up emotions I can’t even begin to explain them all.

In those moments where I thought that we’d lost her for good, losing my shit doesn’t even come close to describing it. I was just damned glad we found her.

Now I get to keep her.

But we have to help her get back to her normally sassy self first.

It killed me to see the feisty, playful woman become quiet and withdrawn after the incident with that bitch Mandy. Knox said she was overwhelmed, or some shit like that, but I think she's unsure. Of us. Can't say I'd blame her. The girl's been alone for ten years, and then we show up, and it's been one clusterfuck of a whirlwind after another.

She chose a bedroom for herself that first night and locked herself away from all of us. We didn't see her for over eighteen hours. Macklin said she needed sleep, as her body was unused to expending so much energy, and I guess that makes sense. Doesn't mean I didn't itch to check on her every few minutes though. Levi kept saying I was acting worse than a mother hen.

Huh. That would be a first.

I'm usually the love 'em and leave 'em sort. Not the spend-the-night-cuddling, talk-about-our-emotions sort, but she makes me want things I've never even considered before. The woman is under my skin. No doubt about it.

Instead of joining us in the study once she surfaced from her room, she's been lounging in the overly feminine sitting room across the foyer, the one us guys avoid like the plague. With its antique tables lined with doilies — seriously, who uses fucking doilies anymore — an abundance of ridiculous pillows, and its fragile-looking chairs that couldn't hold a lap dog let alone a real man, it's like inviting a bull into a china shop. In other words, Levi and I should definitely steer clear.

From my spot on the leather sofa in the study, if I lean over far enough, I can see her sitting in her favorite seat. Having her in my line of sight comforts me. Yeah, Levi's giving me shit for that too.

What the fuck, right?

I find myself leaning against the door jamb, just watching her, because spying on her from the other room wasn't enough. Another first. I act. I don't observe. I think she fucked with my DNA or something because I'm not sure I even recognize myself right now.

She fiddles with the small device in her hand, mumbling and grumbling the whole time. Macklin decided, in his infinite wisdom, that she needed a cell phone, so we can all get a hold of her when we need to. Yeah. No problem at all.

Dumbass!

Once she figured out how to turn the damn thing on, he had to explain the

basics to her. That was an interesting conversation. Oh, sure, she's seen plenty of people using the devices, but when it came down to actually using one herself, without her powers, let's just say that it was pretty damn hilarious. It's kind of like checking out that Pincushion, or Pintacular, or whatever the hell it's called website. Sure, they give you pictures and detailed instructions, but the end result isn't always the gorgeous creation they achieved. More like an epic fail. Sometimes monkey see, but monkey can't do. Now that she's figured out texting and emojis, we're all inundated day and night. I mean, a guy can only take so many eggplant emojis before he's ready to show her the real thing, right?

As she bites her lower lip, intent on whatever it is she's doing, softly cursing every few seconds, my dick takes notice and insists it should be us biting that pouty pink bit of sweetness. My hand drops down to give our pal a little more room. It's getting a little restricted in there.

"Hey, woman. That phone still causing you grief?"

Any other person might startle at my sudden appearance, but not her. Our girl doesn't even so much as flinch.

"This game is ridiculous. How am I supposed to move all of these little things across the screen when it's so damn small?"

"What game are you playing?" I ask as I enter the room and try not to cringe. The carpet is a pale, pale pink. The wallpaper is cream with itty bitty roses scattered all over it. In one word...hideous. No, I take that back. Two words...fucking hideous.

"It's something called *Candy Crush*," she mutters, face still glued to her phone.

And there goes my mind. Right into the gutter.

"I have something that can crush your candy, woman."

That makes her pause and look up at me out of the corner of her eye. A smirk appears, and I'll be damned if that isn't a welcome sight.

"You think you've got moves, do you? Think you can spread my jam?"

"Oh hell yeah. I can definitely fill up your soda."

"Gonna release my honey?"

"You know it, girl. I'll melt your ice so fast you won't know what happened."

"Are you two really flirting with *Candy Crush* innuendos right now?" my wankstain of a brother interrupts.

Fate just chuckles. It's one of the sexiest damn sounds ever.

“Hey there, Levi.”

“Hi there, sweets. Hmm...guess that kinda fits with the *Candy Crush* theme, right? How are you feeling today?”

“Almost normal...” She pauses, tapping her chin with her index finger. “At least I think. Hard to know what normal is when I haven’t been normal for at least...oh...something like a hundred years give or take.”

She looks sad again, and the sight does funny things inside my chest. Levi and I share a look, one that requires no words because we can have entire conversations with our eyes alone.

“Your powers still giving you shit, babe?” I ask, walking over and crouching down in front of the settee. No way in hell will I sit my gigantic ass on it. It’d probably crumble to the ground.

My hand finds her calf, and my fingers begin absently rubbing circles lazily along her soft skin. She peers up at me, a sheepish look on her face.

“Maybe. I can’t figure out what’s wrong. Macklin’s been researching potential causes, but so far no luck. Reggie hasn’t been much help either.”

“We’ll work it out. Don’t you worry that pretty little head of yours.”

“You shatter a glass with a look or accidentally cause a vase to fly across the room all by itself, and it’s like you’ve got the plague or something. Just what I didn’t need - more things for Cole to grumble at me for,” she huffs. “I swear. I don’t know how I survived his moods the first time around without killing him.”

“Don’t worry about him,” my twin says, walking into the room and making it feel ten times smaller than it did before. “We all know that you’re feeling off right now, and damned well you should, all things considered. But I think I may have just what you need to take your mind off of it.”

Her eyes leave mine and focus on my brother.

“Oh! Now I’m intrigued. Do tell,” she says, sitting up a little straighter.

“Thad and I just got hired to clear a house about an hour south of here. Wanna tag along and see us in all our glory?”

Her eyes light up like we just offered her a million dollars. Or maybe coffee. Yeah, definitely coffee.

“Think Cole and Knox will let me go?”

“Who’s the boss around here?” I challenge with a smirk, knowing just how to get her fired up.

The feistiness that’s been missing the last few days once again sparks in her eyes. “That would be me,” she declares with a confidence I find sexy as

fuck.

“Hell yes, you are,” Levi croons. “Don’t you let them forget it. Go grab the boots Knox bought you and throw on a pair of jeans too. Not sure what shape this place is going to be in.”

“Thanks, guys.” She pauses, placing a delicate hand on my bearded chin, the touch sending the good kind of electricity straight to my junk. “I appreciate you so fucking much right now.”

She leans forward and plants a soft kiss on my cheek before standing and doing the same to Levi. Still crouched in front of the settee, I watch her fine ass sway as she damn near skips out of the room. When she’s out of sight, I look up at my twin and see him enjoying the same view.

“Bro, you sure it’s a good idea to bring her along?”

“It’s time she sees what we’re about, Thad. Keeping her cooped up in this place isn’t doing her any good. Those jackasses need to pull their heads out of their asses and realize that.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I agree one hundred fucking percent. Their excessive coddling is doing nothing but alienating her,” I respond, pausing long enough to put my thoughts together. “Just want to make sure we know what we’re getting ourselves into here.”

“It’ll be fine, brother. She needs to learn about us. About our abilities. Especially now that we don’t have to worry about our powers hurting her. The more she knows, the better off we all are.”

“You’re right. Not sure why I’m so worried about it.”

“Because you’ve become a regular fucking prick, that’s why.”

“Shut the fuck up, asshole!”

His laughter dispels my unease. He’s right. It’s time to show our girl what we can do. I trust my brother’s judgment more than I trust my own most of the time. He’s just as invested in Fate’s well-being as I am. He would never jeopardize that.

“You get all of our stuff loaded up?” I ask as I stand and head out of the god awful room.

“Yeah. It’s all in the SUV. Not sure if we’ll even need it based on the conversation I had with the client, but better safe than sorry.”

Cole walks out from the kitchen followed by Knox.

“You guys heading out to a call?” Cole probes.

“Yup. It’s just south of here. Couple says their young daughter keeps talking to her ‘imaginary friend,’ and it has them freaking the fuck out,” Levi

responds.

“You need some back up?” Knox asks around a mouthful of pear. The dude is always fucking eating. How he manages to stay fit is another of life’s great mysteries.

Levi and I share another look before I respond simply, “Nope. We’re all good, bro.”

Cole’s eyes narrow slightly. “What aren’t you telling us?”

“No idea what you’re talking about, man,” Levi mutters.

“You two are acting shifty as fuck, which usually means you’re up to something, and that never bodes well for us.”

“I don’t know what the hell is up your ass,” I reply. “We go on calls without backup all the time.”

Just as Cole gets ready to open his mouth to command we tell him what the fuck we’re up to, I see movement on the stairs.

My eyes lock onto her like a magnet to metal.

Her hair is falling loosely down her back, making my fingers itch to touch the silky waves. She covered the white tank with the cropped leather jacket I told Knox to add to the pile of shit he was buying. Her dark jeans look well-worn even though they’re brand new, with holes on her thighs and across one knee, showing hints of skin. Her black combat boots are laced up with hot pink laces and make her look more badass than I thought possible.

Her eyes find mine, and the smile I see there tells me she knows exactly how I’m feeling right now. Here’s a hint...it’s not saintly.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” Cole demands.

The smile vanishes, and her eyes narrow.

“I’ll go wherever I damn well please. You’re not my daddy, Cole.”

She walks down the stairs, every male eye glued to each of her steps. Her shoulders are straight, and there’s a fire in her eyes that I would be leery of if I were Cole. That’s not a figure of speech either. There’s a hint of literal flames in her gorgeous gray eyes. Last time we saw that, Mandy almost got shish kabobbed by a bunch of butter knives.

As she reaches the last step, the candles on the table in the foyer all flare brightly. The flames are brighter than they should be naturally and seem to be growing larger by the second. Fate’s eyes widen in panic, and the flames flare higher.

Levi reaches out and wraps his large hand around her smaller one. She eyes the connection, and, as if that was all she needed, the flames are

immediately extinguished - both the literal and the figurative ones.

“That’s exactly what I’m fucking talking about. You can’t control your powers and shouldn’t be leaving the house yet,” Cole snaps.

“How about you back the fuck off, Cole,” Levi barks, shocking the hell out of Cole and Knox. Levi is usually the mellow to my harsh. The calm to my storm. The sun to my rain. For him to go against our leader shows just how much Fate is affecting him too. “That’s exactly why I asked Fate to come with us. To get her out of this house so she can blow off some steam. Better to aim it at some ghosts rather than your cranky ass.”

Fate’s eyes tear up, and one fat drop spills over, rolling down her cheek. She looks so damn sad that I just want to hug the shit out of her. She gasps, bringing a finger from her free hand up to touch the wetness.

“What is it, babe?” I murmur softly, closing the distance between us and wrapping one large hand behind her neck, my thumb brushing another tear from her cheek. Her hand is still in my brother’s, and something about the three-way connection just feels right somewhere deep inside my soul.

She looks up at me, another tear spilling free. “Ghosts can’t cry. I haven’t shed a tear in...God...I don’t even know how long.”

“You’re alive now, babe. You’re going to feel all the feels, and, as much as it pains me to say it, crying is part of that. But just for future reference, tears are more Knox’s thing.”

That brings a small smile to her face.

“But that’s not what’s really bothering you. Talk to me.”

The smile falls, and her eyes well up again. Shit! Why’d I have to go and open my big, dumb mouth?

“What’s wrong with me, Thad? Why does my power keep freaking out?”

“Nothing’s wrong with you, babe. I’m sure your power is just trying to balance itself out after everything you’ve been through.”

“You really think that’s it?”

She’s silent for a moment, the hope in her eyes causing a strange fluttering in my chest as tears continue to slip down her cheeks. My heart is pounding, and everything inside me wants to fix whatever is causing her pain. *The fuck is this?* It feels familiar, but so has every fucking other thing lately.

“I do. You’ve been through hell, woman. Cut yourself some slack.”

“What would I do without you guys?” she whispers.

“You’ll never have to find out,” I whisper back.

“We’re leaving,” Levi informs Cole and Knox. “We’ll make sure to text when we arrive and when we’re on our way back.”

I force myself to step away from the woman that’s doing crazy things to my insides and turn to face my brothers.

“You guys make sure she’s safe, yeah?” Knox murmurs.

Cole remains stubbornly silent, his jaw clenched so tight I’m surprised his teeth haven’t shattered. He obviously wants to argue against this little outing but has realized how pointless that would be.

“You know we’ll guard her with our lives,” I say solemnly, earning a begrudged nod from Cole.

Knox moves toward Fate. Releasing Levi’s hand, she steps into Knox’s embrace, his arms wrapping around her and his cheek coming to rest against her temple.

“You listen to the twins, little ghost. Do as they say and don’t do anything crazy. I expect you to come back to me, you hear?”

“I’ll behave. I promise,” she says quietly.

She steps back and spares a glance at Cole.

“Please understand why I need to do this,” she pleads.

“I do understand,” he mutters, “but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

She surprises us all when she walks up to him, stopping with only inches to spare.

“Thank you,” she says before going up on her toes to give him a kiss on his cheek. I’ve never seen Cole blush. Almost wish I had a camera to record the moment.

“Alright, you two,” she says, turning our way. The tears are gone, and our feisty girl is coming back online. “Let’s hit the road. Assuming, of course, that I can actually leave the property now that I’m a real girl. Wouldn’t that be shit luck.”

“Right this way, woman.” I bow, sweeping my arm toward the front door. “Your chariot awaits.”

“Don’t let him lie to you, Fate. It’s a Denali, and a messy one at that. His lazy ass uses the floorboards as a garbage can for all his fast food wrappers.”

“Why does that not surprise me?” Her laughter dispels the negative vibes crowding the room as I follow slightly behind her and Levi, risking a backward glance at our brothers. I can appreciate the worried looks on their faces even if I think they’re unnecessary. They should have a little more faith that we’d never let anyone or anything harm a hair on her head. Playful and

provocative we may be, but when it comes to the most precious thing in all our lives...being protective is the name of the game.

I give our brothers a small nod in understanding and rush out after our girl. She's waiting for me just outside the door, and when she places her small hand in my much larger one, I feel complete for the first time in this current existence.

Because that's what this last fifty years without her was – existing. With her by my side, her hand in mine...that's fucking living.



A look in the rearview has my heart stuttering in my chest.

Fate's head is sticking out the back window, with the biggest smile I've ever seen plastered on her face. She's practically bouncing in her seat, her excitement and utter joy overflowing now that she's successfully left behind the place that's held her captive for the last ten years. Standing up to Cole's asshole-ish ways was worth it for the simple pleasure of this moment.

"We're almost there. You ready, woman?" Thad asks, twisting around to watch her as she pulls her head back into the SUV.

"I'm totally ready!" she eagerly replies. "What should I expect once we're there?"

Thad looks over at me. He's still nervous about her seeing firsthand what we're capable of. Why, I'm not sure. It's not like him to worry so much. I still love the dipshit, and the fact that I know my twin possibly better than I

know myself means that I understand why he's freaking out. His feelings for Fate are new for him, or at least new as far as this current existence is concerned, and Thad doesn't do emotions. I, on the other hand, want to feel all the emotions. The good, the bad, and everything in between. It's what makes life worth living.

I pull off the interstate and navigate onto Main Street which runs the entire length of the small town in Southern Illinois. I've got to admit, it's got a certain kind of charm. There's a grassy median running down the center of the street with old-fashioned street lights perched in regular intervals. The shops on each side have doors open in greeting and signs swinging in the breeze. Benches dot the sidewalk, so the weary can rest or neighbors can sit and chit chat.

"Oh my ghost! What the hell is that?" Fate gasps from the backseat.

Up ahead, I spot a crowd gathered around something very large and very orange.

"You've gotta be shitting me," Thad mutters.

"Is that what I think it is?" I ask.

Fate scrambles in between our seats to get a better look, having unbuckled her seat belt in her excitement.

"Can we stop? Please? I want to see what that's all about."

"It's the Wienermobile," I confess reluctantly.

Her eyes cut to mine. "I'm sorry. What did you just say?"

"The Oscar Mayer Wienermobile. It travels across the country promoting the Oscar Mayer hot dog brand."

"You mean to tell me that car is shaped like a giant wiener?" She glances back to the crowd, considering. "Now *this* I have to see. I bet it's epic!"

Thad rolls his eyes and looks back at her. "Mine is even more epic, woman."

"Babe, I have no doubts on that score. But it's not every day a girl gets to see a gigantic mobile wiener." She turns those gray eyes on me and sticks out her lower lip in a pout that is just too damn sexy to ignore. "Pretty please, Levi?"

"How the hell can I say no to that? Let's do it."

Thad groans as I pull into a spot in front of the local diner and throw it in park. Before Thad and I can even unbuckle our seatbelts, Fate's already opening the door and bolting out of the car.

"Come on, dipshit. We can't let her get into any trouble, or the guys will

have our asses,” I exclaim, quickly exiting the car and jogging after her.

She’s right at the front of the crowd, staring in wonder like it’s the most magnificent thing she’s ever seen. Honestly, it probably is at the moment considering her unlife these last hundred years or so. In reality, it’s a giant orange hot dog on a bright yellow bun. I don’t get the allure, but others obviously do. People are asking the driver questions like he’s some sort of celebrity.

He spots Fate and immediately does a double take. His short, five-foot-five-tops ass is going to try to hone in on our girl. I can see it written all over his ruddy face. Unbelievable. Like he even stands a chance. Wait ‘til Thad gets a load of this.

“Hey, pretty lady. Want to sit in the driver's seat?” he walks up and asks Fate.

“Hell yes!”

Well, damn. Guess the little man has some game after all. Either that or our socially deprived girlfriend is just a little too easy to please these days.

She ducks through the door in the middle of the - fuck, I never thought I’d say this - wiener before I can stop her, immediately making her way up to the driver's seat and waving out the window.

“You let her go inside that thing?” Thad grumbles, coming up beside me.

“Have you met that woman? You think I could stop her from doing anything she wants to do?”

“Good point, wankstain.” Thad’s eyes narrow on the driver standing a little too close to Fate for our comfort. “Who the fuck is the douche canoe leaning over her shoulder?”

“That’s the driver, and he’s got about two seconds to remove his hand from her arm, or I’ll be removing *him*...permanently.”

At that point, a spark of electricity is visible through the window, and a loud yelp reverberates out the door. The driver clutches his hand and backs away from Fate, quickly shaking his head. We can’t make out what she’s saying, but the guy looks terrified.

She slowly makes her way back outside and over to us, the smirk on her gorgeous face doing nothing to ease my worries. In fact, it increases them.

Thad’s fists are clenching by his sides. “What the fuck did he do?”

“He asked if I’d like to get a drink with him later. When I politely refused, he asked if maybe I just wanted to get a closer look at *his* wiener.” She snorts, rolling her eyes. “Like I’m not already surrounded by enough

wieners as it is.”

“He fucking did what?” Thad bellows. “I’m going to kick his ass!”

I quickly grab Thad’s arm and pull him back.

“No need,” Fate adds a little too smugly. “When he went to slide his hand down my arm, my power didn’t take kindly to that and shocked the shit out of him.”

“What did you say to him before you walked away?” I ask.

“I told him I was actually pretty hungry and would be willing to look at his wiener if I could have a bite,” she snickers. “Even snapped my teeth and licked my lips for good measure.”

We both just stand there, gaping at her.

“Holy fuck! You’re like a female version of us,” Thad sputters, eyes wide.

“If the guys find out about this, they won’t leave you alone with us. Ever,” I reply with a grin, only partially serious.

“Then let’s not let them find out, eh?” She simply shrugs and starts walking back to the car. “Come on, boys! We have a house to un-haunt. De-haunt? De-ghost? What’s the technical term for removing unwanted spirits these days?”

“It’s called clearing or cleansing the home,” I tell her as we all climb back into the SUV.

“Got it! Now what else do I need to know?”

“Buckle up first and then we’ll give you the rundown.”

“Seatbelt. Right,” she grumbles, eyeing the safety device like it’s a snake that’s going to bite her hand if she touches it. When everyone is in and restrained, I put the SUV in drive and head toward the residential section of town. The house we’re driving to sits at the end of a long, gravel lane. The separation offers privacy without destroying the close-knit feel small towns are famous for, as the neighbors’ drives veer off to the left and right with their own private entrances.

“Okay, so here’s how we usually do this,” I start, knowing Thad isn’t going to be much help. He’s become such a Nervous Nelly where Fate’s concerned. “We talk with the family first, getting an idea of what we’re dealing with. Usually, we recommend they leave the premises to avoid any confrontations, especially with angry, aggressive spirits.”

“They willingly do that? Just leave two strangers alone in their home?”

“By this point, they’re usually willing to do whatever we say to get rid of

whatever is causing them grief.”

Thad adds seriously, “And you’re here to observe *only*. If we tell you to do something, listen. Sometimes these spirits don’t want to give up their current arrangement so easily, and they lash out. I don’t want you accidentally getting caught in the crosshairs.”

“I understand. I promise to listen and not get in the way,” she replies with an innocent look on her face.

Something tells me to be wary of that look.

I don’t have time to question it as we pull up to the house at the end of the drive. It’s a seemingly well-maintained, older two-story with light gray siding and white trim. The large yard is mowed, with several flowering bushes lining the front. There are a couple of ride-on toys and a few dolls sitting near the sidewalk that leads up to the porch. The windows at the front of the house are open, the curtains fluttering in the breeze. A rocking chair and small table sit next to the screen door.

At first glance, everything appears completely normal, but appearances are often deceiving. I mean, just look at us.

“You guys aren’t going to grab your gear?” Fate asks as we meet on the sidewalk and make our way up to the house.

“We usually wait until they’re gone so we don’t freak the family out any more than they already are,” Thad states in a low voice.

“Plus, we might not even need it,” I add before leaning forward to ring the doorbell. The sound echoes inside.

“Be right there,” a feminine voice calls out.

“Just remember,” Thad murmurs, his eyes locked on Fate, “do everything we tell you to do. No questions.”

“When did you become such a worrywart?” Fate complains with a roll of her eyes.

“Since you exploded like a goddamned grenade,” Thad snaps.

“Point taken,” she whispers back just as a young woman approaches the screen door.

“Can I help you?” she asks as she dries off her hands with a dish towel.

“Hi there. I’m Levi, and this is my brother Thad,” I greet her as I motion toward my twin before nodding toward Fate. “This is our assistant, Fate. We’re from Valley Investigations and Paranormal Society. You called about a situation in your home?”

“Oh! Yes. Hi. I’m Paula. Please, come in. Have a seat in the living room,

and I'll grab my husband from the backyard. Tricia is upstairs playing in her room."

We follow her into the front room of the house. A well-worn sofa and loveseat fill the space around the coffee table, which has magazines neatly stacked on top. Everything is clean and tidy. Pictures of the young family hang on the walls and adorn the mantel over a small fireplace.

We sit down on the sofa, Fate between Thad and me. It's a little bit tight with our considerable bulk, but Fate doesn't seem to mind. She silently takes in the room, a slight furrow between her brows. Before I can ask her about it, the screen door toward the back of the house opens and closes, and the sound of footsteps immediately draws closer. As the couple enters the living room, the wife looks excitedly nervous, while the husband looks like he'd rather be anywhere but here. That's pretty typical for most of our jobs.

"Um, this is my husband Frank. Frank, this is Levi, Fate, and Thad. They're from the paranormal company I told you about. They said they can help us."

We stand and shake hands with the reluctant-looking man. The couple is in their early to mid-thirties. They both have mousy brown hair and tired eyes that speak of the struggles they've been having here.

"I don't know if y'all will be able to help, but at this point we're willing to give it a shot," he says, placing his hands in his back pocket. He won't look at us, instead maintaining eye contact with his wife.

"Why don't we all sit, and you can tell us what's going on," I suggest.

They shuffle over to the loveseat, sitting and sharing a look before he places his hand on her knee, obviously giving her comfort.

"We moved into this rental six months ago. At first, everything was great. There's plenty of space and lots of yard for Tricia to play in. She's six. The neighborhood is quiet, and everyone seems friendly."

I spare a sideways glance at Fate who's still slowly inspecting the room. Every so often, she'll tense up, but her face is as calm as can be.

Paula's voice brings my attention back to her. "Then about four months ago, we heard Tricia talking in her room. It sounded like she was playing with a friend, but I knew no one else was here, so I opened the door and peeked in. She was sitting on her rug, all her dolls and accessories scattered over her bedroom floor. When I asked her why she'd made such a mess - because she's almost always obsessively neat - she said Abigail wanted to play dolls. I asked who Abigail was, and she said it was a little girl she had

made friends with. But there was no one else in the room.” The tears start falling, and she quickly tries to wipe them away.

Frank reaches over to the end table, grabbing a tissue for his wife. They share a brief look before he turns to us, taking over the explanation and giving his wife time to compose herself.

“It went on like that for a little while, and we just chalked it up to an imaginary friend. We’d left behind family and everyone we knew when we decided the city wasn’t for us, and Tricia took it pretty hard. She’s struggled to make friends at school, and since it seemed to be pretty harmless, we didn’t worry much. All kids have imaginary friends, right?” He sighs and rubs his forehead with his free hand.

“I’m guessing things changed,” I solicit.

“Yes,” he answers gruffly. “Instead of harmless playing, she started wandering off in the middle of the night. We’d wake up to the sound of the door opening and find her outside in the backyard with her stuffed animals. Or down the gravel drive in the middle of the day when we’d been looking for her everywhere. She just keeps saying that Abigail is trying to keep her safe, but we’re worried that one of these days she’s going to walk off, and we won’t be able to find her.”

“Have you ever noticed anything that felt negative in nature?” Fate asks suddenly.

I peer at her at the same time Thad does. I’d give anything for Knox’s ability right now. Something is going on with her, but I’ll have to wait until the family is gone to ask.

“Around the time Tricia started wandering off, we started hearing random footsteps upstairs when all of us were down here. Doors slamming shut. We’ve had dishes fly off the table and shatter against the wall when we turn our backs. Lately, Tricia refuses to go into her room. She said Abigail has told her not to because the ‘bad man’ is in there,” Paula stammers.

Just then, we hear the pounding of little footsteps on the stairs, followed swiftly by doors slamming shut.

Paula jumps up as a little girl carrying a floppy-eared bunny hurries into the room.

“Mommy, Abigail says we should go now. The bad man isn’t happy that these people are here.”

Paula and Frank share a look and then glance back at us. Fate stands up and walks over to Tricia before crouching down in front of the little girl. “Hi,

Tricia. My name is Fate. That's a cute bunny you have there. What's her name?"

"Her name is BunBun."

"That's pretty. Does Abigail have a bunny too?"

"No. She said she lost hers a long time ago, but it looked a lot like BunBun."

"Is Abigail here now, Tricia?"

"She's waiting at the top of the stairs, keeping an eye on the bad man for you. She says she knows who you are and that you'll help her."

Fate peeks over her shoulder, eyeing Thad and me before turning back to the little girl.

"Abigail's right, Tricia. We're here to help. Why don't you go wait on the porch while these guys behind me talk with your mom and dad."

"Okay," the little girl agrees before walking toward the door. Just before pushing it open, she turns back to Fate. "Abigail says she has to go away now, but that she'll always remember me. Will you tell her I'll miss her and to be safe?"

"I can definitely do that," Fate whispers.

The little girl nods her head and walks out the door. Fate stands up and makes her way back over to the side of the sofa next to us.

"Don't worry," I reassure the nervous parents, "we'll take care of the problem, and hopefully you'll be able to get back to normal life."

"Thank you. We're going to the park. Just text me when you guys are done," he says, nervously looking at the ceiling. He grabs his wife's hand, pulling her behind him as he snags her purse off the entry table and heads out the door without a backward glance.

"Fate," Thad says before grabbing her hand, "what's going on?"

Fate takes another look around the room. Her brows are furrowed, and I notice goosebumps break out along her arms.

"I don't know. There's something strange happening here, but I just can't sort out what it is I'm feeling. I'm a little out of practice, guys."

Thad's big hand engulfs hers, his thumb rubbing back and forth.

Just as I'm about to suggest that we go grab our gear, a small ghostly figure appears in the doorway. Thad and I jump up, and Fate takes a step back toward us. We're in a line, looking at the figure standing a few feet away, her long hair nearly down to her waist with a big bow sitting on the top of her head. Her dress is tattered and stained with dirt and blood, pieces of the

material missing in random places. Judging by the style, I'd guess she was alive some time in the late 1800s.

"You're from the Gateway," her little disembodied voice says.

"You must be Abigail," Fate says quietly.

"Yes. And you are Fate, the one the Gateway chose as its own."

"Yes. But how do you know that?"

"We all know who you are. You've been gone a very long time."

"I have, but I'm back now."

"I know. Everyone knows. Some are more happy about it than others."

"Others like the bad man?"

"Yes. And there are lots more like him. They know you're here now, and they're coming for you."

"Why are you warning me?"

"Because I don't like to see people get hurt the way I was hurt," Abigail states simply.

"Is that why you stayed with Tricia?"

"Yes. I didn't want the bad man to hurt her, so I'd lead her out of the house whenever he was around."

The room is quiet at the admission that the ghost of a little girl would protect her living counterpart. We don't see much good in this line of work, and it makes me want to step in and do whatever I can for this little girl who died much too young.

"Abigail, would you like us to help *you*?" I ask gently. "Maybe make it so you can see your family and friends that are waiting for you on the other side?"

Fate's eyes are on me, and I wish I knew what she was thinking.

"I'd like that very much, but you have to make sure the bad man crosses over too. I can't leave here until I know he's gone and Tricia's safe."

"Where is he?" Thad asks.

"He's in Tricia's room. Up the stairs, the only door on the right."

Thad and I share a quick look, both stepping away from Fate. My twin acknowledges what both of us are thinking.

She's not coming up there with us. The guys will have our asses.

Who's going to tell her?

You tell her, bro.

Hell no. You do it, dipshit.

Rock, paper, scissors?

Fine. On three.

One, two, three...

I push through a mental image of a rock. Thad sends paper, then immediately does a silent celebratory dance.

Fuck!

My eyes swing over and lock with hers.

“Sweets, I need you to listen to me, okay?” I whisper.

She nods.

“Stay here with Abigail. No matter what, do not come upstairs, got it?”

Her eyes narrow, but she nods again.

“Fate, I need you to say that you promise to stay right here. I’m not falling for that innocent look,” I insist. “You forget...Thad is my twin.”

The side of her pouty pink lips tilts up, and I’ve never wanted to kiss someone as badly as I want to kiss her right now, but we have business to attend to first.

“I promise to stay here,” she vows.

I wrap my large hand around her neck, pulling her to me, and kiss her forehead, desperate for any connection.

“Good. We’ll be back in just a minute.”

Thad and I head over to the stairs and look up.

“You go first, and I’ll cover you,” I tell my twin.

He glances over his shoulder to where Fate is standing. When he turns back, he tilts his head all the way to the left until an audible crack is heard, then repeats the motion on the other side.

“She’s not going to freak out, brother. Give our girl some credit.”

A large Gurkha blade appears in his hands. It’s long and slightly curved but wicked in battle. My hand lights up from the bright white orb that appears.

A gasp behind us draws our attention, and I see Fate’s wide eyes as she takes in my twin’s weapon and my palm. It’s not fear or worry in those gray depths, but appreciation and pride. Thad releases a breath at the sight and takes the first step up the staircase.

“Told you,” I quip.

“Shut up, wankstain.”

We hit the hallway outside the bedrooms and make our way a few feet down to the only door on the right hand side.

“On three?” he asks.

“On three,” I confirm.

“One,” he whispers.

“Two.”

His hand grabs the doorknob.

“Three!” he shouts.

Throwing open the door, we burst into the room and stand back to back.

“You see him?” I ask.

“No. You?”

“No.”

The room is icy cold, the window frosted over with little snowflake imprints covering the panes. In the middle of June. A blast of cold air whips around us, our hair flying in the current.

“Where the fuck is he?” Thad shouts over the noise.

Before I can answer, the cold stops and rushes past us and out of the room.

“Fuck! He’s headed for Fate,” I yell, a lead weight sinking in my stomach.

We rush through the door and run back down the stairs to find Abigail cowering against the wall outside the living room.

Walking up next to her, we stand in the doorway, and see the aggressive spirit behind Fate. His arm is around her throat with the talon-like claw of his opposite hand digging into her neck. The fact that I can see her swallow through the transparency of his arm does nothing to calm the whirling anger and fear in my gut.

The motion has his grip tightening ever so slightly, and a small drip of blood runs down the creamy expanse of her neck. My eyes meet hers, but instead of the fear I expect to see, she looks as steady as ever...but a lot pissed off.

What fresh hell is this? Thad urgently sends over through our connection.
How is he touching her right now?

I have no fucking idea, bro.

“Now, here’s what’s going to happen,” Bad Man says.

“Yeah, you’re going to let her go, and we’re going to send your ass to the fiery depths of the other side where you belong,” I growl.

The dickhead smirks. Seeing the wall behind him through his creepy as fuck face does nothing to detract from the sinister feeling he’s projecting. “Oh, I don’t think so. You’re going to go back and tell your little crew that

their days of ruling over us are over. The queen is coming with me.”

“Are you fucking mental?” Thad asks the demented apparition.

“Like you two douchebags can stop me. Without your queen at full power, you two are as dangerous as a couple of toddlers with diapers full of shit.”

“That is oddly specific,” Fate notes.

“Shut the fuck up!” Bad Man snarls, though Fate just smirks.

Thad and I take a step forward, but he catches it. A blast of icy air throws us back against the wall in the hallway.

Scrambling to get up, Thad moans and clutches his shoulder. A trickle of warmth makes its way down my forehead. *Fucking for real right now?* I wipe the blood out of my eye and rush back to the living room doorway.

The sight in front of me has me pausing, Thad coming up beside me.

“What the ever-loving fuck?” Thad murmurs.

Fate is standing in the middle of the room, her gray eyes alight with ghosted flames. Her long, brown hair is swirling through the air, and Bad Man is kneeling in front of her, terror etched on his face. A rope made of what could only be described as electricity is wound around his body, tying his arms to his sides.

“Never touch what’s mine,” Fate fumes, her voice low and full of menace.

The sound has a slight echoing chime to it, sending a shiver through my body, and I see my twin shiver next to me. I’d be lying if I said something about her possessiveness doesn’t turn me right the fuck on.

Suddenly, I see her standing in front of me, but not here...somewhere else. *Sometime* else. She’s wearing a fancy black dress that trails on the floor behind her, and she’s berating a spirit that’s kneeling on the ground at her feet for giving us shit. Thad’s next to me and we share a look, rubbing the bulges in our pants in perfect unison, grinning wildly at our hot as hell woman.

The memory evaporates as quickly as it came, and I find myself wishing for more of those little snippets from our past lives. Every hint of familiarity seems to fill up an empty space inside my soul.

Bad Man whimpers, cowering in front of her, bringing me back to the present. Completely unconcerned with him, her eyes lock onto us and flare again at the damage she can see. The rope tightens around the man at her feet, and he cries out in pain.

“We’re okay, sweets.”

She considers that a second, the flames in her eyes diminishing ever so slightly, and the rope on the pissant in front of us loosens a bit. Obviously, whatever she sees in my eyes is enough to calm her rage. Looking at the apparition kneeling in front of her, she tilts her head slightly, considering something.

“Oh, Thaddie Poo, wanna take care of this piece of shit for me?” Fate sing-songs in a malevolent voice. The melodious chime from the encounter with Barbie was obviously her *playful* voice. This one is just creepy as fuck.

“Uh...” is my twin’s reply. Master linguist, he is not. Pretty sure he’s standing there with a hard on he can’t hide, drooling over the sexy as fuck, completely badass woman in front of us.

“What he means to say is...yes, sweets. He’ll take care of this shithead for you.”

Thad’s brain finally catches up with his dick, and he steps forward. Clearing his throat, and running a hand over the bulge in his jeans, he huskily spits out, “I got this, woman.”

His Gurkha reappears and begins to glow as he slowly approaches Bad Man.

“What was that about toddlers with shitty diapers?” he retorts, stopping a couple feet away from the ghost that is now trembling in fear. The blade’s red flames flare brightly. Heat emanates off it, but it’s harmless to us. Spirits are another story. I feel it’s power inside me, the other half of my own. The opposite of my pure light.

Thad eyes Fate. Her normally gray eyes are still shrouded in ghosted flames while she locks eyes with my twin. She nods, and that’s all the permission he needs.

He swings the blade right through Bad Man’s midsection.

The apparition screeches loudly while his entire ghostly body is engulfed in flames that don’t burn anything but the piece of shit spirit. We all stare while he slowly vanishes in a cloud of black smoke.

“It’s safe now, Abigail,” Fate says quietly, her hair slowly falling to once again rest against her back.

The little girl apparition pops her head around the archway leading into the room and releases a pent up breath, walking right up to Fate.

“Thank you, Queen. I can finally rest now that I know he’s not going to hurt anyone.”

With that, her little ghostly arms wrap around Fate's legs in the biggest ghostly hug I've ever seen. Fate just smiles and runs her hand through the ghost's long hair.

"Old me might not have liked being called Queen, but new me is kind of liking the sound of it."

We all chuckle slightly, the air in the room growing lighter with each passing second.

"Levi, I think you can help Abigail now," she murmurs.

I reach my hand out, my palm glowing with soft white light. "Abigail. Are you ready?"

"Yes, I am," she says, walking up to me but pausing a foot away. "Tell Tricia that I'll miss her very much."

"Of course. She told us to tell you she'll miss you too and to stay safe."

She takes another step closer to my hand and eyes me seriously for a second.

In a voice so low only I can hear, she says, "Take care of our queen."

"I will. I'd give my life for hers," I vow.

She studies me for a minute before she places her tiny hand in mine.

"Bye, Levi," she says, and then she's gone in a wisp of white smoke.

My hand drops down to my side. There's a peace inside me when I can send one of the deserving to meet with the spirits waiting for them on the other side. I look up, and my eyes lock on Fate's. They're once again the gray I've grown so fond of. God, she's fucking beautiful.

Her eyes sparkle with all sorts of things I can only hope to rediscover one day. She takes a few steps, stopping with only inches to spare between us, and my forehead drops to hers while my hands find her hips.

"I thought we were going to lose you again," I whisper.

"You'll never lose me, Levi. I'm here to stay."

"I sure as fuck hope so, sweets. I'm not sure what I'd do if anything happened to you."

"Here's to hoping we don't have to find out," she says as she goes up on her tiptoes and lightly touches her lips to mine.

I stand there, frozen in place. Her lips are softer than I imagined and feel like heaven against my own. Her hands snake up my chest, her touch waking me up and sending me into action. My hand comes up and wraps around the back of her neck, pulling her face into mine. I kiss her like she's my last breath of air, running my tongue along her lower lip, begging her to open up

for me.

It's like coming home. The warmth of her mouth and the touch of her tongue on mine as her body leans into me. My hands slide down to her ass, pulling her against me, eliminating even the tiniest space between us like my body wants to become one with hers. I groan through the kiss, all of our important parts suddenly lining up.

She pulls back, and I try not to mourn the loss of her taste. Then I realize Thad has come up behind her, pinning her between us, and the fire in my blood soars with the three-way contact. Our connection, already strong, comes alive. Suddenly, their thoughts are inside my head.

God, she's so fucking hot.

I can't lose this, can't lose them, again.

I shut the connection down before I'm overwhelmed by the intensity of the moment. She tilts her head over her shoulder, kissing my twin the same way I was just kissing her, while my mouth finds her ear, licking it and trailing kisses down her neck. I grind my erection into the softness of her and a low moan escapes her mouth. I wish like hell we were anywhere but here so I could take advantage of what I know we all want.

But we're not. We're in our client's house, and the guys are probably having mini heart attacks since I forgot to check in when we arrived.

Dammit! Being the responsible twin really has its disadvantages sometimes. I pull away from Fate slowly, the sight of her playing tongue twister with my twin sending more heat through my blood.

"Guys, as much as I want to see this thing through to its obvious conclusion, we can't. Not here."

"Goddammit, bro!" Thad curses as he pulls himself back from Fate. "Sometimes I hate your realist ass."

Fate chuckles even as she groans slightly while removing herself from between the two of us.

"Rain check?" she asks, a wicked smirk tilting her swollen, pink lips.

"You know it, woman," Thad promises, lifting his hand to push her hair out of her face.

"Oh my ghost! Look at that!" she exclaims, pointing at my brother's wrist.

"What the fuck?" I murmur, seeing the solid line dotted with four dots in the center.

Thad eyes his wrist and smiles broadly. "Bout damn time I got mine."

Fate eyes me, a little bit of hope mixed in with a hint of fear. “You?” she asks nervously.

I glance down to my own wrist, seeing the solid black line with five dots in the center, and hold it out for her inspection.

“Yup. Me too. You?”

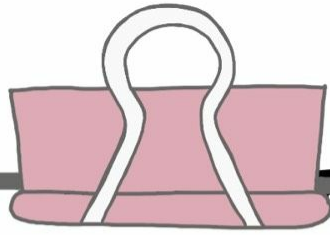
She shrugs out of her leather jacket and eyes her left bicep.

Just above Knox’s and Macklin’s lines are two lines that match ours.

Her fingers ghost over the marks before her eyes come back up and connect with mine.

She smirks, shrugging her bare shoulders that are just begging me to lick them. “Looks like you boys are stuck with me.”

“Wouldn’t want to be stuck anywhere else, sweets.”



19. Fate

Ghost Girl Fact #8:

Insult us and we'll just turn it into a compliment, metaphorically brush our hands off, and call it a day.

The SUV barrels down the two-lane road, back to the estate. The guys are on the phone with Cole while my head hangs out the window, feeling the sun and wind on my face. It's one of the best feelings in the world. Next to being sandwiched between two totally drool-worthy guys, of course.

Hot damn! That was worth every added little bit of frustration. I make a promise to myself that one day soon, I'll grab one, or more, of my guys, find an empty bed, and put it to good use. It's been too damn long, and it's way past time I get a little TLC.

I hear my name and reluctantly pull myself back inside the vehicle. The guys keep telling me it's not safe, that I'm not a dog, but I just can't find it inside myself to care. I've already come back from the dead once. I say bring it on! Well, okay. Maybe I need to talk myself off the ledge that leads to crazy town. Don't want to do something stupid and miss out on all those

orgasms I keep promising myself, right?

“How mad were they?” I ask, biting my lower lip. Nothing flares my ire up faster than the blue-eyed devil that is Cole, and we can’t afford to let my emotions get out of control right now. Crazy fucking powers. Ugh!

“Well, they weren’t fucking happy,” Thad mutters.

Cue eye roll. “No shit, Sherlock.”

“Better learn my name, woman. You’ll be screaming it out from beneath me soon enough.”

“Whoa! You sound pretty confident in your abilities, big guy.”

“Never had any complaints,” he croons, a smirk plastered on his way too kissable lips.

But that’s all it takes to set off my temper - so much for keeping my powers under control. Throw a sprinkle of jealousy my way and *Bam!* One irate ghost girl coming right up. My hands start to spark, and the car starts to shake, a little smoke seeping out of the inside vents.

“Bro! What the fuck?” Levi growls, nervously eyeing me in the rearview mirror. “You better calm her down. Now, before she makes the car go boom!”

Thad swiftly turns in his seat, casting me a nervous look once he gets a glimpse of my pissed off expression.

“Babe, I didn’t mean...”

“Don’t you ‘babe’ me, Thad. I know exactly what you meant,” I growl. “A ghost girl can’t even leave her men alone for a hundred years without them going off to find somewhere else to stick their willies.”

“Ok, first off. We don’t call them willies. We call them dicks. Or cocks. Definitely not fucking *willies*. Secondly, might I remind you that we had no memories. Of anything. Not even *you*. I can promise that none of those girls meant anything even close to what you mean to us.”

I know he’s right. I know I’m being slightly irrational. But I. Don’t. Care. I look at the hunky piece of twinsie in front of me and narrow my eyes. Time to prove a point.

“You’re right,” I murmur thoughtfully.

I watch as his smirk makes a reappearance. Poor man. He thinks he’s won this round.

“I mean, I guess since we have no memories of each other, then I shouldn’t feel guilty for all those daydreams about hot men with all their muscles and sexy ass smiles. Guess it’s totally okay that I wondered how

they'd feel above me, and beneath me, and behind me. All the while wishing they were touching me. Licking me. Thrusting their big, yummy cocks into me while I come like I've never come before. It's okay, right? I mean, since I had no idea who you guys were and all. You want me to detail out some of my more naughty daydream sexcapades, *babe*? Wanna hear *all* about the one where some Scottish guy with a killer accent ate me out like I was his last meal? Or what about the blond surfer who could bend my body in ways I didn't know I could bend, all while he fucked me senseless? I mean, I could detail it down to the size of each guy's *cock* and how good it made me feel? Hmmm?"

By the look on his murderous face, I think he gets my message. If he doesn't like imagining me with some fictional guy, then he definitely wouldn't want to hear even the tiniest hint of me with someone real. I can't deny they had a life before they found me again, but I'll be damned if they'll get to parade it in front of my face. I tend to get a little stabby just thinking about them with anyone else. Maybe now he gets that.

He ends our silent staring contest with a small nod.

"Message received," he grumbles.

The sparks disappear, and the ride smooths out now that the vehicle isn't under duress. Fucking wonky powers. From what Reggie has explained to me, they shouldn't be so reactive to my emotions, but so far no one can figure out how to fix it. Story of my life.

I catch Levi's eye in the rearview mirror and realize he's looking pretty stabby himself. Good. Hopefully they pass the message along to the others.

"You hungry, sweets?" he murmurs cautiously.

"Mmm...yes. Find me some yummys!"

"You're pretty yummy, woman. Wouldn't mind getting a bite of you."

I cock my eyebrow and look at the naughty twin in the passenger seat.

"You're not forgiven yet. If anyone is getting my yummys, it's Levi. He's been a good boy."

"I'm not sure if I should be appalled at being likened to a well-behaved toddler or excited because...hell yes, I want your yummys."

"Mmm...you're right. I'm not really the *call me Mommy*, sort. Ew..." I trail off as I suddenly feel my mark flare up with the itchy-tingle I've grown to recognize as that damn ghostly summons. "What the hell?" I mutter.

"What is it?" Thad asks nervously.

"I think Knox is trying to summon me. I don't even know if it will work

now that I'm in this form. Shit!"

"You think he's trying to pull you back to the house? Why not just call us?" He pulls out his phone. "No bars."

"It's gotta be important for him to be trying this right now. He and Macklin agreed to wait until I felt stronger."

"We're only about fifteen minutes out," Levi says as the car picks up speed.

"Good," I say nervously, bringing my fingers up to run over Knox's mark. I can actually feel the tug from his line specifically as I brush over it. As I start to pull my hand back, my fingers slowly start to fade, wisps of smoke trailing off where my fingertips once were then out the window as my hand begins to disappear.

"Uh...guys..."

Thad looks back, and his eyes widen in fear. "Fuck! Levi. Hurry."

Levi looks back at me in the rearview, but by this point, the fade is picking up speed, smoke flying out the window faster than a smoker dragging on a cigarette.

It doesn't hurt, but it's damn disconcerting.

"Guys. Get to the house as fast as you can. Something tells me shit's going down." I glance at my bottom half and watch as my belly fades away to nothing. I look at my twins one last time before it begins to consume my chest, crawling up my neck. "And hurry! Son-of-a-..."

I don't get to finish the word before I'm whisked through the vortex. It's only seconds before I start to materialize in the foyer of the estate. The wisps of smoke slowly gain solidity until I'm whole again and clutching the table in the middle of the space to keep me upright.

"Bitch!" I cry out. "Knox, you better have a damn good reason for..."

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the self-proclaimed Queen of the Gateway." A raspy voice with a distinct New York accent cuts off my well-deserved rant.

I look up, and my eyes catch on an apparition standing in the doorway to the study. He's tall and gangly, with deep sunken eyes and cheeks. He's dressed in an old-fashioned suit from the twenties, complete with pinstripes and that weird little pocket handkerchief. His hair is slicked back, and his whole look screams mob. Though the badass effect is lost since he's totally see through.

He's holding my new friend with an arm wrapped around her front and a ridiculously slender hand wrapped around her throat.

To her credit, Reggie doesn't look afraid. Just worried. And she'd only be worried for one reason.

"Who the fuck are you?" I eloquently ask the mystery man while I try to force myself to stand up straight. Traveling via the ether is not for the faint of heart - or ghost girls who don't have their shit together yet.

"Ah, ah, ah...you're not the one askin' questions here. I am. And you're gonna tell me what I wanna know, or I'm gonna end your little weirdo friend here."

I narrow my eyes and place my hands on my hips. "Hey! That's not very nice. No name calling."

The slimy man looks at me like I've grown two heads.

"They said you were different."

"Who's they? And how am I different?"

"You're..." he waves his hand around in the air like he's trying to come up with the right words, "significantly less intimidating."

"I'm not sure if that's a compliment or an insult."

"Definitely not a compliment," Knox mutters.

I glance back to see him, Cole, and Macklin standing side by side, forming a wall behind me.

I hadn't even realized they were there. Good God. Am I that easily distracted?

Turning back to Mob Man in front of me, I eye Reggie. She shakes her head, ever so slightly, and looks even more nervous than before.

"And tell me...why should I be afraid of you?" I sneer.

The evil glint in his eye gives me pause.

"Because I know how much you value your friend here, and I can send her to the other side faster than you can blink if you don't gimme what I want. You with me? And I'm not talkin' 'bout the pleasant side either."

My temper starts to rise, and with it, my powers. I force myself to take a steady breath, knowing I can't afford to lose my shit and let my powers go haywire. Not now. I need to maintain control for Reggie's sake.

"You, a measly spirit, can send her to the afterlife?" I ask doubtfully.

His eyes narrow and begin to gleam red. He brings one of his translucent hands up, and it's then I notice a large signet ring on his bony finger. Right in the center, inlaid in the metal, is a glowing red ruby. Something tells me it isn't just a fashion statement.

"How the fuck did a ghost like you get a ring like that?" Cole demands

from behind me.

I don't turn around, though I want to. It sounds like he has some idea what that ring is, but I've learned my lesson while out on the call with the twins. Never give your enemy your back.

"Friends in high places, my boy. You best remember that. Now..." He glances back at me. "Where is it?"

I study him for a second. Am I supposed to know what that means? Do they not know we don't have our memories? There's that mysterious *they* again. What the hell is really going on here?

"Where is what?" I ask.

"Don't fuck with me, girl. Where is the book?"

"Oh. The book," I repeat slowly and pretend to fidget nervously. I have no fucking clue what he's talking about, but he doesn't know that. Let's see just how distracted I can make him. "I've placed the book away for safekeeping. Can't let insignificant spirits like you get their greedy little hands on it."

His hand tightens on Reggie's neck, and she lets out a soft squeak. Ok, guess that answers one question. Spirits, or at least *this* spirit, can hurt other spirits. Good to know.

"You'll tell me where the book is right now, or you can say goodbye to your little friend."

One of the guys snorts behind me, and I hear a muttered, "Someone thinks he's Al Pacino."

Before I can show off my awesome impression skills, he brings his free hand up, makes a fist, and aims the ruby right at Reggie. She looks at me with resignation in her ghostly eyes. She knows that I have no idea what book he's talking about or where it might be.

Can't a ghost girl catch a break? I mean, as if ten years of solitude weren't bad enough, then I find out I've been dead-ish for the last hundred years and have absolutely no memories of anything or anyone. Now I don't even have time to acclimate to this solid ass body I'm sporting because Mob Man over there has to go and fuck with my friend. Why do the bad guys always want to touch what's mine?

I feel my powers come alive, my fingers starting to spark.

When Mob Man notices, I sense his hesitation as his nerves kick in. He wasn't expecting me to be able to do this. Obviously, *they* aren't fully informed, or he would've been a little more careful who he was threatening.

An idea begins to take shape. He doesn't really want Reggie. He wants me. Isn't that what Bad Man wanted too? Things are starting to make a little more sense.

"Fate," Knox angrily whispers from behind me.

I smirk. My empath already has an idea of where my mind has gone, and he is not happy. Cole's going to lose his shit in three...two...one...

"You don't really want to hurt my lovely friend over there. What you really want is me, right?"

I see a calculating gleam in his eye. Perfect. Just what I'm going for.

"Like hell," Cole growls. "Don't you even think about it, Fate."

"Oh, she's thinking about it alright," Knox scoffs.

"Oh, ain't this cute? Your ridiculous little male menagerie is concerned for you. Big Bad Queen of the Gateway can't even make decisions on her own anymore? Such a pity you've been reduced to this. Guess my *friend* was right after all. You're of no real concern to me. Gimme me the book, and I'll leave you all to do...whatever it is you all do."

My eyes narrow, and my power surges to life inside me, but I tamp it back down. This guy has no idea what he's in for, and I want to keep him complacent.

"How about an even trade? You take me and let her go, and I'll lead you to the book."

He considers me for a moment, the hand with the ring twitching slightly. Then he considers my guys. Apparently making a decision, he drops the hand with the ring but doesn't let Reggie go. "Okay."

"Fuck no, little ghost!" Knox snarls.

"Fate, what the fuck?" Cole shouts.

"Fate, you can't do this," Macklin pleads.

They all talk simultaneously, but I can't let their worry and fear distract me. Something in my brain starts to fissure, a small crack becoming a narrow opening where a memory slips out. Not only should I have five marks on my bicep where I currently only have four, but I should also have one on my wrist. One that I share with Reggie. They call me ghost girl for a reason. I can do things no normal person can do. Being able to affect and be affected by spirits is one of them. With the good, always comes the bad. You know - a yin and yang kind of thing.

Latching onto the idea forming thanks to my wacky memories, I know exactly what I need to do and trust that Reggie knows the old me well enough

to know what she'll need to do next.

“Okay, Mob Man. On the count of three, I’ll give you my hand, and you let her go. If you try to screw us over and take us both, let’s just say my guys have full permission to take you out by any means necessary.”

“God dammit!” Cole mutters behind me, but out of the corner of my eye I see the glow from that mysteriously large knife he has hidden somewhere on that delicious body of his.

I risk a quick glance over my other shoulder, and I’m stunned to see Knox’s eyes glowing, shifting from color to color, while his hands are holding luminescent orbs that match the color shift in his eyes. First red, then blue, yellow, then green, and on and on they change. It’s hypnotizing.

Macklin’s eyes are also gleaming, but his are a pretty blue, like the color that flickers in a flame from a gas fire. He doesn’t have orbs like Knox. Instead, his entire body is encompassed by a faint glow similar to his eyes.

Well, damn! My guys are always hot, but with their powers out and at the ready, they’re sex personified. Desire unfurls throughout my body faster than a lit match thrown on a trail of gasoline.

Down, girl! Now is totally not the time.

Why do I feel like that’s the story of my life these days? *Ugh.*
#GhostGirlProblems.

Mob Man’s voice is suddenly pulling me out of my little desire bubble. “On three then.”

Time to get this show on the road.

“One...two...three...”

I reach out my right hand, and his bony fingers grasp mine. Reggie releases a totally undignified yelp as she’s pushed toward the guys. “Hey, watch it, you brute,” she mutters.

As she rights herself and begins to pass me, my left hand comes up and snags her ghostly left wrist. Out of reflex, her hand clasps mine in return. Our eyes meet, and the connection is instantaneous. But the moment is quickly over, and we’re yanked apart faster than I can blink. I only hope that was long enough.

Mob Man’s arm is now wrapped around the front of my shoulders and pulling me into him so my back hits his front, his coldness seeping into my being. Gross! I don’t want his tainted spirit germs invading my new body.

The guys look ready to lose it, but I stay as cool as a cucumber. Honestly, that phrase has never made any sense to me, but whatever. *No time for*

rambling thoughts, Fate. Keep it together.

I give them a slow nod, letting them know it's okay. That this is exactly what I wanted to happen. They each nod back reluctantly, and a shaken Reggie is standing next to Cole with a determined look on her ghostly face.

See you there, she mouths before giving me a small nod. Since Mob Man's gaze is fully locked onto the guys, he doesn't notice.

"Now. Your queen and I are going to leave. You don't follow, or she's dead." He brings up the signet ring, making a show of running it down the side of my face.

The guys all snarl. Even calm, peacekeeping Macklin. I kind of dig it.

I roll my eyes at Mob Man. This dude is so clueless. And fucked. *Definitely* fucked. And not the fun kind either.

Slowly, I bring my hands together in front of me, hoping he misses the movement. I can't really see them since my face is tilted slightly toward the ceiling, but I say a small prayer that this is going to work. Otherwise, I'll look like the loser he currently thinks I am. Only one way to find out.

My right hand grips the inside of my left wrist. The guys' eyes dart down to my hands, then quickly away, as if they know I'm up to something but don't want to attract Mob Man's attention. They're looking at me with varying levels of curiosity, anger, and fear. I'm totally going to get disciplined for this little stunt later. Might need to lend them my paddle.

"Alright!" Mob Man growls. "Take me to the book. Now!"

"You got it, Mob Man. I'll see you guys soon. Don't freak out."

With that, I close my eyes and think, *Gateway*.

Before I even finish the word, our bodies start to dematerialize. One quick look at the guys tells me they are, indeed, freaking out, and I can feel their all-consuming panic. Hell, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little nervous myself. I *will* see them again. Reggie won't let me down. I somehow know that down in the depths of my soul.

The last thing I see is Thad and Levi bursting through the front door, both with matching looks of horror on their identical faces as they take in me and Mob Man slowly turning into wisps of smoke. I shoot them a quick wink before the smoke completely consumes us, sucking us into the vortex.

20. KNOX

EMPATH FACT #3:

TO HELL WITH THE FACTS. I'M
COMING. LITTLE GHOST. JUST
HOLD THE FUCK ON.

Gone. Her and the slimy *Scarface* wannabe vanished right before our eyes. I search inside myself, that spot I've reserved just for her, but it's just a small spark. Wherever she is, she's too far out of reach.

"Where the fuck is she?" Cole growls. He's on the verge of totally losing his shit, and I don't even have to be an empath to sense that.

"She took him to the Gateway," Reggie offers quietly, looking at Cole like he's an enraged bull, ready to charge.

"The fucking *Gateway*? How the hell are we supposed to get to her? What the fuck was she thinking?" He's pacing now. Never a good sign. "I should have tied her to the damn bed and left her there."

"I think she would've liked that actually," Thad retorts.

Cole just growls at him. Literally.

Reggie eyes him warily as he continues to mumble to himself. "Is he

going to be okay?”

“Don’t worry about him. How can we find her?”

“I can get you there, but first I need to mark all of you.”

“Mark us?” Macklin asks. Not even Fate’s spectacular vanishing act or the fact that she could be in danger can quell his eternal curiosity.

“You know, with the mark of the Gateway. It’s similar to the marks you all share,” she replies simply.

“Only two of us are marked,” Macklin responds.

“Bro, make that four of us,” Thad says proudly, lifting up his wrist and showing it off as Levi does the same.

“Wait, only four of you share her mark?” she asks, and I can sense her steadily growing concern.

“Why? Is that a bad thing?” I question.

“That’s a *terrible* thing!” she exclaims. “How did I not realize that? It explains so much.”

“Explains what?” Cole snaps.

“It explains why her powers are acting all crazy and why she’s not at full strength yet. She had to sacrifice pieces of herself to tie you all to her. Those pieces were gifted to you and sealed with a mark that each of you wore. Through those marks, your commitment to each other was sealed and the bond created. Those powers of yours, they used to be hers. Only residual bits of each one remain within her. Without that bond in place, she’s...” Reggie trails off, searching for words while we all stand back and wait in stunned silence, “unbalanced, for lack of a better word.”

“You’re telling me this is our fault?” Cole says quietly. “That she went off to the Gateway, with a man that could very well kill her, missing integral parts of herself because she doesn’t bear all of our marks?”

“*Your* mark,” I add softly. I’m trying really hard not to blame him right now, but I’m fucking pissed. His eyes cut to mine, and the regret and despair I feel pouring off him are enough for me to temper my next words, even if my soul is seething inside. “She doesn’t bear *your* mark. You hesitated. Don’t get me wrong, I understand why, but she’s ours. Even you have to admit that now. She’s lodged somewhere deep inside our souls, and there’s no getting her out. I wouldn’t want to even if I could.”

The room is silent while we all process those words. She’s ours. We’re hers. Now it’s time we go get our girl.

“Do it.” I look at Reggie and stick out my wrist. “Give me the mark.”

“Are you sure?” She looks around at the other guys.

Macklin steps up next to me, holding out his wrist. “We’re sure.”

Levi steps up next. “Let’s get this done. We need to save Fate.”

Thad follows his twin. “Do it. I need to get to my woman.”

Reggie looks at Cole. He’s standing in front of us, head hanging down, shoulders slumped, guilt and blame flowing off him faster than raging rapids.

“Cole, man, I know we don’t say this enough, but we appreciate all you do for us. We respect your judgment and understand why this entire situation has been hard for you. We’ll discuss your hard-headedness later. First, we have to do this. Now.”

Cole raises his head, his eyes connecting with mine. “I’ve let her down. I’ve let all of you down.”

“And you can make it up to her, right now.”

He glances around the room, meeting the eyes of each of our brothers. Walking up on my other side, he holds out his wrist.

“We need to save our girl. I can’t let her down again.”

Reggie smiles, looking at each of us. “You all may be a bunch of douche canoes, but, for the record, I love you like brothers. Damn glad to see you again.” Walking up to Cole, she clasps his left wrist with hers.

“Do you swear your allegiance to the queen and promise to protect her from here on out with your life?”

Without hesitation, Cole responds, “I do.”

“Good. We have witnesses in case you forget that again.” She snickers and walks up to me.

“What the hell?” he mutters.

As she clasps my wrist, I feel a slight warmth before she’s moving on to Macklin.

“Why didn’t he have to say the oath?” Cole asks.

“The oath wasn’t a required part of the transfer. I just wanted to hear you say it.”

“Fucking temperamental spirits,” he grumbles.

We all chuckle as she moves on to Levi and Thad. Once we’re all staring down at the new marks on our wrists in the shape of a small solid star, she stands in front of us again.

“Okay, quick crash course on how this works. Let’s call it Gateway Dynamics 101. The mark on your wrist is what ties you to the Gateway. To move to and from, all you need to do is touch your wrist with the intent to go

there. The intention part is important. Right now, since it's your first time - or at least your *second* first time - you'll need to actually say the word in order to move through the vortex. Damn. Bet non-virgins everywhere are jealous of you five right now. Not everyone gets a second first time."

"That's totally not helpful," Cole scoffs.

"Now...Fate is likely trying to stall until we all come to save the day. She's not familiar with the Gateway, but the Gateway will be familiar with her. Hopefully, she's still got her mental link in place even if she doesn't know it, so the Gateway knows to keep her secrets."

"That's reassuring," I deadpan.

"I know, right?" she quips. "Ok. I guess I should've asked this before, but you all do have your powers, right?"

"Yes," we all say in unison.

"Thank fuck for small miracles. Then light 'em up, boys."

On both sides of me, my brothers let their powers free. Reggie steps back, next to Cole.

"Now that's what I'm talkin' about. Nothing like showing up to a fight with all this glowing man meat. Good thing we don't need the element of surprise on our side. Everybody ready? On the count of three?"

We all mumble our agreements.

"One..." Reggie starts.

"Two..." I say.

"Three..." Cole adds.

"Gateway," we all say in unison.

As our bodies all start to dematerialize, I finally understand just why Fate hates this part. The lack of control. The disconcerting notion that your body is spreading out into the unknown and you can only hope and pray it all gets put back together the same way it came apart. There are certain parts of me I'd rather not lose if you know what I'm saying.

I send all of my thoughts across the ether to my little ghost, telling her to hold on tight. That we're on our way. Hopefully, it's enough. Hopefully, we're not too late.



The Gateway is not what I expected. In my head, I had concocted this image of some ancient castle, all stone walls and cold stone floors. Drafty windows and bad lighting.

This place is...none of those things. It feels warm and inviting with its white and black damask walls covered in photos that I have not had the opportunity to explore because dickhead has me backed into a corner, literally. I finally give up on standing and slide to the floor. The tile under my ass is sparkly and totally something I would've chosen myself. Though, I guess I did.

Huh. Good to know old me and new me share the same sense of style at least.

The main room is like a large conference room, mostly empty except for the totally amazing chair sitting up on a raised dais along the far wall. It's slightly ornate, with a white frame and black tufted back and seat. A red runner flows from the chair straight out the door.

Damn, I've got good taste.

Mob Man is pacing the space in front of me, waiting for his crew to show up. Every once in a while, he'll pause and aim that ring in my direction as if to remind me who holds the power here. When we first arrived, he contacted his *friend* who assured him he had nothing to worry about but insisted he wait for reinforcements.

His friend sounds like a dumbass to me.

"Do they not trust you to do this yourself?" I ask, sounding bored. Probably because I am. We've been here for what feels like hours but has realistically been thirty minutes. I'm hungry and tired and honestly starting to

get a little worried. My power isn't cooperating - again. I've tried to shoot some of those electric sparks at the turd-waffle, but do you think anything happened? Nope. I've got nothing. Static electricity is more powerful than I am at the moment.

"She trusts me. I was told to wait here for back up, so that's what I'm doing."

"She? Who's she?"

"None of your damn business."

"Well, I mean...it kind of is my business since it involves me and my book."

"Just shut the hell up. Where the hell have you been for the last hundred years anyways?"

"That's none of *your* damn business. Unless you're my thong, don't be up my ass."

He side eyes me like he can't believe the words that are coming out of my mouth.

"Dude, no one is coming." Even I can hear the whine seeping into my voice. They should've been here by now. Unless Reggie and I weren't on the same page like I'd thought. Or maybe something happened to Reggie and the guys. Or maybe the guys didn't want to get involved. I mean, one command from Cole and they'd be forced to stay put. Lord knows Cole and I aren't on the best terms.

As the minutes tick by, hope diminishes. Mob Man becomes increasingly agitated while I sit with my back against a wall, a numb ass, and a bad attitude. Out of nowhere, five apparitions appear, startling Mob Man.

Quickly recovering from his shock, he growls at the men, "Where the hell have you been?"

"Do you have it?" asks a gravelly voice. It comes from the one in the hoodie and baggy jeans that are about ready to fall off his ass. I mean, he's wearing a belt, but it's doing a piss poor job of keeping them in place. How do they get those damn things to defy gravity like that?

"No. I was told to wait and not to attempt to retrieve it myself."

Hoodie Man rolls his eyes. "Dude, she doesn't even trust you enough to get a simple book?"

"She trusts me," Mob Man sputters, glancing at me.

I just shrug my shoulders. "See, guy. She totally doesn't trust you."

"She just wanted back up with me in case anything goes wrong."

“Bro, she doesn’t trust you,” Hoodie Man says. “And I don’t have time for this shit. Let’s get the book and get the hell outta here.”

As I watch the interaction, I feel a weird tingle inside my brain. Like someone’s trying to get in. Are one of these guys a telepath? Is it my guys? Am I developing a brain tumor?

Hoodie Man glances my way and snorts. He’s totally mature, I can tell. “So *this* is the Queen of the Gateway. You’re sure? She doesn’t look like much to me.” He eyes me up and down, disbelief written all over his ugly ghost face.

“Yeah, it’s her. How else would she have brought me here?”

Hoodie Man crouches down in front of me, his forearms resting on his knees.

“You don’t look as badass as stories would have people believe. Maybe we’ve all been worried for nothing.”

“Here’s a tip,” I say, leaning forward to place my forearms on my bended knees, mimicking his position from the ground. “You might want to pull up your pants because when my guys get here, it’s going to be impossible to run in those things. And you *will* want to run.”

“Oh, Sugar Tits, your guys aren’t coming or they’d be here already.”

“You lookin’ at my tits? That’s your second mistake. My guys won’t take kindly to that either.”

“How about you just tell me where the book is so we can all be on our merry way, yeah?”

“How about you eat a dick?” I reply, throwing in a head tilt for good measure.

“Okay, boys, she wants to do this the hard way,” he says to his cronies in the back while getting to his feet.

“I like it hard, just not from you. Or at least I think I do. It’s been awhile. But I do know I’ve got enough hard things of my own,” I retort, really just trying to keep stalling in the hopes my damn men actually do come for me.

As all of their eyes start to glow red, I get to my feet and back myself against the wall. Right before they lunge for me, all the doors around the room start opening and closing. I now fully understand just how creepy that shit is because this time it isn’t me. Though, whoever it is has good timing - a ghost girl can appreciate another, right? I’m all about solidarity.

The cronies pause, all looking at each other nervously.

“What are you waiting for? Grab her already!” Mob Man orders.

That tingling is back in my head, and I tap it a couple of times with the heel of my hand. The cronies haven't moved an inch and look even more worried now. Oh, right. Queen of the Gateway. Tapping her head like an insane person. I'm totally going to roll with that. With my evil smirk firmly in place, I take a step forward and twitch my head for good measure. They take a step back.

"What's the matter, boys? You aren't scared of little ol' me now, are you?" I ask with a little more confidence than I'm feeling.

Hoodie Man throws his arm out, halting his crew.

"No. Not really. All you've got is a couple parlor tricks from what I hear. We're not afraid of you."

The tingling is becoming an incessant buzzing in my brain. It's like the feeling you get in your hands or feet when the circulation has been cut off for way too long and then you try to use them. It's a strange mix of constant tingling with pinpoints of pain.

"Oh my *ghost!* Can you *stop* it already?" I yell out, smacking the heel of my hand against my head a couple more times, and a little harder, for good measure.

Hoodie Man shares a look with Mob Man. "She's out of her damn mind, bro. You sure she even knows where the hell the book is?"

"Well, I mean..." Mob Man responds, looking as nervous as the other guys now. "She said she hid it somewhere."

"Well that's fucking great," Hoodie Man states, throwing his arms in the air in frustration. "We're all going to have our asses handed to us if we don't get that book."

As they start arguing amongst themselves, I try to pay attention, but the constant brain buzz is driving me crazy. All of a sudden, the buzzing stops, and a wealth of information floods my brain. It comes so fast, I grab my head with my hands, bending over as the room spins - or at least it feels that way as my stomach does a flip.

It's over as fast as it began, and I stand up straight and shake my head back and forth to make sure there was no permanent damage. Mind melding is not for the faint of heart. Oh wait, that's a Vulcan thing, right? Well, whatever the hell that was, it was probably a lot like that.

But now I *know* things. Like how to navigate the corridors to get to my bedroom. Or how to lock the doors to keep the spirits out during the off hours. It's like I've been given the remote to a smart house, the Gateway

being the smart house, and it's bluetoothed directly to my brain.

The room has gone quiet, and they're all staring at me again.

"What? You act like you've never seen a real woman before, boys," I snark, placing my hand on my hip.

Hoodie Man looks at his cronies, then Mob Man. "Get her!" he shouts.

I dive out of the way just as his ghostly hand brushes my arm, sending an involuntary chill through my body. Fucking ghosts. Always so damn cold. A room along the far wall catches my eye, and I race toward it. Throwing the door open, I'm just about over the threshold when my hair is tugged from behind so hard that I'm flung backward.

"Stop playing games, Sugar Tits," he snarls in my ear, his cold breath sending goosebumps down my body. "Give me the book, and I won't have to hurt you."

"Let me go, and I won't have to hurt *you!*"

He tugs me by the hair to the center of the room and pushes me to my knees. My eyes water from the burning in my scalp, and my knees throb from the fall. This being a real girl shit hurts something fierce, but I'll be damned if I let one tear slip free in front of these bozos.

"Now, that's a much better position for you, Sugar Tits."

"Ew! As if," I sneer.

The malevolent look on his face would break a normal girl, but I've got Cole, and he's a helluva lot scarier.

"Where. Is. The. Fucking. *Book?*"

"Up your ass and around the corner," I deadpan.

A ghostly backhand smashes across my face, whipping my head to the side, blood spurting out from my busted lip. Guess he didn't appreciate my charming sense of humor.

"I'll ask you one more time. Where is the book?"

"It's with Yomama."

"Dude, did she just cut a Yo Mama joke?" one of the cronies snickers.

Hoodie Man is obviously not amused, earning me another backhand across the face. This one hits me square in the eye, the force hard enough it sends my body crashing to the floor. My head bounces off the pretty tile with a loud thunk, and the room spins for a moment before the world rights itself again. I slowly push myself back to my knees. *This real girl shit is honestly turning out to be a huge pain in the ass*, I think as I take a deep breath, cursing the fact that my head is throbbing in sync with my rapidly beating

heart. *Wonder just how much this body of mine can take? Pretty sure I'm going to find out.*

Warmth trickles down my chin thanks to the blood seeping from my lip. My eye is slowly swelling shut, and I'm pretty sure the sight of me would scare most small children. And these days, those little shits don't scare easily. The guys, however, are going to freak the fuck out when they get a good look at me. Assuming they actually show up. My stomach rolls, and I have a feeling whatever's in there will be making a reappearance on Hoodie Man's sneakers real soon.

"Last chance. If you tell me where the book is, I'll let you live. You don't, I kill you once and for all. But first, I'll go grab those useless guys of yours and kill each one of them in front of you."

And with that, I feel my power surge slightly for the first time since we've arrived. But it's still six against one, and those aren't good odds.

"How about you all go to Hell?"

He grabs me by the throat and pulls me off the ground until my feet are dangling in mid-air. For a ghost, he's got some impressive strength. My hands wrap around his translucent wrists, but no matter what I do, I can't relieve the pressure that's slowly cutting off my air supply.

"You should've just given me the book while you had the chance," he snarls, inches from my face.

"And you should let her go right fucking now," growls a voice from behind me. A voice I've grown to love and hate, sometimes both at the same time.

Hoodie Man doesn't even flinch. He looks to where my guys must be standing, and shouts out, "Get them! Maybe one of them can tell us where the book is."

As the sound of fighting breaks out all around me, Hoodie Man's hold on my throat never eases up. If anything, his grip tightens, and I know I'm going to pass out within seconds. Or worse.

"Maybe you misunderstood me?" Cole asks in a low, deadly voice that somehow still manages to do things to my semi-conscious body. Contrary bitch. Love him or hate him. Just pick one already.

"I'll give you the same offer I gave her. If you tell me what I want to know, you can have your pitiful excuse for a queen back, and we'll leave."

Things are going hazy, spots dancing in my vision as the room grows slowly darker.

With the last bit of awareness I have left, I hear a grunt from behind me and a body hitting the floor. I recognize that grunt. It's been aimed at me enough times.

That's all it takes for my powers to flood through me. A threat to one of my guys. Even the asshole.

Hoodie Man whimpers as my power sparks against him, and the hand that's around my throat releases its hold, dropping me to the floor. I take a few deep breaths, desperate for air, but this is no time to be weak. My guys need me. I stand, admittedly on shaky legs, but my hands are alight with my pretty pink orbs, which are brighter than ever. The light in the room begins to flicker, and I glance behind me to see Cole picking himself up off the ground. Blood oozes from the wound in his shoulder, while his attacker is nothing more than a wisp of smoke behind him.

Our eyes meet, and in the space of a few heartbeats, all of his fear and regret and longing floods me, and my heart swells with an emotion I really don't have time for. Stubborn ass. Took him long enough. It's enough that he came for me. That they all came for me. I'll have to remember to thank them later.

Cole's eyes widen in terror a second before he shouts, "Fate!"

In that second, an image appears in my head and is gone faster than I can blink. With intent, I grasp the Gateway's mark on my wrist and spin to face Hoodie Man just as a magicked, ghostly blade slices right through my middle. I gasp.

"No!" Cole's guttural scream reverberates through the room. All fighting ceases, and I can hear the sound of footsteps running in my direction.

The entire room is focused on the blade sticking out of my mid-section, and I'm inundated with the feelings of disbelief and horror flooding off my guys.

I glance down at the translucent metal sticking right through me, then look up and meet the eyes of my attacker.

We stand there, a premature celebratory grin crossing Hoodie Man's face.

"Remember when I asked if you wanted to go to Hell?" I whisper, grimacing theatrically, though it really does hurt like a motherfucker.

My fingertips glimmer, the electricity pulsing off them in bright pink wisps of color. His grin morphs into a look of shock as I thrust my hand right into his chest. "I wasn't asking hypothetically, dumbass."

His eyes widen as a loud screech leaves his mouth. The blade simply

slides through the rest of my body and disappears before it hits the floor. Meanwhile, I send a silent thank you to the Gateway for that little tidbit of information. Apparently all it takes is a little intent to shift between forms, my corporeal and incorporeal state bendable to my will, along with some strange new mix of the two. Thank fuck this ghostly body isn't quite as weak as the previous one - or as see through. Though the power required to maintain it is a bitch at the moment.

Flames engulf him, a chorus of screams echoing through the room before he disappears in a cloud of black smoke. I turn and face the rest of the astonished men in the room.

"Who's next?" I ask, realizing I'm floating slightly above the floor now, each of my hands holding bright pinkish orbs. Even my orbs are pretty.
#GhostGirlFTW

The remaining cronies all make a run for the exit. I mentally connect with the Gateway, and the doors slam shut, sending them all to a screeching halt.

"Take care of them, would you? I think I might pass out," I mutter to the guys before I give up the hold on my power. My body, once again returned to its solid form, reels from its injuries. The pain is too much to bear, and I start to collapse.

Strong arms catch me before I hit the floor, and the smell of soap and something earthy and alluring surrounds me. I manage to open my eyes and find myself staring into Cole's icy blues. His hand comes up to brush a stray piece of hair off my face.

"You came," I whisper.

"I'll always come for you."

I smirk. "There's a dirty joke in there somewhere."

He chuckles, and it's one of the best sounds I've heard all day.

"You can tell it to me later."

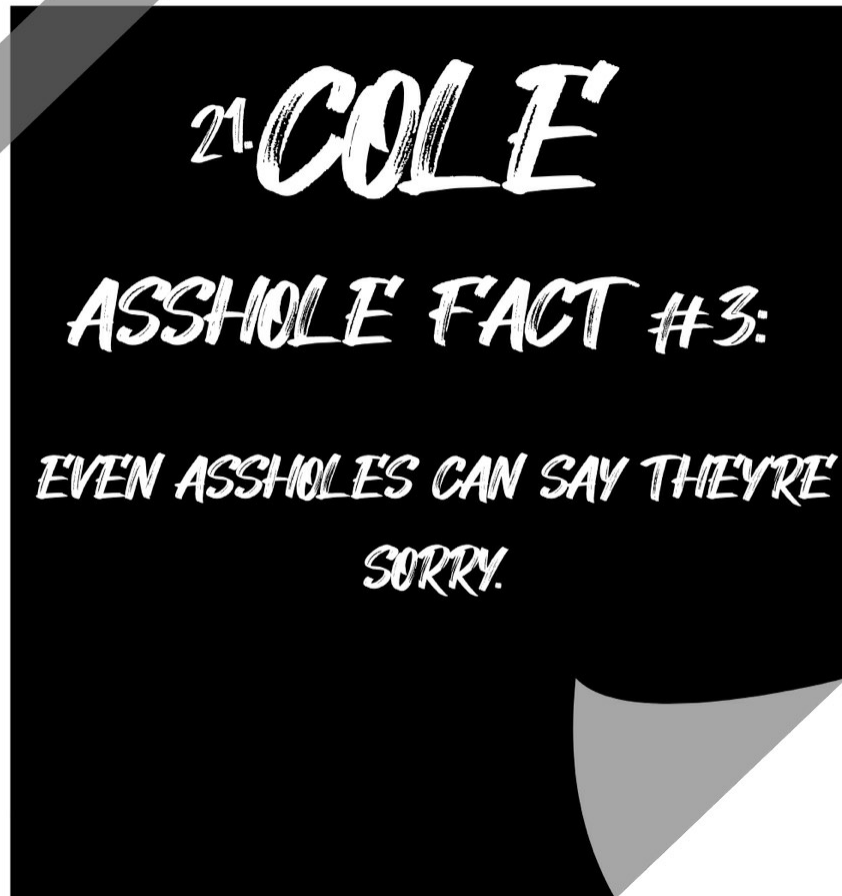
"The guys?" I whisper. I can't seem to keep my eyes open any longer.

"Don't worry about them. They're fine."

"Thank you."

"Shhh. I've got you now, love."

And with that, I pass out.



Despite everything she just went through, the look of utter peace on her face should settle me, but it doesn't. Her eye is swollen shut and already turning black and blue, and she has a puffy bottom lip, though the blood has stopped seeping from the split. Even in this state, she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

My guilt is practically a living thing, churning in my gut. If I hadn't been so stubborn, she might be sitting here giving me shit right now instead of lying unconscious.

When she passed out, I carried her away from the chaos. With Reggie leading me through the maze that is the Gateway, we made it to her bedroom. Placing her on the enormous bed that could easily fit our entire group - I had to stop my brain before it could dive too deeply into *that* thought - she didn't so much as flinch when her body touched the cool silk sheets. Reggie pointed

me to the bathroom so I could find clean washcloths before racing back out to check on the others. I gently washed the dirt and blood off her face, wincing at each new mark I came across. Then I cleaned myself up, bandaging my shoulder well enough that blood was no longer dripping down my body.

I've been lying here for the last hour, praying that she'd wake up soon so my heart would stop its frantic beating. My soul is restless, being this close to her and not being able to tell her how sorry I am. That I think she's one of the strongest women I know. That my feelings for her are so deep and complex that I couldn't put them into words if I tried. If I did, her contrary ass would probably just give me shit for it anyway. Then I'd get pissy, and we'd start arguing. I'm not going to lie, there's nothing hotter than seeing her cheeks flush with anger and those gray eyes of hers ignite with fire. Not the ghost kind. The female kind. And damn...I can't wait to see that look aimed my way again.

Now, as I lie here with my body next to hers, watching the slow rise and fall of her breathing, I know it's going to take time. I know she's likely never going to forgive me for being such a stubborn jackass. And that's okay. We have nothing *but* time for me to prove to her that I can be different. I make a promise to never put myself in a position to have to say I'm sorry to this woman ever again. She deserves more from me, and I'm going to give that to her. Starting right now.



My body is wrapped in a comforting warmth, surrounded by the scent of earth and sun and soap, which does miraculous things for my weary soul. It

seems oddly familiar, though I can't seem to place it.

The pounding in my head and the sting from my lip as I take a deep breath tell me I'm most definitely still living. I'll consider that a win.

As I slowly open my non-swollen eye, a quiet gasp leaves my lips.

Inches from my nose is the one man I never would've expected to see. In sleep, his features have softened, looking almost innocent in their boyish charm. For the first time, I can appreciate how long his eyelashes are when his piercing blue eyes aren't distracting me. A small mole sits near his nose on his left cheek. His breathing is even as he sleeps, and I take a moment to catalog his features. It will help me remember the total innocence he's got buried deep down the next time he aims that grumpy scowl my way.

With his peaceful expression committed to memory, my eyes continue their exploration and land on a very impressive, very naked chest, minus the bandage criss-crossing over his shoulder and under his arm. The sight of the bandage does little to stop my gawking. Perfectly symmetrical chest muscles, an eight pack that is evident even in sleep, and tanned skin that is just begging for my tongue to trace every line and groove. For a moment, I forget who I'm drooling over.

But let's be honest, even when he's pissed off and scowling, my traitorous body still wants him. The man is hot. Both figuratively and literally. With his arm thrown over my body, I'm slowly overheating and not really in a good way considering my pulse is pounding and that pounding is reverberating through my injured skull.

I ever so slowly lift his heavy ass arm up and off my body, setting it gently on the bed in front of him. He doesn't so much as twitch. Making my way off the opposite side of the bed, I wonder just how big this thing is when it takes at least three or four good shimmies of my hips to even reach the edge. Setting my feet on the floor, I slowly attempt to stand, and I'm proud of myself when the room only spins once. Alright, maybe twice.

As I head for the only open door in the room, I glance back at the half-naked man still sleeping peacefully. Every ounce of my soul wants to climb right back in and take advantage of this situation. See what that chest of his feels like all up against my own. But every ounce of my sore body thinks that is a very bad idea.

Since when did you become such a realist? I ask said body. She's usually such a horny broad. Not sure why she's getting all shy now. Pretty sure she just rolled her eyes at me. And now I'm talking to myself. Maybe I hit my

head harder than I thought.

From where I stand, I notice just how ginormous the bed really is. With its cream silk sheets that are now covered in my blood, it's easily big enough to fit, oh...say, five massive guys. Just imagining what we could get up to on that thing is enough to have me wishing I had all my memories back. Bet the highlight reel is epic!

The massive bathroom calls to me, and my injured body slowly makes its way across the room. The sparkly, dark gray floor tile warms my feet as I step in, marveling at the elegance and sense of serenity that engulfs me. Lighter gray mosaic tiles line the walls, with two large gilded mirrors placed above the double vanity on the right hand side of the space. The counter is lined with enough shit that you'd never guess we've been gone a hundred years. Makeup and lotions - *is that massage oil?* - all sit near the closest sink, with razors and cologne and all kinds of guy shit by the other. The shower easily takes up the entire wall on the opposite side of the room, enclosed completely by glass walls with a glass door at the center. This thing makes the bed look small. A tiled bench sits in the middle of the large space, with a small recessed shelf above it dedicated for towels. At the far end, it has one of those amazing showerheads on the ceiling and at least three more on the wall. Plenty of room for group showering. *Sign me up, please!* At the other end, still within the glass, is a large bowl-shaped tub that could easily fit three or four people.

First the bed, now the shower. One might think I had a need for spaces that could easily accommodate multiple people. My mind, though still scattered and pounding, has gone straight to the gutter. Even after discovering the uniqueness of our relationship, it never really occurred to me that these guys would be into a group thing. I've suddenly flipped from fantasies about sandwiches to fantasies about one big, heaping, man meat casserole. Ooh...and Jello. I mean, the tub *is* shaped like a bowl. There's always room for Jello, right?

Did I have a food fetish in my past life?

But the second I catch sight of myself in the large mirror above the sinks, my raging libido dies an instant death.

Even with the lights on low, I can see the utter devastation that is my face. I walk up and place my slightly shaking hands on the pretty white granite countertops and lean in a bit to get a good look at the damage. My left eye is swollen so much that you can barely differentiate between my upper

and lower eyelids. It's a lovely shade of blackish purple. My bottom lip is puffy with a large split near the middle, and my neck is sporting a very unattractive necklace of finger-shaped bruises in varying shades of hideous. In other words, I look like hell.

That's only compounded by the fact that while my leather jacket and boots have been removed, I'm still in the white tank and holey jeans that are now dirty and stained with my blood.

I stare at myself a moment. Not only am I unused to seeing myself so battered, but also at seeing a face that is still so unfamiliar. I look back at my reflection, wondering what the old me saw when she looked in this mirror. Did she have the same doubts and worries that I have? That I'll never be powerful enough, or strong enough, or...hell...let's be honest...*me* enough to keep five guys interested?

"I'm sorry," comes Cole's low, deep voice from the doorway, startling me out of a brewing pity party.

I glance his way and am once again shocked by the sight of his bare chest. He takes my silence as a sign of my being upset, when in reality I am just struck mute by the way his abs and pecs flex as he shoves his hands into his back pockets.

"I know you and I didn't get off to the best start, and that I've been an ass to you since day one, but I never would've let you intentionally walk into danger if I had known."

Those last words break me out of my trance, and I finally bring my eyes up to meet his.

"If you had known what?" I ask, confused. My brain is *not* firing on all its cylinders.

"That not having all of your marks was the reason your powers were unstable. Reggie told us you need us to help balance them." He pauses and takes a couple of tentative steps toward me. Pulling one hand from his jeans, his fingertips skim over the four marks on my bicep. "You have my brothers' marks, but not mine."

"And whose fault is that?" I snap, angry despite myself.

"Mine. I know that."

I sigh, not wanting to fight. I get why he kept his distance. I would've done the same thing in his place. But it still hurts. Especially now that we know what he is to me. *My first.*

A sigh escapes me again as the weight of all of this strife between us

slowly starts to dissipate. With understanding, comes a certain level of clarity which allows me to see things in a way I hadn't been able to, or *wanted* to, before. "Look, I don't blame you, Cole. In fact, I should probably be thanking you."

At that, his blue eyes widen. "Whatever the hell for?"

"For keeping them safe when I couldn't. For protecting them and making sure you all got back to me."

We stand there, staring at each other - both of us realizing we're at a sort of crossroads. I'm the first to look away. My own emotions are battering my defenses and his aren't helping.

"I need to take a shower," I say softly, turning to walk away and only wincing slightly as the room tilts a bit.

His hand reaches out and grabs my elbow, steadying me.

"Why don't you let me help you?"

I look at him like he's out of his mind.

"You can keep your bra and panties on, just let me help you get the dirt and blood off."

I study him for a moment, surprised to still see this helpful, open side of him. Another olive branch. One I can't and don't want to refuse.

"Okay."

Slowly, he reaches for the hem of my tank top and gently lifts it up, taking extra care when it has to go over my battered face. My eyes are locked on him as his finger comes down to trace a small, dark bruise on my abdomen where the blade impaled my ghostly form.

"I was struggling to keep myself from going solid. It's only a little sore," I whisper.

He sucks in a deep breath and releases it carefully, like he's trying to calm himself down. Nothing about the interaction is in any way sexual, but it stirs something in my belly that feels distinctly familiar.

I reach down and unbutton my jeans, working them over my hips. He shocks me again by dropping to his knees before me and helping me push the tight material down each leg and over my feet. I stand before him in nothing but a white lace bra and matching panties. He doesn't ogle my body or make any suggestive comments, but my body blazes to life like a bonfire regardless.

Standing again, he takes my elbow once more and walks us over to the large shower, through the glass door, and down to the far end. I swear, it's at

least a mile long walk. Or at least it feels that way with my body battered and Cole's hands on me. Letting go long enough to reach over and turn on the water, making sure it's the right temperature, his eyes once again meet mine. There are unspoken words reflected in them, telling me a story that I don't think he even realizes he's written. One that would probably send us both up in flames if we were to read the words out loud.

"I'll leave the jeans on," he says quietly.

"Why would you do that?"

His face flushes with heat, which catches me off guard. He brings one of his large hands up and runs it down the back of his head and neck. His eyes won't meet mine, and there's something about his nervous energy that I find completely irresistible.

"I, um...don't really care for underwear."

My brain just about explodes with the implications of that simple statement.

"It's up to you," I say softly. "I mean, we're both adults, and I promise to behave."

His eyebrow quirks up like he doesn't quite believe that last part, and he continues to stare down at me, reading something in my expression that tells him what he needs to know. Unbuttoning his jeans, he pushes them down his muscular legs.

By some miracle, I manage to keep my eyes above his waist. I mean, I *want* to look. I really, really do. But I'm not sure my brain can withstand another hit at the moment.

With his hands on my shoulders, he gently guides me back until I'm partially under the flow of water. I close my good eye, letting the warmth roll over me, rinsing away the chaos of the day and soothing my ridiculously sore body. His large hands begin to softly massage shampoo into my hair, eliciting a moan I can't seem to stop from escaping my lips. It's not a sexual sound, though I'd be lying if I said his touch wasn't affecting me at all. When he's done, he lets the water rinse the suds away before combing the conditioner through the strands with his fingers. There's a shuffling somewhere beside me, bottles moving around with a thud here and clang there, like he's moving them around, looking for something. The noise halts when he's made his choice. The first touch of his hands as they begin to caress my body has me sucking in a gasp.

"I'm sorry, did that hurt?" he murmurs.

I shake my head and whisper, “No. It didn’t.”

He pauses for a moment, gauging my words, before his hands return to my neck and shoulders, working his way down and under my arms, over my chest and stomach, around my hips, and the inside of my thighs before carefully washing each foot. He doesn’t linger on any one area, carefully working his way back up.

His touch is all business, but my traitorous body doesn’t give a damn. My breathing has become erratic, and I’m drenched, *not* from the shower. I open my good eye and see his gaze is locked on me. I’m not sure I’ve ever felt so safe and cared for. Maybe in my past life, but definitely not in this one.

We stand there for a beat, taking each other in, neither of us making a move or speaking.

Finally, it’s too much. All of the anger and sorrow and fear and regret and longing built up over the last however many years finally burst forth.

We step into each other at the same time, our lips connecting with a force that would probably shatter the moment between mere mortals, but just stokes the fire between us even higher. The distinct tang of copper hits my tongue, and I know that my lip has busted open, but I can’t find it in me to give a damn. His large hand wraps around the back of my neck, pulling my face closer as if even the air between us should know better than to get in the way.

His tongue licks the blood off my lip before forcing my mouth to obey his command and open for him. Our kiss is frantic. Manic. Out of control.

He pulls back slightly, and I groan, hating the little bit of space separating us.

My eyes open, and I see his widen in surprise as his thumb gently brushes underneath my black eye. The swollen one that suddenly doesn’t seem so swollen.

“It’s healing,” he gruffly responds to my silent question. “So is your lip.”

My tongue darts out to lick the cut but encounters nothing except smooth skin. Our eyes connect, and the barely banked heat in those normally icy blues is enough to have me melting on the spot.

“How?”

His fingers drop down and skim over the marks on my bicep. All *five* marks on my bicep. Our eyes meet again, and the tilted smirk on his lips even makes my inner bad girl swoon.

“You’re all mine now.”

“I think I always have been.”

That’s what sends him over the edge of his control. Reaching behind me, he grabs my ass and hauls me up, my legs automatically finding their place around his waist. Before I can ask about his shoulder, my back is hitting the cold tile and his mouth is on mine again. His very large, very hard dick rubs against my panties, and I move my hips, trying to get enough friction to ease the ache that has been haunting me for so long.

“Don’t tease,” I murmur as I come up for air.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he responds as his hand comes up to push the cups of my bra down, my breasts resting on the material. He just stares for a second before he’s diving in with a groan and swirling his tongue around my nipple, sucking until my head tilts back, hitting the tile. I don’t even feel it. He lavishes the same attention on the other one before he pulls back slightly. “I just needed a taste of those first.”

“This is not a taste test. This is a feast. Devour me. Now!”

His chuckle is dark and delicious as his hand wraps around the leg of my panties and pulls. The threads snap, and the offending garment is sailing through the air behind him. We both moan as skin meets skin. His dick slides back and forth through my wetness, once, twice, three times. Granted, it feels better with the panties gone, but I still need him *inside me*.

“Please,” I beg.

“What do you want, love?” he whispers.

“I need you. Now. Please.”

His hand slides between us, grabs a hold of his dick, and lines himself up. He pushes in slightly and pulls back. In and out. In and out. I feel my power surge to life. Suddenly the feeling of him moving against me, teasing me, seems more than familiar. My body is remembering every touch, every caress of his skin against mine. The dueling sensations are vying for recognition, the phantom touch from a memory coming back into focus. We’ve been together like this before, entwined around each other, the cool tile against my back and his warmth enveloping me everywhere else. Every slip of him against my wetness feels amplified by its counterpart from my past, and I’m almost desperate in my need for him, two distinct sets of feelings coalescing inside me.

“Now, my alpha,” I command in a voice huskier and deeper than my own.

“Yes, my love,” he replies simply.

The next time our eyes meet, mutual flames are reflected there.

In one thrust, he's filling me where I've been so empty for so long. He's big, and I'm out of practice, but the little hint of pain is swept away by the pure pleasure of having him inside me. His warmth floods my soul and shatters the remaining barriers around my heart. With each thrust, he builds me back up, making me whole again. I can feel my body tightening, need and want coiling rapidly. His steady rhythm becomes erratic. His body joining with mine. Harder. Faster.

"Fuck," he moans. "You feel so damn good. I'm not sure I can..."

"Don't hold back. I want your cum. Now!"

"Fuucckkk!" His groan is all it takes, and I'm flying over the edge with him. Soaring into the ether. Together. He's still holding me like he'll never let me go, the blackness surrounding us, almost caressing us, as our souls are reunited. It's a place where no one can touch us or come between us. A darkness that only our light can dispel. His hips are continuing to thrust, slower now, dragging every last ounce of pleasure from both of our bodies. His mouth meets mine, but this time it's slow and gentle and says without words everything he's feeling. Time seems to pause, though I have no idea if that's how this works. I just know that this place is special. And it's ours. All of ours.

When he finally pulls away, we're back in the bathroom, both of us a little dazed and a lot exhausted. He slowly lowers me to the ground, holding on to steady me which I appreciate. I'm not all that sure I wouldn't just crumble into a heap at his feet.

"Let's wash up and go get some rest," he says quietly.

We wash quickly, and he steps out to grab us towels. He goes around his waist, then he holds mine out for me. Stepping into him, his big arms wrap me in a brief embrace over the towel, and I take a moment to just enjoy the peace I feel. My face is squished into his chest, and I can barely breathe, but I don't think I've felt this safe since...hell, probably since old me stood on this amazing warmed tile. He carefully dries me off, kissing my forehead before picking me up, the towel falling to the floor. Walking into the bedroom, he lays me down softly on the plush mattress. The sheets have been changed, the cream exchanged for a deep navy blue.

"You changed the sheets?"

He blushes slightly and shrugs. "They were ruined."

"You going soft on me, alpha?"

He drops his towel, but this time, I don't even attempt to keep my eyes above the waist. I take him in. Every long, thick, *hard* inch of him, before he climbs in next to me.

He smirks. "Do I look soft to you?"

"No. Nope. Definitely not," I say, licking my lips. His dick bobs in response.

"Uh uh. None of that look. There will be plenty of time for that later. Now, you need sleep."

I pout, but he refuses to be swayed. He lies down inches from me, once again face to face. His hand comes up, and his fingers softly trace over my neck.

"The bruises are gone now."

"How's your shoulder?"

He rolls it a couple of times and moves his arm.

"Good as new."

I grab his wrist and turn it toward me, finding the mark that matches mine. A solid line with a single dot in the middle. Because he was my first in our past life. And now he's my first in this one. It feels destined.

With one finger, I trace the mark of the Gateway just below my mark on his wrist.

"Sounds like there's a lot Reggie hasn't told us."

"I don't think she realized just how much we didn't know."

"You're right. We'll have to ask her specifics."

"Later. Right now, we need to rest." He pulls me closer, his hand resting on the space just above my ass. My head is tucked under his chin, my hand absently stroking his chest. With every breath, I inhale his earthy scent, with underlying hints of sunshine and soap. I didn't know sunshine even had a scent until this moment, but it does, and it soothes me like few things can.

"We should check on the guys," I whisper, which is immediately followed by a yawn.

"Reggie said she'd make sure they were okay and would only disturb us if anything went wrong. I think she wanted to give us some time alone."

I make a mental note to thank Reggie later.

My eyes refuse to stay open a minute longer. Right before I drift off, I feel him place another soft kiss on my forehead. For the first time in a hundred years, my soul feels complete.

22. KNOX

EMPATHY FACT #4:

SOME THINGS ARE BETTER
LEFT UNFELT.

The room is shrouded in black smoke from all the asshole ghosts we just sent packing. The back of my hand swipes across my forehead, collecting sweat and dirt along the way. I'm on edge. The emotions in the room slowly start to dwindle now that we've taken out the garbage...but not fast enough. Anger, hostility, fear, the need for revenge. All still swirling around, creating a powerful cocktail of negative energy. Even my usual breathing technique is struggling to keep it all at bay.

Then there's the worry I can feel from all the guys and the pain and guilt I can still sense from Cole. Fate is remarkably at peace, though there are muted traces of pain and worry as well. The sight of her dangling from that piece of shit's hands will haunt me for a long time. Our little ghost just can't catch a break.

Where the fuck did they go, anyway?

Glancing around the room, a scuffle near the door catches my attention. The twins have some poor schmuck of a ghost backed up against the wall and are taunting him with their powers.

Rolling my eyes, I shout, "Hey, numbnuts! Stop dicking around."

"How about you make us?" Thad jeers.

"Ignore them," Mack says, coming up beside me. "At least it's keeping them occupied."

"True that. Where the fuck are Cole and Fate?"

"She passed out. Cole carried her out of here with Reggie guiding him. I really think we need to check on them."

"I'm sure Cole's got it under control. Let's make sure everything is cleaned up in here, and then we can figure out where he's taken her."

"You're right. I'm sure Cole would let us know if anything were wrong," he murmurs, staring at the door like a dog whose owner just left for the day. His fear and worry are damn near suffocating me.

"She'll be okay, mate."

"I know you're right. I just keep seeing her impaled by that damn blade, and it's making me all...itchy."

"Itchy? That sounds like a personal problem."

He turns to me and glares. "Shut up. You know what I mean. It's like something inside me needs to see her to confirm she's still alive."

"I feel the same way, Mack. A part of me is desperate to go to her, but luckily for me, my empath abilities are helping me keep it locked down. I can *feel* that she's okay, so I don't need to storm the castle to hunt her down."

His hand lifts to brush through his messy waves, which fall into even bigger disarray. He's got a black smudge across his cheek, and his glasses are smeared with...god only knows what. "Cole was hurt too. What if..."

"Mack, they're *both* fine. I promise. I'll know if anything changes."

A sigh escapes as he struggles with his growing panic.

My hand grips his shoulder firmly, letting him know he's not alone. What he needs most right now is to be grounded. As much as I'm accustomed to being surrounded by emotions, Macklin is the opposite. Living his life with his head in cold, hard facts has left him unprepared for the vulnerability and emotional dependence that comes with this reignited connection to Fate.

"Right now, I'm pretty sure they're both asleep. Their feelings are muted, but still very much there."

"Okay. You'll tell me if you feel anything happening, right?" he asks,

swiping a hand across his cheek, spreading the sooty mark even more.

“I will. I swear.”

He nods, walking to a closet and grabbing brooms and a few rags along with some sort of cleaning spray.

“How the hell did you know that was there?”

“I...” he trails off. His brows furrow for a second, obviously trying to work something out in that big brain of his. “I just knew. Maybe the Gateway mark added to my knowledge banks or unlocked that portion of my memory. I’m not sure.”

“Huh. Okay, then.” He tosses me a broom, and we get to work cleaning up the dirt and overall grime from the slimy spirits. Amazing how much residue those fuckers can leave behind. The blood stains from Fate are another matter. I grab a rag and spray bottle and begin cleaning up the evidence that our little ghost is no longer a mere presence but a flesh and blood woman. What’s more concerning is that she’s able to be harmed by spirits. With that thought, I realize that the shroud of black smoke has been replaced with a blanket of worry covering the entire room. Now I’m the one with a prickly sensation crawling across my skin like an itch that can’t be scratched.

“So, boys, you’ve got it all handled, yeah?” Reggie asks, sauntering into the room like she doesn’t have a care in the world. Or at least she wants us to think that. I can sense differently. Her aura is a grayish yellow, giving away the concern she’s trying to hide.

Mack rushes forward. “How is she?”

“She’s still out. Cole was going to clean her up and watch over her. I made sure the rest of the entrances were sealed shut for now.”

“And we’re just going to let the asshole who’s been a ginormous cock knob to her since day one care for Fate? He’s more likely to argue with her or piss her off than coddle her. And we all know my woman deserves some damn good coddling at the moment,” Thad grumbles.

My eyes narrow on him. “Don’t forget, he’s still the leader of this group, and we need to respect that.”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t get your panties in a twist there, Knoxie boy. I get it.”

“Plus, they need some time to...work through their issues. Don’t you think?” Reggie asks.

Macklin nods. “She’s right, guys. Fate needs Cole’s mark to complete the bond.”

“Fine. We can be patient. Right, bro?” Levi asks his twin, placing his hand on Thad’s shoulder.

“I hate it when you all gang up on me,” Thad mutters.

“So, it’s settled. Let’s get the rest of this shit taken care of, and then we can all throw our feet up in the office while we wait. There’s a bottle of your favorite Macallan in there,” Reggie states, lifting her hands and flinging brooms through the air at Thad and Levi with a smirk.

“You had me at whiskey,” Levi quips and nudges his brother’s shoulder toward the ash pile left from their little spirit play toy earlier.

By the time the chamber is clean and the tile once again sparkling, we’re all exhausted. Mack leads the way to the office, and Levi heads straight for the bar to pour our drinks. Our resident nerd walks around the space, looking at items that haven’t been touched in over a century.

Reggie walks in and pauses when she spots Mack inspecting a fountain pen and stack of papers on the lone desk in the room. “That’s Fate’s desk. That letter in your hand, you left it there for her the last time you were in here.”

Mack looks astonished as he reverently runs his finger across the page. “We had something special planned for her.”

“You did,” Reggie agrees softly.

“What happened?”

Her despair hits me like a punch to the gut. “I don’t know. I wish I did.”

Levi walks over and hands out drinks, and the fact that Mack takes one says a lot about his emotional state. Along with women, he typically avoids alcohol since he says it impacts how quickly he can access information. We sink into the sofas with glasses of amber liquid in our hands. Reggie is staring off into the fire as if it can give her the answers to the questions we’ve all been asking.

“Think they’re still okay?” Macklin asks, his voice hesitant like he doesn’t want to ask but can’t help himself.

“They’re fine, Mack. Actually...” I trail off, sensing Fate is awake through our bond. She’s tired and sore, but the hints of desire tell me that she’s going to be just fine. “She’s awake. And I’m pretty sure Cole’s up now too.”

Mack jumps to his feet. “That’s great! Can we...”

Reggie cuts him off without even looking back. “Let’s give them their space, Mack.”

We all eye her a little warily for a moment. Her despair from earlier is growing, and if she doesn't knock it off, I'm going to have to do something about it.

Glancing at Mack, I quickly reassure him. "I can tell you that they're both feeling the effects of the fight, but they're otherwise totally fine."

His shoulders slump, and I feel like I just kicked his puppy.

"We feel your pain, Mack," Levi says, holding his glass up in solidarity, and Thad clinks the glass with his own.

A moment later, the room starts to feel overly warm. Glancing around, I note the fire is still fairly small, definitely not big enough to give off the level of heat I'm suddenly experiencing. A trickle of sweat drips down the side of my face, and I swipe it away.

"Is anyone else in here getting warm?"

"Nope," Thad responds.

Levi shakes his head.

Reggie mutters, "I wish."

Mack looks at me quizzically. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I mumble, though silently I question what the hell is going on. The emotion in the room, while high, isn't anywhere near the peak of my limits, but this feels remarkably close to that dangerous line. Something powerful is brewing.

"You sure? You're looking a bit flushed and are acting a little...shifty."

"It's just..."

The sensation floods me then. This isn't your typical kind of warmth. This heat is created when two people who share a deep bond start to become physically intimate. I've felt something like this before, but nowhere near as strong. With all of the fiery emotions between Cole and Fate, it's a wonder I haven't spontaneously combusted already. I flush for a different reason this time, trying to block out a bulk of the feelings before I'm coming in my pants again. Don't need a repeat of that any time soon.

Fuucckk!

"Knox? What is it?" Mack asks.

Suddenly, we're all hit with an intense blast of power that knocks us all back into our seats. Reggie ends up halfway across the room.

Levi's hand is holding his drink in the air, making sure he doesn't spill a drop of the precious liquid. "What the fuck was that?"

"Fuck if I know," Thad mutters, tossing back the last of his whiskey.

“Knox, what do you feel?” Macklin asks.

Sending my senses out, I suddenly know exactly what’s happening and can feel the tension and relief and desire that’s flooding the bedroom where Cole and Fate are holed up. “Um...” *Fucking smooth, Knox!*

All four sets of eyes turn to look at me.

Mack’s nervously wringing his hands now. “Is it Fate? Is she okay?”

Trying again, I clear my throat. “I’m not sure.”

Macklin’s eyes narrow on me, and his finger points in my direction. “You’re lying.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can tell you’re lying. Something inside me is...” He pauses, looking around the room. “Something is different. I can’t pinpoint it, but I can *feel* it. Thad, tell me something. Let me see if I can figure out if it’s true or a lie.”

Thad’s eyebrows shoot up. “Aren’t we a little old for two truths and a lie?”

“Just fucking do it!” I growl.

“Fine. Calm down, bro. Okay. Let’s see.” He rubs his chin between his thumb and forefinger before coming up with what is sure to be a doozy. “Fate, Levi, and I got it on while we were out on that ghost call. Right in the front living room. Clothes hanging from the curtains. Sweat dripping down our bodies. Our dicks sliding in and out of each...”

“Okay...that’s enough,” Mack says, holding his hand out like that alone will stop the huge taint biscuit who’s smirking on the opposite sofa. “That’s a lie. Right?”

“Shit, bro! How did you know? I mean, it could’ve happened, but my wankstain of a brother put a halt to it.”

Levi punches him in the shoulder.

“You know a client’s living room is not the time or the place, dipshit.”

“Fucking cockblock,” Thad mutters.

Macklin interrupts their bickering. “I’m not really sure *how* I know. It’s like that blast leveled up my powers. I can sort of... glean information from you and determine if what you say is true or not. Now tell me something else. Let’s try it again.”

Levi starts before Thad has a chance. “Fate shocked the shit out of the Oscar Mayer Wienermobile driver.”

That earns him the side-eye from Thad.

“That’s....the truth,” Mack blurts out.

“Bro,” Thad barks, “I thought we weren’t going to talk about that.”

“Too late,” I chirp. “We’ll discuss that little morsel when Cole returns.”

“Ah hell,” Thad grumbles.

“Your turn, Reg,” Mack claps excitedly, earning a glare from the spirit.

“Fine. I’ll play your stupid little game. I’m the one behind Fate’s death and disappearance.”

She says it with a straight face, and it’s our turn to glare at her.

“Mack?” I hiss.

He studies her for a moment, his head tilting to the side like it might help him think better.

“That one’s not quite as easy as the others. Mostly it seems like a lie, but there are hints of truth woven in. Maybe this new power isn’t as reliable as I was thinking it was.”

“*Did* you have something to do with what happened to Fate?” Thad snaps at Reggie.

Placing her hands on her hips, she stares him down. “She’s my best friend. What do you think, you big oaf?”

Ignoring the silent glaring contest now taking place, Mack’s disappointed eyes find mine again. “Guess I’ll need to work out the kinks. What about you, Knox? Feel any different?”

“Don’t think so,” I say, getting up and heading to the bar in the corner. “Feelings all within normal parameters. Auras are still there with normal intensity, though now that you mention it, after that little blast, you’ve all gained a silver band around the inner portion of your auras. Much like the one our little ghost has. So yeah, just your average empath stuff here.”

Thad walks up beside me and grips my shoulder with one hand while he holds his other hand out toward me for a refill. “It’s okay to be average, Knoxie boy. We can’t all be awesome.”

He laughs like he’s the funniest thing to happen since Jo Koy.

When our eyes meet, I feel my power surge in a way it’s never done before.

Thad’s face gets serious, then his eyes well up and tears spill over. Before I can figure out what’s happening, he’s sobbing like a baby, throwing himself into my arms and holding on tight. I reluctantly wrap my arms around him, awkwardly patting his back.

“What the fuck just happened?” Levi asks.

Not sure what’s more odd, the fact that he doesn’t seem the least bit

worried about his twin or that he's got a hint of a smirk on his face.

"I honestly have no idea. He was laughing, and I just wanted to shut him right the fuck up."

Mack quickly gets to his feet, rushing over to us. Meanwhile, Thad is still sobbing in my arms.

"You just changed his emotions. You thought it, and it happened."

"I...I guess I did briefly think to myself that I wanted to make the big fucker cry, but I didn't want him to turn into a blubbering mess!"

"Well, maybe accuracy will come with practice."

"Fuck! How do I fix him?"

"Why fix him? I kind of like him like this," Reggie mutters.

"Imagine him calm and relaxed?" Mack shrugs.

"Super helpful, mate."

My hands are still patting the back of the giant man in front of me, but I close my eyes and imagine Thad calming down and getting just a little bit sleepy. I mean, it would be kind of nice to have him out of the way for a minute.

The crying slowly stops, and he stands, wiping his face with the back of his hand.

"Hey, Knox. 'Sup, bro?"

"Uh...nothing. Why don't you go have a seat next to Levi?"

Thad's face turns until he eyes his twin, gives the head nod that is in every man's silent vocabulary, then walks over and drops back into his seat.

Levi's eyes are as round as saucers when they meet mine. "Bro! What the fuck? That was *epic!*"

Mack claps his hands together. "We've all leveled up. Levi. What have you got?"

He looks at us warily as we both move closer.

"Well...uh...I'm not sure."

"Feel down deep inside yourself, in that place your power resides. It should feel different than it usually does," Mack spouts off, suddenly the expert in the crazy that has enveloped us all.

We watch as Levi's face scrunches up. He honestly looks constipated rather than powerful.

"Wait. I can feel it. It *does* feel different. There's this warmth and brightness to it I've never experienced before."

"Try to use that. Let's see what happens," Mack says excitedly. Dude

really does cream his pants over a good mystery.

Levi closes his eyes, and suddenly the room is flooded with a bright light.

Covering my eyes with one arm, I shout, “Ok, shut it off...or pull it back in...or whatever the fuck. I don’t want to be permanently blinded.”

I peek out from behind my sleeve and see the room slowly returning to its normal state.

“That is *totally* badass!” Levi exclaims.

“Yay! You’re a giant flashlight,” Reggie deadpans, earning her a glare from Levi this time.

“So we can safely assume that if you have light, Thad has something with darkness as he’s your opposite.” Mack is pacing back and forth, muttering to himself. “But wait, what caused it? Do you think Fate and Cole were affected as well? Are they okay?”

My eyes meet Levi’s, and he must see exactly what I’m struggling to hide. “Oh, I think they’re *just fine*. Right, Knox?”

Perceptive bastard!

“Um. Yeah. They’re completely fine. More than fine, actually.”

“Then what the fuck is going on?” Thad asks around a yawn.

I look at Mack, and his eyes go wide.

“Oh!” His cheeks steadily grow pink.

“No way! She’s fucking the asshole first?” Thad groans, his eyes closing as he slumps further into the sofa.

Levi smacks him upside the head. Reggie tries too, but her hand sails right through.

“Hey! What the fuck, bro?”

“Could you be any more crude?” Mack says with a roll of his eyes.

“I mean, I could. Yeah.” Thad shrugs. “But I’m a little tired at the moment.”

Ignoring him, Mack says, “Well then. They’re obviously okay, so we should just...let them be for a few hours.”

“Sounds like a plan to me. Maybe I can play around with this light thing a little.”

“Don’t you dare! My eyes are still recovering.” I shudder dramatically, but the bastard just chuckles.

“We could always play two truths and a lie,” Mack suggests softly, a hopeful look on his face.

“Seriously, mate?” It’s my turn to groan.

“I mean, I want to practice my new ability. Practice makes perfect, right?”

“Fuck! Fine. But it doesn’t leave this room, understood?”

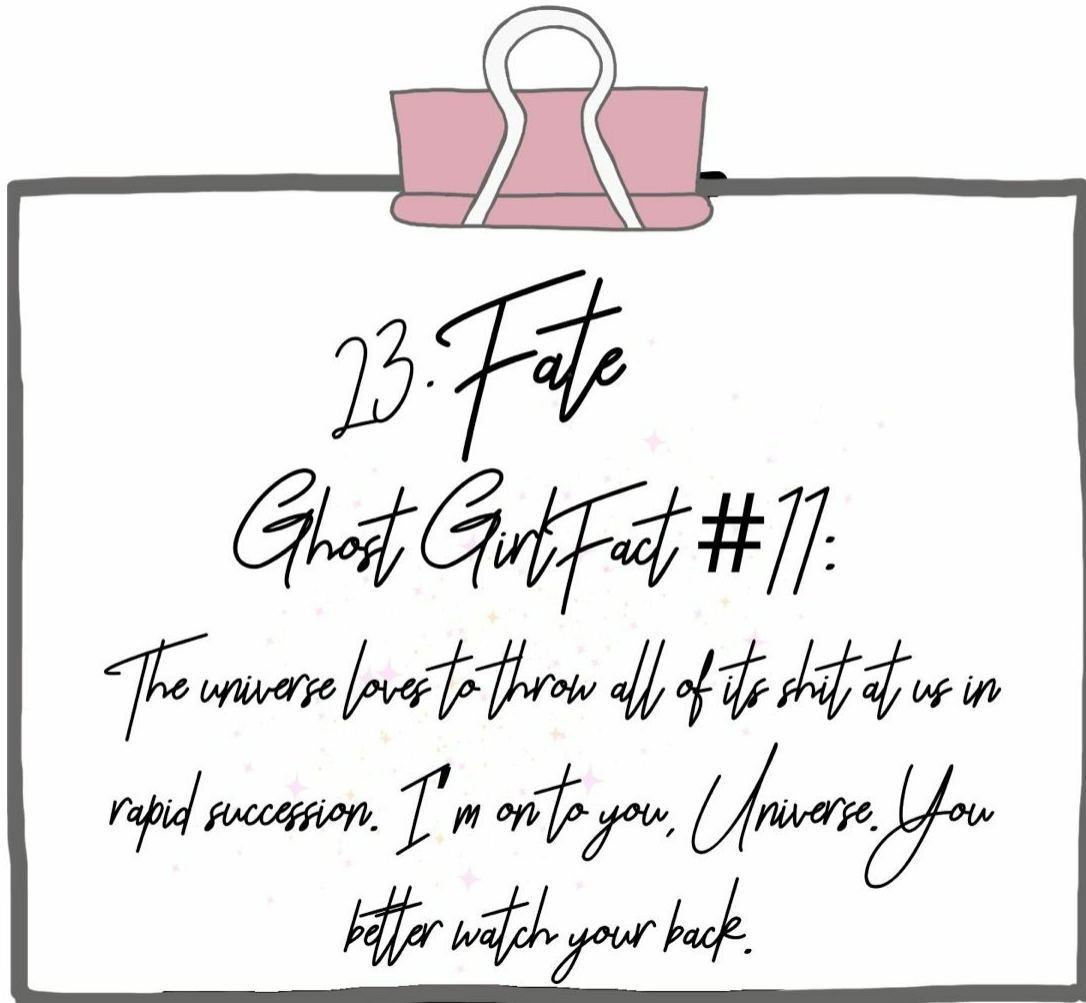
Macklin simply nods.

Levi drains his glass. “Count us in, after I get us refills.”

Thad just yawns.

“Someone’s gotta keep you all in line, so I’m in too,” Reggie says, settling herself on the floor in front of the fireplace.

I glance at the clock and decide to give the lovebirds a few hours. If they’re not out here by then, I’m going in after them. Can’t let the asshole have all the fun, after all.



I woke up in Cole's arms. Let me repeat that just in case the ramifications of that statement haven't hit home. I woke up in *Cole's* arms. Crazy, right? The asshole sure does like to cuddle. I know, color me surprised too.

Never in a million years would I have thought that this could be real life. Oh, sure, my body wanted the insufferable man, but my brain wasn't sold on the idea. Something about almost dying...again...changed that. Softened us both up to the reality of all of those complicated feelings swirling around inside of us - like a kid on a merry-go-round that's had one too many sweets, but as soon as the spinning stops and he vomits it all up, he feels so much lighter.

Cole and I are that kid. Now we're free of the mess that was holding us down. I know. I'm so awesomely dignified, it's no wonder the Gateway chose me. Cue eye roll.

Things can only get better from here. Right?

Turning, I watch my alpha cover that amazing chest with a black shirt he found in the massive closet. Apparently old me was a little bit OCD. All of the clothes were organized by guy, then by color. Shoes were organized by style and then, you guessed it, color. Accessories put away in alphabetical order by type. She was apparently a very well organized woman or, as I have started to refer to her, a total psycho. I swear, some days I wonder if the guys found the wrong girl.

He notices me perving on him from my comfy perch on the side of the bed, my arms braced behind me and my legs swinging off the side, and gets that smirk on his face that does lovely things to my lady bits.

“Knock that off, love, or we’ll never make it out of this room.”

“Hmm...I mean, that wouldn’t be such a bad thing, would it?”

“It would if the others come crashing through the door to check on you.”

“I repeat, that wouldn’t be such a bad thing, would it?”

He just chuckles, walking over to me and wrapping those big arms of his around me as he pulls me up against him.

“I’m not sure how this used to work between all of us, but in this life, I’m not so sure I’m willing to share my time with you.”

Resting my arms over his shoulders, my hands play with his hair as I study those blue eyes of his. His sudden possessiveness has me biting my lower lip, all the ways we could take advantage of our alone time playing on a continuous reel inside my mind.

He pulls my body harder into his, all of our important parts lining up, his hard to my soft, and I can’t stop the moan that escapes my lips.

Trailing his lips along my neck, he whispers in my ear, “I can see those naughty gears turning,” he pauses, dragging his tongue around the rim of my ear, “but we really do need to check on the others. I need an update.”

With that, he gives me a quick kiss on the lips and sets me on my feet before walking toward the bedroom door.

I stand there, hot, bothered, and confused about what the hell just happened. Along with the fact that I can actually *feel* the concern radiating off him. I’m staring at him for all of two seconds before a big, dramatic pout appears on my face.

“Nope. Save that pout for Knox or Macklin. It won’t work on me.”

“You suck.”

“No, but I bet you do.” He shoots me a wink as he opens the bedroom

door.

“Hmph!” I narrow my eyes at the pain in my ass, or, more accurately, pain in my pussy. “It’ll be awhile before you find out just how awesome this mouth is, you big tease.”

He chuckles again, holding out his hand, and I all too easily relent and let him wrap his large fingers around mine as he guides us through the Gateway. We reach the set of double doors to the main chamber, and I mentally give them a little push. They slide open, revealing...an empty space. This feels eerily familiar. My stomach sinks for a second, wondering where in the hell the others are, before we hear low murmurs coming from a door off to the side of the dais.

I take a step toward the sound, but Cole tugs me back. He’s still holding my hand and looking at me with that uber serious expression I’ve grown accustomed to. He glances down at our joined hands before meeting my eyes again. “I know things haven’t always been easy between us.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” I mumble.

His lips tilt up in a half-smile, softening his face for a moment before the serious Cole is back, his brows furrowing and his lips getting that tightness to them whenever he’s stressing out about something. I note that his concern from before has morphed into intense worry now. For me. For us. Whatever it is he’s struggling with, I want him to know that I can help. That we’re in this together. Partners.

My hand comes up to cup his chin, my thumb running along his bottom lip. His tension eases, and with it, something shifts in my heart. Like a crack was just filled and repaired. I remember the first time I saw him outside the estate. The urge to do exactly this had scared the shit out of me. Now here we are.

Mind. Blown.

“I need you to promise me something,” he asks softly.

“Anything,” I respond without hesitation.

“Promise me you won’t run. No matter what happens from here on out, you’ll stay. You’ll fight for us. For what we can rebuild.”

“I promise,” I whisper, too overcome by the depth of feelings I have for this man to say anything more.

“And I promise to trust you and support you and prove to you every day that I deserve to be by your side.”

I can’t help myself. I go up on my tiptoes and kiss him. It isn’t the frantic

meeting of mouths it was before. This is soft. Real. Heartfelt. A way to seal our promises to each other.

We pull apart, our hands still interlocked, and head toward the voices.

Finding the others in an office, they're sitting on deep burgundy sofas that surround a lovely fireplace. A small fire is warming the room, and it settles something inside me. The total familiarity of this scene - right down to the seats everyone has chosen. It all just feels...right.

"They're aliiiiivve," Reggie says, doing her best - which is terrible - Frankenstein impression. Then she pouts when no one pays her any attention.

The guys jump up and immediately surround us.

Knox is the first to get his hands on me, wrapping me up in a hug that barely allows me room to breathe.

"Are you okay?" he asks softly.

"I'm fine. Really."

He kisses my forehead before his eyes meet mine, gauging my words. I don't need words to know how he's feeling since his relief rushes over me like a gust of fresh air.

Before he can reply, I'm whisked out of his arms. I expect Thad or Levi, but my brows shoot up when I realize it's Macklin that has just stolen me away.

I don't get a word out before his lips touch mine in possibly the sweetest kiss I've ever had, telling me everything I know he's too shy to say out loud. When he pulls back, the familiar blush is there, and I can't stop myself from hugging the shit out of him.

"You gave us all heart attacks," he murmurs, and the fear and concern that he's been struggling with since seeing me almost impaled hits me with all of the force of a wrecking ball. The breath is briefly knocked out of me, and I try to stop my body from trembling under the sheer weight of his feelings. I manage to regain control of my own senses. Barely.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you worry. I should've checked in sooner."

"She was in no condition to do anything, let alone head back into a potential battle," Cole grumbles from behind me. Like, *right* behind me. I can feel the heat coming off the guy just as well as I can feel the heat from the fire. Maybe he's part demon. It would explain a lot, actually.

"But you're okay now?" Mack asks as he backs away, letting his eyes survey my body. "I mean, you look pretty good."

My eyebrows shoot up. “Just ‘pretty good,’ eh, Mack?”

Cue blush. *Oh my ghost. It’s just too easy.*

“You look amazing,” Knox croons from my side.

“Wait. How *do* you look so amazing?”

“Jesus, Mack!” Knox slaps him upside the head.

Mack quickly grabs his glasses as they almost fly off his face from the force.

“I didn’t mean it like that! She always looks beautiful. I’m just wondering how there’s not a single scratch on her.” He risks a glance at Cole. “Or you for that matter. Your shoulder wound was pretty serious. It probably needed stitches.”

I point to the five marks on my left arm. Macklin’s fingers run over the marks, and I shiver. The move was almost clinical in nature, but my damn body doesn’t give two fucks. In all reality, she’d probably be happy giving more than two fucks. Horny broad.

Cole responds for me since I seem to have lost all ability to communicate effectively.

“The second my mark appeared on her arm, the injuries started to heal. Swollen and bruised eye. Split lip. Bruises around her neck. Bruised knees. A small bruise on her abdomen where the knife went through her. In a matter of seconds, they were almost totally gone.”

“Wow! That’s incredible. And your shoulder? The same thing?”

“Yup,” he answers, pulling the neck of his shirt down and showing the smooth skin that I may have kissed while he was sleeping. Yup. I was a total creeper.

“Are you fuckers done chit chatting? I’d like to hold my woman, now.”

With that, Thad uses his substantial size to manhandle me away from the discussion still taking place amongst the others. The second I’m wrapped in his massive arms, I feel another body come up behind me and sandwich me in.

Mmm...twin sandwich.

“You really okay, sweets?” Levi whispers in my ear.

I nod, then let my forehead fall to Thad’s huge chest, unable to speak due to the sheer amount of worry and affection I can feel emanating off these giant guys. Like an embrace within an embrace, our souls holding onto each other while their tenderness infuses me with warmth from the inside out. They may seem scary, but they’re really just big, squishy teddy bears. Just

don't tell them I said that.

They seem to sense my struggle and hold me tighter. This would probably suffocate any normal woman, but it just makes me feel cared for on a level I haven't known in too long. Like - at least a hundred years.

"We got you," Thad murmurs. "Don't ever forget that, babe."

"Thank you," I whisper back.

Then my stomach decides to end the feel-fest with a loud rumble, followed by a round of chuckles.

"You hungry, little ghost?" Knox asks.

"I'm starving. I don't think I've eaten since..." I trail off and try to think.

"It's been over twenty-four hours. Breakfast yesterday," Mack answers.

"Thanks, Mack."

Knox looks at Reggie. "Where's the kitchen? Mack and I will go whip some food up for the group."

"Take the main hall to the right and follow it until it ends. It'll be straight ahead."

"I think I knew that," Macklin states, a thoughtful look crossing his face.

"Any requests?"

Before anyone can respond, a voice from the doorway startles us all.

"Oh my gosh, Fate! It's really you. You're back!"

All eyes swing to the woman blocking our exit, the guys quickly forming a protective semi-circle around me.

"Who the fuck is it now?" I whine, throwing my hands in the air. "What's a ghost girl gotta do to enjoy some peace and quiet around here?"

"It's alright, guys. The Gateway let her in," Reggie responds before turning to our new visitor. "Destiny, what are you doing here?"

As if that's all my brain had been waiting for, the flood gates open and a sudden rush of memories is released, assaulting me with an intensity I struggle to contain. My hands grab my head as arms steady my swaying body. From somewhere in the room, I can hear the guys calling my name and asking if I'm okay. I attempt to respond, but the memory drags me under.



There is nothing more exhausting than a morning spent in the Land of Torment. It's hot there. Really, really hot. Think fire and brimstone and wisps of sulfur on the air. Then there are the screams. From everywhere. All the time. My body is wracked with shivers. Man, I loathe that place.

Every month, my sisters and I have breakfast together. We take turns hosting, but I just can't seem to find it in me to get excited about it anymore. It's not that I don't care for my sisters. I do. But Destiny has been absent more often than not lately. Her and Karma have been at odds the past few years. Karma is just...I release a loud sigh when I think of my eldest sister. I love her dearly, but the woman is a lot to handle on a good day, let alone a really bad one. Karma is like a cocktail of negativity and paranoia with a splash of vengeance thrown in. I'm not sure if the Land of Torment made her that way, or if she's always been a bundle of instability.

Karma was the first sister tested by the Gateway to take over the role of Guardian of the Spirits. It quickly became apparent that she was too darkly influenced, her balance tipped to the punishment side of the scale. She was given the Land of Torment, or sent there as retribution for the chaos she'd created, depending on whose story you believe, and became the Keeper of Darkness.

Destiny was the second sister to endure the test for the Gateway. She was everything innocent and pure, love and happiness, kindness and charity. Where Karma was the darkness, Destiny was the light. Pure, blinding light. When the balance tipped to the enlightened side of the scale too heavily, she was quickly given the role of Keeper of Light, on the Isle of Light - for obvious reasons.

Then, the Gateway tested me, more intensely than either of my sisters. It needed someone with the ability to remain neutral, rational, and unbiased. To fairly judge those who sought their path to the afterlife. When I was chosen, my sisters rejoiced. Though Karma, in true Karma fashion, seemed slightly jealous, which only grew worse once I cemented my balance through the bonds with my guys.

As I float through the Ether, I let my mind wander over today's topic of polite conversation, whether I should truly trust the guys. This seems to bother my eldest sister...a lot...as it comes up frequently these days. I constantly reassure her that they're totally dedicated to me and that I trust them implicitly, though, I will admit to having some doubts recently.

I'm sure that's common in every relationship that has weathered the years, right? Like the mysterious letters that the guys have been receiving that are whisked away before I get a chance to read them. Or the numerous last minute meetings one or more of them will head off to at all hours of the day and night. Then there are the low conversations they've been having when they think I'm not paying attention.

Karma thinks they'll leave me one day. Which is preposterous. We're all bonded. They couldn't leave me without severing those bonds and joining with someone else. But the little hint of doubt in the back of my mind grows larger every time she brings this up. I know I should just ask the guys, but it honestly seems so silly. After five hundred years together, I know them. They would never do something to hurt me.

Then there's Reggie. My best friend and confidant hasn't been around much lately either. I'll see her in passing, and then she scampers off saying

she forgot to clean something. That woman hates cleaning as much as I do. Seriously, what is going on with everyone?

I shake the negative thoughts from my head and decide enough is enough. It's time I have a talk with everyone before my imagination gets the better of me. I'm the balance, afterall. I can surely be unbiased and rational when it comes to my five and my friend, right?

As I arrive back at the Gateway, I make my way to the great room. The doors are open, so I call out for the guys. It's quiet here. A little too quiet. There are always spirits lurking around, but even they seem to be absent right now. Strange.

Walking into my office, I see a note sitting on my desk, telling me the guys are at one of our favorite spots - a deep cavern with a large, natural spring-fed pool - and to meet them there as soon as I return. Maybe they've been planning something special for all of us. The thought cheers me up as I transition to my ghostly form and head back through the ether.

The humidity hits me the second I turn solid, heat flowing out of the mouth of the tunnel that leads to the cavern. I'm thankful for the flowing blue gown that is light and airy. It swirls around me as I walk down the path, cautiously excited to see my five, but I don't get more than a few feet in before I hit a veil of power. Something strong and different than anything I've ever felt before. I make a mental note to ask the guys about it.

Their voices reach me before I can see them, and I smile, warmth filling me at their playful banter.

Then I hear a distinctly female giggle. It sounds eerily familiar. Almost like my own. My stomach drops, and my body goes cold.

As I round the bend that leads into the main portion of the space, I stop dead in my tracks. There, before me, is Cole. In his tan trousers and white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up, showing off the forearms that always manage to spark a tingle down deep in my belly. Except this time, it feels more like a lead weight.

In his arms, with her slender, pale hands clutching the front of Cole's shirt, is my sister Destiny. The curls of her long white hair are flowing freely in the slight breeze that blows through the cavern. Their eyes are both closed, and their lips are a mere breath apart from connecting. There's an odd shimmer around her, but I barely notice. My eyes are on the man that just broke my heart.

My book, which is always with me, falls from my hands, landing on the

rough ground of the cavern with a loud, echoing thump. They jolt apart, confusion etched on Cole's handsome face as his icy blue eyes look at me like he's never seen me before. Destiny just stares at me, though I swear I see a slight smirk tilting her lips, her eyes mocking me. Something niggles the back of my mind when I look at her, but the scene in front of me is demanding all of my attention.

Cole's unfocused eyes shoot to Destiny and grow impossibly wider, then dart back to me with a dawning look of horror on his face.

"Fate? How did you..."he trails off, looking at Destiny. "Destiny?"

His large hand comes up and runs through his dark hair that has grown longer than usual, hanging down past his chin. "Fate, I'm not sure what's happening right now, but this is not what it looks like."

I can't speak. Can't move. Can barely breathe. I just stand here and let the tears fall while I look at my first. The one I chose before all others. With my sister.

"Destiny? When did you get here?"

I hear Macklin's words, and my eyes meet his as he walks up to our cozy little group. He takes one look at my expression, his glassy eyes shooting to Cole and Destiny, noting their closeness, and takes a step toward me. My body finally breaks out of its frozen state, and I take a step back. He pauses, glancing at the ground before picking up the book I dropped, his brow furrowing and his concern growing. He knows what that book means to me. Without it, my power would disappear, and so would theirs. The planes would be sent into chaos. At the moment, I don't even care.

Then I notice the others behind him. Knox, Thad, and Levi. Another step back. And another. They all have the same glassy eyes, their stares unfocused.

Were they all indulging in drink? Drugs? Those aren't usually things we enjoy, but others often do. Have they all changed so much while I sat here thinking everything was fine? Was I just not enough for them?

My mind whirls with the implications. The mysterious letters and late night meetings. Hushed conversations. Karma's insistence that they would leave me one day. My heart shatters into a million pieces, and a sob breaks free before I can stem the sound with my hand. They're all here. They all knew what was happening, and no one cared enough to stop it. Or they're all in on it. Together. Without me. With her.

"Fate? Please!" Cole begs. "Listen. I'm not sure what's going on here,

but we'll figure it out."

My fractured soul is bleeding from the blow, and it's only by some miracle that I'm able to hold it together at all. I turn and start to run back down the tunnel, the need to get away so strong that I almost trip over my gown but catch myself at the last second.

"Fate! Don't go!" Cole shouts from behind me.

I run faster. Just before he reaches me, I transition back to my ghostly form and head for the only person left who won't lie to me. The one person that will help me figure out how this all went so wrong.

As the memory begins to fade, the movie in my mind turns into brief snippets, rapidly flickering from one scene to the next. A knife, the feeling of cool night air on my skin, boots kicking my already battered body, blackness, then dirt filling my lungs, before it's all stuffed back inside the locked box in my mind.

My mind is reeling, and my hands have a death grip on the arm of whichever guy is unlucky enough to be holding me at the moment. But I can't trust these guys, right? I abruptly throw the offending arm off, shuffling back a few steps. Then a couple more. It's a struggle to breathe. To think. Tears flood my eyes before I can even stop them.

Looking up from the floor, I scan the room, fat drops rolling down my cheeks. As they land on each guy, it's like some weird connection is made, and their eyes change from concerned to 'what the fuck' in a split second. Their growing horror is nothing compared to the tumultuous level of crazy inside my brain. Do they remember too?

Before I realize it, I've backed myself up against a desk. With nowhere else to go, panic sets in full force. I can't tell the difference between my emotions and Fate's from a hundred years ago. They're all raging through me, twining around each other and creating one hell of a powerful concoction inside me.

My safe haven has been ripped away, and my soul that was finally whole and happy is keening from the loss all over again. As a combination of two lifetimes of grief converge into one, it seems worse now than all those years

ago. I'm all alone, again, questioning who I can trust.

What the fuck did I do to deserve any of this? Did the guys know all along? Have they been praying I wouldn't remember?

"Fate?" Macklin asks gently.

I ignore him. I need to get out of here. I need to go...somewhere. Anywhere. But where?

"Fate," Cole whispers urgently, "you promised."

My eyes dart to his, finding some level of calm. Which doesn't make sense, right? He was the one almost swapping spit with my sister after all. But something in his gaze centers me. Grounds me. Helps clear the fog that is consuming my brain. It slowly erases the residual feeling from the memory and brings me back to myself. To who I am now.

Hastily running the backs of my hands over my damp cheeks, my gaze locks on my sister. Her long, straight hair is pure white, with braids that pull the hair back from her face, meeting at the back of her head in an intricately beautiful knot. I've envied that damn knot for hundreds of years since my own hair can't seem to be tamed. She's dressed in a flowing white gown that is damn near the same color as her super pale skin. She's beautiful, her face radiating pure innocence.

How the fuck does she pull that shit off? I'd probably just look constipated.

That small niggle in the back of my mind has become a large battering ram against my subconscious. Looking back at the vision through what are basically a fresh set of eyes, I remember the odd shimmer in the air, the veil of power just outside the cavern, and something else. Something else that's not quite right.

Walking up to Destiny on unsteady legs, I stand with only inches between us, our eyes locking onto one another. Hers are a pale blue and seem incredibly relieved to have found me yet concerned at my current state. The pounding in my head grows the longer I stare into her eyes. Her eyes. What is it about her eyes?

And then it hits me. Her eyes. The pale blue eyes I'm staring into aren't the same bright green eyes that smirked back at me in the cavern.

"It wasn't you," I whisper.

And with that last revelation, the pounding in my head gives one last beat before my eyes roll back into my head, and I pass out. Again.

Fucking ghost girl problems.

TO BE CONTINUED...

A TWIST OF
Fate

Prologue

Somewhere Between
realms...
Present day

“You said she was dead. Gone. Forever.”

“I said I *thought* she was dead and gone forever.”

I watch as she paces the small room. Her lithe body still makes my breath quicken and my dick swell - even after all the years that have passed. Something about her calls to me, drawing me in every time she’s near. This time, though, the effect just makes me angry. I gave up everything for her, and for the first time, I’m wondering if I did the right thing.

“You promised that with her out of the picture, you and I would finally be together. That we’d rule over the realms and be powerful beyond measure. I’ve waited. Patiently. Now all of a sudden, she’s back. What does that mean for us?”

She stops and looks at me, a wicked smirk tilting her plush red lips that mock me with their perfection.

“For us?” she simpers. “Oh, darling. Don’t fret. The plan is still in place, and we’ve got the advantage. They don’t have their memories. It’ll be like taking candy from a baby. We just have to find the book before they do, and

then you and I will get our due. Give me a little more time.”

“Give you more time,” I huff, trying in vain to keep my frustration under wraps. She doesn't like it when I question her, but I can't help but ask, “A hundred years wasn't enough?”

Her eyes narrow and arms cross over her chest. “You're starting to sound a tad bit ungrateful, darling.”

I barely stop myself from staring at the ample cleavage she's displaying, fighting the urge to look. To touch. It seems unnatural, my pull toward her. I know the second I give in, I'll go under again. Lose myself. Just like I always do. Though maybe the forgetful oblivion is preferable to remembering everything I've lost.

“I'm wondering how much longer I have to wait. I love you. I want us to be together and don't understand why we can't be.”

“I've got a plan, darling. Killing her obviously didn't work, but I've learned from our mistake. Instead of removing her from the equation, we'll remove something far more precious. This time, we'll be successful. I promise, shnookums. Then you're all mine.”

God, I hate that stupid nickname!

As she walks up to me, her green eyes captivating my own, I feel myself backing down. Giving in. Again. It always happens like this. I start to get angry, then she wraps herself around me, as she's doing now, her curves molding to all the hard parts of me, and everything is forgotten. Time. Heartache. The family I gave up to be here - with her. It's like she pulls at my soul the way no other does.

The realization jolts me to a level of awareness I haven't had in decades. *Her pull*. Is it really love? Because it suddenly feels tainted. Dark.

Before I have time to contemplate that thought, I'm tugged under again when her lips meet mine.

She just needs more time. Give her space and everything will happen the way it's meant to. Trust her. Love her. Give in to her...



The squishy softness beneath me has me snuggling in, my body at peace even if my brain is mush thanks to the total chaos that seems to plague my very existence. I almost wish I could go back to being invisible. *Almost*. Cocooned in warmth, I'm so damn comfortable that I may never leave. It's cozy here with no one trying to kill me or fuck with me or my guys.

I'm on my belly, my arms cuddling the pillow beneath my head instead of a warm body. Pity, that. The sheets surrounding me smell of petrichor, that scent that lingers in the air after the rain, and when I take in a deep breath, I get an underlying hint of parchment. A smile tilts my lips as the click-clacking of a keyboard somewhere beside me tells me exactly whose bed I'm in.

"How'd you get stuck with the defective ghost girl, sexy nerd?" I mumble.

He chuckles softly, which is followed by the sound of sheets rustling and something being carefully set down on a hard surface. The bed jostles a bit, and his scent swamps my senses.

My eyes open and lock on to his. This is the first time I've seen him without his glasses, and getting an up close and personal glimpse of his chocolatey brown eyes has my appetite sparking to life. And I'm definitely *not* thinking about food. His arm is tucked under his head, causing his bicep to bulge enticingly, and that's when I notice he's sans shirt. My heartbeat accelerates as I let my eyes scan his lean, muscular chest, all the way down to his ridiculously defined ab muscles, to the small patch of hair that leads to something large and very excited to see me just beneath his blue jogging shorts.

"My eyes are up here, you know," he murmurs, his amusement brushing against my senses.

I smirk, enjoying this new playful side of him. "But there's something *really* interesting happening down *here*."

His answering chuckle has the butterflies in my stomach fluttering happily.

Reluctantly, I lift my gaze back up to his smiling face. A hand comes up to brush a stray lock of hair behind my ear then lingers there, his thumb caressing my cheek. His smile falls away as a rush of emotions floods the space between us. They all hit me at once, and I suck in a deep breath, struggling to find my equilibrium as the room spins.

The hand still lingering on my face glides down my body until it presses against my lower back, causing our bodies to collide with a force I didn't expect from my shy guy. One arm snakes beneath my head, his hand tangling in my hair, while the other holds me snugly in place.

"You good, sexy nerd?" I whisper in his ear. My face is nestled against his throat while one arm has wound its way under his arm and around his back, my hand gripping his shoulder.

"Yes. I just need to hold you for a minute."

"I'm fine. Really. I think my brain just became overloaded and shut down."

"That's not why. I mean, I'm glad you're okay. It's just..." He trails off, his hold on me getting even tighter. Good thing I'm not your average girl, or I'm pretty sure I'd be passing out again from lack of oxygen. "First, I see you dangling in the air by some maniac's hand. Then Cole whisks you away, and I

don't know if you're dead or alive. When I finally *do* get to see you, you pass out again from one hell of a memory dump."

He pulls back, his eyes scanning my face.

"I can still see the devastation on her face. *Your* face all those years ago. It wasn't just Cole that broke your heart. It was each and every one of us."

His despair leaks through our connection, but he's right, so I don't argue with him. Cole's betrayal was the biggest shock, but the others stood by and let it happen. Old me didn't know there was something more sinister at play. All she knew was that her five, the ones she trusted more than she trusted herself, had tossed her aside, thrown her away like their bond meant nothing. It was as if someone had reached straight into her chest and ripped her heart out, holding it in their hands while it still pumped, leaving her body dead and lifeless.

"We didn't...we'd never..." he stutters out, unable to form a complete sentence.

When his big brown eyes meet mine, I see the tears he's holding back. His emotions influence my own, and before I know it, fat drops are rolling down my cheek, his tears combining with mine before landing on the bed beneath us.

"I know we don't remember most of our past, but I can tell you that I loved you with everything I was and all that I had. *That* I remember now. Clearly. That day in the cave, I swear I've never felt anything as powerful in my entire life as the feelings I had for you. I may have only known this version of you a relatively short time, but I've already fallen again. We're meant to be, and nothing will ever change that for me."

He kisses me then, his warm lips meeting my own. I can taste our combined tears, our despair and our love. It's the reunion of two lost souls that have found each other again. Another missing piece finding its home, nestling into the hole in my heart that only it can fill. I'm one step closer to being complete, and while we may not have all of our memories, we sure as hell will be making new ones.

Pulling back, he rests his forehead on mine.

"We should get up and go find the others. They've been worried about you," he says softly.

"Where are we?"

"We're back at the house in Illinois. I needed access to my equipment, and the guys needed to decide if we wanted to close up shop here or use this

as a base of operations.”

“How long was I out?”

“It’s been over twelve hours.”

“Seriously? Damn. I guess memory dumps really do take a lot out of a ghost girl.”

“Mmhmm.” His hand is absently rubbing my lower back, and with every sweep against the tops of my ass cheeks, my pulse jumps. “And for the record, you’re not defective. You’re pretty damn perfect.”

When our eyes meet again, there’s a barely restrained heat reflected back at me. My lady bits, having been on snooze while I was unconscious, are now fully ready, willing, and able.

Our souls have reconnected, and now my body is ready to catch up. Leaning forward, I let my lips whisper across his seductively. “Just for that, I think you deserve a special thank you. We have time, don’t you think?”

His cheeks flush. “A special thank you? Um...what did you...uh...have in mind?”

Rolling us slightly, I’m looking down at him from atop his yummy chest. The simple pressure from my body pressing down on his has every nerve ending feeling electrified in a good way. The lovely bulge I spied earlier lines up nicely with my...

Oh my ghost! That is no mere bulge. We’re talking lengths of epic proportions here.

My shocked eyes find his, and the amusement there has my lips breaking out in a wide grin.

“You’ve been holding out on me, sexy nerd.”

“I’d rather be holding *on to* you.” His large hand wraps around the back of my neck and forces my head down for a kiss. This isn’t the slow sweetness I’ve come to expect from him. This is hot enough to send every book in here up in flames. And trust me, there are *a lot* of books. He moves my head the way he wants it, his tongue coming out to play roughly with mine. My hips grind down onto that impressive dick he’s been keeping from me, and a moan escapes my lips, interrupting our kiss.

“God! That feels so good,” I mumble.

“You keep that up,” he says, his voice hoarse between ragged breaths, “and this will be over before it even begins.”

“That just means we’ll be ready for round two.”

A groan is his only reply as I kiss my way down his neck and over the

rock-hard pecs, giving each nipple a swirl of my tongue and a gentle bite, which earns me another groan and a buck of his hips.

I continue down his body, licking each and every line of his eight abs, my fingers sliding through the patch of hair that leads to my new favorite toy. Snaking under the elastic band, they finally wrap around their newly discovered plaything, and I'm surprised despite myself. He's long and so thick that my fingers barely touch as I grip him firmly and give him a couple of strokes, like a sort of friendly little hello.

"Fate..."

"Shh...let me play, Mack."

"You don't understand. It's...been awhile for me."

My head tilts up so I can look him in the eyes. "How long are we talking?"

His cheeks flush. "A hundred years...give or take?"

I blink. That's all I can manage as every fiber in my body tunes into what he just said. The fingers that are still wrapped around his dick spark inadvertently, and he groans, bucking into my grip.

"That's *not* helping. Fuck! Do it again."

My power obliges.

"Shiittt!"

"Let me get this straight. You haven't been with anyone else in over a hundred years?"

"Well...I mean...fifty of those years were spent unconscious. But the next fifty...well, I just...I'm pretty sure I was waiting for you and didn't even know it." He's breathing like he ran a marathon, and that just turns me on even more.

We're locked in a staring contest, my hand still gripping his huge fucking cock, and my body is suddenly so overwhelmed that I can barely think straight.

"Oh. Then you have *definitely* earned this and so much more...but we'll start here."

My hands wrap around the band of his shorts and push them down to his knees, suddenly finding myself face to face with a monstrous dick. *Hell. Yes.* That's it. I've got to name his cock. This is a large mythical creature if there ever was one, and it deserves a name.

"Are you just going to stare at it or..." His voice is huskier than usual, and it sends another pulse to my girly bits.

“Nessie and I are just getting reacquainted.”

An undignified huff leaves his mouth. “You cannot call my dick Nessie. It’s not a girl.”

“Oh. Right.” I pause, thinking. My hand returns to the magnificence in front of me, giving him a couple of strokes while my brain sifts through information. “How about Jaws? Or Godzilla? Anaconda? Oh, I know. I’ll call him Quetzi, short for Quetzalcoatl which means *precious serpent*.”

He just raises one eyebrow before flinging his head back onto the pillow.

“I don’t really care what you call it, but if you don’t hurry, it won’t be a snake tongue coming out to greet you.”

“Ha! *Coming*. I see what you did there.”

“Fate!”

“Right. Hello, Quetzi. Long time no see.” With that, I run my tongue from the base to the head of his shaft, licking off the bead of precum there.

“Fuck!”

My tongue swirls around the head before taking him deep. He hits the back of my throat, and I gag slightly, but the sounds leaving him do miraculous things for my confidence. I mean, I *am* a bit out of practice, but this is totally like riding a bike. Your body takes over, moving faster and faster until you’re cruising down the road. *Look, Ma! No hands*. Well, at least for a brief second. This monster is too big to let my mouth go it alone for long.

My head bobs, sucking him down like he’s one of those ice pops I keep begging the guys to get me. You know, the ones with alcohol in them? *Yum!* I wrap my hand around the base, making up the difference for what won’t fit in my mouth, and squeeze. Sliding my hand along with the movement of my mouth.

Mack’s hands fist in my hair, roughly guiding my movements, and the fact that my easy going guy is fucking my face sets my body on fire. Taking my free hand, I maneuver it under my body and beneath the band of the yoga pants I’m currently wearing, rubbing my clit in time with the bob of my head and thrust of his hips. I’m soaking wet and would love nothing more than to impale myself on his monster dick, but this is *his* reward. There will be plenty of time to see what sort of magic he can do with that thing later.

“Fate...I’m gonna...” he moans.

When I’ve sucked him in as deep as he can go, I swallow around him. That’s all it takes. He’s exploding down my throat, and I devour every drop

even as my own orgasm crashes through me, soaking my fingers. Panting, I slowly lick him clean, not wanting to miss out on one drop of his salty taste on my tongue. When I sit up, his eyes open and find mine, looking at me with raw, possessive need, and I'll be damned if I'm not willing to sacrifice myself on the altar of his body.

He sits up just long enough to grab my hips and pull me forward so that I'm straddling him. Grasping my hand, he slowly brings it to his mouth. The second he wraps those sultry lips of his around the first finger, sucking the evidence of my orgasm off, followed by the second, and the third, I'm about ready to detonate again right then and there. Pretty sure I'm grinding down on Quetzi involuntarily, my body taking over since I'm incapable of coherent thought.

My mouth drops to his, our kiss still almost frantic in our need. I can taste myself on his tongue, and it's the sexiest damn thing I've experienced in the last hundred years.

I'm panting as I pull back enough to look into his eyes. His want and need are amplifying my own, but underneath the haze of desire and passion is a wealth of affection and...love. It's like taking a sip of spiked coffee and feeling the heat moving through me as it warms me up from the inside out, finding all of the coldness inside and banishing it with barely any effort at all. I've been frozen for so long that the thaw feels absolutely incredible.

Emotion bubbles up within me, making my throat tight and my eyes tear up. With our lips a mere breath apart, I whisper, "I love you too, you know."

His eyes widen for a moment before a sparkling intensity appears. A gentle sweep of his thumb brushes away the stray tear as it trails down my cheek. "I'm so glad we found you."

"Let's never lose each other again, okay?" I beg softly.

"Never," he promises before murmuring roughly, "Now. Are you ready for round two, echo?"

"Echo?"

"Because our feelings are an echo of each other's," he says before a mischievous smirk tilts his well-kissed lips. "And...Echo might also be a badass female comic book character."

"Marvel or DC?"

"Marvel."

"Hmm...I approve then."

His eyes get a mischievous glint and my eyes go wide as my stomach

flips at the seriously naughty look that crosses his sexy face right before he unexpectedly rolls us so he's on top.

And that's a perfect 10 from the Russian judge!

2. MACKLIN

TECHIE FACT #4:

MOVING FORWARD. THESE WILL NO
LONGER BE LABELED TECHIE
FACTS. FATE'S GIVEN ME MY MOJO
BACK.

She squeals, her laughter sparking a light in my soul that's been missing for so long, and I want more. I bury my face into her hair, her scent surrounding me. I've always wanted this woman, even when I thought I could never have her, and now the need is practically a living thing inside me, demanding to be released. Against everything my body wants, I rein it in. Now is the time for reassurance and rebuilding, not just simple sex. Not that anything with her could ever be simple.

"Should we pick up where we left off?" she asks silkily.

Pulling back, my eyes meet hers. "Is that a legitimate question?"

She grins. "Not really. I just had to give the illusion that I was asking for permission."

Her arms wrap around my neck and we're nose to nose, both grinning like little kids. It's not really a sexual move, more one that speaks of

intimacy, a desire to be close, to share, to connect. Her body is laid out beneath mine as I prop myself up on my elbows, her legs coming up to wrap around my waist. Her warmth has my hips bucking involuntarily.

“You don’t ever need permission. You have an open-ended invitation to use my body for whatever nefarious purposes may run through that titillating brain of yours.”

“I love it when you use big words like that. It turns me on.”

“Does it now? Guess I need to rein in my concupiscence around you.”

“Mmmm...more.”

“I’m positively libidinous with your body beneath mine.”

She moans playfully. “God, you’re so *hot* when you go all sexy nerd on me.”

“Well, you give me all of these lascivious thoughts.”

“Are you going to keep talking, or are we ever going to copulate?”

“Oh, I’m definitely ready for coitus,” I growl, dropping my head and nipping the tender spot where her neck and shoulder meet. Her laughter turns into a moan, but this time it’s not playful at all.

“God, yes. Please!” she simpers, her body doing some weird shimmy before she looks up at me. “Finally!”

The second we’re skin on skin, I realize what that shimmy was. Her wiggling out of her leggings. She’s a Houdini, and I’m mesmerized. My dick suddenly meets her warm wetness, all thoughts of just how she did it gone and it’s my turn to groan. She rolls her hips, and I grit my teeth, my body urging me to join us. Complete this connection. Make her mine. Now. But my mind wants to brand itself onto hers. Mark her in more than just a sexual way. Make us one in *all* ways.

Pushing myself up on one hand, I grasp the hem of her tank top. She lifts her arms, and together, we pull it off. We’re both completely bare and I swear my soul sighs. *Finally*, it repeats. Lowering myself so we’re touching, chest to chest, our eyes lock onto each other. My length slides through her wetness, my hips thrusting slightly, back and forth, despite my resolve to take this slow. It just feels too damn good.

She rolls her hips in a way that has my dick primed in the perfect position, the tip notched in her heat, and I thrust without thinking. It’s not fast. There’s no hesitation, but it’s exquisitely slow. It’s a constant movement, her heat surrounding me inch by delectable inch. And she’s tight. Too tight. I should probably pull back, give her more time to adjust, but as I

go to do just that, her heels dig into my ass, pushing me in harder, faster, and before I realize it, I'm fully seated inside her.

Fuck!

My forehead meets hers, and we stay like that. Fully connected for the first time in a hundred years and it's like nothing I've ever experienced. I can't believe it was anything like this all those years ago. There's no way it could've been. Because this is perfection.

"I love you," she whispers.

My head comes up enough to see the emotions shining in her gray eyes, and I'm captivated all over again. "And I love you, echo."

She kisses me then. It's slow and sweet, sparking to life the ghost of a memory in my mind as my body begins to move. Not all the details are clear, just hints of them imprinting themselves over one another. Her tongue sliding against mine. Our bodies entwined the way they are now. My hardness sliding in and out of her exquisite softness is torturously slow, drawing out both of our pleasure. Both of us drowning in the intimacy of two separate moments in time that combine into one glorious surge of emotion. And then it's gone, and I'm back in the here and now as the kiss becomes more intense. My body moves faster, responding the only way it knows how. Each thrust pushing her further up the bed.

For a moment, I'm scared that I'm losing control. Hurting her. I pull back, but before I can ask, she says, "More, Mack. Make me yours."

And my control snaps. I thrust in, hard, the entire bed groaning under our weight. Then again, harder. She shouts out my name, and I'm lost to the frenzy building inside me. With one hand, I pull both of hers above her head, using them as leverage to pound into her as my free hand grabs her breast, squeezing.

"Yes. Yes. *Fuck. Yes,*" she repeats over and over again as I satiate myself with her body, praying that she's close because I'm not sure how much longer I can last.

"Now, Fate. Come for me *now,*" I growl, and her hooded eyes widen slightly, her back bowing just as she topples over the edge. Her body tightens around my dick like a vise, the pleasure so intense it's painful. I explode. A cascade of color lights up behind my eyelids as my body is overwhelmed by the sheer level of power coursing through us. And then nothing. Total blackness. But I see her. She's a shining star, always there to make sure I know the way home. We're still moving, our bodies dragging out every last

bit of ecstasy they can as our movements slow and our breathing evens out. Even then, I can't quite force my hips to stop. It's a slow push and pull, and it feels incredible. When her eyes open, she smiles sleepily, and I'm once again struck by her beauty. Not just her gorgeous face, but the purity in her heart too.

"Welcome to the ether," she whispers. "It's our place. One only the Guardian and her consorts can find."

"I don't care where we are," I murmur, "as long as I'm with you."

I kiss her again. Because I simply can't *not* kiss her. And when I open my eyes, we're back on my bed, in the house in Illinois.

"That might take some getting used to," I say softly, rolling us both so we're on our sides facing each other, our bodies somehow managing to stay connected.

"I don't mind practicing. Help you get familiar with the place," she says with a smirk.

"Oh, I'll definitely need some practice. Might take me a while to really get the hang of it."

She just chuckles and burrows her face into my neck, and I find that I like it. A lot. My hand rests right above her delectable ass, and the moment just feels...complete. Like we're on our way to being what we once were. Possibly so much more.

"What are you thinking about?" she asks quietly.

"Wondering how I got so lucky. Twice."

I can feel her smile against my throat. "I think I'm the lucky one."

"I don't think I can put into words just how incomplete I felt until you came back into our lives." My brothers brought a sense of purpose to my life, reaffirming some of the missing connections in my soul, but the circuit was never complete. Not until Fate.

"You don't need to. I understand. Truly."

"I suppose you do," I say, nuzzling her again. She smells like sweetness and fire, like something that I've always known and could never forget. But somehow I did. And I need to figure out how so that it never happens again.

"It's going to be okay," she soothes, her hand softly caressing my back. Picking up on the emotions suddenly rolling through me.

"You believe that," I state. It's not a question.

She pulls back, looking me straight in the eye. "I do. I won't let anything happen to us again."

My hand comes up to brush a stray hair from her cheek, my thumb running along her bottom lip as she tries to pull it between her teeth.

“We’ll do it together.”

“*Together*. You’ve said that before. In the study when Cole stormed out and I was still just a spirit who wasn’t *really* a spirit at all. I didn’t know who I could trust, so I wasn’t a fan of that word at the time.” Her smile lights up her face. “But it’s growing on me now.”

“Good. Because we’re stronger that way. Now that all of the bonds are finalized, we’re all finding we’re stronger too.”

“Stronger?”

“We all sort of...leveled up after you and Cole...” I stop, unreasonably embarrassed to finish that sentence despite what just passed between us.

“Fucked? It’s okay. We’re all adults here and can use the naughty words.”

I just chuckle and playfully swat her ass. “You sure do bring out the naughty side of me.”

“Mmm...my sexy nerd has a naughty side. I can’t want to see more of *that*.” The flame in her eye sparks again, and as much as I want to dive back into her, the rational side of my brain is kicking into action.

Fuck, being the rational one really sucks sometimes.

“And you’ll get to see plenty of that...soon. But for now, we’ve got work to do.”

She sighs, her lip coming out in one killer pout.

“Ah ah. None of that. The others are probably out of their minds with worry, and you know Cole will eventually come in here and order us to get going if he has to.”

As I pull back, my semi-hard dick slowly leaves the warmth it’s been nestled inside, causing us both to groan. She clamps down around me, and my dick practically begs me to stay where we are.

“Fate...” is all I can manage as I try to regain control of my body.

“Fuck. It feels so good,” she murmurs before a sigh escapes. “But you’re right. We need to check on the others. So explain this leveling up thing to me real fast.”

She sits up, moving off the side of the bed completely naked, and for a moment I can barely breathe. Can barely think. The woman is *beyond* perfection.

“Nu-uh. You don’t get to have that look right now when you just went all

work-mode on me. You'll have to wait."

It's my turn to sigh as I attempt to contain my growing need. Rolling out of bed, I grab my shorts and pull them on, along with the t-shirt I had thrown over my desk chair. When I turn around, she's in her tank top and pulling the leggings back over those long legs of hers that were just wrapped around my waist.

"Eww." Her nose is scrunched up in clear disgust, but she's still damned adorable.

Fuck, Mack. Pull yourself together, man. "What's the matter?"

"You don't want to know, sexy nerd."

"Maybe I can help? You can tell me anything, Fate," I say, ready to tackle the world if it makes my echo happy.

"Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you. There's a whole...*SeaWorld situation*...happening down there right now, if you know what I mean." She motions toward the apex of her thighs, and my eyes dart between hers and the area she's directing my gaze to. Then mine widen when her meaning finally hits.

I clear my throat, trying to stave off the ridiculous smile that wants to plaster itself across my face. I must not be successful because her eyes narrow.

"You look entirely too pleased with yourself right now."

"Well...I...no, of course not. I..."

Her lips quirk up. "I didn't think caveman was quite your style, Mack."

"When it comes to you, Fate, my style is ever-evolving."

"Stop saying things like that or you'll never make it to your desk." She sighs, a dreamy smile crossing her face before she shakes her head and looks at me with serious eyes. "Now, tell me more about all these new powers before I decide to jump you again."

Chuckling, I say, "Well, for me, I can now somehow detect lies. I'm still playing around with the accuracy of it and how it all works, but it could prove invaluable."

"Oh, our own personal lie detector. Nifty." She looks thoughtful for a moment. "And the others?"

"I think I'll let them explain their own powers to you. I don't want to steal their thunder."

She cocks her head to the side, studying me with a crooked grin. "You're really pretty amazing. You know that, right?"

My power flares, and I can't resist the urge to let it free. Feeling the truth of her statement flood through me, filling up the emptiness I've felt for so long with her sincerity, hell, with each and every thing she does. "Same could be said about you." I walk over and kiss the tip of her nose. "Oh, just make sure you ask Knox about making Thad cry. It was epic. Now, come on, I need to look something up on my computer."

"That's not code for 'straddle my cock and ride me while I work,' is it?"

My head whips her way, and she's got that mischievous grin plastered on her face. That hint of naughtiness is too damn attractive, immediately distracting my intent focus that rarely concedes. My power can't tell if she's being serious or playful, but my dick doesn't care. The image is cemented in my mind, and it wants nothing more than to be inside her again.

"Think we can make that work with the desk chair?" I grunt out. Before I know what my body has in mind, I'm lifting her up, her arms wrapping around my neck and legs coming around my waist as I walk us over to the desk, both of us somehow managing to shed clothes as we go. At this rate, we're never going to get anything done, but I can't find it in me to care.

She laughs, the sound making my soul sing and my dick jump at the same time. Damn, this woman is going to be the death of me. Figuratively, of course, because I'm not letting her go again.



It's been hours, and there's been no sign of Fate. I wouldn't admit this out loud, but I'm a nervous fucking wreck.

"You need to relax, bro. She's fine," my twin mutters as we head downstairs.

"The fuck? I know that."

"Then why are you so damn fidgety?"

"I'm not fidgety!"

"You totally are."

"What are you two fuck nuggets arguing about?" Knox asks as soon as we walk into the kitchen.

"Dipshit's worried about our girl. She's been out for a while now."

"I told you, I'm good. You just don't fucking listen."

We take a seat at the table as Knox throws sandwiches together at the

counter.

“I’m sure she’s fine. Mack would let us know if anything changed.” Knox straightens clearing his throat and looking sketchy as all hell as he walks over and sets plates in front of each of us.

“What aren’t you telling us?”

“What are you talking about?”

“He’s definitely hiding something, bro.”

“What the fuck ever, numbnuts. Eat your food.”

“Dude, it’s super weird how you do that.” Deciding to worry about Knox’s weirdness later because I’m suddenly starving, I pick up the sandwich and take a big bite.

He grabs a bag of chips from the counter and sets them in the middle of the table before he sits down with his own plate. “Do what?”

“Give us food without us even having to ask.”

He shrugs. “Empath. Comes with the territory. When you two get hangry, the bickering gets worse, and I try to avoid *that* at all costs. Remember the time you two decided you could hold off on lunch until we were done with the job we were heading to? You ended up throwing punches right in front of the client and almost got arrested.”

Before I can respond, Reggie pops into the chair next to me and I almost choke on my ham and swiss. “Fucking hell. Can’t you warn a guy?”

“Where would the fun be in that?” She smirks. “Destiny is getting anxious. Where’s Fate now?”

“She’s still with Mack.”

“Hmm...guess she deserves some R&R before walking back into the shit storm.”

Levi chuckles. “Rest and relaxation? Is that what they’re calling it these days?”

She ignores my twin and looks my way. “What’s with the look, Thad? You a little...*stressed*?”

“What the fuck? Can’t everyone just worry about their damn selves?”

The quirky ghost just rolls her eyes at me.

Levi smacks me upside my head, and I turn to glare at him. “What the hell was that for?”

“Be nice, bro. Just because you’re irritable doesn’t mean you can take it out on the rest of us.”

“For the last damn time, I’m *fine*.”

“God. Some things never change,” she mutters, looking around the kitchen. “Unlike these cabinets. I remember this kitchen when it didn’t have any. Just a big table in the center for food prep. A big black cast-iron cook stove and a sink for washing dishes. A buffet over on that wall with a china cabinet. One of those old-fashioned phones with the circular dial and big black mouth and ear pieces. Damn, the early 1900s were a simple era.”

Knox pauses with his sandwich halfway to his mouth. “Wait. You remember *this* house?”

“Well, yeah. Fate spent a lot of time here.”

“Why would she spend time here?” my brother asks, leaning forward in his seat, the mood suddenly turning serious.

Reggie looks around at the rest of us, then her eyes dart up to Cole who is suddenly standing at the table.

“I think I’m finally starting to get it. When you said you don’t remember anything, you literally meant *nothing*,” she whispers. “Shit.”

Cole grabs a chair and flips it around, settling his arms along the back as he studies the ghostly assistant.

“Reggie, tell us what you know about this place.”

“This was Olivia’s house; we called her Liv. She and her brother Nicholas inherited the house when their parents died. That’s how Fate met her. She helped the parents cross over after their accident. Nicholas was quite a bit older and unexpectedly found himself guardian of his younger sister. Up until then, he’d been a trust fund brat, living off an inheritance from their grandparents with little to no real responsibility, and he didn’t take the transition well. Fate stepped in and helped with Liv, despite your disapproval. You all felt that getting too close to the living could pose problems, but Fate was adamant that Liv needed her. Over the years, they grew closer, almost more like sisters. She told Liv everything and vice versa. I’d come along with Fate from time to time when I could. Even though Liv could never see me, Fate would always relay conversations between us. I guess I just assumed their bond was the reason Fate reappeared here.”

The room is dead silent at Reggie’s words.

“But that still doesn’t make sense. Liv wouldn’t even be here anymore.” I may not be the resident genius, but even I know when something doesn’t add up.

“He’s right for once,” Levi murmurs, rolling his eyes when mine narrow on him. “Oh, admit it, you’re wrong more often than you’re right...about

anything.”

“Way to throw your blood under the bus, bro.”

Cole barks, “Knock it off, fuckwits. Take that bickering bullshit somewhere else.”

I flinch forward, egging my twin on just as Cole’s big hand shoots out and punches my shoulder.

“Fuck,” I mutter. “What did I do?”

Cole just glares at me.

“Well, of course Liv isn’t here anymore,” Reggie says quietly, bringing us back to my very astute observation. *What? I know big words too.* Her eyes are glued to the table. “She probably died years ago.”

“Then why here?” Cole glances around the table. “Why would Fate’s spirit be tied to this place. What the fuck are we missing?”

“Can you tell us any more about what happened the night Fate vanished?” Knox asks.

We wait in eager silence, but Reggie just sighs.

“I don’t know much more than any of you, I’m afraid. You guys called me that night, as soon as you couldn’t locate Fate with your marks. I called in the sisters, and we all did what we could to find her. Karma and Destiny sent out their most trusted commanders and associates, while I spent hours checking every single one of her favorite spots, coming up empty each time. At one point, Mack headed back to the cave to see if he could find any other clues as to what happened, and he discovered some sort of *magical* signature surrounding the entire location, the same one that was found in the heavily laced drinks you had all been consuming.”

“So, someone knew where we would be, what we would be doing, and took measures to set these events into motion,” Levi says thoughtfully. “That’s gotta narrow the suspect pool, doesn’t it?”

“It has to be someone in our circle that knew us well enough to anticipate our every move,” I add, getting more pissed off by the second. “Possibly even Fate’s reaction. If Liv and Fate were so close, are we sure it wasn’t her?”

“It couldn’t have been Liv.” Reggie shakes her head adamantly, her brow furrowed. “She adored Fate.”

“None of that answers the question as to why Fate showed up *here*. There has to be something we’re missing,” Knox interjects.

“Reggie, did Fate and Liv always meet here at the house?” Cole asks.

“Well, no, actually. Nick was kind of a prick after their parents died, I mean, understandably so since real life kind of bit him in the ass. I popped in a couple of times, looking for Fate, only to find Nick throwing an adult-sized tantrum.” She pauses for a moment as if something just occurred to her. “Fate would always get Liv out of the house when Nick was in a mood. One of their favorite places to go was out toward the back corner of the property. They’d grab a picnic basket and blanket and sit out there talking-”

My hands hit the table a little harder than I intended, startling the ghost beside me. A mess of emotions swamps me as I remember the night we thought we lost Fate. “No fucking way that’s a coincidence.”

“What?” she asks.

“That’s where the willow tree was.”

“There was no willow tree out there then, but willows *are* Fate’s favorite tree.”

“My woman has a favorite *tree*?”

“She has a favorite...*everything*.”

“Of course she does.” Wait...if the woman has a favorite *everything*, that means I can work my magic and become her favorite *twin*. I put a pin in that for later. A slow smile tilts my lips up. Fucking woman and her crazy ass.

Something that feels a whole lot like mushy sweetness rolls through me. I know what it is, and I’m choosing to ignore it. At least for now. Emotions are something I usually tend to avoid, like laundry or Mack when he’s in research mode, but Fate pulls them to the surface with no effort at all, and it still terrifies the shit out of me. I mean, it makes sense, considering what we once were to each other, but until this point, my feelings have been locked up tight. My twin is the only other person that even comes close to making me *feel*. Yeah, I’m definitely not comfortable with all of this quite yet.

“Reggie, did one of us check here that night?”

“Of course. It was one of the first places we stopped, but there was a big party going on. Liv was making the rounds on the patio with the guests, so we assumed Fate wasn’t here, or if she had been, that she didn’t stay long.”

Cole rubs his chin between his thumb and forefinger. “I think you and I need to go check out the spot where the willow was. See if we can find anything else that might give us a clue as to what happened a hundred years ago. There’s a reason the willow popped up in that specific location.” Cole stands, and Reggie joins him at the back door. “Knox, you come with us. Maybe you can pick up on something we can’t.”

“You got it,” he says, throwing away our plates and closing up the chips. I turn to Cole. “What about us?”

“I think we need to talk with Destiny. Maybe she can fill in some of the gaps. Why don’t you two-”

“We’ll go check on Fate and Mack,” Levi offers, cutting Cole off. He stands and makes his way over to the door.

I glance at Cole, whose eyes are narrowed on Levi.

Don’t say a fucking word, cumwipe, my twin says through our connection.

But...

Thad, so help me, God. I will murder you in your sleep. Shut the hell up for once and let me handle this.

“Don’t wake her if she’s still sleeping. We’ll hold off a bit longer. But if they’re up, then get them and meet us in the study.” Cole and the others head out the back door.

I push my chair out and get to my feet. “What the fuck is up with you, and what’s with that look on your face?” I ask, walking up to Levi. “Do you have to take a shit or something?”

“Think she’s up and they’re...you know...bumping uglies?” He smirks as we head upstairs.

“Bumping uglies? Who?”

My twin eyes me a moment, like he’s trying to gauge if it’s worth the effort to explain shit to me.

“Mack and Fate, dipshit.”

“Maybe? How would I know, and why the fuck would I care? All that’s going to do is piss my dick off.”

“Knox knew more than he was letting on. I’m guessing he was trying to give them some time alone. Maybe we can convince them to let us join in.”

“Bro, don’t get my dick’s hopes up.”

“Think Mack’s a missionary kinda guy? We can make that work, right?”

My twin and I turn down the hall at the top of the stairs and head toward Mack’s room. We pause outside the door, both of us leaning in to listen.

“I hear voices,” I whisper.

“Me too,” he says softly. “Should we knock?”

I don’t have the patience for this shit. “Hell no! I’m going in.”



Sneaking kisses along Mack's neck earns me a warning growl that is beyond sexy.

"Fate..."

"But you've been working for awhile, and I *need* you, sexy nerd." I pull back and watch his pupils dilate. *I've got him now.*

"You had me less than an hour ago." He raises a brow as I push my lower lip out, earning a sigh. "You're killing me, echo."

I let my tongue lick across my upper lip in what I hope is a sexy come hither gesture but probably ends up looking like a dog licking slobber off its mouth. "But I can make you feel *good* while I do it."

He dives in, surprising me, as his mouth assaults mine. My arms are over his shoulders, the handheld gaming system still in my grip. He grabs my hips, my legging-covered pussy sliding over that incredible length of his as he

pulls me in close.

The bedroom door suddenly slams open, and both of our heads whip up. Mack spins the chair slightly, his hands coming down to rest on my ass.

Thad's voice is suddenly booming throughout the room, "The fuck is this?"

"Bro, you are so disappointing," Levi says matter-of-factly as he saunters in.

I bury my face into Macklin's neck, laughing.

"To be continued?" he whispers in my ear.

My hand sneaks between us. "Bye for now, Quetzi." Mack snorts as I give him a little stroke since a goodbye kiss is not an option at the moment. Shooting a glare at the twins near the door, I huff out, "You two have really horrible timing."

"Don't aim those angry eyes at us, woman. When do we get our turn?"

"Your turn? What is this? The Fate merry-go-round?"

The twins share a look.

"I mean, the Fate merry-go-round sounds pretty damn hot to me. How about you, bro?"

"I'm here for it," Levi responds with a shrug. "Mack is willing to let us hop on. Right, Mack?"

"There is seriously something wrong with you two. Fate is not a damn piece of playground equipment. Right, Fate?"

My mind is stuck on the image of the three of us, all in different arrangements, and my girly bits are practically clapping in excitement. Not literally, of course. That would be weird, even for me.

"Yeah, she looks totally appalled by the idea, bro," Thad mumbles sarcastically.

Levi laughs. "If by appalled, you mean totally for it, then yes. I would agree."

"What the fuck are you doing, anyway?" Thad mutters.

"What? We're chuddling," Mack replies with a grin.

"What the hell is *chuddling*?" Levi asks warily.

"Chair cuddling, obviously," I snark. My arms are still over Mack's shoulders, and I wave the gaming system in my hand that I hadn't set down yet. "Mack had work to do and said I could sit with him while he got it done."

"Dude, you have a hot ass girl straddling your cock, and you decide to

work?” Thad asks in complete disbelief.

“Unlike you two, I can think with something other than my dick.”

But the smell of sex in the air proves it hasn't *all* been work, and Mack's fingers tighten slightly, pulling me into him a bit more.

Thad's eyes narrow. “Tell me you're not at all affected by her heat rubbing against that monster you have in your pants. I bet you can't.”

“I've already won one bet, remember? Which reminds me, you both need to pay up.”

“Oh. Now, this sounds interesting.” I set the game down onto the desk, my full attention now aimed at my naughty twins. “What was the bet?”

“Who has the bigger dick,” Levi grumbles.

“Mack's dick really is a thing of legend, am I right?” My grin is quick. “I named it, you know.”

They both laugh.

“You named his dick?” Levi asks, chuckling. “Of *course* you did.”

“Want me to name yours too?” Looking between the two of them, I see their gazes heat as they study Mack and me.

“Abso-fucking-lutely!” the twins agree in unison.

“You can call it whatever the hell you want as long as that means you get up close and personal with it, woman,” Thad murmurs.

“Well, I might need to...you know...take a little peek at the goods. Maybe give each of them a little pat down. You know, really get a *feel* for their personalities in order to give them the best name possible.” My tongue comes out to lick my bottom lip before dragging it between my teeth, a wicked grin spreading across my face.

“Hell yes, woman. What's mine is yours.” Stepping into the room, Thad walks up to me. Mack's nuzzling my neck now, his grip on my ass so tight I wouldn't be surprised if there are bruises there later. I'll be damned if that doesn't turn me on even more.

“You're not leaving me out, sweets,” Levi says, suddenly in front of me. For a big guy, dude's a damn ninja.

“Who wants to go first?” I simper, causing simultaneous groans.

“We like to go at the same time,” Levi murmurs seductively.

My eyes dart between them, and my cheeks flush as I shift on Mack, causing him to grunt. My power sparks at the sound, a bit of pink skating along my fingertips. I roll my hips again involuntarily, earning a full-on moan from the man beneath me.

Thad's hand drops to rub his junk, and my gaze falls to watch the movement. Lifting my own, wanting to be part of the fun, I let one fingertip run along his zipper. My power courses over him, causing his hips to buck.

"Fuck!" His teeth clench, and I can tell he's holding onto his control by the barest of threads. I want nothing more than to see that control snap.

Levi watches us, his eyes glued to what I'm doing to his brother, so I shift my hand, mimicking the motion on him.

"Fuck is right," he groans as my power flirts down the front of his jeans.

Mack is sucking on my neck as my hips rock, his hands pushing on my ass, drawing me in harder.

"You all are wearing too many clothes," I whisper.

Before any of us can move, Cole's shout travels upstairs. "Nice try, fuckers."

"Goddammit, Cole!" Levi yells in frustration.

"Fucking hell. Seriously?" Thad groans. His head tilts back, and his eyes clench shut.

With a sigh, I sit up straight, releasing a frustrated huff. "I'm surrounded by an entire group of hot cockblockers. All the dicks yet I get *no* dick."

"You just had my dick," Mack mumbles into my hair.

I grin. "I did, didn't I?"

"Maybe we can just-"

Before Thad can even finish, Cole shouts again, though there's still no real bite of command in his tone. "Get your asses down here."

Knox's chuckle echoes down the hall before he's suddenly leaning against the doorjamb.

"This is all your fault, empath! You fucking narced us out," Thad fumes.

"It's not like I could miss the rush of desire up here. It's like a fucking ocean, and you all are drowning in it. Hell, I could feel it all the way out back. The willow was a bust, by the way, and Cole wants you downstairs."

My face is probably fifty shades of red by now, so I close my eyes and bury my face into Mack's neck. Why I'm suddenly embarrassed, I have no idea.

Welcome to the Fate Shit-Show. Dead or alive, she's a hot mess of calamity.

That would be the intro if they ever made a movie about my life. Why my mind has gone there at this moment, I can't say. Though I *am* a horny bitch who's prone to pity parties and bouts of irrational behavior. It's all in the

Ghost Girl Handbook. Hmm...I really need to look into getting a copyright for that title. I make a mental note to talk to Mack about that later.

The scent of lemony coconut and fresh herbs floods my nose just as a presence inundates my senses. The pitter patter of my heart picks up its pace as if it recognizes its match in the man that's now beside me.

"Little ghost, you need to stop fainting. It scares the shit out of us," Knox says softly next to my ear, his fingers playing with my hair.

"For the record, I do this shit on purpose just to fuck with you all," I mutter when I finally find my voice. My eyes are still closed, and with the soap opera my life has become, I may just keep them that way. Avoidance sounds like an awesome plan to me at the moment. "And I totally didn't faint."

"Then what would you call it?"

"I passed the fuck out. Faint sounds too...*dainty*." I pause to think about it for a second. "I'd bet that word has never been used to describe me. Ever."

Reggie's voice interrupts our little discussion. "She's definitely not *dainty*."

Opening my eyes, my gaze locks on my ghostly BFF who is leaning against the door frame. "Are you calling me fat?"

"Fat just stands for fierce as tits," she quips.

"Are tits fierce though?"

"I mean, yours are." Reggie shrugs.

"Hmmm. You're forgiven."

"Figured as much." She eyes me a moment, a worried look crossing her face. "You really okay, boss? You had us all worried there for a minute."

"I'm good, Reggie. I promise."

"Okay. You just let me know if these fuckers give you too much shit, and I'll help you bust their balls."

"You're the best, Reg. Thank you."

She smiles. "And on that note. I'm outta here. I'm going to reach out to Destiny and let her know we'll be contacting her shortly. Peace out," Reggie quips before fading into nothing.

Knox just rolls his eyes at us before giving me his serious look, my stomach fluttering at the intensity I see reflected back at me. "Fate, each time you faint, my heart stops. I think I'm losing you all over again, and my soul can't take another hit like that."

He's crouched next to the chair, his entire body tense, and it's then I

realize just how much he's holding back. How he's managing to keep it all from me, I have no idea, but he needs to stop. Now.

"Let me in," I demand softly, running a finger along his scruffy jaw.

His hazel eyes meet mine, searching for something. Releasing a sigh, he holds my stare as the flood gates open. Worry, relief, lingering fear, and even a hint of desire hit me all at once. I'm damn near overwhelmed by the onslaught of everything he's held back. There's so much left unsaid between us. Things I need to ask him. Things I need to say. To him. To all of them. There just never seems to be enough time before we're whisked off into the next bit of crazy.

That needs to change. Now. Especially if someone out there is trying to break us all apart. We've already lost a hundred years. I don't want to waste another second.

"Thank you for seeing me," I whisper, knowing he understands I mean so much more than the literal sense.

"I'll always see you, little ghost," he whispers before pulling back to drop a kiss on my forehead. "Even when you don't necessarily want to be seen."

"And you don't need to hide yourself from me. Ever."

He nods, that way guys do when they don't want to make promises they have no intention of keeping.

"Hmm...you think I don't know what that little nod means?" I watch the smirk tilt his lips. "How'd you keep all that locked up anyway?"

"Honestly, I have no idea. I've never had anyone else who could sense emotions like I can. I'm not sure if this is something else that's new or something I've always done."

"Which reminds me. You all need to tell me about your power ups."

The guys share a look. One that clearly says there's more that I don't know and they're trying to determine just how much they can tell me.

"We have *a lot* to talk about, but let's start with the memory." He straightens, towering over Mack and me.

Sighing, I drop a quick kiss on Mack's cheek before I maneuver my way off his lap, knowing this conversation will probably go best when standing on my own two feet. I take the opportunity to look at the other guys.

He's right. I guess it's time we all talked about what happened...and whatever the fuck else they're keeping from me. "You all remember that day?" I ask hesitantly.

Thad nods sadly. "We do now. You somehow shared the memory when

you glared at each of us like we just ate the last donut.”

“Jesus, bro,” Levi mutters, rolling his eyes before turning to me. “Fate, you know that something was off that day, right? That wasn’t us. Or it was, but something wasn’t right.”

“No, I know that. *Now*. Speaking of...where’s Cole?”

“I’m right here,” he answers quietly.

I turn to find my sullen alpha standing off on his own, tucked in a shadowed corner away from everyone else. He must’ve gotten tired of waiting on us to come down, but when did he sneak in?

“It wasn’t you, Cole.” His eyebrow raises, and I just sigh. “Okay. I mean, like Levi said, it *was* you, but there was something affecting you. A power or spell or whatever the hell would make someone hazy-eyed and almost drunk. I can see that now.”

“And that makes it better? Fuck, Fate! Someone did something to us. Got to us somehow and I almost kissed...whoever the hell she was. All this time, I’ve been throwing shade your way when ultimately it was my fault you ran. My fault you ended up...” He trails off, shaking his head and running his hands along the shaved side of his hair. When his eyes meet mine, I can see the torment in them, the regret and guilt. They match the emotions that I can feel flooding the space between us.

I make my way over to the broody man who’s glaring at me again. Except this time, I know that anger really isn’t aimed at me. It’s aimed at himself.

“Cole, this isn’t on you. This is on whoever decided to fuck with us. They wanted to separate us, and they succeeded.” I pause, wrapping my arms around his waist, tilting my head back, and looking straight into those icy blues. “Temporarily. We’re getting a second chance, and we can’t let them come between us again.”

Big arms encircle me while his eyes search mine, then he kisses me. Like, *really* kisses me. My arms snake up his chest and wrap around his neck. The space between our bodies suddenly vanishes, his hands having slipped down to my ass, pulling me into him. He slowly ends the kiss with a lingering swipe of his tongue along my bottom lip, causing me to groan. My eyes slowly open to his smirk.

Fucking tease!

“I promised to trust you,” he murmurs, his husky voice giving away just how affected he was by that kiss, no matter how hard he tries to hide it. “And I do. It’s just going to take some time to get over this guilt. Seeing the entire

thing play out, watching your heart break because of something I did... It was torture, and I need you to know one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“When I find out who did this to us, to *you*...I’m going to hurt them. Over and over and over again.”

I shouldn’t be turned on by violence. But I am. I really, really am. What does that say about me?

Knox is suddenly stepping up behind me, his warmth seeping into my back as Cole pulls away slightly. My lady bits perk up again and take notice of the fact that I’m sandwiched in between these two, but then I feel Knox’s laughter and twist my head to look at him. My eyes narrow as curiosity flares with a hint of irritation.

“What’s so damn funny back there?”

“I’m getting the evil eye from Cole. He doesn’t want to see my dick.”

My eyebrows shoot up, and I turn to look at my scowling alpha. “What’s wrong with Knox’s dick? Is it disfigured or something?”

“Disfigured? What the *fuck*, Fate? My dick is just fine, *thank you very much*. Cranky pants just isn’t quite up for group sexy times yet.”

“*Group* sexy times? Hell yes. Sign me up!”

A chorus of groans follows.

Cole eyes me like I’ve lost my mind. “Not going to happen, love.” The term flows off his tongue with ease, and, just like every other time he says it, my soul swoons at the softness that’s in direct contrast to his normally brash demeanor.

“Should’ve mentioned that before you kissed me,” I mumble into his shirt.

“What was that?” he asks.

“Oh, nothing,” I reply quickly.

Mack snickers, and I quickly turn to glare at him. Cole does not need to know he just inadvertently tasted Mack’s cum. “But I mean, come on. What’s a little sword crossing amongst friends?”

“Yeah, Cole. You know you want to *cross swords* with us,” Thad snickers.

“Not in a million years. No telling where those swords have been.”

And just like that the temperature in the room drops dramatically. My power floods through me, stronger than it has before. My fingertips spark, a brighter pink this time with hints of silver shooting through it. Cole and Knox

each take a step back, getting out of my power's path.

"Oh, good going, Cole. Now you've pissed her off," Levi grumbles.

The room is full of wary looks, all aimed at me. When will these guys figure out that I am one jealous bitch? *Maybe I should add that to the handbook.*

"Fate-

Whatever Cole was going to say is cut off by a spark of electricity that zaps through the room. The guys all duck down. Good thing they have quick reflexes. Not sure my power would spare them at the moment.

"Here's the thing..." I say as I slowly walk around the bed, my fingers trailing along the elegant wood four-poster, leaving a trail of pretty pink power in their wake. "I don't like hearing about your past sex lives. Thad and Levi learned that little lesson already, but I guess the rest of you need to hear it. Logically, I know you had no idea I even existed, but we all know *logic* isn't always my strong suit." Walking up to Mack, who's now standing, I turn around and face the rest of them, leaning back into my sexy nerd as his hands find my hips. "At least one of you doesn't have any concerns as far as that goes."

"Really, Mack? You played the celibacy card?" Thad rolls his eyes.

"Hell yes, I did." His chin lands on the top of my head as his hands slide forward around my waist.

"So. If you don't want me to zap your dicks off, please refrain from discussing past hookups. Okay?" I clap my hands together like a coach who just gave the world's best motivational speech. "Okay, good chat! Now...if you all could see yourselves out. Mack and I have more...*work*...to do."



“What the fuck, woman? You’re giving him another turn after just giving us that little speech?”

My eyes narrow on Thad.

“So we’re going there, are we? Fine. Show of hands. Who here has a problem with our current arrangement?”

The guys all stare back at me, no one saying a word or moving an inch.

“Then let me make myself clear. I won’t choose. Ever. I get that this might seem unfair, and that not all of you will be comfortable with the same arrangement this time around, but it’s the only way it can be. If you can’t handle that, then there’s a whole other discussion we need to be having.”

The room is silent. It might not show on the outside, gotta give the ol’ poker face a trial run, but on the inside, my stomach is in knots. I’m not sure what I’d do if any of them decided they couldn’t stick around for this. For *us*.

“You know I’m in, little ghost.” Knox walks up to me, wrapping one of his big hands around the back of my neck, his thumb caressing my cheek. “You can’t scare me away that easily. And if it means crossing swords with these fuckers, then so be it.” His kiss takes me by surprise. Instead of the soft and sensual attention I expected from my empath, this is hot as fuck with a hint of dominance that I can tell he’s struggling to keep under control. His facial hair tickles my skin as he changes angles and smashes his lips against mine even harder. As far as first kisses go, this one is killer. Mack’s arms are still around my waist as Knox’s hand snakes between us to grab a handful of my ass. Pretty sure his knuckles brush against Mack’s giant trouser snake, judging by my sexy nerd’s quick intake of breath, but I don’t have time to question it before Knox pulls back. My lips chase after his, and he nips my bottom lip. “Ah, ah, ah. Don’t be greedy. Greedy girls get punished.” He winks at me then whispers in my ear, “I haven’t forgotten about the paddle.”

I’m pretty sure my eyebrows have hit my hairline. He just smirks as he backs away.

I’m now a puddle of mush in Mack’s arms, and I feel him nuzzle my hair with his nose as he chuckles. *Yup. Panties have a bigger puddle now too. Fuck. Me. Literally, please!*

Levi’s suddenly in front of me, his index finger lifting my chin and closing my mouth. Apparently it dropped open after Knox’s little dom bombshell. Domshell? Yeah. Definitely Domshell. Light bulb moment! All these fabulously awesome Fate-isms need to be shared with the world. I make a mental note to have Reggie or Mack start adding them into...let’s call it the Thirsty Girls Survival Guide. And another mental note to copyright that. Geesh. I’m going to be busy.

“I’m not going anywhere, sweets,” Levi says, drawing my attention back to him. “You know that. And neither is my dipshit brother. We’ll always be here for you.” His kiss is soft and sweet, a promise really, and I’m disappointed when he pulls back. Not much in my life is soft and sweet these days, and I just want to dive into him.

He walks back over to stand next to Thad, giving him a look that tells me they’ll be discussing this later.

Thad’s sigh echoes around the quiet room. “I’m sorry, babe. You know you’re stuck with me, right?” It’s his turn to approach me, but he doesn’t settle for sharing me with Mack. He tugs me into his arms and gives me, quite possibly, the best hug I’ve ever received. His lips briefly drop to mine

in a kiss that's fast and rough before he sets me down. Leaning forward, he grips my chin in between his fingers. With serious eyes, he warns, "You better be ready, woman. Because I call dibs on next, and when I get my hands on you, I'm not stopping until neither of us has the strength to move anymore."

"Dibs? What are you...twelve?" I swat his arm and he laughs, walking back over to Levi.

My eyes come up and lock onto Cole's. He's staring at me with those icy blue eyes, his face a mask of pissed off. This one could go either way. My alpha isn't one for sharing; he's already made that perfectly clear. What if this is all too much for him? What if he walks away? At one point in time, I may not have minded so much, but now I'm pretty sure I'd be lost without the grumpy asshole.

"Oh, stop looking at me like that," he says, his arms crossed and his scowl firmly in place. "I promised I'd prove to you that I deserve to be right here by your side."

"You did," I say softly.

He stalks up to me and stops with only inches between us. He raises his hand, his thumb pulling my bottom lip out from between my teeth, and drops a kiss on my forehead. "I keep my promises, Fate." He pauses, a grin tilting his mouth. "But I still don't want to see any of these fuckers' swords anywhere near my own. When you're with me, you're all *mine*."

I swallow, the promise in his eyes enough to have me melting on the spot.

Mack clears his throat, and I turn to look up at him.

His hands are in his pockets and his lips quirk slightly to match the mischievous grin that I'm sure is slowly spreading across my lips.

"Aren't you going to ask me what I think?" he asks.

Making my way back to him, I wrap my arms around his waist and tilt my head back, my eyes locking on to his. "What do you think about all of this, Mack?"

His arms envelop me, and I can't help but burrow into him like I'll never get close enough.

"To have you here with me is a bit surreal. I wasn't sure I'd ever feel this way about anyone, *ever*, and the fact that I've got this second chance with you, stealing these last few hours reconnecting even before my other three brothers...hell, it makes a man feel powerful. It makes me want things I stopped hoping for years ago. And I want them with *you*. So, I think you need

to stop worrying. None of us are walking away from you. We didn't a hundred years ago, and we won't now. Or ever." He seals his promise with a kiss, and the tension drains from my body.

"Now that we've got all of that settled, we need to meet downstairs in the study," Cole states before heading for the door, obviously expecting us all to follow.

"Downstairs for what?" I ask.

"Cole thinks Destiny might have answers, so we're going to talk with her," Knox offers.

I sigh dramatically. "Reality is highly overrated."

Cole's staring at us impatiently from the doorway. "Are you coming?"

"I mean, there's coming and then there's *coming*. One is way more fun than the other. I say we go with option two."

"You might be able to distract all these other fuckers with sex, but it won't work on me. It's time we get some real answers. Now come on."

"But do we *have* to?" I whine.

"Fate, don't make me give you an order," Cole says, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Ha! I'd like to see you try." My hands land on my hips as my lips quirk up.

"Fine." He smirks. "Fate, get your tight little ass downstairs. That's an order!"

The entire room holds its breath, the heaviness of Cole's power hanging in the air even though the command wasn't aimed at any of them.

I walk straight up to Cole, the guys all waiting for me to give in to the command. A blinding smile lights up my face. "Cole?"

"Yes, Fate?" he asks, his eyes wide with a quick flash of confusion before it's replaced by his trademark scowl.

"Eat. Shit." Then I wink before continuing past him. "I'm going to go take a shower, boys. Need to dress to impress for this lovely little reunion. Meet you all downstairs in, say...an hour, give or take?"



God, it feels good to be me again. Even if I can't remember exactly who *me* was, this sure does feel right. Pushing Cole's buttons is way too much fun. I just wish I could've taken a picture of his face to remember this momentous occasion. His shocked expression would be a fantastic reminder of just how badass I am. Total missed opportunity there.

My room is quiet as I enter, a much appreciated moment of solitude washing over me and helping me regroup after the chaos that always ensues when my guys are around. I mean, there are five of them and only one of me. Sometimes it's a bit overwhelming after ten years of being alone.

I head straight for the adjoining bathroom. Reaching in to start the shower, I let all the ways I'm going to take advantage of my immunity to Cole's powers fight for priority in my brain. Steam envelops me as I step in, the hot water instantly soothing my sore muscles. I get a wicked sort of satisfaction

at the fact that my lack of acquiescence has to be chipping away at that huge ego of his even now. Wonder what all the guys think about it? Will they resent that I don't have to follow the same rules? I don't know how any of this group shit works. I haven't been a part of one for over a hundred years. I've only had to rely on me, myself, and I. #GhostGirlProblems.

Don't get me wrong. I'm loving the fact that I'm finally part of the team. That there are people who care about me and have my back. But somewhere deep down inside, something is tugging at my mind. Telling me that I need to work extra hard to protect them. That whatever happened all those years ago, the threat is still out there and it's very, very real and closer than we think. Whoever it is, they're waiting and they're gunning for us. I can't...no, I *won't*...let my guys get caught in the crossfire this time. Call it a gut feeling, instinct, repressed memory, hallucination. Whatever the fuck this feeling is, it's twisting me up inside, making me antsy, and I *hate* being antsy.

Taking my time, I wash and condition my hair then grab my loofah, scrubbing my body and cleaning off my time with Mack. Eau de sex isn't really the scent I'm going for during this upcoming reunion with my sister. I spare a glance at my legs and other girly bits. Things are a tad *hairy*, if you know what I mean, so I quickly take care of that too. Who knew shaving your lady parts required so much flexibility? *Phew! I need to work out more.*

With everything clean and my fingers turning pruney, I finally step out and dry off quickly, running the towel roughly over my hair as I head for the walk-in closet. The dress I'd picked out in an effort to wrap myself up in some semblance of normalcy - but let's be honest, I'm so far from normal, it's not even funny - sits on the small chair in the corner. Before I pull it over my head, I find myself in front of the floor-length mirror on the wall. Willing myself into my ghostly state, I can make out the bathroom behind me through my translucent body, all of it reflecting back at me. Then I'm solid again. I flicker back and forth. Testing my power. Testing my control. A mere thought is all it takes to switch back to my ghost girl form, and I watch as red jeans mold themselves to my legs, paired with killer black heels and a black T-shirt. My hair is now dry, lying in loose waves against my back. My makeup is a little more dramatic, black winged eyeliner and bright red lipstick. But something's still not right... Ahh. Of course. I watch as *Ghost Girls Do It Better* scrawls right across my chest. *So much better than a lame dress.* Plus, it's a quirky little reminder to myself and a huge fuck you to those who think they can mess with me...*and* maybe a little something to

draw the boys' eyes right where I want them.

What? I've got five guys to keep entertained. Boobs will do the trick almost every time, because...*boobs!*

Giving the mirror one last glance, I realize I'm no longer the girl I once was. *They* made me this way, forced me to become the woman I am now, and I can't forget that. Old Fate is dead. Now it's my turn to be who I need to be in order to do what needs to be done.

Looking at my phone, I've got roughly thirty minutes to waste. I'll be damned if I give Cole any satisfaction by showing up early. *Candy Crush, it is!* Stepping into my bedroom, I'm suddenly hit with that odd tapping sensation in my brain, like someone knocking to get my attention, but it's just the Gateway trying to get me a message. At least this time I know I'm not losing my mind as I calm my thoughts and let the image hit me. It's fuzzy, but someone is in the hall, just outside the main chamber, and the Gateway wants me to know. But why?

Without thinking, I touch the mark on my arm and silently say, *Gateway*. The trip doesn't take nearly as long this time and is a lot less disconcerting. The main chamber appears, candles flickering in sconces along the wall, almost like it was expecting me, and in a sense, it was. We're connected, and I can truly feel it now. It's the blood in my veins. The air in my lungs. It's soul deep. It's also different from my connection to my guys, but just as important. Taking a deep breath, I swear I feel the Gateway do the same. Metaphorically speaking, of course. Pretty sure it's relieved that I'm here and finally accepting who and what I am.

There's a tug on my mark, Knox's line specifically, similar to all those times he inadvertently played summon the ghost girl. By touching the mark, I can travel to wherever he is almost immediately, or I could communicate with him, letting him know where I am. But I can also choose to ignore it. Which, of course, is what I do, then grimace slightly. Yeah, I didn't really think this through. He's going to be pissed. The guys are *all* going to be pissed when they find out I left without them knowing. Guess this whole team player thing is going to take some getting used to.

I walk over to the chamber doors, willing them to open. The hinges creak and startle the man standing on the other side, his hand raised, about to knock.

"Fate? It's really you?" the male spirit asks, his eyes wide when they land on mine. "Have you seen Liv?" He takes a step closer, but I step back, an orb

appearing in my hand, ready to chuck it his way if he so much as thinks of taking another step toward me. One glance at the orb and his eyes widen.

He's standing there in a light-colored suit, the jacket unbuttoned to show off his crisp dress shirt and dark tie. His blond hair is parted dramatically to the side and appears to be slicked back with...whatever they used to slick hair back with in his era. There's a sudden stirring in my gut, maybe a sense of familiarity, but this feels different from the guys or even Reggie. I know him, but I'm not sure how.

"Who the fuck are you?" I growl. "And what are you doing here?"

"So it's true. You don't have your memories."

"What makes you say that?"

"There have been rumors," he hedges, his nerves kicking up a notch along with a hint of something that's gone before I can make it out. He quickly changes the subject. "Plus, you wouldn't be asking who I am. It's me, Fate. Nicholas."

Well, fuck! Way to give away your secret, Fate. Might as well roll with it now. "Sorry. That does nothing for me."

"Shit. I was afraid of that."

"What are you doing here?"

"When I heard you were back, I rushed here immediately. I need to find Liv and thought she might be here with you."

"That's the second time you've mentioned Liv. Who is she?" Another spark in my gut, but this one much warmer than the first. I should know Liv. She's someone close to me. I can feel it in my heart every time he says her name.

"Liv was my sister. Look, I don't have much time, but I also needed to warn you."

"Warn me about what? If it's about the spirits who are angry that I'm back, I already know."

"Not just the spirits, though there are plenty of those out there as well. Trust no one. Not even the ones closest to you."

He tugs on his tie, the movement somehow stirring a memory that doesn't ever fully coalesce. Something about it makes me feel uncomfortable, slightly nauseous even, but I'm not sure if it's the movement itself or what he's insinuating.

"What do you mean?"

"Fate, you need to know. What happened to you, it was no accident. The

whole thing was orchestrated.”

“Who orchestrated what?”

“It was all an elaborate plan set up with the intent to see you gone.” He glances toward the door nervously, tugging on his tie again. “Look, I have to go. Meet me at the club on Elm tomorrow night. I can tell you more then. Be careful and stay alert. I’ll see you soon.”

“Why would I...” I don’t bother finishing my question as he disappears. “Well, shit. That whole encounter was beyond bizarre. Almost as bizarre as a spirit going to a damn club.”

When did this become my life? I go from *being* a crazy spirit to being the *Queen* of Crazy Spirits. Not sure I’d consider this a promotion at the moment. And let’s not forget, the guys will lose their shit if they find out I was alone here with some lunatic ghost.

“Hey, Gateway, let’s keep this between us, yeah?”

I sense the Gateway shaking its head at me in disapproval and roll my eyes.

“You try dealing with that band of overprotective hooligans and then tell me you wouldn’t do the same thing!” I huff, which is met with silence.

And did Nick just insinuate that someone close to me was responsible? Yes. Yes, he did. But who? I refuse to believe it could be my guys, and from what little I remember, there are only a handful of people that are in my immediate circle. Reggie, my sisters, and this mysterious Liv, if my gut is right. Something else is going on here, and I need to get to the bottom of it, *now*.

Even knowing I don’t have much time, I walk up to the black and white damask wall covered in photos. Moments in time captured for all eternity. Not all of them are traditional prints. It’s like the Gateway took snapshots throughout our lives and recorded them for all of us right onto the wall itself, framing them in mismatching colors and shapes. Everywhere I look is proof of the life we once shared. Love we once had. If I didn’t believe it before, I’d believe it now. Which makes what Nicholas just said all the more strange.

Almost every single image contains smiling faces, stolen kisses, loving embraces. My fingers trace Knox’s shoulder-length hair and charming grin as he dances with me to music that’s long since gone silent. They move to run along Mack’s monocle. He’s holding it up to inspect some sort of document while I grin up at him, tucked into his side. My eyes catch an image of the twins standing side-by-side, their arms crossed, with me sitting on their

shoulders, balanced between them, grinning cheekily. And Cole, my grumpy asshole. Looking at me from across a crowded room, anyone else would think he was angry. Furious even. But I see differently. I can see the protectiveness in his gaze as he watches me with complete focus.

Then there's one of me, by myself. I'm standing in a black dress that dips dramatically low in the front, my chest barely covered by the thin lace. The skirt is full, trailing behind me and parted down the front, showing off my thighs and the thigh-high heeled boots that do wondrous things for my legs. I look powerful, I realize. My hair is blowing in the wind, and a pretty pink orb of electricity is sparking in my hand. But it's what's in my other hand that has my full attention. A book. Small and black and seemingly mundane. My heart stutters as my power glimmers, and I know exactly what that book is.

Stepping back, I take one last glance at my old life, the one that was stolen from me, and I get angry. No. I get *pissed*. Bright pink bolts of my power, lined with silver, streak along my arms.

"Do you know what happened to me?" I ask softly.

It's almost like I can see the Gateway answering inside my mind, shaking its head.

There's a question that is coming full circle from a hundred years ago, and I can't decide if I want to even ask. But I have to know. My future depends on the answer. "Were my guys at all responsible?"

I hold my breath, waiting for the answer, but it comes almost immediately.

The Gateway rolls its eyes at me.

"Wow. Really? It's a legitimate question. They were up to something a hundred years ago, and no one can tell me what. Even you have to admit it's a little coincidental! Can't I just ask and get it off my chest?"

It's like the Gateway just raises its eyebrow in response, telling me I should really know better. And of course I do. But removing that scrap of doubt actually puts us one step closer to figuring out who was really behind what happened.

"Then who could Nicholas be referring to?"

No response comes from the Gateway.

"They can't get to us again. I won't let them." My gaze catches on my reflection in the glass of a large picture in front of me. The girl staring back at me is a stranger. My hair is nearly black, hanging damn near to my waist. My face is flushed from my brewing anger, and there's a fierceness in my eyes

that I don't recognize. Is this a part of who I used to be or a new part that's flickering to life because of the events of my past? Whatever it is, I embrace it and watch the silver in my eyes flicker into ghostly flames. My power is ready, and it's angry too. I should be taken aback at the level of pissed off I'm feeling, but I'm not. Because I understand. My power remembers even if I don't, and it wants revenge on those who wronged us.

"We need to be stronger. We need to be ready. I...I need to protect them. But how am I supposed to do that if I can't remember anything that could potentially help us?"

The room is silent, with a stillness to the air that wasn't there moments ago as the Gateway assesses me. I can feel it skimming over my thoughts, searching for something. There's a soft *clank* that comes from the direction of the office, and I immediately raise my hand, one of my pretty pink orbs appearing in a blink. But that sense of warmth floods me again, and I know that it's the Gateway. It's made a decision and is directing me to something.

I slowly make my way toward the office door, peeking my head in to find an empty room. The fireplace has gone cold, the seats left empty, and a bit of heartache hits me again, stronger this time. That sense that you're forgetting something important. But I'm pretty sure I know what it is. It's an entire lifetime of moments, some that took place right here in this very room, and I'm angry again. I glance at the desk, *my* desk, but all I see are items stacked into neat piles. A chair that appears well worn and comfortable. None of it looks familiar, but it sure *feels* it. Walking around the desk, I sit in a chair that seems like it's molded to my body. Though, I suppose it is. What sort of business does the Guardian of the Spirits do on a daily basis anyways? Is there paperwork involved? Because I *hate* paperwork. Or at least, I *think* I do.

A picture frame catches my eye next. It's knocked over, probably from my little freak out before, and my fingers slowly grab the corner and set it upright. It's the guys, all in old-fashioned suits. They're looking back at me with a fierceness in their eyes that I haven't seen before. Cole has a pocket watch in his hand, the chain snaking out of the pocket in his vest. The twins look dapper in their bowler hats, and Levi is even leaning on a cane. Macklin and Knox are in longer jackets that are fully buttoned, their hats in their hands, their hair slicked back and neatly styled. A grin tilts my lips, and I make a mental note to give all of them shit about this later. But for now, I take in their strength. Their poise. And, *okay*, their hotness. They look damn good in those suits, even if they're over a century out of style.

My eyes well up, tears suddenly threatening to spill over. *What the fuck is wrong with me?*

Another soft *clank* comes from the bookshelf along the wall, distracting me from a brewing pity party. Pushing out of the chair, I make my way over and inspect the shelves, looking for whatever might have made that sound. Two books are tipped over, leaning against a metal dish.

Ah ha! I found you. When I try to move it, it won't budge, so I push the books out of the way and stare at the seemingly innocent little bowl. It has a weird dip in the middle, and when my curious little finger runs along it, something sharp catches and pricks my finger, a drop of blood dripping into the dish as I yank my hand back.

"Ouch! That wasn't very nice," I mumble, popping the sore finger into my mouth.

The Gateway's amusement skims along my senses. It's oddly exciting to feel this natural camaraderie with a non-living entity that gives off all of these motherly vibes. *Damn, that was a mouthful.*

"Haha, very funny! I'm starting to think old me was a sadistic bitch. First color coding the closet, now weird blood thirsty contraptions. What's next? A hidden torture..."

My words die out as a portion of the bookshelf clicks open, creating a door where one definitely wasn't before.

"Please tell me there's not really a hidden torture chamber back there. Though I'd take a secret red room, if you know what I mean."

The Gateway metaphorically raises one brow.

"What? Have you *seen* my guys?"

And...cue eye roll. I get that a lot.

I slowly move forward, pushing the door open with my foot. A hundred years is a long time to be away, and who knows what sort of creepy crawlies might be waiting to ambush me in there. A small candle flickers to life, illuminating the room in a soft glow as I step inside. It's actually surprisingly clean. The space is fairly large, a work table taking up most of the far wall, a small rolling stool in front of it. On top of the table is an empty mortar and pestle, blank pieces of scattered parchment with an old dried up fountain pen laying amongst them. Above the table are narrow shelves with jars of what appear to be various herbs and seeds and who knows what else inside them. Along the left wall are hundreds of small wooden drawers. As I near them, I notice there are only small loops, big enough for a single finger, that sit over

tiny indents that look similar to the indent in the little dish on the shelf in the office.

“Oh, come on! Really right now? No way am I pricking my finger a billion times to find something that I won’t even recognize if it jumped out and slapped me in the face. You’ve led me here. Now help a ghost girl out.”

I swear, if the Gateway is anything like Cole, I’m getting a narrow-eyed glare right now.

Suddenly, an image of CCLVII flashes in my mind, so I scour the rows upon rows of drawers until I find the one with CCLVII carved just below the loop. Two hundred and fifty-seven in Roman numerals. Reluctantly, I push my finger into the dip, anticipating the pinch and the poke but still flinching slightly. The drop of blood that wells up on my fingertip is sucked into the divot, and the drawer slides open.

I go up on tiptoe to peer into the tiny drawer, finding a single small object. My fingers gently reach in and lift out what appears to be a tiny glass bubble, not much larger than a marble, really. It rolls around my hand, cold to the touch, and feels like it weighs nothing at all.

“Okay, now what? In case you’ve forgotten, I have no idea what this is or what I’m supposed to do with it.”

Another silent sigh, like those a mother heaves when they give in to their child because they know it’s faster to just get shit done than to waste time arguing about it.

An image pops into my head, courtesy of the Gateway, and I know what this tiny bubble is and what it’s used for. It’s not a perfect solution, but in a pinch, it could mean the difference between life and death. I close my hand and shatter the bubble, its essence seeping into me and mixing with my power. Now it sits inside me, waiting for the moment when it’s needed. And I have no doubt, I *will* need it. Unless I can figure out who did this to us, and why, and end them before they can try again.

“Thank you,” I whisper to the Gateway before one last thought pops into my head. It’s a longshot, but it doesn’t hurt to ask. “Gateway, show me the book.”

I feel nothing. See nothing. Hear nothing.

“Do you know where it is?”

Immediately, I get a sense that it’s not here.

“So you do know, but you just won’t tell me? Or you have no idea where it is either?”

Pretty sure it metaphorically shrugs in response.

“Oh, so it’s like that, now is it? You don’t trust me?” It’s almost a whisper, that last part. A bit of hurt working its way into my heart for a place...no, a *being* that I can’t remember yet feel more connected to the longer I stand here. It’s an odd, almost maternal feeling that skitters across my senses. A reassuring warmth that suddenly embraces me, though there’s no one else here. And then I realize, it’s protecting me in its own way.

“I’m going to be smarter this time around. Stronger. Old me got complacent. Let doubt cloud her mind. I’m going into this with guns blazing and need everything possible in my arsenal. Help me turn the tide this time. *Please.*”

The entire place goes still, time almost seeming to pause as the Gateway makes a choice. An image appears in my head, and I smirk. “You won’t regret this...but I *do* need you to do one more thing for me...”

1. KNOX

EMPATHY FACT #5:

THE DECISION TO TRUST ISNT
MADE LIGHTLY. NEITHER IS THE
DECISION TO BEND HER OVER MY
KNEE WHEN SHE'S BEEN
NAUGHTY.

The look on Cole's face was priceless. For once in his life, there's someone who can actively defy him, and for a control freak like Cole, that's gotta be a hard hit to take.

I pat him on the shoulder on my way out the door. "Better get used to it, man. That woman is going to take full advantage of her immunity to your...charms...now."

"I can still chain her to the damn bed," he grumbles.

"Want me to go make that happen right-" He cuts Thad off before he can even finish that thought.

"Hell. No. You two ass-clowns go get everything ready...with no detours. We'll meet downstairs in thirty minutes. And that is an order."

"Bro, what were you thinking?" Levi asks Thad as they follow me out the door and down the stairs.

“I wasn’t, okay? I just...”

“You just what? Lost your damn mind for a second? I thought you were all for this?”

“I am. No fucking way would I walk away from that woman, but my brain short circuits whenever I’m around her. If I don’t get inside her soon, I think my dick might explode.”

Both of our hands drop to grab our junk as Levi mumbles, “Ouch, bro.”

“You know what I mean. I can’t think straight. Her ass. Her tits. It’s like they hypnotize me, then stupid shit is suddenly leaving my mouth against my will.”

“Stupid shit always leaves your mouth.”

“True. But you know it’s more than that. It’s *her*. The way she walks and talks and how she gets that wild look in her eye when she’s pissed off. Hell, even the way she zapped my junk. The woman is a walking drug, and I’m going through withdrawal.”

I silently commiserate with Thad. His desperation is damn near suffocating me, or maybe that’s just because it matches my own. The hazy pink layer making up the outer rim of his aura tells me his feelings go much deeper than he’s admitting out loud.

“Well, you need to get that shit under control. Don’t fuck this up for us.”

“Fuck! I know. I’m sorry.”

Walking into the study, the twins get comfortable while I head over to grab a drink. It’s not like we have anything better to do.

“Well, at least we’ve laid it all out there now,” I say, pouring the whiskey into the glass. “She knows where each of us stands. It’s going to be important, now more than ever, that we all communicate. Without our memories, we need to rebuild these connections before someone tries to fuck with us again.”

“Hey, grab me one, bro,” Levi says.

“Yeah. One for me too. I’m gonna need it to get through this upcoming conversation. My dick is seriously unhappy it was denied again.”

I snort. “You have regular conversations with your dick?”

He snickers as I pour two more, walking them over and handing them off before going back to grab my own.

“My dick is a great conversation starter. You should try talking to your own. He’s probably unhappy too. More so because you ignore him. ”

“Fuck off with that shit. My dick is perfectly fine.”

“You’re just jealous Fate wants to name my dick and not yours.”

“Name your dick? The fuck?”

“She named Mack’s and said she’d name ours too,” Levi offers.

“I could give two shits if she names my dick. I’ll leave that for you fuckers if that’s what you want to waste your time on when you’re with our woman. I, on the other hand, will be putting mine deep inside her the second the opportunity presents itself.”

“What? Two inches deep because that’s about all you’ve got.”

“Eat shit, cuntmuffin.”

His smug grin makes me want to slap it right off his face. I’m about ready to stand up and prove to him just what I’m packing when Cole and Mack walk in, taking the empty seats as they quietly discuss Fate.

Settling back onto the sofa, I take a sip of the amber drink, letting the warmth flood through me, as I distract myself by thinking about the contradiction that our little ghost is. On one hand, she’s all fire and power. On the other, there’s a vulnerability there that I don’t think the others can quite grasp, but I can. Because her soul is a perfect match to mine, and I can feel her in every fiber of my being.

“Anything you want to share with the rest of us?” Levi asks Cole, drawing me out of my introspection.

“I was just asking Mack how Fate seemed when she woke up.”

Neither of them attempt to finish that thought.

“Well?” I ask, looking between the two of them.

“She was fine. A little embarrassed that the memory drained her to the point of passing out again.”

“That seems like an awful simple statement considering the amount of time you both spent alone in there,” Levi notes with a raised eyebrow.

Mack blushes. “Um, so we sort of...uh...”

“Well, well, well...Mack’s celibacy has finally ended,” Thad chuckles. “How’s it feel to be back on the wagon, bro?”

Mack grins, though he tries to hide it. “Pretty damn great, actually.”

All of us chuckle, and it feels good to be sitting here with my brothers, our woman upstairs in the shower. It feels...right. Complete.

Reggie pops up in the doorway, and it’s a testament to our growing ease that none of us even so much as flinch.

“Destiny is ready when you all are.”

Cole responds. “Fate’s showering, but should be down in less than an

hour.”

“Good. Because let me tell you, playing secretary is exhausting. Those sisters are going to drive me to drink.”

“You can’t drink,” Mack states, totally missing the sarcasm.

She gives him her best glare. “No shit, Sherlock.”

As the guys start chatting about the upcoming meeting, I let my senses drift to my little ghost. It’s no surprise her emotions are all over the place. Happy one second, angry the next. I’ve never met another woman who is as emotionally unstable as ours. That thought makes me smile, because it’s what makes her perfect for our particular brand of crazy. Between Cole’s perpetual grump factor, Mack’s shy sweetness, the twins’ unpredictability and humor, and my own tendency to get a little broody, her ever-changing personalities will blend right in.

All of a sudden, the whirlwind of feeling vanishes, or at least is significantly muted. She’s gone. My soul panics, but I maintain my composure until I can figure out what’s going on. My fingers brush over my mark out of habit, hoping that she’ll appear in front of me with that angry fire in her eyes. Instead, an image appears in my mind. She’s at the Gateway. *What the fuck? What was that? And better yet, what the fuck is she doing at the Gateway?* Part of me wants to rush after her. The other part of me, the more rational part, remembers what she was feeling before she left. Confusion. Worry. Anger. And a definite dash of resolve. It’s risky, but I decide to let her do whatever it is she’s doing. And if she’s not back soon, I’m going after her. *We will* be having a chat about this later though.

“So, how do we travel to the Isle of Light?” Macklin asks Reggie, pulling me from my ghostly stalking.

I try not to let on that something is going down. The guys don’t know she’s gone, and for now, I’m going to keep it that way. She’s a grown woman with more power in her pinky than almost any other being in existence. Something tells me we had limited control over her actions in the past, and, admittedly, the control we have now is minimal at best. We need to trust her, and I plan to start right now.

“We don’t have to actually go to the Isle of Light. We’ll simply call Destiny from here.”

“Wow! Really? How does that work?”

“Oh boy, here we go,” Thad mutters.

“You’ve revved his engine now, Reg,” I add, determined to act normal,

but the topic of conversation could not come at a more opportune moment.

“Gosh, this is starting to feel just like old times.” She smiles, and a sense of warm nostalgia hits me. “Anyways, to answer your question, Mack, the Gateway marks are interconnected with the Light and Torment marks. Because of your connection to Fate, you have access to inter-realm communication as well.”

“Inter-realm communication?” I ask.

Thad chuckles. “Anyone else feel like they’re in an episode of *Star Trek*? I want one of those cool as fuck comm badges they wear.”

We all look at him, shaking our heads.

“What?” Thad asks incredulously. “I’m a Trekkie. So sue me.”

Levi rolls his eyes. “Sometimes I wonder if you were dropped on your head as a baby.”

“So we can use these to talk with each other too?” Mack asks.

“Of course, and track each other as well. Fate’s mark is a direct line to her.”

“Track?” I ask.

“Yes. The marks serve several functions. Communication, transportation, and built-in tracking. Just remember, it’s all about intent.”

“If that’s the case, then why couldn’t we find Fate when she ran off that night?” Cole mutters.

“We don’t know. Destiny, Karma, and I couldn’t figure it out back then. Something was blocking our ability to track her.”

“Something or someone?” Cole asks.

“Both,” Mack responds, a serious look on his face. “Someone who knows who and what we are and ways to get around our powers.”

“We need to talk to Destiny. Maybe she’ll have some answers for us.”

They toss ideas back and forth, but I tune them out. Concentrating on my connection with Fate, I wonder what she’s up to and how much longer I can keep it from my brothers. I’m not sure how long I sit there, my mind conjuring one horrible image after another of what she might be encountering there without me, before her presence suddenly floods my senses. Relief, nerves, a lingering sadness that wasn’t there before she left, and still a hefty amount of anger, all flow through our connection.

Cole gripes, “Where the fuck is Fate?”

“Right here, *Ass-Cole*. Give a girl a break, would ya?”

She rushes into the room wearing a pair of red jeans that hug every damn

curve and a tight black shirt that says *Ghost Girls Do It Better*. My eyes linger on her tits for a bit longer than they should, and when my eyes meet hers, a mischievous grin spreads across those luscious lips of hers. Instead of her boots, she's in sky-high black heels that do phenomenal things for her long, toned legs. The silver at the center of her aura is stronger somehow, drawing me in with its uniqueness, along with the interchanging yellow and pink that are skimming along the outer rim. Those hints of happiness and love go a long way to soothing my soul, but that doesn't mean she's off the hook.

Before she turns away, my eyes narrow and hers widen.

Oh, you've been naughty, little ghost. Don't think you got away with anything.

Her throat bobs when she swallows, momentarily distracting me as I picture those lips of hers wrapping around my cock and her throat swallowing down something else entirely.

"Damn, woman, I can't wait to have those heels wrapped around my—"

"For fuck's sake." Cole rolls his eyes. "Is that all you think about?"

"I mean, I'm not sure how you can think about anything else when she looks like *that*."

Silently, I agree with Thad on this one. But I'll never admit that out loud.

"So, are we busting out of this gin joint or what?" Fate leans forward and does some weird grab and shimmy thing with her boobs.

"What the hell are you doing?" I ask, equally mesmerized and perplexed by the movement.

"You try to wear one of these fucking things. Damn torture devices is what they are. Bet the devil got a good laugh when he designed them."

"You realize there is no such thing as the devil, right? Your sister rules over the Land of Torment," Mack replies earnestly.

"Hmm..." Reggie pauses. "Honestly, this sounds like something that would be right up Karma's alley. Making others miserable."

"Which reminds me. Why haven't I heard from her?"

Reggie purses her ghostly lips. "That's because I'm fielding her calls. You can thank me later. And you'll also be happy to know we won't be leaving the comfort of the study today. We can talk to your other sis from here."

"Well, isn't that nifty? Time to get the first half of this little family reunion over with, I suppose."

Fate's emotions are jumping all over the place, and I study her, cataloguing every one that flits across my senses. It's more...jumbled than usual, and that's saying something considering the woman is a walking contradiction most times. Something is definitely up with her, but I want her to come to me with it, extending that trust I'm desperately trying to give her rather than hounding her to talk to me.

"Can you just take something seriously for once?" Cole mutters.

"Why would I do that when I've got you to do it for me?"

The two stare each other down. It'll be a miracle if we get through this call without the two of them bickering. Although, Fate came back from the dead, so maybe miracles really are possible.

"Come here, little ghost. I want to hold your hand."

She walks over to me, intertwining her small hand in my much larger one and gracing me with one of her beautiful smiles.

"You're the sweetest." Even in heels, she has to go up on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek.

I lean forward and whisper in her ear, "You won't think I'm so sweet when I bend you over my knee later for leaving this house without telling anyone."

Our eyes meet and her cheeks flush, and it takes every ounce of willpower I have not to rush her out of the room so I can see what that blush looks like on other parts of her body.

"You two are gross." Reggie feigns a gag, and I straighten, getting a better hold on my withering self-control.

"Oh, shut it, girl. You know you missed us."

"Oh, yeah. *Totally* missed all the PDA, not to mention the random groping that happens whenever the lot of you are around. Bunch of horny bastards is what you all are."

"Can we please get on with this?" Cole impatiently asks.

"What you ever saw in *that* one," Reggie mock-whispers, pointing at Cole, "I'll never know." She turns to the rest of us as Cole rolls his eyes. "Alright. Mack, can you get the curtains? Everyone else, ready?"

Fate's grip tightens on mine, her nerves filtering across my senses. This upcoming chat with her sister has her on edge. She looks up at me, and I give her hand a squeeze back, trying to project a small amount of calm onto her, letting her know I'm here for her. Her lips tilt up and shoulders relax, though I'm not sure I can take credit for it, as she responds, "Ready."

Reggie touches the mark on her wrist that matches ours, and suddenly, there's a fuzzy image appearing on the curtain, almost like a big screen that you'd see in a conference room, without the defined edges.

"Holy shit! Knox, look!"

The grainy image has come into focus. Everywhere I look is covered in fluffy whiteness, seemingly made up of smoke and mist. There are individual islands of floating clouds, rivers of bright light flowing between them. Houses constructed with a material I've never seen before, at least not that I remember, are dotted along each island, making up little neighborhoods where kids are playing and neighbors stand chatting with one another. They all pause and turn our way when they hear Fate.

"Anyone else think this is a little bizarre?" Fate whispers. "They're all staring. And now they're...bowing?"

"Definitely a little odd," I reply quietly, "but I don't feel anything negative. In fact, they're relieved and almost reverent."

"Of course they are," Reggie pipes up. "Everyone was so worried when you disappeared. When the Gateway went on lockdown, we lost all communication. No one has seen or heard from any of you in over a hundred years. I can only imagine what Destiny's gone through in that time and how that's affected her people."

In the background, a large white castle sits nestled on its own island of clouds. The light surrounding it is reflecting off the pearly material, making it hard to look at.

There's mumbling in the background just before the view changes and Destiny comes into the picture, almost as if she had to shift from the back camera to the front camera on a cell phone. She's standing in the middle of what appears to be some kind of gathering place with benches and a giant fountain in the center.

"Ah. I never get this right. There you are! Hello, little sister."

"Hey," Fate says softly, adding an awkward little wave.

"How are you feeling?"

"Better, thank you. Sorry about the whole passing out thing," Fate says.

"It's understandable, really. You've been through quite an ordeal, and we're not completely sure how all of that even happened. We're notoriously hard to kill."

"By 'we' you mean..."

"The Soul Sisters."

“Wait. We’re called *the Soul Sisters*?” She snorts before beginning to hum “Lady Marmalade.” Which version I can’t quite be sure.

I discreetly elbow her.

“What? It’s funny!” Fate rolls her eyes, but one glance at her sister and her face falls.

Destiny is wringing her hands and getting that look that women get when they’re desperately trying not to cry. “Reggie explained about your memories, but I guess I had hoped...”

Fate’s hand, which is still tucked into mine, squeezes tightly. She whispers, “I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for, dear sister. We’ll figure out how this happened and who did this to you, and we *will* handle it.” In place of the sadness, a fierce expression has taken over Destiny’s face, and while she may be the *good* sister, right now, I wouldn’t want to cross her.

Fate glances at the resident nerd and gives him a weak grin. “Mack, I know you’re dying to ask questions over there. Why don’t you see if Destiny can answer some of them for us?”

The dude is practically bouncing in place, so eager to get answers, and Fate's looking at him like he's a stray puppy who wants someone to play ball with him.

Hell, maybe we should get her a puppy. She'd love the hell out of that. Cole would probably kill me, but it might be worth it to see that gorgeous smile on her face more often.

“Destiny, can you think of anyone specifically that would want to hurt Fate?” Macklin asks, and I feel Fate tense next to me.

Destiny sighs and says softly, “You wouldn’t think we would have many enemies, but unfortunately, there are some out there. Those who would love to see us out of the picture. Like angry spirits that aren’t ready to leave the mortal plane. A few have attempted futile attacks on the Gateway in order to remain with their loved ones. For the most part, though, they’re harmless. Here on the Isle, our biggest threats are from Karma’s realm. The negative always try to conquer the positive, but luckily, good always prevails. Or at least it had until Fate disappeared. Then there’s Karma who is...well...*Karma*. Even her most loyal guards don’t exactly hold much love for her.”

“How many people have access to the kind of magic Mack found that night?” Cole asks gruffly. “Magic strong enough to affect five immortal

beings? Not to mention affect the magic of the Gateway's mark?"

One look at Fate, with her shoulders straight and a determined expression on her face, would have a lesser man on his knees. Lucky for her, I'm more than capable of handling a strong, powerful woman. She must sense me studying her, or maybe she senses my surge of desire, because she turns those gorgeous gray eyes on me, and I'm lost. This woman pulls me in like no other, and I can't tell what's up and what's down. Left from right. It's like I'm drowning in her, and I don't even fight it.

Destiny's still talking, and I force myself to look away from the one woman I can't believe I could ever forget, or risk taking her right here, right now.

"Over time, Karma's gotten...*lax* with her safeguards. It's why we've been fighting for ages. A few of her higher-ups have disappeared and are still unaccounted for. It could be any one of them if they got their hands on some of the items she stores in her realm."

"Items like what?" Macklin asks.

"Oh gosh. Any number of things really. She's gotten bored over the centuries and is always using her powers to create and craft things. Armor for her commanders. Potions. Magical trinkets that she gifts to those that--"

"Trinkets?" Cole cuts her off, suddenly looking very interested in where this is going. "We've come across some of these *trinkets*. Signet rings with rubies in the middle. One of them appeared on the hand of the spirit that Fate took to the Gateway."

"Ah, yes. Karma designed those to help her commanders manage the unruly souls. Unfortunately, they worked a little too well, and word got out that the rings actually enslaved a soul to the ring bearer."

"Well, that doesn't sound good," Fate mutters.

"It's really not. At one point, it was believed that Karma's highest in command was secretly amassing an army using one of those rings. For what, we were never sure, but then she disappeared. After that, Karma promised to collect every signet ring and lock them away. Apparently, some of them were missed." Her tone has a hint of sarcasm she doesn't even try to hide. Then there's the eye roll she adds for emphasis.

"The spirit also said something about a book..." Mack trails off. At the mention of the book, a slew of emotions hits me through the bond. Nerves. Guilt. Satisfaction. Eagerness. There are so many, so varied that I can't make sense of them all.

When I glance up at the screen, Destiny's already pale skin has turned a scary shade of white.

"Whatever you do, do not let them get their hands on the book. It would be catastrophic."

"What's in this book?" I ask. "Why is it so important?"

"Within the book is the name of every soul and their final judgment. If it were to fall into the wrong hands, the person holding it could change the fates of spirits they wanted to release. It would throw off the balance of the realms, sending the planes into chaos. Fate's powers, which she gifted to each of you, are fueled by those judgments. Even the slightest change could have cataclysmic consequences. If the balance between realms tips too much one way or the other, the human realm could have an influx of negative spirits flooding the realm, causing chaos."

"You mean like that scene with the Stay Puft Marshmallow man in *Ghost Busters* when the city is overrun by spirits?"

Destiny just looks at Thad, one elegant eyebrow arching and her lips tilting ever so slightly, and continues on as if he hadn't spoken. "Your own powers could flip topsy turvy and become unmanageable. And so much more that I don't even want to fathom at the moment. Now, do you see why it would be disastrous if it were obtained by someone with the intent to cause chaos?"

"But surely it isn't as simple as getting the book. Right?" Levi asks. "There's gotta be a...code word, or key, or some other magical thing that protects it?"

Fate's gazing up at me when I turn to her, and I don't need my empath skills to note the worry that's causing her brows to furrow and her plush bottom lip to be tortured by her teeth.

"Please tell us you all put some sort of protection on that thing and didn't just *assume* it was untouchable," Thad adds, his arms crossed over his chest as he leans against the doorjamb.

"Of course we put safeguards on it. As each of us was tested and given a trial as Guardian of the Spirits, our blood was imbued into the book. Now, the only way to gain access to the contents of the book is through the blood of a sister."

"Always fucking blood," Fate mutters under her breath. I don't have time to question it though, before Macklin asks a question that has the whole room holding its breath.

“Do you know where the book is? In the one memory I have, right before she ran off in the cave, Fate dropped the book. I picked it up, but unfortunately, I have no memory of where I would’ve put it or what it even looks like.”

“Sadly, I do not. It’s a small book, barely bigger than my palm, with a black leather cover and no distinguishing marks. You need to find it before they do. If they get their hands on it, all of our realms will be doomed.”

The second she describes the book, I remember it. The small journal Macklin had on him when we met in Chattanooga. His eyes meet mine with an *oh shit* expression.

Fate’s head whips my way, her eyes narrowed in calculating curiosity.

Cole continues asking questions, wanting details about the book and how we might find it. What he doesn’t know is that won’t be necessary. Mack and I know where it is. We’ll have to tell everyone as soon as the call with Destiny is over. We need to work out a plan to get it back.

My eyes once again meet Fate’s, and the look she’s giving me is one I can’t decipher. My free hand comes up, my thumb saving her poor lip that’s once again getting tormented by her teeth, and I run my finger across the plump pinkness, soothing it. Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, I look into her eyes and wish I could make things better. Make it so none of us has to worry about what might be coming our way, but I know that’s not possible. So I do the only thing I can think of. My lips drop to hers in a soft kiss. They don’t push for more. This isn’t the time for that.

Pulling back slightly, I rest my forehead on hers. “I’m here, little ghost. For whatever you need.”

She sighs against my mouth just before Levi’s big hands begin rubbing her shoulders. I straighten, eyeing my brother. His eyes are on Fate, his brow furrowed and his stance rigid. He’s just as worried about her as I am. When his eyes meet mine, words are spoken without a sound, and I hope he understands what I’m silently willing him to do.

He nods before leaning down and whispering in her ear, “Want to get out of here?”

“Right,” she snorts. “Like Cole will allow that to happen.”

“Always easier to ask for forgiveness, sweets,” Levi says, looking at me with a calculating grin.

And this is why the arrangement works for me. When I can’t be what Fate needs, I know one of the other guys will step in to do what needs to be done.

My time will come soon, and my little ghost better be ready.



Bro, head to the bathroom. I'll meet you there in five, I project through our twin link.

Why the fuck would I...

Just do it, dipshit.

Fine. Whatever. This call is depressing as fuck anyways.

Thad slowly backs out of the room and heads toward the bathroom at the far end of the hall with no one noticing he's gone. Mack is deep in discussion with Destiny now, so I lean forward and whisper in Fate's ear. "Sweets, I'm going to the bathroom. Wait a minute or two, then follow me, okay?"

One elegantly arched eyebrow raises slightly before she nods.

Slowly, I detach myself from Fate and, using my stealth to my advantage, make my way out of the room and down the hall. The knob turns silently under my hand when I reach the bathroom, and I walk in, leaving the door

cracked open behind me. The room is surprisingly large, with white and black tiled floors and a simple white wallpaper with tiny black flowers. A tub-shower combo sits along the left side with the vanity and toilet on the right and a full-length mirror taking up most of the wall straight ahead.

What the fuck are you up to, wankstain? Thad asks from the toilet. His big body is perched on the seat like he's taking a shit. Thank god he's not.

You'll see. I smirk. *And you'll thank me later.*

Only a few moments go by before the door opens. Fate's eyes widen as she takes in the two of us waiting for her.

"Well, this is either some weird twin bathroom break or a deliciously naughty trap. I'm really hoping it's the latter."

"Shut the door, sweets, and we'll show you."

She grabs the handle and closes the door without a sound, turning the lock before those gray eyes turn toward us. She licks her lips, and my twin and I groan in unison.

"Fuck, woman. Are you trying to kill us?"

"If this isn't what it looks like, me killing you will be the least of your worries. No nookie for either of you for *weeks*."

"Then we have nothing to worry about." I lean over and flip the switch, plunging the room into darkness.

"Uh, guys, I'm all for a good game of Bloody Mary, but if Reggie is to be believed, we actually helped her spirit cross over years ago. Pretty sure there are better things we could be—"

When she goes silent, I know Thad has finally shut her up the only way he knows how. By shoving his tongue in her mouth. The sound of their bodies rubbing against each other in the dark has me reaching down to adjust my dick, which is getting awfully cramped in these jeans.

Using my newly souped up power, a small light flickers on, coming from nowhere and everywhere all at once. It illuminates the room in a soft glow. Fate's gray eyes widen as she leans back, a smile spreading across her face as she looks around the room, and I use her distraction to take in every detail. Her dark hair is gleaming in the low light. Her lips are already swollen and pink thanks to my twin's kiss, and her face is flushed. The sight simultaneously sends a jolt to my heart and surge to my dick. No other woman, apparently in any century, has ever affected me the way she does.

We've been practicing our new abilities. Honing them for when they might be needed. Or for situations like this when we finally have our girl

alone and want to show off. You take your moments when you can in a relationship like this. *Shit. Now I owe Knox for the assist.* Having an IOU out with him is never a good thing, and I briefly wonder how he's going to call that favor in.

"How are you doing that?" Fate asks, drawing my eyes back to hers as she looks at me from within my brother's arms, awestruck.

"Remember how Knox mentioned something new?" She nods, and I begin explaining, "When you and Cole finalized your mark—"

"In other words...when you fucked each other's brains out," Thad quickly interjects.

I cast a quick glare at my twin before turning back to Fate. "When you got the fifth mark, all of our powers leveled up. Thad and I can manipulate light and darkness."

She looks up at Thad, a mischievous twinkle in her eye that has nothing to do with the soft light that surrounds us. "Show me yours?"

"Oh, I'll show you mine alright, woman."

"You can show me *that* in a minute. First, I want to see your darkness."

Thad releases his hold on her and steps back. He doesn't lift a finger, doesn't so much as twitch, but a small wisp of darkness twirls itself around the room, almost like it's dancing to music none of us can hear. Just before it disappears, it swirls into a heart.

"Awww!" she says softly. "That was amazing."

Fucking show off! My feet eat up the few steps between us, ready to impress her myself, and I wrap my large tattooed hand around the side of her face, my fingertips brushing through her hair. "*You're* amazing." I kiss her then, the soft scent of vanilla and cinnamon, like freshly baked cookies, engulfing my senses. Pulling her in closer, I feel my brother step up behind her. The moment they touch, our group connection comes alive, the power zipping across my senses causing me to groan.

Fate takes advantage of the brief pause and whispers, "I really do not want to be interrupted this time, so let's hurry. *Strip. Now.*"

And I feel the tug on my subconscious with those commands. Similar to Cole's, not quite as strong yet still impossible to ignore. I'm shocked but don't have time to think about it. With little hesitation, we both move back and begin to unbutton shirts and pull down jeans and remove shoes and socks.

Before long, we're standing in front of her, while she's still fully clothed.

“The fuck? You planning on joining us or just ogling our bodies, woman?” Thad rasps, his voice a little gritty. I’m not sure Fate realizes just how on edge he is right now. If she doesn’t hurry up, he’ll take matters into his own hands. In other words, she won’t have a wearable scrap of clothes left to leave this room in.

“Just taking a second to appreciate the absolute majesty that’s before me. That’s all.”

A chuckle escapes despite my desperate need for her. “You can look all you want later, sweets. Now is the time for action.”

She bites her bottom lip then, and I growl.

“Oh, you’ve done it now, woman. You’ve awakened the beast. Better hurry.”

She grins as her hands reach for the hem of her black shirt, quickly lifting it up and over her head. She’s wearing a red lace bra that leaves little to the imagination. Her breasts are almost spilling out of the thin cups, her rosy nipples pebbled beneath the lace. She reaches for the button on her jeans, but Thad stops her.

“Let me,” he murmurs, “I’ve been dreaming of doing this since the moment I first saw your lips mouth the word *fuck*.”

Stepping up to her, his fingers reach for the button just as Fate giggles. Not the sound you want to hear when you’re standing in front of your woman buck-ass naked for the first time. Or the second first time. *What the fuck ever. That shit’s confusing as fuck.*

“What’s so damn funny?” my twin demands, his hands halting in mid-reach.

“Well, um...” Her giggles have turned into laughter that she’s trying to hide behind her hand. “When you stepped forward, your...” She waves her hand in the general area of Thad’s dick, chuckling so hard now she can’t speak.

“You’re laughing at my dick?”

“No! Well, yes, but no.”

His eyes narrow as she tries desperately to stem her laughter.

“Your dick...it swung...and its shadow looked like it was waving hello to me.”

Taking a step forward, I watch, and sure enough, my cock bounces. Its shadow bobs on the wall.

“Oh my god! Your cocks are the world’s best shadow puppets. Shadow

dicks? Cock puppets? No. That sounds like sock puppets...though that could be fun too. Nope, neither of those sounds right.”

My twin and I share a look. If we don't take control of this situation quickly, we'll be fucked. And not in the way I planned.

His fingers resume their task, making quick work of the button on her jeans and pushing the material down her legs. Her hands find his shoulders, and she steps out of the heels first then the tight as fuck red jeans, but those gray eyes are on me the whole time with barely concealed heat still mixed with a hint of amusement. When I take another step, intent on tasting that dirty mouth of hers, the shadow bounces and she giggles again before her eyes widen.

“I've got it. Peen puppets. We'll start a new trend. #PeenPuppets.”

Thad looks up at me, his lips tilted up on one side, telling me whatever is going on in that crazy head of his should be interesting.

“Step back into those *fuck me* heels, woman. I've wanted to see you just like this since you walked into the study earlier.”

She does as he asks, and the sight before us is one I'll never erase from my memory for as long as I live...which is a long time apparently. Her thong is red lace that matches her bra. She's standing there in killer black heels, her legs spread apart and her hands on her hips.

“Now who's the one doing the ogling?” She smirks, the glow from my light making her eyes sparkle.

Fuck, she's beautiful.

“Oh, we're going to be doing so much more than ogling, woman,” Thad says roughly, his hand wrapped around his dick.

It's then I see the shadows start to move and take shape, coalescing into one solid-looking form. It kind of looks like a...

“Is that a dick?” Fate asks. “A shadow dick?”

“My woman likes peen puppets. Figured I'd try to give her something even better. I'm going to call it the shadow schlong.”

She's mesmerized by the floating shadow cock. Shadow schlong. *Whatever*. Watching. Waiting so intently she doesn't notice Thad stepping up behind her. He unclips her bra, and she gasps as it falls to her elbows. She lets her arms drop and it falls to the floor as Thad's hands grab her hips, pulling her back into him. When her ass hits his now rock hard dick, she moans, dropping her head back onto his chest, her hands gripping the tops of his thighs, but still keeping an eye on the floating shadow dick.

His hands come up to take fistfuls of her tits, squeezing gently, learning their shape and their feel, tweaking the nipples until she starts squirming against him.

“Are you wet for us, woman?” Thad asks, dragging one hand down over her toned stomach, under that scrap of red lace, and into the apex of her thighs. When his fingertips hit their target, he turns his head and groans into her hair.

I smirk. “That must be a yes, sweets. You soaking those panties?” She murmurs her agreement, and my hands drop down to my junk, one hand stroking and one hand giving my balls a squeeze to get my body to calm the hell down for a second.

“She’s so goddamn wet, bro. And smooth, all over.”

I groan, squeezing my balls tighter, hoping like hell I don’t embarrass myself as I imagine what that shaved pussy’s going to feel like as I slide deep inside her.

Thad’s hand is moving now, stroking back and forth, her hips bucking, trying to take more than he’s willing to give her quite yet. He pulls his hand away, and she honest to god whimpers, which causes my dick to throb even harder. He brings his fingers up to his mouth, licking her wetness off. “Fuck me. She’s sweet as sin, too. Just like I knew she would be. You ready for more, babe?”

“Fuck, yes. Please! I need one of you inside me.”

“Oh, something’s going to be inside you all right.”

Fate gasps as the shadow dick starts to move toward her slowly. My twin pushes the red lace down those long, lean legs that I desperately want wrapped around my face. She lifts her foot, letting the thong dangle from her toe until Thad snatches it away.

“Bro, aim a bit of your light right in the middle of that shadow. Just a little should do the trick.”

I do as he asks. A small glow appears in the center of the shadow just as the tip brushes against Fate’s knee, skimming along her inner thigh.

“Oh my god,” she rasps. “I can feel it. It’s warm.”

Thad’s smile is downright sinful. “Now we need to get you prepared for us. We’re not small, woman, and that pussy’s too damn tight. The shadow schlong is going to help us with that.” He wraps his hand around one of her thighs, lifting it and letting her knee rest in the crook of his arm.

And she’s spread wide open. Her skin is slick and wet, and I have to fight

the urge to slam myself inside of her as I watch him drag his fingers through her wetness, using it as natural lube. His fingers dip between her ass cheeks, then he slips a single digit in, up to the knuckle. She groans as he works another finger in, because my brother's right. We're too damn big, and despite how sopping wet that pussy is, she still needs to be stretched first.

The shadow schlong reaches her clit, another moan escaping her lips as it slides itself back and forth, teasing her.

Needing to be close to her, touching her, tasting her, I lean forward. My mouth wraps around one of those pert nipples, sucking on it then nipping it gently before moving to the next one.

"Oh fuck!" she groans, and I glance down, seeing the shadow schlong lining itself up and sliding its knobbed tip in and out, teasing her. "It feels... oh my *god*..."

My twin is sucking a spot on her neck, the fingers on his free hand doing something between her ass cheeks. Fate's moans are growing louder which tells me things are about to get real...*fast*. The shadow schlong is thrusting itself in and out of that beautiful pussy now, her hips rolling back against Thad's hand.

She's close, so I crash my lips into hers just in time to stifle her moan as her orgasm rips through her. Her nails are digging into my back as she rides it out, the pain helping to stem the rising need inside me. Her movements are slow and her eyes open as her entire body now leans against me.

"That was fucking amazing," she murmurs before chuckling. "Leave it to the shadow schlong to escape the notice of the cockblockers."

"The shadow schlong is gone now, sweets. It's only us. Ready for round two?" I ask, giving her a quick kiss to the temple before I lift her up, her legs instinctively wrapping around my waist, her arms going around my neck. The second my dick slides through her wetness, I bury my face in her hair, trying desperately to get myself under control.

"If round two is a twin sandwich, then yes. Yes, I am."

Thad and I groan in unison. With one hand gripping her ass, I reach between us, sliding my tip through her wet heat, rubbing around her clit, as I feel Thad's fingers using that slickness once more on her ass. I hiss at how damn good she feels, and my control snaps. Thad's fingers have barely retreated when I thrust into her, only managing to go still when I bottom out, giving her body time to adjust.

"You good, babe?" I rasp.

“Soooo good.”

Pulling out slightly, I fight my body's urge to claim her. To take her hard and fast and all the other ways it demands I make this woman ours. I push back in slowly. Pull out, push in. It's fucking torture. “Thad,” I grunt, my need once again becoming an inferno in my blood. If he doesn't get himself inside her soon, he's going to be on his own.

The second his body comes up behind hers, our connection comes alive again and their combined thoughts flow through me.

God, this feels sooooo good.

I can't wait to be inside her.

Her body tenses as he slowly enters her tight ass. A blow by blow description of everything he's feeling flooding my mind. *Tight. Warm. Fucking amazing. Don't come. Almost there. Don't. Come.*

I grit my teeth, my hands gripping her ass so hard I'm scared I'm hurting her.

You're not...hurting me, she responds through the connection, shocking me. Where Thad's presence rushes through my subconscious with all the grace of a bull, hers slinks in, stroking along my senses. *It feels...impossibly good. I feel...full. Oh god!*

I pull back, her heavy-lidded eyes meeting mine, and kiss her. Distracting her with my mouth, my tongue darting in and out, making my dick jealous as it sits wrapped in her heat, unable to move until my dipshit brother settles himself inside her.

When they both sigh, we all stand there for what seems like hours but is mere seconds as we take in the feeling of being connected in the most intimate way possible.

So help me god, if one of you doesn't start to move, I'm going to scream, and we definitely don't want that. The cockblockers will ruin all of our fun.

You heard our woman. Thad grins over her shoulder before he pulls back and thrusts in. Hard. Luckily, I anticipated this and sealed my lips over hers, because she screams, one born of shock and pleasure, and I swallow it up.

Holy shit! Again! she begs once she's caught her breath.

He obliges. Then it's my turn. I pull out and thrust back in, her pussy already fluttering around my cock. And I know I'm doomed.

Fuck! I groan out across the connection.

Double fuck! Fate replies. Even her internal voice is hoarse now.

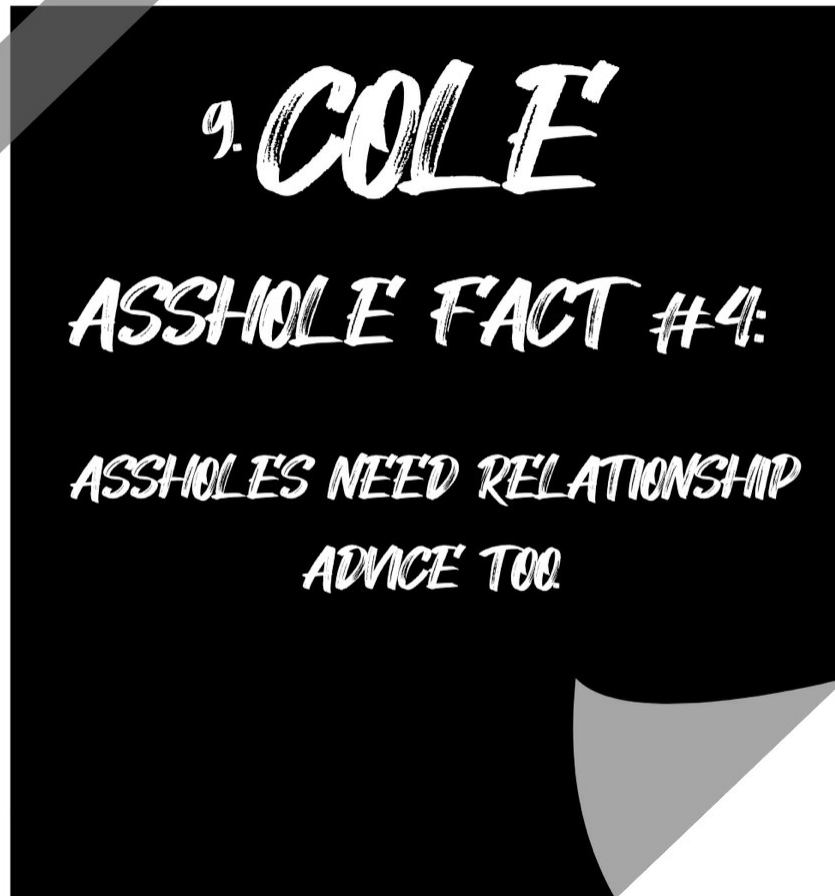
Don't you two fucking go without me, Thad grunts out as he picks up the

pace. We find our rhythm then. Both of us fuck into her tight holes in tandem, her arms wrapped around me so tightly that I can barely breathe, but I don't give a damn.

Oh god, I'm going to... She doesn't even finish the sentence before her entire body goes taut, squeezing my dick so damn tightly that for a second it's almost painful, and then as it begins to flutter with aftershocks, I glance in the mirror and see the three of us, moving together like we've done this a million times before. Suddenly, the scene shifts, and I watch the three of us together in a different time, different place. The black lace dress on the floor is familiar, matching the vision I had of her at Paula and Frank's house. We're moving in sync, the images slowly overlapping each other. The sight is so damn erotic that my rigid grip on my control snaps as the past fades and all that's left is the present. I let go and lose myself inside her just as Thad's forehead drops to her shoulder with a groan.

And we stay like that, the three of us basking in our connection, coming down off the high together, and nothing has felt so right in my entire life...or what I can remember of it anyways. My soul is sated, along with my body, at least for the moment.

There's an uncertainty plaguing us, our past knocking at our door, but I know that together, we can take on anything that comes our way. Sharing a look at my twin over Fate's shoulder, I know that we will do whatever it takes to keep our woman safe.



They must think I'm blind, deaf, and stupid. Asshats should know better by now.

With Levi, Thad, and Fate gone, my attention is divided as Mack continues his deep discussion with Destiny, bouncing theories back and forth and asking questions about the limitations of the communication and tracking functionality. I'm listening, but my thoughts are also on the one woman I seem to piss off by simply existing.

On one hand, I know we share a deep, unbreakable connection. That's the only way to explain the fact that we've managed to find each other in two different lifetimes. When I look in her gorgeous gray eyes, I can see the depth of her feelings for me. On the other, well, maybe these last fifty years have turned me into an insecure shell of a man because I can't quite squash the need to protect her, which brings about an almost irrational desire to lock her

up and throw away the key. Then the doubt creeps in. Will she stick around and put up with my crazy ass if I can't get this under control? I'm supposed to be her right hand, the one she can rely on when things go sideways. I'm *not* her keeper. I just need my brain to get with the program.

I'm not sure how all of the other guys are reconciling our past lives with our current existence, but for me, it's a constant struggle. A balancing act, really, between what I know to be true and what my current feelings are dictating I do. Did I always have this bit of self-doubt, one that is sometimes so strong that fear and worry get the jump on me and I'm spouting shit and acting before my brain can override the new brand of crazy that has become my norm.

Releasing the breath I hadn't even realized I was holding and silently berating myself for having gone into my own internal dialogue for *way* too long, my gaze scans the room. Mack is saying his goodbyes to Destiny, and I'm shocked that I have absolutely no idea what the last half of their conversation entailed. Knox is next to him, and as soon as Reggie closes the connection, they dive into their own little huddle that I suppose I should be worried about as they walk just outside the study doors. Scattered thoughts seep through.

Book.

Tennessee.

Is it still there?

My eyes narrow. *What are they keeping from me?*

Before I can interrupt their little powwow, Reggie pops up next to me. What the fuck? I really need to get my head out of my own ass.

"You've got a strange look on your face, Ass-Cole."

Rolling my eyes at the impertinent assistant, I head over and grab a glass of whiskey from the bottle Levi oh-so-helpfully left on the desk then make my way back to the sofa. The leather creaks as I sit.

"I don't know what you mean," I finally respond, my eyes meeting her unblinking stare.

Her head tilts as she studies me. "You look...unsure? And I'm not sure I like that expression on you."

"I'm not unsure. I'm...contemplative. There's a difference. In fact, maybe you should go and check on your boss since she seems to be the one who's *unsure*."

The second that last word leaves my mouth, I can't hide my grimace. I

sound like a fucking whiny teenage boy. Fuck. My. Life. Maybe the ridiculousness of that statement will be lost on the spirit who's been isolated for the last hundred years. Then I see the look on her hazy face. Nope. She caught every single nuance of what I said.

Instead of the sarcastic retort I expect, her eyes get serious and she takes a seat facing me. I still find it odd that she doesn't just sink right into the sofa, but when I asked Fate about it, her only response was, "Never look a gift horse in the mouth." I smile at the memory as I take another sip of the whiskey, warming me from the inside out.

"Cole, I know I give you shit..." At my raised eyebrow, she rolls her eyes. "Okay, a *lot* of shit, and that I don't take much seriously, but that's only because I remember the friendship we used to have, and I forget that you...*don't*. It's hard reconciling the fact that someone you've spent centuries with and know better than almost anyone suddenly views you as a stranger."

I would probably deny it if anyone asked, but I'd be lying if I said that there isn't some sense of familiarity between us. A sense of trust, despite my lack of trust in just about anyone else, that is impossible to ignore. Releasing a sigh, I lean forward, my elbows hitting my knees and the glass of whiskey hanging from my left hand.

"I'm sorry, Reggie. Sometimes I forget that we're not the only ones dealing with this entire fucked up situation."

"No need for apologies. I just want you to know that while I call Fate my friend, the same applies to you and the guys too. That means I'm here if you need to talk, or have questions, or, hell, even if you need to shout at someone. I'm not going anywhere."

The glass of whiskey suddenly becomes very interesting. Her words resonate somewhere inside me. Like this is something we used to do. Often. But the man I am now is struggling to come to terms with that fact. I have questions. Lot of them. And she has answers, so what's stopping me from asking them? Taking another swig of whiskey while she patiently waits for my reply, I steel myself for answers I need but don't necessarily want.

"Can I ask you a question?" I say softly.

There's no hesitation as she immediately replies, "Always."

"Did I always fuck up this badly where Fate is concerned?"

She snorts. "Oh yeah. You two are a lot like magnets. On one side, you're two opposing forces, clashing any time you come close. On the other, your draw is so strong that it's next to impossible to separate you."

The analogy makes me smile because it's one hundred percent dead on, and I feel something inside me relaxing, breathing a sigh of relief. The fact that this is normal for us goes a long way to settling something inside me that I wasn't even aware of. Our eyes meet, and I see the humor glinting in her gaze, but there's also sincerity when I pick up on a single thought.

Love like theirs is special, and I wish he could remember that.

"Thanks, Reg. That's actually really helpful."

"I know." She smirks.

Chuckling, another question comes to mind which douses my budding good mood.

"But how am I supposed to keep her safe if my commands just bounce right off her?"

She laughs outright. "Dude, that never worked. *Ever.*"

"She's always been immune to my power?"

The smirk grows into a full-fledged smile. "Always. And before you ask, you're the only one she's immune to."

"Why the fuck am I the only one?"

"She told me recently that when she first saw you, she called you Alpha in her head. She didn't know who you were, but something inside her remembered even when she didn't. Your power is an alpha's power of command, but *she* gifted that to you through your bond. Even if you would never admit it, we both know that she's the *true* alpha of this group. It's like the two cancel each other out."

My brow furrows as I let my mind skim over everything she just said. Despite my need to dispute her claim, I know I can't. It's the truth, even if it twists my gut to know that her immunity to my power is a serious disadvantage when it comes to keeping her safe.

"You know it kills me to say this, but somewhere inside I know you're right."

Her eyes go wide, and she brings a hand up to her heart, feigning shock. "Did Ass-Cole just admit that I'm right? Has Hell frozen over? Are pigs flying? Is that the fat lady I hear singing?"

"Live it up now, Reg, because I'm not sure if a moment like this will ever happen again."

Her smile grows as she looks at me. "Right, because the alpha would *never* ask the *assistant* for relationship advice. That would be very...unalphalike *for sure.*"

“This was *not* relationship advice. This was a friendly conversation.”

“Oh. Right. My apologies. Because *caveman need no help with woman.*”
Her voice gets deeper on those last words, and I chuckle despite myself.

“Uh...Cole, man, I think you need to come see this.”

My eyes find Knox standing in the doorway to the study, nervously darting glances into the foyer. A brief thought flits through my mind.

The twins need to be prepared to protect Fate.

“Looks like playtime is over, alpha. Go see what your little boy band member wants.”

Smirking, I stand and make my way over to Knox, finding Macklin standing at the base of the staircase. He’s looking increasingly nervous, and suddenly, I hear his question loud and clear in my mind.

What are they here for?

Glancing between the two, I ask, “What the fuck is going on?”

“That.” Knox points toward the door, and my eyes widen as they take in the sight in front of me.



Did you know that a man *dressing* you can be damn near as sexy as them *undressing* you? Yeah, me neither. But hell if I don't want to dive right back into that twin sandwich as Levi helps me back into my pants. Or as Thad fastens my bra for me. It's the quiet care they show me in this simple moment that makes my heart beat a little faster and proves to me these guys are so much more than they want everyone to believe. And *that* gets me just as wet as Thad's little shadow schlong. Though honestly, it wasn't all that little now that I think about it.

And...I'm soaked. Again. SeaWorld 2.0. This time I don't have the safety of my panties either. Pretty sure one of the twins stole them. I could go ghost and materialize a pair, but I kind of like them knowing I've got nothing on under these jeans. Serves them right.

"You know, I distinctly remember you saying that you wouldn't stop

until neither of us could move. I kind of feel like I didn't get the full experience I was promised."

Twin groans fill the small space.

"Trust me, woman. I'll keep that promise, but the bathroom is no place for that sort of sexathon. Let's take this up to the bedroom where I can *properly* demonstrate every single thing I want to do to you."

Levi straightens after helping me into my shoes, leaning in to drop a kiss on my forehead. "I'd like to show you a few things myself, sweets."

The look in his eyes is one that I've never seen before. The desire, sure, but never the serious intensity he's currently studying me with. It sure looks and feels love-*ish*, but it seems deeper somehow and *way* more complicated. The butterflies in my belly take flight.

A harsh knocking on the door interrupts the moment.

"Fucking Cole," Thad mutters from behind me.

"I'm honestly a little surprised it took the jackass this long to hunt us down," Levi murmurs thoughtfully.

"I'm honestly surprised you haven't realized I can hear everything you fucknuts say through the goddamn door! Now open up." Cole's muffled reply comes from the hallway, with only a smidgeon of the irritation I've come to expect from the grumpy asshole. *Weird*.

Stalking forward, I whip the door open and find Cole's hand mid-knock and his eyes narrowed.

"The shadow schlong made me do it!" I deadpan.

His eyebrows hit his hairline before he quickly schools his expression. "I have no fucking idea what that means, but while you all were *playing* around in here, we've had a situation arise in the foyer. Come on."

I glance back at the two blond giants behind me who are both grinning wickedly. "Come on, heathens. Our presence is needed elsewhere, I'm afraid."

"You go on ahead. We'll be right behind you, admiring the view."

Chuckling, I head out the door and let them ogle my ass the entire way to the foyer, torturing them by swishing my hips a little more than I normally would, earning me intermittent groans. When I reach the doorway to the foyer, I stop abruptly.

"What the fuck?" I whisper.

"Holy shit!" Levi rasps.

"What new level of hell is this?" Thad asks.

Cole glances back at us, not saying a word, but his expression clearly says, *Yeah, like I said. We've got a situation.*

Filling up the foyer is roughly twenty or more spirits. All in varying degrees of *creepy as fuck*. At the sound of my voice, all of their ghostly eyes turn toward me.

Is that what I looked like? Because if so, it's a wonder the guys didn't poof me right into the ever after! Talk about terrifying.

The twins have come up to flank me on either side, and Cole is slightly in front of me, partially blocking me from the crowd. Their protectiveness is flooding through me, but right now, I don't feel any danger. More relief and wonder as the group of spirits stares at me like I'm their savior. Hell, maybe I am. And that thought freaks me the fuck out.

Stepping in front of Cole earns me a small growl, which I choose to ignore so I can address the group. "Well, okay then. Someone want to explain to me what the hell is going on in here?" My eyes quickly scan the room and find Knox and Macklin near the study doorway, keeping a close eye on our new crowd of ghostly...friends or foes? *That* is yet to be determined.

"It's true. You're really back." The disembodied voice draws my focus to an older gentleman wearing unfortunate plaid pants with a polo shirt and a pair of golf shoes. The entire left side of his skull is caved in, and I'm suddenly very thankful he's not in full technicolor, because...ewww! He's hopeful, a tad bit reverent, and more than a little surprised.

I clear my throat to at least make an attempt to sound professional. Maybe throw in a little bit of queenly confidence for good measure. Can't have them realizing I have zero clue what the hell I'm supposed to do in this situation. "I'm standing here, aren't I? *Obviously*, I'm back. So, why are you all standing in our foyer?" That was the opposite of queenly confidence. *What the fuck, Fate?*

"We need help crossing over," another ghostly voice says. The woman is standing at the back of the crowd, but she's tall and slim, beautiful really, wearing a fifties-style dress with a collar and buttons going down the front before flaring out from her hips. But that's not what has my attention. It's the bullet hole in the middle of her forehead, which appears to be perpetually oozing ghostly blood. "We've been waiting to be reunited with our loved ones on the other side for so long."

"You're going to help us," another, deeper voice says. This time, I feel the slightest hint of aggression, a tad bit of uncertainty, and a whole lot of

anger. He's at least six and a half feet tall but leaner than the twins. He's in jeans and a Chicago Blackhawks T-shirt. "It is your job, right?"

My eyes meet Knox's across the sea of spirits. His stance is rigid, his jaw clenched so tight I'm surprised his teeth are withstanding the pressure. He's obviously picking up the same feelings I am, and his concern is hitting me full force. I shake my head slightly, telling him not to do anything crazy.

Focusing back on Tall Guy, I say, "Of course I can help, but not here. I'll need you all to head to the Gateway where-"

"No!" growls Tall Guy, his voice holding enough power to rattle the windows. "Right now."

My eyes narrow at his tone, and my power ignites. The guys have tightened up their positioning again, cutting me off from the angry spirit, but I don't need their protection. This spirit just wants to be with his family, not stuck somewhere without a voice where no one can see or hear him. I remember what that feels like. Before I can say anything, Tall Guy has taken note of my guys blocking me off and, quite frankly, loses his shit.

"You can't ignore us." His voice is impossibly deeper, an echo now cascading around the room. Doors begin to slam shut, and the room grows cold. "You *will* help us, or you won't like the consequences."

I push through the protective circle of my guys, and someone's hand lands on my arm, attempting to pull me back. Cole. Of *course*, it's the asshole. Our eyes lock for a brief moment before I glance at his hand then back up at him. My expression very clearly tells him what will happen to said hand if he doesn't remove it. Immediately.

He drops his hold with a sigh and whips that wonder knife out from wherever it is he keeps it. Then I notice the rest of the guys all following suit. All lit up and sexy as sin.

Hot damn, I could look at them all day. But first - other things to attend to. Down, girl!

Turning back to Tall Guy, I take a step forward. The ghosts all part slightly, leaving an aisle straight to the cranky ass spirit. Clearly, they don't want to get in the middle of whatever is about to happen.

"I'm sorry," I say, my head tilting slightly. "Did you just threaten me?"

My pretty pink wisps of power are now skimming along my skin, and that manic glee is back, the one I was so surprised by when my guys first arrived. This time, I embrace it fully, feeling my power surge at my acceptance. Because while I may understand why this spirit is upset, that doesn't mean he

gets a free pass to talk to us like that.

“I’m not afraid of you,” Tall Guy says, though he’s definitely not as confident as he was a second ago. A hint of fear is beginning to slither through his anger, making my power giddy with anticipation.

“You don’t have to be. We’re not your enemy.”

“But they warned me that you wouldn’t help us. That you aren’t as powerful as you once were and that we shouldn’t even come to you. That we’d be wasting our time.”

“Who warned you?”

“Another spirit and his friends.”

Interesting. The spirits are pretty damn chatty. We need to figure out a way to work that to our benefit.

In the meantime, my power is firing up inside. “And you trust him? Some spirit you don’t even know? As Guardian of the Spirits, it’s my duty to help you,” I say, my voice holding a melodious chime that has all of the spirits bowing their heads. All except Tall Guy, who’s struggling against my power. “But I won’t do it here.”

“I don’t trust you,” he says, taking a step forward. His fists are clenched at his sides, and I’m praying he doesn’t make a stupid move that he’ll end up regretting.

A growl sounds from behind me, and I know my guys are seconds away from removing the threat if I can’t get him to calm the hell down. The other spirits have backed up against the walls now, getting out of the line of fire.

Way to go, Fate, fabulous first impression on the spirit community. Mob Man doesn’t count. He was an ass that who got what he deserved. Hoodie Man and his cronies too.

I decide to try a different approach. I may not remember who I am or how I used to do this, but I can carve my own path. Create new ways of doing things. Make this job my bitch. You know, the usual.

“How did you die?” I ask quietly, reining my power in slightly to look less imposing.

This question takes him by surprise, his eyes going wide for a moment before sadness slightly diminishes his anger. He swallows. “Fucking cancer,” he says quietly.

“Hmm. And you left someone important behind?”

He eyes me a moment, debating how much he wants to tell me. His eyes close, and he takes a deep breath as he reluctantly responds, “My wife and

two kids. She's been...struggling. I think she can sense my presence, and it's hurting her."

"How long have you been stuck here?"

"I'm not sure exactly. I come and go, but I think it's been roughly five years."

Five years of watching your family move on without you. Watching your wife struggle with your death. He's entitled to that anger, even if it is misplaced.

"What's your name?"

He considers me a second. "Kyle."

"Kyle, I'm Fate. I'm sorry that life wasn't kind to you. That you had to leave behind loved ones and then had no choice but to watch and listen but never be seen or heard. I can tell you from experience, that sucks ass." I shake my head, my hand landing on his shoulder without thought while remembering my own ten years of nothingness. His eyes widen along with mine as I realize I've somehow projected those remembered emotions onto him. *How the hell did I do that?*

"You really do understand." His features soften as a small grin replaces the frown. "You're nothing like what I expected."

"Ha! That seems to be a recurring theme around here. So, how about a compromise? I'll agree to help you here, a show of trust if you will, if the rest of your group will promise to head to the Gateway where we can be sure no one on this plane will see what's about to happen. There are just too many of you." I don't know how I know this is a potential problem, but my instincts tell me this is what needs to happen. I glance toward the stairs and notice Reggie for the first time. She's been silent, blending in with the rest of the spooky specters...*spooksters? Might need to think on that one a bit more...*but there's a small smile on her face, and she gives me a thumbs up and a wink. My lips tilt up as one eyebrow raises.

Could've jumped in here at any time, Reg.

She just rolls her eyes like she knows exactly what I'm thinking.

Tall Guy quickly scans the crowd of ghosts, getting nods and a couple of ghostly touches meant to comfort. Something tells me this group has stuck together, supporting and protecting one another, and I wonder if there are more groups out there like this. Trying to survive in between realms.

He slowly walks forward, and my guys start to close in. There's a moment of hesitation as he shoots them wary looks.

“Stop it, you guys. He’s not going to do anything stupid, right, Kyle?”

“Right.” He swallows again, his eyes darting to each of my fearsome five.
Hmm...I like the sound of that. Mental note to use that again later.

“Thad. Levi.” That’s all I have to say before I feel the heat of two ginormous bodies standing on either side of me. I lightly touch each of their hands, bringing our connection to life.

How do we do this? I ask.

You’re asking me, woman? Thought you had a plan.

I do. Kinda.

That’s reassuring, Levi deadpans.

I glare up at him. He just winks back.

How do we know which realm he’s destined for?

Our powers just know, Thad answers seriously. Which causes my eyes to snap up to his. *What? I can be serious. It just makes me all...itchy.*

Sounds like a personal problem, bro.

Shut your mouth, wankstain.

Boys! Focus.

Sorry, they project in unison.

Just have him come closer. Our power should activate, Levi says.

Okay, then. Let’s give this a shot.

“Kyle, step forward.”

He eyes the twins cautiously before closing the gap between us. As soon as he’s within range, Levi’s hand begins to glow. He lifts it, and an orb appears, floating above it. A sense of comfort and relief floods through Kyle as he stares at the sparkling white light. I swear, if he wasn’t a ghost, he’d be crying right now as the closure he’s been seeking is one step away. He releases a deep breath, and I feel his acceptance and anticipation.

“Thank you for trusting me,” I say softly.

His eyes find mine, and the gratitude and relief he’s feeling causes a little spark in my chest. It’s powerful, and I *would* gasp, but then the guys would just panic again. Best leave that to chew on later.

“I’m sorry I was so rude. I just...they made you sound so horrible.”

“Yeah, well. Must mean I’m doing something right if I’ve got haters, eh?”

“Ha! Right.” He chuckles. As his laughter fades, his face slowly turns serious again. “Be careful out there. Our group is a peaceful one, but not all of them are. We’ve heard rumors that some of them are preparing for a fight.”

“Thank you for the warning. We’ll make sure to watch our backs.”

He nods before turning and taking one last look at the rest of the spirits all watching in awe. With a simple wave, he turns back around, reaches out, and grasps Levi’s hand. He’s gone in a wisp of white smoke.

The room is quiet, and all of the ghostly eyes are suddenly on me again.

Plastering on my best fake smile, I pretend I still know what the hell I’m doing as I say, “Reggie, prepare the main chamber. We’re going to have guests.”

“You got it, boss,” she acknowledges with a chuckle before she disappears.

“Now, do you all know how to get to the Gateway?”

“Yes,” comes from the lady with a bullet hole in her forehead. “We stopped there first, but when the doors were still sealed shut, we started asking other groups if they had heard anything. We were told we could find you here.”

My eyes dart to Cole who has managed to come up alongside us.

“Who told you where we were?” he asks.

“The same group of guys that told us we couldn’t trust you. They tried to get us to join their group, but Kyle refused. He may not have trusted you, but he *definitely* didn’t trust them.”

All of us share a look. That explains how Mob Man knew to find us here as well. Guess he didn’t just get lucky after all. Our time here is definitely limited if everyone knows where we are.

“Okay, you all can head to the Gateway. We’ll be there momentarily.”

In a blink, the entire foyer is empty.

“How the fuck do they know where we are?” Cole growls.

“Who the hell are they?” Knox asks.

“We only came back here to assess our next moves, knowing this place would be a temporary stop. I suggest we start packing everything up and either move to a new location or operate solely from the Gateway for now,” Macklin adds.

“We can take Fate upstairs and...help her pack.”

Cole rolls his eyes at Thad. “Not going to happen, jackass.”

Thad shrugs, throwing me a wink. “Can’t blame me for trying.”

“We stick together as much as possible from here on out. Who the fuck knows what they have planned.”

All of their eyes have landed on me, and I can sense their worry, their

fear, and their need to protect. My eyes narrow, an itchy feeling crawling across my skin at the looks on their faces. I recognize those looks and have zero patience to deal with them right now.

“Don’t you even think about going all cavemen on me. I’m just as powerful as any of you, arguably more so, and I won’t sit back and twiddle my thumbs while you all play babysitter to the *poor little ghost girl*. I agree, we need to stick together, but I’m not the only one that needs to be careful. We’ve all got targets on our back.”

“She’s right,” Levi says, looking around at the guys before his eyes meet mine. “We’ve all seen what she can do, and we need to trust her.”

“Aww...thanks, babe.” I go up on my tiptoes and give him a quick peck on the cheek.

“Kiss ass,” Knox mutters.

“I’d kiss her ass any day,” Thad quips.

“It *is* a nice ass,” Levi adds.

“For fuck’s sake,” Cole grumbles, rubbing a hand across his brow.

Mack and Knox share a look, the latter nodding slightly before Mack clears his throat. “We...uh...might also know where to find the book.”

Internally, I panic. Externally, I’m as cool as a cucumber. They can’t collect the book considering the location they think they know is *wrong*. I suppose they could get lucky, but I’m freaking out that they’ll discover the secret I’m keeping. They won’t care if I have my reasons for hiding it from them. Knox side-eyes me, picking up on my panic and guilt, no doubt, so I start thinking about unicorns and donuts and anything else that makes me happy to try to throw him off my guilt trail. He raises one eyebrow before turning away. Whether he legitimately believes my sudden shift in emotions or he’s giving me a hint of privacy to have some thoughts and feelings that I don’t immediately need to explain, I can’t be sure. Nor do I care, so long as he focuses on something else.

“*Might* know?” Cole growls, crossing his arms over his chest.

“We may have put it somewhere in Tennessee for safe keeping roughly fifty years ago and haven’t checked on it since.” The sentence is said so rapidly, I find myself slightly impressed that he didn’t gasp for air at the end.

“You mean you two have known the location the whole time and didn’t share it?” Levi asks, incredulous.

“No! We only just realized it when Destiny described the book. It matches the description of the small journal I found in my pocket when I

woke up in New York.”

“And you’re just now connecting the dots. Mr. *I Know It All?*” Thad snarks.

“I know, I *know*. I *really* should have figured it out sooner. It just didn’t click. The way they talk about the book, I expected some sort of large ancient tome.”

“It’s been fifty years. We forgot. We’re *sorry*.” Knox throws a dirty look in Thad’s direction.

“Mack. Knox. You need to retrieve that book, and we need to find a secure location for it.”

“We’ll make a plan to get that done before we make the final move to the Gateway.”

“Now that that’s settled, Thad, Levi, I want you on the perimeter. Make sure everything is locked up and do regular sweeps to ensure no one is on the grounds.”

“You got it. C’mon, bro,” Levi says, placing a hand on Thad’s shoulder and leading him away while Thad’s eyes find mine.

“Don’t forget, woman. Sexathon. Coming your way soon.”

“Will it include the shadow schlong or the peen puppets?”

“What’s a shadow schlong?” sweet, innocent Macklin asks.

Knox puts his hand on Mack’s shoulder. “You probably don’t want to know if the twins are involved, mate.”

Cole rolls his eyes, but I don’t miss the hint of amusement in his tone. “Mack, start packing up all of the equipment. I want to be out of here as soon as possible.”

“I could use some help with all of the cameras.”

“Knox, help Mack but keep your senses open for any threats.”

“Will do.”

Knox and Mack start whispering about #PeenPuppets and what that could possibly mean. I chuckle.

Wonder if they’d be willing to show me their #PeenPuppets? Bet Quetzi really would look like an anaconda.

“What do you want me to do?” I ask, turning to Cole.

“Stay out of trouble.”

My hands land on my hips, and my eyes narrow.

“Cole, don’t piss me off.”

“I mean it, Fate. Our enemies know our location. Likely know that we

don't have all of our memories. Until we can get somewhere safe, I don't want you alone, and I don't want you doing anything stupid."

My eyes are locked onto his, feeling his fear like a living breathing thing, but that doesn't mean he gets to lock me away in a tower. In fact, he can fuck right off with that line of thinking. Mack and Knox have gone silent, watching the exchange like they're watching a ping pong match.

"So much for that promise to trust me, huh?" I force myself to hold his stare, fighting to not let the hurt show. He's not willing to give an inch, but neither am I. His arms are crossed over his chest, trademark scowl firmly in place.

"Little ghost, you know we-"

I cut Knox off, aiming a sharp glare in his direction. "You too? I expected it from him, but not from you, Knox. What about you, Mack?"

My sexy nerd visibly cringes but doesn't say a word. A tiny bit of hurt snakes its way into my heart. They may have let me into their merry little boy band, but they still look at me as lesser-than. Fuck them and fuck that.

Turning, I walk away before my power sparks and does something I can't take back. I can feel it just under the surface, begging to be released on the lot of overprotective assholes. "Fate..." Cole starts.

I throw up my middle finger as I trudge up the stairs, letting them all think I'm being a good little ghost girl and listening to orders. As if my power wanted to add its own two cents into the mix, Lily Allen's "Fuck You" begins to blare throughout the house. *Yeah, fuck you all very, very much.* If they think I'm going to just sit back and let the men folk handle it, they don't know me at all.

11. MACKLIN

TECHIE FACT #5:

THE CULMINATION OF ONE
HUNDRED YEARS OF
CELIBACY. AKA PHENOMENAL
SEX LEAVES US HANGRY.

We all watch as Fate heads upstairs, her middle finger held high until she turns the corner and escapes down the hall. It doesn't take an empath to know that she's livid. If she were a cartoon, smoke would be coming out of her ears.

"Fuck!" Cole snaps as he begins to pace the foyer with both hands on his head. "It's like one step forward and two steps back with that woman."

"Except this isn't a Paula Abdul song," Knox chuckles.

Cole just glares his way before he stops and says softly, "I just want her safe."

"That's what we all want, mate. But there's a right way and a wrong way to go about that when dealing with our little ghost. You just chose the *wrong* way."

"I think we need to keep her busy. Each of us could use the help, and it

would be a way to keep her close without treating her like a child.”

“Where were you five minutes ago, and why didn’t you stop me *before* I pissed her off?” Cole grumbles.

“Despite popular belief, I am not your keeper.” As soon as it leaves my mouth, I’m stunned. So is Cole apparently. His eyebrows almost hit his hairline as his lips tilt in a small grin.

“I didn’t know you had it in you, Mack.”

“Neither did I. What the hell is wrong with me? I’m...I...” I stand there, staring around the room, trying to work out what just happened. It’s like my brain is malfunctioning. I don’t snark. *Ever*. It’s just not in my vocabulary or cellular makeup.

Knox just shakes his head. “Don’t worry, Mack. Damn woman is going to drive us *all* to drink.”

“Truth.” I run my hand through my hair, wondering where my logic has gone. Where is my rational brain, the one that deals in facts and never emotion? Crushed to dust right along with my hundred years of celibacy no doubt. That fact unsettles me because rational is my safe zone, yet it makes me want to grin at the same time. Maybe I need to have my head examined.

“Ok, so how do we fix this?” Knox asks.

“You mean, chaining her to the bed isn’t a viable option?” Cole snarks.

“Wait. That’s not a bad idea!”

Knox’s head whips my way. “Mack, you can’t be serious.”

“What? Oh...no. That’s not what I meant. I just thought that while we might not be able to chain her to the bed, we could *metaphorically* chain her to the Gateway. Tout it as her needing to learn her role. Holding court in the main chamber while the doors open for the first time in a century. It should be enough to keep her occupied for a bit while the rest of us pack up here. Plus, Reggie will be with her, so she won’t be alone.”

Cole’s finger runs along his bottom lip as he thinks it through. “Damn, that’s an excellent plan, Mack.”

“Think she’ll go for it?” Knox asks.

“I think if we approach it the right way, play off the empathy she showed that spirit tonight, she’ll feel obligated to see it through.” I start running through possible scenarios in my head.

“Okay then. Who’s taking charge of the Keep Fate Occupied Movement?” Knox asks.

Cole and I share a look before we both turn to face Knox.

“Wait, what? Why me?”

“Because you can accurately assess her feelings and steer her toward the end goal.”

Cole smirks. “What he said.”

“Fuck me.”

“That’s Fate’s job.”

Knox shoots a questioning glare at Cole. “Since when do you make jokes?” Then he sighs, wagging his finger at us. “Fine. I’ll make sure she’s on board, but both of you will owe me one.”

“I don’t think this needs to be said, but you need to handle it with more care than Cole did tonight.”

“Thanks, Mack.”

“Got it. Don’t be Cole. Don’t piss her off. Easy peasy.”

Cole gives Knox a dirty look, raising one eyebrow. “Now that the situation with Fate has been handled, tell me about the book.” He’s all business, the simple statement holding a hint of his power. It’s just enough to be noticeable, sending the message that he expects the question to be answered now, but not enough for it to have us jumping to comply.

Knox runs his fingers through his hair. “Shit, man. I have no idea how we didn’t put two and two together. But dammit, that was fifty years ago.”

“He’s right. We really should have figured it out sooner. It was in my pocket when I woke up in New York, and as soon as I connected with Knox, I showed it to him. We couldn’t figure out how to open it, but I didn’t want to get rid of it. It’s not like we had a home or anywhere safe to stash it, so we found the local library and talked our way into the restricted section. We hid it high up on one of the top shelves. Time passed, and...well...we both forgot about it.”

“You need to get the book before we’re operating solely out of the Gateway. Once that happens, I want us all to stick together as much as possible. No unplanned trips.”

“Got it.” Macklin nods. “So, what *are* our long-term plans? She’s not going to sit quietly, doing nothing in the Gateway forever.”

“We need to track down any lead we come across. Find a way to draw the culprit out. Somewhere safe and far away from Fate.”

“She’s not going to like that,” Knox says, pulling a candy bar from his pocket, ripping it open, and taking a bite. When he feels my stare, he asks, “What?”

“Have another one for me?”

“Actually...” He pauses, his hand going to his pocket and pulling out another candy bar. “Here you go, mate.”

Chuckling, I open the wrapper and take a bite of my own. *Damn, this is good. Didn't realize how hangry I was. Guess great sex and the best blowjob of your life will do that to a man.*

“I don't care if she likes it or not. She's been through enough, and I'm not going to risk her again.”

“She's not going to see it that way. We're supposed to be a team, and she's going to feel like we're excluding her.” The look on Fate's face earlier was one I don't want aimed my way again. But at the same time, I want nothing more than to keep her safe, and sometimes, that means doing what needs to be done despite someone else's displeasure or discomfort. It's called love.

“Well, she'll just have to get over it.”

“I want to hear you tell her that when shit hits the fan.”

Cole just rolls his eyes at Knox. “I'm going to go pack up my stuff. Get started on the cameras and other equipment. I want to be out of here in under forty-eight hours. Then we'll start hunting down leads, see if we can find the fuckers who did this and get it handled before she even realizes it.”

Knox and I share a look, both of us knowing the chances of either of those things happening are slim to none.

Cole stalks off, grumbling to himself about headstrong spirits.

I take another bite of my candy bar, going over our options. *How does one draw out a bad guy who hasn't been found in over a century, that always seems to be one step ahead?*

“You know this isn't going to end well, right?” Knox asks, his mouth full of chocolate and caramel.

“I know. But if we succeed, then at least she can be pissed off *safely*.”

He eyes me a second before his lips tilt. “I think I like you like this.”

“Like what?”

“Relaxed. More open. Giving shit, not just taking it. I'm proud of you!”

“Well, geez. Thanks, *Mom*.” Rolling my eyes, I take another bite.

“See? That's what I mean. Sex looks good on you. Now come on, we've got a lot of work to do, and, since you nominated me as Fate's keeper, you're going to talk me through what I need to say so I avoid screwing this up worse than Cole already has.”

And just like that, I grin. From celibate nerd to giving someone else advice on women. My shoulders straighten as I take the last bite of chocolate, thinking of all the ways I want to thank Fate for making this my reality.



D. Fate

Ghost Girl Fact #17:

There's nothing quite like girls' time to really warm
a ghost girl's heart.

Why the fuck did I agree to this? Knox is a smooth one alright. Getting me to go along with holding court over my *subjects*. “Fate, it’s your duty to help those poor spirits out,” I recite in my best Knox impersonation. Which is honestly total shit, if I’m being honest. “They’re depending on you to help them, just like Kyle was.”

And dammit, I fell for it. Hook, line, and sinker. I don’t even like fishing...the nasty worms and the poor fish with a hook shoved through the side of its mouth. That’s me. I’m that pitiful fish. *Fuck!*

Pacing now, I brush my fingertips over the Gateway’s mark on my wrist. I have no idea how this works. I’m totally winging it, praying I don’t somehow walkie talkie the guys by accident.

“Yes, boss?”

“Oh, thank God! Reggie, can you meet me in my room?”

“Of course! Wait. Which room? Gateway or Illinois house, because, to be fair, I can’t keep up.”

“Illinois house.”

“Got it. Be there in a jif.”

My mind is all over the board. I’m already dreading being center stage, putting on a show in front of spirits who are going to expect me to know what the fuck I’m doing, yet I’m also oddly excited about taking the reins again.

“What’s up?”

I jump, my heart pounding in my chest. “For fuck’s sake, Reggie. Don’t give a girl a heart attack!”

“Sorry?” She says it like a question, which tells me she’s not sorry at all. “So, what’s going on? You sounded urgent.”

I contemplate her for a moment, her eyebrow raising when I simply stare silently. I reach for the connection I can feel with her somewhere in my soul, needing to make a decision. “I don’t remember how this worked between us in the past, but can I trust that what is said between us *now* stays between us?”

Her expression turns serious. “Fate, we may joke and laugh and rib each other mercilessly, and I may be a sarcastic bitch, but my loyalty has and always will reside with you. You’re not just my boss. You’re my best friend.”

My heart squeezes. What she’s saying rings true, and I start to get a little choked up. I’ve officially made my first friend, in this life anyways, and I’m beyond glad that I’ve got another female to help temper all the cocky maleness around me.

“Don’t!” she says, her hand coming up in the universal symbol for *stop*. “If you start, I’ll want to follow, and we both know I can’t fucking cry, so don’t torture me.”

My lips tilt into a grin. I can see why old me chose her. Straight shooter, that one. “I need your help.” It takes one look at my face for her brows to draw down and her hands to find her hips.

“Who do I need to kill...or at least seriously maim? Please say Cole.”

I laugh. “No one. I just need to know what you remember about Nicholas or his sister Liv.”

Her head tilts to the side as she considers me a moment. “Did the guys tell you about our conversation in the kitchen?”

“Conversation in the kitchen?” I’m confused for a moment until realization dawns and my anger spikes, my power zipping along my skin.

“Those fuckers!”

“Oops.” She grimaces. “Want me to smack them for you the next time I see them?”

“I want them to treat me like a goddamn equal. Not some fragile fucking princess! They need to share with me. Talk to me about the important things. What’s it going to take to get that through their thick skulls?”

“I mean, if it hasn’t sunk in already, it’s doubtful it ever will.”

“Dammit! It’s a good thing they’re sexy as sin, because let me tell you, my power is ready to rip them to shreds, and I might consider letting it out to play otherwise.” *Hmmm. But there are other ways to make them see the error of their ways.* All sorts of schemes begin running through my mind. Deliciously naughty, sometimes silly, revenge plots all vying for my attention.

Reggie’s voice breaks through my musings. “Have I told you I’m beyond glad to have you back? I missed all this chaos.”

Her feelings are genuine. Happiness. Relief. Excitement. Contentment. All swamping my senses. I owe her, I realize, for all that she did while I was gone. “I haven’t thanked you.”

“For what?”

“For watching over them for me. Keeping them safe.”

“No thanks necessary, boss. Despite my snark, they’re my friends too. I wouldn’t have been able to live with myself if anything had happened to them on my watch.”

There go these damn eyes again. Maybe they’re dysfunctional?

“We’ve already talked about this. Knock that shit off!” But she snuffles too despite her protest.

I step forward and wrap her in a big hug. Her transparent arms wrap around me, and I silently thank the Gateway for this particular perk of being Guardian of the Spirits, which makes this moment possible. Pulling back, we share a small smile before it’s time to get down to business.

“Okay. So...Nick...”

“If the guys didn’t tell you about him, how do you even know who he is?”

I briefly detail the encounter with the spirit and his request for me to meet up with him. “Tell me what you remember about him.”

“Well, he was always kind of an asshat, little bit of a bad temper, lots of bluster but no balls.” She considers me for a moment, then her head tilts and

a wicked gleam lights up her ghostly eyes. “Are you going to meet him at the club?”

My mind was made up the second Cole told me to stay out of trouble and the guys didn’t back me up. Sure, there’s a small part of my little ghost girl heart that wants to do this out of spite, but the larger part is doing this because it knows I’m powerful enough to handle this and wants to prove it. “Yes. I’m going, and I’d like it if you went with me.”

“Hell yes! Girls’ night!”

“Okay, but say nothing to the guys. We’ll figure out the details later.”

“Ooh...they’re going to be so pissed. I love it!”

“One more thing...” I hesitate, not sure if telling her is a good idea.

“Fate, whatever it is, you can tell me,” she attempts to reassure me.

“But what if it puts you in danger?”

“I’m a spirit. What can they really do to me?”

“There’s plenty they could do to you, and I’m not sure I’m willing to risk it.”

Her ghostly hands land on her hips, her eyes narrowing. “Girl, fuck off with that shit. You don’t like the guys treating you like glass, and I won’t have you treating me the same way.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. So, I need you to help me get the book.”

Her eyes widen. “You know where it is?”

“I do. Are you in?”

“Girl, that’s like asking if chicks ogle guys in gray sweatpants. Of *course*, I’m in!”

“Perfect! Because Knox practically knows my every move and I can’t risk alerting him to my plan.”

“I’m in, of course, but why don’t you want them to help you?”

“Something tells me the book is the key to all of this. If I have it, I can store it somewhere safe that no one else knows about. It can’t be used against my guys since they won’t have any idea where it is.”

“Whatever you need, consider it done.” She eyes me expectantly. “Does that mean it’s time to get ready for the Gateway’s grand re-opening?”

Sighing, I let my head fall back and release the breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “Fine. Let’s do this.”

“Eek. This is going to be so much fun! I’ll meet you there in just a few. Luh you...byeeeee...” she exclaims like a dork before she disappears.

Chuckling despite myself, I shake my head. I must be a magnet for crazy.

That's the only explanation for this life I'm living. Of course, I wouldn't have it any other way.

With a simple thought now, I begin to dematerialize, my body slowly dispersing until I'm nothing but wisps of smoke traveling through the ether. Then, in the blink of an eye, it starts to put itself back together again inside my room in the Gateway.

I take a deep breath, letting the seriously discomfoting feeling slowly fade. *Yup, not sure I'll ever get used to that.*

I mentally check in with the Gateway, making sure that all of the preparations for the day are underway. It scoffs, like I really should know better, before responding in the affirmative, confirming the task I asked of it has been completed.

Perfect!

Reggie pops up beside me, and to my credit, I barely flinch this time. She's practically bouncing on her toes as she heads straight for the bathroom and starts gathering her weapons, aka makeup and hair products.

"You look way too excited about this. Not sure *fun* is the word I would use," I retort, giving her a skeptical look as I trail behind her like a sullen teenager.

"You just wait. You're going to knock 'em all dead."

"Aren't they already dead?"

"Hardy har har. Aren't you hilarious?" She rolls her eyes and gets to work putting my hair up in big rollers while she starts in on my makeup. My eyes are closed as she applies eyeliner and a slew of other shit to my face that I probably can't even name. I have to force myself not to twitch or risk getting stabbed with the brush tip.

"So, I'm thinking a sophisticated updo. Something classy yet stylish."

"Why can't we just leave my hair down?"

She pauses, pulling back to shoot me the evil eye. "I think an updo would really show the spirit community that you're a serious leader who's back and ready to kick some ass."

"How the hell is my hair going to tell them all that?"

"It's about your image, Fate. Let them see you as strong and put together instead of..." She pauses, waving her hand at me. "Whatever *this* is."

I glance down at the ripped sweats and tank top I changed into when I got back to my room. "I don't see anything wrong with this," I huff, though I begrudgingly admit to myself she's probably right.

“And therein lies the problem, my dear Guardian.”

My eyes narrow. “Was old me a prima ballerina or something? I’ve already discovered her penchant for color coding and bloodthirsty contraptions.”

Her sad eyes meet mine, and I suddenly regret my snarkiness. “You were the epitome of grace and neutrality. You could silence a room with a mere look, but you never took advantage of that power.”

“Do you miss her? The old me?”

She looks thoughtful for a moment. “In some ways, yes, but in other ways, I can already see that you bring something to the table that I think she lost along the way.”

“And what’s that?”

“Empathy and compassion, with definitely more humor. Don’t get me wrong. She embodied those things too, but they weren’t as dominant as they should have been in her later years. She grew...complacent, maybe? Not sure that’s the right word, but she’d been Guardian for so long that I think she kind of lost sight of the personal aspect of her role.”

We both go silent as she finishes my eyes, lathering my lashes in more mascara than I thought was possible. I’m not sure how my lashes are even still standing at this point.

“Alright. Hair time,” she says, rubbing her hands together.

“Leaving it down. Great! Sounds like a plan.”

A low beep fills the room, and her head tilts like she’s listening to something I can’t hear.

“Are you going to be a big girl and let me do your hair?”

“But why?” I whine.

“Either I do your hair, or you face the consequences.”

“What does that...” I trail off as she touches her mark, the look on her face positively sinister.

“Hello, Karma. What can I do for you?”

An image appears in front of Reggie’s face, and the woman staring back at her is beyond beautiful. Her deep red hair is in a high ponytail, the front somehow poofed up, towering over the back. With dark eyeshadow and winged liner surrounding her sparkling green eyes and her lips covered in a deep plum, her makeup is bold and dramatic. When she speaks, her voice has an alluring smoky quality to it. It’s a voice of power and dominance, one that clearly tells the listener, “Don’t fuck with me.”

“Reggie, I want to speak to my sister. I’ve been waiting long enough.”

Her tone, as if Reggie is nothing more than a mere servant, has me gritting my teeth, and I have to take a couple deep breaths in and out to calm down before I do something stupid like open my mouth and give myself away.

“I apologize. It’s been pretty chaotic here, and I’m not sure she’s available at the moment.” Her eyes cut to me, and I vehemently shake my head.

“Oh, Fate. Karma is on the line. Are you available?”

“Reggie, tell her that I won’t be put off any longer. I *must* speak with her.”

Reggie looks my way, holding up her index finger before motioning toward her hair in a swirling motion. After the briefest of pauses, she holds up two fingers before whipping her fingers at the image, all just out of view.

Well, shit! What’s the lesser of two evils here? Deal with my hair being pinned and cemented to my head or finally have a long overdue chat with my other sister? Karma can’t be that bad, right?

She must see the resignation plastered all over my face because she stifles a laugh and does something to widen the screen. It’s somehow pushed farther back, allowing it to take in more of the room. Karma’s eyes immediately find mine, her gaze dipping to do a quick study that has me sitting up straighter in my seat.

“Hello, dear sister. You look...well.” Her head tilts a bit like she’s wondering if those words are even sufficient for the quick appraisal she just gave me.

“Um. Hi. I’m sorry I haven’t been able to talk until now. Things have been a little crazy.”

“I can only imagine, little one. So, you’re back in the Gateway full-time now?”

The fact that she calls me little one irks the shit out of me, but since I don’t remember her in the slightest, I let it go and plaster a smile on my face.

“That’s the plan. The guys are closing up the house in Illinois now.”

“Mmm. Probably a good idea. You’ll be safer there. How are those guys of yours doing? They were absolutely manic when they lost you.”

“They’re doing great, I guess,” I mutter, unable to hide my disgruntled tone.

“Ah. I understand, darling. This whole situation has been hard on all of

you, especially without your memories. Destiny filled me in. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not. You're my...sister. You should know what's going on."

"I mean, they *are* guys, dear. I've warned you about this in the past, though you obviously don't remember. They get bored and are always looking for the next best thing. Pity, really. Maybe it's time you listened to your big sis and considered making a fresh start, now that you're back."

My eyes narrow. I remember bits of those conversations, my withering patience and the frustration that was beginning to eat at me, but she doesn't need to know that.

"I would never consider replacing my guys," I say, a bit of bite in my voice that I can't withhold.

"Hmm. Well, if you ever change your mind, you know where to find me. I can help you figure it all out." Her eyes don't leave mine, and there's a spark of...something that I can't quite make out. "Anyhoo...do you have any new leads as to who's responsible for this mess?"

"Unfortunately, no. We're still searching for clues that might point us in the right direction."

"Pity. Well, I can see that you're in the middle of getting ready, so I won't hold you up any longer. Sorry I couldn't be there in person, but I'm dealing with my own chaos here at the moment. I'll make it a point to stop by soon, okay, little one?"

With that, she blows a kiss and the screen goes dead.

"What the fuck was that?" I whisper to myself.

"That, my friend, was your sister. Now maybe you understand why I held her off as long as I could."

"Is she always like that?" I wave my hand, indicating the space where Karma's image had been.

"Always. Most of the time, she's worse. I'm surprised she let you off that easily if I'm being honest."

"I don't know whether to thank you or curse you right now."

"Drastic times call for drastic measures."

I scowl at her. "You're evil. But after that little stunt, you're leaving my hair alone, right?"

She sighs and gets to work, taking the rollers out of my hair a little more aggressively than I think is called for. "Fine. Whatever."

What feels like hours but is probably less than thirty minutes pass by, and

I'm already over this day.

"Are we almost done?' I whine.

"Nearly there. Let's get you in your dress, then it's just a few final touch ups."

"How long is this thing going to take anyways?"

"You do realize our backlog is like...a hundred years long."

"Fuck. Me."

"You're not my type."

My eyes cut to hers in the mirror. "And your type is?"

"Blonde. Petite. Quiet."

"Yeah, I'm definitely none of those things."

Standing, I make my way over to the dress hanging next to the mirror. Reg begins to help me into the dramatic gown as my eyes meet my reflection's. The girl staring back at me is almost unrecognizable and just as unhappy with this situation as I am. I'm supposed to hold court, *whatever the fuck that means*, as the doors to the Gateway's main chamber open to spirits for the first time in a hundred years. I'll be stuck here forever. Not my idea of a good time, mind you. The more I think about it, the angrier I get since I really should have seen this coming. *Fuckers! I bet they were all in on it.*

Despite that, they were right in a way. I need to do this. Just...note to self...don't let Reggie get the idea to play dress up again any time soon, even if she has done the impossible and made me look regal and strong.

The dark blue gown is made of beautiful satin, with long lace sleeves that hug my arms and a deep v that dips down the front, showing off my cleavage. The back trails along the tile in a sea of blue fabric. My hair is lying in loose waves against my back, with a small braid added to the front to keep it out of my eyes - the one concession I let my assistant have. My eyes are set off by the charcoal and ice blue eyeshadow she applied, my cheeks rosy and lips glossy.

"There! All done," she declares, stepping back and appraising her masterpiece.

"I feel like a girl playing dress up with her mom's clothes. Is that weird since these are technically *my* clothes?"

"Just wait until the guys see you. They're going to have a shit fit!"

"What? Why?"

"Girl, you look hot as *hell*. Every dude ghost in there is gonna want to be all up on that," she says, waving her hand up and down my body.

“I have enough cranky dick. I don’t need any more.”

“Trust me, I *know*, but that’s not the point. The point is getting them to sweat a little for being ass clowns and sticking you with the shit job, which is going to take for-fucking-ever by the way. They’ll be lucky if they get laid sometime this century.”

“Oh. *Devious*. But wait, doesn’t that also mean that *I* won’t be getting laid any time this century?”

“Eh. Details. Come on, let’s go! Don’t want to keep your subjects waiting.”

We walk through the Gateway and into the main chamber through a door off to the side of the dais, stopping just before entering the room. The dress drags behind me, the thing weighing damn near as much as I do.

“Wait here! I’m going to announce you.”

“Announce me? What the fuck for?”

“It’s ceremonial.”

“Reggie, old me may have wanted to be announced like some kind of psychotic royal, but new me just wants to get this shit over with so I can get out of this goddamn dress and go binge on ice cream and wine.”

“You can have a pity party any ol’ time. You only get one *second* first impression.”

“But what am I supposed to *do*?”

“You don’t have to do anything. The spirits will cross over when they’re ready. There may be those that want to speak to you, but most just want to see for themselves that you’re truly back. Once that happens, the Gateway’s power will make sure they can finally see their loved ones. See, easy peasy, lemon squeezy. You sit and look all hot and powerful, and the Gateway will take care of the rest. It’ll be just like old times, minus some memories and a small stick up your ass.”

I roll my eyes. She really sucks at this whole pep talk thing, yet in her own fucked up way, she’s helped strengthen my withering resolve. This is for all of those who were stuck like I was. Alone and without a voice. Hell, even for those who have found others to share their time with while in between realms. They’ve still been without their loved ones for way too damn long, and it’s my job to help them. I’m going to do my best to be so much more than I ever was. They deserve that much.

My eyes start to tear up, but before a single tear can spill, she’s smacking my shoulder.

“Bitch, don’t even think about it. I just spent way too long on that makeup.”

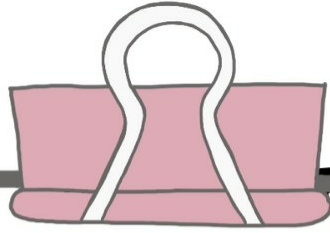
And just like that, the moment is gone, but I’m pretty sure that’s just how we roll. Her smile is gentle when I look at her, realizing she knew just what I needed.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“You never have to thank me, boss. Just being here with you all is thanks enough. Now, are you ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be, I guess.”

With a nod, she walks out onto the dais, her head high and looking more regal than I ever could. The entire room goes silent. I take a deep breath and exhale, stepping out right after her. The place is packed wall-to-wall with spirits, and I gasp, looking out at all the people who have been waiting for a century to be reunited with their loved ones. My heart squeezes, and as much as I don’t want to be doing this right now, the weight of my role as Guardian of the Spirits hits me full force. The responsibility and all it entails settles around me like a cloak that is surprisingly comfortable and familiar. A smile spreads across my face as I scan the room. *I can do this*, I tell myself as I settle in for a long day.



13. Fate

Ghost Girt Fact #18:

If you see us straightening our metaphorical crown,
shit's about to go down.

“They did this on purpose,” I whine many, *many* hours later, running my hands through my hair and shifting uncomfortably in my overly elaborate chair. “My ass is numb, and I’m honestly not sure I can sit here much longer. You’re partially to blame for this too, ya know. Had to get all excited about playing dress up.”

She just chuckles as another spirit makes his way up the stairs. He stands in front of me, those opaque eyes that still weird me out silently tracing over me from head to toe. He’s tall, cute in a boyish surfer sort of way, and wearing only a pair of swim trunks that show off his buff body which is still dripping water that vanishes before it hits the floor. Unfortunately for him, his arm is riddled with vicious gashes of torn flesh, and he’s missing half a leg. I have the sudden urge to ask him just how he’s managing to stand upright without it.

“Don’t do it,” Reggie whispers, but I swear her lips don’t move. It’s like she’s a goddamn ventriloquist.

“Do what?”

“Ask whatever ridiculous question is swirling around that head of yours.”

“How do you know it’s ridiculous?”

“You get *the look*.”

“I have a look?”

“Yes. When old you got *the look*, I could trust she would keep those thoughts to herself until we were alone. You, not so much.”

“I feel so attacked right now,” I huff, turning back to Buff Guy, whose smirk shows off his adorable dimples. “Oh. Sorry. That wasn’t very nice of me considering your...er...*situation*.”

“I’ve heard you were different,” he says, his amused voice deep with a bit of an echo.

“Yeah. You and every other spirit in here apparently.”

“But most think it’s a nice change. From what I’ve heard, you used to be...” He stops, possibly realizing that it’s not a good idea to accidentally insult the woman who could send him to an afterlife of torment.

“Used to be what?”

“Well, some people say you used to be a little dry. Cold, even.”

“Huh. Apparently dying...*again*...brought back my sense of humor. Gotta look at the bright side, right?” I smirk.

He chuckles, his eyes holding mine, before his gaze shifts to just above my left shoulder and he quickly drops his head, studying the floor intently.

The sound of a throat clearing and the scent of sunshine and soap bring a smile to my face despite the fact that I’m still uber pissed off at him. Turning, I find Cole clearly assessing Buff Guy.

“Making friends?” he asks, propping himself up against my very pretty, albeit excessively fancy, chair. He crosses his arms over his chest and looks down at me with an expression I can’t quite read. Still a scowl, but more than a scowl. I swear, this man’s facial expressions have their own personality. But then I feel it. A shot of jealousy with a splash of possessiveness.

I haven’t seen any of my guys in...hell, I’ve lost count of how many hours. Now Cole’s standing here, coming off like a douche. It’s like a match to a flame as far as my anger is concerned. “My new friend and I were just chatting about how most of the spirits think I’ve changed for the better. Isn’t that nice?”

His eyebrow raises before he turns to silently glare at Buff Guy again.

“Yeah. Nice.”

Buff Guy is still studiously staring at the sparkly tile, trying desperately to seem as inconspicuous as possible.

“Sorry. How rude of me. Cole, this is...shit. I didn’t get your name.”

Buff Guy raises his head, his eyes not quite meeting mine. “My name is Rylan, my queen.”

“Nice to officially meet you, Rylan.”

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, as well, my queen.” His gaze once again hits the floor. For a second, I think he might actually bow, and then I wonder how he’d actually accomplish that.

Cole’s voice is low and deep and suddenly brushing against my ear.

“You’re *flirting* with the subjects, *queen*.”

My eyes narrow as my power comes alive, anticipating a fight with my asshole. Wait. That came out wrong.

“I’m being *friendly*,” I say through gritted teeth. I’m tired and hungry, and I’m pretty sure my ass will never regain feeling. I want a long hot shower and a day’s worth of sleep, but knowing neither of those is going to happen any time soon, my anger spikes. I don’t have the patience for his shit right now.

He harshly whispers in my ear, “I may have agreed to share you with my brothers, but that’s where I draw the line. No strays.”

Taking a deep breath in, I release it slowly. *I will not lose my temper. I will not lose my temper.* Hell. Who am I kidding? I’m totally going to lose my temper. It’s Ghost Girl Fact #5.

“Cole, I am five point three seconds away from losing my shit. You all are the ones that stuck me here. Now let me do my job,” I growl.

Poor Rylan looks about ready to piss his pants. The power exchange between Cole and I even has Reggie shifting uncomfortably next to me. Surprisingly, though, she’s staying quiet, which says a lot. The girl is *never* quiet.

“We have enemies out there, Fate. You need to take this seriously. You never know who the bad guy might be.” He pauses, once again assessing Rylan. “Or who’s working for the bad guy.”

A flicker of an idea dots across my consciousness, but it’s gone before I can grab onto it.

“Then why isn’t Knox sitting with me to do *his* job? It would make this

whole process so much easier, wouldn't it? But noooo, you all have *men shit* to do and important things to discuss. Without me. And don't even try to pretend like that isn't happening behind my back, because I know damn well it is." I stand suddenly, causing him to straighten and poor Rylan to almost tumble down the stairs. My anger is a dangerous thing at the moment, like a grenade with a twitchy finger through the pin, which is the only thing keeping it from exploding and blowing everything and everyone here up in smithereens. Whether it's from exhaustion or Cole's perpetual asshole-ishness, I'm not sure. Probably both. "When are you going to get it through that thick skull of yours that I'm not some helpless female? That I am more than capable of handling just as much shit as you are?"

"Fate?" Reggie quietly interrupts, sensing now is not the time for jokes.

"What?" I bark at my friend, immediately feeling bad when Reggie looks taken aback for a second. I take a deep breath and release it slowly, trying to rein in my temper. "I'm sorry."

"What should I do with..." She nudges her head toward Rylan and the rest of the spirits who are watching this little showdown with keen eyes. *Fuck!*

Turning my attention to the blond surfer earns me another growl from Cole that I completely ignore. "Rylan, my apologies. I bet you're beyond ready to cross over, and here I am, keeping you lingering even longer."

"No worries, my queen. I actually don't have anyone waiting for me on the other side. Take all the time you need. I've made quite a few friends among the other spirits here, so I've got company until it's my time."

He's still studying the floor rather than looking me in the eye, wringing his hands behind his back. That flicker from before is now an idea sparking somewhere inside this head of mine, taking shape and cementing itself as a solid plan. And it's a damn good one too. If I can convince my guys to go along with it.

"Fate," Cole growls, not wanting to be ignored.

The entire room feels as if it's holding its breath, waiting for the inevitable explosion that they can sense building, their creepy spirit eyes watching me. I can sense their worry. Their fear. My power is lighting up inside me at the sheer amount of energy it's surrounded by.

Movement near my office door catches my eye. Knox and Macklin walk out and stop abruptly when my eyes narrow on them. Mack visibly swallows, and Knox grimaces slightly. They know shit's about to hit the fan.

Not literally. That would be gross.

“Fate, so help me, if you continue to ignore me, I’ll-”

Spinning around, I glare at him in challenge. “You’ll *what*, Cole?”

My power suddenly turns the flames in all of the sconces pink.

“Oh, you’re in for it now, Ass-Cole,” Reggie murmurs under her breath.

Just then, Thad and Levi nudge their way through the main doors, dodging the crowd of spirits. They take one look around the room that is now bathed in pink, their eyes flying to me, and immediately throw up their hands.

“We didn’t do it!” they exclaim in unison.

My voice booms out, “I’m truly sorry, friends. I’m going to take a short break, but I’ll be back momentarily.”

Rylan begins to make his way down the stairs to join the rest of the spirits.

“Rylan, don’t go far, okay?”

He pauses, eyes meeting mine for the first time since Cole’s arrival. “As you wish, my queen.”

“What the fuck does he need to stick around for?” Cole growls.

“Do you know how the black widow got its name, Cole?”

“How is that relevant right now?”

“Because they kill their mate. Often times devouring them during sex. It’s awfully tempting right now.”

Rylan’s chuckle breaks the silent stand off we’ve entered, and Cole glares his way. He clears his throat. “Right. I’ll just go wait over there.”

“Fearsome Five, please convene in my office. *Now*.”

“Who the fuck is the Fearsome Five?” Thad asks.

“Pretty sure that’s us, dipshit,” Levi replies with a roll of his eyes as they both start walking toward the office door.

“Reggie, hold down the fort while I’m gone.”

“Will do, boss. Good luck, boys.”

I make my way down the stairs, dragging my dress behind me as I head toward my office. The spirits part as I approach, leaving an open aisle for me to walk down. As I get closer, Mack and Knox’s eyes scan down my body, lighting up every nerve ending along the way, but I’ll be damned if I show it. They move aside as I approach, studiously ignoring both of them, and I catch the wary look they share as I pass by.

The room is warm, a small fire already glowing in the fireplace. The Gateway must have anticipated that I’d want some ambiance for this little

chat, not that it will help. Walking in, I continue over to one of the sofas and sit down with an audible, “Oomph!” I’m adjusting my dress as the guys all wander in, taking seats around me.

“Damn, woman. You look hot as fuck in that dress. I can’t wait to get you out of it.”

I just stare back at Thad, giving him *the look*. Not sure which look exactly, but a look that very clearly tells him how pissed off I am right now.

“What the hell is that look for, and who do I need to kill?” Thad asks with a seriousness that still takes me by surprise.

“Don’t pretend like you weren’t a part of this, Thad.”

“Part of what?”

“Of stuffing me in a goddamn chair for hours on end. I haven’t even been able to pee, let alone eat or drink. And my ass may never recover!”

Levi looks between Cole, Knox, and Mack. “This is all your doing, isn’t it?”

“We didn’t *do* anything. She’s simply taking over her rightful duties,” Macklin responds, though the lack of confidence in his words is a sure sign of a guilty conscience.

I growl, my fists clenching in an effort to stave off my power that wants to spark higher. “There’s nothing *simple* about this, Mack. Did you all really think I wouldn’t see this for exactly what it was? A way to get me out of the way?”

He swallows, adjusting his glasses as he takes in my heated stare.

“Fate, we never-”

“Don’t, Knox. Just *don’t*.” A weird combination of anger and hurt is swirling together inside me. I know he can feel both, and he sighs, bringing his hand up to rub the back of his neck.

“The idea was to greet the spirits. Not flirt with them,” Cole mutters.

“I was being *friendly*.”

“Too friendly,” Cole adds. “Fucking hardheaded female. It’s like you have no self-preservation skills at all.”

All five pairs of eyes focus on me. Knox is probably gauging my emotions. Macklin watching me with a hint of guilt shining in his eyes. The twins look like they’re waiting to see what I do so they can react accordingly. And then there’s Cole. He looks pissed off, but that’s nothing unusual.

Deep breath in, deep breath out.

“Might I remind you, it wasn’t my idea to throw me into a sea of

unknown spirits. That's on you guys."

"Not us." The twins point incriminating fingers at the other three.

"What the hell?" Knox mutters.

"So I was...what? Supposed to sit there and act like a statue while the spirits came up to chat with me, hope shining in their creepy ass eyes?"

"Ideally, yes," Cole snarks.

I growl again in response. Maybe I'm part wolf because I've got this growling thing down pat.

"Fate, you have to understand where Cole's coming from. He..." Mack's excuses cut off as I narrow my eyes in his direction. He quickly shuts his mouth, miming zipping his lips for extra measure.

"So, you all agree with Cole then. I'm just supposed to sit there, keep my mouth shut, and act like a goddamn gargoyle or some shit? And why, if not for wanting me out of the way?"

"Little ghost, you know that's not what we want you to do. We want you to be yourself, show the spirit world that their leader is back and better than ever. We just figured it made sense for you to get a jump start on our roles here while we packed everything up to make the move."

My eyes narrow on Knox. "And that's the *only* reason? You want to be *responsible* spirit guardians?" They share a look, some sort of bro speak that makes me feel even more like an outsider. There's more they're not telling me. My eyes narrow. "What are you all up to?"

"What do you mean?" Macklin asks a little too innocently. He shifts in his seat and starts to fix the bottom button on his shirt that was already perfectly in place.

"I *mean*, what the fuck are you all up to? You're hiding something from me. The last time you did that, I ended up six feet deep and covered in dirt. In case you needed the reminder." The room is silent. Struck a nerve, I did, but they're not going to admit to anything right now. Big men gotta protect the little lady. *Fucking hell*. "Look. We'll come back to that in a minute. Right now...I have an idea I want to discuss with all of you."

"Oh hell. Here we go," Cole mutters.

I turn my glare on him. "Can we vote him off the island?" I snark. "All in favor?"

Thad and Levi raise their hands, grinning unrepentantly.

"You're hilarious." Cole rolls his eyes.

"I think we should use Rylan as an undercover spirit. Get him to work his

way through the groups and find out anything he can about what might be in the works.”

“Who the fuck is Rylan?” Knox asks.

“Buff surfer guy. Missing one leg.”

“Wait, is he a *blond* buff surfer?” Thad asks, his eyes narrowing.

“Uh, yeah?”

“Like the blond surfer from your fantasies?”

And now that little chat in the SUV is coming back to bite me in the ass. I wave my hand around like it’s no big deal. “I made that shit up to get my point across.”

“Isn’t that convenient?” Levi remarks, shooting me a questioning glare.

Cole grumbles, “She was flirting with him.”

“I was just talking to the dude,” I manage through gritted teeth.

“He was laughing.”

“I’m funny.”

“Not *that* funny.”

“For fuck’s sake.” I attempt to stand but get sucked back down by the weight of this ridiculous dress.

“Here, let me help,” Macklin says as he walks over to me and offers his hand.

“Thank you,” I mutter softly as he pulls me to my feet, his grasp on me tightening ever so slightly as I attempt to pull away. His disappointment filters through me just before our hands disconnect, but it doesn’t sway me. He may be adorable, but I’m not ready to forgive any of them yet. Even my sexy nerd. “Look, I think this is a good idea. We have no more information now than we had all of those years ago, aside from the fact that it wasn’t really Destiny that was there with you all. We’re no closer to identifying the threat, and that’s dangerous.” I take a moment to eye each of them. “I know you all have been operating without me for years now, but you can’t leave me out. I’m just as much a part of this team as any of you. I’m not some *thing* to be cherished and placed on a shelf for safe keeping, dammit.”

“Fate, we know that. It’s just...” Knox fumbles, at a loss for words as his hand nervously runs through his hair.

“We just want to keep you safe,” Mack says honestly.

“Keeping me in the dark isn’t keeping me safe. It’s making me blind to what might be lying in wait out there. Like it or not, I am the one the Gateway chose. Not any of you. At the end of the day, you’re all here

because of *me*. Now, I have no problem working with you, taking your advice and discussing the important matters that affect us all. That's what a team does. What being in a relationship entails. We trust each other. *But it has to go both ways*. The second you all start operating like I have no say is the second I'll be forced to take drastic measures."

A voice in the back of my mind reminds me that I'm keeping secrets of my own, but I tell it to shut the hell up, ignoring its eye roll. Because us ghost girls don't have enough quirks without having entire sarcastic conversations with ourselves.

"What the fuck does that mean?" Cole shouts.

"Assuming you start including me in whatever it is you're planning, you won't have to find out."

"Are you threatening us?" His voice is quiet, even, but it holds that sort of deceptive tone that lets you know you're skirting the delicate edge of his anger.

"Cole, man, you know that's not what she—" Thad starts, but I cut him off.

"A warning. A threat. A simple fact. Call it whatever you like."

He stands and the rest of the guys follow, their eyes darting between the two of us, not sure who's going to lash out first. Anger. Surprise. Worry. Fear. All combining in a toxic mixture that's battering against my already thinning self-control.

"Okay, let's just calm down," Mack says quietly, always the peacekeeper. His arms are out in front of his body in the universal sign for *let's not do anything stupid*. He starts to step between us but risks a brief glimpse at Knox, who simply shakes his head. *Yeah, probably not a good idea to get in the middle of an alpha war right now, sexy nerd*.

But I'm not letting this go. I'm an equal, or this will never work. This hardens my resolve to meet up with Nick and get answers. I'll just have to prove to them that I'm more than just a doll they can dress up.

"I'm going to go change. I'll see you guys back in the main chamber in twenty minutes."

I swish past them all, heading for my room. First thing on the agenda, remove this heinous dress. Second, try not to let the hurt that's seeping back into my heart take root. I know they mean well, but that's no excuse. They need to trust me. Period.

Memories or not, this isn't their job. It's mine. I'm the Guardian of the Spirits, and I don't take orders from them. If anything, they take orders from

me. Time to remind them just who's boss around here.



“That went well,” Knox snarks from the armchair next to me as the office door leading to our suites snicks shut behind Fate.

The damned woman is just too hard headed for her own good. Doesn’t she understand the threat we’re facing? Why can’t she see that we’re all just trying to protect her?

“Fuck!” I throw my head back and stare at the ceiling. I can admit I was a jealous ass. Something about seeing her smile at another guy, especially while knowing she’s pissed off at me, dredged up the same old insecurities I thought were on the way out.

“Did you all really think she wouldn’t see right through your plan to keep her occupied?” Levi asks, throwing his arms up on the back of the sofa. “My sweets is too smart for that.”

“I thought I did a believable job of selling it,” Knox mutters. “She didn’t

seem at all suspicious at the time.”

“Pretty sure not seeing any of us all day while sitting on her ass gave her plenty of time to become suspicious. And angry,” Thad points out.

Mack pushes up his glasses even though they weren’t falling down, a nervous tic not even his newly found confidence can squash. “Yes. That was a miscalculation on my part. I should’ve accounted for our lack of presence in my plan. We should’ve made regular appearances to keep her mollified.”

“But she’s right. We truly are no closer to answers than we were before. Over the last twenty-four hours, every lead we’ve tracked down has been a dead end,” Knox says, shooting a look at Mack.

Mack clears his throat, breaking the silence. “We, uh, went to retrieve the book and discovered the library where we hid it has been renovated. Entire sections were moved around, and we, um, couldnotfindthebook.”

He says that last part so fast, it’s almost unintelligible, but I catch it.

“What was that? It sounded like you said you couldn’t find the book.”

The two share another look before Knox adds, “It was gone. We checked everywhere. We’re assuming it either got lost in the shuffle or moved somewhere else.”

“Fuck! That’s not good.”

Mack hesitates a moment before he offers, “Her idea was a good one. With a spirit on the inside, we might be more likely to get intel that we wouldn’t otherwise have access to.”

My head swivels so I can look at him. “You think we can trust some spirit that we don’t even know to gather information and not double-cross us? For all we know, he’s working with *them* already.”

“I doubt it. Fate has an amazing sense of intuition. If her gut is telling her to trust this guy, then I think we should at least give it a shot. The twins can keep an eye on him, and we’ll vet any information he gives us before acting on anything.”

“Knox?”

“I’ll get a read on him while you ask some additional questions, see if I can pick up anything on his intentions.”

Macklin nods. “I’ll give my new lie detector skill another try as well. Between Knox and I, we should be able to get a better feel for what this guy’s plan is.”

“Thad? Levi?”

The twins share a look, probably communicating between themselves. It’s

damn annoying when they do that shit.

Levi turns back to me. “We trust Fate, and if she thinks this is a good idea, we’re all for it.”

“And we’ll keep an eye on the fucker in case he decides he’s going to try to get a little handsy with our woman. Or, you know, betray us or some shit,” Thad adds.

I study each of them. Their resolve to trust her without a second thought makes guilt twist my gut. Why is it so damn easy for them and so fucking difficult for me? Another sigh escapes. I’ve never sighed so much in my entire life. This woman is fucking me up inside.

There are residual feelings, ones I remembered even when I only had the vaguest details from my nightmares, and they all revolve around Fate. This immensely deep love that both excited and terrified me. A sense of connection that surpassed even that of my brothers. All for a woman I couldn’t recall. Then she popped back into our lives and my soul was willing to dive right back in without a second thought. But the past fifty years, or hell, now I know it’s more like one hundred years, has taught me to be wary, and I’m having a really hard time shaking that niggling sensation in the back of my mind that tells me shit isn’t over yet. More is to come. I can’t go through this again. I won’t survive it.

“Fine. We go out there and interrogate this guy before we agree to give this a shot. If anyone feels like anything is off, let me know, and we’ll pull the plug on this asinine plan before we get in too deep or give too much away.”

Knox’s hand comes up, his thumb rubbing his temple. I didn’t realize it until now, but with all of the spirits in residence, he might become overwhelmed. While generally useful, his power is sometimes a burden. We can’t afford to have him out of commission for days right now.

“You okay?” I ask as the others talk amongst themselves.

“Yeah. Something’s just...off. I can’t really explain it.”

“Maybe it’s the sheer number of spirits in here. You’re not overloading, right?”

“No. Though there are a ton of emotions filtering through here right now. Just as some leave, others’ arrive. But that’s not it.”

“Is it a threat?”

“Definitely not. Just have this feeling that something isn’t right. Like...have you ever heard a siren and started worrying that it might be

someone you know in an accident? Or stood on the edge of a cliff but all of a sudden your brain plays out the scene as if the person you're with steps too close and falls off and there's nothing you can do to save them, but it doesn't really happen?"

We all just stare at him like he's losing his damn mind. My worry is ratcheting up by the second as my normally dependable brother is apparently having some sort of meltdown or some shit.

"You really are just like a mom, aren't you?" Mack asks.

"Shut up, man." Knox just shakes his head.

"Knox, monitor that for changes and keep me updated."

"Will do."

"Alright. Are we ready to get this over with so we can spend some time smoothing things over with our girl?"

"Hell yes!" Thad is the first to jump up and make his way to the door with his twin hot on his heels. "Though it's all of you that have some ass kissing to do, we can still put in a good word for you."

"It's not your turn, fuckers!" Knox grumbles, stalking toward the door and elbowing the twins out of the way.

"Oh, does poor Knoxie have a case of blue balls?" Thad taunts.

Knox turns to glare at Thad, the look more menacing than I've ever seen. Between the emotions riding him and whatever else is going on, this won't end well. Knox is strung tight at the moment, and I don't need anything pushing him over the edge. Neither a three day sleep nor a fist fight between brothers would be good right now, so I step between them before either can say another word.

"Not right now. We've got more important things to deal with."

Knox doesn't back down right away which is a definite indication I need to keep an eye on him. The last time he rode the emotional empath roller coaster, he ended up with a black eye and Thad broke two fingers. It would've been worse if Levi hadn't broken them up immediately.

"Knox..."

"Fine. Yeah, I'm good." His hand comes up to push his hair back as he releases a deep breath.

"Sorry, bro," Thad murmurs.

My eyebrows raise in shock. First, Knox being overly aggressive, then Thad apologizing without even being prompted by Levi. What the fuck is happening here? Levi looks just as shocked as I am.

“What? You all act as if I’ve never apologized before,” Thad grumbles.

“You don’t. Ever. At least, not without some serious manipulation on my part,” Levi responds, giving his brother a pat on the back. “Maybe you’re finally growing up.”

“Fuck off, wankstain. Let’s go find our woman.”

The twins enter the main chamber, Macklin following. I grab a hold of Knox’s arm, stopping him before he can do the same.

“Seriously. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just walking a tightrope with my own emotions right now.”

“You going to be able to keep that under control and help us with...whatever the fuck his name was?”

That earns a small smirk from him. “Rylan, or as Fate refers to him, buff surfer guy.”

I growl despite myself. “The fact that she keeps referring to his physical stature hasn’t gone unnoticed. Trust me.”

He chuckles, his shoulders relaxing a bit. “Mate, we have nothing to worry about. When she talks about him, there’s no sexual interest there. She may find him attractive, but she doesn’t want him like that. I’d know. Trust me. The woman isn’t shy when it comes to her desires.”

Considering him, I nod. That somehow eases the bit of tension that had wound me up tight. I need to remember that I’m not in this alone. My brothers are powerful men in their own right, and I need to let them help me navigate the murky waters surrounding, quite simply, the love of my long life. *Dammit. Why haven’t I told her that?*

Those three little words have been on the edge of my tongue for a while now. But I don’t want to say them when we’re rushed or preoccupied. I want to be able to take my time and *show* her, not just *tell* her. I want to wrap myself up in her and leave the rest of the world behind for a little while. Life doesn’t want to cooperate though, and there hasn’t been a moment of peace that’s lasted long enough to take advantage of. What if I wait too long and we lose her again? I can’t let that happen. I need to talk to her. Right after we find her and apologize.

His hand claps my shoulder as we both make our way back into the sea of spirits, and I experience a twinge of guilt that my own inner turmoil might be adding to the overflow assaulting him. The twins are up near the dais, scanning the crowd. Standing beside them, Mack has a bit of a confused expression on his face that instantly has me on high alert.

As we approach, I catch sight of Rylan standing off in the corner talking to a group of spirits. Something about him doesn't seem quite right, but I don't have time to study him before Macklin is drawing my attention his way.

"I don't see Fate."

"She probably hasn't returned quite yet."

"But where's Reggie then?" Macklin asks.

I scan the room, searching for the quirky spirit assistant, but I can't find her either. My brow furrows as something that feels a lot like worry starts to settle in my gut.

"Maybe Fate needed help with something," Levi offers, though I notice he's studiously scanning the room as well.

"Knox, what do you feel?" His silence up until now has my worry ratcheting up a notch. Especially since he said something felt off.

"I..." He trails off, closing his eyes as the rest of us continue scanning the room. "Shit! I can't feel her."

"What the fuck do you mean *you can't feel her*? Are the spirits creating interference?"

"I don't know. Maybe? That's never been an issue before though."

"We've never been surrounded by this many spirits at once before either," I add. "Thad and Levi, run to her room and see if she's in there."

"You got it!" Levi responds as he and his twin rush out of the main chamber.

"Something tells me we need to talk to the surfer. Something isn't right here."

Spotting the bastard across the room, I head in his direction. Rylan turns my way, straightening as I approach. It hits me then. The difference I hadn't caught before. His missing leg is once again whole, and the gash marks on his arms have disappeared. He's now wearing a t-shirt and jeans, though I can still see right through him.

Fucking Fate! What are you up to?

"Have you seen Fate?" I damn near roar. *Fuck niceties.*

"Yes. She was just in here a little bit ago."

"Do you know where she went?" Macklin asks.

"We talked briefly. Then she spoke privately with Reggie, and they both disappeared."

"Talked about what?" He's studying me, like he's trying to gauge whether

or not he should tell me.

“Mate, I suggest you spit it out before we all lose our patience,” Knox demands, stepping up into the surfer’s personal space.

“I don’t know where she is, I swear,” he replies, avoiding my question.

Thad and Levi come running back into the room. “She’s not in her room or any of ours.”

I turn my power onto the spirit in front of me. “You’ll tell us what she said to you, right now.”

His eyes widen briefly, and I can tell he’s struggling against the weight of the command, but he’s no match for my power. “When she came back into the room, she was wearing a different dress than before. She looked *amazing*.”

Growls sound off around me, right along with my own, and Rylan’s eyes widen even more.

“But I didn’t...I don’t...” he stammers.

“Tell us what you talked about.”

“When she came up to me, she said she had a job for me and asked if I’d be willing to do some reconnaissance work for you guys. Said that you need someone on the inside to be your eyes and ears. I agreed to help, then Reggie walked up, they had a brief conversation, and Fate asked me to hold out my hand. She clasped it in hers, and when she let go, there was this mark...” He holds out his left arm, and sure enough, the mark of the Gateway is now on his inner wrist. “That, and I suddenly found myself with a fully healed body and the ability to change out of those damn swim trunks. She said she didn’t have time to explain right now, but she’d give me the rundown later. Then the girls had another conversation before they walked off.”

“What the fuck is that woman thinking?” I fume.

Rylan takes a step back but comes up short because Thad and Levi are now standing behind him. Macklin has closed in on his right and Knox on his left. He may be a spirit who could walk right through us, but right now, his self-preservation skills are obviously functioning correctly if he’s smart enough not to try. He looks around at all of us warily.

A quick thought filters through my mind. *Shit! What have I gotten myself into?*

“Mack.” It’s all I have to say before my brother takes over. Let’s see just how well this new power up of his works in real-life applications. I share a quick look with Knox, telling him I want him paying attention as well. He

nods.

“Do you know where Fate is?”

“No.”

“Do you have any intentions of betraying us?”

“No! Why would I?”

“Are you working for anyone who means us harm?”

“No. I’m loyal to the queen.” He stands up, militantly straight.

I glance at Knox, and he nods, telling me what I already suspected.

“Mack?”

“He’s telling the truth. He doesn’t know where she is, and he’s loyal to her.”

Dammit. I could use an outlet for my anger right now, but at least we know we can trust him for the time being. “Fine. But let me make this very clear. I catch even the smallest hint that you’re double-crossing us, I will end you. It will not be quick, and it will be *very* painful.”

He swallows but nods.

“Are we clear then?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good! Report back to me with anything you find. If I’m not available, search out one of my brothers. I don’t think I need to tell you that you need to stay as inconspicuous as possible. We don’t need our enemies knowing that we’re looking for them.”

“I understand.”

My eyes catch all of my brothers’, and they nod.

“Go. First report is due in twenty-four hours. Hopefully you have something for me then, and we’ll reevaluate this little *arrangement* again as soon as we locate Fate.”

“I’ll get you something. You can all count on me.”

“We’ll see about that.”

I turn and head back to the office, my brothers following in my wake. Heading straight for the liquor cabinet in the corner, I pour myself a glass of whiskey and chug it in one swallow. The door clicks shut just as I finish pouring my second glass.

“What the fuck was she thinking?” Knox mutters as he walks toward me, intent on getting his own glass, I’m sure.

“She fucking wasn’t thinking. That woman is going to be the death of me.”

“Technically, she’s the one responsible for our lack of death,” Macklin says, and I just glare at him.

“Knox, any idea where she might be?”

“Not a clue. But we should be able to track her using our marks.”

“Mack?”

“He’s right. I’m sure I can figure it out.”

“We just touch our marks, right?” Knox asks.

“Yes, but it might be more complicated than that if she’s left the Gateway.”

“If we can’t find her that way, we’ll split up and search.”

“Anyone else have this odd sense of déjà vu?” Thad asks.

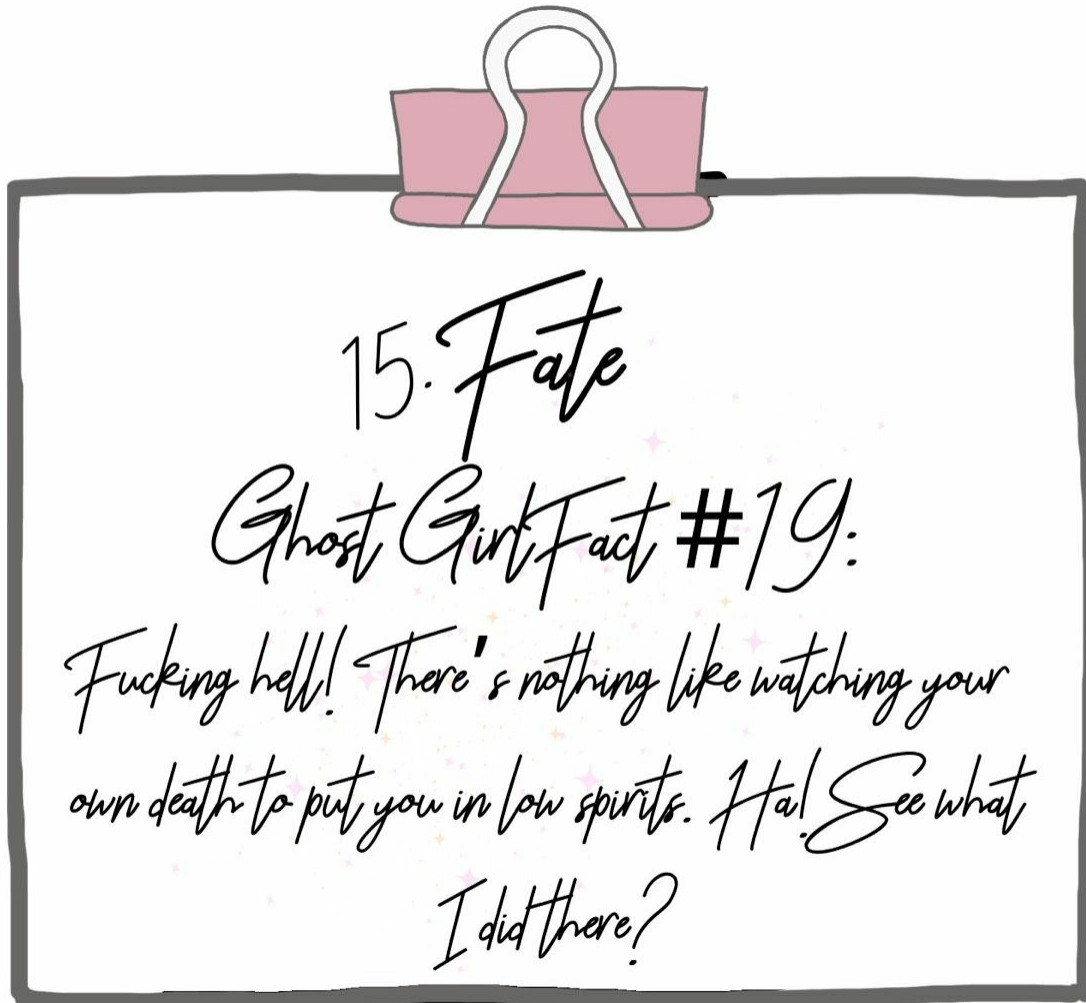
“For sure,” Levi responds. “Let’s just hope the outcome is different this time.”

“Do you think it’s odd that she was wearing a different dress when she walked back into the chamber?” Macklin asks, a curious expression on his face.

“That is odd,” Levi acknowledges. “Our girl hates dresses.”

“She’s definitely up to something,” I muse, my eyes narrowed in thought.

“When we find her, her ass is mine,” Knox growls, and despite the seriousness of the situation, I smirk. I know how his preferences run, and our woman is in for a shock if she thinks she’ll be getting out of this unscathed. Maybe I’m into this group thing after all because I want nothing more than to see her ass turn pink for this little stunt.



“Ok, so now what?” Reggie asks as we walk into the club, ghost girl style.

That’s not a euphemism. We’re literally incorporeal...though we did take the time to do our hair and makeup and tucked our lady bits into sexy as hell dresses just because it makes our little ghost girl hearts happy.

What? We can pretend this is a real girls’ night out if we want to. Don’t judge.

Reggie’s wearing a tight black strapless dress with a pair of killer pink stilettos. Her pink hair is flipped to one side, showing off the shaved hair underneath. Of course, I can’t really see any of those colors because of the whole translucent thing going on, but she described it to me in vivid detail.

“Now we wait for Nicholas to show up. Let’s find somewhere inconspicuous to wait. Like that corner back there. Hopefully there aren’t any surprises, but in case I need to ditch the ghost form, we wouldn’t want to

freak out the living.”

We make our way to the back, walking right through the lines of people at the bar waiting for drinks then the crowded dance floor. Some people shiver as we pass through them, while others don't even seem to notice.

“Hey, look at this hottie,” Reggie says, dancing up on a slender blonde whose boobs are one small slip away from a serious wardrobe malfunction.

Laughing, I point to another pretty girl a few couples over. “You missed that one. Short, curvy, and has the whole innocent thing going for her.”

“Ooh...you're right,” she says, dancing over to the blonde in question. “Yeah. She's more my style.”

“Alright. Come on, Casanova. We can play later.”

“Party pooper.”

Chuckling, I settle into the corner, with its thin bar running along both walls, just big enough for drinks and those tiny purses women bring that hold practically nothing. It's located next to the hallway leading to the rear exit, which could prove useful if we need a quick getaway.

The club is in the busy downtown area about thirty minutes from the house in Illinois. It was built inside a converted factory, the city having renovated the area a few years earlier in an effort to revitalize this part of town. It worked, and the surrounding blocks have grown immensely popular for businesses and city dwellers alike. Other businesses and urban condos have popped up in the adjacent buildings which has helped this part of the city prosper for the first time in years. Maybe all of those real estate agents were good for something after all. At least I got all the city gossip and can tell you whether now is a good time to buy or sell. Super useful for a Guardian of the Spirits. *At least my sarcasm game is strong.*

Looking out over the crowd, I realize we're not the only spirits in here. There are a few scattered around the room, but they don't seem to notice anyone or anything. It's almost like they're still going about their work, pulling on unseen levers and hauling invisible items for whatever they used to manufacture in this factory. The ghosts trapped here probably don't even know they're dead. My sexy nerd would call this a residual haunting, so I make a mental note to have Thad and Levi come back when there are less witnesses to help these poor souls pass on.

“It's really too bad the guys can't see you. You look totally hot.”

I glance down at the deep purple dress that has a hint of metallic shine to it, making it almost black. There are thin slits cut out, showing hints of skin,

and it also barely covers my ass. Or maybe my ass is simply too big for this dress. *Yeah, probably that.* My heels are, admittedly, pretty damn hot if I do say so myself, with thin bands that hug my legs all the way to my upper thigh.

“I’ll have to use that to my advantage once they realize what I’ve done. Distract them with boobs and ass before they know what hit ‘em.”

She laughs. “How long do you think we have before they find us?”

“Knowing Macklin...probably not long enough. Hopefully, Nick gets here soon and says whatever he has to say before that happens.”

“Girl, you’re playing with fire. They’re going to be *livid*. I don’t envy you there.”

“Reg, can I ask you a question?”

“Of course. But if you’re going to ask me to become a part of your harem, you should know that I’ve refused on multiple occasions.”

My head snaps her direction, and I catch the mischievous smirk on her face.

“Haha. Funny. But you’re not *my* type,” I say, tossing her own words back at her.

“Right. Because your type involves an appendage I’m not all that fond of.”

“Don’t knock it ‘til you try it, girl.”

“Oh, I tried it back in my day. Not really a sausage lover. Tacos are more my thing.”

I snort, watching my ghostly bestie as she keeps an eye on the crowd. I realize then that she’s been watching me and my guys for god knows how many centuries. The love and affection, the good times and the bad, the relationships that, from the sounds of it, we weren’t at all quiet about. Then she spent another hundred years without *anyone*. My heart hurts. I know how lonely I was spending ten years by myself. I can’t imagine what she’s gone through spending all those years alone. Then I get a bit angry, wondering why old Fate never offered to help her find someone. “Has there ever been anyone...” I stop myself, not sure how to ask the question considering she’s a spirit.

Her eyes are wistful as they turn my way, sadness filtering through our connection. “There was someone I was interested in years ago. I had the *biggest* crush on her, but...” She hesitates, her eyes suddenly sad. “I don’t know what happened after everything went down. I keep hoping she’ll show

up at the Gateway now that it's opened and I'll get to see her again."

"I'm sorry, Reg," I say softly, laying my hand on top of hers. "If there's anything I can do, just say the word."

She smiles sadly. "Thanks, boss." Her eyes stay locked on mine as she tilts her head a bit, like she's trying to figure me out. "You really have changed. For the better I think. Not that I had a problem with the way you were, mind you, but...I like the new you." She shrugs, once again scanning the sea of bodies in front of us.

A comfortable silence stretches out between us. She's not the first person to tell me that I'm different. Hell, she probably won't be the last. But to know people like what they're seeing makes me feel good. Maybe this time around, the new and improved Fate will handle business and get shit done. Then I'll get to actually enjoy the life that was taken from me. I think of my guys and all we've lost. We've had a second chance fall into our lap, and here I am, rushing head first into potential danger. I'm starting to think Cole is right after all. Maybe my self-preservation skills really are busted. I can only imagine the worry and panic they're probably experiencing as they realize I'm gone. I should feel guilty, and I do a little, but I'm also determined to show them that I'm just as capable as any one of them.

"Reggie, were we always like this?"

"By *we* you mean..."

"Me and the guys. They push and push, and I have to fight to prove myself?"

She looks thoughtful for a moment. "I wasn't around during the early years with all of them. I came along much later. By that time, you all worked like a well-oiled machine. That's not to say everything was perfect though. Cole still pushed your buttons, and the twins still had that naughty sense of humor that would get you going. Mack was the peacekeeper, stepping between you and Cole when things got heated, and Knox was the emotional one that relied on you to calm him down when things got too intense. In those ways, not much has changed. In others...well...they knew with a single look when they'd gone too far. They could anticipate your needs without you having to say a word. Now, they've lost that ability right along with their memories. It's you who has changed the most. They're starting from scratch and having to relearn your boundaries, and while I don't agree with how they're handling it, I *can* understand where they're coming from."

"I'm not sure if that makes me feel better or worse." I sigh, glancing out

over the busy dance floor, wondering at the enormity of all we've lost. I shake myself out of it, telling myself I'll worry about this later when really, I'm back to practicing avoidance. "God, I need a drink. It's like I'm a teen and had to sneak out of the house without Mom or Dad catching me. My nerves are making me jittery."

"So go corporeal and grab yourself one. I won't judge."

"No, probably not a good idea. For one, I didn't exactly bring any cash. But also two, I need to keep my wits about me. Don't want to do anything stupid and give the guys a bigger reason to be pissed off."

"Too late. You'll be lucky if you get out of this in one piece as it is. Might as well throw in some alcohol to prepare you for the upcoming smackdown."

I sigh. "I know. Cole's going to strangle me."

She chuckles. "Don't think it's Cole you're going to have to worry about."

"What do you mean?" I ask, scanning the room, praying that Nick gets here soon. Our little detour to get Rylan set up and to hide the object Reggie collected for me cost us time we didn't have in the first place. But now the book is tucked away for safekeeping which is a load off my shoulders. I know the guys will eventually find out, and while I know I should tell them, I'm just not quite ready for that conversation yet. *Fuck, I'm no better than they are.*

"You and Knox haven't...*you know.* Done the deed yet, have you?"

"Um, no. Why?"

"Oh. You're in for a surprise with that one then."

Before I can ask what the hell she's talking about or how she knows more about my sex life than I apparently do, Nick and two other spirits poof into the place, scanning the busy club, no doubt looking for us. The second he spots me, an almost resigned look flashes across his face before he conceals it behind a smile. I still can't quite pinpoint the feelings he elicits. There's familiarity, sure. But there's something else. A sense of unease, definitely. Kind of like a used car salesman. A pain in the ass but, overall, a necessary evil.

He's in the same light-colored suit, with the same tie that he's currently messing with. There are two guys flanking him. Dude has an entourage? Seems a little excessive if you ask me, considering he's dead and all.

Guy One is wearing a similar suit, but in black or some other dark color.

His head is bald, and he's wearing a hoop earring in his left ear. Guy Two is in a tuxedo, complete with bow tie and tails. His hair is a bit longer on top, with the sides shaved, think David Beckham. *What? Real estate agents watch the damndest things on YouTube when they're bored at open houses.* His dress shoes are so shiny I could probably see my reflection in them...if they weren't translucent.

"Fate! You came," he says as he walks up, Guy One and Guy Two hanging back. "Nicholas. Glad you made it. I don't have much time."

He scans the room again. "You didn't bring your guys with you."

"No, I didn't. I brought Reggie with me."

"Ahhh. So *this* is the infamous Reggie."

I look at her, noting the scowl on her face and then let my eyes ping pong between the two. "I thought you knew him."

"I know *him*. He shouldn't know who *I* am because, you know, the whole *spirit* thing."

"Liv mentioned you once or twice," he says, tugging on his damn tie again.

That gets her attention, and she straightens, her eyes hopeful. "She did?"

"Yes," is all he adds.

Reggie deflates a bit, the scowl returning. Mental note to look into that later. Let's be honest here. At this point, my mental note list is *way* too fucking long.

"Okay, we need to get on with this." We've been gone too long already, and every second we stand here is another second closer to me being in deeper shit.

He considers me a moment, his head tilting to the side. A smarmy grin breaks out on his face. "They don't know you're here."

I ignore that statement. "What is it that you have to tell me?"

"You're in danger."

"As I said, I'm already fully aware of that. If that's all, then this was a huge waste of my time."

He eyes Guy One and Guy Two, the lackeys stepping forward with just that quick glance. Sensing something isn't quite right, I'm immediately on the defensive, my power beginning to simmer and my hand turned and at the ready. Reggie straightens as well, her gaze never leaving Guy One and Guy Two.

"There's no need to panic. We're not here to hurt you."

“Then what’s with the muscle?”

“They’re here as...backup,” he says simply, but something about this still seems off.

He glances back at Guy One, and they stare each other down for a moment before Nick sighs. He turns toward me then, taking another step forward, and I can feel my power sliding against my skin. It really isn’t happy about this situation.

“You need to know that something is coming. Something powerful and practically unstoppable,” he says softly, so low only I can hear him.

He takes another step, now standing less than a foot away. He tugs on his tie with his left hand before his right comes up to lie across my marks. At the contact, a memory stirs, throwing me back one hundred years.

Distraught, I look up at the bright lights of the house. The circular drive is overflowing with cars, and I follow the sounds, around the side of the property and to the backyard where an orchestra is playing. Obviously, they’re having some sort of party; people are milling about, laughing and dancing. I scan the crowd, looking for Liv through the tears streaming down my face, but Nicholas intercepts me.

“Fate, you’re here,” he says, but his eyes don’t quite meet mine.

We’re not exactly friends, and the fact that he sought me out and is talking to me right now is enough to throw me off for a second, but then the sight in the cave comes flooding back in and the tears start to flow harder.

“I need to see Liv.”

He looks around cautiously, tugging on his tie before his hand wraps around my upper arm, guiding me off to the side, away from the people who are starting to notice my presence.

“I’ll get her for you. Why don’t you go wait out back, in your picnic spot, and I’ll send her to find you.”

“Thanks, Nick.”

I skirt the bright lights of the patio, sticking to the shadows to avoid drawing more attention to myself. In my current state, I don’t need anyone looking too closely. As soon as I get to our spot, I see the rectangular hole that’s been dug into the ground. Confused, I stare at it, thinking maybe Liv decided she was finally going to plant that garden out here like she had always talked about.

I’m looking into the hole, trying to figure out what I’m seeing in the dark, when the first blow comes from behind. Before I can recover, merciless

strikes begin to rain down on me. I feel each blow, each stab of pain as a knife repeatedly pierces my skin. I'm shoved to the ground, and for a split second, I think it might actually be over, but no. It was a mere pause, the strikes beginning again with renewed force. With each kick to my ribs, each strike to my head, each stomp of someone's boot, my mind reels and my body aches.

I can barely breathe, let alone scream, as another kick to my face breaks my jaw. The pain is excruciating, but I'm alive. I have to fight. For myself. For my guys. But then I remember why I'm here in the first place, and a different type of pain, this one more immense than any of the physical damage they're inflicting, hits me with all of the force of the heavens. I stop trying to fight. Stop trying to futilely block their hits. There is nothing here left to fight for.

It goes on for what feels like hours but is probably mere minutes. Hands wrap around my ankles and drag me across the cool grass, where I'm callously dumped into the hole in the ground. The hole that was not meant for a garden, but for a grave. They don't bother to kill me first. They want me to suffer. I land on my back, facing the twinkling stars in the night sky as I make a half-assed attempt to save myself, to get to the ether, but my power is nowhere to be found. My arms and legs are at odd angles, each breath a struggle, and every bone in my body feels like it's been cracked in two, but at this point, the pain barely even registers as my body long ago began to shut down.

This is it, I realize. My eyes fall closed, and I let the tears that are falling dampen the dirt beneath my head as they roll down my cheeks. It isn't like I could wipe them away if I wanted to anyways. I'm ready to face the inevitable.

I am going to die.

I could attempt to get to the ether again, but why? There is nothing left for me here any longer. My time has come. More tears spill down the sides of my face, thoughts of my guys playing through my mind despite the hurt raging through my heart. The happier times. The way I want to remember them. Their smiles. Their support. Their love.

The sound of feminine laughter floating on the night's breeze has me struggling to open my eyes that are nearly swollen shut. The last thing I see before the dirt starts falling down on me is Nicholas standing over the hole in the ground, peering down into my grave with sorrow-filled resignation on his

face. The dirt begins to fall, covering my body, my face, filling my lungs. I say one final I love you to the men who broke my heart before the world goes black.

I'm jolted back to the present as Nick roughly jerks my arm to get my attention. "Fate? Are you listening?"

I look at him and can't seem to reconcile the man I knew with what happened that night. Something still doesn't make sense, especially now that I know the entire thing was an elaborate setup. He said so himself. What would he have to gain from my death? My brain begins to put the pieces together, registering the lack of surprise on his face when I showed up at the house. Those murky feelings he's been giving off. He was a part of it all.

"It was you," I whisper, unable to say the words any louder.

His eyes go wide.

Reggie steps up beside me. "Fate? What do you mean?"

I ignore her, staring at the man that was at least partially responsible for my death even if he didn't land a single blow. "You set me up that night. You somehow knew I'd come, and you led me right into their hands."

"I'm sorry, Fate. I truly am. It was never personal. I..." He looks off to the side, tugging on that damn tie with his free hand, hesitating. "I loved her. Or at least I thought I did. Now I know better, but it's too late. The damage is done, and I can't stop it."

He looks back at me then. Sadness and guilt shining in his opaque eyes that I know are usually a deep brown.

My bicep under his hand starts to tingle then burn slightly. I try to rip my arm away from him, but his grip is too damn tight.

"I truly am sorry, Fate."

"Nick, let go of my arm."

"Do me a favor," he rasps.

Reggie fumes, "I don't fucking think so!"

"Find Liv and make sure she's taken care of, okay?"

"Let go of my arm, Nick. Now!" I let my power free, just enough for him to understand I won't be manhandled and maybe give him a taste of what's coming.

He jerks his hand away, shaking off the shock from my power, but keeps talking. Faster now, like he knows he's running out of time, his words just low enough that only I can hear him. "Look, I'll do what I can, but most of the time I have very little control. Whatever you do, don't let her get the

book.”

“Don’t let *who* get the book? Nick, you’ve gotta give me more information than that. You’re not making any sense.”

I watch as he struggles to speak, Guy One and Guy Two stepping closer, but Reggie mirrors their movement, distracting them and giving us a few precious seconds. His whispered words are so low now, the music almost drowns them out. “You don’t understand. I can’t tell you. It’s part of the spell she’s got me under. For the first time in over a century, I’ve started to gain a little bit of clarity, but it comes and goes. Just know this. *Don’t. Trust. Anyone.*”

16. KNOX

EMPATHY FACT #6:

WE HAVE LIMITS. STRICT ONES.
ALWAYS TO BE OBEYED OR
SUFFER THE CONSEQUENCES.

“Macklin, how much longer?” I ask my brother. He’s desperately reading through a book he found in the office, his hair mussed and his shirt half-untucked.

“This is in Latin, but I think I’ve finally got it.”

“Reggie said it’s about intent. Isn’t that enough?” Levi asks.

“Think of it like a genie’s wish. If we’re not specific enough, we could end up with unexpected results. We don’t have much time to waste, so it’s better to be a bit cautious now rather than go on a wild goose chase when time is more critical.”

There’s a sense of urgency riding me that I don’t understand. Of course, we want to find her before something happens to her or she does something stupid, but I’m pretty sure this feeling isn’t mine. Is it Fate’s? Maybe the increased range is yet another side effect of our power up?

Cole is busy pacing in front of the fireplace, grumbling to himself.

“Cole, bro, you’re going to wear out the carpet.”

He pauses long enough to shoot a glare at Thad before resuming. “Fucking woman and her stubbornness.”

He’s right, and he’s also wrong. She wouldn’t have gone off alone if we hadn’t had our heads stuck up our asses. “This is our fault,” I say quietly, swirling the amber liquid around in the glass I’m holding.

Cole stops, throwing his arms in the air. “How the fuck is this our fault?”

“We left her in the dark. Tried to play heroes. The woman is smart. Too damn smart, honestly. She knew we had no intention of changing our plans.” And that, I realize, is why I’m so angry. Not just at her for leaving without telling us, *again*, but because I’m partially to blame. “And she was right. We were going to continue to seek out leads. We were going to keep shoving her back onto that damn pedestal, all in the name of protecting her.” I shake my head. “We’re all sitting here in this room because she made it so. We’re her *balance*, not her *keepers*. We need to remember that and do better. *Be better.*”

The room is silent while they take in my words. They all know I’m right. Even Cole, but he’s going to have the hardest time admitting it.

A sudden sense of alarm hits me, the emotion skimming along my skin, followed by faint feelings of pain and despair, agony, and resignation, almost like an echo of a memory. It’s kind of similar to hearing someone talk while you’re underwater. You can tell they’re talking, but can’t make out what they’re saying. I jump to my feet, frantically trying to decipher what the hell is happening. Then it hits me. I know what this is.

“Knox?” Cole asks, stomping over to me and studying my face. His aura is taking on a grayish tinge, full of fear and worry, both slamming into me. It’s disconcerting to see my unshakeable brother coming undone.

“We need to go. Now! I think Fate’s having another flashback.”

“Fuck!” the twins swear in unison.

“Macklin!” Cole barks.

“I’m on it!” he says, rushing over to us. He brings up his left wrist, placing the fingertips of his right hand on Fate’s mark. “Show me Fate.”

Thad and Levi have joined us in the center of the room, everyone eagerly waiting.

“Shit! Think, Mack, think,” he mumbles to himself.

“It didn’t work?” I ask.

“All I could see was a crowd of people surrounded by darkness that was

broken only by color-changing lights.”

“What the fuck? Is she at a rave?” Thad gripes.

“Gateway, I need you to show me the location where I can find Fate.”

“This better work, Mack.” My hand comes up to rub my temple. My head is pounding, and my breaths are becoming shallow. My entire system is going haywire, tiptoeing ever closer to the edge of my limits. But overshadowing all of that is a feeling of hopelessness. And overlying *that* is a sense of panic. *Fuck! This isn't good.*

“She’s at a club on Elm.”

Cole shouts, “What the fuck is she doing at a club?”

“Maybe she just needed a night out?” Thad offers with a shrug.

“I don’t know what she’s doing, but we need to get there. Whatever memory just surfaced, it’s not a good one. There’s agony and terror and...shit....it’s gotta be from *that* night. There’s no way it could be anything else.”

Their eyes all look at me in stunned horror.

Mack looks at each of us. “Imagine Fate very clearly in your head. Hold the Gateway mark and say ‘Take me to the club on Elm.’ Theoretically, it should transport us there.”

“Should?” Levi asks, looking skeptically at his mark.

“Just do it, jackass,” I snap.

We all touch our marks, and I silently repeat Mack’s words in my mind, picturing my little ghost and praying she hasn’t gotten herself into a heap of trouble.

Right as my body begins to dematerialize, black wisps of smoke floating through the air, Mack shouts, “Wait!”

Fucking really? The next thing I know, I’m standing in a darkened alley flanked by my brothers as their own bodies rematerialize next to me. Mack is the last one to arrive, looking around frantically.

“Oh, thank God.”

“What the hell, Mack?” Levi fumes.

“The Gateway threw me a curve at the last second there.”

“The fuck? You speak to the Gateway now?” Thad grumbles.

“It’s not really actual speech, per se. More like images that get its point across. Pretty sure we all have the same ability, I’m probably just more open to it than you guys.”

“Well, what the fuck did it say?” Cole demands.

“The Gateway said it would not be wise to suddenly appear in the middle of a room full of the living. Then it rolled its eyes, or at least, it felt like it did. Apparently it altered our course somewhat.”

“So where the fuck are we then?” Thad hisses.

“We’re still at the club. Just in the alley beside the building.”

Levi scans from side to side, making sure no one saw us. “So, what are we supposed to do now?”

“All I know is that I’m not waiting in a goddamn line. We need to get inside. Whatever it was I was feeling before is stronger here.”

“We need a plan,” Cole says, eyeing the opening of the alleyway.

“Well...” Mack starts, looking at the rest of us nervously.

“Spit it the fuck out, Mack,” Cole barks, his patience gone.

“I have an idea.”

“For fuck’s sake, man, just tell us what we have to do,” Thad grumbles.

“We ghost ourselves.”

“Say what now?” the twins say in unison.

“Hear me out. We have Fate’s power, right? We can move through the ether, so it stands to reason that we can also...change forms.”

“How?” I ask, the urgency like a constant battering ram against my senses now that we’re near a crowd of people.

“I sound like a broken record, but it’s all about intent. We think about changing forms, and it should happen.” He closes his eyes, and before I can scoff at the idea, his form begins to flicker until he’s completely transparent.

“Bro, that’s fucked up,” Thad murmurs.

“Fucked up or not, let’s do this.” Closing my eyes, I imagine myself as a spirit. It tingles slightly, a sense of weightlessness taking over my body. When I open my eyes, I can see the blacktop through my boots. “This is seriously tripping me out.”

“Alright. Now the rest of us.” Cole and the twins mimic what Mack and I have already done.

“My dick kind of tickles,” Thad chuckles. “Damn, is it over already?”

“That’s what she said,” Levi adds with a smirk.

“Shut the hell up, bro.”

Standing in an empty alley, in all our ghostly glory, and they still have to bicker like two little kids. I roll my eyes. I don’t have time for this.

Thad looks around the group, his eyes bugging out as he lifts his arm, a finger poking through Levi who just raises a brow. “You’re all creepy as

fuck!”

“So are you, jackass,” I retort.

“Alright, enough.” Cole shivers lightly, though he tries to hide just how uncomfortable he is in this form. “We need to get inside.”

A thought strikes. “Dumb question...do we go through the door, or can we walk through walls?”

“I’m assuming we can walk through walls, but I wouldn’t suggest that at the moment. We have no way of knowing where Fate’s at inside, and we don’t want to lose the element of surprise. The door would be smarter.”

“Good point, Mack. We go in, find Fate, and get the fuck out of here. Understood?” Cole looks around at all of us, his power shooting out to ensure we don’t screw this up and no one tries to play hero. “We can’t risk drawing more attention to ourselves right now.”

All of us respond, “Understood.”

We make our way toward the street, the sounds of cars and people becoming louder the closer we get. Turning the corner, a parade of color is lined up along the wall, people waiting to get through the door. Their auras fill the sidewalk with a colorful pattern like a kaleidoscope, emotions flooding through me from everywhere all at once. Excitement, anxiety, greed, lust, and everything in between.

The metaphorical bucket that houses my emotional intake is brimming, on the verge of flowing over the edge. Crowds are normally something I avoid if at all possible, which also has the totally unintentional side effect of getting me out of grocery duty. Can’t complain about that.

No one seems to notice us as we walk toward the bouncer, making our way inside.

Just as Thad starts to walk through the door, the bouncer steps through him to let more people in. “Oh, that’s just not right,” he groans.

Smirking, I turn back to the crowded bar and let my ghostly eyes adjust to the darkness as I begin to scan the crowd, frantically searching for Fate. The place is packed. An ocean of auras and emotions, along with the smell of sweat and alcohol. Such a lovely combination. My gaze quickly looks for the silvery aura that I know like the back of my hand.

It doesn’t take me long to find her. Zeroing in on her like she’s the lighthouse to my ship, my eyes lock onto my little ghost, tucked into the far back corner, and her emotions are so high right now that they drown out those of the living. There’s a spirit in a light-colored suit, probably white

based on the lack of contrast in his translucent form, standing far too fucking close, his hand wrapped around her upper arm, and he's not letting go. I'm moving before I can think, storming toward them, walking through anyone and anything that gets in my way. I hear my brothers behind me, the twins making random comments about how gross the living feel as their bodies slip through them, but I tune them out. I'm focused on one thing, one ghostly female who isn't going to be able to sit down for a week when I'm done with her.

Just before we approach the group, he jerks his hand away, shaking it like she just zapped him with her power. *Yeah, fucker. Didn't expect that, did you?*

Reggie steps toward the two spirits behind Mr. White Suit just as he leans in, whispering something too low for me to make out, and I see red. My power ignites, the glow being drowned out by the shifting colors bouncing off the disco ball in the middle of the dance floor.

"Back away from her. Now!" I growl as my brothers step forward, effectively boxing the group in.

Fate looks up at me, her eyebrows shooting up to her hairline as her eyes quickly dart over the others.

Mr. White Suit shoots Fate one last pleading look. "Remember, Fate, find Liv," he says urgently.

Thad and Levi reach out, but just before their hands make contact, the two spirits behind Mr. White Suit touch his shoulders, and they all disappear.

"What the fuck?" I growl.

"It's about fucking time you all showed up. What took you so long?" Reggie rolls her eyes.

I watch as Fate's hand comes up to rub her upper arm where the shithead had grabbed her. She's studying her marks a little too intently. Despite the clog of emotional haze in the room, her confusion and worry hit me.

Taking a deep breath, I try to get a handle on my temper. Looking at each of my brothers, with their varying levels of pissed off expressions, I know I'm not the only one. Thad and Levi are both standing at the back, arms crossed over their chests, looking like giant vikings. Their faces are blank, and from experience, I know the fact that they're silent right now does not bode well for Fate.

When my eyes meet Macklin's, I see the disappointment and hurt, along with a hefty dose of anger born of worry. Fate must see it too because guilt

immediately floods our connection.

Cole's staring at her with his trademark scowl. So, nothing unusual there. I can feel the fear lingering within him, the relief that he's found her and that she's safe. Why can't the fucker just be real with her for once? I'm honestly a bit fed up with his go-to reaction. All it does is push him, and the rest of us as collateral damage, further away from her.

When I turn back to Fate, her eyes meet mine. I want to be mad, and I am, sure. Hell, I'm positively furious, but I'm also overwhelmed with so many other emotions that I can't even comprehend them all. Love, fear, gut-wrenching worry. Even though she's fine now, we were almost too late.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, then she grimaces, knowing that's lame as shit.

"You fucked up," Cole growls, his temper barely leashed.

"I know. But I..."

"No *buts*, Fate. Immature stunts like these will get us all killed."

Her eyes narrow on Cole. "Immature?"

"Maybe we should take this..." Mack doesn't even get to finish his thought before Cole steps up into Fate's space.

All of us go on high alert. Ready to jump between them if needed.

"Yes. Immature and irresponsible."

Her anger is now through the roof, dampening her guilt. The lights throughout the club start to flicker, the music begins skipping, and the temperature starts to drop. She pokes her finger into his chest, and even though they're both incorporeal, the force pushes him back slightly.

"How dare you call me immature and irresponsible! I did nothing different than what you and the guys have been doing behind my back. I followed a lead. Just because I'm a woman doesn't mean I'm any less capable of handling our current situation."

"Yeah. Because it looked like you were handling it just *fine* before we showed up to save your ass."

The pink and silver of her power is skimming over her skin, growing brighter the angrier she gets.

"Saved my ass? Did you not see me shock the shit out of him? Did you not see that I had it under control? I didn't want to hurt him. He's under some kind of spell, just like you guys were. He was trying to warn me."

"Cole, man, back off," I say, laying a hand on his shoulder. "We should take this discussion somewhere else."

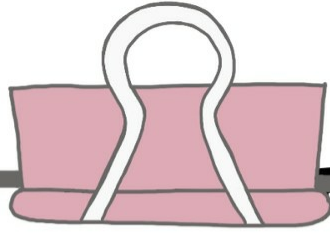
I can feel Fate studying me as Cole's eyes meet mine, and I'm sure he can

see just how close I am to losing it.

With my own emotions spiraling out of control, the emotions from Fate and my brothers filtering through my senses, and all of the chaos in the room around me, I'm getting close to my limit. I need to get out of here.

With one last look at the woman that's going to be the death of me - for real this time - I let all of my emotions free. I want her to understand. Her gorgeous gray eyes go wide, and her pouty lips open slightly. The urge to grab her by the back of the neck, push her to her knees, and have her help me release the tension building inside is almost too much to restrain. But now is not the time or the place. And there's the fact that we *really* need to talk first.

"I'll see you guys back at the Gateway," I say as I touch the mark on my wrist and pray I make it to my room before I pass out.



17. Fate

Ghost Girl Fact #20:

*Oops, I did it again...didn't I? Spank me, baby,
one more time.*

Knox disappears in a wisp of black smoke, and I can breathe again. The enormity of what he was experiencing was overwhelming, and the fact that I was at least partially to blame makes me feel like complete shit.

My eyes meet Mack's. There's understanding there despite the lingering anger, a hint of forgiveness, and relief. Yet that doesn't make me feel any better. When I look at the twins, their faces are stoic as they stare back at me. They're still, quiet, and that's honestly more terrifying than if they were raging at me. I'm so used to my twins' naughty banter that the silence is powerful enough to damn near suck the air out of the room. Turning, I'm caught in Cole's glare. That's nothing unusual, but what he's feeling tells me it goes far deeper than being furious with me. Besides all of the anger and worry, there's a common denominator between my guys: *hurt*. I can deal with their fury. The hurt, well, it twists me up inside.

“I really am sorry, but if I had told you what I was planning, you never would have let me come. I needed to do this.”

“Was it worth it?” Cole asks, his tone deceptively soft.

“Cole, I...”

“You know what? Save it.”

“But let me explain...”

“Oh, you’re going to explain alright. But right now we need to get out of here, and I need to check on Knox.”

“Is he okay?” I ask, concern for my snarky empath overriding everything else.

Macklin jumps into the conversation. “He’s close to an overload. When that happens, he’s usually out cold for days.”

“Fuck! What are we waiting for then?” I look at my friend. “Reggie, if there are spirits still lingering at the Gateway, can you let them know I apologize for the unforeseen delay and I’ll hold court again as soon as I can to make up for it?”

“You got it, boss.” In a blink, she’s gone.

“Are we ready?” I ask quietly.

They don’t respond to me. Instead, Cole shares a glance with Mack before he and the twins simply vanish. Mack stares at me with an inscrutable look on his face, making me suddenly feel self-conscious, which is ridiculous.

“Mack?” I whisper cautiously.

He simply shakes his head. “Come on, echo. Let’s get you home.”

He grabs my hand with his own ghostly one, which still surprises me. I didn’t know they could go ghost. *Another thing they didn’t tell me?* My gaze drops to that simple connection then back up at my sexy nerd, holding his intense stare with my own as our bodies begin to dematerialize and reappear outside our rooms in the Gateway. My other three guys are waiting for us there, in deep discussion...until they see us. They all straighten, another shared look passing between them.

So the bastards have learned nothing. Great.

Cole starts to head toward Knox’s room.

“Cole?”

He turns to look back at me.

“Let me check on Knox?”

He doesn’t say anything at first. Just contemplates me with that damn

scowl on his face. With a single nod, he walks away without a word. *Fucking hell. He's going to make me grovel, isn't he?*

The twins stalk over. Thad leans down and pulls my chin up with one of his large fingers, forcing me to meet his eyes.

"We've got your back. Always, woman. But don't *ever* leave us again." His lips meet mine roughly, but he's gone so quickly I have no chance to deepen the kiss.

Levi steps into me before I can recover and drops a sweet kiss to my forehead. "You can make it up to us later, sweets." His eyes locking onto mine before he steps back with a small smirk. "Though that might have to wait until you can sit without flinching."

What the fuck does that mean?

My two blond giants follow after Cole.

"Go check on our empath. He needs you," Mack says as he wraps his big arms around me and I bury my face into his chest.

Taking a deep breath, I inhale his scent, like rain and the freshness that follows a storm, shoring up my defenses for what's to come.

"Good luck." With that, he follows after his brothers.

What the hell? It's like everyone knows something I don't. I eye the door down the hall that I know belongs to Knox. I haven't been inside any of their rooms yet, so I honestly don't know what to expect when I finally force my feet to move in that direction. Taking a deep breath, I knock softly.

No answer.

"Knox, it's me. Can I come in?"

Nothing.

I start to worry that I'm too late. That he's already passed out and I'm going to find him laid out on the floor or slumped over in a chair. What if he's hurt? I don't hesitate. Quickly opening the door, I walk into the darkened room. There's a soft light coming from the back corner that barely reaches the doorway from what I'm assuming is the bathroom as there aren't any windows in the Gateway. Making my way inside, I wait for my eyes to adjust. They flare wide when they catch a glimpse of him.

He's standing in front of a huge wall of photos, much like the one in the main chamber, a glass of what is probably whiskey in his large hand. His large bed is directly behind him, perfectly made and untouched. But that isn't what has my full attention. It's the fact that he's shirtless, his jeans unbuttoned slightly, with his feet bare.

“Knox?”

He doesn't acknowledge me, but I see him straighten slightly as he raises the glass to his lips, downing the remaining contents.

“Are you okay?” I ask softly. I shouldn't feel uncertain, but this is uncharted territory. “I told Cole I'd check on you.”

“You should probably go,” he murmurs, his voice low and deep which sends a shiver down my spine, along with a hefty dose of pain since he apparently doesn't want me here.

“The guys said you were close to an overload. Is there anything I can do to help?”

His head turns my way slowly. The look in his eyes gives me pause. It's primal. Almost feral. I suddenly feel like I just walked into the den of a predator...and I'm the prey.

“I don't think you're ready for what I need, little ghost. Best leave now while I still have a tight leash on my control.”

There's a sense of desperation that filters through the block he somehow erects around his own emotions. It shouldn't make my toes curl or cause my body to flush with need, but it does. He must sense it too as his nostrils flare and his fists clench.

“Fate,” he rasps. “*Please.*” It sounds like a warning and a plea, all in one.

There's no hesitation, no more uncertainty. He needs me, and I won't let him suffer alone. “Let me help you,” I whisper as I step into him, our bodies a mere breath apart.

He still doesn't make a move, but I can feel his resolve weakening as his grip on his control loosens.

“What do you need?” I ask. “What can I...” I don't get to finish the sentence before he's moving. I'm backed against the wall, his hard body covering me as he raises one hand, roughly grabbing my jaw and forcing my shocked eyes to meet his.

“You don't have any idea what you're up against here, Fate. This is your last chance. Leave and come back when I've slept this off.”

“I'm not going anywhere.”

“Stubborn goddamn woman,” he curses before his mouth smashes into mine.

The kiss is harsh, consuming, and hot as all hell. His hand slides from my jaw down to my throat, his grip tightening slightly. Not enough to completely block my airway, but enough for me to know just who's in control here.

He pulls back, his breathing labored as his heavy-lidded eyes meet mine.

“You’ve been a very, very bad girl,” he growls, and I swallow harshly. Not out of fear, but out of an arousal so intense, I’m soaked and my pussy is throbbing from a single sentence. “Do you know what happens to bad girls, little ghost?”

I shake my head, completely unable to speak. I’m so lost in this version of Knox that I’m pretty sure my brain is malfunctioning.

“They get punished.” He pushes off of me, just far enough that he can spin me around, my hands coming up to brace against the wall just in time to save my face from meeting it. His hands grab the bottom of my dress and push it up past my hips.

His swift intake of breath echoes around the quiet room before a string of curses leaves his lips. “You’re not wearing any fucking underwear.”

He says it like an accusation, and I grin despite the seriousness of the situation. I don’t know what to say in response to that because it’s pretty damn obvious that I’m bare.

“Fate, I…” He trails off. He must take my silence for reluctance. It’s not. My body is practically shaking from the shared need flowing between us. There’s still anger wafting off of him, sure, but his desire for me is overriding all of my mental functions.

He takes a few steps back. At his retreat, I risk a glance over my shoulder. He’s standing at the end of the bed, his eyes rolling down my legs and back up, lingering on my ass. He can probably see my wetness as I’m pretty damn sure it’s starting to trickle down my thighs.

“I’m right here, Knox. Tell me what to do.”

He shakes his head as if to clear it, his eyes coming up to meet mine. The look is hot enough to set this entire place ablaze. “Come here,” he commands.

He may not have Cole’s power, but my body doesn’t seem to know that. I slowly straighten and push off the wall, turning to walk toward him, my dress still bunched up around my waist. He swallows, his eyes never leaving the apex of my thighs as I stop just in front of him.

“Turn around and place your hands on the bed.”

My eyebrows shoot up. *He can’t really mean to...*

“The longer it takes you to obey, the worse this is going to be for you.”

I turn slowly, placing my palms down on his silky comforter.

“Do you know why you’re being punished?”

“Because I left without telling anyone?” I ask softly.

“Twice.”

I gulp. *Shit. I forgot about that.* “Right. Twice.”

“And what did I say would happen?”

“You’d bend me over your knee.”

“But I think I like this view so much better.” His fingertips trail up my outer thigh. “You’ll count them. If you don’t, I’ll start over.”

Fuck. I didn’t know I was into this, but I really, really am. Pretty sure I’m dangerously close to an orgasm from the anticipation alone. I can’t speak, so I nod. No sooner does my head dip than his large hand is landing with a smack against my ass. My fists clench in the comforter.

“What do you say, little ghost?”

“One.”

Another smack, this one against the opposite cheek.

“Two.”

The next one is harder and has me jerking forward, the heat from his palm leaving a path of fire along my skin.

“Fuck!”

“That’s not counting, little ghost. Do I need to start over?”

“Th...three.”

The next few come in rapid succession, and I struggle to keep counting. My body is strung tight, one spark away from erupting into flames.

When his hand lands on my ass again, the slap echoes around the room and I groan, my body falling forward and my chest hitting the bed. My grip on his comforter is so tight that I’m scared I’ll rip the damn material as an orgasm shoots through me.

“Tsk, tsk. Did you just come?” he asks, his husky voice telling me he’s just as turned on by this as I am. His fingers trail along my inner thigh, skimming over the wetness there as two fingers slide through the obvious evidence of my release. “Oh, you really are a naughty girl, aren’t you?”

His palm runs across my ass, spreading heat in its wake, and I suck in a breath. He chuckles, the next two hits landing with resounding smacks, one on each cheek. My ass is on fire, and I probably won’t be able to sit down for a week, but I count them both. *Nine. Ten.*

As I struggle to steady my breathing, I hear the zipper on his jeans as he lowers it, the fabric sliding down his legs and landing with a light thump on the floor. My pussy clenches with a whole different kind of anticipation.

“You can’t ever leave us like that again, little ghost. You’re our heart, and without you, we’d all be lost,” he says softly.

Tears suddenly fill my eyes. I didn’t mean to hurt them; I just needed them to let me in. To know that I’m just as capable as they are. To trust me. Even thinking that last part sounds totally ass backwards in my head. You don’t earn trust by going behind someone’s back. Isn’t that the very same thing I’m fighting them for? And then a trickle of guilt works its way in as I remember the book. *Shit!*

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“Sorry’s not good enough.” His hand grips my hip as he steps into me, sliding his dick through the wetness that he finds between my thighs. “You don’t get to come until I say. Do you understand?”

One glance over my shoulder and my belly flips. The look in his eyes is one I haven’t seen before. There’s possessiveness and fire, need and anger, worry and relief, and something that looks a lot like...love? They’re all fighting for dominance, but it’s that last one that causes a pang in my heart.

My eyes meet his. “Yes, sir.” It slides off my tongue as if I’ve said it a million times before. It’s as natural as breathing. My soul remembers, even if I don’t.

“Say it again,” he rasps as he lines himself up and drives in. There’s no pause or allowance for my body to acclimate to his size, and he’s definitely not small. He pulls out and thrusts back in, slamming me forward, my forehead meeting the sheets as I hang on for dear life.

“Yes, sir. Please, sir.”

He grabs a handful of hair, wrapping it around his fist, effectively pulling my head back as he fucks me harder. Faster. It stings a little, but that just adds to the intensity of the almost overwhelming pleasure. I can feel another orgasm building each time our bodies slap together.

“Ah, ah, ah. Don’t even think about it, little ghost. I’m not through with you yet,” he growls.

Dragging my lower lip between my teeth, I try to breathe, try to stop the orgasm I can feel sneaking up on me as he continues pounding into me mercilessly.

“Oh, *fuck*,” I groan.

He pulls out suddenly, and I whimper but don’t have time to curse him before he’s turning me around, lifting me off my feet and throwing me on top of the bed. He crawls between my legs, a hungry look in his hazel eyes that

practically sends me over the edge again.

Suddenly, the moment is imprinting itself over another. As he positions himself between my thighs, the memory of another time begins to play in my mind, his hand grabbing my leg and hooking it around his back, his dick poised at my opening before he thrusts in all the way to the hilt, impaling me with his cock. The images are damn near in sync as he continues to move, two separate moments in time, and I moan as two distinct sets of feelings meld together. Now I'm the one on the verge of my own overload as the past finally recedes. My eyes fall closed, and he stills. Another whimper escapes. I need him with a desperation I've never felt before.

"Keep your eyes on me, little ghost. I need to see you," he says, softer now.

When our eyes meet, our bond flares brighter than it ever has. This connection between us has always been strong, even since that very first day, but now, it's like we've become one. One body, one mind, one heart. It's beating to its own rhythm. Our rhythm. Unique to us and us alone.

His lips drop to mine while he begins moving. It's slower, which does little to minimize the effect he has on me. There is so much more between us now. I can feel the worry he hid and the anger he still hasn't quite let go of. And I can feel his love. This bright, colorful piece of his soul. A place he saves for me and only me.

"Come for me," he whispers. "Now, Fate."

And I'm flying over the edge as he follows, him in my arms as we're both consumed by the blackness. The place where we will always be safe and can always find each other if anything ever happens again. A single tear trails down my cheek. He pulls back slightly, kissing it away before it can fall to the nothingness.

"You're mine."

"And you are mine," I whisper. "I love you."

His eyes widen slightly before his lips tilt up. *There's the grin I adore.* "And I love you, my little ghost."

He kisses me once more, but this time it's achingly slow and sweet.

When my eyes open again, we're back on his bed, on top of the silky soft sheets. He props himself up on his elbows as he stares down at me.

"Promise me, Fate. No more scaring the shit out of us like that."

"I promise," I say softly. "But you need to promise to trust me too. This only works if it goes both ways."

“I can’t speak for the rest of the guys, but you have my word.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” A grin spreads across his face. “Now, let’s get this dress off you. I think I still need your help. Not sure that was enough to avoid an overload.”

“Mmm...is that so?” I ask as he rolls over onto his back.

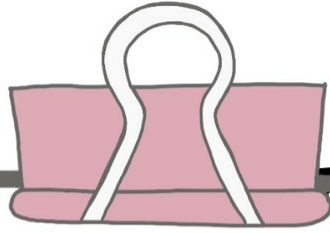
“Yup. I might need you to take over now. I’m on the verge of collapse.”

“You’re right. The situation is absolutely *dire*.” I transition to my ghost girl form just long enough to remove the dress and heels. “There, now let me help you with that,” I say as I straddle his hips. My hands slide up from his abs and through the hair on his chest as his hands find my ass. I hiss out a breath when the touch sends fire through the sensitive skin there.

He chuckles, the relaxed sound warming my heart. “Maybe you’ve learned your lesson?”

“Doubtful. I’m sure I’ll need a reminder or two.”

The heat in his eyes matches the heat in my belly, and I feel his dick as he maneuvers his hips, lining himself up. “I think that can be arranged,” is all he says before he thrusts into me and I’m once again lost as I let my body take over to help my empath work off some steam. *Who am I to say no when duty calls?*



18. Fate

Ghost Girl Fact #21:

When we fuck up, we fuck up good. Go big or go home, that's the new ghost girl motto.

We didn't get much sleep. Knox needed a lot of *help*, or so he said, and I'm nothing if not a dedicated ghost girlfriend.

Now I'm cuddled up against his chest, one of his muscular arms serving as my pillow, as I tell myself I need to get up and check in with the others. His sleepy eyes meet mine, and I can't help the smile that spreads across my face. He drops a quick kiss on my forehead. "I like waking up with you next to me, little ghost."

"I don't hate it," I say with a shrug, but I'm unable to completely erase the grin from my lips. My body feels too fucking glorious this morning.

"Your ass might hate it if I have to give you a few extra swats to remind you where you belong."

His voice is lower than normal and a bit husky from sleep. It sends a shiver through me, but my girly bits are still passed out from all the fun last

night. Pretty sure they aren't down with any sausage for breakfast. Pity that.

"I'll be lucky if I can sit down today without a pillow under me." I fake pout, and he chuckles, a satisfied glint in his eye.

"Good. After that stunt you pulled, you deserved it." He looks at me quietly for a moment before he softly asks, "I wasn't too rough last night? I..." He hesitates. "It was like my body remembered us, our limits and our passion and our desires, even if my brain doesn't."

"Definitely not! I trust that you'll take me right to the edge and never let me fall without catching me."

"God, I love you." He turns slightly, wrapping his arms around me and kissing me. I want to warn him about morning breath, but I'm lost in the moment, in the feel of his plush lips on mine and our tongues battling for control. *Is morning breath different from morning breath mixed with cum? Because lord knows I didn't brush my teeth last night.* His hands slide down, cupping my ass, and I break the kiss, hissing as the sting registers.

"Fuck! That's sore."

He just chuckles, damn him, as I roll out of his arms and get out of bed.

"Awww. Don't go, little ghost, I'll keep my hands above the waist."

"Nope. My ass is not happy with you at the moment." I turn and look over my shoulder, trying for sexy peekaboo but probably end up with duck face. The sight of him in bed, his dick barely covered by the sheet, has me cursing my vajayjay's figurative "out of order" sign. With his hair falling loosely around his face and his drool-worthy chest and abs, he's positively sinful. But alas, reality calls, so I turn to head into the bathroom. "Besides, we need to go find the others. They were worried about you last night."

Even his sigh is sexy. *Dammit.*

After cleaning myself up and doing one of those odd brush your teeth with toothpaste on your finger things, I walk out to see him pulling on a t-shirt and a pair of sweats. Sadly, they're not gray.

I could ghost myself and throw on some clothes, but I want to wear something of his. Something to remind myself of what it feels like to officially reclaim the last of my guys. Call me sentimental...or maybe territorial is more accurate? I mean, pissing on him to mark my territory might be a mood killer.

"Can I borrow a pair of boxers and a shirt?"

His eyebrow raises, but he walks into his massive closet without question. While he's gone, I take a moment to finally scope out his room since I wasn't

thinking about it last night. It's all clean lines with a modern feel. Tones of gray and slate blue artfully arranged with throw pillows and modern wall art. It's clean, simple, but comforting and a bit edgy, which is just like my snarky empath.

"Did you have the Gateway redecorate for you?" I ask, walking over to the wall of photos. There are quite a few of the guys together, a lot of the six of us, and a surprising number of just Knox and me. They span centuries. One photo catches my eye, and I feel tears forming. His big arms are wrapped around me, his forehead against mine as we stand under the moonlight. Somehow, the Gateway caught an image that shows our auras brushing against each other, a core of pure yellow as our happiness shines through. The girl in the photo doesn't look any different, her emotion matching my own at this moment, and I wonder if Knox looks at me with the same intensity he looked at her.

Big hands grab my hips and pull me back into him. "Yeah. And I asked if I could have some of the pictures from our lives before. Thought maybe they might spark a memory or something."

I turn in his arms. "Did they?"

He shakes his head sadly, and all of a sudden, I'm on the verge of tears. Not pretty tears either, but the ugly kind that makes your nose red and causes snot to drip. Before I even know what's happening, I'm a sobbing mess against his chest.

"Fate? What is it?" he asks, concerned.

"I...don't...know." Each pause is punctuated by sniffles, as if my tears are hiccuping. God, this is horrible. Ghost girls are *not* attractive when they cry.

"Shit! I didn't mean to make you cry."

Suddenly, my sobs are replaced by a completely irrational need to laugh. It starts as a giggle, but soon I'm bent over and full on hysterically laughing, tears once again streaming from my eyes for an entirely different reason.

"Okay. What the hell is going on? Your emotions are changing faster than I can register them."

I straighten, which is a struggle because I'm laughing so hard my stomach muscles are complaining. I take a few steps away, trying to get a hold of myself. Slowly, the laughter dies, and I take deep breaths as I try to figure out what is happening.

"Are you good now?" he asks, walking up to me and grabbing my shoulders. The effect is immediate. Anger floods through me, and I need to

punch something. I jerk out of his hold, walk straight up to the wall, and slam my fist into it.

“Fuck!” I shout, then immediately grab my hand. “Ouch! That hurt.”

“Seriously. What the fuck is going on, Fate?” he asks.

“I don’t know. It’s like my emotions are going haywire, and I have no control.”

His eyes widen, and he takes a step back. “Oh shit.”

“Oh shit, what?”

“My level up. I can influence the emotions of others. Somehow, I must be doing that, but I’m not trying to, I swear.”

“Is this what Mack meant when he told me to ask you about making Thad cry?”

“Yes. I accidentally discovered it after you and Cole finalized your last mark.” His hand comes up to push his hair out of his face and stays on the top of his head.

“Okay, we need to figure this out. Why is it just happening now, and what’s causing it? Throw me those clothes and let’s go find the guys.”

He walks over to the bed, picking up the shirt and boxers, and starts to walk toward me. Fear slithers through me, a cold sense of anticipation followed by an intense desire to run away.

“Whoa. Okay, maybe just...stay over there and toss them to me.”

He looks crestfallen as he does what I ask, and my heart clenches. “Don’t worry. We’ll find a way to fix this,” I reassure him as I quickly dress. “Come on, babe. Let’s go figure this out.”

We head toward the office, our usual meeting place, with Knox walking a couple feet away from me. The sudden distance after our newfound closeness last night is making me antsy, and I’m hit with the urge to throw myself in his arms despite the repercussions. The sounds of the other guys chatting hits our ears as we get closer, but the second we cross the threshold, all talking ceases and four sets of eyes turn to us. We stop in front of the fireplace, making sure to keep a few feet between our bodies, the space feeling like miles. The guys are watching, noting something is definitely not right.

“What’s the matter, babe? Did he have trouble getting you off?” Thad mocks.

“Shut the fuck up, man,” Knox snaps.

“Whoa! What’s up your ass, bro? Figured you’d be on cloud nine after a night with our girl.”

“Guys, we have a problem.”

“What kind of problem?” Cole asks.

“Knox’s power seems to be...malfunctioning.”

Mack sits forward in his chair. “Malfunctioning how?”

“If he gets too close to me, I get this rush of emotion. I cried, laughed, and punched a wall in rapid succession right before we came in here.”

Macklin jumps up, grabbing my hand and checking it over. He looks up at me quizzically. “Are you lying?”

“What? No. Knox saw it all.”

Macklin turns toward Knox. “Did she really experience all of that in your room?”

“She just fucking told you she did. I watched her sob, watched her bend over in riotous laughter, and then watched as she damn near put a hole in my wall. So yeah. She most certainly did.”

Mack’s brow furrows. “Maybe my power is malfunctioning too because it keeps insisting you two are lying.”

Cole stands and makes his way over to us. “Mack, what could cause something like this?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll need to do some research and see if I can figure it out.”

“Okay, let’s see if we can...” He trails off, his brows shooting up and then narrowing on my sexy nerd. “So you think I’m a cocky prick?”

It’s Macklin’s turn to look shocked. “I didn’t say that.”

“No, but you thought it.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Cole, what are you talking about?” I ask. “How would you know he was thinking that?”

I watch as his cheeks go pink, his hand rubbing the back of his neck.

“So, I...uh...may have gained a slight ability to read people’s thoughts.”

The entire room erupts into curses and growls. I sigh. Both because it’s yet another thing he hasn’t shared with me and because I’ve probably had some not nice thoughts he’s picked up on as well. *Oops. Sorry, not sorry, Ass-Cole.*

“Look, it’s not every thought, usually just ones sparked by powerful emotions and only what’s at the forefront of someone’s mind. Even then, it seems I need to be fairly close to the person for it to work, and I only get short bursts, not a running dialogue. I can’t mindmeld or anything.”

“Seriously, bro?” Levi asks. “You didn’t feel the need to share that with

all of us?”

“None of you asked.” He crosses his arms over his chest, daring us all to question him.

“We shouldn’t have to ask that sort of shit, jackass,” Knox mutters with both of his hands on top of his head this time.

My head tilts as I study him. “So, is it one hand when the problem seems kind of bad and two when we realize we’re in deep shit?”

His gaze whips my way, his expression clearly telling me now is not the time for random ass thoughts. I shrug. *What can I say? Now I’m curious.*

“Okay, let’s all cool down while we try to figure out what’s causing this.” I look at the twins. “What about you two? Feeling okay?”

Thad and Levi share a look and shrug in unison.

“Try using your light and your shadows,” Mack suggests.

Thad brings his hand up, and all of a sudden, the shadow schlong appears, twirling around the room, diving in and out of us all. It starts rubbing itself on Cole’s leg, practically dry humping it.

“What the fuck is that?” Knox asks in shocked wonder.

Macklin laughs. “Peen puppets is starting to make a whole lot more sense now.”

“Really, Thad? Now is not the time to bust out the shadow schlong.”

“Um, babe. I’m not doing that. I tried to get the darkness to descend on the entire room.”

“Oh. Well, fuck.” I look at Levi. “And you?”

Colorful lights appear, much like the disco ball from the club the night before.

“Guess that answers that question.” My hands land on my hips as I try to figure out what the hell I’m supposed to do now. “Mack, any ideas what’s going on?”

“Wait,” Mack says, walking up to me and rolling up my left sleeve. “What happened to your marks?”

“What do you mean?” I ask, glancing at my bicep. A gasp escapes my lips, seeing the once beautiful crisp black lines that now look as if they’re dripping down my arm, like ink down a page. I bring my fingers up to run along the lines. They’re dry, not wet at all, but something is happening. Then my mind flips back to last night. Nick’s hand on my arm and the tingly, burning sensation that followed.

Oh fuck. We’re in trouble, and it’s all my fault.

They're all circled around me now, or at least all of them except Knox who is trying to maintain a certain distance, discussing what could have caused this and how we're going to fix it.

"Uh...guys?"

Apparently, I wasn't loud enough since they continue to talk around me. Macklin is spouting theory after theory, none of them even close to being correct.

"Guys!"

Nope. That didn't work either. *Fuckers*. I bring two fingers up to my lips and whistle as loudly as I can. *That* gets their attention.

"I know what caused this."

All of their eyes land on me. Waiting. I'm not sure I really thought this through. If they were pissed before, they're going to be *uber* pissed now. *Fuck my life*.

"What aren't you telling us, little ghost? I'm not feeling anything warm and fuzzy right now."

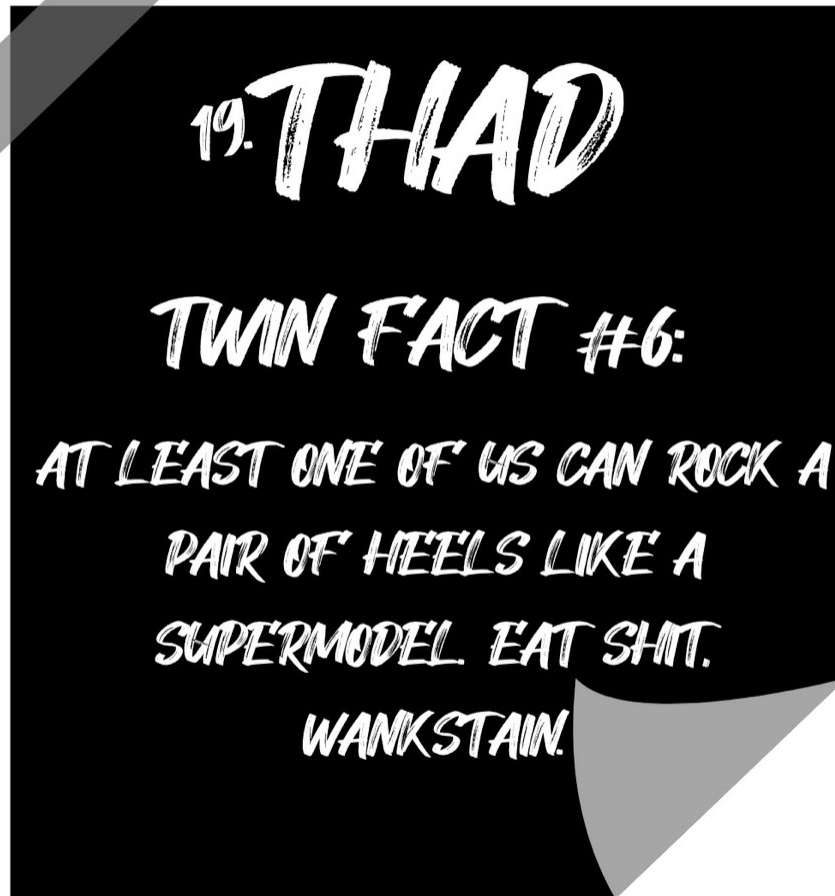
"Remember how Nick grabbed hold of my upper arm last night?"

They all scowl in unison. It's honestly fascinating to watch, and I'd ask them to do it again if I wasn't already anticipating the shit storm I'm about to throw myself into the middle of.

"Well, I kinda sorta felt this weird sensation the longer he held on to it. I think he might be the one responsible."

The room erupts into chaos, the guys shouting and cursing and overall losing their effing minds.

It's going to be a long day. *Le sigh*.



“Bro, I feel ridiculous.”

“You look ridiculous too.” Levi chuckles, smoothing his skirt and turning side to side in front of the full-length mirror. “Does this skirt make my ass look big?”

“Really, wankstain?” Looking down at my own skin-tight black dress, I wiggle, trying to get it to lay right. Big dudes just weren’t built for strapless micro mini dresses.

“Why do we have to do this right now? Isn’t there more important shit we should be working on?”

“There is, but Fate is stressing the fuck out, and this might make her smile.”

I consider him a moment. Sometimes the wankstain has good ideas. I can give him that much.

“Fine,” I mutter, adjusting the long red wig so the fringe bangs stay the fuck out of my eyes. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Don’t forget the heels.”

“Hell *no*, bro!”

His laughter echoes through the room. “Come on. Don’t be a pussy.”

“Why not? I’m dressed like one.”

He lifts one leg, stepping into the four-inch heel before lifting the other leg and attempting to stuff his foot into the empty shoe. He wobbles precariously before reaching out and planting a hand on the wall beside him, almost falling into the dresser.

We’re in his room, getting ready to make good on our bet, and I’d prefer to be any-fucking-where else. The connecting door to my room is on the other side of the dresser in the middle of the adjoining wall. With two queen beds in each, everything in here is the mirror image of what’s in mine, with the exception of his whites and grays, while mine is all blacks and reds. To be fucking honest, I’m not even sure why we have our own rooms since we always sleep in the same one every night.

“How the hell do chicks wear these things?”

Now it’s my turn to chuckle. He’s standing there in a red and black plaid skirt, white shirt that’s knotted just under his pecs, showing off his tattoos and chest hair, and knee-high white socks that are now crammed into the black heels. His long blond hair is parted and fashioned into rough pigtails. Then there’s the makeup. Bright blue eyeshadow and red lipstick. Mack was *very* specific about how this was supposed to go down.

Fuck. They’re never going to let us forget this one.

“We never should have made that bet with the nerd,” Levi grumbles as he attempts to take a few steps and almost falls flat on his ass. Again.

“Lot of good that does us now,” I grumble.

“C’mon, dipshit. I’m not sure how long I can stand in these fucking things. My feet are already killing me.”

Eyeing the heels in front of me, I sigh. *Fuck! Why did I agree to this shit?* I manage to get my big ass feet into the stilettos with minimal wobbling. Who knew they even made heels this big? After a few steps, I find I’m surprisingly good at this, adding a little sashay, swinging by hips, owning my strut.

“The fuck? You got something you want to tell me, bro?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You’re awfully comfortable in those heels.”

“Maybe I just have better balance than you. Or maybe my center of gravity is lower.”

He just raises an eyebrow like he doesn't believe a damn word coming out of my mouth. “Alright. Time to pay the piper.”

Walking out of Levi's room, I strut down the long hallway, while Levi is forced to hug the wall and use it for support.

“Seriously, how are you so damn good in those things?”

“Maybe I'm just the all around better twin.”

“God, you're such a dick.”

After the conversation with Fate and Knox this morning, we all parted ways. Everyone needed space to cool down and take a moment to assess what was happening to us. Fate looked devastated, and I wanted nothing more than to wrap her up in my arms and never let her go, but she said she needed to take a shower. My instinct was to follow her, make sure she's okay and not let her out of my sight. It was a struggle, but I quickly reined that in, knowing that the last thing she needed was me smothering her.

The woman may not understand yet, but I'll be here when she's ready. Whether she needs someone to talk to or someone to hold her when she needs to be held. Or someone to fuck her when she needs to be fucked. Whatever it is, I'll be here for her. Even when she does stupid shit and should know better. I'm supportive like that. My twin may be more grounded, the obvious choice to bring the warm and fuzzies, but I can prove I'm more than just the comedic relief. I've been in her shoes more times than I can count, so I know exactly how she's feeling. That thought surprises me momentarily. I've never commiserated with anyone else, and I'm surprised to find it empowers me. Has me straightening my shoulders, determined to do right by my woman, including dressing up like a schoolgirl gone wrong.

Voices from the kitchen filter into the hall, and I glance back at my brother who is still struggling a ways behind me.

“Pick up the pace, wankstain. Let's get this shit show over with.”

His response is a bunch of unintelligible mumbling.

Walking through the doorway, I notice Fate and Macklin sitting side by side at the dark wooden table in the center of the room that easily fits at least ten people. They each have mugs in their hands, their heads together as they talk softly. Knox is placing serving plates of fruit, salad, and a meat and cheese tray complete with rolls and condiments onto the table, carefully avoiding getting too close to anyone. He's probably worried about projecting

emotions and turning all of us into the equivalent of hormonal teens. Cole is at the counter, pouring a cup of coffee with a scowl on his face. The dude needs a new default facial expression, that's for damn sure.

The kitchen is bright and surprisingly welcoming, with a mix of sparkling white cabinets and warm brown accents mixed in. Fate had the Gateway change a few things, calling it *modern farmhouse*. Whatever the fuck that means.

My woman brings the mug to her lips, taking a sip just as her face turns toward Levi and me. She immediately spews coffee all over the table, making Mack almost topple backward in his chair to avoid the spray. Gasping, she brings the back of her hand up to wipe away the mess from her face before her bright eyes land on us again.

Her laughter immediately causes my heart to pound, and I realize I would do this every day if it meant hearing her laugh like that.

Damn. She's fucking gorgeous.

"What the fuck are you two doing?" she asks, her smile too wide for her face.

"Making good on our bet," Levi responds as he shuffles up next to me.

She spares a glance at Macklin, the fucker sitting there with a smug ass grin. "You're an evil genius, sexy nerd. I love it!"

He doesn't even respond, just takes another sip of his coffee.

"Where did you even get clothes that would fit?" she asks, studying every inch of us. "Damn. Heels too? You guys take your bets seriously."

"Ask him how the fuck he walks so well in his," my twin taunts, playfully glaring at me from my side.

"I mean, he has a good point, babe. You strutted in here like you were owning the runway."

"My talents are multifaceted."

Knox snorts.

Cole just raises an eyebrow and says, "You two look like jackasses."

"I don't know," Fate says, eyeing us up and down again. "They're pretty hot." Her wink sets Macklin off, and they both start laughing.

"Fuck. I need to sit down." Levi makes his way to the table, shoving his bulk into one of the chairs in front of them as Knox drops a towel down. Fate grabs it and wipes up her mess, but she can't stop sneaking glances at us. Each time, her smile grows until she's biting that plush lower lip.

"Woman, you need to stop doing that, or I can't be held responsible for

my actions,” I groan, sitting next to my twin.

Her eyes sparkle with mischief as she leans forward, her tits pushing together until they damn near pop out over the top of her black tank top. “Stop doing what, *doll*?”

Resting my forearms on the table, the sides of the red wig fall forward. Our eyes are locked, and for a moment, I can almost forget that there are four other people in the room, watching our interaction.

“Do you have any idea what you do to me, babe?” I growl, my eyes dipping to her cleavage as one of her slender fingers runs along the valley of her tits. Thoughts of sliding my dick between those luscious globes damn near short circuit my brain.

“You want to stick your dick *where*?” Cole nearly growls.

“Ignore him as he malfunctions.” Her grin grows as her focus stays on me. She simpers, “What do I do to you, Thad?”

Her voice is a mere whisper, but the sound of my name leaving her lips instantly has me rock hard. Before I can respond, a shout echoes through the room.

“What’s up, bitches?” Reggie pops into the seat at the far end with Rylan standing by her side. She quickly takes in those of us at the table, her gaze doing a double take when it lands on the hotness that is my twin and me.

“This is a new look for you boys. I kind of dig it.”

“We’re hot, right?” I say, grinning.

“Soooo hot!” Reggie fans herself. “But for real, what is this all about?” she asks, waving her hand up and down in our direction.

“Lost a bet,” Levi answered.

“You two will never learn.”

Both of us turn to her. “We did this often?”

“Oh, definitely. Usually against Mack, but occasionally Knox too.”

“Huh. Guess things never change, eh, bro?” I say, smacking him on the shoulder.

Knox chuckles. “Yeah, apparently you’re dumbasses in both lives.”

I cut an evil glare in his direction, but he just smirks back at me. It's been a long time since our banter was anything but that - banter. We've played around, sure, but we've rarely come to *real* blows. That hiatus might be about to change.

“Anyways, I caught up with Rylan, and he’s got an update for you all.” Reggie looks his way, elbowing him in the side when he can’t seem to stop

staring.

“Oh, right.” He clears his throat. “There are whispers throughout the realm that the ‘plan is in motion.’”

“What fucking plan?” Cole demands, his power sneaking out as the rest of us wait with baited breath.

“I...I don’t know. It’s always just referred to as the *plan*. No one I’ve talked to knows any of the details, but whatever it is, it’s supposed to be *big*. I’m supposed to meet up with another group here shortly, and I’m hoping they’ve got more information for me.”

“Thanks, Rylan,” Fate says, cutting off Cole’s next statement. “Keep digging and see if you can get any other details.”

Cole opens his mouth to speak, and Fate’s eyes narrow. His lips smack shut, and I quickly disguise my chuckle behind a cough. He catches it though and aims an angry look my way.

“You’ve got it, Your Highness. I won’t let you down.” Rylan nods at the rest of us before he disappears.

“He’s supposed to report to me,” Cole mutters.

Fate’s brow raises, “Wait. You guys actually approve of my idea?”

“We quickly vetted him yesterday when we discovered you were missing. For now, we’re willing to give him a chance.”

Her smile spreads from ear to ear, and I swear my heart stutters.

“Hey. Guys! Focus.” Reggie claps twice, dragging our attention away from the woman whose smile draws us all in like moths to a flame. “Fate called me earlier and let me in on what’s happening with your powers. I think I know who can help us.”

Cole straightens off the counter, walking over to the table and taking a seat next to Levi. “Who?”

“Someone we can trust?” Fate asks. Hearing her sound so unsure makes my gut twist uncomfortably.

“Yes. I mean, I haven’t seen him in over a century, but he’s the one who originally helped you with each of your bonds, so he should be able to help you fix them.”

Fate shares a look with Cole, relying on his guidance despite the fact that they’re still in some sort of weird battle of wills. She may not realize it, but the trust we once had is already being rebuilt. Those connections we lost are slowly regaining their power. It’s a beautiful thing to witness, I mean, if I was the sentimental sort. Which I’m most definitely not. Okay, moving on...

“What’s his name?” Cole asks when he finally turns to Reggie.

“Death.”

The entire kitchen is silent, staring at the quirky ghost like we’re all waiting for the punchline, but one never comes.

“I’m sorry, did you just say *Death*?” Levi asks.

“Yes. Death. Like *the* Death. The Grim Reaper. You know, black robe. Big scythe? Not ringing any bells?”

“You’re telling us Death is a real person?” I ask.

“Well, yeah. I mean, he skirts the line between the spirit world and the human realm, but he’s as real as any of you. The disguise is just for dramatics. You all were pretty close, actually, with him and his brothers. ”

“And where do we find Death?” Fate asks, her head tilted like she’s trying to wrap her brain around the fact that we’re talking about Death like a living breathing being.

“He has a house in the ‘burbs. I can give you the address.”

“Wait a minute.” I pause, strands of the wig falling into my face, making my nose itch. I quickly push them back and tuck them behind my ear. “You’re telling me Death lives in suburbia?”

“Yup. White picket fence and everything.”

“That’s fucked up,” I mutter. “Wonder if his neighbors know who lives next door?”

Cole stands. “Everyone get ready. We’ll head out in thirty minutes.”

We all do the same, except for Knox. When I glance at him, he’s sitting at the far end, his elbows on the table and head bowed.

“What’s up, bro?” I ask, for once reining in my dickishness.

“Maybe you all should go. With my powers going crazy, I shouldn’t get too close to anyone.”

“Oh!” Reggie exclaims. “I totally forgot! Fate, I remembered that you and Death both worked together previously to create pendants that would draw the energy out of excessively strong spirits. They may work to tamp down on the guys’ powers as a sort of temporary solution. The Gateway said they can be located in drawer five. ”

We all turn toward Fate who looks like a deer in headlights. Cole crosses his arms over his chest. Macklin looks like he might burst with all the questions that I’m sure he’s got rolling around in that big brain of his. Levi toddles up next to me, grabbing my shoulder to steady himself, and Knox looks hopeful.

“Drawer five? What’s she talking about, Fate?” Cole asks, accusation dripping from every word. “Keep in mind that I could just read it from your brain, but I’m *trusting* you to tell us.”

“Uh...” Her lips purse and her nose scrunches up as she goes silent. It should not look adorable, but it totally fucking does. “I mean, you could try, but aren’t you a little...*off*, right now, babe?” Then she shoots a quick glare at Reggie.

The ghostly assistant just shrugs before saying “Oops.” Then she’s gone. Cole stands completely still, eyes glued on her.

Fate sighs. “So, I may have stumbled on a secret room inside the office.”

“A secret room that you didn’t think you should tell us about?” He arches his eyebrow. “And when did this happen?”

“Eh, that doesn’t really matter, does it? I can take you all there right now and show you.” She heads toward the doorway, damn near at a jog.

“Fate.”

One word from Cole and our woman stops in her tracks.

“Explain.”

She turns around with a glare aimed at the unlucky bastard. “In case you forgot, I’m immune to your commands.”

“In case you forgot, I’ll spank your ass if you don’t tell us what you’re hiding,” Knox growls, standing now and making his way around the table.

“That’s totally not a punishment.”

“It will be when I won’t let you come.”

I watch as she swallows, and I immediately imagine the warmth of her mouth as she swallows down my dick. Then I remember I’m in a goddamn mini dress and look down to see my cock tenting against the material. *Fuck my life.*

She takes a deep breath and lets her head fall back for a second before straightening her shoulders and looking at each of us.

“I’ll explain on the way to the office,” she says as she turns and heads out of the room.

We all stand there for a moment.

“Fucking woman is going to be the death of me,” Cole mutters.

Fate pops her head back through the doorway. “Well? Are you coming or what?”

“Oh, we’ll be *coming* alright, sweets,” Levi grumbles. “Now you owe us times two.”

Her eyes widen, and her cheeks flush.

“Bro, don’t put that look on her face. My dick is going to push this damn dress up farther than anyone needs to see if it gets any harder.”

“Wait, you aren’t wearing anything under there?” Fate asks, her eyes dipping to the hem of my mini dress.

“Babe, we don’t own any underwear,” Levi states.

She licks her lips, and we groan in unison. “Guess that answers that question. No matching boxers or boxer briefs for you guys.”

“Babe, you’ve already seen us without our clothes on.”

“But I was too distracted by...well...you,” she says, waving her hand up and down. “I wasn’t paying attention to the underwear situation.”

“Alright, fuckers. *Enough.*” Cole takes a deep breath, releasing it as he studies her. “Let’s have Fate show us what she found. There have been secrets on *both* sides, but maybe from this point on we can all try to be a little more honest with each other.” Cole heads toward the door, and a guilty look crosses her face, but she quickly masks it before she turns and heads down the hallway. The rest of us follow in her wake, Levi trailing behind until he gives up, kicking off his heels.

Yup. Totally the better twin.

When I turn back to the hall, I hear Fate begin to explain her first encounter with Nick, and my blood boils at the thought of her being here alone with a strange spirit. Makes me want to bend her over *my* knee and maybe knock some sense into our headstrong woman. We may need to learn to trust her, but she needs to learn to trust *us* too.

Walking into the office, she heads over to the bookshelf and places her finger inside a little dish. When she jumps slightly, I almost can’t stop myself from rushing over to make sure she’s okay, but she just scowls as she places her finger in her mouth.

My dick, having ignored my quick bout of panic, immediately focuses on her mouth sucking on said finger and sends a signal to my brain that says that warm wetness should be wrapped around it instead.

Down, bro.

No. Dick wants mouth.

Soon.

Now!

Good god. Now I’m having arguments with my own dick. The woman really is a drug, and I’m apparently going through withdrawal.

A soft click echoes through the room, and Cole walks over, pulling open a hidden door in the bookcase. The rest of us follow as he walks into the small space that looks like something straight out of some old movie with witches and magic.

“What the fuck is all this?” Knox asks as he leans over the desk, shuffling through old papers.

“Apparently, it's a room I use to store my very own magical trinkets,” Fate says from the doorway, watching all of us as we look around, our eyes landing on the hundreds of drawers built into the wall.

“What’s all in here?” Macklin asks, his fingers skimming across row after row of drawers of all sizes. Dude’s probably ready to cream his pants with all of the possibilities hidden within those tiny wooden boxes.

“I don’t know,” Fate says, walking up to the shelves and scanning for the one Reggie pointed her to. “It’s not like I can prick my finger hundreds of times to search them all. *Fucking bloodthirsty bitch,*” she mutters softly to herself. “And the Gateway isn’t exactly forthcoming with information. I’m not sure it fully trusts me quite yet.”

When she finds drawer V, her finger lifts the small loop, and she flinches again as she’s once again poked. Before she can move, I walk over to her, lifting her finger and placing it in my own mouth. The coppery tang of blood hits my tongue, and her pupils dilate as her tongue peeks out to lick her pouty lower lip before dragging it between her teeth.

I groan, the sound echoing in the small room. Leaning forward, I wrap my arm around her back, pulling her into me while my lips caress her ear as I whisper, “Don’t think I won’t take you right here up against the wall, woman.”

Her quick intake of breath has my dick rock hard, but my twin has to ruin the moment, hitting my shoulder to effectively knock me away from Fate.

“What the fuck, bro?” I growl, glaring at him.

“Keep your dick in your skirt a little longer, dipshit. Fate needs to help Knox first.”

Sobering, I glance toward Fate who has a guilty flush spreading across her cheeks.

“Right, let me see what’s inside,” she says, turning away from me and pulling open the drawer.

Her delicate hand reaches in and pulls out a small velvet bag. She lifts out a silver chain with a black crystal at the end.

“So, do I just put it on him?” she asks the room.

We all wait in silence as she has a one-sided conversation with the Gateway. She nods then walks up to Knox, lifting the chain over his head as he bends down, making it easier for her to reach. It settles around his neck, and he straightens, his hand coming up and his fingers wrapping around the pendant.

“Whoa!” he says, his eyes going wide.

“What is it?” Cole asks. “How do you feel?”

“I feel...nothing. No emotions. No auras. It’s like...this vast emptiness.” His brow furrows as he studies the black crystal.

“That’s a good thing, right?” I ask.

“Yes?” he quietly answers, but it sounds more like a question.

“Knox, why don’t you try to project an emotion?” Fate suggests, walking over and tentatively laying a hand on his shoulder.

He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. We all hold our breath, waiting to see what happens.

“Did it work?” Fate asks. “No one’s feeling any crazy surge of anger or sadness or anything, right?”

We all answer in the negative. Knox’s shoulders relax even though he still has a worried look on his face.

“Anyone else need one? There are more in here.”

“Grab another one and let’s keep it with us, just in case anything else happens,” Macklin suggests.

“Good idea.” Cole walks to the door. “Now it’s time to get Reggie back here and get that address so we can go pay a visit to our old friend, Death.”

20. COLE

ASSHOLE FACT #6:

WE'LL FACE DOWN DEATH
HIMSELF IF IT MEANS KEEPING
OUR GIRL SAFE

The craftsman I'm staring at is way too fucking cheery to belong to Death. It's white, with a porch that spans the whole front of the house and two rocking chairs in the corner, along with an honest to fucking god porch swing. The bushes lining the front are neatly trimmed with budding flowers littering the space between them. And then there's the picket fence. I think Reggie punked us.

"Anyone else feel like we just walked into Mayberry?" Fate asks softly, her eyes taking in the house then glancing up and down the street.

"Maybe Reggie gave us the wrong address?" Levi asks, walking up and grabbing Fate's hand. She smiles up at him, and for a split second my gut twinges. Once again, we're at odds, and while it's not *totally* my fault, I feel guilty. Maybe Knox is right. Maybe we did push her into keeping things from us, simply by keeping things from her. *Fucking empath is always right!*

“Are we just going to stand here staring at it, or are we going to see if he can help?” Knox asks, fidgeting with the crystal around his neck.

“Let’s go,” I say, leading the way up the sidewalk. The stairs don’t even so much as creak under our feet, and that’s saying something considering how damn big the twins are. Fate walks up next to me, still holding onto Levi’s hand, a box of donuts in the other. Mack is on my other side, and Knox and Thad bring up the rear.

Glancing down, I catch Fate worrying her bottom lip between her teeth as I reach forward to ring the doorbell. It chimes as I step back, shifting my body slightly so I can face the woman who’s always the focus of my attention. Lifting my hand, I run my thumb along the plump pink skin, pulling it to safety. Her eyes meet mine, and I’m lost. This woman owns my soul even though I struggle to show it.

“It’s going to be okay. We’ll fix this,” I say softly.

Before she can respond, the door swings open, and a man appears, partially concealed by the screen door in front of us.

“Fate?” a deep voice asks in disbelief before he pushes it open and is suddenly right in front of us. “God! It’s really you. I can’t believe it. I heard rumors, but...”

He steps forward and wraps her up in a giant hug before any of us can stop him, lifting her off her feet with an audible “oomph.” Levi manages a quick save of the donuts before they tumble to the porch.

She’s an angel.

The thought hits me out of nowhere, and I frown. *That better be a malfunction because I swear I’ll kill him. I don’t care who he is.*

The guy is massive, which makes sense considering he’s Death and all, and he’s gotta be at least seven feet tall, towering over all of us. He’s not overly buff, but in damn good shape for someone who rules the dead. *How much exercise could dealing death blows really offer? And why the fuck am I even thinking that right now?* The bright blue t-shirt he’s wearing is snug against his chest and arms, and his jeans look well worn and comfortable. His feet are bare, and when he pulls back, holding Fate at arm’s length, he smiles, showing off bright white teeth. But perhaps the most unexpected characteristics are the full head of platinum blond hair and bright blue eyes. He would look more at home on the sidelines of a kids’ soccer game than reaping the souls of the dead.

When he finally stops ogling our girl, his eyes scan the rest of us. I see it

then, the darkness that must lie within, as those eyes turn almost black.

“You all were supposed to protect her,” he growls, placing Fate to his side and wrapping an arm around her.

This hot little piece is mine.

She absently pats the hand resting on her shoulder like she’s not even aware she’s doing it. It’s a casual gesture, telling of a certain level of ease, like this is something they’re used to, but I’m watching the interaction for any sign that his thoughts really are...*less than ideal* where Fate is concerned. “It’s okay. It wasn’t their fault.”

He doesn’t say anything, just continues to glare at us with those creepy as fuck eyes.

“What the hell happened a hundred years ago?”

“We...uh...experienced some sort of interference that night with our marks,” Mack says, the words fumbling out. “Someone deliberately set out to harm Fate and made sure we wouldn’t be able to locate her.”

“And why were you looking for her?” he growls. “Why did she run off in the first place?”

We’re all silent as he scans the group, knowing damn well he won’t like what we have to say. Pretty sure none of us want to risk his ire until we know just what we’re facing here.

“It’s a long story...um, Death,” Fate says softly, her hand now resting on top of his. Their closeness is starting to make me growly. “Not sure if you heard, but we don’t exactly have all of our memories.”

“You can call me Nate.” He gazes down at her then, an affectionate look on his much too fucking attractive face. “And yes, I heard, babe. Just didn’t want to believe it.”

At that, a chorus of growls sounds off around me. The bastard just smirks, a challenging gleam spreading across his face as he assesses us with a keen eye that sees far more than he lets on.

The motherfucker is testing us.

“Ah. There they are. Was wondering if things had changed since you’ve been back.”

She looks up at him, a grin tilting her lips as she says, “You must know us pretty well?”

“I know more than I care to, that’s for damn sure.” He chuckles and pulls his arm back, reaching for the door. “Why don’t you all come in?”

Fate grabs the box of donuts from Levi. “We brought donuts.”

“Let me guess. Reggie’s suggestion? Damn spirit knows my weakness. I’ll grab some coffee and meet you in the study. First door on the left.”

Fate turns and heads in, with Levi, Knox, and Thad trailing behind her. Macklin follows, which leaves me alone with Death. Nate. Whatever the fuck his name is.

I cross my arms over my chest as he stands there holding the door. “Can we trust you?”

The smirk never leaves his face as he regards me. “Still untrusting, I see.”

I don’t have time to fuck around, but I need him to know one thing. “I won’t lose her again. I’ll do whatever it takes, to whomever is in my way, to keep her safe.”

His eyes go black again as he nods. “Good. And this time, you call me if you need any help with that. I’d like to get my own hands on the fucker who did this. No one messes with Fate and lives to tell the tale.”

I nod and feel my soul start to settle. It’s good to know we have a powerful ally in our corner even if he does live in the suburbs, looks more like an investment banker than the grim reaper, and has a thing for my girl. I’d get Mack’s or Knox’s read on his intentions if our powers weren’t shit. *Fuck our luck!*

He motions for me to follow him inside, and I do, noting the brightness isn’t limited to the outside. Vases of fresh flowers are placed throughout the entryway and front sitting room. The dining table is set for eight, with cloth napkins rolled and tied with elegant holders.

“Help me grab stuff?” he asks, not looking back.

“Sure,” I say, slowing down a bit as I notice the photos lining the hallway wall on our way back to the kitchen. There are a few of Nate in the black robe and scythe. *Wonder if he considers that his work uniform?* There are also a few of him with a dark-haired woman that I don’t recognize. But what catches my attention are the photos of him with the six of us. They span the centuries, telling a story that I wasn’t even aware we had. He’s not just our ally. He’s our friend. Then I see the photo of him with three other men. All equally larger than life, with serious eyes and straight faces.

“My brothers,” he says over my shoulder, and I’m a bit ashamed to admit I flinch. Dude’s awfully damn stealthy for being so goddamn big.

“You don’t exactly look like brothers,” I note, my eyes finding his. “Where are they right now?”

A look crosses his face but is gone in a blink. “We haven’t exactly seen

eye to eye in the last century. We were all close to Fate. All of you, really. And they didn't handle her death well."

They're off doing the chicken dance at a wedding.

I almost snort. That one is *definitely* a malfunction.

He turns and heads back toward the kitchen, so I follow. He quickly starts the coffee pot then turns to grab a large glass pitcher of lemonade out of the fridge. With the door still open, he points to a shelf as he begins placing mugs and glasses on a serving tray. "Grab the creamer and the jar of sugar on the counter too."

"Looks like you were prepared."

He just chuckles at my suspicious stare. "Living in this neighborhood, surrounded by SAHMs. Hell yes, I am."

"SAHMs?"

"Stay at home moms. They're a chatty bunch."

The incredulous smile crosses my face before I can stop it. "Do they know who you are?"

"Sure they do. Once they found out, I damn near had to fight them off with a stick. Women love the bad boys."

I laugh, and for the first time in a while, I let myself relax, thinking about my own woman and the fact that she always forgives me despite my asshole ways. "That they do."

We head back to the study where the group is sitting around a large coffee table, spread out on the gigantic sectional that takes up most of the room. A desk is along the far wall, and there's an unlit fireplace at the opposite end, banked by a few comfortable-looking arm chairs.

"We have questions," Thad says, holding up a stack of paperbacks and pointing to the back cover of one of the books. "What is RH?"

"Reverse harem," Nate responds, setting the tray onto the table. "Some call it Why choose. RHomance. One woman. Multiple men. You all might find them enlightening."

Levi holds up his own stack. "*Hidden Hope* by Elizabeth Knight. *Luna* by Letty Frame. *Hidden in Darkness* by Ali D. Jensen. *The Heir* by Ivy Clyde. *Shadows and Shade* by Amanda Cashure."

"*Rival* by A.J. Macey. Oh...this one sounds interesting. *Haunts and Hotels* by Jarica James. *Atlantis in Time* by J. Grace. *The Magic of Discovery* by Britt Andrews." Thad shuffles through even more books as he asks, "You mean to tell me you've read *all* of these?"

“Yup. Read them all and discussed them at length. I’m part of the neighborhood book club. This one is a new one that we just started reading,” he says, reaching over and grabbing a book off the table next to him.

“This one isn’t RH, but it’s still damn good. *Empyrean Born* by M.K. Hall.”

“Who *are* you?” Levi asks, setting the stack of books down.

“I’m assuming that’s a rhetorical question. Books never hurt anyone, and reading romance doesn’t make me any less of a man. In fact, it offers me insight into the female psyche.”

“Bro, maybe he’s been body snatched. That’s the only explanation.” Thad snickers.

“Who all is in this *book club*?” Fate asks with a smirk. “Do you take turns hosting? Maybe you bring a charcuterie plate to pass around?”

Nate raises his eyebrow. “You’re enjoying this far too much.”

“Mmmm...maybe. Just hard to picture Death sitting in a living room with a bunch of gossipy women, casually discussing orgies, sex toys, and fellatio over tea and snacks.”

“And how do *you* know what’s inside those books?”

“Puh-lease. First thing I did when Mack got me my cell phone was download the book app so I could buy my own. A ghost girl can never have too much inspiration, you see.”

Nate laughs as he reaches for the carafe of coffee, pouring Fate a cup and adding cream and sugar. Exactly how she likes it.

“Thank you,” Fate says as he hands it to her.

“Anything for you, babe,” he says, grabbing a donut for himself and sitting at the end of the sofa next to her. The guys all tense up, shoulders straightening and eyes narrowing at his familiarity with our girl. “Damn, it’s good to see you! You have to tell me what little you know about happened all those years ago, but first, Reggie must have sent you here for a reason, and I’m fairly sure catching up wasn’t it.”

Fate sighs, and the sound adds another crack in what little bit of a heart I have left. I want to take on some of the burden of that guilt she’s carrying and let her know that despite my actions, she’s the most capable woman I know. If I could just get my alpha senses to stop tingling every damn time there’s a perceived risk, maybe I could keep my mouth shut.

“We have a teensy weensy problem we need your help with.”

“By teensy weensy, she means catastrophically huge,” Thad mutters,

earning a glare from Fate. “What? Be honest with the man. Or spirit. Or...*being*. Whatever the fuck he is.”

“Hmph!” Turning back to Nate, she straightens her shoulders and looks him in the eye. “Something is happening with the guys’ powers. They’re...malfunctioning.”

“Malfunctioning, how?”

“Knox is unintentionally projecting emotions. Cole is reading thoughts that simply aren’t there. I’m having trouble telling truths from lies,” Mack replies.

“Levi has turned into a disco ball, and Thad’s shadow schlong is misbehaving,” Knox adds.

An image of the shadow schlong doing nasty things to Death suddenly assaults my brain. *I’m never going to be able to unsee that, Knox. Fucking hell. That’s not possible unless he has zero gag reflex.*

At that last one, Nate’s eyebrows raise. I wouldn’t have believed it either if I hadn’t seen the damn thing for myself. *Fucking jackasses.*

“When did this all start?”

“Do you remember Nick?” Fate asks softly.

“Slimy rich boy with an attitude problem?”

“Yup, that’s him,” Thad mutters, a glass of lemonade in one hand and a donut in the other.

She relays what happened at the club, and Nate’s eyes go black, a heaviness descending on the room.

“Let me see your marks,” he demands as he shifts, sliding his leg up onto the sofa so he’s facing Fate.

Shit, I burned the popcorn!

This time I do snort, and all eyes focus on me. I clear my throat. “Sorry. Ignore me.”

With one last glance, like she’s checking to make sure I’m not losing my fucking mind, she removes the leather jacket she’s wearing and turns so he has a better view of her bicep. He growls as his fingers skim over the marks that still look like they’re dripping down her arm, even more so now than they did earlier. All of us shift closer to Fate, not sure what’s going on.

“He used the Vinculum potion. Something that I haven’t seen in centuries. It was originally used to help souls that were trapped in a location for various reasons. It gradually weakens the bond tying a spirit to one specific place until the spirit is eventually freed. That was long before you

came along. How he would've gotten his hand on it is highly concerning.”

“Wait. You said it *gradually weakens the bond*. Does that mean that it's going to continue to slowly disintegrate each of our bonds with Fate? Meaning our powers will get worse? What will happen if it destroys them completely?”

Nate regards Macklin then scans the rest of us. Taking a deep breath, he says, “If the bond is weakened fully, your souls will move on to the afterlife.”

The room is silent as we all process his words. Everyone is holding their breath as they realize the seriousness of the situation. If they feel anything like I do right now, fear is ratcheting up, threatening to spill over.

With the high level of emotion in the room, random thoughts begin trickling in, most ridiculous, some utterly inconceivable.

The cat is out of the bag.

Not the gumdrop buttons!

We need pizza!

Oh damn! I think I sharted!

Popsicle sticks!

Give me peanut butter!

Dishonor on your cow!

I bring my hands up to bracket my head, my palms resting on my temples to try to stave off the headache that is inevitable at this point. Is this what Knox feels like all the time?

“How long do we have?” Knox asks gravely while subconsciously rubbing the mark on his wrist.

“It's hard to say. Your bonds are strong, so it could be days, maybe a week before the problem becomes irreversible.”

“Can't you fix it? Reinstate the bonds like Reggie said you did the first time?” Levi asks quietly.

Nate takes a deep breath, shaking his head. “I was able to do that at the time because each of you had died. Your soul's connection to your body was already pliable, and it was just a matter of moving that connection to the mark. When that happened, Fate became your anchor.”

“There's got to be a way to fix this,” Thad mumbles.

“There is,” Nate answers grimly.

“How?” I ask, knowing I'm not going to like the answer. My eyes land on Fate. I can't lose her. I won't. I will do whatever it takes to keep her with me.

“We kill you. Again,” Nate says matter-of-factly, and the entire room

explodes into chaos.



21. MACKLIN

TECHIE FACT #6:

EVEN WITH ALL THE KNOWLEDGE
IN THE WORLD, WE DONT ALWAYS
HAVE THE RIGHT ANSWERS.

“Abso-fucking-lutely not!” Fate shouts. “Are you out of your goddamn mind?”

“Just hear me out,” Nate says, holding his hand up in a silent plea for patience.

She looks around the room, her eyes meeting each of ours as she points her finger, adding a jab for emphasis. “Don’t you even think about it. You hear me?” Then she turns her glare on Nate. “And no. I absolutely will not hear anymore about any plan that involves these guys dying. Nope. No. *Hell no!* Not going to happen.”

“Fate...” I start, but when she whips her head in my direction and her eyes narrow, I shut my mouth. Waiting for her to calm down is a much better idea.

“Look, it wouldn’t even hurt...*much.*” Nate says that last word under his

breath, but she still hears it.

He must have very little experience dealing with an upset woman because he should know that women hear *everything*. That's not really even much of an exaggeration. Women hear better than men because they listen with both hemispheres of their brain and pick up more complex tonality and nuances compared to their male counterparts. Best practice? We should really just try to keep our mouths shut in order to avoid the inevitable fall out from anything that leaves our lips.

"Much?" Fate's voice rises in pitch. "Please tell me you have some other idea because...I just...can't."

The last word comes out a bit choked, and I scoot over, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her into me. Her sweet smell overtakes my senses as I bury my face in her hair, holding her tight. When she doesn't pull away this time, I relax, letting her very essence swallow me up. This woman is my world, and the last thing I want to do is let someone intentionally kill me, but if the alternative is leaving her forever, I'll do it. I'd do it *all* for her.

"There's gotta be another way," Levi says softly, eyeing Fate like he's ready to come over and steal her from my arms.

I'd just like to see him try. The intense wave of fierceness that fires up inside me is surprising but welcome. It's like I'm finally coming into my own, and it's only taken Fate and a hundred years to get here. I release the breath I wasn't even aware I'd been holding and mentally shake my head at myself.

"Nate," Cole starts, pausing to glance in our direction. "How would that work?"

"Cole!" Fate growls.

"Love, you know we wouldn't even consider this if there was any other option, but the alternative is far worse. I'll do whatever it takes. I promised you that I'm not leaving your fucking side, and I meant it."

"I think you need to explain this to us," Knox says, sitting forward and placing his elbows on his knees.

"It's pretty simple really. Using my power, I let it flood your body, metaphorically bleeding the life out. Once you've taken your last breath, I pull out your soul and re-anchor it to Fate's."

"What are the risks?" I ask, knowing it can't be that easy. Nothing ever is.

"Well, there's the possibility that the bond won't take, though the likelihood of that occurring is slim." He looks at me, the blackness

overtaking his eyes again. “The biggest potential risk comes from the potion he used that caused the initial problem. We have to wait out the potion, giving it time to wear off. We need to make sure enough of it is out of her system to avoid it purging the new bond, but we can’t wait so long that we risk the original tether snapping completely.”

“Mack,” Fate whispers, gripping the front of my shirt. I’m not entirely sure she even realizes she’s doing it. “Please.”

Her big gray eyes are begging me to say no. To stop this plan before it goes any further, but I’m not sure I can. I wrap my hand around hers, trying to reassure her, but she can see by the expression on my face that I’m willing to give it a shot if it means we avoid getting ripped from her side.

She sits up, turning toward the twins on the opposite side of the sofa. “Thad? Levi?”

The twins look at each other. It’s obvious they’re having an entire silent conversation that ends with them nodding in unison.

Thad begins, not a hint of humor or teasing in his tone, “Woman, we promised to always be here for you.”

Levi picks up where his brother left off. “And if that means we have to die to keep that promise, then so be it.”

A single tear rolls down her cheek as she looks to Knox. She doesn’t even get a word out before he’s speaking.

“Little ghost, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do to wake up next to you every day for the rest of my life. Wouldn’t you take desperate measures if the roles were reversed?”

She swallows, tear after tear trailing down her cheeks. My thumb catches a few as it brushes across her pale skin. It kills me to see her so upset, but Knox is right. She wouldn’t hesitate if she was in our shoes. It would already be done, with barely a second thought.

She turns toward Nate, her voice pleading. “You’re sure there’s no other way?”

He silently regards her, his fingers drumming along the back of the sofa as he clears his throat. “I was...recently made aware of a startling piece of information. It is, as yet, unconfirmed, but if it’s found to be accurate, it could provide us with an alternative.”

Fate opens her mouth, but before she can speak, Nate cuts her off. “Fate, I’m not sure we can risk the time needed to verify the information before finding the person in question. It’s going to be cutting it extremely close. Too

close.”

Cole, who’s been watching the entire exchange, asks, “Can you tell us more about this discovery and how it might help us?”

Nate brings his hands up, rubbing them down his face. “What I’m about to tell you must not be repeated outside these walls.”

We all nod in agreement.

He takes a deep breath, releasing it in a rush. “I have a daughter, but I have never met her. Didn’t know she existed. I’ve attempted to find her but have had little luck. If what I’m told is true, then not only does she have half of my power, but she carries with her a ring that could very well help solve your soul problem.”

“Let me guess, a ring with a glowing red ruby?” Cole asks.

“Yes. How did you know?”

“We’ve seen them around,” Knox replies.

“Wait, that’s another possible option, right?” Fate asks, her voice full of hope and desperation. “We can just ask Karma for one of the rings and…”

Nate shakes his head. “Unfortunately, the ring alone wouldn’t do it. You’d need the ring, along with someone who has a commander’s power to wield it, a power which is only given to Karma’s top level commanders by your sister herself, *and* someone with my powers to anchor the spirit. That’s the only way to avoid the whole dying thing.”

“How *did* you have a daughter? Isn’t that an impossibility given your...situation?”

His lips tilt slightly at my question. “I always thought so, and you can imagine how fucking shocked I was when I discovered that I had a child out there. I’m not entirely sure how it happened, to be honest.”

“Who’s the mother?” Fate asks softly.

She’s tucked back into my side, my hand casually playing with her hair. We’ve barely just gotten her back, and the threat of losing her again is almost too much to bear. I want to whisk her away, somewhere far from the danger, despite knowing that’s completely illogical.

“She was once Karma’s most trusted advisor and highest in command. We fell in love, but when she attempted to leave, Karma threw one of her tantrums and convinced her to stay just a little bit longer. I was furious, but what could I do? Much like you all are tethered to Fate, Mirna was tethered to Karma until she could transfer her bond to me. After a while, she began to feel a strange power whenever she was around your sister for any length of

time. We started to suspect that Karma was purposefully giving her big assignments to keep her in the Land of Torment longer, trying to force a stronger bond through some sort of transference that would be next to impossible to break. So, Mir began to amass an army using one of the anima mea rings - or soul rings. I tried to tell her how impossible a plan to overthrow Karma would be, but she wouldn't listen. We fought, and she said that I didn't understand what they were going through there. We were supposed to meet two days before she was going to put her plan into motion, except she never showed up. That was twenty-seven years ago now, and I never saw her again."

There's a certain lack of emotion as he explains the story, an almost mechanical repetition to the tone, like he's locked that part of his past, and everything associated with it, away. The years and the pain have probably worn him down until this was the only way he could cope.

"Do you trust the source that gave you this information?" Cole asks.

"I do. One of my brothers got it first hand from another defected commander."

"Destiny mentioned that some of my sister's commanders have gone missing. You're telling me that they just left their posts?"

He nods grimly.

"How? You said they're tethered to her."

"The commanders have more freedom than most of the others. Some have found ways of going undetected in order to escape the realm. Mir used to go days, sometimes even weeks, without checking in with Karma, and that irked your sister fiercely."

"Undetected. That can't be a coincidence. It's eerily similar to being able to avoid being tracked. Any idea how they're doing it?" I ask, thinking about the night of Fate's disappearance. What they've used could have been the same thing used on Fate, making it impossible to find her.

"No, unfortunately."

Fate's brow is furrowed. "But why would they leave?"

"You never could see your sister for who she really is," he says, rolling his eyes.

"Trust me, from the little I remember and the single conversation I've had with her, I'm not a fan, okay?" she asks, tilting her head, considering him.

"But why don't you tell me why you don't like her?"

"Do you want the sugarcoated version or the truth?"

“Always the truth.”

He eyes her cautiously, like he doesn't quite believe her. “To put it nicely...she's a narcissistic bitch. And that's on a good day. On a bad day, well, let's just say I can see where the whole *Devil* thing came from.”

“I'm not disagreeing with that assessment.”

He studies her for a moment, and the silence draws out.

“You're different.”

Fate rolls her eyes. “So I've been told. Over, and over, and over again.”

“None of that helps us right now. How do we find your daughter?” Cole asks.

“I've got limited information. Her name is Asher. I've discovered that she's hiding out to avoid detection...per her mother's orders. Potentially in a small mountain town in the Pacific Northwest.”

“Where's her mother?” I ask.

He swallows. “Trusted sources say that she's no longer alive.”

The room is utterly silent as we all process his words. Fate pulls herself from my arms, leaning forward to grab Nate's hand.

“I'm so sorry, Nate,” she whispers as his much larger hand grips hers tightly.

“Do you know what happened?” Cole asks without any of his usual growl despite the fact that our girl is holding hands with another man.

“I do not. All I know is that she managed to get Asher somewhere safe before she left to ‘take care of the problem,’ and no one heard from her again.”

“What problem?” I ask, the facts compiling in my mind and starting to paint a picture that I don't like.

“I'm guessing she meant she was going back to have it out with Karma. That's the only thing I can think of.”

“Okay. Macklin, I need you on this. It's a priority. We need some potential locations.”

“Got it! I'll start as soon as I get back to my computer.”

“I feel like I should also mention that, depending on how old Asher was when Mirna left her, she may or may not know how any of her powers work.”

Fate scowls at our friend. “Stop being all doom and gloom. It's going to work. It *has* to.”

“Doom and gloom is kind of my thing,” he chuckles. “You know, Death

and all.”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m surrounded by a bunch of smart asses.”

The chuckles in the room do nothing to lighten the heavy emotions hanging in the air. *Wait. How can I feel everyone’s emotions?* They’re faint, barely noticeable, but definitely not something I could ever feel before. It’s hard to tell where mine leave off and everyone else’s begin. Is this another side effect of the potion? Are our powers slowly morphing into one another’s? I decide to keep this to myself for now. I know we agreed to no more secrets, but until I have more time to analyze this new development, I don’t want to cause unnecessary panic. I can tell the crew once we’re back at the Gateway and I have more information.

Cole’s gaze scans over the group before landing on Fate. Her hand leaves Nate’s, and she sinks back into me.

“Cole, I don’t want to hear the words that are about to leave your mouth right now,” Fate says, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Love, we need to-”

“That ‘Love’ shit won’t work on me this time, Cole.”

“Sweets,” Levi says, his eyes never leaving our girl, “you need to listen. We need to be prepared for every eventuality. If we can’t find Asher soon, we’ll have to revert back to Option A.”

“He’s right, babe,” Thad agrees, glancing at his brother before turning to Fate. “We’re all willing to give this a shot, because I for one am not eager to fucking die again. But at the end of the day, we may be forced to accept the fact that it’s our only option. We’d rather suffer through another death than risk leaving you alone.”

More tears trail down her cheek. “Goddammit! I spent ten years not able to shed a fucking tear, and now I’m a leaky faucet.”

Knox smirks. “Pretty sure you were always ‘temperamental and somewhat irrational’ per Ghost Girl Fact #4.”

“You read the handbook? I’m impressed.” She smirks, looking at me. “You’ve got competition, sexy nerd.” She wipes away the moisture from her cheek before she sits up straight, that ghostly flame I love so much lighting up in her eyes. “Fine. I may not like it, but I get it. But hear me when I say, Option A is an absolute *last* resort. Mack’s going to work his computer magic, and we’re going to find Asher. And when we do, she’s going to fix all of you. Problem solved. Case closed. No one has to die. We’ll celebrate with wine and alcoholic ice pops.”

“That’s a strange combination,” Nate mutters, “even for you.”
“Don’t knock it until you try it.”

22. **LEM**

TWIN FACT #7:

**WE JUST CHRISTENED THE FATE
MERRY-GO-ROUND. AND IT WAS
EPIC!**

Tap tap tap. Mack's door sits ajar, and after the quick knock, I push it open. My heart rate picks up at the sight of our girl, passed out in his lap. Her head is on his shoulder, her dark hair falling down her back with Mack's hands gently rubbing over it. Her face is turned my way so that I can see the dark circles under her eyes and the paleness of her skin. It's been two days since the talk with Nate. Death. Whatever the fuck you want to call him. Two days that she's been confined in here with Mack while he frantically tries to find Asher. Two days closer to the possibility that we'll be taken from her against our will.

None of us has said much, but I know the others are experiencing what I am. Our powers are starting to meld together or some shit. So not only are they going haywire, but bits of our powers are bleeding into each other. The only problem? We can't use or manipulate them. It's made a precarious

situation even more dangerous, and Cole asked Fate to grab each of us one of the spelled necklaces to avoid any unexpected occurrences. That also means we have zero access to our powers now, leaving us entirely too vulnerable.

“How long has she been asleep?” I ask as I walk up, kneeling next to his chair. I run my thumb across her cheek, my large hand damn near covering the entire side of her face as my fingers tangle in her hair.

She’s straddling Mack, her arms wrapped around his back. Fuck. I might as well say it. They’re *chuddling*. I smirk despite myself. Damn woman and her crazy ass terms.

“I think she passed out about thirty minutes ago. Couldn’t get her to go lie down,” he says softly, not wanting to wake her up.

We both know she hasn’t gotten much, if any, sleep over the last forty-eight hours and could use the rest.

“Want me to move her to the bed?”

“Good idea. She’s going to get a kink in her neck laying like this for much longer.”

I stand, noticing the wet spot on his t-shirt. “She’s drooling on your shoulder.”

“I know,” he says, smiling.

“Even drooling, she’s fucking sexy as hell.” Shaking my head, I lean forward as he lifts her up and into my arms, and I carry her bridal style over to the bed. Her face nestles into my chest, and my soul sighs just from her nearness.

“Any luck so far?”

“Not yet. I think I’m getting closer though.”

Leaning over the bed, I place her down on the soft comforter, but when I go to pull away, her arms come up and wrap around my neck.

“Don’t go,” she whispers, tugging me back down. My hands land on the mattress on either side of her, and I rub my face against her neck and into her hair, taking a moment to inhale her scent, a unique blend of vanilla and cinnamon. I want nothing more than to eat her up, but she’s exhausted, and despite my almost desperate need to be with her right now, I’m not that big of a dick.

“You need sleep, babe. Rest. We’ll be here when you get up.”

Her gray eyes open and lock onto mine as I pull back again. One hand comes up and brushes back a hair that’s fallen out of the knot at the back of my head and into my face. I want to kiss her, but I know if I do that, I won’t

be able to stop myself from taking more than she's able to give right now.

"I need you, Levi," she whispers.

A groan escapes before I can stop it, and her lips quirk slightly, my sweets knowing exactly how to exploit one of my few weaknesses. Namely *her*.

"You need me too. I can feel it." Her eyes trace the movement of her finger as she traces it over my face. "Please."

The whispered plea is my undoing, so my head dips until my lips touch hers. It's slow and sweet and hopefully tells her everything I'm feeling right now. The want and the need and the fear and the...*love*, all fluttering through me. It's the last one that shocks me, though I'm not sure why. I've known I was damn near in love with her from the first moment we saw her ghostly self. But admitting it out loud, now that there's the very real possibility that we'll lose her again, is enough to have me deepening the kiss. An almost desperate need to reinforce our bond is rushing through me, one last ditch effort to make everything as it was, and the hope is enough to drive me onto the bed next to her. My big body dwarfs hers when I move on top of her, her arms winding around my neck and those long lean legs wrapping around my waist.

If this is the last moment I get with her, then I'm going to take it even though my rational brain kicks in, reminding me that she's worn out and needs to sleep. *Fuck! I hate it when I'm sensible.*

"Dammit, sweets," I rasp as I pull back, "you need to sleep."

Her gray eyes light up with ghostly flame, and *fuck me* if my dick doesn't get harder than it already was at the sight.

"I'm pretty sure you don't give the orders around here." With a smile on her face, she tips her head to the side and demands, "Kiss me, and don't stop this time."

The power in the air has me sucking in a breath. It's now so much stronger than Cole's, and no matter how hard I fight it, I can't deny her. Whether it's her power alone or simply a lack of self-restraint, I can't be sure. Possibly both.

Our lips meet again, and I can feel her smile against my mouth. I bite her bottom lip, not hard enough to break skin, but enough for her to know just how I feel about the situation. She groans, her tits pressing harder against my chest as she pulls me down so that my weight is resting on her, pushing her into the mattress. Her hips tilt up, and even through our clothes I can feel her

heat sliding against my dick which is straining to break free of its denim confinement. *Dammit. My inner monologue is starting to sound like a romance novel. When the fuck did that happen?*

“Fuck, Levi. I need you.”

“You’ve got me, sweets. Always.”

Lifting up on one arm, I pull her shirt up and over her head with my free hand. She’s bare beneath me. So goddamn perfect I momentarily forget what I’m supposed to be doing as I stare down at her.

“Fuck. You’re not wearing a bra.”

She chuckles. “Well, aren’t you observant?”

“You’re such a brat.”

“And you love me for it.”

The second the word leaves her mouth, her eyes go wide as they meet mine.

“You’re right. I do.” The declaration leaves my lips, and I find I’m not embarrassed or even anxious about her response. It’s a simple fact, and it’s time that she knows exactly how I feel about her. What if I don’t get another opportunity to tell her everything she is to me? “I love you. Everything you do and everything you are. Everything from the way you bite your bottom lip when you’re nervous to the way you bust our balls at every opportunity. I love every single fucking thing about you, and I wasn’t complete until I found you again.”

“I second everything the wankstain just said.”

My twin’s voice has my head popping up in surprise as I spy him in the doorway. I had completely forgotten we were in Mack’s room and that we weren’t alone. Apparently, the dipshit found us too.

“Don’t look at me like that. You were damn near broadcasting your thoughts so loudly that I’d be surprised if they couldn’t hear them on the moon.”

Imagine our shock when we realized the amulets hadn’t blocked our ability to twin speak. Even though we may not remember how it came about, there’s always been something about this connection with my twin that felt wholly *us*. Like maybe the original bond took some kind of twin intuition we had as humans and bumped it up a notch, giving us the twin speak we’ve grown so accustomed to. With our marks back, there’s this new undercurrent to our connection, one that now includes Fate. If I’m being honest, I would miss having the dipshit randomly popping ridiculous observations into my

brain. It would probably feel like cutting off a limb or something.

The asshole in question saunters up to the side of the bed, his big body making the mattress dip as he climbs up and over to where Fate and I are. Dropping to his elbows, he pushes a piece of hair off her cheek before placing a soft kiss on her lips.

“I love you too, woman. More than life. I need you to know that.”

“I love you both, so much. Thanks for always having my back.”

“Always,” we say in unison.

Her head tilts to the left, looking toward where Mack is sitting. He’s leaned back in his chair, nonchalantly pushing his glasses up when all of our eyes land on him.

“Don’t mind me,” he says, his voice deeper than usual and a little uneven.

“You gonna watch, Mack?” Thad asks, a mischievous glint in his eye. “Or do you want to participate?”

There’s no shock or outrage or jealousy at that question, which is a surprise. Instead, it feels familiar, thrilling even, as I let my eyes trail over Fate laid out like a buffet for the three of us to feast on.

A simple smile graces her face when Macklin glances at Fate. “I’m not sure I’d be able to keep myself away right now if I tried.”

“Good,” Thad says. “Bro, better make sure our girl is ready for us.”

A grin spreads across my face as I haul my body up, my hands going to the waistband of Fate’s leggings so that my fingers can wrap inside the elastic and start to slowly slide them down her legs. Her cheeks flush, and her eyes are on me, pupils blown wide.

“Tsk, tsk. No underwear either, I see.”

“Nope,” she says, popping the ‘p.’

Tossing the leggings aside, my fingers begin to trail up her leg then over her mound, slipping two through her heat. I groan at the warm wetness already there.

“She’s soaked, bro.”

“Does the thought of us all taking you turn you on, woman?”

She swallows and nods, watching my hand as it slides up and down, through her folds, but never touching the spot I know will have her writhing beneath me.

Mack has come up alongside the bed, his glasses off, his hand rubbing over that monster he has in his pants.

“God, she looks fucking amazing spread out like that,” he murmurs.

Thad grins. “You know shit’s getting serious when the nerd starts cussing.”

My eyes are once again following my movements as I slip one large finger inside her opening. In and out, stretching her slowly. Then I add another.

I risk a glance at Fate and realize that Mack has leaned over and is kissing the shit out of her. His hand is wrapped behind her head, his fingers tangled in her hair. Thad is sucking on one of her pink nipples, his fingers playing with the other one, tugging and pinching on it.

Removing my fingers, she releases a whimper that sends a jolt straight to my dick. I have to adjust myself, telling it to calm the hell down. We’re going to make her ours, fuck her until she doesn’t know where she ends and we begin, strengthening this bond in the only way we can. If it’s not enough, then at least she’ll have one last memory of us.

The panic tries to grip me, my soul restless with worry, but I tamp it down. There will be plenty of time for that later. Right now, there’s only one thing I want to focus on. My sweets.

I slide down and let my tongue lick through her wetness. She tastes of sweetness here too, sweeter than I would’ve thought possible. I lap at her, spearing her with my tongue over and over again then circling it around the nub at the top until her hips begin to buck. Thrusting two fingers inside her, I feel her tight walls fluttering. She’s close.

“God, don’t stop, Levi.” Her fingers snake through my hair, keeping my head right where she wants it.

Thad catches my eye, giving a quick nod before he bites down on one of her nipples. I thrust a third finger into her tight hole and suck hard on her clit at the same time.

She explodes with a scream, her pussy clenching around my fingers, her taste becoming impossibly sweeter as I continue my assault. Slowly, I gentle my movements while her body relaxes. Sitting up, I wipe my mouth across my forearm, pull my shirt over my head, and quickly remove my jeans, watching her the whole time. Her eyes are closed, her body sated, while Mack continues caressing her breasts as if in awe of the absolute beauty before him.

Movement by the door catches my eye, and I see Knox standing there, a heated look on his face as he takes in the scene. His eyes find mine, and he nods toward the desk. I glance back, almost doing a surprised double take

when I see Cole. He's in Mack's chair, his dick in his hand as he strokes himself to the sight of what we just did to our girl. We didn't even hear the fucker come in.

I damn near snicker, knowing Fate's going to fucking *love* the fact that he's here watching.

I look back at Fate just as she wraps those swollen pink lips of hers around Mack's cock. His jeans are around his knees and her other arm is wrapped around him, her hand on his ass, pushing him further into her mouth, taking more of him than I would've thought possible.

My own hand comes down, giving my dick a couple of strokes before looking at my twin, who's used the time to remove his own clothing.

What'll it be, bro? he asks through our connection.

I don't fucking care. I just need to be inside her...now.

Fine. You take her ass since you got her pussy last time.

I nod. My dick's so hard that it's throbbing in time with the push and pull of Mack's dick sliding in and out of Fate's mouth. She damn near gets the whole thing down her throat before she hums. Fucking *hums!* He grunts, his hand squeezing his balls so tight I'm a bit worried for him, but it does no good. He's past the point of no return and is coming before he can stop himself. She swallows every damn drop, licking him clean as we all sit and watch.

I don't remember sharing with any of these other fuckers before, and I thought I might feel...something if it were to ever happen. Jealousy maybe. Anger. Hell, I don't know. Instead, I'm so fucking turned on I can't think straight. All I can do is simply watch as Mack practically stumbles back, the wall steadying him enough that he remains upright. His eyes are heavy lidded as he watches her turn her head and kiss Thad, my twin not at all bothered by tasting another brother's cum. Instead, he groans, rolling to his back and taking Fate with him. Her legs straddle him, and with very little hesitation, he's lining himself up and thrusting in, releasing a harsh breath when he's fully seated inside her. Her body bows and her head drops back, the dark brown waves of her hair falling against her creamy skin as her groan reverberates around the room.

Now it's my turn to squeeze my balls, watching her hips start to roll, her lithe body sensually riding my brother. His big hands are on her hips, moving her faster, thrusting up into her harder. Pulling her body up and slamming her down on his dick.

“Fuck!” he rasps. “Bro, I don’t think I’m going to be able to...”

“Oh, god. Thad. Please...” Fate’s pleas turn to gasps, her breasts bouncing with each hard thrust from my twin beneath her.

Fucker’s going to go without me. Selfish prick.

I glance at Knox, considering. “You up for it?” I ask. Knowing he understands exactly what I’m saying.

“Is that even a fucking question?” he growls, his eyes never leaving our girl as Thad fucks her like no one else is watching.

“Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fucking *fuccckkk!*” Thad shouts at the same time Fate cries out his name.

He thrusts a few last times, milking that tight ass pussy for every drop he can, and I can’t even blame him. I know how damn good she feels wrapped around your cock. She slumps forward, and he takes a second to catch his breath, lightly stroking her back and hair.

Knox walks up to the side of the bed, lifting our girl off of Thad. Her arms immediately come around his neck, her legs wrapping around his hips. She lifts her head long enough to smile up at him, a slightly drunken expression on her face. *Drunk off orgasms. Bet that beats out wine or ice pops any day.*

“You’re here,” she says softly.

“You think I’d be anywhere else?”

“No, sir,” she whispers.

Knox groans, maneuvering them both onto the bed, with her on top. She barely has the strength to hold herself up and lies across his chest. I hesitate while my dick weeps, demanding that we get inside her. *Now.* But she was already exhausted, and now she’s gotta be spent.

“Levi, don’t you even think about it. Get your ass over here,” she orders.

Chuckling, I walk up to the bed, climbing on and positioning myself behind her. She’s soaked, both from her own wetness and my twin’s cum. Swiping my finger through it, I bring it up to her back hole, rubbing it around, barely inserting a digit to prepare her for what’s to come. *Ha! See what I did there? She’d love that.* Inserting one finger, Knox’s patience has apparently run out because I feel him thrust into her, and she sighs. *Fucking sighs.* I can feel Knox’s shallow thrusts through the thin membrane that’s separating us, and I add another finger, stretching the tight ring of muscle.

Knox kisses her as he stills, giving me time to withdraw my fingers and line myself up. My hands wrap around her hips as I slowly slide the tip

inside, my head falling back when her ass clenches around my dick. I slide in and pause, allowing her body to adjust and giving mine a chance to relax. I'm already perilously close to embarrassing myself.

"Fuck, Levi. Stop torturing all of us," she growls.

As if that's all my body was waiting for, I pull out and thrust back in, immediately doing it again. Knox matches my movements until we find a rhythm, each pull and push feeling like heaven. My eyes close, and I let my body just feel her warmth wrapping around my dick so tightly that I'm not going to be able to hold out long, especially with Knox's dick sliding against mine as we both move inside her at the same time.

When I open my eyes, I find Cole standing next to the bed, his hands wrapped around her face as he fucks her mouth. She's staring up at him, the look passing between them one I'm sure we've all shared. Love. Devotion. A promise that this won't be the end.

That's all it takes. I'm hurtling toward the edge, and there's no stopping it.

"Fuck, I'm gonna..." I don't even get to finish my sentence before I feel her body clench around mine, her orgasm slamming into her at the same time my entire body tenses. I'm coming with a roar, gripping her hips so damn hard I'm hoping I don't leave bruises.

I can feel Knox still, and with a growl, he's coming too, right as Cole's head tips back and he grunts. We fill her up, and she takes every bit of what we have. There's no blackness this time. No silent space that feels like home. I don't have time to be concerned, though, as my gaze is drawn back to my sweets. The only woman that has ever captured my soul.

Despite my dick's protest, I pull back, leaving her warmth. Now, she really does need to rest. Knox grunts as I climb off the bed, grabbing the warm washcloth that Mack is holding out to me.

Knox lifts her up and lays her back onto the bed, her body pliant in its orgasm-induced haze. Gently, I clean her up, caring for her in a way I've never felt the need to do for anyone else. She'll still need a shower, but at least she won't wake up to a sticky mess.

I glance around at my brothers as Macklin covers her up with a portion of the comforter. She's already asleep, her hair spread out behind her in a just-fucked disarray that's undeniably sexy and a flush to her cheeks that's been missing these last couple of days.

"We need to find Asher. Leaving Fate alone and unguarded is not an

option,” I say softly, not wanting to wake her, though a bomb could probably go off without disturbing her at this point.

“Let’s pow wow in the office in fifteen minutes,” Cole suggests. “We need to have some back up plans in place, just in case.”

“Agreed,” we all say in unison as we watch the woman we love sleep. We know we won’t see peace like this in the days ahead, so we’re soaking it up while we can.

23. KNOX

EMPATH FACT #7:

BEING EMOTIONALLY NEUTERED IS
A HARD PILL FOR AN EMPATH TO
SWALLOW.

The fireplace is roaring with flames that are warming the room, but everything feels cold, empty. It's been like that almost from the moment the necklace settled on my chest. This vast space with just...nothing. At first, the silence was welcome. But now, it's consuming my every thought as there is nothing to distract me from my current reality. I've always wished I could shut off my power. Experience the quiet everyone else gets to exist in. Now that I have, I'd take it back in a heartbeat.

Tonight was...there are really no words. Amazing just doesn't quite cut it. The only way it could have been any better is if I could've felt what she was feeling, the sensations rolling over me in waves as she climaxed. Her pleasure skimming across my own as I watched my brothers take care of our girl. I keep telling myself I'll get to experience all of that again. Soon. Otherwise, I'll lose it, and that's not what Fate needs right now. She needs

me to be strong, so that's what I'll be. For her. There's a part of me that has its doubts. I'm so used to using the emotions that I sense to help me figure out my next step, to decide if I'm making the right choice. Without that backup...I'm just as lost as the rest of these assholes. I have to figure it all out on my own for once, and that's kind of terrifying.

Macklin walks in and shuts the door. Making his way over to the nearest chair, his head is down and his brow furrowed in thought.

"How is she?" Levi asks.

"Good. Still out like a light."

"Then why do you look so upset?"

"I don't like leaving her alone right now. What if she wakes up and we're not there?"

"She'll be out for awhile, Mack. This won't take long and then you can get back up there and watch her like a creeper while she sleeps."

His eyes narrow on me, but I just grin, which earns me an eye roll.

"I bet if you were up there, you wouldn't be able to take your eyes off her either!"

"Nah. I'm not taking that bet because I'd lose."

"Exactly."

"Okay," Cole cuts in. "Let's get to it so we can get out of here. How are we all feeling?"

We all share looks, but no one speaks.

Sighing, I decide to dive in first. "Honestly, I feel exhausted. Like I've been awake for days, yet I took a nap this afternoon. A *nap*. That's unheard of for me."

"Same here, bro." Thad drags his big hand through his loose hair. "I haven't said anything, but it's been damn hard to even get out of bed."

Levi and Macklin nod.

"So we're all feeling it then?" Cole asks.

"Yes. I was assuming it was from the potion beginning to degrade our powers and our bonds, but I think it's more than that. I think it's slowly draining our souls of their life force." Macklin's eyes scan over the group as if hoping one of us can dispute what he's saying. Unfortunately, we can't.

The entire room is silent as we consider what this means. Our time is running out, faster than the sands through an hourglass. We thought we had a week. Now it appears we may not even have days.

Cole clears his throat. "Macklin, how close are you to finding Asher?"

“I’ve narrowed it down to three small towns. I’m just waiting on some additional intel.”

“Is it time to call Nate?” Levi asks seriously.

Cole’s hand is rubbing against the stubble on his chin that normally would never be there. It might not seem significant, but no matter what we've gone through in the past, the man has always maintained a certain level of precision in everything he does. That includes his appearance. So the fact that he’s let this small thing go tells me just how much our current situation is affecting him. “I’ll talk to Fate. Convince her that we need to start looking at Option A more seriously.”

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s a good idea, bro,” Thad mutters.

“Why the fuck not?”

“Thad’s right. You’ll just piss her off, and knowing how precarious her emotional state is right now, that could send her right over the edge.” Levi seems thoughtful as he leans his sizable body against the arm of the sofa, his head in his gigantic hand.

“For fuck’s sake, give me some damn credit. I can handle this.”

“Cole...”

“Seriously, guys. I’ve got this.”

I study him a moment, wishing like hell I could pick up on his current emotions to determine if I really should pull out a veto on this one. Shaking my head, I decide to let him have a go at it. Better him than me, after all. “I don’t envy you, mate.”

He sits silently for a moment before he leans forward, his elbows hitting his knees.

“Fate isn’t the only one here who will lose something if this plan goes wrong. You all know that, right?”

“What do you mean?” Thad asks, his tone low and face serious.

“I just...” Cole looks around the room, eyes landing on each of us before they drop to study the tile. “Look, I think it just needs to be said. Thank you for helping me all those years ago despite the fact that I made it extremely difficult for all of you.”

“Cole, man. You don’t need to thank us,” Levi says. “We’re brothers. It’s what we’re here for.”

“But we didn’t know that then. You helped out a stranger, brought me into your group and accepted my leadership after I had been a drunken, angry ass.”

“I mean, you still kinda are...the ass part anyways,” I say with a smirk. He chuckles. Let me repeat. Cole *chuckles*.

“And you all are a bunch of immature jackasses.” He grins for a moment before it slowly falls, his face once more taking on a thoughtful look that’s unusual for him. “I just want each of you to know that I value the time we’ve had. You really are brothers in every sense of the word, and I never would’ve made it without you. If shit goes sideways and I don’t make it, I know Fate will be in good hands.”

I watch as Mack discreetly wipes a tear from his cheek. “I second that,” he says, his voice a bit husky. “You all are my family, and Cole’s right. If this goes badly, Fate isn’t the only one that will be losing something. We’ll be losing each other, as well. But I know that she’ll be taken care of as long as any of you are with her.”

The twins share a look, probably talking in bro speak, before they turn to the rest of us. Levi is the first one to talk. “We know we’re a lot for most people to handle, but you all have done a bang up job of it from the moment Knox and Mack found us in Chicago. We’d have probably ended up in jail or worse.” He glances at his twin with a grin. “Or at least Thad would have if it wasn’t for you guys.”

“Thanks, bro. Throwing your blood under the bus. *Again.*”

Levi leans over, wrapping his big arm around his brother’s neck to effectively pin him in a headlock. “You know I love you, bro.” Levi starts rubbing his fist over Thad’s hair as he squirms, trying to extract himself from his twin’s hold.

“Knock it off, wankstain! Don’t mess up the hair.”

The room fills with our laughter as we watch the twins battle back and forth until Thad breaks free, hopping up from his seat.

“Fuck nugget, if we survive this, I’m going to wedgie you so damn bad you’ll be squealing like a little girl right in front of our woman.”

“You can try.”

“And that goes for all of you since you’re all just sitting there not helping a brother out.” He sits back down on the sofa, running his fingers through his hair to get the tangles out. He takes a deep breath, releasing it slowly. “But he’s right. And maybe it makes me a pussy to say this,” he pauses before finishing softly, “but I’m pretty sure I speak for my twin and I when I say we’ll miss you fuckers and we love each of you like blood.”

The room sobers once more as the laughter dies out and we’re all faced

with the very real possibility that this might be the end. Not just of our relationship with Fate, but with each other as well.

“Dammit, I’m gonna miss you guys. And that’s honestly something I never thought I’d say.” I rub my hands down my face, my gut sinking with the realization that this could be it. “I remember waking up next to the creek. No memories. No home. No idea what I was supposed to do. Then I found Mack, and together, we found the twins. When we found Cole, we became family. We had purpose. We loved hard and fought harder, but we always came together in the end. I wouldn’t have wanted to spend the last fifty years with anyone else by my side.”

My voice cracks a bit on that last part, and I clear my throat in an attempt to keep my emotions in check. This time, I can’t even blame it on anyone else. These are solely my own, and it’s honestly a little bizarre. The room is overflowing with emotions, yet I feel none of them. Not the sadness that has to be present or the anger at how unfair all of this is. Maybe that’s for the best, because if they all feel as deeply as I do right now, I’d break under the weight of their grief for sure.

Reggie appears in front of the fireplace, and we all sit up straighter, dragging sleeves across our faces and clearing our throats. She takes one look around the room, but rather than some sarcastic remark leaving her lips, she just nods, her brow furrowing as her lips bunch together.

“I’m sorry for interrupting,” she says softly.

“It’s okay, Reg. We were just...” I look at each of my brothers.

“You don’t need to explain. I get it. This isn’t easy for any of us. Not even me. I just got you all back and now...” She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “Fuck. It sucks not being able to cry.”

“Look,” Cole says, studying Reggie with serious intensity, “if shit hits the fan, we need to know that you’ll be here for Fate. Take care of her and make sure she’s okay. She’s going to need someone by her side.”

“You don’t even need to ask. I’ll always be here. For any of you.”

“Thanks, Reg,” I say softly. “I think it would be a good idea to make sure Nate is available too. He seems like he was close to Fate, and while it fucking pains me to say this, it would be good for her to have someone here to comfort her if the worst happens.”

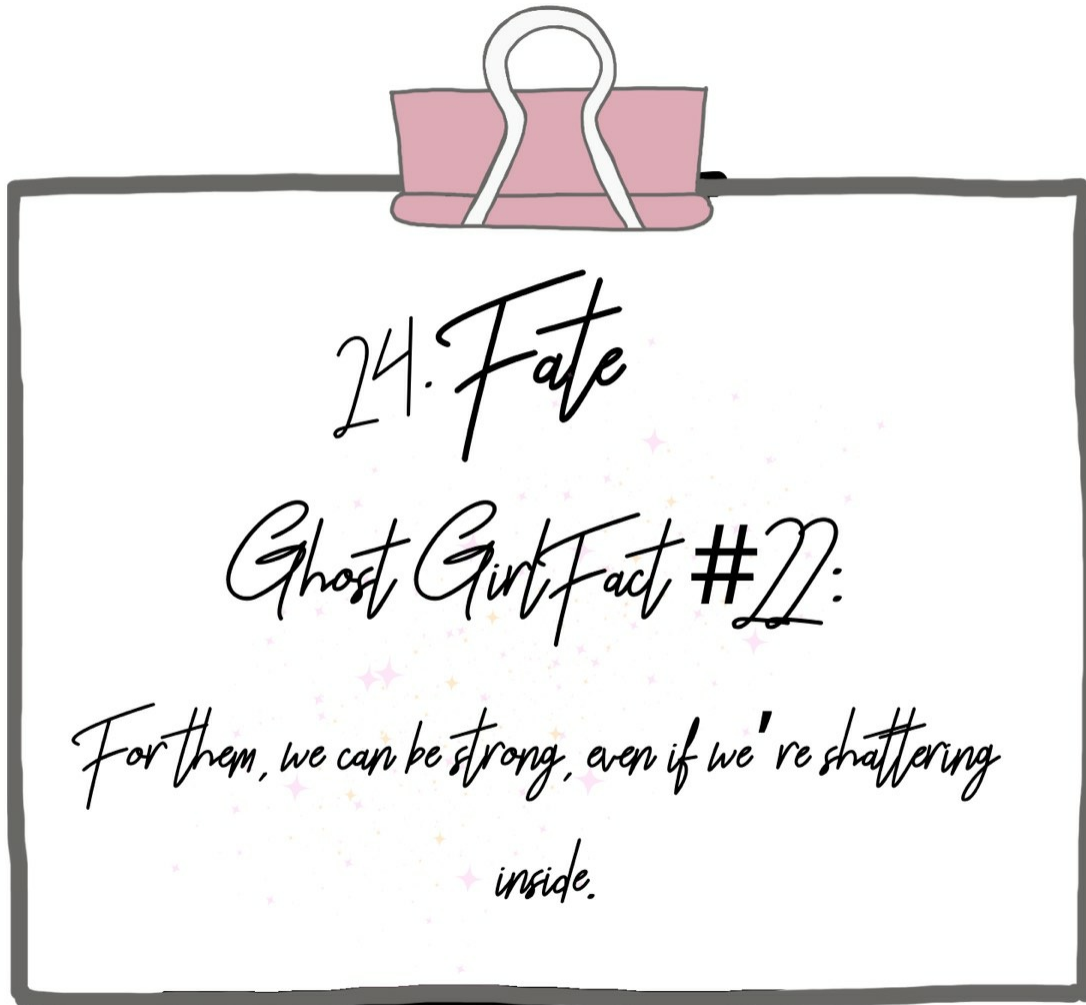
She nods. “I’m sure that won’t be a problem.”

I take another look around the room. At the men that have been a part of my life for so long that it feels like they’ve always been there. In a way, I

guess they have. We have centuries together, even if we can't remember them, and if this is the end, then at least I can go knowing that I've told them what they mean to me.

I refuse to focus much on the future - on all the what ifs playing around in my brain - from this point on. My only goal is to spend whatever time I have left with my little ghost, soaking up as much of her as I can. It may be days or it may be hours. Either way, I'm going to love her with all I have and hope that it's enough to see her through for eternity. Just in case.

With that final thought, I feel this sense of...warmth envelop me, like maybe the Gateway is giving me a giant hug, and I have to turn away from the guys as I'm suddenly overcome with my *own* emotions for once, a tear rolling down my cheek.



Aside from an epic orgy, the last seventy-two hours have been a huge disappointment. I know what you're thinking. My entire unlife seems to be one giant calamity after another. You wouldn't be wrong.

You hear that, Universe? Even they think it's time to cut this ghost girl some slack.

Sighing, I spin myself around in my chair. The desk is still untouched, the picture of my guys staring back at me each time I circle round. The note Macklin left for me a hundred years ago sits neatly on top of a stack of books. No one knows what the hell it means, so I'm not even sure why I've kept the damn thing. I release another sigh, dropping my head back to stare up at the ceiling while the chair spins.

"You're going to get sick," Cole says, suddenly standing in front of my desk. His face is upside down each time my chair does a complete three-

sixty, but his scowl is unmistakable from any angle.

“What’s it to you?”

“Who do you think is going to have to clean that shit up?”

“Reggie?”

He just raises that infuriating eyebrow of his as he comes around the desk, placing a hand on the back of my chair to stop its momentum.

When I lift my head, Cole is crouching down in front of me. “Love, we’re running out of time.”

I study the man before me. Sure, he’s still scowling and he’s still an asshole most of the time, but my soul practically melts from his nearness. Everything he’s feeling washes over me, and it’s so jumbled and chaotic that I have to take a deep breath or seriously risk losing my lunch on those brand new boots he’s wearing. Not that I’ll give him the satisfaction of knowing that, mind you. But despite all of that, or maybe because of it, I don’t understand how he can ask me to do something like this. Something that could very well kill my own soul if anything were to go wrong.

“Imagine it was me. Imagine you had to stand by and watch as someone drained the life from my body. You’re forced to watch the breath leave my lungs and can do nothing as my heart stops beating. All the while you’re hoping and praying nothing goes wrong and you don’t lose me in the process. Now imagine having to watch that *five times over*. How can you ask that of me?”

His thumb comes up to wipe away a tear I didn’t even realize had leaked out of my dysfunctional eye.

“We don’t have a choice, love. Our powers are getting worse. Some weakening. Others are becoming some sort of weird hodge podge with all of our powers mixed in, but they’re completely nonfunctional. We...” I can feel the struggle inside him as he trails off. His gaze leaves mine, and I know whatever he’s about to tell me is going to take this from bad to worse. “We’re growing weaker, Fate.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We haven’t wanted to say anything, figuring it was just stress or the added load caused by our powers going crazy, but Mack confirmed it’s more than that. We’re physically growing weaker. Knox stumbled in the hall today, out of nowhere. Had Thad not been there, he may have crashed to the floor. Thad helped him back to his room, and he seems fine now, but we’re all starting to feel it. I don’t think we have much time left.”

My heart is pounding frantically while my mind fights to find another option. An alternative. I won't risk losing my guys forever. There has to be another way, right?

"I can see those gears turning, love, but we have only *one* choice."

I throw myself at him then, which probably isn't the smartest move considering he just told me how weak they're all feeling, but he catches me, like I knew he would, wrapping those muscular arms of his around me. I always feel so safe here. Like nothing can touch me, nothing can touch *us*, as long as we're together like this.

"It's going to be okay," he says with his face buried in my hair.

"You can't promise that." My voice cracks. All of his emotions are combining with all of my own, creating a whirlwind inside me. My power comes to life, the air chilling and the flames in the fireplace flaring bright.

He pulls back, looking me straight in the eyes. His icy blues study me while his hands frame my face. "I won't ever leave you. Even if I die and they can't reinstate the bond, I'll always be with you. There's nothing that could drag me away."

And he kisses me. It's one of desperation and longing. And love. So much fucking love.

When he finally pulls back, he rests his forehead on mine. I need to tell him. Show him. Something. I can't risk leaving it unspoken.

"Cole, I-"

"I love you, Fate. Forever and always. You're the other half of my soul."

The bastard beat me to it. The tears fall in earnest now as I stare into the eyes of my first. "And I love you."

He kisses me again. This time, I know what I need to do even if it's going to kill me in the process.

"Let's call Nate."

He studies me again. "Are you sure?"

I nod, afraid that if I attempt to say anything else, I'll break down. They don't need a hot mess right now. They need me to be strong, and for them, I'll do whatever it takes to make sure this whole plan goes off without a hitch.

The twins walk into the room, take one look at Cole and me, and plop down onto the floor next to us.

"Group hug?" Levi asks with a grin, though his green eyes are studying me with an intent that's unmistakable.

I sniffle and nod. “Group hug.”

Before Cole can stop them, both brothers wrap their arms around us, a little tighter than I anticipated until we’re all squished together. Cole grunts before grumbling, “Back off a little, fuckers. We need to breathe.”

“What the fuck is happening right now?” Knox asks as he enters the room, but he’s smiling at the sight of the impromptu love fest on the carpet.

“Come on, Knoxie boy, join our group hug.”

“Uh, I think I’ll pass, thanks. That looks painful.”

“Oh, c’mon, Knox. You know you wanna join us down here on the hard ground while the big fuckers squish the ever-loving shit out of us,” Cole snarks.

“Wow. You do sarcasm well. I didn’t know you even had it in you,” I retort.

He boops me on the nose. “Oh shut it, you.”

“Guys.” Macklin comes running into the room and skids across the tile as he takes in the group of us. “Uh. What’s going on here?”

“Some sort of weird group sex experiment,” Knox deadpans.

“Huh. I’ll join in just a second,” Macklin says, earning himself a round of cheers from those of us on the floor. “But first...I found her.”

I gasp, crawling out of the pile of huge male limbs. “You found Asher?”

“Yes. She’s in Oregon. A small mountain town that’s barely on the map.”

“Oh my fucking god. I love you so much right now, you sexy nerd,” I shout as I hop into his arms and kiss him hard. His hands come up, grabbing my ass and spinning with me.

When we finally pull apart for air, the other guys are surrounding us, their hope practically a tangible thing. It burrows into my soul, and for the first time in days, I feel like I can breathe again.

“Looks like we’re going to Oregon, boys. Grab your shit and be ready in an hour.”

“Okay, well. That was interesting,” I mutter, picking bits of food out of my hair and pulling on the sleeve of my now completely soaked shirt.

“I warned you that us removing our necklaces was a really bad idea, but

you said, and I quote, ‘It will only be for a few minutes, Knox. What’s the worst that can happen?’ Well, little ghost, you’re looking at the worst right now.”

The trip through the ether was an eventful one to say the least. Knox made Macklin cry, hence most of the wetness on my shoulder. Then Cole kept accusing everyone of thinking outrageous things, which pissed Knox off, which in turn set off the twins.

Imagine, if you will, a massive food fight complete with flashing disco lights that blinded everyone during the melee and a shadow schlong that wanted to get a little too friendly with all of us.

Did I mention the food came from the basket of goodies I was bringing to woo Asher since Nate conveniently had something urgent come up and couldn’t make it? I’m guessing he just chickened out, which I will give him shit about later. But for now, these fuckers ruined perfectly good donuts and chocolate. Not to mention the wine and alcoholic ice pops that have completely destroyed my shirt.

I quickly go ghost and change into a fresh shirt. This one is red and says *Ghost girls wear red to hide the blood stains* in black letters. It’s totally not aimed at the sexy as shit Fearsome Five with me. Nope. Not at all.

Thad chuckles when he gets a good look at it. “You got something to say, woman?”

“Yeah, totally a great way to make a first impression on someone who may or may not know who the fuck she is. That won’t scare her off at all,” Cole mutters. He’s never appreciated my graphic tee obsession.

“For fuck’s sake. Fine.” I go ghost once again, changing to a plain white t-shirt, leather jacket, and skinny jeans with my shit kicker boots. “Better?”

“You look great, Fate. Don’t let these ass munchers tell you otherwise.”

“Ass munchers, Mack? Really?” Thad snickers. “What do you know about ass munching?”

“Lord save me from these jackasses,” I mutter.

“In case you’ve forgotten, there is no one to pray to, sweets.”

“Oh, fuck off. All of you.”

I stomp out of the forested area where we purposefully landed, leaving the guys to figure out their own attire, and take in the quiet, picturesque town nestled into the mountains. The entirety of this place is one main street dotted with adorable businesses and restaurants, their doors open in greeting. Cute little benches are placed outside every other shop as if beckoning visitors to

sit down, stay a while, and make themselves at home.

Walking onto the sidewalk, I've got to admit the town is quaint, with a kind of charming quality you don't see in many places these days. Residents sit on the benches, chatting and waving to passersby.

"Well, hello there, pretty lady," an older man says as he stares at me through glasses that have to be a couple inches thick. He's wearing suspenders with his pants pulled up to his chest and a tweed cap on his head. "You ain't from 'round here."

I smile because he's as adorable as this town. "No, sir. I'm actually here looking for a friend."

"Saw you just walk out of the forest. You some sort of elvish creature or something?"

Chuckling, I shake my head. "No. We just had car trouble a ways down the highway and had to walk a bit. My...other friends should be meeting up with me shortly once they figure it out. I got a head start so I can find Asher."

The second I say her name, his grin vanishes. "Sweet girl. Such a shame what happened to her mom all those years ago. You ain't here to hurt her, are you?"

"No, of course not."

He studies me for a moment, his smile returning. "I believe you. I have a sense about these things, you know."

"I believe *that*. I'm Fate, by the way," I say, extending my hand to shake his weathered one.

"Pretty name for a pretty girl. It's a pleasure to meet you, Fate. My name's Gus."

"Pleasure to meet you, Gus. Don't suppose you could point me in Asher's direction?"

"How about I do ya one better? I'll walk you there myself." Grabbing his cane then using his free hand to push off the arm of the bench, he stands and adjusts his hat. He's at least half a foot shorter than I am, and I decide I kind of love him. In a grandfatherly sort of way of course. Turning to me, he offers his arm, the other maneuvering the cane. "Allow me, milady."

"Why, thank you, kind sir."

I wrap my hand around his frail arm as we slowly make our way down the street. It takes us at least ten minutes to make it past three doors before he stops in front of a cute boutique called Amóre. According to Mack, Asher has a little shop that sells all things romance - candles, flowers, chocolates,

massage oils, and all sorts of...well...uh...toys.

For fuck's sake. Why the hell am I blushing?

Looking for a distraction from the myriad of ideas currently assaulting my brain, I glance toward the front window. There's a giant red heart with a display of boxed gift sets. *Eek. How damn cute! I adore her already. We're going to be besties! I can already tell.*

Tilting my head, I make a mental note to guilt my guys into adding some romance into our relationship. Once all the *save their souls* stuff is over, of course.

"What are your intentions toward our girl?" comes a deep voice from behind me, and I smile. Turning, my gaze lands on a grinning Knox. The food is out of his hair, but his shirt has a couple of barely noticeable stains.

Gus's head falls back as he takes in Knox. His eyes narrow, and he stands just a hint straighter, or as straight as his hunched back will allow. "And just who are you, young man?"

"My name is Knox, sir." He holds out his hand, and after a brief examination, Gus shakes it. "I'm with Fate."

"Mmmm. You get that car fixed?"

Knox turns to me, his eyebrow raised in question, and I motion with my head, clearly telling him to play along. Or maybe not so clearly as he looks at me dubiously.

"Uh...our other friends are still working on it."

"There are more of you? Are you all giants?"

I laugh. First elves. Now giants. Just what happens in this sleepy little town? *Those things aren't real. Right?*

"Cole, Thad, Levi, and Macklin should be joining us momentarily," Knox says, and Gus's bushy eyebrows almost hit his hairline. "They sent me ahead to check on this one. She has a penchant for getting herself in trouble."

"Fate? No, she's a good girl. I have a sense about these things." He turns toward the door then, pushing it open as a little bell above it chimes. "Asher, you here?"

"Hey, Gus! I'm in the back. I'll be right out."

The inside of the shop is just as cute as the front. Everything is in shades of pink or red, against a sparkly light gray background. Shelves are stocked with bath bombs, books, and other little things that would be perfect for date night. I remove my hand from Gus's arm as I begin to wander around the shop.

“Oh, hey there. I see Gus brought some new friends.”

Her voice is soft and sweet, and I turn toward our unsuspecting savior. She’s as tall as I am, maybe a little taller considering she’s sporting some killer four-inch pale pink heels. Her blonde hair is up in a high ponytail, and her bright blue eyes project an image of total innocence. But there’s something in her gaze as she studies me then does a quick assessment of Knox, that tells me it’s all an act. I feel her panic increase along with her fear. She knows exactly who she is, and now she’s terrified she’s been discovered.

“Hi, I’m Fate,” I say, watching as her entire demeanor changes. Her shoulders relax, and she releases a deep breath. *Okay, that’s...not what I was expecting.* “This is my friend Knox.”

“Nice to meet you guys. I’m Asher. Welcome to my store.”

“Well, looks like you kids have some things to talk about. I’ll just mosey on back to my bench. Holler if you need me.”

“Bye, Gus, and thank you for helping me today.”

“Anything for you, my dear.” He shoots a look at Knox. “You take care of this girl, or you’ll be dealing with me, ya hear?”

“Yes, sir. I will,” Knox replies with a grin.

“I’ll send the others this way as soon as I see ‘em.”

“Thanks again, Gus.”

He acknowledges me with a tip of his hat as he makes his way out the door, and it shuts behind him with a quiet click.

“Who sent you?” Asher asks the second I turn back around. “How did you find me?”

My head tilts as I study her. There’s a spark in her eyes that wasn’t there before, and I’m starting to think she knows more than Nate expected.

“We’re friends of your father. He gave us the general location, and we used all of our resources to locate you. It was *not* an easy task.”

“My father?” she whispers, the shock in her voice easily recognizable. “My mother was always tight lipped about him whenever I asked. She’d always break down and be sad for days. I guess I always assumed something terrible had happened to him, so I stopped asking.”

I shake my head. “He’s very much alive and would love to meet you.” Knox snorts as the word *alive* leaves my lips, and I cut a glare in his direction before continuing. “He’s willing to let you take this at your pace though. He’s...an important man and doesn’t want to push a relationship until you’re ready for one.”

“Then why are you here?”

“We’re here because we need your help. You have a specific set of skills that will ensure the survival of my guys.”

Her head tilts and she studies me, her brow furrowed as she wrings her hands in front of her.

“They don’t know who I am here. They don’t know what I can do. It’s a...quirky little town with its own secrets, but I’ve worked hard to maintain mine, and I won’t do anything that jeopardizes that.”

The door chimes, and in walk the remaining four members of the Fearsome Five.

Asher’s eyes go wide, and I expect to be hit with a blast of desire, or at least some attraction, because, let’s face it, my guys are pretty damn hot, but there’s nothing except a little worry, still a hint of fear, and a whole lot of surprise.

“You really weren’t kidding with the whole ‘guys’ thing.”

“Ha! No. Definitely not. I’m surrounded by dicks. Literally...and sometimes figuratively.”

Grumbles follow my little dig, but they deserve it after that food fight fiasco.

A cautious grin replaces the frown as she takes us all in.

I point to them one at a time, noting they’ve each cleaned up but still sport stains of dubious varieties. “This is Cole, Macklin, Thad, and Levi. Boys, this is Asher.”

A chorus of varying greetings sounds out from all of them.

“How did you know who we are?” Knox asks, his arms crossed over his chest.

“My mom told me that I would only ever be safe if the Guardian returned. She said if anyone with your names ever showed up, that I could trust you because it meant you *might* be able to right the wrongs. She also said, and I quote, ‘There isn’t a snowball’s chance in hell that would ever happen.’ Whatever that means.”

The doorbell chimes again, and we all turn to look at the man who just entered. He quickly assesses each of the guys then looks me over, causing the five to all growl. I just roll my eyes, which Asher catches. She giggles.

“Down, boys. He’s not interested.”

New guy’s gaze locks onto Asher. He’s concerned and more than a little interested. He’s as tall as Cole, his black hair speckled with bits of gray, and

he's got possibly the bluest eyes I've ever seen, aside from Ass-Cole's of course. He's seriously attractive, but he's only got eyes for one girl, and as I take her in, I note she's just as attracted to him if the blush on her cheeks is any indication.

Ahh. So it's like that, is it? My new bestie has a thing for older men. Wonder what Daddy is going to think about that.

"Everything okay, Asher?"

"Uh, yeah. I mean...yes, of course it is. Sutton, this is Fate."

"Nice to meet you," he says, glancing at me briefly before eyeing the guys again. "And who are they?"

"They're with me."

"And what do you all want with Asher?" he asks, walking further into the boutique which is starting to feel a whole helluva lot smaller with all these huge men in here.

He places himself by her side, arms crossed and posture defensive.

Macklin, ever the peacekeeper, steps forward. "We came here to talk to Asher. We need her help with..." He trails off as Asher vehemently shakes her head. When Sutton glances her way, she looks around the room like she wasn't just doing a bobblehead impression. "With...uh...a situation we have."

"Sutton, I'm fine, really," she assures, placing her hand on his arm. "I need to talk with these guys, and it's going to take us a bit. Why don't I give you a call later?"

His eyes drop to the contact, and I get a rush of desire so strong, I suck in a breath. Knox looks at me, his eyebrow raised, and I shake my head slightly, telling him I'm fine. *Hot damn, that's some intense chemistry right there. Oh, do I get to play matchmaker? Please say yes!*

He turns, assessing all of us once more before he reluctantly nods. "You need anything, you call, you hear?"

"Of course."

He walks out slowly, eyeing each of the guys on the way. Opening the door, he takes one last glance at Asher over his shoulder before he's gone.

"Oh god. That was close. He's too damn observant." Her hand comes up, rubbing her brow.

"He's totally got the hots for you," I say with a grin.

Her head whips my way. "He does *not!*"

"Oh, he so does!"

A blush creeps across her cheeks and down her neck as she bites her

bottom lip. “I couldn’t...he doesn’t...” Releasing a heavy sigh, her desperation hits me with the force of a wrecking ball, her loneliness gutting me. She takes a deep breath and straightens her shoulders. “We can talk about my love life, or lack-thereof, later. You said you need my help, though I’m not sure what I could possibly do for all of you.”

“We have a slight *problem* with our souls, and your dad said you’re the only one that can help,” Cole explains, his deep voice eliciting a stirring in my girly bits. *Dammit. Not the time, Fate. Not the time.*

Her hands come up to smooth her ponytail, her nerves skyrocketing. “Your souls? How on earth can I help with your souls?”

My eyes catch on the sparkling gem on her right hand, and for the first time in almost a week, I let my hope soar. Our eyes meet, and I point to her hand. “With that ring on your finger.”



Asher's tiny apartment above the shop is pretty much what I expected. Lots of pinks and reds, hearts scattered throughout the place, tons of frills and lace, sparkly pillows, and loads of glitter. Oh god, the glitter. If I'm being honest, it kind of looks like Cupid came in and threw up everywhere. But hey, if the daughter of Death, successor to the Grim Reaper himself, wants to live in Barbie's Dreamhouse, who am I to judge?

"It's so soft and squishy," I say, grabbing a giant crocheted heart pillow and rubbing my cheek on it.

"I have something soft and squishy you can rub your face on, woman."

My eyes dart to Thad, my brow raising. "Pretty sure it wouldn't be soft or squishy for long."

The guys all snicker.

"Oh, but that gives me an idea!"

“Oh great, here we go,” Cole mutters under his breath.

“I heard that, but I’ll ignore your snark because you’re under heavy stress at the moment. Asher, where did you get this?”

“Oh, I made it to sell in my shop. Crocheting relaxes me.”

“Do you think you could crochet a dick?”

A thoughtful look crosses her face before she cocks her head to the side, which gives me another idea. *Cock.*

“We can call them Cuddle Cocks!”

“Oh my god. That’s hilarious! Yes, I can totally do that. And I’ll make a tag that says ‘Inspired by Fate.’”

“Yes!”

“Can we focus here?” Cole gripes from the floor.

“You should be thankful I love you because sometimes you make me feel a little stabby.”

His lips tilt on one side, giving me a hint of smile that is rare for him. “Murderous looks good on you, love.”

Asher laughs. “Y’all are seriously entertaining to watch. You need your own reality show.”

My eyes get as round as saucers as another idea strikes me, but before I can explain it, Knox cuts me off. “Little ghost, hold that thought until after we fix ourselves and can get up off the floor, yeah?”

“None of you appreciate my genius.”

“We appreciate you, echo, but we’d appreciate being able to get off the ground too.”

“Fine. Okay. Where do we begin?”

The furniture has all been pushed to the outer edge of the room. The Fearsome Five are laid out in the center, shoulder to shoulder, on the cream carpet, making the room feel smaller than it already is. Asher circles around them, worrying her lip with her teeth and twisting the ring around and around her finger. She walks up next to me, and I can feel the uncertainty and the concern now radiating off her.

“I only know what I’m doing in theory,” she says quietly, leaning in so only I can hear her. “My mom gave me a brief rundown on how to work the ring, along with a stack of books she said would help me if I ever wanted to learn more about my powers, but that was years ago. What if something goes wrong? It’s not like I’ve had much opportunity for practice around here. I tried to mix a smidge of my power in one of my lotions once. Let’s just say I

won't be doing *that* again. Poor Gus was nearly catatonic for an hour!"

"I can always call your dad. It won't take him any time at all to get here, and he can walk us through this." That was apparently the *wrong* thing to say since her anxiety damn near shoots through the roof and her eyes go black with a hint of purple around the rim. Just like Nate's, only slightly less terrifying. "Or not..."

Darting a quick look at the guys, then up at the ceiling, her eyes land back on me. With a deep breath, she exhales. "I've got this. I think." She mutters that last part as she walks back toward the guys, but I still catch it.

"Why are we on the floor again?" Thad asks as he lifts his arm to push his hair out of his face and almost hits Mack in the chin.

"Watch it!" Mack cries, elbowing him. "She's going to be messing with our souls. Would you rather lie comfortably on the ground to start with or let your giant body crash in a heap on the floor if things get a little out of control?"

Thad nods. "Point taken."

"Do we need to remove our necklaces?" Knox asks.

Asher looks at me, and I shrug. "They're some sort of power nullifier. Without them, all hell will break loose. I would suggest hiding your food and beverages. Especially any wine you may have. Actually, you can just hand any bottles over to me now, and I'll take care of them for you."

Levi chuckles. "Nice try, sweets. We need you sober."

"Fuck. Fine." I roll my eyes. "You all suck."

"No, but you do," my guys all say in unison before they look at one another and burst out laughing.

Asher giggles. "You guys are not at all what I expected."

"We get that a lot," I say with a shrug.

"Are we ready to get on with this? I'd prefer not to lie here all day." Cole glares, but there's a twinkle in his eyes that I'm pretty sure he reserves only for me.

For a moment, that sneaking sense of dread that's been slowly consuming me lightens a little when I think of all the special little things my guys save for me and me alone. Like that twinkle in Cole's eye, Mack's playfulness, Knox's domshell, and the sweet and sensitive sides of Thad and Levi that make me want to squeeze them like giant teddy bears. My eyes meet Cole's, and I feel my familiar snark edging out the remaining worry.

"You can ignore that one." I point to Cole. "He's all bark and no bite."

“Oh, there are a few things I’d love to *bite*, love, but now is not the time and this is not the place.”

The desire in his eyes has me sinking my teeth into my lower lip, causing a few of the guys to growl.

“You’re killing us here, little ghost,” Knox says hoarsely.

“I really *will* kill you if any of you even think about dying on me before we get you fixed.”

“Well, we’ll already be dead, so that’s not much of a threat, now is it?” Thad snarks.

“Okay, so that was an admittedly lame consequence,” I say, tapping my index finger on my lip as I glance at Asher. She’s distracted with her nose in a book, scanning the pages for something. “Let’s try a reward instead. If this works, group sexy times as soon as we’re back to the Gateway.”

“And if I’m not interested in group sexy times?” Cole asks.

“Don’t you sit there and pretend like you didn’t take part last time.”

He smirks. “My sword was nowhere near any of their swords.”

“Fine. We’ll create a safe No Sword Crossing Zone just for you then, babe.”

He considers me a moment, then nods. “Deal.”

Asher walks back over, blushing fiercely. Her cheeks and neck are so pink it looks like she’s got a sunburn. I guess she wasn’t as distracted as I thought.

“Sorry. We’re a little much.”

“Don’t be. It’s...intriguing.”

“Mmm. Is it now? Who else would be in Asher’s harem, I wonder? Sutton and...” I trail off as she becomes impossibly redder, her eyes getting this far off look in them. She’s embarrassed, oddly turned on, and suddenly, I wish I had some of Cole’s mind reading ability because I bet there are some naughty fantasies fluttering through that sweet little brain of hers.

“Look at how late it’s getting!” she says as she eyes the guys on the floor like they’re about to perish any second. “We should really get you guys fixed up now, right?”

“You can change the subject, but now that we’re besties, I *will* get it out of you sooner or later.”

Her gaze meets mine, and the laughter that’s sparking behind those big blue eyes tells me she’s really not as innocent as she wants everyone to think. There’s a darkness there that she’s not used to letting out of hiding, and it’s

going to be so much fun to watch it come to life. Just thinking of how well her and Reggie will get along and all of the shenanigans we'll get up to when we finally awaken her dark side is enough to have a smile spreading across my face.

Chuckling, I walk over and kneel at Cole's head. He's upside down when my eyes find his, but I lean forward and drop a kiss on his lips. The seriousness of the situation descending on the room with a heaviness that's impossible to miss.

"I love you, Fate."

"I love you too, Ass-Cole," I whisper, my voice cracking as tears threaten to spill.

I move over to Knox, repeating the motion, and am inundated with love and worry and even a hint of desire. His hand comes up and grabs the back of my head, keeping me there before I can pull away. The kiss says everything we're both feeling without words. When I pull away, his eyes lock with mine, and it's all I can do to stay strong. To not break down in a sobbing mess. His hand trails down my face, catching a rogue tear before bringing it to his mouth with a look that sears my soul.

Scooching over to Macklin, my sexy nerd, he pushes his glasses up his nose nervously. My hand wraps around the back of his neck, my thumb caressing his cheek as we stare at one another upside down.

"Don't worry, echo. We'll be fine."

"You better be," I say softly before leaning down and letting my lips linger on his. I pull back just a bit, letting my lips whisper over his as I add, "Because my echo needs its counterpart." He sighs against my lips before he deepens the kiss for just a moment before letting me go.

Thad is next, with a mischievous glint in his eyes that's in direct opposition to the fear I can feel coursing through him.

"Well, woman? Get over here and kiss me."

I smile because I know that's what he needs right now. A little reassurance that I'm more than willing to give him. My lips smash into his, and the kiss is hot and passionate and totally us.

Another hand turns my head, and before I know it, I'm kissing Levi, switching between the two as they take their turns taunting me with their mouths.

"This isn't over, sweets. We'll continue this back at the Gateway as soon as we're done here."

“You’re damn right we will. You owe me a sexathon,” I murmur, my voice not as steady as I want it to be. It’s taking everything in me not to cry right now. These guys need me to be strong, and I’ll do it if it means things will go smoothly.

Standing, I look over my Fearsome Five. The guys who’ve made me whole again. They’ll be okay. They have to be.

They each remove their necklaces. Closing their eyes, they grit their teeth. Doing everything in their power to maintain control.

Standing opposite Asher, I nod, telling her without words that she can begin.

“Okay...so...you’re going to feel a...tug on your souls. Once the souls are unattached, the...uh...original marks *should* disappear until the new marks take hold.”

They all nod, not looking at all unsure, unlike my own nerves fighting to take over.

Asher holds out her hand, which is shaking slightly. *Well, that’s not at all comforting. Be quiet, Fate, don’t freak out the uber-powerful newbie who’s about to play with your lovers’ souls.* The ruby lights up, seeking out its targets as she begins to speak in Latin. “Tenebrae, ab hoc loco. Et non pertinent hic.”

Darkness, leave this place. You do not belong here.

“Redi, animarum, ut origins tuam.”

Return, souls, to your origins.

“Novis inter marchas rursus totum.”

With each of these new marks, you are once again whole.

“Coniunctio indissolubilis semper haec et punietur qui conantur.”

These bonds will forever be unbreakable, and any who try shall be punished.

The ruby suddenly flashes red, the color so intense my arm comes up to shield my eyes. As soon as the brightness recedes, I turn to my guys. Their backs are arched off the floor, their heads tilted back. There’s a sort of black sludge seeping from their mouths, whirling into the air, circling over their bodies. As the last of it joins the cloud of darkness hovering above us, their bodies relax onto the floor. Their eyes are still closed and their bodies unnervingly still.

Asher and I stand motionless as the sludge continues to circle the room.

“What is that?” I whisper.

“The poison that was used to taint your bonds.”

“How do we get rid of it?”

Instead of replying, she shouts, “Et abiit, malum.”

Be gone, evil.

The cloud stops spinning, contracting slightly before it explodes outward.

We cover our heads until silence descends once again.

My guys are too still. I drop to my knees, trying to find proof of life, but their chests aren't moving. They don't seem to be breathing. My hand darts forward, my fingers checking for a pulse in Macklin's neck.

Nothing.

No. No, no, no. This can't be happening!

Seconds tick by.

My hands roam over each of their faces as I push myself across the floor. They're cold. Lifeless. So unlike the boisterous group I've become so used to, my heart shatters. The tears I refused to shed before now fall in a torrent down my face.

It didn't work. This is all my fault. I failed them.

“Fate, I...” Asher begins, her voice cracking as she watches me fall apart.

“There m-must be something we c-can d-do,” I manage between sobs as I throw myself across Cole's chest.

“I don't...”

Before she can finish, large arms are suddenly wrapping themselves around me. I gasp, my head whips up, and I find myself staring into a familiar pair of smiling ice blue eyes. There's a spark that skitters along our connections, lighting back up and slowly gaining strength.

“Oh thank god,” I sob, burying my face into his neck as I try to get a hold on my emotions. I take a deep breath, pull back, and promptly punch him in the chest. “That's for making me freak the fuck out.”

I drop back onto his chest as it rumbles with laughter and promptly begin crying again. #GhostGirlProblems.

“Hey, little ghost. It's okay.”

It takes a second for his words to sink in, and I slowly lift my head. A sense of dread is building inside, my stomach twisting as a dull throbbing begins in my head.

“What did you just say?”

“I said, it's okay. I think it worked.”

“No. What did you just *call* me?” I whisper.

“Little ghost?” He tilts his head like he’s trying to figure me out.

My eyes widen. “Knox?”

“Babe, you’re starting to freak me out.”

“Oh fuck!” The smiling blue eyes and the laughter should’ve been my first clue that something wasn’t right. *Dammit!*

“Uh, guys...” I hear Thad say before I turn to see him sit up. His head turns, and his green eyes lock onto mine. His hand raises to push up a pair of glasses that aren’t there. “We have a serious problem.”

“Macklin?”

Thad’s head nods. *OMG!*

“Fuck yes, we do,” Knox says, his hands rubbing his face again and again.

“Um...?”

Knox’s hazel eyes find mine. “It’s me, woman.”

“Thad?”

Macklin sits up, his eyes scanning down the length of his body. “Fuck, bro. You’re so tiny!”

“Levi?” My voice is barely above a whisper at this point because my brain just can’t comprehend what’s happening right now.

“Hey, sweets.”

“This better be a goddamn prank because I swear to god...”

“Aww, hell. Which jackass am I? Please say I’m at least the smarter twin,” Levi says, sitting up.

“Cole?”

“Yes, love?”

“Oh my fucking hell!”

“You can say that again, sweets.”

My eyes find Asher’s, and she looks just as stunned as I am. Her face is pale, and she’s wringing her hands nervously.

“Asher,” Thad says, though it comes from Knox’s mouth. “We need your dad. Now!”

Knox chuckles, though it sounds rough since it’s coming from Cole, who never laughs. The muscles are probably atrophied or something. “Bet you never said that to any of the other girls.”

The room goes cold as my anger spikes.

“Really, Knox?” Thad mutters. “You had to go and piss her off?”

“Fuck. Sorry, little ghost. I didn’t mean it.”

“What’s happening right now?” Asher whispers, wrapping her arms around herself.

“These numbnuts don’t know when to keep their mouths shut,” Cole gripes as my eyes narrow on the Fearsome Five.

I take a deep breath, counting to ten before I do something rash...like kill them all myself.



My five guys are spread out around Asher's apartment, staring at their counterparts.

"Do I really look like that?" Knox's body points to Thad.

"You mean, do you really look like a giant cuntpuddle? Yes, yes, you do," Knox answers from behind Cole's blue eyes.

"Shut up, fuck nugget."

I watch them banter back and forth, unable to say or do anything as we wait for Nate to get back to us. It seems like their powers have stabilized at least. Thank fuck for small victories.

But I can't stop thinking about what will happen if they're stuck this way. They're like this because of *me*. What if I never get them back? Will I ever get to look into Cole's scowling icy blues? Will I ever be held in Levi's sweet arms or hear Thad's dirty talk come from his mouth? Will I ever see my sexy

nerd push his glasses up his nose? Will *my* Knox ever bend me over his knee?

“Hey,” Asher says, bumping my shoulder and pulling me from my spiraling thoughts. “We’re going to get them back. I’ve never met my dad, but I know my mom loved him. Every time I asked, her eyes would light up for a brief second before the tears would begin to fall. And believe me when I say she was not a woman who loved or trusted easily.”

“Do you want to meet him?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. Sure, a part of me wants to reach out to the only living family I have left. Learn more about myself and what makes me *me*, ya know?” She looks around the room, lost in thought. “But the other part is terrified of bringing him into something that I don’t understand. My mother left him and went into hiding for a reason. Not to mention, exactly how does one just show up at someone’s door claiming to be their long-lost daughter?”

“I mean, I brought donuts when I showed up claiming to be his long dead friend.” I shrug then wink at her, enjoying the easy grin she gives in return.

Her grin falls as she begins to study the ring on her finger. When her eyes find mine again, there’s sadness there. I can feel it trickling past all of the other emotions swirling in the room. Hitting me with an intensity that makes me withhold a grimace. “I like my life here. I’m not sure I’m ready to give that up.”

“Then don’t. If there’s anything I’ve learned since I’ve been back, it’s that you have to do what feels right to *you*. Not anyone else.”

We share a look, and she nods. “Thank you, Fate.”

Suddenly, Reggie appears, and we both jump to our feet. The second I reached out to her, she immediately hopped into action, and with everything that’s been happening over the last few hours, I’m beyond thankful she’s got my back. I glance at the guys who are all studying me from behind strange eyes. Honestly, it kind of creeps me out, so I turn back and focus on my ghostly assistant.

“Nate found something. We need to get an item specific to each of the guys. Then Asher will need to try the incantation one more time. The souls should sort themselves out with something to guide them back to the correct bodies.”

“God, that sounds like something straight out of a body snatcher horror flick.” I glance over at my sexy nerd. “Mack, any idea-”

“Echo, I’m over here,” comes from Thad’s mouth.

I turn toward him and grimace. “Shit. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll run to the Gateway and grab a small item for each of us. While I’m there, I want to grab a book I found when I was reading about the marks, just in case we need it.”

“Don’t be long, okay?”

Thad’s big body walks past the others, stopping right in front of me. Green eyes stare into my own, but behind his intense look, I see the sweet shyness that could only be my sexy nerd.

“I’ll be back before you know it.” His large arms snake out and lift me off my feet as his lips meet mine.

“Okay, watching myself kiss our woman is surprisingly hot.”

“Isn’t it just like watching your twin kiss her?” Knox asks, the question missing too much Ass-Coleness to sound natural coming from our resident grump’s mouth.

“Hell no! I’m way more handsome than the wankstain over there.” He points to his twin’s body, Cole twisting Levi’s face into a grimace that looks more constipated than anything. Smolder-y alphahole on Cole’s face, gastric distress on Levi’s.

Holy hell. This is giving me a headache.

“Be back in a minute, echo.” Mack touches the mark on Thad’s wrist and slowly dematerializes until he’s gone.

“That is so cool!” Asher murmurs, looking at the spot where my sexy nerd in disguise was standing just seconds before.

“Eh...it still gives me the creeps,” I mutter.

“You’ve done it for centuries though.”

“Did she forget to mention the details surrounding the fact that she spent one hundred years dead and buried only to come back to spend another ten years as a ghost? None of them have their memories from their lives before.”

“Are you serious?” she asks Reggie.

“Dead serious!” I smirk. “See what I did there?”

The guys all groan at my lame attempt at humor as I tell Asher the story that we’ve managed to piece together since I became a real girl again.

“You mean to tell me that despite not remembering one another and having no idea who you were to each other, that you still felt the connections you all share?”

“We did. They’re lucky I wasn’t a living breathing girl when I first met them. Pretty sure climbing a guy like a tree the first time you lay eyes on him is frowned upon even in today’s more sexually enlightened society.”

She chuckles.

I glance at the clock and note that over ninety minutes has passed.

“Shouldn’t Mack be back by now?” I ask.

Levi takes a look at the watch on his wrist, those green eyes more serious than they’ve ever been as they take on Cole’s asshole-ishness. “It definitely shouldn’t have taken him this long.”

I slide out of my leather jacket and slide the sleeve of my white tee up. My marks have gone back to normal, no sign of the ink-like drips in sight.

“Do I touch Mack’s mark, or do I touch Thad’s since Mack is in Thad’s body?”

“Try them both?” Knox suggests.

I try Thad’s first and immediately know that’s the wrong one because it says he’s in the room with me. Next, I touch Mack’s mark and can sense that he’s still at the Gateway, but he’s not alone. My brows furrow as I try to figure out who could be there with him, considering we’re all here.

“Guys, I think we need to get to the Gateway. Someone is there with Mack.”

“Who?” Cole asks.

“I’m not sure. The Gateway seems...confused.”

The guys all share a look before they turn to me.

“Shit. I should’ve gone with him. We said we weren’t going to split up,” Cole says, Levi’s big hand coming up to push his long hair back out of his face.

“Could it be Rylan or Nate?” Knox asks.

“Maybe, but I think the Gateway would’ve been able to tell me it was them.”

Reggie tilts her head. “It’s like the Gateway can sense the presence, but something is blocking it from being able to tell exactly who it is.”

We all share worried looks, anxiety twisting my gut as I lock onto icy blues that hold my empath’s struggle with his own emotions. “We need to go. Now.”

“Stay here,” I tell Asher. “As soon as we figure out what’s going on, we’ll be back and we’ll get this situation straightened out.”

“What about me, boss?”

“Reggie, you stay here and keep an eye on things. If things go south, I’ll try to get a message to you. If that happens, call Nate. He may be our only hope.”

“Be careful,” Asher says as we all touch the Gateway mark on our wrists and begin the journey through the ether.

The doors of the Gateway’s main chamber are closed, which I find odd. Since we had the grand “we’re back” party, we’ve left them open.

Using my power, the two large doors slide inward. The flames in the sconces on the wall are lit, casting the room in a soft glow.

We take a few steps into the main chamber, and I stop abruptly. There, on the dais, sitting in my overly elaborate chair that I refuse to call a throne, sits none other than...Agent Barbie? The guys’ confusion is mirroring my own. She’s wearing a tight red camisole with her obnoxiously large fake boobs almost popping out of the neckline and skinny jeans with bright red heels. Her hair is down, flowing over her shoulders as she sits, legs crossed and fingers lightly thrumming along the chair’s arm.

But what sets off my power is the sight of Thad’s body kneeling at her feet. He’s bound by some sort of rope made out of fire that doesn’t seem to be burning him, similar to the electric rope I used on Bad Man. His eyes meet mine, and he shakes his head almost imperceptibly before letting his gaze drift to the woman beside him.

She doesn’t notice. Her eyes are locked on us, a smirk plastered on her heavily made up face.

“Well, well, well. Look who finally decided to join us, darling.”

“What the fuck are *you* doing here, and what are you doing with...Thad?”

“Ah ah. You don’t get to ask the questions right now.”

I growl, my power skirting along my skin, just begging me to blast this fake bitch into smithereens.

“Don’t try anything risky, sweetie. Wouldn’t want anything to happen to this sexy piece of man at my feet.” She moves her index finger in a circular motion, and the binds tighten ever so slightly, causing Mack to grimace.

My heart is pounding in my chest as I try to work out a way to get him out of this safely. The guys are at my back, silent, steady. Letting me take the lead, which honestly surprises the shit out of me. The fact that I’m too stressed to even make a shit joke right now speaks volumes. I struggle to calm my power down to a dull spark.

“There. That’s better. It’s simple really. If you give me what I want, I will let you have your little boy toy back. No harm. No foul. If not, well, I’ll be taking him as a consolation prize. I mean, he *is* the embodiment of darkness after all. We’d work together pretty well, I think.” She runs the back of her

manicured finger along his cheek. To his credit, Mack doesn't so much as flinch.

"What is it you want?" I ask, my voice deceptively calm, while internally my power wants to strike her down. I should've gotten stabby while I had the chance.

"The book, my dear."

"We don't have it," Knox says, the deep timbre of Cole's voice echoing around the room.

"I beg to differ. I have it on good authority that *she* does have the book."

I can feel the guys' eyes on me as I continue to stare at the blonde bitch.

"Fate?" Cole asks. Hearing such suspicion and demand leaving Levi's sweet mouth is entirely disconcerting, but I have bigger issues right now.

I take a step closer, and Barbie raises her hand, a bright flame floating above her palm. Something about it is eerily familiar, and a tug in my subconscious causes my panic to rise, hitting my gut with a sense of impending doom.

"So you haven't told them?" Her voice is a lilting mock that sets my nerves on edge. "Interesting."

I take another step.

"What hasn't she told us?"

"Are you finally going to fess up, or should I spill the beans myself? You *never* kept secrets from them in the past. Though they definitely did. A whopper of one, I might add. I've got to admit though, I'm really surprised by this new you, little one. "

It's those last two words that have the memory sparking to life. There's only one person in any realm that has ever called me little one. Hurt and shame slither through me. How could I not have seen this coming? How did I not figure it out sooner? It's always been her. The jealousy, the power, the constant negativity. The signs were all there, and I just explained them away with excuses. It all makes sense now.

I take one more step closer.

Her smile falls, and the true monster comes out.

"You take one more step and none of you will survive this time. I'll make sure you're all turned to ash, and I'll finally get to take back what rightfully belongs to *me*."

"That's what it's always been about, hasn't it? You never cared about me at all. You just wanted what I had. How long have you been plotting against

me?”

A sinister grin appears on her face, satisfaction heavy in the air with an almost malevolent sense of glee. “So you’ve figured it out, have you?”

“Fate, what’s going on?” one of the guys asks from behind me, but I can’t spare them a single glance right now. She’ll strike me down as soon as my back is turned.

“I’ll give you whatever you want, as long as you let Thad go.”

She studies me then, tapping her bottom lip with one of her sharply pointed red nails, knowing she has the upper hand. “Hmmm. Maybe the book isn’t enough.”

“Let. Him. Go.”

“I mean, your disgustingly righteous men should’ve been mine from the start. Them. The Gateway. The control of the realms. Then it was snatched away from me.”

“What the fuck is she talking about?” one of the guys mutters behind me, but I ignore them as I prepare to protect them the only way I know how.

“Last chance. Let him go. You can still walk away from this.”

“Oh, dear little sister, I’ll walk away from this regardless.”

Before our eyes, the blonde real estate agent fades away. Her bleached blonde hair turns deep red, worn in a high ponytail with some sort of jewel-encrusted wannabe scrunchie. Her lips are a dark plum, malice-filled eyes heavy with eyeliner and mascara. She’s wearing a tight black dress that forms to all of her curves. Her green eyes stare back at us, amused and vengeful at the same time. She really is unhinged.

The guys all gasp.

Her laugh floats in the air, and my eyes widen. It’s the same laugh I heard above my makeshift grave as the dirt covered my broken body. Despite myself, my heart breaks and tears threaten to fall.

“Aww. Don’t cry, little one. It’s really not personal. I simply want what I was promised. The bowels of hell and the scraps I was offered no longer suit me.” She slowly stands on her ridiculously high heels, making her way down the few stairs to the main floor. “It really was an ingenious plan. Get you out of the way, which would untether the bonds to your guys. I’d step in, assume control.” Her angry glare cuts my way. “But you just couldn’t die like a good little sister, could you? No, you had to come back and draw them right back to you. I could feel you, you know. The second your soul returned, I knew it was only a matter of time until they found you again, and they didn’t

disappoint. Sniffing you out like a bunch of scraggly mutts. But I needed to know where the book was and just how strong you were. That's where Mandy came in. Nifty little trick, that." She caresses the ruby necklace against her chest.

"I'll give you the book, Karma. Just let Thad go."

She ignores me, continuing her evil monologue. "Imagine my surprise when they didn't seem to know who they were and there was no sight of you. So I stayed close to gather as much information as possible. Even had dinner with your precious *Cole*. He probably would've let me take him home with me that night if Knox hadn't called and interrupted us."

My eyes cut to Mack, his reassurance shoring up my resolve. I keep my voice soft and even, not wanting to provoke a bite from the bitch in front of me until I'm ready to dodge it. "Let's talk about this, Karma. We can work something out."

"Hmm. I think I'm done talking." Her tone is ominous and more than a little self-assured. Shit's about to get very real.

What the fuck do I do?

An image of the Roman numerals CCLVII pops into my head, and I swear the Gateway rolls its eyes at me again. *Oh, right! Duh! Bad Fate.* In that split second, I know what needs to be done.

Her hand shoots out, the flame turning into a bright red orb heading for the rest of my guys, but I spin and cast a glass-like orb, encasing them in a clear impenetrable bubble. Her power shatters against it like ice, and her scream of frustration echoes through the space as I check to make sure my guys are safe. They're banging on the wall of the bubble, desperation etched on their faces. Their fear and frustration flood our connection.

I'm sorry, I mouth, knowing they can't hear me. I'm sure there will be hell to pay for this later, but at least there will *be* a later.

Turning, I watch as Karma throws a tantrum reminiscent of a two-year-old. I spare a glance at Mack, who stares back at me with so much love in his now green eyes that I can't look away.

"You *shouldn't* be able to do that!" she shouts, her reaction showing the crack in her sanity before she manages to get her temper under control. An eerily calm facade falls into place, though I can feel her hate and her anger roiling beneath the surface despite the mask. "You will pay for that, little sister."

Suddenly, I know something so much worse is coming. I'm frantically

trying to figure out a way to get Mack away before my psycho sister gets her hands on him, but I'm scared if I make one wrong move, she'll strike him down before I can save him.

"Karma, please. I'll give you whatever you want. Just let him go."

Her head tilts to the side as she considers me. "Well, that's good, because I've just decided the book alone isn't enough. The guys aren't enough. I want it *all*. The book. Your guys. Your title. Everything. When you're ready to hand it all over, you know where to find me."

Mack's eyes go wide, his lips forming the words *I love you* before they both disappear in a cloud of black smoke.

My knees give out, and I fall to the floor, my power exploding out of me and cascading around the room. Grief, so complete and overwhelming, has a chokehold on my heart as I stare at the empty spot Mack just filled.

This is all my fault.



The sounds of screams and the stench of sulfur hang heavy in the air. It's difficult to breathe, or really even think, but I keep trying. I have to. For Fate's sake. She's got to be losing her mind with worry right now, and considering I'm in a five foot by five foot cell, I have nothing better to do than plan my way out of here.

My options are slim.

My mark is covered by a cuff made entirely of flames, similar to those she bound me with in the Gateway. It's powerful enough to cut off communication with the guys and my ability to travel through the ether, taking those escape options out of the equation, but not strong enough to dull my recovering powers completely.

Hopefully, now that Asher reversed the potion's effects, they'll be fully operational soon. That's a plus.

Being in a gigantic body in such a small space is definitely...*not*.

Who knew being six foot six and nothing but muscle would actually be a hindrance? It's damn hard to get comfortable when you can't stretch out and you keep hitting your hands and feet on the bars because you're not used to your new wingspan. Now, if I had Thad's powers and could manipulate the darkness into some sort of key, *that* might have been helpful, but unfortunately, I quickly discovered that was not a possibility. Don't get me wrong, knowledge is great, but little good it does me here.

I heave a long drawn out sigh as my brain tries to come up with alternative options.

"Thad?" a soft voice whispers from the darkened cell next to me. I can hear the uncertainty and maybe a teensy bit of hope clinging to the single word.

I clear my throat to cover up the fact that I was just the smallest bit startled and decide now is a good time to test out my best Thad impersonation. "Uh...yeah? Who are you?" Why I deepen my voice, I have no idea since it's his tone that comes out anyways.

A petite ghostly figure approaches the bars, a collar tight around her throat with a small red ruby nestled inside the metal. Her long hair is nearly to her waist, and the nightgown she's wearing is tattered and torn. She tilts her head as she studies me intently, eyes going wide as her small hands wrap around the bars.

"Oh my god! It's really you! Is Fate here too?"

"Fate?" I ask, as if I don't know who she's talking about. I have no idea who this girl is or whether she can be trusted. Better to really play dumb. Come to think of it, that's a perfect Thad reaction.

Her eyebrows shoot up. "Fate. You know. Guardian of the Spirits. The woman who owns your heart. Buster of balls and self-proclaimed sarcasm queen."

"I know who Fate is. How do *you* know Fate?"

"Don't you remember me?"

"No, should I?"

"What did she *do* to you?"

"Who?"

"Karma. The fucking bitch who thinks she's hot shit."

"It's a long story," is my simple reply as I rub my temples. A headache is forming behind my eyes, either from my powers trickling back to full power

or the whole body swap thing. I can't really be sure at the moment.

"You really don't remember me?"

"Nope. Sure don't." It's honestly easier to channel Thad than I expected. Just think in monosyllabic terms. *Should I fondle my balls? I feel like that's the kind of thing Thad might do. Take a moment to rearrange things downstairs regardless of who might be watching.*

It's her turn to sigh as her hands fall away from the bars. "I was hoping you'd have back up on the way and you'd be able to get us out of here. Is she...Fate is back...right?"

"Who are you?"

"My name is Liv."

"Liv? Nick's sister?"

"So you remember Nick, but not me?" Her hands land on her hips, her words full of indignation. For a moment, I see a hint of Fate in her reaction, a sign that these two really were as close as everyone has mentioned.

"Let's just say we had a run-in with your brother and it didn't end well."

"Ugh. Karma's got him wrapped around her little finger. The bitch never hesitates to throw it in my face. I'm not even sure he knows I'm a prisoner down here."

"Why *are* you stuck in here? Can't you just walk through the bars?"

Her delicate hand comes up and runs along the collar at her throat. "Not with this on. It gives her control over me and nullifies most of my ghostly characteristics while I'm in this place. I'm little more than her puppet."

"Hmmm. Maybe we can use that to our advantage if we can get it off you. Not sure I can craft any tools down here, but there's got to be something we could use."

Her eyes narrow, and she studies me again. "You sure don't sound like Thad."

Good going, Mack. Already forgetting your cover. "Um. Well...like I said. It's a long story, and we..." Doubt trickles in. Us nerds aren't meant to go undercover. We don't get to be heroes, and we *definitely* don't rescue damsels in distress. We fight with our knowledge and our brains. *Not* our fists. Except in this body, maybe I can use my size to our advantage. *Alright, Mack. Time to pull up your big boy pants and get shit done. For the first time in your life, you've got the brains and the brawn. Use it. You can't let Fate, or Liv, down.*

"Is this a trick? Are you here to gather information for *her*?"

Taking a calculated risk, I decide to drop the Thad act. This girl was like a sister to Fate, once upon a time. If that's true, then maybe she has information that can help us. "Definitely not. I just have to think for a minute. Maybe I can come up with a plan to get us out of here. If we can get the collar off and then electronically alter it, reversing the polarization, we might be able to use that to escape."

Her eyes widen again. "Wait a minute. You sound more like...*Macklin*?"

She obviously knows us pretty well, even if we don't remember her. I nod, my lips tilting up. "Nice to meet you...*again*...Liv."

"But...how are you in Thad's body?"

"I probably sound like a broken record, but it really is a long story. Karma can't know, Liv. She thinks I'm Thad, and we need to keep it that way."

"Your secret is safe with me." She mimes locking her lips and throwing away the key. "Boy, this has to be one helluva tale. Fate dies, you all go missing for a hundred years, and now you're back with no memories, in someone else's body. Bet Fate freaked the fuck out."

"You have no idea."

"I can't wait to hear all about it."

"If we can get out of here, I'll let Fate regale you with all of the details that I'm sure she'll embellish just because she can."

She chuckles. "That sounds like Fate, for sure. God, I've missed you guys."

"Don't worry, Liv. I'll figure something out."

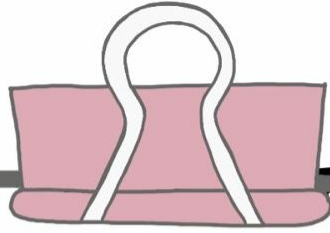
"I trust you, Mack," she whispers.

Our gazes turn toward the ominous staircase that sits in the far corner of the dank basement as the doorknob creaks and the door at the top of the stairs opens. Fiery light filters in through the crack as the screams get louder. Liv quickly darts back into the darkest corner of her cell just as the clacking of heels on wood echoes through the space seconds before she comes into view on ridiculously high heels. She reaches the bottom with a sweep of her long green dress, and looks at me with an evil glint in her eyes.

"Well now, my pet. Let's see what trouble we can get up to today, shall we? Why don't you be a good little boy and show me just what that darkness of yours can do?"

THE END

IT MUST BE
Fate



1. Fate

Ghost Girl Fact #25:

*Does anyone have a cheat sheet? This soul swap
shit's complicated. (But, for real, do you have one?)*

Cole = Levi
Knox = Cole
Macklin = Thad
Thad = Knox
Levi = Macklin

In that single moment between breaths, in the split second that determines whether or not you take another, time simply stops. There's a stillness that descends, ensnaring everything around it. There's no love or loss or...anything at all. Just this vast nothingness that casts a shadow over everything within reach. Then, in the next moment, there's sound and light and life, and you take the next breath, but everything is suddenly different. The axis has shifted ever so slightly, yet the repercussions are immense.

One second, he's there, looking at me with eyes that aren't his own but are filled with everything he can't say. The next, he's gone.

My soul is keening at the loss of its echo, yet at the same time, an all-consuming fire has been lit within me, slowly flooding the hollow space left in Macklin's wake as I stare through tear-filled eyes at the empty spot he occupied. The juxtaposition of the two warring emotions leaves room for little else. There is only pain. Only anger. Grief. I'm not sure if this is what it looks like for anyone else, but for me, it's an internal battle between giving up and pushing on. Taking that next breath or letting it be taken.

Swiping the back of my hand across my face, I take a deep breath, picking up the pieces of my broken heart and holding myself together as best I can. The edges are jagged, but the pain just serves to further my purpose: getting my sexy nerd back.

I love you. The silent words are on repeat in my mind, and I simply refuse to let those be his last.

Get it together, Fate. This is no time to fall apart. You survived death and Ass-Cole's shitty attitude. You can survive this too.

Getting to my feet, my eyes are unfocused, my mind a jumbled mess of contradictions. I was chosen as the Guardian of the Spirits because of my ability to remain fair. Balanced. Neutral.

That last word has my hands fisting, nails digging into my palms as my jaw clenches and tears continue to pour like rain down my face.

Neutrality? Yeah. Fuck that shit. Righteous fury is about as neutral as I can manage at the moment. My head drops back, releasing my anguish, frustration, and complete and utter rage at the top of my lungs. The roar echoes through the silence of Gateway but does little to ease the ache inside.

Fate.

The woman's voice cuts through my grief, and my head whips around, trying to find the source.

I'm right here, Fate.

"Who's there?" My gaze takes in the room around me, landing on my guys, who have somehow managed to escape the bubble and are frantically racing toward me. For a moment, guilt consumes me. I had completely forgotten they were here. "Oh, thank god. You guys, I'm hearing voices, and I..."

Cole doesn't stop. Before I can jump out of the way, his body runs right through me, familiar tingles shooting across my skin as he heads toward the

dais. “Where the fuck did she go?” he growls.

“I’ll check the office,” Knox shouts as he rushes in that direction.

The others split up, searching for something. No, not *something*.
Someone. *Me*.

My heart rate picks up as panic begins to creep in. I raise my hand, and sure enough, I can see the sparkly tile through my fingers.

They can’t see you.

Shaking my head, I take a step back. “No. This can’t be happening.”

Don’t worry, it’s not—

“Don’t worry? How can I not worry? I’m somehow a fucking ghost girl again.”

Fate—

My eyes narrow. “Who are you?”

It’s me.

“Me...who?”

The Creator.

“The Creator? Should I know you?”

You do, in a sense.

“In a sense? What the hell does that mean, and how are you talking inside my head?”

You know me as the Gateway.

“The Gateway isn’t a real person.”

I existed long, long ago. Before I created the Gateway, before the Guardian, before the Keepers, there was me.

I look around the main chamber, searching for...hell, I don’t even know what. *Am I suffering some sort of psychotic break?*

“Where am I?”

Between planes.

“How did I get here?”

You transported yourself here with that blast of magic caused by your grief. But you can’t stay long. The living don’t survive very long in the Lacuna.

“Lacuna?”

A gap between the planes. One which no one but you has ever been able to access.

“How the hell do I get out of here?”

You have to will yourself out.

My eyebrows shoot up. “It sure as hell wasn’t that easy before. Trust me, I know. I was trapped here for ten fucking years.”

She chuckles, the sound like the pretty tinkling of a windchime. ***That was different. Your soul wasn’t whole. Now, it is.***

I think about Macklin and the situation we’re currently facing, and the pain threatens to engulf me again. “It doesn’t feel whole right now.”

He’s still very much a part of you. You’ll get him back, of that I have no doubt.

My sorrow once again gives way to irrational anger.

“You let her take him. You did nothing to stop it,” I snarl, taking an aggressive step forward toward...what, I’m not sure.

A sigh whispers around me. ***In giving my creations free will, I gave up any power I had over them. Now I’m nothing more than a guide, a source of information. I can’t control Karma any more than I can control you or Destiny. You are each your own woman, with your own strengths and flaws.***

Flaws. I definitely have some of those. But a love of wine and sex isn’t in the same league with Karma’s murderous tendencies.

“You created her. Can’t you...*uncreate* her?”

If only it were that easy...

Out of the corner of my eye, I see movement. Turning, I find my guys pow-wow’d by the office door, in what appears to be a very angry discussion. Their worry, their fear, their grief hits me, putting a dent in my own. In my selfishness, I had forgotten they witnessed Mack’s abduction and then my vanishing act.

“I need to go to them. Let them know I’m okay.”

Like I said, you just have to think about leaving this plane and returning to your own, then your powers should take you there.

My eyes scan the room once more, looking for the woman behind the voice, even if I logically know I won’t find her. “I never heard you while I was here before.”

It took a lot out of me to ensure your soul remained here until you were ready to return. I didn’t have the energy for much else.

Despite my tumultuous mental state, the slightest bit of warmth seeps in. She’s the very reason I was able to come back to them. “So, I have you to thank for that. To be honest, I’m not sure there are words great enough for—”

You don’t need to thank me. What you’re doing, righting the wrongs of

your sister, that's more than thanks enough for me. It's technically my fault, after all.

I shrug. "I mean, I can't argue with that."

Her amusement floods the space around us. This feels familiar, this connection between us, and I realize why. She's the one who gave me my title, my life, my guys. She's the one behind the scenes, guiding me and making sure I have what I need.

"But I'm not sure how to beat her. Without our memories, she's got the upper hand. Old Fate would be kicking ass and taking names, but I'm just over here crying and feeling sorry for myself. I'm no better than some store brand knockoff of the real thing. You should call me Fake. Or Not Fate. Maybe iFate for imitation Fate."

You were chosen to be the Guardian because of your infallible balance. The ability to look at both sides of a situation fairly and impartially. That hasn't changed just because you're different. In fact, I'd argue that your experience has given you a strength your past self never had. Now, more than ever before, your balance is bolstered by the renewed love and support of your men. You found each other despite the numerous obstacles put in your way. You fought to come back together again, and that determination will serve you well. Your sister, who's always been driven by her dark side, tainted by it really, doesn't have that advantage. Don't let it go to waste. Use it.

I let my mind play over her words, knowing in my heart she's right. There is no old Fate versus new Fate. There is only one, and that's me.

"Thank you," I murmur, and a rush of warmth rushes through our connection. Much like a mother's love, it's not tangible, but you always know you can count on it.

Go. Save the world.

Right. Go. Like it's that easy. I close my eyes and say the first words that come to my head. *There's no place like home. There's no place like home.*

Oh, and Fate?

"Yes?" I'm concentrating on my guys. On the main chamber of the Gateway. On everything that makes this place my home.

I'll always be here. All you have to do is ask, and if I can help, I will.

There's a shift in the air. Nothing more than a gentle breeze that sends my hair fluttering around my face.

When I open my eyes, I'm once again staring at the last place I saw

Macklin. This time, while the pain is still very much present, the anger that had been turned down to a simmer flares brightly, giving me renewed strength. Tears threaten, but not out of sadness. Out of pure, undiluted fury.

A hand on my shoulder has me whipping around, pretty pink orb in hand, ready to strike down anyone who dares to cross me right now. Instead, Cole's icy blue eyes stare back at me.

"Fate?"

My name tumbles from his lips in that low, rich voice of his, and my bottom lip begins to tremble, another tear trailing down my cheek. Without another word, he closes the distance between us, wrapping his strong arms around me, steadying me. I give myself this one moment to be weak. To let someone else hold me up while the rest of my world crumbles down around me.

"Where the hell did you go, little ghost?"

For a split second, I had forgotten the heaping pile of shit we're in. You know, like Knox's soul in Cole's body. *Sigh*. Our problems just keep piling on. But now that I'm back in the arms of one of my guys, I know that everything will be alright.

"Guys!" he shouts. "She's over here."

The rest of the guys come running in from different directions. I'm not sure what they were doing while I finished up my chat with the Creator. I sort of lost track.

"Where the fuck was she?" It may be Levi's voice, but it's got Cole's sharp sting.

"I'm not sure. She hasn't said."

A big hand runs down the back of my head, fingers running through my hair.

"You okay, sweets?" Levi asks, but when I look up, it's Macklin's face I'm staring at.

"It's so weird looking at him standing right in front of me yet knowing he's not here." I sniffle, staring into the chocolatey brown eyes I adore so much. "My brain is a fucked up mess, you guys."

"Welcome to the club, woman," Thad mutters, running a hand down Knox's blond locks.

"What the dipshit means to say is, you're entitled, babe. You've been dealt a shit hand lately."

Thad nods. "Yeah, what the wankstain said."

“I fucking love all of you. You know that, right?”

“We know, little ghost.”

Cole crosses Levi’s massive arms over his chest. “Now, where were you?”

“I was in Lacuna with the Creator.”

All of the guys share a look. One that I recognize as the classic *what’s she talking about* look.

“Lacuna?” Knox asks, strong arms never once letting me go.

“A space in between planes. That’s where I was held until my soul was strong enough to come back the first time.”

“How did you get there?”

I shrug. “My power apparently.”

“The Creator?” Cole asks, his scowl transforming Levi’s handsome face into something between constipation and heartburn.

“We know her as the Gateway.”

“Her?”

One brow lifts. “Do you have a problem with a powerful woman being responsible for the creation of the universe?”

“Explains why there’s so much drama around here, that’s for sure,” Cole grumbles.

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t just say that, even if it *is* mostly accurate.”

“She knows we’re going after Karma and said she’ll help if she can.” I look up into the blue eyes that are usually so cold but are now looking back at me with an unfamiliar warmth. “I can’t lose him, Knox. We have to get him back.”

“Mack’s smart, love. He’ll know how to maneuver through this situation until we can rescue him,” Cole says.

I pull back, meeting his intense focus through Levi’s green eyes. “But how are we going to do that? We need a plan. I’ve tried to find him through the connection, but it’s gone dark. Something is blocking it.”

“We’ll come up with something, but in the meantime, we could all use some food and rest.”

“In what reality do you think I’d be able to eat or sleep right now, Cole?”

Before he can respond with some smartass remark, there’s a shift in pressure that has us all spinning around.

“Nate?” I ask, confused as Death runs toward us.

“Fate! What the fuck was that? When I got Reggie’s message about the soul swap situation, I left my book club meeting to look for answers. All of a sudden, I get this buzz in my head that turns into a raging headache. I almost crashed my car. I knew it could only be you, so I got here as fast as I could.”

“Yeah, I *may* have released a huge surge of power...totally by accident, mind you...but for good reason.” When I feel the tell-tale sign of oncoming tears, I steel my spine and take a deep breath. Mack needs me, so I’m going to put on my big girl panties and deal. “She got him, Nate. Karma took Macklin.”

He stares at me for only a second, unblinking. The next moment, his blue eyes turn completely black before he steps forward and wraps me up in a hug.

“I’m so sorry, babe. We’ll get him back. You have my word on that.”

A chorus of growls sounds from behind me.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” I bark. “Stop it already. He’s friend, not foe, remember?”

“Why’s he gotta be so touchy feely?” Thad gripes as he shoots a glare at the big blond hunk at my side.

“Wait, which one are you again?” Nate releases me and steps back, taking in all of my guys. “I’m going to need a chart or something.”

“Dude, same!” I roll my teary eyes.

He looks at me with a smirk that’s lacking some of his normal charm, then holds out his fist. Despite the sniffles, I weakly lift my hand and totally bump it.

“But for the record, since none of you remember, she’s like a sister to my brothers and me. It’s never been anything more than that for any of us.” He studies me for a second. “Though now that I think about it, we’ve always been pretty *touchy feely*, and you all have always been *growly*. I think she enjoys the rise it gets out of you. Maybe things haven’t changed that much after all.”

“Doesn’t make us feel any better, *Death*,” Levi grumbles.

The air shifts again, and we turn to find Reggie rushing over to us.

“Fate?” Reggie calls out. “What happened?”

“Reggie? Thank god you’re here. Mack’s gone.”

“Gone? What the fuck? Wait. You mean Macklin in Thad’s body is gone. That’s not confusing or anything.”

“Preaching to the choir, girl.”

“Shit. That’s not good. How are we going to swap everyone back if he’s

not here?”

I look over at the blonde bombshell walking up beside her. “Asher, thank you for coming with her. We’re going to need you. Maybe with all of us, we can work out a plan to get him back, or at least start figuring out a solution to the body swap fiasco.”

“Asher?” Nate’s voice squeaks like a teenage boy’s during puberty, and one of the guys snorts.

My eyes widen. *Shit! She’s not going to like this.* Seems like that father-daughter reunion is going to happen whether either of them are ready or not.

Asher is staring at us with a confused look on her face while Nate looks as pale as, well, death.

“Ummm...Nate, this is Asher. Asher, this is Nate. Otherwise known as Death.” I fake a cough and mumble quickly, “Andalsoyourfather.”

Her pretty blue eyes widen and dart to Nate’s. No one says a word.

“This is awkward,” Thad sing-songs out of the corner of Knox’s mouth, earning him a nudge in the side from Levi with Mack’s elbow.

“Look, I know this isn’t how either of you imagined your first introduction would go, and I’m truly sorry for that, but on a positive note, at least it’s out of the way now, right? You’ll have plenty of time to get to know each other once we get all of this shit figured out. An eternity, in fact. But for now, we need your help with the problem at hand.”

“Getting the guys’ souls swapped back,” Reggie adds. “Can we do that without Mack physically here?”

Nate finally manages to tear his eyes from Asher’s and turns to me, a contemplative look on his face. “It *could* be possible. It really just depends on the strength of Asher’s power, the strength of the new bond before he got taken, and where exactly he is. I’m assuming the Land of Torment.”

“That would make the most sense,” Cole interjects. “Karma would be heavily protected there and knows we can’t follow her with our severe lack of knowledge.”

Another shift of pressure and Rylan is running toward the group.

“Oh goodie!” Reggie claps. “The gang’s together again.”

“What the fuck is *he* doing here?” Knox asks.

Cole crosses his arms over his chest. “If he hugs her, I’ll rip his arms off.”

“I’ll help,” Thad adds.

I just roll my eyes.

“Guys!” Rylan pants, as though he just finished running a marathon.

“Seriously? You got the bat signal too?” Thad groans.

Rylan’s brows shoot up. “Bat signal?”

“Fate’s little magic S.O.S. call she inadvertently sent out,” Levi responds.

“Um. No. I came as soon as I got this latest intel. Karma’s got Thad.”

Thad rolls his eyes. “Intel that’s as good as that chewed up stump you were sporting.”

“Hey, now. Fate fixed that. My leg is whole again, thank you very much,” he says indignantly, glaring at Thad before turning back to me. “But I confirmed it. She’s holding him in the Land of Torment.”

“First of all, I’m right here, bro.” Thad points to himself. “Second of all, we already knew that.”

“Wait. You’re not Thad. You’re Knox.”

“Long story, man,” Levi says, patting him on the shoulder.

“We’re gonna need a cheat sheet,” Reggie adds.

“That’s what I said,” Nate interjects.

“Might want to get some printed,” I suggest.

Reggie nods.

Rylan is looking at us like we’re crazy, but he just shakes his head. “But there’s more.”

We all straighten. I told the guys Rylan would be useful, and look, I was right. *Mental note to rub that in their faces later.*

“Well, get on with it, man.”

“I was at a bar—”

“What the fuck were you doing at a bar?” Knox asks.

“It’s where a lot of ghost groups gather.” He shrugs. “We can’t get drunk, but it doesn’t stop us from wanting to pretend we have real lives.”

I wave my hand in the air, a universal get-on-with-it motion. “Rylan, you were at the bar...?”

“Right. I was at the bar, and this ghost showed up. Guy was a real downer. Collapses on an empty bar stool, throws his head in his hands, and just looks generally miserable.”

“What does this have to do with anything?” Cole grumbles.

“I started chatting him up. Turns out, he’s one of Karma’s right hand men. He’s having some major regrets about that by the way. Had to listen to him whine about it for over an hour, but he let it slip that she’s got someone trapped in the dungeon inside her palace and he’s not being very cooperative. She calls him to an inner chamber, removes the cuff that blocks his powers,

and demands he give her a demonstration. Even though he keeps telling her something about a potion and it affecting said powers, when he doesn't perform as expected, she loses her shit. According to my source, he's taken some brutal beatings."

My gut churns with dread, and the tears I swore I wouldn't shed blur my vision.

"Babe," Thad murmurs, wrapping an arm around my waist and tugging me into his side. "He'll be fine. He's in my body, and it'll take a helluva lot more than a couple beatings to bring me down."

Even knowing Mack is ridiculously smart and that he's got Thad's strength to back him up does little to soothe my soul. He's there, alone and hurting, because I couldn't save him.

"How am I going to fight my sister when she knows every weakness we have? She's always one step ahead." I run a hand through my hair, letting out the breath I was holding. "If I had my memories, I'd know exactly how to find him in the Land of Torment and how to get him out. But I don't. The Creator said I have the advantage here, but I just don't see how. Fuck! What are we going to do?"

"What we're not going to do is fret over shit we can't change. We'll strategize and come up with a foolproof plan."

My head snaps up. "Like what, Cole? Like trying to negotiate with my psychotic sister who wants to see me dead? Oh, I know! Maybe we meet some stranger in a club and fuck everyone's souls up? Yeah, Cole, those were all uber successful the first time around."

"So you're going to, what? Throw yourself a fucking pity party instead? Feel bad for yourself because things aren't going your way? Poor. Little. Fate."

"Bro, what—"

I cut off whatever Levi is about to say. My eyes narrow and my fingers spark as I stare at my gentle giant turned Ass-Cole. "What did you just say?"

"I said..." Cole mutters, "enjoy your pity party while the rest of us try to get Macklin back."

The lights in the room flare bright pink, and the temperature drops, causing frost to appear on just about every surface.

"Are you fucking serious right now?"

"Cole, back off, man," Knox warns, taking a step toward him.

The asshole just crosses his arms over his chest. "Go grab your wine and

alcoholic ice pops and let us handle it.”

“Dude is digging his own grave right now,” Thad scoffs.

“Sweets, just remember that I kind of like my dick, so aim high,” Levi throws out from somewhere to my left, but my eyes are locked on my asshole. Not literally, of course. I’m not as limber as I used to be.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” I growl.

“Apparently the only one here capable of putting a plan together.”

I’m up in his face faster than he can blink, jabbing my finger in his chest. “Who the hell died and made you king?”

“You did.”

The silence that follows is absolute, and for a split second I’m struck speechless, which doesn’t happen often, let me tell you.

“*You did,*” he says again softly, a haggard sigh leaving his lips as he cups my cheek with his large hand. “And it about killed me, love. But I survived. Then I saw you for the second first time, and it was like everything inside me came roaring back to life. You were gorgeous, strong, fiercely loyal—a force that I didn’t know how to handle—and you loved me despite how much of an asshole I am. You’re confident, powerful, one of the most capable women I’ve ever met who has literally fought her way back from death. Maybe this was the reason. We all needed to experience the pain in order to prepare ourselves for what is to come.”

His hands slide down my arms, sending those damn tingles throughout my body despite how pissed off I am right now. Cole’s steady gaze grounds me from behind Levi’s green eyes.

“I know you’re struggling right now, but if there is anyone in this room that will be able to go up against Karma and win, it’ll be you. Now, I need you to hold on to that anger I see lighting up those beautiful gray eyes. Let it fuel you because we’re going to need it for everything that lies ahead. The others might be willing to coddle you right now, but I don’t think that’s what you need.”

He kisses me then. It’s not a gentle coming together; it’s rough and hard and does exactly what he meant it to. It reignites that inner flame I have burning inside. The one that I need to keep lit for my sexy nerd so he can find his way home. Cole slowly pulls back, dropping his forehead to meet mine.

“Sometimes I really hate you,” I whisper, and the psycho chuckles. “But I *always* love you.”

“And I love *you.*” He places a kiss on my forehead. “We all do.”

Remember that.”

“Thank you.”

“Any time, love. My dickish services are available upon request.”

My eyes narrow. “But don’t think you’re forgiven that easily. I won’t be calling on those *dickish services* any time soon after this little stunt.”

With a groan, he smashes his lips to mine, and I can’t help but draw from his strength and his power, letting it fuel the anger just like he said it would. We break apart, both of us breathing heavily.

“You’re right, bro,” Levi says. “It is hot watching myself kiss our girl.”

Thad’s confident smirk transforms Knox’s face. “Told you so.”

“Okay, so what are we going to do?” I ask, my hands finding my hips. “How are we going to get him back, and how are we going to fix your souls?”

“One thing at a time, sweets.”

“Wait, if she removes the cuff, why doesn’t Mack just transport out of there?”

The entire room looks at Rylan.

“Don’t look at me.” He raises his hands. “I’ve told you everything he told me.”

“We have to assume that she’s somehow blocked that ability.”

Exhaustion hits me out of nowhere, and I can’t stifle the yawn before it leaves my mouth.

“Knox, why don’t you take Fate to get some rest while we start working on a plan.”

“But I’m not—”

His scowl shuts me up.

Sighing, I grumble, “Fine. I’ll *try* to get some rest, but I make no promises.”

“Mind if I come along?” Levi asks, a hopeful look in his eyes.

“Not at all. The more the merrier.”

“Rest. All of you. I mean it.”

“Yeah, yeah, *Dad*.”

He snorts. “You can save the daddy kink for Knox. I prefer to hear you scream my name when you’re with me.”

Just like that, my pulse jumps and I’m suddenly not at all interested in sleep.

“I know that look, but I mean it. Sleep. ”

My lower lip pops out into a dramatic pouty face.

“Love, I told you that shit doesn’t work on me. Now, I want you to let the guys take care of you so we can be ready when we figure out a way to free our nerd.”

He’s right. We have to be at our strongest.

Nodding my agreement, I glance around the room. All around me is the family—as eccentric as it may be—a ghost girl never thought she’d have again and the love that is more than I ever could’ve hoped for. I swear to whoever may be listening that I will *do* anything and *give* everything to keep them all safe. Even if I have to die trying. For real, this time.

2. MACKLIN

SEXY NERD FACT #8:

FIRST RULE OF THAD CLUB IS
YOU DONT TALK ABOUT THAD
CLUB.

My face hits the hard cement floor, my bound hands unable to stop the impact when I'm thrown head first into my cell. The bars slam shut behind me, the flames on the fiery magicked cuffs receding to one hand now that I'm locked away again. I remain unmoving until I hear the heavy boots thud up the stairs and the telltale click of the door at the top.

Slowly, I roll my heavy body over onto my side and take a few deep breaths before attempting to sit with a loud groan. I learned that lesson the hard way the first time. Sit up too fast after a beating, and you pass out. Who knew? I suppose I should have. I *am* the Keeper of Records, after all.

One eye is swollen shut, and my bottom lip is split open. My cheek is throbbing where it met the cement, and although my jaw hurts like hell, I don't think it's broken. Blood is pooling in my mouth and trailing down my chin. Turning to the side, which causes a hitch in my breathing, I spit, then

bring the back of my free hand up to wipe the rest of it away. Exhausted, both mentally and physically, I throw my good arm over my bent knees, letting my head fall forward to rest a moment. It's only a matter of time before she sends for me again, and I'll need all my strength to keep up this stupid charade I'm being forced to play.

"Ma...I mean, Thad, are you okay?" Liv whispers from the adjoining cell.

"I'm fine, Liv." I don't mention the cracked ribs or my dislocated shoulder.

"We need to get you out of here. She'll just keep beating the shit out of you until she figures out who you really are."

"She won't. I'm sure the others are already working on a plan to get me out of here. In the meantime..." Using my good arm, I push myself to my feet, pausing to take a deep breath and exhale slowly as the room tilts slightly. Shuffling over to Liv's cell, I realize I'm limping as I go. Apparently, I twisted my ankle pretty damn good too. "Let me see that collar again. Maybe I'll have better luck this time."

"Hey, maybe you should rest. You don't look so good."

"No rest for the wicked, as they say."

"You're not the wicked one. She is," Liv mutters. She leans against the bars so I can use my good hand to feel around the collar for a break, button, seam, anything that might give us an edge on getting it off.

"Don't worry. Fate will make sure Karma gets what's coming to her. Man, that woman is fierce when she's angry."

Liv smiles. "I remember the time this boy, the younger brother of Nick's closest friend, kept harassing me. He kept trying to take liberties and wouldn't take no for an answer. He cornered me behind the stairwell one night when our brothers were drunk off their asses, called me a tease and said he'd show me what happens to girls like me if I didn't agree to be his." She studies the bars intently, her brow furrowing slightly at the memory. "I told Fate about it, and she was livid. I didn't see him at school for several days, but when he finally came back, he was sporting a black eye and a cast on his arm. When he saw me, he panicked and ran the opposite way, hitting his broken arm against the wall in the process. Fate said she *had a talk* with him."

"I just bet she did." I chuckle. "Fate doesn't take kindly to people she cares about getting hurt or being treated poorly." I let my hand fall, not finding anything on the collar that could help us. "This is a dead end."

“Do you think they’ll really figure out a way to get you out of here?”

“I know they will, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to stop trying to save us in the meantime.”

The creak of the door has Liv shooting back into the darkened corner of her cell. I step away from the bars and manage to slide down the back wall, bending my knees and letting my head fall back. I don’t hear the unmistakable sound of heels against tile or the heavy thud of the guard’s boots. Whoever is coming is being incredibly quiet about it.

A tall, thin shadowy figure appears at the bars. With my eyes mere slits, I try to catch a better glimpse of our visitor without letting them know I’m awake. The second recognition hits, I have to fight back my anger and the desire to punch his fucking face in. That thought is so unlike me, that for a second, I wonder if some of Thad’s instincts are indeed rubbing off on me, and that’s a terrifying thought. What’s next, man buns and incorrect grammar?

“Thad,” Nick whispers, his head darting to the left and to the right.

I almost don’t respond, but then I remember I have a part to play. “Go away, Nick. I have nothing to say to your scrawny ass.”

Shoot. Maybe that wasn’t very Thadesque. Probably should have used some random insult with the word taint in it.

“Listen, we don’t have much time. I’m not supposed to be down here, and honestly, I’m not sure how long this bout of lucidity will last.”

“Nickie?” Liv murmurs, standing about a foot away from the bars of her cell.

His head whips her way, and his eyes widen. “Olivia? What...how...”

She cautiously steps forward. He hurries over to her cell, but she shuffles back again.

“Liv, it’s me.” He looks her over, taking in her tattered gown and the collar at her throat, and I see anger flash across his face. “How long have you been down here?”

“I lost count decades ago.”

His jaw muscles clench. “I’m so fucking sorry, Liv. If I had known or at least been in my right mind, I would have—”

“Nick, I thought you said there wasn’t much time?” I prompt, not moving. My body is too damn sore to try to heft Thad’s enormous weight around anymore than I have to.

“Nickie, can you get us out of here?” She takes a few hesitant steps

forward, studying her brother with wary eyes. Her hands grip the bars so hard her knuckles turn white.

“Sorry. You’re right. I came to help, though I’m not sure how. She’s becoming suspicious of me, so I have to be cautious,” he murmurs reluctantly before straightening. “Just know I’ll do whatever I can.” His eyes cut to me before he continues. “But you have to promise me that you’ll take Liv with you when you go.”

“As long as we can get that collar off, you have my word. Fate wouldn’t let me leave here without her if we could help it.”

He nods, his opaque eyes staring into mine, and for the first time, I think that somewhere down deep, he might actually care about his sister after all. “Just...stay alive a little longer. Do you have any of your powers? That might help if you can give her just a teaser to keep her invested.”

“I’ve got nothing. The potion is still fucking with them.”

“I’ll never be able to apologize enough for that. For all of this, really, but now that I’m *me* again, maybe I can help make things right.”

With my powers coming back online, the sincerity in his words rings true. He wants to make amends.

He turns back to his sister. “I’m sorry, Liv.

“I know, Nickie,” Liv soothes. “Just help get us out of here, and then we’ll have eternity to catch up.”

He cautiously gives her hands a squeeze, but his eyes find mine. “I’ve got to go, but I wanted to tell you this one thing. She let it slip that she was worried how long she’d be able to keep you down here because your bond with Fate can be utilized like a two-way street. If Fate were to send her power down through your connection, then she could give you just enough strength to get out of here. Karma believes it’s only a matter of time before you all figure that out, with Macklin on your side and all.”

I sit up a little straighter, my heart starting to race as that information filters through my brain. The only problem is that the bond is a mass of tangled connections right now, with our souls swapped and all, and I’m not sure it will work. Then there’s the little problem of getting that information to Fate.

“Thanks, Nick.”

He takes one last look at his sister, regret heavy in his eyes. “I love you, Liv. I’ve got so much to make up for. I’ll get you out of here if it’s the last thing I do.”

With that, he turns and quietly heads back up the stairs.

The second he's gone, I ask, "Do you trust him?"

She sighs, one weighted with hope and uncertainty. "I haven't seen my brother in close to a hundred years, only the monster she turned him into. Today was the first day I saw a glimpse of the man I remember. And honestly, I haven't seen *him* since before our parents' deaths. But do I trust him?" She looks toward the door. "I want to, but I can't say for sure."

My head falls back against the cement wall, and I let my eyes close. For the first time since I found myself locked down in this hell hole, I have hope. Hope that I'll get to hold Fate in my arms again soon. Hope that we'll be able to beat her psychotic sister. Hope that I might actually get my own body back.

Hope's a powerful fucking thing.

3. KNOX

EMPATHY FACT #8:

THE NEXT TIME SHE FUCKS HIM
SHE'LL BE THINKING OF ME AND
THAT'S SO FUCKING SATISFYING.

Despair, grief, guilt...they're battering at my metaphorical wall, forcing me to fortify it or be lost to the flood myself.

"If you could get all of your memories back, would you?"

My eyes cut to Macklin's, where Levi's soft concern stares back at me as he leans against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest.

"What kind of question is that?"

"It's an honest question. Would you want to remember who we were? Who Fate was? How we used to be together?" He's studying me with a serious look. "For the record, I don't want them back. What I feel now, for that woman in there, goes beyond anything I felt back then."

"How can you be sure?"

"There have been moments, ones where the past seems to superimpose itself onto the present, and in those moments I remember myself, her, our

feelings at the time. Then the memory recedes, and I look at her. The love inside me now far surpasses anything past me ever felt. And he loved her a shit ton.”

Looking toward the bathroom, I hear the continued hum of the shower. She’s been in there far longer than what’s normal, but we’ve let her have her space. She’s no doubt crying, if the deluge of emotions I’m experiencing is any indication, even though she doesn’t want us to know that. She wants us to believe she’s strong. Capable. Fearless. All things we already know she is. Now if only she would believe it herself.

“She’s blaming herself.”

My head whips his way. “It’s not her fault.”

“We all know that, but convincing her is going to be difficult.”

“We just have to be here. Let her know that she’s not alone.”

He appears thoughtful for a moment, which, considering he’s wearing Mack’s face, is actually a hint of comforting familiarity despite all of the uncertainty we’re facing.

“You never answered the question.”

I’ve never really thought about it. Our memories would make our lives a helluva lot easier, but I’m sure most of us would agree that we’re different people now than we were then. Just from the little glimpses we’ve seen and the photos plastered over the Gateway’s walls, it’s clear. How would having those memories back affect who we are now? Would we cease to exist, reverting back to who we used to be? Would I want that? Would I want to risk losing everything we’ve become this time around? The answer is simpler than I expected.

“No. I wouldn’t want our memories back.”

“Even if it meant we’d have the knowledge we need to win this war?”

Fate’s voice has our heads whipping toward the entry to the bathroom. She’s standing there in only a towel, her hands clutching it tightly, long dark hair dripping onto that creamy skin that I love to watch turn pink under my hand.

“Even then,” I say with certainty. Walking over, I brush a stray strand behind her ear. “Our past is just that. Past. We’ve already started working toward a new future, and I’m not willing to let anything get in the way of that. Not your sister. Not even our past selves.”

She studies my face, no doubt assessing whether I’m just placating her or if I’m telling her my own truth.

“I don’t deserve you,” she says softly, turning to Levi who is now beside us. “Any of you.”

“Pretty sure you got that backward, sweets. It’s definitely us who don’t deserve you.”

Levi reaches out, pulling her toward him. Her hands land on Mack’s biceps, the towel all but forgotten as it slips to the floor.

“You’re the ones that brought me back. I wouldn’t be here without you.”

“We were barely living until you came into our life, little ghost.” I walk up behind her, sandwiching her between us.

She looks over her shoulder, a spark of heat lighting up her eyes for what feels like the first time in hours. We’re supposed to be getting rest, but with that look in her eye and the wave of lust that rolls over me, my entire body is demanding something much more engaging.

“You all sure looked pretty alive to me. And that’s saying a lot considering I was the one that was a fucking ghost girl.”

Chuckling, my hands land on her hips. “We were merely surviving.”

“And now?”

“We’re thriving, and that’s all because of you.”

“I’m not so sure about that. I bet—”

I share a look with Levi over her shoulder. “We’ll prove it to you.”

Levi grabs her chin, bringing her face to his as he drops a kiss on her lips. She makes this sound, one that has my dick tightening in my jeans. Actually, it’s Cole’s dick, which is going to make this whole thing really fucking interesting. I don’t stop to think about that though. Instead, I kiss along the sensitive spot between her neck and shoulder, sending goosebumps skittering along her skin.

“Do you like the idea of the two of us taking you, little ghost?” I whisper against her ear.

“It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Levi snorts. “You’re right. But this time, I get to take Mack’s anaconda for a test drive. You’ll have to tell me who drives it better.”

“Does that mean I get to try my hand with Cole’s sword?”

She laughs, and the sound is like another zap to not-my-dick.

“Oh, we’re going to have so much fun with this.” Her grin is mischievous, desire overriding all of the other emotions that have been eating at her. “Now...I think you both are totally overdressed.”

Sharing a quick look, we step back and shrug out of our clothes. My hand

automatically reaches for my erection, and I've gotta admit there's something highly erotic about knowing I'm stroking our alpha's cock. That I'll use it to pleasure our girl. That she'll be getting off on *his* dick, but I'll be the one calling the shots.

She's standing there, watching us, her bottom lip between her teeth.

"God, there is something really fucking hot about watching you both play with their dicks while they're not here to see it." Her eyes get that faraway look in them, no doubt remembering exactly where Macklin is.

"Eyes on us, little ghost. We're with you right now, and we're going to make sure you feel fucking fantastic."

She nods, releasing a breath as I step up to her, my hand wrapping around her neck to smash my lips against hers as her arms wrap around me.

"God, how does he fucking walk with this thing between his legs? Now I know how an elephant feels."

There's genuine amusement there, but the levity is betrayed by a hint of underlying worry that shows he's rallying himself to give our girl something to take her mind off things.

She smiles against my lips, her small hand reaching down to give Cole's dick a stroke, but I'm the lucky one feeling every fucking bit of it. She breaks the kiss, turning to Levi, who has a hand wrapped around Mack's thick cock, running up and down the length as if testing its weight.

"You do realize you automatically get the front door because there's no way in hell I'm letting you in the back."

Levi chuckles. "Don't blame you one damn bit, sweets."

"Let's move this to the bed," I murmur.

Without hesitation, I pick her up bridal style, causing her to giggle, and carry her to the oversized bed in the middle of the room. Laying her down on the cream silk comforter, I just stare at her for a moment, realizing how fucking lucky we truly are. Not-my-dick jumps with anticipation at the thought of everything we want to do to her. Taste her. Fuck her. Share her. Make her so damn delirious that she can't think about anything but us.

With her dark hair spread out, that tanned skin contrasting against the light fabric and her gray eyes staring back at me with undiluted need, she's gorgeous.

Placing one knee on the bed, I prowl toward her, lips trailing up her toned calf, over her knee, and up her thigh. My mouth moves toward her center, but I don't touch her yet. I need her desperate, so dizzy with want that she's

begging us to take her.

She growls. "What are you waiting for?"

"So impatient," I tsk. My nose traces the outside of her sex, her scent so impossibly sweet that if I'm not careful, I'll be the one begging, and we can't have that. "What do you say, little ghost?"

Her eyes flash with fire, but it's not anger reflected back at me. It's barely contained longing, an ache I'm more than happy to help ease. "Please, Knox, please use Cole's smartass mouth to eat my pussy."

"Ah ah. So close. You missed one keyword there, little ghost."

She swallows, her head falling back to the bed as I let my tongue play in the crease between her legs and the one spot we're both practically panting for.

"Please eat my pussy, *sir*."

"Much better." I dive in, leisurely licking her from bottom to top, her moan causing me to shift my body against the bed, the silky softness against not-my-dick pushing me right up to the razor edge of pleasure and pain. I have the strongest urge to buck against the bed, stroking myself as I feast on her, bringing me closer to the edge that I'm already precariously balancing on, but I get a tight grip on my control and let her taste satisfy me...for now.

The bed dips, and my eyes catch Levi kneeling on the bed next to Fate. His mouth is consuming hers like she's his last meal, but instead of jealousy or disgust, I'm turned the fuck on. Mack's hand finds the back of her neck as if to pull her closer even though there's already no space between them.

"Fuck, I need your mouth, sweets," he murmurs against her lips.

She smirks, looking down at me with wanton desire playing across her face. "Flip me over, *sir*."

My eyes find hers, and the look she's sending me says she's daring me to argue. Lucky for her, I'm too damn gone to do more than oblige. I sit up, grab her waist, and have her on her belly before she can so much as squeak. I lift her hips up so she's on all fours. Then, just because I can, my hand lands with a loud smack against her ass that has her yelping in surprise.

"What the hell was that for?" she growls.

"Just a reminder who's really in charge here, little ghost."

Levi's brows snap up, but he doesn't hesitate. He's kneeling in front of her, gripping her chin and guiding her right where he needs her.

"You heard him. Now, be a good little girl, and we'll make sure you get yours too."

Eyes narrowed, she looks up at him. "Just remember...you're not packing the normal equipment there, pal. Take it easy with that thing."

His eyes spark, but he just says, "Don't worry, I've got you."

Without further argument, she opens her mouth, her tongue sneaking out to lap up the bead of precum before wrapping those plump lips of hers around the tip of Macklin's enormous dick.

"Fuck, she's really good at this. Especially considering the size of this thing."

She takes him deep, gagging slightly but swallowing as much of him as she can. She hums, and he throws his head back on a long moan. His hands wrap around her head as his hips start to buck, but she doesn't let up.

My hand caresses her ass cheek, the one that's now a pretty shade of pink, before dipping lower. She's soaked and needy as Levi fucks her mouth with Macklin's cock. Without warning, I thrust two fingers into her cunt, her walls instinctively tightening around them, then quickly pull them out. She whimpers around the cock in her mouth, and I thrust my fingers back in before once again pulling them out. She growls, her hips trying to follow the withdrawal of my hand, but I don't allow it. Instead, I land another smack on the opposite cheek which sends her shooting forward, forcing her to take Levi deeper.

"Holy hell, Knox. Do that again."

So I do. *Smack!*

"Ahhh. Shit. I'm too close. I need to be inside her."

His eyes lock with mine, an unspoken plea passing between us. He pulls back, and Fate sits up, turning to look at me over her shoulder. Her lips are swollen and pink, her eyes glassy with need, and her hair is in a messy tangle around her face. She's the sexiest thing I've ever seen in my life.

With her emotions in total upheaval, a chaotic mixture of shameless need and underlying sadness, I'm struggling to keep my own emotions under control. Add in Levi's sudden desperation, and it's an uphill battle that I'm sure to lose.

Levi has managed to lie back on the bed, that monster dick of Macklin's hard enough that it stands upright. He's so hard, the veins are throbbing as he runs his hand up and down the length, watching us with heavy-lidded eyes.

"Look what you've done, little ghost. Better take care of that."

The smirk she throws over her shoulder has me reaching down to stroke Cole's cock, and just that thought has me holding back a moan of my own.

"Yes, sir."

She crawls up the bed until she's straddling Levi.

"You ready, big guy?"

"Feels like that has a whole new meaning right now."

She giggles as she reaches a hand down, lining up the massive erection and sliding it through the wetness between her legs. Levi's hands grip her hips, steadying her, and I can see the tension there as he struggles to let her go at her own pace.

She slowly slides down his cock before pushing up and slamming back down until she manages to take him balls deep.

"Fuck. Me," she rasps.

"You got it, sweets." Levi lifts her up and slams her back down, her scream of pleasure echoing around the room.

"Shit! Do that again," she moans.

"What do you say, little ghost?"

"Fuck. Please do that again, *sir*," she pleads.

Levi's eyes find mine, and I nod. He lifts her again and lets her body weight drag her back down. Hard.

"Oh, god."

"No, sweets. You know who's fucking you right now, and it sure as shit isn't God."

"Levi, please."

"Ride me," he commands.

"Yes, sir."

I'm stroking Cole's cock, watching my woman ride my brother, and I'm getting precariously close to embarrassing myself. Deciding I can't wait any longer, I maneuver myself behind Fate, placing a hand on her lower back. She stills, throwing a heated look over her shoulder as I push her down onto Levi's chest.

"My turn," I demand. Snaking my hand between our bodies, I run my fingers through the wetness where they're combined then rub between her ass cheeks, preparing her for me. First one finger into the tight ring of muscle. Then two.

Wonder if Cole has taken her ass yet. If not, I'll gladly claim this first for him, I think with a smirk.

Guiding the tip of Cole's dick to her ass, I slowly push in.

My voice hoarse, I manage, "Relax, little ghost."

“Easy for you to say,” she mumbles against Levi’s chest. “You don’t have Mack’s demon cock inside you.”

My chest rumbles with laughter I try but fail to contain. “Touché.”

But her body relaxes bit by bit, and I pull out slightly then thrust back in until we’re hip to ass.

She feels fucking phenomenal, her tight warmth wrapped around not-my-dick like a glove.

“Ready?” I whisper against her ear.

“God, yes.”

“Not God, sweets,” Levi reminds her.

“Fuck. Yes, I’m ready, sirs.” She lifts her head just enough to raise a regal brow down at Levi. “Better?”

“I think someone needs another reminder that she’s not the one in control here,” Levi suggests, his eyes meeting mine.

Smiling, I pull out and thrust in hard. Her shout turns into a moan as it sends her wet pussy sliding against Mack’s cock.

“Oh my ghost!”

I do it again, finding a rhythm with Levi as we fuck our girl like she’s never been fucked before. She’s going to remember *us* the next time she’s fucking them, and that thought has my balls drawing up, my orgasm becoming nearly impossible to hold off much longer.

“I’m going to...”

“Yes, we feel you, sweets. You’re squeezing our dicks so fucking good.”

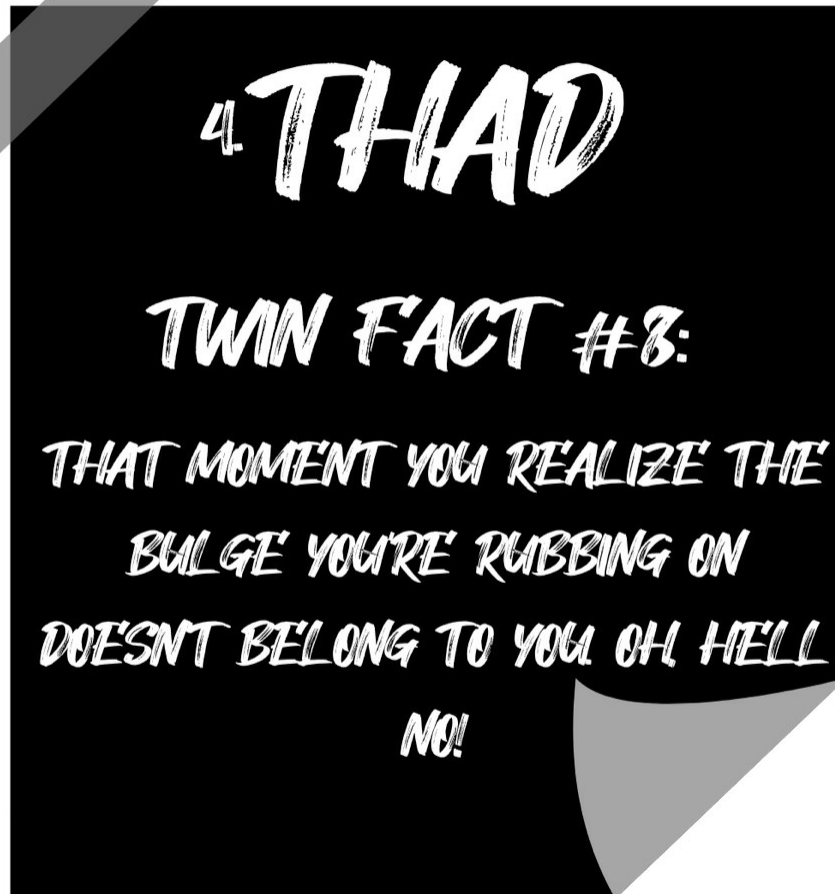
“Come for us now, little ghost. Scream for us.”

And she shatters, her shout turning into a long drawn out moan that has me shooting over the edge with her. Levi’s hips continue to buck against hers wildly, chasing his own end, which has the added benefit of drawing out my own orgasm with the push and pull of Mack’s dick against the thin wall separating us. As if fucking my girl with not my dick wasn’t overwhelming enough, I have to share space with Mack’s cock monster.

He comes with a roar, thrusting into her one last time before he stills, his hands gripping her hips so hard his knuckles are white. We’re all breathing heavily, Fate laid out against his chest and me against her back. I know I should get up, move off of them so I don’t crush her, but my body just won’t cooperate.

I kiss along her shoulder as Levi nestles his face in her hair with a shuddering breath, her responding sigh warming my heart and pleasing my

soul. For the moment, there's this sense of...peace isn't really the right word...contentment, *maybe*, that permeates the space between us. Either way, love fills me to the point of overflowing. *This*. This is the reason I don't care about our memories. We're creating new ones every single second we're together, and no matter how great things were before, this is so much better.



My feet land with a loud thud on the coffee table as I relax into the sofa, my arms spreading across the back. Predictably, Cole scowls at me from behind the desk in the Gateway's office before turning back to the book Nate is studying. Asher has placed herself on the opposite side from Nate and keeps sneaking glances at her dad when he isn't looking. They're going over potential fixes for the soul swap situation, and all I can think about is what the wankstain, Knox, and my woman are getting up to without me.

Bro, how's Fate?

Butt out, dipshit. Not a good time.

I smirk. ***It's like that, is it? Can't give me a little play by play?***

Next time. I'm about to give Mack's anaconda a run for its money.

Our connection goes silent. Fucker is enjoying himself while I'm stuck here with the stick in the muds.

Releasing a loud sigh, I have to admit that I *am* ready to have my own body back. Oh, wait. That's right. It's fucking trapped in the Land of Torment with a sadistic bitch who continues to beat the ever-loving shit out of it. Let's just hope that by the time I get it back, my dick is unharmed. Women always like to shoot for the jewels. I rub my junk as phantom pain hits my balls, then I realize it's actually *Knox's* junk I'm rubbing, and my hands fly into the air faster than a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Reggie snickers beside me. "You just realized the dick you're rubbing on isn't yours, didn't you?"

I can feel heat flood my cheeks and choose to ignore the pain in the ass ghost just as Rylan comes up and sits in the chair next to me. He runs his fingers through his hair, giving it that beachy messy look, and he's got a babyface that has me wanting to punch him just to make him a little less perfect. Though he keeps sneaking glances at Asher, so I suppose he's safe...for now.

"God, that must be weird, right?" Rylan asks. "How do you take a piss? You have to touch your bro's dick to pull it out, right?"

"Well, thank you for that fucking thought," I grumble. "Cole, hurry it up, yeah? I'm on a piss strike until we figure this shit out."

Cole lifts his head. "What the fuck is a piss strike?"

"Say you have to go take a leak... How're you going to do that?"

Cole's brow scrunches up in confusion for a moment before the lightbulb comes on. "Oh, fuck no. I'm not touching Levi's dick."

"Exactly. That's a piss strike."

Nate chuckles, completely ignoring Cole's death glare. "Don't worry. I think we may have found something." He looks over at Asher, his eyes softening as hers widen.

"Oh, um, right." She blushes and clears her throat. "So, it looks like Macklin had already found the items he came to retrieve. They were lying here on the desk. That's a huge step in the right direction."

Fucking nerd. Macklin just had to run off in *my* body to find personal items that could help our souls find their way home, only to be snatched by the wicked witch of the west. Oh wait, wrong damn story.

Reggie drums her fingers on the arm of the other chair. "Let's say you guys are able to figure out a way to reverse the soul swap even with Macklin gone. That's going to put Thad at Karma's mercy." She turns her ghostly eyes on me. "You won't know what's already been said or have any idea

about anything Macklin may have put into play.”

“If Mack is as smart as we all know he is, he’s keeping his head down and playing dumb, which is something I excel at, while he waits for us to get him out.”

“Remember that time it was your turn to cook dinner and you *accidentally* put five garlic bulbs into the stew instead of the five cloves it was supposed to be and Fate got so hangry she refused to allow you to cook ever again? It’s making so much more sense now. Your genius is seriously impressive.” She looks over at me, sees the look on my face, and grimaces. “Shit. Sorry. I always forget you guys don’t have your memories.”

Not remembering our pasts is one thing. But having someone else recount our own memories to us without getting even a spark of recognition is another. Sometimes new me wants to put old me in a headlock and give him a solid punch to the face for being such an asshole. I might not be the model of good behavior, but new me knows better than to let my woman get hangry.

“I’m starting to think that’s a blessing, honestly.” Wanting to drop the subject, I look over at surfer boy. “You didn’t get any other information when you were chatting with the cry baby at the bar that I can use if I end up in the land of fire and brimstone?”

“Nothing useful, apparently,” he mutters.

“Wait. I think I found something that might help,” Cole murmurs as he holds up a book. “This says something about a ‘transference of power.’ Reggie, does that sound familiar at all?”

“Hmm. Vaguely. I remember Fate mentioning something about it a few years before she went missing. After that famous shipwreck, Knox was struggling with his empath powers due to a particularly heavy influx of spirits, and she thought about giving it a try.”

“Wait, are you talking about the sinking of the Titanic?” Asher asks in awe.

Reggie snaps her fingers. “Yup! That’s the one.”

“Just how old are you guys?” she whispers.

“Not a day over ancient,” I quip.

She chuckles. “This is definitely going to take some getting used to.”

“Would you consider Sutton ancient?” I ask innocently and watch Asher’s eyes widen and flick to Nate, whose eyes have gone completely black.

“Who is Sutton?” Nate practically growls.

At his tone, Asher straightens her shoulders, with her hands going to her hips. She's got the defensive female posture down, right to the narrowed color-changing eyes. Instead of our woman's pink sparks, Asher's got some kind of black and purple shit going on. "Now, wait a minute. I'm a big girl who has been on her own for years. You don't get to do..." she lifts one finger, randomly waving it at him, "that."

"Do what?" he asks innocently, his blue eyes bleeding through the black.

"Go all overprotective dad on me."

"But I am an overprotective dad."

"Well, rein that in. We are so not there yet."

"Hmph." Nate crosses his arms over his chest and pouts like a teenager.

Cole looks thoughtful for a moment. "Nate, have you ever been to the Land of Torment? Any idea how Karma holds her prisoners?"

"I've only been there a handful of times, but I do remember that whenever Karma would escort spirits between places, they'd have this cuff around their wrists. It was made of fire and would ensure they were cooperative. I'd bet she'd be using something similar to that every time she escorts Macklin out for his little performances."

"If we could potentially use it to override Karma's power, it could be just enough to give Thad a chance to go ghost and escape. We need to see if we can find anything else on this transference—how it works, what side effects it may or may not have."

"I can start looking through some of these books and see if I can find anything," Asher volunteers.

"I'll help as soon as we get the soul situation handled," Nate adds. Asher considers him for a moment before giving him a tentative nod.

"Shouldn't that be our priority? Getting Mack back and *then* swapping our souls?" I ask, letting my power escape the tip of my finger. Tiny shadows flicker in and out as I work to get back to full strength. It's a lot like a brand new box of tissues. My power is stuffed to the brim, and I have to gently pry the first few tissues out in order to avoid shredding them in the process. It's fucking maddening. My power is not normally this fragile, so I can only hope that it will get easier with time.

Nate shakes his head. "You have to remember, the bonds are a tangled mess right now. Anything we try will be exceptionally more difficult with them muddled. Our best shot is getting everyone's souls back in the right bodies and then using the transference to get you free. Hopefully."

“This is going to suck ass, isn’t it?” I sigh, letting my shadows morph into swords as they mock battle it out.

“It’s definitely going to be hardest for you,” Cole admits. “Plus, we’ve got the added stress of you being separated from Levi.”

“Shit. I didn’t think about that. You all better make it fast, or there’s no telling what will happen.”

The last time we were separated, it was bad. I felt like my soul was being ripped in two at around the ten-hour mark, and no amount of anger management, aka *fighting*, eased the urge to rip everyone and everything around me apart. This has the potential to go much longer than that, and I’m wondering if I should have them lock my twin in a room or cage or something. No telling what will happen, even if he is the nicer twin.

“Don’t worry, Thad. We’ve got this.” Nate turns to Asher. “Why don’t you run me through exactly what you did before.”

“They all laid in a row on the floor, removed their nullifiers, and I began the incantation.”

“Which incantation did you use?”

“The Latin one.”

“Repeat it for me. Let’s see if we need to tweak it at all to fit this specific scenario and to cover the distance needed between the bodies.”

She looks over at Cole, ignoring Nate’s bristling at the snub. Cole gives her a slight nod. “Okay. It went like this...tenebrae, ab hoc loco. Et non pertinent hic. Redi, animarum, ut origins tuam. Novis inter marchas rursum totum. Coniunctio indissolubilis semper haec et punietur qui conantur.”

“Hmm. That one is good, but we won’t be able to use that this time. We’ll definitely need to alter it.” He leans over, scribbling onto a sheet of paper before tearing off the note and handing it to Asher. “Here, this should work. Try it out.”

Asher scans the document, turning to rest up against the desk as she begins reading. “Ut melius recta se Haeduorum iniurias, iter invertere.”

To right the wrongs, reverse your path.

Each word spoken is repeated in my head.

“Redi, animarum, ut te origins, neque sentiunt eius iram.”

Return, souls, to your origins, or feel her wrath.

My eyes close, and I can feel my limbs getting heavy.

“Semel iterumque totum, haec vincula non conteram.”

Once again whole, these bonds shall not break.

Taking a deep breath, I exhale and try to turn my head to look at Cole but discover I can't move. That's when I hear a loud thud from somewhere in the room.

“Et hoc votum meum, ut ultima.”

This final vow is mine to make.

The world goes dark.

5. COLE

ASSHOLE FACT #7:

I JUST MIGHT BE CURED OF MY
AVERSION TO SWORD CROSSING.

One minute, I'm standing at the desk listening to Asher recite Latin. The next, my body fucking goes limp, I crash to the ground, and everything goes black. For mere moments, I'm surrounded by nothingness. A darkness so absolute, not even a speck of light can be found. Then out of the corner of my eye, I see a glimmer in the distance. My body moves toward it without conscious thought, and the second I'm fully engulfed in the light, I feel a tug that's excruciatingly painful before I'm slammed back to consciousness.

Suddenly, my body is overwhelmed with sensations. Warmth, euphoria, and utter exhaustion. *Wait a goddamn minute. I recognize this feeling.*

"What the fuck, you jackasses?" Fate's mumbled words reach me at the exact second I realize I'm balls deep in her fucking ass, the round globes curving against my lower abdomen, with my entire body weight pinning her to the body beneath her. "Can't. Breathe."

“Fate?” I rasp, my voice hoarse as I gently raise up as much as my shaky muscles will allow.

“Get the hell off me, you lazy fuckwits. You’re heavy as shit.”

My dick slides out of her warmth as I lift myself off her, and I don’t have the energy to bite back my moan of pleasure. I roll off and drop to the bed next to her, a pair of angry gray eyes finding mine.

“Oh. Hell. No. Absolutely no round two...for either of you...after that little fiasco. You were supposed to be making me feel *fucking fantastic*. Those were your exact words, Knox. Instead, I get one measly orgasm before you two promptly pass out and damn near suffocate me. Death by sex suffocation is not how I’m going to go out. Not today, Satan.”

“Fate?” Macklin’s voice pipes up, damn near as hoarse as mine.

Her face swings back to him. “And just for that, big guy, my sexy nerd totally drove it better. At least he gave me multiple orgasms. Though, come to think of it, I suppose some concession does have to be given for your inexperience with the rapid blood loss that occurs since Quetzi consumes it all, leaving very little for your brain. Bet that takes some getting used to. Maybe some tolerance build-up as well.”

“Fate—”

“No, Knox. The answer is N-O.”

“You don’t understand.”

“I understand alright. You all talk a big game but can’t live up to the hype.”

I can’t help it. I smirk. “Love, I’ll show you just how big my hype is, but that will have to wait. We’ve got bigger shit to deal with right now.”

Her wide eyes fly to mine. “Cole?”

My hand reaches up, wrapping around the back of her head and pulling her to me roughly as my lips crash to hers. *Damn! It feels good to kiss her with my own fucking mouth.*

I pull back just enough for our lips to brush as I tell her, “The next time I’m in your ass, I most definitely will make you feel fucking fantastic, you hear me?”

A rough chuckle rumbles from Macklin, and Fate’s gaze whips to him. Tears fill her eyes, spilling down her cheeks and onto his chest.

“Hey, echo,” he says shyly.

“Oh my ghost, sexy nerd. I’m so glad you’re back.” Her lips meet his, and he deepens the kiss, his hands tightening on her ass.

He breaks the kiss. “But how?”

“Asher and Nate were going over the incantation, and it must’ve worked a little too well. We weren’t prepared for it to actually happen,” I respond sheepishly.

“I’m not complaining,” Fate murmurs, burying her face in Mack’s neck.

Mack nuzzles into her. “So...I’m a better Quetzi wrangler than Levi, huh?” he asks with a smirk, his hands running up and down her ass cheeks, which has her body sliding ever so slightly up and down that behemoth he’s got packed inside her.

“I mean, you’ve got more experience with that monster serpent than he does.” Her grin turns mischievous. “But we could always go another round, you know, just for comparison purposes.”

I’d love nothing more than to take her up on that, get my hard dick inside that tight warmth of hers, but reality is a real buzzkill. “Sorry, love. That comparison will have to wait. We need to go find the others. If Mack is back, that means Thad got transferred to the Land of Torment.”

“Oh fuck!” She drops a quick kiss on his nose before she pulls herself off Mack, eliciting moans from them both. “To be continued, sexy nerd.”

His hands come up and run down his face. “Fucking hell. I thought Karma’s torture was bad, but this...this might be worse.”

Her eyes flash, and the temperature drops. “I’m going to fucking end my sister for what she did to you.”

“We’ll help,” Mack offers.

“I fucking love you, sexy nerd.” She kisses the shit out of him then fumbles off the bed, rushing to the closet. We hear the telltale sound of her rummaging through her clothes as she mutters to herself. “Ugh, guys are messy. I’ve got more seepage from my lady hole and pretty pucker than should be normal. Seaworld 3.0 up in here.”

“TMI, Fate,” I grumble. “Plus, I’m not sure *pretty* is an accurate descriptor of that particular body part.”

“Well, mine *is* pretty,” she calls out.

“Fucking woman.”

Macklin just chuckles.

“Now, Cole...” she starts from the closet. “Please tell me you came up with a plan before you all soul swapped back.”

“We did. At least, in theory. We’ll go over the details when we get back to the others.”

“In theory. Great.” The sarcasm is dripping from her tone.

I look over at Macklin, the two of us still laid out on our backs on the bed. “You okay?”

“Yes. It’s...bizarre really. One second, I’m feeling every ache and pain shooting through Thad’s body, and then I’m back in my own, blissed out on the aftershocks of an orgasm. I’m not sure I can move just yet.” His eyes meet mine, and I see the humor in them. “Or how I feel about Levi touching my dick.”

I chuckle. “Don’t remind me. Knox probably got off on the whole thing. Fucking kinky bastard.”

He laughs out loud. It’s so damn good to have him back, but that means Thad is in a very precarious position. The thought sobers me. “Did you get any details that might help us get Thad out of there?”

“Yes. I’ve got a lot to tell you guys.”

“Good.” I nod. “Come on, we better get up.”

I’m shoving my arms into my shirt and Mack’s pulling on his pants when Fate comes back into the room. We both pause, taking in the absolute fucking majesty of our girl in all of her pissed off glory. She’s wearing a fitted white t-shirt with *Ghost Girl Gone Bad* scrawled across her tits and a pair of tight leather pants that look like they’re molded to her body. Her black heels do things for her legs that should be illegal.

“Echo, are you trying to kill us?” Macklin groans.

She smirks as she heads for the door. “Just remember, I was naked in the middle of a sexy nerd-asshole sandwich, and you all had to go and toss a bucket of reality on us.”

We share a look, and for the first time in this life, I don’t cringe at the thought of our swords accidentally crossing. Maybe Knox did me a favor after all.

“Raincheck, love.”

“Definite raincheck,” Macklin agrees as he finishes tying his shoes and stands.

She shoots a look over her shoulder as we follow her out of the room, heading toward the office. “Not gonna lie, it was epic watching Knox and Levi handle your dicks.”

We both groan, and I swear, Macklin is as red as a tomato. Who the hell am I kidding? I am too.

“Don’t get any ideas, love.”

She giggles, and it's like a bolt of desire straight to my dick. I drop my hand to adjust myself. Death by perpetual hard on is starting to look like a real possibility.



6. THAD

TWIN FACT #10:

BEING SEPARATED IS THE PITS
(ALONG WITH BEING TRAPPED IN A
DUNGEON).

“Fuuucckk!” I groan.

I feel like I was hit by a semi truck then run over by a bulldozer. My shoulder feels like someone tried to hack it off with a dull axe, and I can only see out of one eye. Quickly taking stock of all the other aches and pains, I turn to take in my new home away from home. *Oh...yup. Broken ribs. Thanks, Mack.*

“Macklin, are you okay?” The small voice comes from the other cell.

Opening my good eye, I look over to see the small female spirit. Her hair is long and messy, her gown a tattered mess. She obviously already knows that Mack was the one pretending to be me, but I still tread with caution.

“How long was I out?”

“Less than a minute, but you just sort of collapsed mid-conversation. I was worried.”

Sitting up fully, I decide this dislocated shoulder needs to be handled ASAP. *What the hell, Mack?* Getting to my knees, then shakily to my feet, I slowly hobble a few steps to the back wall. Taking a few deep breaths, I prepare myself. This is going to hurt like hell.

“Mack, what are you...”

She doesn't get to finish before I throw my shoulder against the cold stone and hear the telltale *POP* of everything going back into place. I must have bit down on my lower lip a little too hard and re-opened the wound there since blood begins to drip down my chin. I take a few deep breaths, holding my injured arm tight against my body, giving the muscles time to relax before I attempt to use it.

“Why didn't you do that before? It's been that way for hours.”

“Uh...I guess I was...distracted by the pain and...just thought of it?”

“Huh.”

Looking at my wrist, I see a cuff made of the same fire Karma had used in the Gateway. I close my eyes and attempt to use my darkness, but nothing happens. I can still feel it, but it's blocked somehow.

“Fucking hell.”

“It cuts off access to your powers,” she murmurs, her head tilting. “You're acting...odd.”

“Can you blame me? Not every day one gets stuck in Torment and is beaten within an inch of their lives.”

She studies me carefully. “So, I've been thinking, and you were right. Reversing the polarization is probably our best option. Want to give it another try?”

My eyes shoot to hers, and I fight to keep my face emotionless. *What the fuck is she talking about?*

“Uh, not yet. Let me rest my arm for a few minutes, then we'll give it another go.”

“Can you explain to me how it's supposed to work again?”

Dammit. All those times I ignored Mack when he went on one his beloved tangents taunt me now. “Well, you...uh...reverse the...uh...polarization, and that should work...right?”

“Yeah, you're definitely not Mack. Let me guess. Thad?”

My eyes narrow on her smug grin. “And who the hell are you?”

“Liv.”

My brows shoot up. “That slimy taint nugget's sister?”

Her sigh is full of pain and acknowledgment. “He wasn’t always that way. I mean, he wasn’t all warm and fuzzy, but he wasn’t a bad guy. Just got dealt a bad hand, ya know?”

“We were dealt bad hand after horrible hand, but you don’t see us turning into double-crossing assholes.”

She nods, looking out between the bars of her cell. “You’re right. You all have been to hell and back, but you’ve held on to that core of goodness in each of you. I can honestly say, despite the years we’ve been apart, I’d still trust you with my soul because you’ve never given me reason to doubt you. At the end of the day, life is about choices. My brother made the wrong ones, but he says he wants to make it right.”

“He was here?”

“Yeah, he came to talk to...well, *you*, and ended up finding me too.”

“He didn’t know you were here?”

She shakes her head.

“Damn, Karma really is a bitch, isn’t she?”

She giggles sadly. “I probably wouldn’t say that too loudly if I were you.”

“How long has it been since she sent for me?”

“Not long enough.”

I slide down the wall, attempting to get as much rest as possible before she comes for me again. I can feel the separation from my twin, our bond flaring at the loss of connection. But much like my powers, the separation effects seem muted too.

“Huh.”

Liv turns. “Huh...*what?*”

“Levi and I can’t be apart for long stretches of time or—”

“Fighting breaks out. Yeah, I’ve been witness to it several times.”

“But that’s the thing. The cuff is muting that for me too. I wonder if Levi is having any effects?”

“Can you feel him through your twin bond? That’s separate from your powers, right?”

I search inside for the link connecting me to my twin. It’s impossible to miss. The bright red flare of energy travels through the bond, but it bounces back when it hits the block created by the cuff and is once again redirected back at him.

“Shit!”

“What is it?”

“The cuff is muting it for me by pushing it through the bond back to Levi. Which means he’s feeling the effects for *both* of us.”

We’re both silent as we process that little nugget of chaos.

“Poor Fate,” Liv finally murmurs.

“Well, on the bright side, we’ve found a potential solution for future separations. I’ll have to remember to tell Mack about this.”

Liv looks thoughtful for a moment. “I get why she keeps asking you about the book, but why do you think she’s so interested in your powers anyways?”

“Best guess? It has to have something to do with my darkness. She mentioned we’d work well together before she disappeared, not realizing she actually had Mack, so I think she’s just taking advantage of her perceived good fortune.”

The creak of the door has me swiftly twisting, temporarily forgetting about my broken ribs, and it takes my breath for a moment. Boots pound down the steps, and a beefy guard moves toward my cell. He’s about the same size as me, maybe a little more lean, with a bald head and an earring in his left ear.

“Ready for another round? She’s got something special planned for you.”

“Oh? Did she finally agree to buy me dinner before she gets the goods? I could really use a juicy steak right about now.”

“She’ll get the goods, no doubt about that. Now put your hands behind your back.”

I slowly move my arms backward, and the cuff expands to encompass both hands. He grabs me roughly by the elbow and maneuvers me out of the cell. Instead of turning toward the stairs, he walks over to Liv’s cell and opens the door.

“Out, blondie. She wants you there too.”

“M-me?”

“Yes. Come now, or I’ll be forced to use the device she gave me.” He waves what looks like a USB drive, but it has a red flashing button on the side that matches the red jewel on her collar.

My anger spikes, a familiar instinct coming alive that tells me I need to protect her, but I tamp it down. Now is not the time to try to make a move.

Liv cautiously exits the cell as he turns and guides me toward the staircase. I glance over my shoulder and see her trailing meekly behind us.

“So, what’s she got in store for me this time?”

“Shut up and just walk.”

I’m limping up the steps, my ankle potentially sprained, but beefy guard doesn’t care. In fact, he speeds up with an evil grin on his face, and I’m forced to keep up. Down a dark hallway with wooden cell doors that have barred windows. Looks like these are the luxury cell accommodations. I attempt to peek in and see who else she might have stashed away down here, but we’re moving too fast.

The guard uses a band on his wrist to get through the next door, and we’re in a room similar to the main chamber in the Gateway, except this space is entirely black, with red accents and chains interspersed along the walls. Suppose it’s a different sort of reminder compared to the hundreds of photos plastered throughout the Gateway. Where the Gateway is bright, with a sort of comforting warmth, this room is dark and dreary, covered in ash and smoke.

Up on the dais is an ornate silver throne with black velvet cushions, but it’s currently empty. We’re ushered through a door at the far side and down another long hallway, followed by a set of stairs that leads to a landing with just one door. My foot is fucking throbbing with every rushed step we take, but I do my best to ignore it and all the other wounds demanding attention. I need to be on alert and prepared for whatever we’re walking into.

The guard taps on the door.

“Enter,” a sultry voice commands.

The door is opened, and we’re pushed into a large circular room made entirely of stone. At the far back, in a smaller version of the throne from the main chamber, sits the red-haired devil herself.

“Karma, I simply must know. How do you deal with the smell down here? It’s positively horrid,” I snark as the guard removes the cuffs from my hands. I spread my fingers, feeling my darkness flood through me right along with a healthy dose of anger now that the bonds are no longer blocked. I discreetly try to access the vortex, with no luck. She must have that blocked somehow. How long has she been planning this?

One red brow arches as she drums her long purple nails on the arm of the chair.

“You seem in awfully good spirits. Shouldn’t you be feeling the separation from your twin by now?”

“Turns out your magic cuff does more than mute my powers. I should really be thanking you for the reprieve.”

“That’s...disappointing. But no matter. We’ll still have some fun with what I have planned.”

“I’m just chomping at the bit to get started.”

“Hmm. I just bet you are.” She twirls a piece of her red hair around her finger while an evil grin spreads across her face. “Are you ready to tell me the location of the book?”

“I couldn’t even if I wanted to, which I don’t...for the record.”

“Well then. Since you’ve been largely uncooperative, I figured a little incentive might help *motivate* your powers.”

“Oh? How’s that?”

She nods, and beefy guard pushes Liv forward.

“Kneel.” Karma’s command is barely out of her mouth before Liv collapses to her knees beside me.

Keeping my expression disinterested, I ask, “What the fuck do I care about some weak spirit you’ve kept locked up here for god knows how long?”

“You may not remember her, but your power should. What will it do, I wonder, when her soul is being threatened?”

“Look, lady, I’m pretty sure I’m not the white knight you’re looking for. If that’s the case, you totally should’ve held out for Levi.”

Her head tilts dramatically. “So you mean to tell me, you’d let an innocent spirit, trapped in the Land of Torment against her will, continue to be punished for things she did not do?”

Fire ignites in my belly, followed by a strong desire to punch something or someone, but I manage to get a good handle on it before I lose my shit and fuck up our chance at getting out of here.

“Like I said, what do I care?”

“Do you know what happens to souls that get banished from their realm?”

“Nope. Sure don’t.”

“Their physical form, as incorporeal as it may be, is lost forever, but their consciousness remains. Aware of everything around them but unable to interact at any level. Some say it’s torture worse than Torment.”

I attempt to look bored, pushing my rising anger as deep down as possible. “What does this have to do with me?”

“If you don’t give me a demonstration of your powers, you can say goodbye to Ms. Goodie Two Shoes here.”

“I’ve already told you. The potion affected all of our powers.”

“Yes. So you’ve said.” Her eyes move to something over my shoulder then spark with red flame. “There you are, *shnookums*. I’ve been looking *everywhere* for you. You’re just in time.”

“Hello, my love.”

The fucking cum stain from the bar saunters past us, right up to Karma, and she pulls his face down for an indecent kiss. When they finally break apart with a wet slurping pop, he straightens, fixing his tie and running a hand over his slicked back hair.

When he turns and takes up his position beside her, his eyes widen dramatically as he finally looks at us.

“Olivia?” He takes a step toward her, but Karma’s hand latches onto his arm, holding him in place. “But…”

“Your little sister is here to do her part for our cause, *darling*.”

His worried eyes dart to hers. “Karma—”

“Did you forget I know all your movements, *shnookums*? Including your little meeting in the dungeons. And for your moment of weakness, you’ll now get to watch your precious Liv experience her last moments in this realm...or any for that matter.”

Without another word, she lifts a finger. Suddenly, Liv’s eyes widen and her mouth opens, a pain-filled scream echoing through the room.

Nick tries to run to his sister, but two of Karma’s guards restrain him, grabbing him and pulling him back.

The power inside me flares, this desperate need to be released. To reach out and harm the woman who’s hurt so many people.

“Ah. Not quite as callous as you wish to appear, *darling*.” She stands and walks over to me, trailing her finger down my chest as Liv continues to scream beside me.

My fists clench at my sides, and the coppery taste of blood fills my mouth as I bite the inside of my cheek to avoid doing or saying something stupid.

She waves her finger through the air, and Liv’s screams cut off. I can’t stop myself from glancing down, seeing Liv’s chest rapidly rising and falling even if she doesn’t officially breathe anymore. With the slew of raw aggression that’s quickly taking over, my heart is pounding as I try to figure out a way to get us both out of here alive. I’m not sure how long I’ll be able to keep it together without losing it completely.

“So, what will it be, Thad?” Karma whispers near my ear. “Will you let her keep her measly existence, or will you sentence her to a fate worse than

death?”

“Thad, don’t do it,” Liv cries, just before Karma waves a hand, sending her into another painful round of screams.

Karma sashays back to her seat, sitting as regally as a queen, while Nick struggles with the guards to no avail. And I stand motionless, staring down at the girl who is like a sister to Fate, even if none of us can remember. With every breath I take, my tight grip on my control slips a bit more.

When my eyes meet Karma’s, there’s smug satisfaction there. I can’t let her win, but I’m not sure there’s anything I can do. If Macklin were here, he’d probably come up with some brilliant plan, but he’s not. She’s stuck with me, and she might die. For real this time.

The screaming stops as Karma grants her one last bit of mercy, though I have no doubt it won’t last.

“I’ll give it to you, you’re more stubborn than I anticipated. I always kind of thought you would be the easiest one to corrupt, but I can see I underestimated you. Such a waste of a perfectly good plan.”

She holds up a hand, and a fiery red orb appears. “Oh, shnookums, last chance to say goodbye to your dear little sister.”

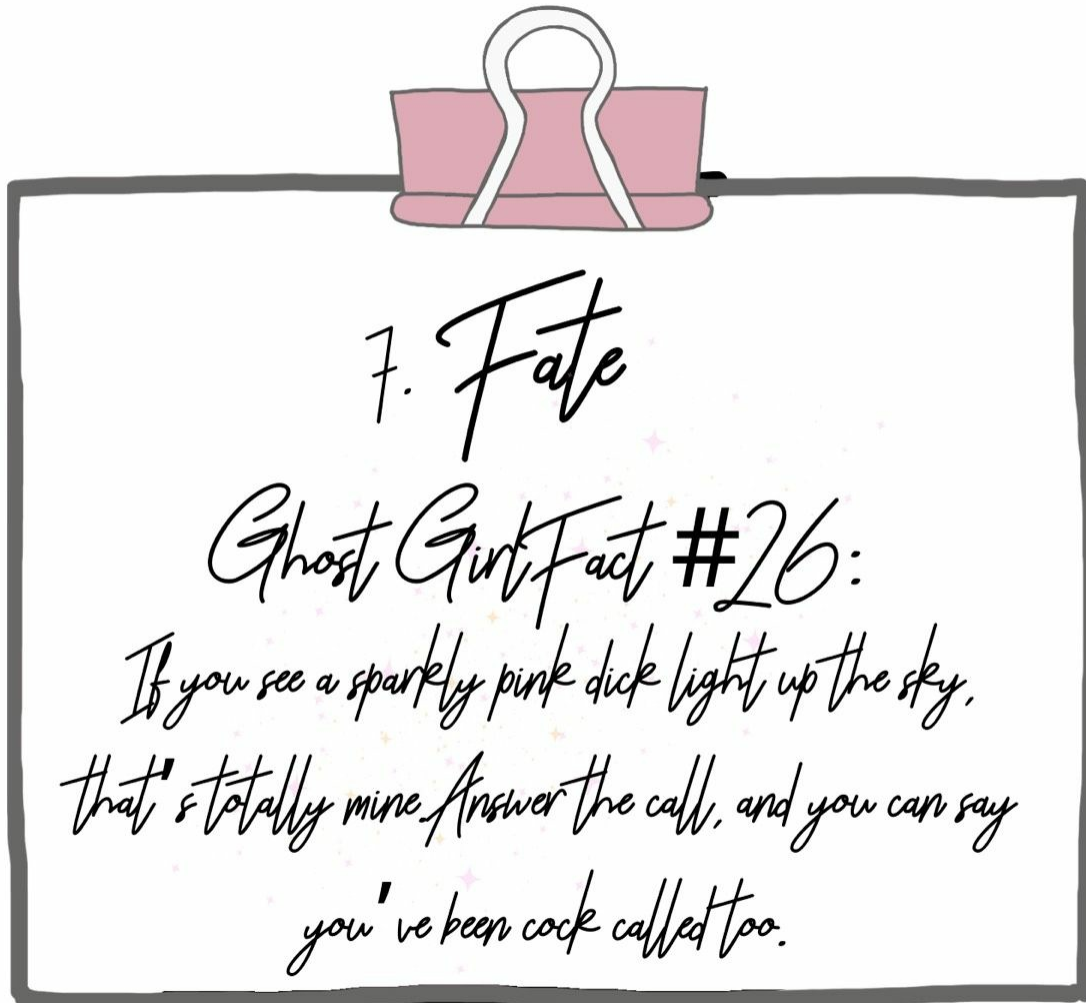
“Liv, I’m so fucking sorry!” Nick cries, still fighting the guards.

“I love you, Nickie!” Liv shouts.

“Just remember, Thad, her death will be on your hands. What do you think your precious Fate will say about that?”

She doesn’t wait for a response. Just pulls her hand back and lets the orb fly through the air directly toward Liv. Without conscious thought, I let go of the tight grip on control, my gurkha blade immediately appearing in my hand. Charging forward, I let the chaotic mess of emotions guide me as I obliterate anyone in my path.

With his guards distracted, Nick manages to escape their hold, throwing his body in front of Liv’s with a growl that echoes through the room.



7. Fate

Ghost Girt Fact #26:

If you see a sparkly pink dick light up the sky,
that's totally mine. Answer the call, and you can say
you've been cock called too.

Raised voices drift into the hall as we near the door.

“A fucking warning would’ve been nice,” Levi growls.

“I told you, it was an accident,” Nate retorts angrily. “Asher was reciting the words and didn’t realize that by touching the desk holding all the items Mack had collected, it would somehow activate the spell. Next thing we know, wham, bam, thank you, ma’am!”

Great. Infighting. Just what we need. Time to dispel some of this rising tension.

“Speaking of wham, bam, thank you, ma’am...” I walk through the door and wave pointedly at Knox and Levi. “I’m sorry.”

Every eye in the room turns toward me.

“What the fuck for?” Knox demands.

“I may have called both of you *lazy fuckwits* when you just up and

collapsed on me, almost killing me in the process, but it turns out it was these two jackasses behind me.” I throw my thumb over my shoulder.

“Christ. It couldn’t have been more than a matter of seconds. You were completely fine,” Cole argues.

“I saw my unlife flash before my eyes.” Holding my fingers an inch apart, I turn and shove them in his face. “I was *this* close to death...*again*...Cole.”

He just rolls his eyes.

“Um...I was actually right here the whole time.” Nate raises his hand with a smirk, and Asher giggles.

“Smartass.” I shoot him a wink before turning to Asher. “Just remember, he’s *your* father.”

I laugh, but Asher almost chokes on the swallow of whatever she’s got going on in that cup of hers. *My bad.*

The entire room relaxes and welcomes Mack back with bro hugs and kind words. Knox pours drinks for Cole and Macklin before handing me a glass of my favorite red wine.

“There’s also another important matter to discuss.”

“What happened, little ghost?” Knox asks with complete seriousness.

“About this bat signal Thad mentioned. I definitely wouldn’t choose a bat. I was thinking maybe a wine bottle, or a donut, or even a pretty pink lightning bolt that matches my powers. Oh, or...better idea. How about a huge dick, you know, since I’m surrounded by them? What do you think?”

They all just stare back at me.

Asher grins. “I vote for the pretty pink lightning bolt or the dick.”

“Definitely the dick,” Reggie agrees.

“Perfect. We’ll combine the two and make it a pink dick. It’s going to be epic. Then when I send out the call, you can all say you got...wait for it...*cock-called*. Like cold-called but with way more dick.”

Asher and Reggie both laugh. The guys, not so much.

Knox shakes his head. “Nope. We’ll never say that.”

“Ever,” Cole adds.

“Mack will say it. Won’t you, sexy nerd?”

“Uh...”

“Pretty please with sugar on top?”

“Well...”

“For fuck’s sake. Mack, it’s perfectly acceptable to tell her no when she’s being ridiculous,” Cole grumbles.

“But ridiculousness looks so adorable on her though.” Mack’s dimples make an appearance, and I totally want to lick them. Then his words register, and I don’t know whether to be flattered or insulted. Possibly a little of both.

I pout instead. “You guys are no fun at all.”

Despite our lighthearted banter, the tension in the room is high. My worry for Thad is escalating by the minute. Cole is perched behind the desk, his elbows on the dark wood as he cracks the knuckles on each hand. Knox is leaning back against the mantle of the fireplace, repeatedly swirling the drink in his glass. Macklin is in the opposite chair, currently downing the entire glass of whatever amber liquid Knox gave him. Levi is on the opposite end of the sofa, his arms crossed over his chest and his foot tapping a mile a minute. Reggie, Nate, and Asher are scattered around the room, looking more uncomfortable with each passing second.

The worry and concern in the air is creating a mass of anxiety in my gut. Both wanting the comfort myself and needing to reassure my gentle giant, I get up and make my way over to Levi.

“You okay, big guy?”

As soon as I’m in range, Levi’s strong arms reach out and pick me up, setting me on his lap. “I’m fine, sweets. Better now with you here.”

Running my hand through his long blond hair, my eyes find his. “We’ll get him back, don’t worry.”

“I know. Thad will be fine. I’m just worried about our bond. If we’re apart too long, things start to get...messy. Plus, we’re talking about being separated by entire realms here. Not sure how that will impact things.”

“Messy is an understatement,” Reggie interjects.

“Messy how?”

“Oh, let’s see. There have been food fights. Bar fights. Fist fights in the living room. Basically any sort of fight you can think of with whomever is in range.”

“She’s not wrong. It starts with us getting antsy and irritable, then gets progressively worse from there. We’ve reached the aggression stage plenty of times before, but we’ve been lucky it’s never gone past that.”

“Thad is our priority, babe. We won’t let anything happen to either of you.” I wrap my arms around his neck, dropping a quick kiss on his cheek. Studying his face, I don’t miss the twitch in his jaw muscle or the way his body feels like stone beneath me, not that he’s normally cushy or anything. I ask softly, “You’re feeling it already, aren’t you?”

He nods, and his arms tighten around my waist. I let him soak up all the comfort he can as I turn to the others, making a mental note to see if Knox can help calm him down with his magic emotion powers. *Totally the technical lingo there.* “So, tell me about this *theory* you guys have.”

Cole nods, taking the lead. “We found something that mentions a process called transference but didn’t have a chance to research it before everything happened.”

“I might have more information on that,” Macklin interjects.

All eyes turn to my sexy nerd, and he blushes, pushing those damn glasses up his nose.

“Tell us about your experience,” Cole says, but the command is clear in his tone.

“Uh. Yeah. Where to begin...” He runs a hand through his hair, his brows furrowed in concentration.

It’s such a *Mack* expression. Even the first time I saw him, part of me longed to kiss him right between the eyes to smooth out those lines, like it was something I had done a million times before. I wish we had time. Time to get to know each other again. Relearn each other’s likes and dislikes. I’d love to hear the stories of their ghost hunting adventures. Find out what their favorite music is. There’s so much we’re missing. Now, more than ever, I’m motivated to end this so we can finally *live* again.

“Just start at the beginning,” Knox prompts.

“I was here, gathering all of our items, when Karma showed up as Mandy. In my surprise and confusion, she got the upper hand and restrained me with that fire rope of hers. Then she planted herself in Fate’s chair and said we were going to wait for her *darling sister*. After the encounter with Fate, she transported me straight from the main chamber to my cell somewhere in Torment. My powers were blocked by this cuff she placed on my wrist, which she would remove each time she had me brought to the inner chamber for one of her question and demonstration sessions.”

“Why didn’t you just escape?”

“The chamber is spelled somehow. The last time they brought me there, I saw her walking around the room, her finger dripping blood around the perimeter. It would disappear into the stone while she mumbled some sort of incantation that I couldn’t quite make out. When she completed the circle, this blast of power rippled through the room.”

“But seriously, why is it always blood?” I mutter.

His brown eyes find mine. “Fate, there’s something else. Liv is being held in the dungeon in Torment.”

“Liv?” Everything inside of me goes still, a familiar tug sweeping over me, the sensation similar to the first time I heard her name. There’s a sense of love there, different than what I feel for my guys but still incredibly powerful. “At the club, Nick mentioned he had looked for her and thought she’d be at the Gateway, but he never found her. That was the last thing he said to me. ‘Find Liv.’”

“Karma has had her locked up this whole time. When Nick appeared—”

“What did that fuck nugget want?” Levi barks, which is unusual for my calm guy. I run my arms along the back of his neck to soothe him.

“He was there to help, but it turns out he didn’t know Karma was holding Liv. When he found out...well, you could tell he was shocked and felt extremely guilty.”

“You don’t think it was an act?” Knox asks.

“No. He seemed genuinely remorseful. He made me promise we’d get Liv out.”

“Of course we will,” I respond immediately. There’s no question about it. She was important to past me, and present me can still feel the connection even if it’s over a hundred years old.

“You should know it might not be that easy. She’s wearing a collar with the same ruby as those anima mea rings. I tried to get it off, but...” He trails off, and his head drops.

His guilt and defeat hit me, and that just powers up my anger. None of this is his fault. None of this is any of our faults.

“Go to him,” Levi whispers in my ear, kissing my cheek and helping me to my feet.

I look back at him to be sure. The tension is still there, and I can feel his agitation slowly growing, but he nods. I trust that if it becomes too much, he’ll tell me. That’s how this will need to work. There’s only one of me and five of them, after all. Communication will be key. *Add another mental note to have that chat when we’re all finally together and whole again.* At this point, that list might take a whole other lifetime to get through.

Le sigh.

“Hey...” Macklin looks up as I approach, immediately opening his arms. I’m in his lap in the next second, holding his face between my hands. “You did everything you could. This isn’t on you. My sister is an evil cunt, and

we're going to bring her down."

He drops a sweet kiss on my lips. "I know, and trust me, I'll enjoy every minute of that after what she did to me...or Thad, really. Poor bastard's probably hating life right now." He shakes his head, obviously reminded of the fact that Thad has taken his place. "On the bright side, Nick actually corroborated your transference theory. He said Karma was worried it was only a matter of time before we figured it out."

Cole drums his fingers along the dark wood. "Did he explain how it works?"

Macklin details the two-way street connection Nick described, and it sparks a sense of familiarity. My head tilts as I process everything he just said. "I don't know how to do it, but I'm pretty sure I did at one point. The words ring true."

Cole nods. "That's our best option then. Thad is at least somewhat prepared."

"And what if he's in the chamber? Will the power boost be enough to get him the hell out of there?"

"If he's in the chamber, which is spelled with Karma's blood," Nate chimes in, "then there's only one way to get him out of there."

"Fate will need to use her own blood to counteract it," Macklin whispers. *Fuck. More blood. Always with the fucking blood.*

"No," Cole commands, his arms crossing over his chest as his power skims right over me with no effect whatsoever. It's sort of like when a guy tries but fails to find your g-spot. He's huffing and puffing and trying *real hard*, but just...nope. Not doing much, pal, but A for effort.

"Did you forget your commands don't work on me? If the only way to get Thad out of there is to throw a few drops of blood on the ground, I'm more than willing to do that."

"First, how will you even know if he's in the chamber or not before you go rushing in there? You said the connection is blocked. Second, you're not going alone. That's not an option."

"I can go with her," Nate offers. "I'm a neutral entity as far as Torment is concerned, so Karma can't use her powers against me just like I can't use them against her. However, I *can* use them against any of the guards we may encounter."

"Then we'll all go," Knox adds.

"Hell no. Are you crazy?" I growl. "I've already lost one of you. I can't

lose another.”

“You all are a liability. If anything happens to you and Fate is distracted, Karma can leverage that advantage. With me, she has none.”

“So what are we waiting for? Should we give it a shot?”

“Fate, Cole was right about one thing. We have no way of knowing where Thad is,” Nate cautions.

“Can you get us inside her palace? Maybe once we’re inside, I’ll be able to pick up on the connection.”

“That’s a huge risk, little ghost.”

I turn, finding Knox’s worried hazel eyes. His fear is like a tangible thing, and for a split second, my resolve wavers.

I’ve put these guys through a lot, and from the looks of it, things are going to get worse before they can get better. But then I feel the love that’s buried beneath the concern and the fear and know that I would do anything, *give* anything, for them. For our love.

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take, Knox. One I’d take over and over again for any of you.”

“Look, maybe you should get some rest. We can try this first thing in the morning. You all have been up for over twenty-four hours at this point. You should be at your strongest before you attempt to do this.”

“As far as I’m concerned, Thad’s been there long enough already. There will be plenty of time for sleep when we get him back.”

My guys all share a look.

“Go ahead. Voice your concerns now so I can ignore them and we can get this thing done, yeah?”

Macklin’s fingers run through my hair. “I’m with Fate. We don’t know why Karma is so insistent on seeing Thad’s powers or what will happen when she realizes he’s not going to give her the answers she so desperately wants. If he slips and she realizes he’s no longer affected by the potion, there’s no telling what might happen.”

“Fuck!” Levi jumps to his feet and storms over to the bar in the corner, pouring himself a drink and tossing it back like it’s water. Then he pours another. His agitation has grown steadily throughout the conversation, but it suddenly becomes this overwhelming darkness, clouding our connection.

“Levi?” I ask cautiously, but I don’t get a response.

I glance at Cole and catch a look being exchanged between him and Knox, who has straightened from the bookshelf and is moving to flank Levi

just as Cole stands and makes his way around the desk.

Macklin stands and gently sets me down in his seat.

I go to stand, but Cole shakes his head. My eyes narrow as the boys take up defensive positions around the room, carefully cornering Levi.

I'm having trouble wrapping my mind around the fact that my calm, soothing giant is suddenly a ticking time bomb, ready to explode at any minute. What the others think they're going to do, I'm not sure, but I'll be damned if I let them harm one hair on his sexy head.

"Levi, babe," I say, standing and instantly earning angry glares from Cole and Knox. "Tell me what's going on."

He turns, his fists clenched by his sides, his chest rapidly rising and falling with each angry breath he takes. "She's got my brother."

Way to state the obvious, I think, but I keep that little nugget to myself.

"I know, big guy, and we're going to get him back."

"Before she tortures him? What if we don't get him out in time? What if she kills him, huh?"

"You know I won't let that happen, right?"

"You didn't stop her from taking Macklin."

The strike hits its target, and my steps falter.

"Hey, this is not Fate's fault. She—" Mack begins.

"Of course it's not her fault. Nothing is *ever* her fault," Levi snarls.

"Levi, watch your words, brother," Knox warns.

Levi takes an aggressive step toward Knox. "Or what? You think you can take me?"

"No one is fighting tonight."

His green eyes are dark as they turn to me. "Says who? You?" he sneers.

Now see, logically, I know that his behavior is a result of the separation from his twin. But my power isn't much for logic. It flares brighter than the dick down signal at midnight.

"Reggie, take Nate, Asher, and Rylan to the kitchen. Get everyone some food. Rest. Mingle. This could get ugly."

Without question, they quickly file out, leaving just me and my guys.

"Fate."

My name sounds more like a warning leaving Cole's lips.

"Cole," I mock.

"This is not a game, Fate. Or the time for one of your outrageous little quips."

“Now, now...that’s not very nice,” I tsk, letting my power out to play as I glare at Cole. The fireplace flares, and all of the lights in the room turn pink.

Pretty in pink, which reminds me of James Spader, which in turn reminds me of my secret crush on Raymond Reddington. There’s something about a brilliant, scheming man that just really does it for me.

“She’s gone off on one of her fucking tangents, and *this* is who you all think is going to save my brother?” Levi scoffs. His pupils are blown wide, and I swear if he were a cartoon, smoke would be coming out of his nostrils and ears.

Something about the way Levi is carefully inching backward has me on high alert. I would never hurt him, but I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure he doesn’t hurt himself or one of the others. He’d regret the shit out of that later.

“What the hell would you know about nice? You’re no better than Karma.” He spits on the ground at my feet, just barely missing my toes.

The temperature in the room becomes frigid.

“You’re lucky I love you, big guy, because anyone else would be ashes on the bottom of my shoe for that.”

“You don’t love me. You only love yourself.”

“Levi, you don’t mean that,” Macklin warns.

The emotions consuming him have somehow doubled. He’s being assaulted on all fronts, with so many varied feelings, that I can’t make out a single one before it morphs into the next. They’ve taken over his mind, and I’m worried if we don’t get a handle on this soon, it might take over his heart as well.

“Like hell I don’t. In fact, I’m tired of this shit show. Y’all can stand around waving your dicks at her. It’s what you’re good at.”

“Levi, don’t...”

But Cole doesn’t get to finish his command before Levi touches the mark on his wrist and promptly disappears.

“Shit! Now what do we do?” I ask in a panic.

“We follow him and stop him before he does something stupid.”

Right. I should’ve thought of that. I touch my mark, and the Gateway responds instantly.

“He’s hopping from place to place, trying to get us off his trail, but I think I’ve got him. Are we ready?”

Cole, Knox, and Macklin all nod, and with a simple thought, we’re

slipping through the ether, off to hunt down our gentle giant turned deranged dick.

See? I really am surrounded by them.



8. LEM

TWIN FACT #9:

I FINALLY UNDERSTAND HOW
THAD'S MIND WORKS. AND THAT'S
A TERRIFYING THOUGHT.

Anger. Worry. Betrayal. Anxiety. Fear. Fury.

This toxic combination of emotions is whipping through me faster than I can keep up. Somewhere deep down inside, I realize it's all completely irrational, part of the stages of separation from my twin, but it's never happened this fast and never this...potently addicting. It's like a part of me wants to feel these things. Wants to revel in the darkness I can feel seeping in at the corners. My light is shoved to the back corner of my mind, somewhere rational me can't reach it.

The other part of me is just lucid enough to know I need to get the hell out of the Gateway before I hurt someone we care about. My harsh words to Fate replay through my mind, a mix of all the doubt and anger threatening to taint everything and everyone around me.

The ground beneath my feet crunches with each step as I make my way

down the darkened alley. Somewhere around here is just the thing I need to work off some of this building anger...even though it's only a temporary solution.

As I approach the quiet street, dimly lit by a single light, I see a few people hovering around the entrance to what appears to be an empty warehouse. *There.*

I quickly cross the road, completely unseen, using my lovely powers gifted to me by the beautiful pain in my ass. I move silently, completely ghosted from view. Through the people standing around and chatting, straight past the bouncer at the door, and into a darkened room. Straight ahead, a spotlight is shining down on the stage where a band is playing. There are people lined up against the mahogany bar on the far right side of the room, booths lining the left side, with a spattering of tables between them.

I scan the mass of people on the dance floor, then the stools at the end of the bar. Then my eyes land on the door in the back corner. Bingo. Making my way through the writhing crowd, I'm through the door and moving down the stairs in the blink of an eye. Thad and I used to come here frequently when he needed to let some of his darkness out, especially after the more malevolent ghost hunts with our brothers. Drawing upon that side of him, the side more closely aligned with Torment, always worried him. He never wanted to let it overtake his light completely, and fighting was one outlet. Tonight, it's my turn.

Before I hit the last step, I rematerialize. On the other side will be tonight's entertainment, and it's going to be a gas.

The woman at the door startles when she turns and finds I'm standing a couple feet in front of her.

"Oh, hell. You scared the shit out of me. I didn't see you there."

I say nothing.

"Are you here to pay or play?"

"Play."

She lifts her finger to her ear. "We have another entry." Pausing, she waits for a response. "Right. I'll send him your way." With a nod, she turns back to me. "Through the door. Find Vinnie. He'll get you entered and ready to go."

Pulling open the door, she motions me in. The music is blaring, some uptempo song I don't recognize. The crowd is wall to wall, but I can see the makeshift ring set up in the middle of the room.

I walk in, noting that the place smells like sweat, cigarette smoke, and greed. My consciousness momentarily pushes forward at the familiarity, remembering that my twin used to love this place. He always said it reminded him of something, though what that something was is lost to our past.

The memory is fleeting, the swirling mass of chaos once again consuming me.

A middle-aged man with a balding hairline and beer belly comes walking up to me. “You the late entry?”

“Yup.”

“I’ve got you on last. Dressing rooms are—”

“I’m going first,” I cut in, knowing the fucking crew has most likely already tracked my ass and are making their way here as we speak.

“Dude, you can’t just—”

I let a little of my power slip through, watching with grim satisfaction as his eyes widen in fear.

“Right. Like I was saying...” He clears his throat. “You’re on first, so you don’t have much time. Throw on a pair of gloves and make your way over to the ring.”

Without even acknowledging him, I push my way through the bodies until I find myself at the side of the ropes. I shrug out of my shirt. One of the bar girls comes over to take it and hands me a pair of gloves.

“Nice tats,” she murmurs with a *come fuck me* grin that barely registers.

I merely grunt in response. *I swear to god I will punch myself in the balls if the darkness even thinks about letting some other woman near us.*

“It’s okay if you’re not a talker. I can do enough of that for the both of us.”

She winks before she lifts the ropes, allowing me to enter. I stretch my shoulders, eyeing the opposite corner where my competitor is turned away from me. He’s about half a foot shorter, with muscles on muscles and a neck as thick as a tree stump. When he turns toward me, his eyes hit my chest, then travel, up, up, up until they meet my eyes. For a second, he looks concerned, but he straightens his shoulders and smacks his fists together a couple times. *Nice try, bro. You can’t intimidate me.*

Right now, I need the action, an outlet for the adrenaline. Need to release some of this pent-up rage before it consumes me whole. My skin feels too tight. I’m antsy, and I realize I’m hopping from foot to foot, waiting for the bell that will tell me it’s time to beat the shit out of this motherfucker.

I'm facing the door, so I see it open. My sweets storms in, looking pissed off and gloriously beautiful, but the darkness in me won't let me fully appreciate it. My brothers are at her back. *Of course they fucking are. Pussies.* The ding-ding-ding of the bell sounds, and as if that's all my inner demon was waiting for, everything else is drowned out by a tidal wave of emotions. Without a second thought, I'm stepping forward, moving on instinct, dodging his first punch then another. He manages to land a blow to my jaw, throwing my head to the side, and the sickening crunch of breaking bone echoes through my mind. Blood is seeping out of my nose, but I don't feel a thing. I turn back to him, a crimson-tinged smile marring my face. His eyes widen, and he takes an involuntary step back. I crack my head to one side, then the other, and pause.

A memory of our first ghost hunt with Fate hits me. Watching my brother do the same thing before we went after the bad man. My gaze briefly scans the crowd, and when my eyes land on Fate in all of her furious glory, I miss the next punch that catches me in the ribs. And just like that, my inner monster is back, furious and done playing around.

In three quick strides, I've reached Stumpy, landing three punches in rapid succession. He's knocked back but doesn't fall. Bastard's tougher than I gave him credit for, but I've already grown tired of the fight. I need something...more.

Pulling my arm back, I let loose and hit him with an uppercut that sends him flying across the mat and onto his back, knocking him out.

The next several moments happen in a blur. The referee comes up, lifts my hand, and announces me the winner. Then I'm being ushered out of the ring, into a back room where I'm told I can get cleaned up to wait for my next match. I had expected to feel better, but I actually feel worse. This need inside me is growing too great to hold back much longer, and it's demanding blood. Demanding to be sated. It's demanding death.

Holy fucking shit. Thad's told me about what he experiences at times like these, but I never understood. Even though what I'm currently going through sounds like it's a hundred levels above that, I still gotta give the dipshit some credit here because this shit sucks ass.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Fate growls as she slams through the door, her pack of puppies on her heels.

"Whatever the fuck I want."

"Levi—"

Fate puts her hand on Cole's chest, stopping him from stepping closer. *Fucker actually listened. Unbelievable.*

There's a hint of ghosted flame in her eyes as she takes another slow step toward me. I'm both terrified and oddly aroused, but neither is enough to douse the fire inside. It wants to be fed and won't back down until it gets what it wants.

"Levi, I'm giving you one chance to calm down and come back home with us."

"And if I refuse?"

"You don't want to refuse."

"Oh, but I do."

Her eyes spark, but the door swings open and in walks the bar girl.

I cringe internally, but there's nothing I can do as my power sits up and takes notice of the inevitable conflict that's about to ensue.

"You going to introduce me to your friends, sugar?" She strolls around the room, and for the first time, I take her in. She's wearing cut-off jean shorts that show off a hint of cheek when she walks. Her bikini top is two scraps of silver material that barely manage to stay in place as she sashays toward me on heels that have to be at least four inches high. Her bleached blonde hair is showing her dark brown roots, and her face is so heavily made up, there's no telling what's really under there. When she reaches my side, she drapes herself over my arm like a worn-out blanket.

The temperature drops, Fate's eyes sparking with pink flame. "Who the fuck is she?"

Bar girl plants one hand on her hip. "This tall drink of water's fun for the night. Who are *you*?"

Fate turns to me slowly, deliberately, and despite the darkness that has taken over my entire being, it sits up and takes notice. A hint of fear still manages to slither through right along with a heavy dose of interest in what happens next, feeding off the potential chaos that is no doubt coming our way.

"Levi."

One word, but it holds significant weight.

Just as I try to extract myself from the bar girl, she latches on tighter.

"Doll, why don't you just leave well enough alone? Looks like you've got your hands full as it is. Leave some for the rest of us, ya hear?"

The lights start to flicker.

“Little ghost, maybe we should—”

“Maybe we should...what, Knox? See if she has an aversion to sharp things?”

“Fate, she’s—”

“I don’t give two shits what this fake bitch is or isn’t, Macklin. She’s touching what’s mine, and she’s gotta pay.”

“Fate, no.”

“Fuck off, Cole. I’m going to teach this Has-Been Barbie that she shouldn’t mess with someone’s man.”

“Here we go,” Cole mutters. “Where the fuck do you come up with this shit?”

She shrugs, her eyes still glued to the woman stuck to my arm. “It’s a gift.”

The blonde’s eyes have darted between them, her hand gripping me tighter with each outrageous thing that leaves Fate’s mouth.

“So what do you say, *doll*? How do you feel about pointy objects?”

“I...uh...”

“Perfect.” Fate claps her hands, and random objects around the room start to rise up. A pair of scissors. A screwdriver from the top shelf. A ballpoint pen. A large safety pin off the floor that opens itself.

“W-what the hell is happening?”

In a blink, bright pink electricity is rolling over that creamy skin my hands know so well. The hand on my arm drops away as the bar girl backs up slowly, the items all seeking out their target.

“Me. That’s what’s happening.”

There’s a silent standoff. Bar girl barely breathes, and Fate’s fingers flex.

“You know what?” Her voice trembles as she hurriedly skirts the outside edge of the room, constantly looking over her shoulder at the objects following her with deadly intent. “You can have him. He’s not worth all this shit.”

She opens the door and slams it shut behind her just as the items fly forward, embedding themselves in the door. Fate brushes her hands off, a satisfied smile gracing her admittedly beautiful face.

“Why do they always run? It’s so disappointing.” Her eyes lock onto mine, and before I can so much as blink, she’s got her pink electric rope wrapped around my body, pinning my arms to my sides. “Now, where were we?”

The darkness inside rears up, and I can feel it expand outward, pushing against the bindings, but it's no match for Fate's sheer power. I roar, and the lights all flicker wildly.

"Whoa! Look at his eyes."

"Why the fuck are they flipping between purple and red?" Cole growls.

"They're the same color as the twins' auras," Knox murmurs.

"Boys, focus. We need to get him back to the Gateway before he hurts someone."

"You mean someone *else*. That guy he fought got knocked the fuck out."

"Thank you for the helpful commentary, Knox." She rolls her eyes. "We go on the count of three. I'll need you all waiting on the other side because I've never transported someone with me before. At least not in this unlife."

"We got you, little ghost."

"Good. Are we ready? One. Two. Three."

The blackness consumes us before giving way to the brightly lit chamber in the Gateway.

"You good, love?" Cole asks Fate, eyeing me like a wild animal, though admittedly I feel that way.

I struggle against the rope again, but it only squeezes around me tighter. An inhuman growl leaves my mouth, and I snarl at my captors, my sanity evaporating with every second I'm confined.

"Yes. Someone run to get Nate. We need to do this now." She takes one look at my face and turns back to the guys. "Like...*right now*."

I watch through wild eyes as Macklin runs out of the room.

"Easy, big guy," she coos. "Just hang in there a little longer until we can get Thad back here. Then we can all live happily ever after. The end."

The beast inside just howls in response.

"Pretty sure you skipped a few steps there, love."

"Thank you ever so much for pointing that out, but this is no time for sarcasm, Ass-Cole."

Nate and Macklin come running back into the room with Asher, Reggie, and Rylan on their heels.

"Nate, you ready?" Fate asks.

"No, but do I have a choice?" he mutters.

"Not really, no."

"Fine. Let's do this."

"Nate and I will head through the vortex. Cole, Knox, and Macklin, you

guys are going to have to hold him until we get back. Think you're up for that?"

"We've got him, little ghost. Go and get back here safely, you hear me, or there will be hell to pay."

"Yes, sir." She winks at him.

I watch their interaction through a red haze. I'm present, but not. Something begins to brew deep down inside me, and my body freezes.

"Echo, something's happening."

"What is it, Macklin?"

"I don't know, but now he's gone really still."

Her gray eyes snap to mine, widening when they scan over me from head to toe. "Fucking hell, what now?"

"Feels like he's about ready to go thermo-nuclear, little ghost. Best hurry it up."

"Right. Hurry it up. Because breaking into a palace, potentially performing a transfer of power, and rescuing Thad and Liv is just easy peasy. I swear, why does everything around here have to be rushed? Why can't we ever save the world all nice and slow-like? You hear that, Universe? I'm looking at you."

In the next second, her and Nate are gone and the small part that is still *me* prays she frees my twin soon. I need them both to get the hell back here because I have a feeling we're nearing the point of no return, and I really don't want to consider exactly what that means.



The trip through the vortex is a quick one, with Nate guiding us to what he hopes will be the perfect location within Karma's palace of darkness. We materialize in a dimly lit hallway filled with wooden cell doors.

"Well, this isn't creepy at all."

"This isn't even the worst of it. Come on."

Nate leads us to a set of stairs. After finding the place oddly quiet and free of guards, we make our way down to the ground floor, descending into the quintessential dungeon. Stone room. Iron bars. Shackles hanging from the walls. The distinct scent of copper lingering in the air. Two cells sit open with no one in sight. My eyes scan over them, noticing the blood on the floor. My power flares, but Nate's hand lands on my arm.

"He's not here, which means he's with her. If he's with her, the cuff should already be off, so we're already a step closer to getting him back."

I take a deep breath and exhale. He's right, but my powers don't give a damn. They're an agitated mass inside me, just looking for the chance to escape.

"I'm going to fucking kill her."

"All in due time, babe. This is an intermission. Not the finale."

"Can't we just skip ahead and come back to fill in the blanks?"

"Bad form, babe."

Le sigh.

"Fine. So, what now?"

"See if you can locate him now since we're inside the palace."

"I totally should've thought of that."

Touching my mark, there's only a brief pause before it guides me to where we need to go, but something stops me from getting specifics. A darkness is there, one that is definitely not natural. "We can't transport directly to him because something is blocking me, but he's in a circular room of some sort that's heavily spelled."

"I think I know where that is. Let's go."

I follow Nate back the way we came, then through another door, ending up in a chamber that reminds me of the upside down version of the Gateway. I'd like to go on record to say that my aesthetic is way more visually appealing than hers. Just sayin'.

When we reach another hallway, my mark tells me we're not far, but my power is getting antsy in anticipation of what we'll find when we get there. Nate turns down a narrow stairwell, and we find ourselves on a small landing with only one door.

"They're in there," Nate says softly, quietly trying the handle. "But it's locked."

I close my eyes, letting my senses reach out, and they skirt along the darkness I saw earlier. The spell feels thick and slimy in my mind, a sort of black sludge that encompasses the entire outside of the room.

"Fucking blood spells," I mutter.

"Can you break it?"

"I sure as hell hope so. I don't want to try the transference now, in case he's still wearing the cuff. It will give us away before we can get in there. If needed, I'll have to do it once we're inside."

"Don't worry, I've got your back."

"Any chance you have something stabby on you?"

He pulls out a dagger from his boot. "Like this?"

I nod, holding my finger out. "Now, poke me."

He grins as he grabs my hand. "Oh man. Can't wait to tell the boys you asked me to poke you."

I laugh, even as the dagger's tip slices the pad of my finger, blood immediately welling up and dripping over. "Give me a heads up. I totally want to video their reactions."

He wags his eyebrows. "And they thought us hugging was *touchy feely*."

"God, I love you...in a totally platonic way, of course."

He winks. "Back at ya, babe."

"Okay, so now what? My blood is dripping all over the place, but I don't know any spells or anything."

"Let me help with that." He grabs my finger, using it to draw on the wooden surface.

A wide U, with a circle beneath it.

"What is it?"

Below that, a straight line down, then a line across.

"A release sigil you taught me."

"Old me was so smart."

He chuckles. "Yes, she was, but I like this version of you better."

At the very bottom, an upside down triangle.

The second my finger leaves the door, a wave of power expands outward.

"Time to make our grand entrance," Nate says as he rushes to open the now unlocked door.

We race in to find...chaos. Thad is standing there, gurkha blade in hand, breathing heavily, as the guard he just impaled disappears in a cloud of black smoke. His cuff is off, and he's looking as wild and angry as his twin. Guess that's one less thing for me to worry about.

Karma rushes from her chair, shrieking, "No, no, no. You stupid, stupid man."

A pale spirit is kneeling on the ground, keening over something we can't see. Whatever it is has become the sole focus of Karma's attention.

"What the fuck?" Nate's surprised outburst catches the attention of everyone in the room.

Thad's shining, angry eyes find mine, softening briefly, before he whips his gaze toward Karma who has straightened and is glaring at me.

"You!" she snarls. "How the hell did you get in here?"

“I may have given her a hand,” Nate replies.

I whip my bloody finger through the air, flinging drops across the ground. “We’re a bunch of bloodthirsty bitches, aren’t we?”

“Fucking Death,” Karma growls, her eyes darting to Nate. “I hadn’t counted on you helping. No matter. You’re not getting out of here with them.”

Her arm comes up, a fiery orb in her palm as she takes another step closer to Liv and Thad.

My eyes narrow, and my power flares to life. “And who’s going to stop me? You? In case you haven’t noticed, I broke your spell, and you are currently outnumbered.”

Nate and I both take steps closer as Thad moves to stand in front of the spirit still kneeling on the floor.

Karma nervously risks a glance around the room as if realizing for the first time that her guards have been taken out. Without a captive to use as insurance, she’s got nothing.

Straightening, her eyes spark with red flame. “This isn’t over, little sister. I’ll get what I want, one way or another. Better watch your back.”

She raises her hand, and a cloud of fiery smoke appears. In the next second, she’s gone.

I rush over to Thad, throwing my arms around his waist. With a grunt, he wraps me up in his big arms and rests his head on top of my hair.

“God, it’s good to see you, woman.”

Pulling back, I take stock of each and every injury I can see. He’s a mess, but he’s mine, and I’m so damn relieved.

“She’s a dead woman walking. I mean, she is quite literally but also figuratively. She’ll be super dead when I’m done with her.”

He chuckles, then winces.

“Shit, I’m sorry, babe. We need to get you home.”

“Wait, there’s something we need to do first.”

His arms drop, and he starts walking around the room, looking for something.

My eyes drop to the spirit on the ground. Walking closer, I kneel next to her.

“You’re okay now. She’s gone.”

Her opaque ghostly eyes find mine, and recognition instantly sparks inside.

“Fate?” Her voice trembles slightly. “Oh, god, Fate. It’s really you!”

She’s in my arms in the next second, and I have no doubt if spirits could cry, she’d be a sobbing mess. My arms awkwardly find their way around her, holding her much like Thad was just holding me.

“Liv?”

She nods but doesn’t let go. “You remember me?”

I sigh. “No, but I can sense our connection. It’s...powerful.”

“Nickie saved me, Fate. He jumped in front of Karma’s orbs. For *me*.”

The image of the smarmy man appears in my head. My distaste for him wars with the relief I feel at knowing that he saved her when I couldn’t. Now neither of us has to worry about being double crossed ever again.

“He loved you.”

“I know.”

My hands are running through her ghostly hair, and the memory of another time and place plays through my mind. Sitting out on our picnic blanket, her crying over something her dickhead brother had done, me holding her, comforting her. The past recedes, and there’s nothing but the young woman in my arms that means a whole helluva lot to me.

“I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.”

“But you’re back with us now. Everything is going to be okay,” I soothe.

“What happens now?”

“Now, we take you home.”

“Home?”

“To the Gateway. Reggie’s there, and...”

Her head pops up. “I’ll finally get to meet Reggie? You’ve told me so much about her.”

I smile. Her eyes are wide and excited, the horror of the current situation forgotten.

“Yes. As soon as we get back, I’ll have her get you settled while the rest of us strategize.”

She nods as Thad walks over to us with something in his hand. He pushes a button, and the light on the collar goes dark as it falls off Liv’s neck. I look up at him, tears shining in my eyes.

Thank you, I mouth.

He simply nods in response.

Her hand reaches up to run along her ghostly neck. “Oh god. You really did it. You got it off.” She looks up at Thad like he’s her very own superhero,

and the big bruised guy actually blushes.

Normally, I'd be bristling at the fact that someone with a vagina was eyeing my man like he was her own personal savior, and I wait for my power to spark. But it never happens. It recognizes that this is Liv. She's family. She's *ours*.

"Guys," Nate calls out. "We need to leave before Karma comes back with reinforcements."

"He's right. Let's get the hell out of here." I tuck a stray hair behind Liv's ear, the completely natural action soothing me in a way I hadn't anticipated.

Thad offers his hand and helps me to my feet.

"Are we ready?" I look at Thad.

His one eye is swollen shut, his lip cracked and bleeding, and I'm almost overwhelmed with the fury that rushes through me. It's only the soft touch of his hand in mine that helps me refrain from tearing this place apart to give her a taste of her own medicine.

"Good to go, woman. Who's got Liv?"

"I've got her," Nate says, taking her ghostly hand with a nod then disappearing in the next second.

With our eyes locked and his grip strong and firm, Thad and I disappear into the vortex.



Rematerializing in the doorway of the office, I take in the scene in front of me, starting to wonder if we ever left Torment.

“Stop struggling!” Knox shouts as he leans on Levi’s upper back, an arm wrapped around his throat in a headlock. “We wouldn’t have to do this if you’d just calm the hell down.”

“I’ve got his hands! Just make sure you hold on to his feet,” Cole demands, knotting the rope around Levi’s wrists as he grabs another from the floor beside him.

“Get the hell off, you idiots!” Levi barks.

“Hell no, you big fucker. You almost took Asher out with the chair you tossed across the room, and you damn near broke my nose with that huge elbow of yours,” Knox scolds.

“But I’m fine now. They—”

“That’s what you said the first time, then proceeded to go all Hulk smash on everything in your path.” Macklin shakes his head, his body straddling Levi’s ass while he holds onto his feet for dear life as the big man beneath him tries to buck them all off.

Now, I should not be all hot and bothered by the sight of my guys wrestling on the floor. I also should not be imagining them rolling around, grappling with each other naked. Hell, maybe throw in some mud just for funsies. Hot *damn*. Wouldn’t that be fucking spectacular?

Soft murmuring has my gaze turning to the far end of the room where Rylan has his ghostly arm wrapped around Asher, comforting her. Huh, isn’t that an interesting development? Though I doubt Nate will be happy that Rylan can get handsy with his daughter despite being a ghost. Reggie is next to them, watching with barely disguised amusement.

Shit. I have to be a responsible adult here, don’t I? Guess my fantasy will have to wait for another day. Le sigh.

“What the actual fuck?” I snap, turning back to the man children on the floor.

Nate just laughs. Typical.

It’s official. I’ve had enough fucking chaos to last me a thousand lifetimes. The room looks like it’s been ransacked or hit by a tornado. Furniture is on its side. Books are thrown throughout the room, and there’s glass shattered everywhere from who the hell knows what.

“You all have some explaining to do,” I growl. “Now let Levi go. Thad’s with us, so he should be fine.”

“That’s what I was trying to tell these fuckers, but they wouldn’t listen.”

The guys cautiously let Levi’s limbs go, then stand, helping him to his feet and cutting the rope off his hands. When their eyes land on Thad, they all grimace.

“Fuck, mate. She really did a number on you.” Knox walks over and gently places his hand on Thad’s shoulder. “Damn glad to have you back.”

Macklin winces. “God, that looks as painful as I remember it being. Glad they were able to get you out of there.”

Levi walks up and gives his twin a big hug, causing Thad to groan. “Thank you for coming back and saving me from these fuck nuggets.”

Thad hugs him back, but when he goes to pull away, Levi tugs him closer.

Despite Thad trying to pry Levi off, his brother hangs on tighter. “The

fuck, wankstain?”

Chuckling, I walk over and try to get the big guy to let go of his twin, but I find myself being squished in the middle of a twin sandwich...and not the fun kind.

“Can’t. Breathe,” I rasp.

“You guys are going to suffocate her.” Mack comes over and wrenches the two apart, shooting a look at Levi. “Go sit over there.”

He pouts but does as directed.

Thad grunts. “God, I need a drink.”

Knox walks over to the liquor cabinet and hunts for an unbroken glass, quickly pouring Thad a drink.

“Good to have you back, brother.” Cole and Thad do some weird guy handshake thing, then Cole turns to me. “Did everything go as planned?”

“For the most part.” I quickly recap the situation, and all eyes turn toward Liv. “And we picked someone up along the way.”

“Hi, guys!” Liv waves at the group, a shy smile on her face.

The guys all return her greeting with the obligatory head nods.

“Liv?” Reggie hesitantly steps forward. “It’s me, Reggie.”

Liv’s opaque eyes widen. “Reggie? Oh my gosh!” She rushes forward and wraps Reg in a huge hug. My spunky assistant’s eyes widen dramatically for a brief second before she returns the embrace. “I feel like I’ve known you for years even though we’ve never officially met.”

“I feel the same way. I’m so glad Fate was able to find you and get you out of there.”

“I can’t believe I’m finally here. This is the Gateway, right?”

“It is,” Reggie responds, darting a glance at me.

I smirk. *Don’t worry, girl, I’ve got your back.* “Reg, why don’t you give Liv the grand tour?”

“Oh! That would be amazing. Would you mind?”

Reggie smiles. “It would be my pleasure.”

They make their way out of the room, Liv asking a myriad of questions as she grabs Reggie’s hand. Reggie risks a quick look over her shoulder, and I just waggle my eyebrows at her, which she ignores in lieu of answering Liv’s questions.

“Right. So, did I miss anything?” I look to Nate, realizing he’s ignoring me. His full focus is on Asher and Rylan who are still standing seriously close together as they talk quietly, so I nudge his side. “You know she’s an

adult, right?”

“I don’t care how old she is. What do we know about him?”

“We know that we’re glad he’s finally stopped flirting with our girl and has moved on to someone else,” Thad mutters.

I roll my eyes. “He never flirted.”

“She’s right. She was the one that flirted with him,” Cole grumbles.

“And kept calling him buff,” Knox adds.

“For fuck’s sake, we’re not back to that old argument, are we?”

“I don’t know, little ghost. We have quite a lot to discuss now that we’re all together and whole again.”

Well, shit. Guess it was wishful thinking that they’d just miraculously forget about it all.

“I’ll leave you to it. I need to check in with my brothers.” Nate’s glaring at Rylan while he addresses his daughter. “Asher, I can take you home.”

Asher looks at Nate, then over at Rylan who has now puffed himself up and crossed his arms over his chest to look more intimidating in front of the overprotective daddy. When she looks at me, she rolls her eyes.

“I probably should be getting back. I need to check in with Sutton before he sends out a search and rescue team.”

Rylan’s head snaps to her. “Who the hell is Sutton?”

“He’s just a friend.”

“But he wants to be so much more,” I add, throwing a wink her way when she looks exasperated with me.

“No, he doesn’t.” She walks over and gives me a goodbye hug.

“Asher and Sutton, sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G,” I whisper-sing in her ear.

“Stop it!” She playfully slaps my shoulder.

“Oh, right. I forgot. Asher, Sutton, and Rylan sitting in a tree...”

She just giggles as she walks toward Nate.

“I should go too. There’s bound to be gossip spreading through the spirit realm like wildfire after the encounter today. I’ll check back in if I get any new intel.” He winks at Asher, who blushes prettily, then he’s gone.

“I can never thank you both enough.” Walking over, I give Nate a hug. “We wouldn’t have been able to do this without you guys.”

“We’ll be here anytime you need us, Fate. Just send out the dick signal.”

My smile is so big it hurts. “You get me, Death.”

He grins back. “Of course I do. Now go rest. You earned it.”

“See you later, besties,” I call out as they prepare to leave.

“Oh, and Fate?”

“Yes, Nate?”

“Thanks for letting me poke you.” With a wink, he’s gone.

That sneaky bastard.

Turning, I find all of my guys eyeing me.

“With his *dagger*.”

Silence.

“Not his *meaty* dagger. A *real* dagger.”

You could hear a cricket chirp in here. If the Gateway had crickets, that is.

“You know what, think whatever you want.” I yawn widely. “I’m going to crash for like, a week, after all this shit. You can yell at me later.”

I’m too tired to walk to my room, so I transport myself there in a blink. Perks of being Ghost Girl Supreme, I suppose. Wiggling out of my tight leather pants and stripping off my white tee, I leave them both on the floor as I stand there in nothing but my bra and panties. I quickly toss my hair up into a messy knot on the top of my head as my adrenaline finally plummets, and with it, a flood of emotions washes over me.

The first tear burns a trail down my cheek as I try to take a deep breath then exhale slowly, a sob escaping instead. My hands fly up, covering my face as I break down, my chest heaving with a week’s worth of stress and fear and anger and relief overtaking me.

A pair of strong arms turn me around, and I suck in a breath. I didn’t hear anyone come in. Then I see the seafoam green eyes staring back at me, at least his good eye, and the tears flow faster.

“I’m okay,” he murmurs, enveloping me in a gentle embrace that is at odds with his overwhelming strength. “We’re all okay, babe.”

I bury my face against his neck, taking in his campfire and marshmallow scent. He holds me like that for longer than I care to admit until my tears are all but gone and I’m a sniffling mess.

When I pull back, he softly wipes away my tears. “Thank you,” he whispers.

“For what?”

“You came for me.”

My puffy eyes narrow. “You didn’t think I would?”

He grins, amused by my irritation. “I knew you would, but that doesn’t

mean I'm not grateful. Until you, there would've been no one except my brothers who cared enough to do what you did."

"I've got your back. Always."

"As I have yours."

Another tear rolls down my cheek, and he leans over, kissing it away. His hand comes up to cradle the side of my face as he kisses the other cheek before lightly brushing his lips against mine. My eyes close, and I give myself over to just being, just feeling, trusting that he'll be there to pick me up if I fall apart.

He kisses me harder, and I taste a hint of copper on my tongue.

"Your lip," I whisper.

"I don't give a shit about my lip. I need you, Fate."

"You have me."

His lips crash against mine as he picks me up, my legs wrapping around his waist. My back hits the wall, his hips grinding against my panty-covered pussy. His hand fumbles behind me, deftly unhooking my bra and pulling it off my arms. One hand grasps his neck while the other wraps itself up in his hair. It's a frenzied game of give and take; there's no finesse, no foreplay. One second, he's fully clothed. The next, his shirt is off and his pants are unbuttoned, dropping to his knees as he pushes my panties aside, lines himself up, and thrusts in.

From empty to full, from pain to pleasure, from overwhelming fear to breathtaking love. That's what this is. This is life. The constant uncertainty. The risk and the reward. *This is love*. The merging of one soul into another. Giving one's self to someone else without knowing if they'll guard your heart as if it were their own, or if they'll tear it up into tiny pieces and throw it at your feet. At the end of the day, I don't want to find myself with regrets. I want to be able to say that I *lived* and I *loved*. Through the good and the bad and everything in between. And more importantly, that I would do it all over again.

His hips are pumping into me, rough and without rhythm, but he's playing my body like a maestro.

"Fuck, I can't..."

"Shhh," I whisper in his ear. "Give it to me, Thad. I want it. I want *you*."

His big hands lift my hips, angling me so that the next thrust of his dick hits a spot deep inside me that has my entire body feeling like a livewire, seconds away from a complete blackout.

“Give it to me, Fate. I want it. I want *you*,” he repeats back to me.

That’s all it takes. I’m tumbling into the ether with him right behind me as he growls out his release. His arms tighten around me as he buries his face in my hair, our bodies going still as we soak up each other’s energy.

“It’s back,” he whispers.

“What’s back?” I ask, confused.

“The last time we were together, all of us, we didn’t come to the ether. It weirded me out.”

“I like it here. It’s oddly comforting.”

He kisses my lips. “Because it’s ours.”

The bedroom slowly comes back into focus, and he moves us off the wall, his hands gripping my ass firmly, and over to the massive bed. Instead of setting me down, he crawls up onto the bed, somehow managing to keep us connected as he situates us then falls backward. I’m straddling him now, cuddled against his neck.

“I don’t want to let go just yet.”

“Then don’t.”

“Can we sleep like this?” he murmurs against my ear.

“Mmmhmm,” I reply sleepily.

“I love you, woman.”

“I love you too.”

Within seconds, his breathing evens out, the beat of his heart slowly lulling me toward slumber. Just as I’m drifting off, I feel a big body cuddling up against my back, reaching a massive arm over me to touch his twin’s shoulder. I’m mashed into another less-fun twin sandwich, but I can sense Levi’s desperation for the connection, and I can’t find it in me to deny him that. So I lay in between my two giant guys as they both begin to snore lightly, overly warm and a bit uncomfortable, with a grin on my face and love in my heart as I fall asleep.

11. MACKLIN

SEXY NERD FACT #9:

WE'RE FULL OF SURPRISES LIKE
DICK JOKES AND WET T-SHIRT
FANTASIES.

Ding.

Ding.

Ding.

“I swear to all that is holy, sexy nerd, if you don’t silence that laptop, I’m going to chuck it across the room,” Fate mumbles from beneath her pillow.

“You wouldn’t,” I mock gasp.

A pair of angry gray eyes peek out at me. “Try me.”

Chuckling, I slide out of bed and over to my desk. It’s been three days of recuperating after our latest encounters with Karma, and Fate has spent most of that time hopping from one bed to the next, sleeping, relaxing, and making Reggie and Liv blush over our not-so-quiet sexual escapades whenever we encounter them in the halls. It’s been glorious.

Leaning over, I enter my password, intent on muting all notifications,

when I see over thirty emails for ghost hunting jobs.

“Whoa!” Sitting in my chair in only my boxers, I start to sift through the numerous requests for help.

“Better not be looking at porn over there, or I can’t be responsible for my actions.”

I look over my shoulder, a wicked grin spreading across my face. “We could cuddle...” One elegant brow arches. “Sorry...*chuddle* while watching porn. See what *pops* up.”

Her head flies up, her eyes wide. “Did you just make a dick joke, sexy nerd?”

“I did.”

Her smile lights up her entire face, and even with her dark hair mussed around her head and red lines from sleep creasing her cheek, she’s the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever seen.

“I’m so proud of you,” she murmurs as she sits up and stretches, the blanket falling to the bed, revealing her round, rosy-tipped breasts. “Ahem.”

My eyes dart up to hers, and I immediately blush at being caught red handed, but it doesn’t stop my eyes from dropping back down or my mind from conjuring a million ways I want to savor those hardened nipples.

Ding.

Ding.

“Okay. That’s it.” Fate slides her naked body out of bed and walks over to me. “What gives, Mack?”

Her arms slide around my neck before she straddles my lap, my hands automatically finding her ass and pulling her against me.

“We’re being inundated with requests for our ghost hunting services.”

“Why is that so surprising?”

“Normally, in any given month, we might receive one or two. We now have...” I turn the chair and check my email again. “Almost forty in a matter of hours.”

“Okay. That *is* unusual. Did you all run an ad or something?”

“Uh...no. We’ve been a little too busy to even think about VIPS lately.”

“Huh. So what does this mean?”

Before I can answer, the door flies open and the twins walk in. They’re wearing their VIPS logo tees and dark blue jeans with their work boots. Hair in matching man buns—even if they refuse to call them that. They’re geared up for ghost hunting.

“Well, hell. Would ya look at that?” Thad walks up, wrapping one of his grizzly paws he calls hands around the back of Fate’s head to pull her forward for a rough kiss.

“Such a shame.” Levi shakes his head, nudges his twin out of the way, and dips his head for his own good morning, er...actually...good afternoon kiss.

When they finally break for air, Fate’s lips are pink and slightly swollen, her cheeks flushed.

“What’s a shame?”

“That we don’t have time to take advantage of all that.” Thad waves his hands up and down.

Her lips quirk up on one side. “Sure we don’t have a few minutes for a quickie?”

The twins groan, and my hands tighten on her round ass cheeks.

“Wish we did, sweets, but we’re heading out on a call. Our phones have been going crazy all morning.”

Fate looks at me. “Yeah, this can’t be anything good.”

Thad’s arms cross over his massive chest. “What can’t?”

“We’ve gotten over forty emails requesting help as well.”

Their eyes widen.

“What do you think this means?” Levi asks.

Fate sighs. “It means our reprieve is over.” She drops a kiss on my cheek and slides off my lap.

When she turns back around, Levi has grabbed her robe and is holding it out for her. “We were going to ask if you guys wanted to divide and conquer?” He helps her slide into it, and we all watch as she ties the belt.

“Is Cole okay with that?”

“He’s not going to have a choice, woman. These aren’t your friendly neighborhood Casper calls. The calls we’ve taken are a whole helluva lot darker in nature.”

Her brow furrows. “How are you guys even getting calls and emails here anyways?”

Levi punches my shoulder. “Mack’s a genius.”

“I had a little bit of help from Reggie who explained the inner workings of the Gateway to me.”

“Okay, well, let me go get dressed and then we can go find Cole and Knox and come up with a game plan.”

She turns to head for the door, and Thad's hand lands with a loud smack against her ass. With a shriek, she jumps, her hand rubbing the offended cheek, but she's grinning when she says, "What the hell was that for?"

"For being too damn tempting."

She chuckles as she heads out. "Office in twenty, boys."

We wait in silence for a few minutes before the twins both turn to me.

"This is her, isn't it, Mack?" Levi asks.

"If I had to guess?" I glance back at my computer screen and see another twelve requests have appeared in my inbox. "Karma's most definitely involved."

"I'm not sure it's a good idea to split up," Thad murmurs.

"Knowing what we know now, I agree." Levi is staring at the door, his fists clenching and unclenching by his side.

I make a mental note to keep an eye on the two of them. Based on my observations, despite everyone's powers being stabilized, Levi still seems to be struggling with the aggression he experienced while also developing a need to be close to his twin at all times. *More to figure out later. Right now, we've got other problems.*

"Do you think it's a trap?"

The twins share a look.

"I'll take that as a yes."

"I wouldn't put it past her, that's for damn sure," Thad fumes.

"So what do we do?" I ask.

Levi starts heading for the door. "We talk to Cole and head out to our calls as a team. If these spirits are somehow linked to Karma, we might be able to get information on her next move."

"I'll meet you downstairs." They shut the door as they leave, and I rush to throw on a pair of jeans and sift through my drawers to find one of my company t-shirts. Once I grab my socks and boots, I head out after them.

Making my way to the office, my mind drifts back to my time in Torment with Fate's psychotic sister. Her questions all focused around the book, with her interest in Thad's powers seeming to be mere entertainment or a simple distraction. Whatever she's planning, the book is key, so we can't let her get it.

Raised voices filter out into the hallway as I approach.

"No," Cole's deep voice snaps.

Fate growls. Literally. "You...you...thundering anus!"

“The fuck?” Cole’s arms drop to his sides, and his brows are damn near at his hairline as I walk into the room. He’s walking a very thin line right now, but honestly, I think he enjoys that. The fighting and most definitely the making up.

“Thundering anus?” I ask, and Fate turns to me, ghosted flames in her eyes. Her white VIPS logo tee is tight across her breasts, and I have this vision of her soaking wet, her nipples poking through the translucent fabric. Shaking my head, I try to focus on what she’s saying.

“I’m trying out something new. Asshole is getting overused and needs a replacement. What do you think?”

“I think it’s bloody brilliant,” Knox remarks, amusement obvious in the tilt of his lips.

“What’s the *thundering anus* done now, echo?” Cole turns the full focus of his glare on me.

“Mack, you need to talk some sense into him. He won’t let me go with you guys on the ghost calls.”

We all share a look, and I grimace. On one hand, I can understand their fears. That something would happen to her while we’re outside of the Gateway. On the other, I know just how powerful our girl is and am confident that she can take care of herself.

I’m struck with an image of her in all her ghostly pissed off glory, her eyes sparking that gorgeous pink I’ve come to adore, as she stalks towards me, commanding me to kneel before her. My dick swells rapidly in my jeans, and I shift to try to hide the completely noticeable bulge in the middle of a totally inappropriate situation. *What the hell is wrong with me? She was just in my bed last night.*

“No. You all don’t get to bully him into agreeing with you.”

“We’re not bullying him, little ghost. We’re just worried, and—”

“And I’m not? Why do you guys always seem to forget that I’m not some weak, helpless female? Or the fact that the very thing Karma wants is to weaken us by pulling us apart?”

“She’s right.” Thad walks up to her side, their hands tangling together. “Karma won the first time by separating all of us. We need to be smarter.”

Fate nods. “We do this together.”

Levi joins the two of them, grabbing her other hand. “I agree with sweets and the dipshit.”

Knox sighs. “You’re right, little ghost. I’m sorry. We’re definitely better

off together.”

“We’re Fate’s balance, after all,” I add. “Together, we’re extremely powerful, and that’s exactly why Karma keeps trying to tear us apart.”

Fate eyes Cole. “Well, thundering anus, what assholeish thing do you have to say to that?”

He’s staring her down, a thoughtful-looking scowl on his face.

“My first thought, always, is to protect you, Fate. It’s instinct.” He walks up to her, pausing with less than a foot separating them. “I’m your right hand man, remember? But what I’ve failed to realize, until just now, is that an inherent part of that job is to be *right by your side...always*. That doesn’t mean leaving you behind where it’s safe or hiding you away where no one can touch you. Because the truth is, you’re always safer when you’re with me. With us.”

The truth of his words skims along my power, and I know he’s not just feeding her what she wants to hear. He truly means it.

A tear rolls down her cheek. “Fucking leaky faucet.” She steps into him, his arms coming around her, pulling her close.

“I love you, Fate.”

“I love you too, Cole. All of you. More than words. More than life.” Her eyes find each of ours, a snarky grin appearing as another tear escapes. “More than donuts or alcoholic ice pops, even.”

“Anyone else notice she didn’t include wine in that list?” Knox muses.

She laughs as we all grin. “Fine. I love you more than I love wine, and that’s a whole lot.”

“Now that we’ve got that little love fest out of the way...” Cole drops a kiss on the top of her head before stepping back.

Fate sighs dramatically. “I knew it was too good to last.”

“You have some explaining to do, but let’s start with the book.”

“This is going to take a while. Mind if we get comfortable first?”

“Not at all,” Knox replies, picking Fate up.

She giggles, wrapping her arms around his neck as he crashes to the sofa with her in his lap. “Mmm. Comfy.”

The rest of us follow them over and take seats around the room.

“Now spill, woman,” Thad says from beside Knox and Fate as he lifts her feet into his lap.

“So, that day I found the secret room here in the office, the Gateway gave me the location of the book. I had Reggie retrieve it for me.”

My mind goes back to that day. I remember Knox and I searching the library high and low for the book we left there almost fifty years ago.

“You got to it before us,” I murmur.

She blushes as her nose scrunches up slightly, and it’s one of the cutest things I’ve ever seen. “I couldn’t let you guys get it.”

“Why not?” Knox asks, brushing her hair over her shoulder.

“For one, it’s my responsibility even if I don’t know how the hell it works, and two, it would make you targets,” she ends in a whisper. “Though I guess it didn’t matter because she got to us again anyways.”

“I’m assuming you put it somewhere safe?” Cole lounges back in his chair, crossing one foot over his knee, giving the illusion of being relaxed, but I can still see the tension in body in the way he’s drumming his fingers along the arm.

“The Gateway created a special hiding place just for the book. I assure you, it’s completely secure. I’m the only one who knows its location.”

Cole nods, apparently satisfied with that answer. “Now, about the bubble —”

She interrupts him, adamantly shaking her head. “I’m not apologizing for that.”

One brow slowly rises. “I wasn’t going to ask you to,” Cole retorts. “I was actually curious how you did it.”

“Oh. Well...it was a sort of one-use spell that old me apparently created and stored in one of those little bloodthirsty drawers. Good thing too. Turns out, I needed it.”

“Do you think the Gateway finally trusts you enough to help us catalogue the contents of all the drawers now?” I ask, my mind already sifting through all the potential spells and trinkets we might find.

Thad snorts. “You’re already imagining the possibilities, aren’t you?”

“Maybe...”

“And there’s nothing wrong with that, Mack. Fucking bullies, the lot of you.” Fate shoots a narrow-eyed glare at Thad before turning back to me. “She seemed friendly enough when I talked with her in Lacuna. I can ask.”

“But we’ve got bigger problems right now. We need to figure out what Karma’s got up her sleeve with this latest batch of ghost calls. There’s no way she isn’t involved somehow.”

“I say we go on some calls. Try to gather intel,” Levi suggests.

“Maybe get our hands on one of those dickhead spirits and see what they

know,” Thad adds as he rubs Fate’s feet.

Cole scans the room. “Whatever we do, we stick together. Agreed?”

A chorus of “Agreed!” sounds out as we all stand and prepare to head to the human realm.

“You all heading out?” Reggie asks as she and Liv walk into the room.

“Yes. The guys have some investigations they need to look into. Could you check in with Rylan for us?” Fate stands and walks over to her assistant.

“Of course!”

“How are you liking the Gateway, Liv?”

The young spirit darts a quick glance at Reggie then turns to Fate. If she wasn’t translucent, I swear she’d be blushing right now.

“I love it here,” she admits. “I can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done.”

“I just wish I could’ve gotten you out of her clutches sooner.”

“Nonsense. I’m here now and will help in any way I can.”

“For now, you two hold down the fort. We’ll check in when we’re done.”

“Sounds good, boss.”

I notice the intense look and secret smile Reggie and Liv share before they walk off hand-in-hand.

“They’re awfully cozy,” I note with a grin.

“Good. They both deserve some lovin’ after the hellish hundred years they’ve been through.”

“You could use some good lovin’ too, woman,” Thad murmurs into Fate’s ear as he picks her up and spins her around. “We still owe you a sexathon.”

“What in the hell would you call the last three days then?”

“Training.”

Her giggle echoes through the room, and the part of my soul that’s reserved just for her swears on its last wisp that it will do whatever it takes to hear that sound for the rest of eternity.

12. KNOX

EMPATHY FACT #9:

EVEN I DONT KNOW HOW TO
CLASSIFY THE EVENTS OF THIS
DAY OTHER THAN TO SAY IT
WAS FUCKED UP.

The humidity in Florida's gulf coast is nearly unbearable, the SUV's air conditioning barely touching the unseasonable heat as we barrel down the freeway toward our next stop. The vehicle is a cover, rented from a local company for appearances' sake. We can't very well pop into the family's front yard without raising suspicions we'd rather not have to deal with right now.

Fate is snuggled up next to me, her head resting on my shoulder, fast asleep. Her dark hair has fallen across her face, and I brush it back, tucking it behind her ear.

"She's exhausted," Macklin says softly, this sort of cozy comfort filling the space between us that makes me want to snuggle into them both to drown out all of our current problems and worries.

"We all are. Hopefully this next haunt bags us a spirit that's willing to

talk before the twins just ash their asses.”

Thad shrugs from the passenger seat. “Hey, we can’t help it if these assholes set our powers off.”

Cole turns toward him. “You need to try. All we’ve gathered so far is that the spirits are definitely from Torment.”

“Which doesn’t make sense.” Mack shifts on the bench beside us. “Why would she want to release spirits from her own realm? Wouldn’t she be hoarding them, growing her own personal army?”

“Do any of us understand what goes on in that woman’s head?”

“Fuck no,” Cole mutters as he takes the off ramp, heading off the freeway and into a residential area.

The sun is just beginning to set, the sky casting an orange haze across the marshy lands. It’s been years since I’ve been to Florida, and I’ve got to admit, I miss the lush green beauty that seems to be everywhere. Though I definitely don’t miss the alligators hiding in the water or the bugs. *God, the bugs.*

After another fifteen minutes, we’re pulling up to a peach-toned, single-story house with the front porch light on. Parking the car in the driveway, we all sit quietly for a moment.

“Same as all the others. We let Knox and Fate feel out the spirits. Mack and I will talk with the homeowners. Levi and Thad will hang back until we need them.” He eyes the twins. “Rein it in, you hear me?”

The twins grumble their agreement.

I drop a kiss on Fate’s forehead. “Little ghost, it’s time to wake up.”

“Hmph.” She cuddles in closer.

Pulling her onto my lap, I nuzzle the side of her neck, letting my lips play across that sweet spot behind her ear.

“Unless you plan on following through with some hot car sex, I suggest you stop now.”

Chuckling, I turn her face and drop a sweet kiss on her lips. What I really want to do is kiss the shit out of her, flip her on her back, and fuck her hard and rough right here, but I’m not sure she’d appreciate the audience...and I’m not talking about the other guys, but rather our new clients.

With a sigh, she lets me help her out of the car then stretches. Even exhausted, she’s got this natural sort of grace with her movements, and I can’t seem to take my eyes off of her. Running her fingers through her tangled hair, she straightens her shirt, and I slowly step forward to wipe a tiny

spot of drool off her cheek. In this moment, the constant lust I feel any time I see her is drowned out by this overwhelming sense of...completeness.

Bending slightly, I whisper in her ear. "I love you, little ghost."

I can feel the smile tilt her lips before she turns, her hands cupping the sides of my face. Her happiness fills me with warmth as her lips touch mine.

"I love you too, Knox." The sincerity in that simple statement just confirms everything that I was already feeling. She's mine. Ours. And we are truly hers.

"Are you two done? I'd like to get on with this already," Thad mutters.

I grab Fate's hand and head toward the others.

"Jealous?" I taunt the big guy.

"Fuck yeah. And horny. And tired. Let's get this over with so we can find a bed and put it to good use on all fronts."

Cole and Mack walk up to the front door and ring the bell. Within seconds, an older man with graying hair and thick glasses greets us.

"You those paranormal investigators my wife called?"

"Yes, sir. We're with Valley Investigations and Paranormal Society. I'm Cole. This is Macklin. My team..." He motions toward the rest of us. "Knox, Fate, Thad, and Levi."

He studies us cautiously for a moment before he opens the screen door. "Well, come on in. Let's get this over with."

Fate and I share a look before we follow the others inside. The living room is in shambles, books lying all over the tile floor. Broken glass littering the area. Pictures frames are askew on the wall.

"What happened here?" Cole asks.

The man crosses his arms over his chest. "Aren't you supposed to tell me?"

"Henry?"

"In here, Margo."

An older woman walks in from somewhere down the hall. "Oh, thank heavens you're here. It just started again a few moments ago."

"Can you give us a run down of what you've been experiencing?" Cole and Macklin listen as the couple details the last few days.

I look over at Fate. "You feeling anything?"

Her eyes are closed, her lips pinched. "These ones are stronger. More menacing. Full of anger and fury. But they feel...different from the others."

"Yeah, I sense that too." The emotions filtering in are muted but still

distinguishable. “It’s like they’re being pushed through a filter or something.”

She nods. “There’s this underlying sense of...glee. Some anticipation. Do you feel that?”

I let my senses expand until I pick up on it too. “What do you think that means?”

“I’m not sure, but...” Her eyes fly open. “I think we’re about to find out.”

A menacing laugh echoes down the hall just as the lights start to flicker.

“We’ll just leave you to it,” Henry says, grabbing his wife’s hand. “Just before you all arrived, we called and rented a hotel room for the next few days. You can reach us by phone when you’re done.”

“But, Henry—”

“But nothing, Margo. We’re getting the hell out of here.”

He drags her off as she takes one last look over her shoulder. A door toward the back of the house slams shut, the sound of a car starting reaching us just as the vehicle’s lights flash through the house and we see a car backing out of the drive and speeding down the street.

“Fate? Knox? What’ve you got?”

Another sinister laugh is followed by doors slamming throughout the house. Fate and I share a look, her expression grim.

“They’re excited. Expectant,” she whispers, her eyes scanning the room. “But why can’t we see them?”

“Thad and Levi, be ready,” Cole commands. “Macklin, what was he saying about a message?”

“It’s in the bathroom, this way.”

We all follow him down a narrow hall to a door on the right. He opens the door, reaching in to flip on the light. There on the mirror, written in black smudges, is a single sentence: *This is only the beginning.*

“That’s not ominous at all,” Thad mutters. “She should’ve used red. Up the intimidation factor.”

“This message is for us.” Mack leans forward, swiping his finger against the mirror. “And this is ash.”

“Karma.” Fate’s eyes narrow. “What is she hoping to gain from all this?”

The menacing laugh is back, followed by the sound of glass shattering.

“It’s coming from the kitchen.” I grab Fate’s hand, and we rush toward the sounds of chaos but stop short when we reach the arched doorway.

Dishes are flinging themselves out of the cabinet, shattering against the tile floor below. A cup flies through the air, exploding against the wall,

quickly followed by another.

“Why the fuck can’t we see them?” Cole growls.

Fate steps forward, but I pull her back. I can feel her anger spike. “Because they’ve got something that’s allowing them to hide from us.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can feel it. Another of Karma’s little trinkets, I’d guess.”

A laugh from directly in front of us startles me back a step, tugging Fate with me. In the next second, she goes ghost, walking through the havoc created by these invisible beings.

“There are at least four of them. Whatever they’ve got is blocking their true power. These aren’t mere spirits. They’ve got to be higher up the chain.”

A wicked smile suddenly tilts her ghostly lips as all activity in the room suddenly stops.

“Want to play?” Her voice has a malevolent quality to it that I’ve only heard when the darker side of her shows itself.

“Fate?” Macklin asks.

No response.

“What in the hell is she doing?” Levi murmurs.

“She’s about to show those fuckers who’s boss.” I can feel her excitement, the thrill that’s flooding through her as her power rises, the lights beginning to glow a bright pink. The temperature in the room plummets, and when I exhale, I can see my breath. Her hair is floating around her head in a ghostly breeze none of us can feel as her feet lift off the floor.

“Damn. She’s fucking hot when she’s pissed.” Thad’s hand drops to rub his dick.

“Agreed, bro.” Levi mirrors him.

Flashes of pink electricity shoot out, encircling five empty spots around the room. Fate’s eyes narrow.

“Surrender or face the consequences.”

“Never!” a tortured voice cries out.

Lifting her hands, she sends another wave of power through to the circles that are seemingly binding nothing but air. Cries echo through the room. One by one, spirits appear, but it’s immediately clear these aren’t your average lost souls.

The men before us hold more physical presence than the others we’ve encountered so far. Each one is wearing one of those damn red anima mea jeweled rings.

The biggest one laughs. His head is shaved military style, his sleeveless shirt showing massive biceps covered in tattoos. “You don’t scare us.”

Fate’s head tilts to the side, her dark hair spilling over her shoulder. “No? How about now?”

One second, she’s standing there in all her ghostly glory. The next, she’s surrounded by a bright silver aura, her eyes flaring with pink ghosted flames as she raises her solid hands. Their eyes all widen as they shriek in pain. Fear slithers through the room, though they try desperately to hide it. Their auras are black, tinged with a ring of red, indicating both death and anger.

“We’ll never...talk.”

“Oh, but I think you will.” She turns to Thad and Levi. “You guys want a turn?”

Matching mischievous grins spread across the twins' faces. “You know it, woman.”

They both step up, their powers igniting as the gorkha blade appears in Thad’s hand, a white orb in Levi’s.

The spirits' eyes dart to the twins and back to Fate as they struggle to get free.

“The first one to talk receives mercy. The rest, well, let’s just say you’ll get what’s coming to you, nice and slow like. Thad is amazing with his blade. You should really see it.” She taps her chin, then holds up a single finger. “Oh wait, you will. ”

“Don’t you say shit,” military man warns, eyeing the others.

“So be it,” Fate chirps, nodding at Levi.

Levi raises his hand, the full focus of his light shining down on each of the men like a laser beam. They scream, an ear-piercing sound that damn near has me covering my ears.

“Huh. Interesting,” Fate murmurs. “Your power is on the more righteous side of the Key Master gig, right? So I guess you’re using...holy light...super duper saintly light...or whatever the hell it’s called?”

“Kinda neat, right?”

“Totes, big guy.”

“Uh, guys...” Two of the men have gone silent, their mouths frozen open and their eyes holding blank stares.

Before anyone can speak, they explode, showering the room in black ash.

“What. The. Fuck?” Fate whispers.

“Uh...guess that holy light is a little more powerful than I thought.”

“Ya think?” I mock.

“Maybe tone it down a little next time, yeah?”

“You got it, sweets.”

“Think my shadows can do that? I wanna try.”

“You’ll get your chance, babe. I promise.”

Thad pouts.

“Anyone willing to talk now?” Cole asks.

“Not a chance,” military man snarls, but the other two share a look.

“It’s Karma,” both men shout at the same time.

“You fucking traitorous shitheads. She’ll end you for this.”

“Well, looks like you’re the unlucky soul who Thad gets to practice his cursed shadows on.”

“That’s boring. Why can’t we call it something badass, like...shadows of destruction or maybe shadows of vengeance? Meh, I’ll work on it.”

He steps toward the scowling spirit, who spits on his shoes, except he’s not corporeal enough for that, so nothing comes out.

Thad looks down at his shoe, then grins maliciously up at military man. “Bet that was highly unsatisfying.”

He raises the hand, sans blade, and swirls it through the air. Shadows coalesce from out of nowhere, bringing a dark presence with them that feels cold and menacing.

A very large, very disturbing-looking shadow dick appears.

“This is going to be so much fun.” Fate claps her hands, her eyes alight with glee.

Military man starts struggling in earnest, his terror growing by the second. If he wasn’t a spirit, I’m pretty sure he would’ve pissed his pants by now. “W-what the fuck is that thing?”

“Meet the shadow schlong’s evil twin. The cursed cock.”

“Ooh. Love that, babe.”

“Thanks, woman.” He winks at her as he steps toward the belligerent spirit. “So, what shall we try first? Mouth or ass?”

“No. No, no, no.” The spirit’s eyes widen as he tries to scoot backward.

“Ah, ah, ah. I don’t think so. You’re not going anywhere.” Fate’s fist clenches, causing the electric rope to tighten around him until he screams out.

“Mouth, it is.” Thad moves the monstrous cock closer to the man’s face. His lips press together, his head jerking back to avoid contact with the cursed cock. It nudges his lips, and just that little bit of contact has his mouth

shooting open, a pained cry escaping as the cursed cock lodges itself in the spirit's throat. He writhes, which only forces the cursed cock deeper. Black veins begin to spread over his body, the darkness consuming him from the inside out.

"This is seriously fucked up." Yet I can't look away as blackness literally begins oozing out of him until his body explodes, shooting black sludge in every direction and leaving puddles on the floor.

"Ewww. Gross." Fate nudges one with the tip of her boot.

Thad tentatively touches his blade to one of the masses, and it bursts into flames, disintegrating in seconds.

"Well now, that just leaves you two. Who wants to go first?"

They both start talking over each other as Macklin and Cole step forward, asking question after question.

My eyes meet Fate's, and she winks. The woman is the perfect combination of innocence and fire...which I suppose makes sense considering she was chosen for her balance. We should count ourselves lucky that she chose *us* to help her keep it.



The Gateway is quiet, the lights low. It's late, and Reg and Liv are either sleeping or out. After Cole and Mack gathered all the intel from Karma's lackeys, I held true to my word. We granted them mercy in the form of a quick and painless death. Or new death. Re-death? *Huh, I need to think of a word for that.*

"Do you think they told us the truth?" Levi asks as we stand in the middle of the Gateway's main chamber.

Macklin nods. "Yes. It was all a huge distraction with the hope that we'd have to split up to handle all the calls since there were so many. Not the smartest plan, but it shows how desperate and slightly delusional Karma has become."

"But what was her plan if she succeeded? That's the real question, isn't it?" Knox asks.

“She wouldn’t entrust that information to her lackeys. It’s likely no one outside her inner circle even knows, and considering Nick is no longer in the picture and she’s lost her top generals, she may just be going rogue.”

Cole is surprisingly calm, but the frustration is there underneath it all. I can feel his steadfast determination, and I just want to hug him. But then I look down at myself.

“I really need a shower,” I mutter, flinging off ash and black sludge that somehow managed to find its way onto the back of my hand.

“Hey, mind if...uh...” Macklin rakes his hand down the back of his neck, peering at me sideways with shy brown eyes. “You know what, nevermind.”

My lips quirk up. *Gah. He’s so fucking adorable.* “Mack, would you like to join me?”

He releases a pent-up breath. “Is that okay? I know you’re exhausted and might need some time to yourself.”

Walking up to him, I rise up on my tip toes, my hands landing on that toned chest of his. “I’m never too tired to spend time with you, sexy nerd.”

He grins, one arm going around my back. “You were spectacular tonight. Did I tell you that?”

“Nope.” I smirk. “Which part specifically did you like best?”

“So modest too,” Cole snarks.

I whip my hand at him, sending another piece of sludge flying off to hit him smack in the middle of his chest. His head slowly drops as he eyes the gloppy mess on his black shirt.

“Looks like you need a shower too, alpha. Care to join us?” I challenge. “Macklin doesn’t mind. Do ya, Mack?”

Sexy nerd dips his head, nuzzling my neck, but I can feel the slight rumbling of his body as he chuckles. “Nope. Don’t mind at all.”

Cole studies us silently, but I can feel his steadily growing need even though he seems as stoic as ever on the outside. “I’ll meet you there in a few minutes.”

Macklin surprises me, picking me up, my legs wrapping around his waist.

“Anyone else?” I ask around a giggle as Macklin spins us around.

“You all have fun. I’m off to decompress after being bombarded with slimy spirit energy all day.” Knox stalks toward us, his hand managing to wrap around the back of my neck right as Macklin pauses, bringing his lips to mine in a crushing kiss that has my toes curling. “But I’ll take a raincheck, little ghost.”

“Us too,” Levi adds. “Who knew using holy light would be so draining.” He nudges Knox out of the way and drops a quick kiss on my forehead.

“No shit. Cursed cocks are no joke.” Thad smacks my ass, his large smile at odds with his pale skin and tired eyes.

“Go rest. You all earned it today.” My eyes meet Mack’s. “Well, sexy nerd, what say you?”

“I say we get out of here,” he says, looking excited.

“Oooh. You’re speaking my language.”

He blushes.

“You’re in for it now, Mack. Good luck,” Thad calls out.

Laughing, I kiss the tip of Mack’s nose as I pull us both through the vortex. We rematerialize in the bathroom. Convenient, right? My power gets me. Now, if only there were some alcoholic ice pops and a platter of donuts on the counter. I’m starved.

I wiggle my eyebrows. “Now what?”

His lips quirk as he takes off his glasses with one hand and sets them on the counter. The other is still holding my ass tightly, and I wiggle against him, feeling Quetzi come to life between us. He walks us straight over to the massive shower, opening the door and carrying me in. I know he’s got to realize we’re both still dressed, so I just sit back and wait to see where he’s going with this. Reaching for the handle, he turns the water on and lets it warm up as I trail kisses up his neck.

Warm water is suddenly raining down on us, and I gasp in surprise. Macklin just chuckles as we stand there, fully clothed, under the spray of the shower.

“This was your plan?” I ask, my head tilted in confusion.

“Yup.” He grins, his dimples appearing.

I can’t help myself. I lean forward and let the tip of my tongue play in one of them like I’ve wanted to do since the second first day I saw him. His fingers flex on my ass. I love seeing this relaxed, playful side of my sexy nerd. Don’t get me wrong, I adore his intense focus, but seeing his dimples come out really revs my motor.

Letting my lips brush against his, I ask, “Are you enjoying yourself?”

He leans back, his eyes scanning down my chest. “You have no idea how much.”

My brow rises. When I finally look down to see what he’s talking about, a grin spreads across my face. My white shirt is now see through, right along

with my white lace bra, making my nipples stand out against the fabric.

“Why do I get the feeling you planned this?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” A blush spreads across his cheeks, down his throat, and beneath his shirt.

“Oh, but I think you do.” With one hand wrapped around his neck, I trail the other down and around my hardened nipples.

His eyes track the movement, and he swallows. “I...may have been envisioning this since I walked into the office earlier. I couldn’t get the image out of my head.”

“Well, now you’ve got it in full technicolor detail right in front of you. What are you going to do about it?”

His eyes spark with heat, and my girly bits flush with a wetness that has nothing to do with the shower. He takes two steps, my back hitting the wall with a force I didn’t anticipate, the bulge in his pants sliding against my damp jeans which rub over my clit. A moan escapes as his head drops, sucking one nipple into his mouth right over the shirt, through my bra, but my pussy doesn’t seem to even notice or care for that matter. My hips buck involuntarily as he switches to the other, giving it the same attention.

“God, Mack. That feels good.” My eyes closed, I let the sensations wash over me, let him consume me, but I need more.

I go ghost, and his head darts up at the unexpected lack of physical form. In less than a blink, I’m naked in his arms. The grin slowly spreads across his lips as he ghosts himself, his clothes disappearing. He’s in front of me in all his chiseled glory, and I let my eyes play over his chest, down his abs, and my mouth waters (metaphorically since ghost girls don’t drool, remember?).

His cool lips touch mine, the first time I’ve been intimate with one of my guys while in our ghostly forms. I can feel it, the pressure of his mouth against mine. The slide of that monster dick against my belly. Our connection is still very much alive, even in this form. In a way, it’s more intense, like our souls are closer without our bodies to get in the way. I suppose the ether makes so much more sense now. It’s our souls wanting a little bonding time of their own. Awww. But sorry, souls, I like my real girl form and all the benefits that come along with it. Like orgasms. And alcohol.

“I want to try something,” he murmurs.

“Anything you want, as long as it ends with you shoving that huge dick inside me soon.”

He groans. “You’re not playing fair.”

“Neither are you. Sliding that dick all over me but never in the one place that needs it most.”

He narrows his eyes on mine, and the intensity there never fails to light an inner fire inside. My shy guy is fucking hot when he drops the tight grip he has on his control. His hips pull back, the tip of his monster dick finding my ghostly opening with unerring accuracy. There’s no more teasing, no slow lead up to our joining. Just one hard thrust, his cock stretching me, filling me, making me forget to breathe. Thank fuck I don’t need to in this form.

He’s balls deep when he stills, our bodies as close as either of our forms will allow, our eyes locked. “I fucking love you, echo,” he rasps.

“As I love you, sexy nerd.”

He kisses me, rough and fast. When he pulls back, his eyes are wild, and it sets off a deep satisfaction inside me. I’m the only one that’s ever driven him to the point of losing it completely.

“I need you. Now,” he demands.

I nod, incapable of responding as I see him fighting to maintain some sense of civility. But I don’t want that. I want to see what would happen if my sexy nerd went feral.

Gripping his neck, I force my body to be whole. As he senses the change, he does the same, and I’m hit with a flood of sensations. The warmth of skin touching skin. The water hitting our naked bodies. Fullness that’s bordering on pain from the sudden stretch of his dick in my very real cunt, but it feels so damn good I’m almost on the edge of a phenomenal orgasm and he hasn’t even moved.

He growls, his fingers digging into my ass. “Don’t you dare come yet.”

“I...it’s...but...” My brain can’t seem to piece together simple words.

“No!”

My eyes widen, a whimper escaping my lips, but my body obeys the command. I’m poised right on the precipice, teetering on the very edge but not allowed to fall. It’s the best kind of torture.

“Good girl.” He pulls back and thrusts in, hard.

The combination of his words and the harsh slide of his dick inside me almost pushes me over, but he stills again.

It’s my turn to growl, and I can feel the rumble of laughter he’s failing to contain beneath me.

A chuckle from the side has me whipping my head around. Cole’s leaning against the glass inside the entrance to the shower, naked, the tattoos on his

forearms flexing as his hand wraps around his dick and strokes himself.

“Enjoying the show?” I grumble.

“Immensely.” He smirks as he walks toward us, propping his body up against the tile beside me. “You’re fucking glorious when you’re naked and frustrated, love.”

“There’s something wrong with you,” I mutter as he pushes a stray piece of wet hair behind my ear.

“Yes. I’m not inside you.” My pussy throbs, causing Mack to groan. Cole shares a look with him. “But we can fix that right now, can’t we, Mack?”

“We sure can.” Mack pulls us both back, turning so that he’s taking the brunt of the spray and my back is now facing Cole.

Cole drops a kiss to my shoulder as he runs a finger down my spine, right in between my ass cheeks. “Remember what I said about the next time I’m in your ass, love?”

“Yes,” I whisper, his touch sending a shiver through me.

“Are you ready to feel fucking fantastic?”

“Oh my ghost, yes!”

“Good.” To my surprise, his hand dips, gathering moisture from the very spot where Mack’s dick is currently waiting patiently inside me. The thought has my body clenching involuntarily.

Mack moans. “Fuck, hurry it up, man. Her pussy keeps squeezing my dick too good.”

“You’ve got our resident genius spurting improper grammar. Quite the feat.”

“Now, if I could only get you spurting something other than smartass remarks, I’d be golden.”

His finger pushes inside my ass, and I tense up.

“Fucking hell,” Mack curses.

Cole adds a second finger, priming my ass for his cock. Without realizing it, my hips roll back against his hand, Mack’s dick sliding out before I push them forward again. I’m fucking myself against the two of them, getting perilously closer to that elusive edge.

Mack’s fingers clench on my ass, pulling me fully onto his cock. I almost cuss him out, but then I feel Cole stepping into me. The tip of his dick pushes against the tight ring of muscle.

“Relax, love,” Cole whispers in my ear.

Don’t these fuckers know that’s not easy when Quetzi’s involved? It’s

like trying to shove a bottle of wine next to a handle of vodka already taking up space in the slotted liquor store bag. It's already stretched to the limits and forcing would not end well. Tearing is bad. *Very* bad.

I exhale and push out slightly, trying to get my body to accept the fact that she's about to be impaled by two cocks. Cole slides in slowly, withdrawing slightly and then pushing in again until they're both balls deep inside me, his hands landing on my hips. I'm surrounded by their heat, their need, and their love and am so overwhelmed with feelings that I suck in a deep breath to hold in my emotions.

Mack pulls back, thrusting in slower this time, with Cole following his lead. They start to fuck me unhurriedly, and it isn't at all what I was expecting. I feel like I'm drowning in them. Every nerve ending is alive, every kiss and caress adding to this all-consuming flood of need. *Want. Fuck, I don't even know what to call it.*

"I'm close," Mack rasps, thrusting in harder this time, the rhythm faltering slightly as they both chase their own satisfaction.

"We need you to come for us, love."

"I..."

"Now," Macklin commands, and it's as if my body was just awaiting his permission.

Forget the pull and push. They're both so deep inside me, grinding me up and down in tandem against their cocks. Macklin kisses me just as Cole bites down on the curve of my neck and shoulder, and I explode, my body going taut.

"Oh fuck," Macklin moans.

Cole growls.

Then we're in the ether. Connected. Riding the high of our euphoria.

Cole kisses the bite mark there's no doubt he left while Macklin nuzzles into my hair. I sigh. What else is there to say?

"Well?" Cole murmurs against my skin.

"Well, what?"

"How do you feel?"

Cole was right before. I feel amazing, but I'll be damned if I'm going to let him gloat about it.

"Pretty decent, actually."

"Just decent?" he asks.

"Okay, fine, you were right."

“About?” he prompts, and I can feel his lips tilting into a grin against my shoulder.

“Now, see, this is why I don’t like providing you with affirmation of your rightness. You get all...smug and shit.”

“Just tell him you feel amazing. Let’s get this over with so we can get back and go cuddle in bed.”

Lifting my head, I kiss the shit out of my sexy nerd.

“Fine, but only because I really want some cuddles.” I glance over my shoulder, my eyes locking onto Cole’s icy blues. “You both made me feel fucking fantastic. Happy now?”

He drops a soft kiss on my lips. “Ecstatic.”

When I open my eyes, we’re back in the bathroom. The water is starting to cool now that we’ve been in here for-fucking-ever. *No pun intended.*

Cole steps back, his dick sliding out of me as he steps into the spray and rinses off quickly before moving out of the way. “I’ll grab us towels.”

Macklin slowly pulls out, and it draws another moan from my lips.

“God, that feels good.”

He smirks as he sets me on my feet, moving us back and quickly grabbing the bar of soap to wash over all of the important parts. “Cuddling first. Then round two.”

“I love you, sexy nerd,” I say, popping up on my toes to let my lips smack against his then quickly rinsing off. “You saved me from SeaWorld 4.0 just now.”

“Do I even want to know?” Cole asks, stepping toward me.

Macklin quickly rinses then shuts off the shower. “Dudes are messy.”

“That’s a huge oversimplification, sexy nerd.”

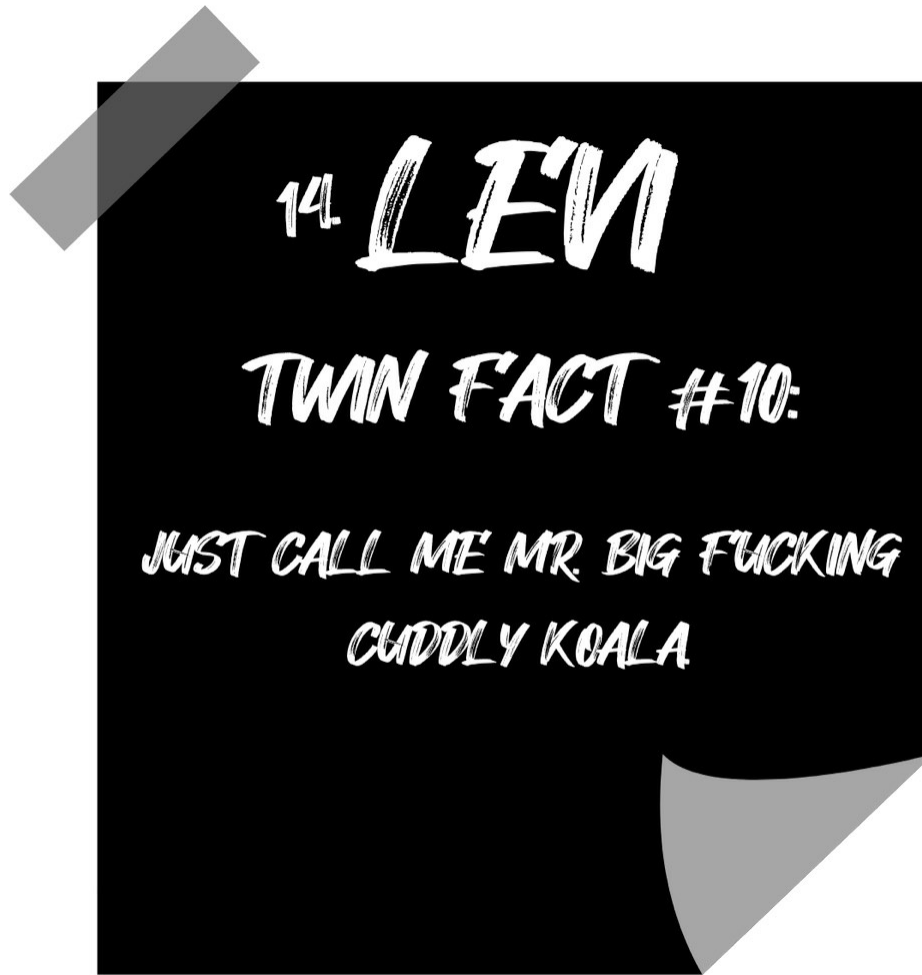
“Yet still accurate.”

I purse my lips, my head tilting as I consider it. Finally, I nod. “I concur with that statement.”

Cole just shakes his head as he holds a towel out for me. I step into him and am immediately wrapped up in the towel, inside his arms, as he drops a kiss on my forehead before he sweeps me off my feet. It’s remarkably similar to our second first time, and when I think of everything we’ve experienced since, how far we’ve *come*—man, the puns just keep *popping up*...oops, did it again—my heart about explodes with love for these men. My arms go around his neck, and as he starts to walk out of the shower, I glance over at Macklin. He wraps a towel around his waist as he follows us out, shooting me a

confident wink.

My heart is full to overflowing, that simple gesture shoring up my resolve. These are the moments I want more of. The simplicity of being together, seeing sides of my guys I never could have imagined. Macklin's commanding attention and Cole's willingness to have his sword near one of his brother's. This is what I'm fighting for. Normalcy. Love. The World. You know...the simple things.



We're cleaned up and are back in the study with drinks in hand as we try to wind down from the chaos of the day. Confronting negative energy for hours on end has left my soul feeling like it's drowning in darkness as thick and syrupy as the sludge that covered all of us. Coming off the separation from my twin, it's an added layer of yuck that I'll admit...I'm not handling well at all.

So...did you win? Thad asks through our twin connection.

I take another swallow of whiskey. ***What?***

Did you win the fight at the underground club?

What the hell do you think?

I don't know what to think. Part of me thinks you whooped some ass.

The other thinks maybe you pussied out.

I snort. ***K.O., bro. K.O. Dude was still out when I left the ring.***

He pretends to wipe tears from his eyes. *I'm so proud. My little brother has grown up.*

I punch his shoulder. Hard. *Little, my ass. We don't know which one of us was born first, dipshit.*

"Ow, fucker!" But he just chuckles as he rubs the ache away.

"Now there's some much needed normalcy," Knox snickers as he walks into the room, heading straight for the liquor cabinet in the corner to pour himself a drink.

"Today was something, am I right?"

"We haven't had cases like that in..." I rub my chin, thinking. "Yeah. No. We've never had cases like that. Even the demonic spirits we've encountered have been a breeze compared to what we saw today."

"It'll take a while to cleanse our souls, for sure."

"How about a game of *what if* to jumpstart the cleanse? A little frivolity to lighten the atmosphere?" Thad suggests.

For years, we've used this silly game to wind down after a long day or a particularly dark job. All the guys join in, though Cole grumbles the entire time.

"Knox...you in?"

Knox just raises an eyebrow as he heads for the chair next to the fireplace. "Hell, why not?"

"Why don't you start things off, bro?"

Thad purses his lips, no doubt trying to come up with something outrageous. "What if...men had vaginas and women had dicks?"

I choke on my drink, coughing. "Damn, bro. Give a guy a warning next time. Shit." When I can finally breathe again, I wince. "Us men would be fucked...literally. I can see it now. Fate wielding Mack's monster cock with manic glee." We all shudder.

Knox adds, "Don't forget, we'd be the ones suffering through childbirth and periods."

He uses his power, sending a surge of random emotions through my twin and me. Within seconds, we go from crying uncontrollably to irrationally angry to immensely irritated to incredibly needy.

When we finally stabilize again, we both groan.

"The fuck, man?" I rasp.

"A little taste of hormone fluctuations to give you an idea of what we'd be up against. We should count ourselves lucky that Fate doesn't get all crazy

hormonal like that.”

Thad shakes his head. “Yeah, I’m out.”

We break out in riotous laughter, and I smile. This is definitely what we needed, I realize. A little moment of lighthearted fun to brighten the darkened corners of our tainted souls. I try to come up with something to keep the mood going.

“What if Fate decided to use that paddle she threatened us with?”

“I’m here for it.” Thad raises his glass in the air before taking another swig.

Knox shakes his head. “No way is she turning my ass pink with that thing.”

“Right. You and your need for control.” My twin purses his lips. “I’m honestly surprised she’s into it.”

He smirks. “Oh, she’s into it, alright. Kinky fucker.” But I soften the sentiment with a grin.

“My turn.” Knox rests his glass over the arm of his chair. “What if we were never able to swap our souls back?”

“Then Levi would be permanently blessed with Mack’s monster cock, and that wouldn’t be fair.”

“Bro, I went one round with that thing. It’s definitely not for the faint of heart. Fuckers as thick as a Coke can. I think I’m damn lucky we got our own bodies back.”

“God, I’m just glad to be out of Knoxie boy’s body over there.”

“Imagine being stuck in Cole’s. It was like I could feel the stick up his ass.”

Laughter breaks out again.

Fuck, when was the last time I laughed this much?

Thad swirls the amber liquid, staring at it with a thoughtful look on his face. “What if we had never found Fate again?”

We’re silent for a minute, all processing the ramifications of that statement. Before her, we were merely coasting through life with this constant sense that something was missing. Now that she’s with us, I feel complete. Whole. Fulfilled in a way that I’ve never felt before. Maybe I felt this way before, but I doubt it. I wasn’t lying to Knox. My love for Fate goes deeper than it ever did. As shitty as it is, maybe this is exactly what we had to experience in order to become the people we needed to be in order to face Karma.

“We’d all be lesser versions of our current selves, and I, for one, am grateful we don’t ever have to face a reality without her in it,” Knox says quietly.

Thad and I murmur our agreement, the mood suddenly solemn.

“What if we can’t beat her?” Thad whispers, unusually serious, and I can only guess that his time in Torment is still playing heavily on his mind.

“We have to. We don’t have a choice.” Knox shakes his head.

I look at my twin. “You were there, bro. What are our chances of beating Karma?”

Thad looks thoughtful for a minute. “The lady is unhinged, and honestly getting a little desperate. On one hand, that could work in our favor. On the other...” His voice drops. “She’s unpredictable, and that’s what worries me. We don’t know what to expect next.”

“Fate is strong. Now that she has us at her back, that’s gotta be worth something, right?”

Knox shakes his head. “But Karma doesn’t play fair. We’ve learned that already.”

Yeah. By spending a hundred years without our memories or the love of our lives. I’m not sure I can endure that again. That any of us can.

“No more of that tonight. Doom in gloom is over for the day.”

“Agreed,” they say in unison.

“So...what if we win this thing?”

Knox grins. “We could travel the world with our girl, making new memories along the way.”

“We could take her to a fancy winery and buy her all the wine she could ever want.”

I think about it for a moment, letting our future play out in my head. “We could get her a puppy. Something we could all be responsible for. Something a real family would have.”

The thought of having a *real* family sends a warmth through my chest, and I’m almost startled to realize I want more than just some floofy dog jumping around us. Imagining Fate round with our child... I shut that thought down quick, or I’ll be forced to explain myself to the nosy empath, and I’m just not ready to share those deepest desires with anyone right now.

“She’d fucking love that.” Thad laughs. “But I’m not picking up the dog shit.”

Knox laughs. “Not it.”

I shake my head, yawning as I say, “You fuckers are lame. I’ll do it.”

Thad rolls his shoulders. “Damn, bro. Don’t start that shit. I’m exhausted!” He tips his head to both sides, and a series of cracks echoes through the room.

“You can say that again.”

“I feel like I could sleep for a year.” I yawn again, dramatically tipping over, resting my head on my twin’s shoulder.

Thad looks at his shoulder, then up at me. “What the hell, wankstain? You’re acting like a big fucking cuddly koala or some shit. Get a fucking pillow or something.”

“But this is better. My soul is still fucked after being on the receiving end of twice the usual blowback from being separated. I need the closeness. Don’t be a dick.” This is my twin. No need to be embarrassed. Knox doesn’t count since the fucker can feel everything I do anyways.

Thad grunts, but the look on his face is full of the sympathy welling up inside him at the thought of what I went through even though he was stuck in a shitty situation in Torment himself.

“Fine, but if you drool, I’m going to throat punch you.”

I chuckle and sit up. “I knew you were a softie at heart.”

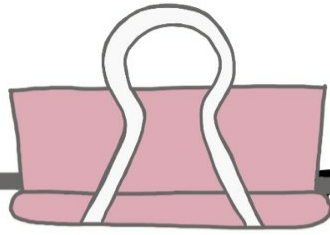
“Shut the fuck up, bro.”

Knox watches us with that knowing eye of his. No doubt feeling everything that’s currently passing between us. Relief. Exhaustion. A desperate need to be close. I’m not even ashamed to admit it. Hell, I might just cram into bed with Thad tonight whether he likes it or not. Our connection needs reassurance that we are truly back together again.

The silence once again washes over us, a sort of restless energy filling the room. A combination of the day's excitement and knowing what Fate, Mack, and Cole are most definitely getting up to, makes it hard to relax fully.

The night’s discussion still swirling through my mind, I send up a prayer to the Creator.

Please let us be ready for what lies ahead. I can’t lose her again.



15. Fate

Ghost Girl Fact #30:

We can judge a person's character simply based on the insults they use.

“I’m so glad you were able to get him back safely, little sister.” Destiny’s solemn face stares back at me from the Isle of Light. “I would’ve helped if I had known.”

Grimacing, I fight to suppress my need to fidget even though it wasn’t a reprimand. “I’m sorry. Everything happened so quickly, and I’m still not used to having so many people around to support me.”

She smiles gently. Her blonde hair is braided away from her face, making her pale blue eyes seem so damn sad, and for like the millionth time, I want to cunt punt Karma for all of the pain she’s caused.

“I know. Just remember, I’m always here for you. Anything you need, just ask.”

“You realize that if she’s gunning for me, you’re probably next on the list, right?” The fear that twists my belly at that thought has my fists

clenching by my sides. I might not fully remember my sister, but my soul does, and the thought of her suffering at the hands of that redheaded bitch is almost enough to make me lose my lunch.

“I have no doubts that the woman has become power hungry enough to want to control everything. It just saddens me that we’ve come to this after centuries of sharing our lives, of being family.” Her sigh is full of sorrow and regret. “But I also have no doubts that you’ll stop her. You’re so much stronger now.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“It’s true. You’ve always been the most powerful of us, but now...I’m not sure how to explain it. I can just sense that something has changed. Your power is flourishing, and it makes my heart so happy to see *you* happy.” Someone calls for her in the background. “I must go now, but don’t forget, I’m always here, little sister. I love you.”

“I love you too,” I murmur just before the connection cuts off.

For long minutes, I stare at the empty office from my seat behind my desk. So many thoughts are swirling through my brain, so many memories just out of reach. It’s incredibly frustrating. My fear of what’s to come causes my power to flare and my anger to shoot from simmer to boil in a mere second. I can’t let her hurt my sister, let alone me or my guys again. *Not. Gonna. Happen.*

“Argh!” I pick up the closest item on the desk and chuck it across the room to release the fury roiling inside me.

Reggie happens to walk in right at that moment, the apple sailing right through her body to explode against the wall in a shower of pulp and juice.

Her brow quirks as she turns to me. “What did that apple do to you?”

Exhaling shakily, I sit back in the chair and shrug. “It had the misfortune of being at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“At least it wasn’t your coffee. I had that mug specially ordered.”

“Never!” I gasp, picking up the mug that reads *Ghosting Ain’t Easy* and pet it gently. “My precious.”

She chuckles. “Macklin sent me in here to remind you about the book.”

“Shit! I got distracted when Destiny called.”

“Is she okay?”

“Yes. She wanted to check in. I sort of keep forgetting I have another sister who isn’t an evil cunt, one who actually worries about me.”

“She always was my favorite.”

It's so easy to forget that we've spent lifetimes together when I don't remember most of them. I need to be better about checking in and reestablishing these relationships. I'm not a lonely ghost girl anymore. "How are things with Liv?"

Pretty sure she'd be blushing if she wasn't a hazy shade of transparent. Her short hair is sticking out from under her backwards hat. She's in a jean skirt with tall black boots and a sleeveless white vintage band shirt. And she's fidgeting. A shit ton. I try to hide my smirk.

"She's good. We're good," she rushes out. Shuffling her feet, she wrings her hands in front of her. "We...uh...we're sort of..."

"You're dating?" I prompt, my voice laced with amusement. Does she think I miss the obvious attraction and desire whenever the two of them are around? *Pssh. As if.*

"Yes...is that...okay?"

My eyes widen as I stand, walking around the desk toward her. "Reg, why on earth would it not be okay?"

"I don't know. She's like a sister to you, and I'm your assistant. Aren't there like...ghostly rules against dating your boss's sister or something?"

Chuckling, I grasp Reggie's shoulders. "I'm happy that you both have each other. I couldn't imagine anyone better for Liv."

She throws her arms around me, the embrace filling me with warmth and love, stirring that familiarity that I wish could manifest into actual memories, but I'm still grateful that I at least have *something* tangible to hold on to.

"Thank you, Fate."

"Oh, stop it. You don't have to thank me. It's about damn time you were able to have a life outside of me and the guys. You've earned it."

"Just know it won't affect my duties."

"I never thought it would." My head tilts. "What are your duties, anyways?"

"I mean, I'm a jack of all trades, really. I organize things. Delegate things. Give the boys shit when they're being dicks. Oh, and make sure all of your favorites are stocked and on hand. Super important shit like that."

"God, what would I do without you?" I smile.

She nods seriously. "Right? Good thing you'll never have to find out."

"I suppose we should get the book to Macklin."

Lifting the nondescript black book, I can feel its hum of power. It's hard to believe that something so small and simple-looking holds the fates of

entire realms of spirits within its pages.

Touching Macklin's mark on my bicep, I send him what I hope is a *come to the office* message. At least, I'm pretty sure that's what I sent. Hell, for all I know it could've been a message telling him to run naked through the Gateway. Though I wouldn't be opposed to that, and am now secretly hoping that's exactly what it said.

A shift in the air tells me that he's arrived, and when I look over, he's sadly fully dressed in jeans and a green button down with the arms rolled up.

"Why do you look so sad to see me?"

"You're dressed," I respond, irrationally pouting.

"Uh...yes?"

"Would you be willing to streak through the Gateway if I asked you to?" I ask thoughtfully.

"Um. Well...that's a little random, even for you, echo. But..." He pauses, as if considering it. "I'd be willing to do just about anything you asked of me."

"Noted for future use." I nod, satisfied, though I'm already calculating the number of things on my growing mental to-do list. *Sigh. I need to start chipping away at that.* I hold out the book. "Here."

"Perfect timing," he says, taking the book and handling it like it's fragile. "Cole and I were just discussing this. He wants me to see if there's anything useful that could tip the tides for us. Now that we know what a portion of Karma's plan was, I think we should try to figure out how the book works. I feel like that's the key to this. Maybe we can take care of all of the negative souls in one shot."

"That would be amazing considering VIPS is being inundated with calls and emails requesting help. These poor people are suffering because my sister is an oozing twat face."

"Oooh. I love that one," Reggie says. "Can I steal it?"

"What's mine is yours. I'm going to head to Asher's to check in with her and Nate, if he's there. See if either of them have any ideas as well."

"Does...uh...Cole know about this?" Macklin pushes his glasses up his nose, a slight blush tinting his cheeks.

"If I said he doesn't, would you tattle on me, sexy nerd?"

He shakes his head vehemently. "No. I'd just go with you myself. No one should go anywhere alone right now."

"Awww. You are the sweetest." I give him a quick kiss on the cheek.

“But Cole and Knox are actually coming with me. The twins will be here with you. Put them to work so they don’t get in trouble, yeah?”

“Of course.” His arm snakes out, grabbing me around my waist and pulling me in for a hot kiss that has my entire body lighting up brighter than the Vegas strip. It’s over just as quickly as it started, and I’m left dazed and wanting. “Be good and don’t give the guys too much trouble, okay?”

My eyes open, and I struggle to comprehend what he’s saying.

“Don’t worry, Mack. We’ll keep her in line,” Knox says, walking into the room with Cole who just snorts.

My eyes narrow. “What’s so funny?”

“The idea of us keeping you in line.”

“I am an *angel*.” It’s my turn to snort. “Yeah, no, I can’t even say that with a straight face.”

Cole just shakes his head. “Macklin, if you find anything, send us a message. Right now the book is our best shot at getting the upper hand.”

Macklin nods, turning the book over in his hands when suddenly his head flies up. “Oh! Fate! Before you go, you need to open this for me.”

My nose scrunches up as I mutter, “Fucking blood.”

Even though I don’t find it funny, the guys chuckle as I reach for the book then flip it over, looking for one of those pokey little divots. There isn’t one.

“How the hell am I supposed to bleed on this thing?”

“See the lock? There’s a small metal piece that pulls out from the bottom.”

“Of course there is.”

Right under the square piece of metal is a little flap. Pulling it out, sure enough, there’s the bloodsucking divot. I flinch when it pricks the skin, pulling a single drop of blood inside. The lock opens, and the hum of power increases.

“You sure you can handle this thing, Mack?” I ask, handing it over.

He slowly opens the cover. “Whoa! This book is putting out some megawatt power.”

“Exactly. You good?”

He nods, already in full research mode as he carries it over to the desk.

“Think he’ll be okay?”

“He’ll be fine, little ghost. Come on.” Knox grabs one hand while Cole grabs the other. “Let’s get to Asher’s so we can get back and spend the rest of

the evening relaxing.”

“That better be code for *giving Fate lots of orgasms.*”

In a blink, we’re thrust through the vortex, landing in Asher’s entryway. The sound of shouting has us all on alert.

We rush into the living room and pause. Nate is currently staring down a very angry Sutton as Asher stands between the two of them, her arms outstretched to keep them apart.

“What the hell is going on here?” Cole barks.

“Fate! Thank god you’re here!” Asher cries, dropping her arms.

“What happened?” I ask.

“I don’t know!” Asher turns angry eyes on her father. “Nate popped in unexpectedly, and the second the two of them saw each other, they started growling like feral beasts.”

“Nate?” I prompt, like a mother chastising her children.

“This is another of Karma’s top generals, and I want to know what the fuck he’s doing here with my daughter.” His eyes are black, and shadows seem to be peeking out from around him.

My eyes go round, and I share a look with Cole and Knox before turning to my newest bestie. Asher’s eyes are narrowed on the handsome stranger. Her surprise and hurt are surpassed only by her anger.

“You’re one of that psycho lady’s henchmen?” she shouts. Her eyes have gone full black with hints of violet around the edges.

“No...I—”

“So, what? You’ve been spying on me this whole time?” she growls.

“Asher, it’s not like that!”

Cole and Knox suddenly have him surrounded. Taken by surprise, they easily manage to subdue him, shoving him to his knees.

Walking up to him, his bright blue eyes narrow on my face.

“Who are you working for? I suggest you cooperate, or I’ll let the asshole behind you play with that large blade of his.”

“I’m not working for anyone. I’m here to protect her!”

“From who?” Nate demands.

“Anyone who would be a threat.”

“You didn’t seem all that concerned when the guys and I appeared in her shop.”

“Why would I?”

“So you know who I am?” I ask.

“Yes, you’re the Guardian. Now that you’re back, we’ve finally got a chance at beating that cum dumpster.”

Straightening, I smile. “I like this guy.”

“Still doesn’t explain why he was getting cozy with my daughter if he’s supposed to be protecting her, *or* who assigned him in the first place.”

“Mirna did before she disappeared. I owed her one, so I agreed to help out until she returned. Except she never did.”

“All this time, Sutton. I thought we were friends when really you were just here to do a job.” Her voice wavers slightly, her glossy eyes returning to their normal bright blue as she looks at the man she once trusted.

His eyes turn to Asher, pleading. “It may have started out as a favor to a friend, but it became so much more than that as I watched you grow up.”

His sincerity bleeds through the worry and panic building beneath his otherwise calm facade.

“That sounded super creepy, dude,” I mock whisper. Knox chuckles, and Cole does that weird half grin he’s perfected.

“Well, you can consider your obligation fulfilled. I don’t need your protection anymore.” Asher walks over to her father.

“Asher, please.”

Turning her sad, beseeching eyes toward me, she asks, “Can you get him out of here?”

Nate wraps an arm around her shoulders. “He might have information that could help you.”

I share a look with Cole and Knox, who nod in unison.

“Looks like you’re coming with us, dude.”

His shoulder slump, his resigned eyes never leaving Asher as he slowly gets to his feet. I can feel his regret, his pain, and his longing battering against my senses. “I’ll answer any questions I can, but it’s been years since I’ve been back. I don’t know how relevant it’ll be.”

“Guess we’ll find out, won’t we, lover boy?” Knox goads.

Sutton’s eyes flash at Knox, but his face is otherwise stoic.

Ahh. I like a good challenge and can honestly admire this guy’s spunk. No, not *that* kind of spunk. I’ve got enough of that, thank you very much. I mean his grit and determination and how I’m going to enjoy trying to break it.

Turning to Nate and Asher, I see the pretty blonde resting her head on her father’s shoulder, with Nate all puffed up like a peacock as his daughter lets

him comfort her.

Yeah, they'll be fine.

“You two, stay on alert and be ready. Something tells me Karma’s final move is going to be made soon, and we need to be ready.”

Nate nods. “Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere until this is all over. If you need us, just call.”

“Keep her safe, Death,” Sutton warns.

Nate’s eyes go black, but before he can respond, Asher’s black and violet eyes narrow, a black fog seeping from fingers as she steps toward him. “You don’t get to play the protective asshole anymore, Sutton. I’m a big girl now and no longer need you to pretend to be the hero. Don’t show your face back here again, do you understand me?”

“You may be all grown up, dove, but I’ll never stop watching over you.”

Asher steps forward, her hand rising with a smoking black ball of...well...death. Like father, like daughter.

Note to self: Don't piss off Asher.

“Looks like that’s our cue. We’ll be in touch.” I wrap my hand around Sutton’s wrist and pull him through the vortex with the guys on my heels.



16. MACKLIN

SEXY NERD FACT #10:

HOW CAN WE BE SO INCREDIBLY
SMART YET SO DAMN STUPID?

The power contained between the pages of the book in front of me is unparalleled. For the first time, I can sense just how catastrophic this could be if it fell into the wrong hands. It's almost as if it's vibrating with the intensity of it all. I'm not afraid to admit that I'm slightly intimidated by an inanimate object.

The first page has some sort of inscription that I will need to translate, but first, I flip through the beginning pages, seeing name after name scrawled across the aged parchment. It's a ledger of every single soul that has ever passed through judgment. Their name is followed by the realm to which they were ultimately assigned. With a seemingly even balance between the Isle of Light and the Land of Torment, I take in the physical representation of Fate's balance and what this means to us. To the world.

Though the book is thin, once open, the pages seem never ending. My

fingers run along the textured paper until I notice a slight bulge about halfway through the book. Flipping to the middle, I find a folded piece of paper. It's old and must have been read a million times if the wear along the edges is any indication. Opening it gently, I find words that seem to be Latin or some other ancient language, written in handwriting that I'm fairly sure is my own. *Ahhh, an ancient dialect of Gaelic.* I skim through my endless well of knowledge and find the language actually comes pretty easily.

"From a well of love, the gift of life is born. To have, to hold, forever sworn. To cherish and protect, forevermore. A precious offering for you to adore."

The lettering is slightly raised as my fingertips skim over the text. A memory slips along the edge of my consciousness, almost in reach, but it dodges every attempt I make to latch onto it. I close my eyes, focusing my mind on the note that I can sense is extremely important. Suddenly, the room slowly begins to fade away, and I'm no longer sitting in the office behind Fate's desk. I'm rushing to find my brothers, to tell them something important.

The paper in my hand holds the answer to what we've been searching for, and I can't wait to tell them.

I rush through the kitchen door and skid to a halt.

"Guys!"

My sudden shout has all of their heads whipping up to look at me.

"I've got it!"

"Got what, Mack?" Cole asks, leaning back against the counter and crossing his arms over his chest. His black hair is long, pulled back with a leather band.

"Remember the spell I've been searching high and low for? The one referenced in that book in the study?"

"Yeah, the one you claim will solve all our problems," Thad mutters skeptically.

"Yes. That one, you naysayer." I roll my eyes. "Well...I found it!" I wave the paper in the air.

The guys straighten.

"What does this mean?" Levi asks as he stands from his chair at the table.

"It means we can finally give Fate what she's always wanted."

The room is silent as they all consider how this will change the very

fabric of our lives.

“We’ve talked about this,” Knox begins, turning on the bench at the table so he’s facing me. “We love that woman, and I, for one, will do anything to break her out of the melancholy she’s immersed herself in.”

“Count me in,” Levi adds with a nod.

Thad puts his hands on his hips. “Ah, shit. If the fuddy duddy’s in, then so am I.”

All of our eyes turn to Cole. He ultimately has the final say.

“You know this means everything will change? It won’t just be about us anymore, and considering the fact that this has never actually been attempted in any of the realms, we have no way of knowing what the consequences would be.”

I nod. “I’m willing to accept those risks.”

He runs his hand over his face. “I never thought I’d say this, but I am too.”

The guys hoot and holler.

“Alright, alright. Mack, do you know how it works?”

“According to what I’ve read, we simply say the spell out loud. The spell will increase our desires, directing them toward the one we love so it can literally work its magic, then...well, I don’t think I need to explain to you what needs to happen next.”

“Now, how do we present this to her? It has to be done delicately.”

“We should plan something special. Surprise her.” Levi smiles at the same time Knox cringes.

“She hasn’t exactly been big on surprises lately, brother.”

“She’ll love this one. What about a night at the cave?” I suggest.

“She does love that place,” Levi says, nudging his brother. “Remember when we stole her away for the weekend a year or so ago?”

“Oh hell. Best sex of my unlife those few days.”

“We didn’t need to know that,” Knox mutters.

“Then we’re agreed? We plan something special and keep it a secret?” Cole asks the group.

We respond in unison. “Agreed.”

The scenes begin to shift rapidly after that. Secret meetings to get the cave ready. Whispers when she’s not paying attention. Notes passed between each other so she doesn’t catch on. Me, writing the note that would send her to find us and leaving it on the desk in the office. The night in the cave. Her

dropping the book. Me picking it up and being surprised to find it open. Shoving the note inside the book for safekeeping.

Which is exactly where it sat for one hundred years. Until now.

“Holy shit!”

The paper in my hand trembles slightly as my hand shakes from the sheer realization at what we had planned to do that night. My eyes skim over the words, pondering their implications. I apparently went to great lengths to find this for Fate, or at least *old* Fate. But our Fate isn't the same woman she was back then. Is this something she would want now? I need to talk to my brothers so we can find the perfect time to do this right.

“What's the matter, Macklin?”

My head whips up. Fate is standing in front of the desk, and I didn't even hear her come in. Blushing profusely, I avoid eye contact, nervously pushing the piece of paper into my pocket while praying it doesn't crumble to dust in the process.

“N-nothing. Just amazed at how many names are listed in this book. That's all.”

“Mmm. Well, I came to get the book actually. I want to try something.”

“I thought you were going to check in with Nate and Asher?”

“Right. Well, that's what I meant.” She looks over her shoulder, then back at me. “He might be able to help me...figure it all out, ya know?”

“Oh, okay. I guess I can study it later.”

With my mind focused on the note in my pocket, I'm not sure I'd be able to give the book any attention anyways. I quickly pick it up and hand it to her, her red nails skimming across my skin, leaving behind an odd tingle. Is my guilty conscience already kicking in because I'm keeping a secret?

“Why thank you, darling.”

My head cocks to the side at the endearment, but before I can question her, she blows me a kiss and disappears.

“This whole day just keeps getting weirder and weirder.”

The twins walk in, arguing. That's about the only thing that isn't strange.

“Mack, you can settle this for us...” Thad begins.

“I'm not getting into the middle of another debate between the two of you. The last time I did, I nearly got a broken jaw for my efforts.”

“That was an accident.”

“And a very important question which still remains unanswered.”

I snort. “Dude, whose ass cheeks are more symmetrical is not a very

important question and definitely something no brother should ever be subjected to.”

“I mean, it kind of is.”

“No, Thad. It’s really not, and I doubt this one is either.”

“Oh, come on,” Levi begs. “Humor us?”

I study the twins, knowing I’m going to regret this. “Fine. What is it this time?”

“Which one of us is hotter?”

My eyebrows shoot up. “How in the hell am I supposed to know? I’m not into dudes.”

“What the dipshit meant to say is, which one of us is hotter as a chick?”

“Yeah, no, I’m not touching that one either.”

“I rocked heels better, that’s for damn sure,” Thad boasts proudly.

“I still can’t figure out how you pulled that off.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “I bet he had been practicing.”

“Did not.”

“Did too. That’s why you asked me all of those weird questions about gravity and balance.”

“Whatever. I totally didn’t, but you can believe what you want.”

Shaking my head, my hand brushes against the note crumpled in my pocket.

“Guys, I need to tell you something.”

Levi straightens. “What is it, Mack?”

“Remember how it was mentioned that we had something special planned for Fate that night in the cave?”

“Yeah. Some sort of surprise or some shit.” Thad leans against the sofa.

“I figured out what the surprise was.” I pull the crumbled parchment out of my pocket.

“A piece of paper?”

Levi glares at his brother. “No, dipshit. I’m guessing it’s what’s on the paper. Right, Mack?”

“Yes. It’s a spell.” I explain the vision I had and what the spell is supposed to do.

They both stare at me wide-eyed.

“Are you going to tell Fate?”

“We have to. She’d want to know.”

“And if she wants to go through with it?” Thad asks.

“Well, I—”

Before I can finish, we hear the others in the main chamber.

“Don’t say a word until we can talk to Cole and Knox,” Thad warns as we walk out of the office, and I find myself nodding in agreement.

When I see Fate, my head tilts in confusion. “That was fast!”

Her eyes widen slightly. “Miss me, sexy nerd?”

“Always, echo. Always.”

“What the fuck is he doing here?” Levi asks, pointing at the man standing with them.

Knox nudges him. “Turns out Sutton, here, isn’t exactly who he said he was.”

Thad cracks his knuckles. “Oh, do tell.”

Fate looks at me, her hand dropping from Sutton’s wrist. “He’s another one of Karma’s generals that went AWOL.”

“And he just so happened to end up in the same town as Asher?” I ask skeptically.

“He’s been watching over her as a favor to her mother,” Cole responds.

Levi crosses his arms over his chest. “Again, what the fuck is he doing *here?*”

Knox side eyes Sutton. “We’re going to ask him some questions. See if he can give us any information that might help us fight Karma.”

“Oooh. Interrogation. This should be fun.” Thad begins bouncing from one foot to the next, tilting his head to each side to crack his neck.

“For now, we’re going to play nice, boys. No torture.”

The twins groan at Fate’s words.

“Should we bring him into the office?”

“Good idea, sexy nerd. Lead the way.”

We head toward the office and get settled, with Sutton placed in the middle as he sits in Fate’s desk chair, while Knox gets drinks for the rest of us.

Cole starts the questioning.

“When was the last time you were in Torment?”

“Twenty something years ago. It was only supposed to be a short assignment. A few days at most while Mirna confronted Karma. When she didn’t return, I couldn’t leave Asher without protection. I was duty bound to stay close and watch over her.”

Cole glances at Knox who nods in confirmation.

“And your friendship now... Is that solely out of duty?” Fate asks.

“It’s...complicated.”

“Doesn’t seem so complicated to me. You see, when a boy likes a girl—”

Cole groans.

Knox chuckles.

The twins snicker.

I push my glasses up my nose as Cole crosses his arms over his chest and continues the interrogation. “Do you still have any contact with any of Karma’s other defected commanders?”

“We used to check in regularly, but communication has become more and more infrequent over the years. The last time I heard from anyone was at least two years ago.”

“Did Karma have any idea Fate might not be dead?”

“It was never talked about, though I heard rumblings from some of her closest confidants that she had her suspicions but could never prove it. About ten years ago, rumor was that she had become increasingly agitated and more paranoid than usual. She killed off some of her closest guards and went through a massive culling.”

“Why?” I ask.

“My guess is that she suspected the Guardian was preparing to return and wanted to punish those responsible for failing the first time around.”

The room is silent for a moment as we process exactly what he’s saying.

“Did you have anything to do with my death one hundred years ago?” Fate asks softly.

The guys all tense, the realization that we could be standing in front of someone who set the plan into motion hitting us like a punch to the gut.

“No. Mirna and I didn’t land in Torment until at least a decade after that.”

“Did she ever say anything about what her next moves would be with Fate out of the way?” Cole asks.

“She never mentioned Fate by name, but all of her upper generals were told to constantly be on the lookout for word of the book. She wanted to get her hands on that at any cost.”

“Well, it’s a good thing she never found it.” Fate looks at me. “How’s it coming with the book, Mack? Did you find anything?”

My brow furrows. “I didn’t have a chance. You came and picked it up right before you brought Sutton back, remember?”

“No, I didn’t. I was with Cole and Knox the whole time while we tried to

figure out the clusterfuck with Sutton.”

“But you did. You showed up and...” My eyes widen as the details start to paint a picture I really don’t like.

The red nails. The nervous look over her shoulder. That fucking tingle.
Darling.

“Mack, you’re scaring me.”

My eyes dart to Cole, then Knox, then the twins, before finally landing on Fate’s worried gray eyes.

We are so fucked!



17. COLE

ASSHOLE FACT #8:

WE DONT TAKE OUR PINKY
SWEARS LIGHTLY.

“Mack?” There’s a sinking feeling in my gut. I can’t explain why, but I know shit is about to hit the fan. Blood rushes through my veins, my adrenaline pumping as my instinct to protect gets thrust into high gear.

“I was sitting in the office when Fate showed up, asking for the book. Said she wanted to try something while she had Nate’s help. I was distracted and didn’t notice...”

“Didn’t notice *what*, Mack?” I demand, forcing back the growl that wants to rise from my chest.

He pushes his glasses up his nose, his eyes darting between all of ours.

Fate walks up to him, her finger running over his forehead, down his nose. The touch relaxes him slightly. “Mack? Who took the book?”

He swallows roughly, his skin paling. “It had to be her.”

“You just handed the book over to Karma?” Thad shouts.

“I didn’t *know* it was Karma. She was disguised as Fate, and I...well...I missed the signs.”

“You couldn’t tell them apart?” Levi snaps.

“Everyone calm down.” The command is clear in my tone as my power flows through the room. “What were you doing when she walked in, Mack?”

“I had just opened the book and was sifting through the pages. I...well..” He shoots a nervous glance around the room, and I pick up a chaotic jumble of thoughts all centered around a spell. He obviously doesn’t want to share with the group, but we will be discussing it later, whether he likes it or not. “Like I said, I was distracted, and I...”

Fate’s forehead meets Mack’s chest as she wraps her arms around him. “It’s not your fault, Mack.”

“It is. I should’ve known better. I...I might have doomed us all.”

“Wait. How the fuck did she get in the Gateway without anyone knowing?” Knox asks as he begins to pace.

“Yeah, did the Gateway just let her walk in?” Thad mutters.

I look at Fate. “Can you talk to the Gateway? Ask her how this could happen?”

Fate closes her eyes, and for a brief moment, nothing happens. The entire room waits in silence. Then she smashes her face back and forth into Mack’s shirt. “Pretty sure *she*’s hanging her metaphorical head now too because she somehow missed it just like Mack did. Whatever Karma used to impersonate me, it’s damn good.”

“So what do we do now?” I ask.

That question brings the entire room back to silence. I’m the leader. The one that is used to knowing our next steps even in the most dire of circumstances. But in this instance, I’m at a complete and total loss. I hadn’t anticipated this potential outcome. Never saw this coming. And now everyone I care about...the entire world...is in jeopardy. My fists clench at my sides as my soul demands that we do something. *Anything*. The helplessness that floods through me threatens to overwhelm me completely.

Sutton breaks the silence, his expression grim. “If she’s got the book, you need to gather everyone you know. Shit’s about to get real.”

I nod. Begrudgingly grateful for some direction while my own mind is a jumbled mix of uncertainty. “Do you have any contacts you could attempt to reach out to that may be willing to stand with us against Karma?”

His serious eyes meet mine. “I can try, but like I said, it’s been a while

since anyone has made contact. I don't know if any of them are still alive."

"Try. We're going to need all the help we can get. Knox, give him one of our cell phones."

Sutton opens his mouth, but I cut him off. "Don't worry about Asher. We'll get a hold of Nate and have him bring her here."

He gives a grateful nod as Knox hands over his phone and walks over to a quiet corner of the room, dialing as he goes.

"Levi, call Nate. Tell him to pack their bags and prepare to stay here until it's safe. Thad, go find Reggie and Liv. We'll need their help preparing the Gateway and reaching out to any contacts that we might not be aware of that could help us."

"You got it," they reply in unison, then both head off to handle their assigned tasks.

Knox meets my eye, casting a glance over at Macklin whose eyes are closed as he holds Fate in a tight embrace. When Knox looks back at me, strain clear as day on his face, I know that this might be the last moment we have together before we head to the front lines of a war we never wanted to be a part of. There's this restlessness that flares inside me. It's unfamiliar, unwelcome, and is desperately seeking an outlet.

Without thought, I'm walking over to Fate and Mack. I try to calm the riot of emotions inside me, the fear and anger, anxiety about what comes next, and the healthy dose of helplessness that's threatening my usually stoic demeanor.

Now is not the time, but considering the dire circumstances we'll soon be facing, I'm going to make a call that has nothing to do with responsibility and everything to do with what I want. And what I want is *her*. Plain and simple. Want her in my arms, calming this storm inside me, soaking up our last bit of calm before we sprint into the chaos. There's this...force, guiding me to claim her. Make her mine. Solidify our love.

Her head comes up when I stop beside them, her gorgeous grays meeting mine. I tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear, letting my fingers trace over her face. She turns in Mack's arms, and I use the opening to pull her to me. Her hands land against my chest, and my mouth drops to hers, my hand holding her in place while I take this for myself.

I don't ask. I just transport us straight into Fate's room, and I can sense Knox and Mack following right behind us. I touch the mark on my wrist, sending a quick message to Thad and Levi, telling them where they'll find us.

“What are we doing, Cole?” Fate asks, a resigned look in her eyes that I plan on replacing as soon as possible.

I share a look with Knox, and he nods. He’s so much better at this shit than I am, and I’m going to let go of my precious control for once and let him take the lead. With a brief kiss on her lips, I step back.

“Strip, little ghost.”

Her beautiful gray eyes widen, that pouty bottom lip dropping open at the shock of the command.

“Fate, don’t make me tell you again. There will be consequences.”

Knox slowly starts to roll his cuffs down then begins to unbutton his shirt. He raises a brow.

“I don’t understand...” she begins.

“We’re all getting ready to face possibly the greatest threat of our lives, love. We’ve had so little control over anything these last hundred years, but this...this is ours to take. Can’t you feel it?”

She nods as her wide eyes meet mine, then dart to Knox and over to Macklin, who honestly looks just as surprised as Fate, but he recovers quickly. Stepping toward her, he reaches for her black tank top and lifts it over her head. He tosses it aside then reaches for the buttons on her jeans.

“Step out of your heels, echo,” he murmurs.

Our gazes lock as Mack helps her pull one leg out, then the other. She’s standing in nothing but a pair of lacy black panties and black bra with her dark hair spilling over her shoulder in big waves. For a second, I skim my eyes over her from head to toe. She’s all long lean legs and curvy hips with breasts that overflow my hands. The absolute stunning beauty that’s in front of me renders me speechless. At least until she opens that smartass mouth of hers.

“Take a picture. It’ll last longer.” She winks.

There it is. That spark that I was waiting for.

I smirk. “Knox, it appears our girl needs a reminder who’s in charge here.”

Seeing our girl light up is something I need more of right now. Watching as she gives us free rein to do as we wish, knowing that we would never abuse that power, is a heady thing. In this, I know Knox will make sure we stay within the boundaries, making sure we’re all enjoying ourselves. And hell, who am I kidding? I get off on watching the others bring our girl to that edge, only letting her fall over when they’re good and ready.

“Happy to oblige, mate.” He walks over to Fate, his shirt hanging open and his jeans unbuttoned. His hand wraps around the back of her neck, fisting in her hair. He tugs her head back, forcing her to look up at him. “You know the rules, right, little ghost?”

She bites her bottom lip but manages a small bob of her head. His thumb brushes against the soft skin there, pulling it free.

“Words, Fate.”

“Yes, sir.”

His mouth crashes to hers. He takes full control, consuming her, and she lets him. He breaks the kiss, trailing his lips along her throat as he angles her face toward me.

“Our alpha looks like he needs you, don’t you agree?”

“Yes, sir,” she whispers.

With one hand, I pull my t-shirt over my head and watch her hungry gaze travel over my chest, following my hands as they reach for my belt. In seconds, I’m stepping out of my jeans, and her eyes zero in on the hand that’s now stroking my cock.

“Are you going to be a good girl? Use that wicked mouth of yours to take care of him?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Kneel, little ghost.”

I study her face, watching lust cloud her eyes as she gets to her knees. She looks so damn gorgeous, with this sort of devilish innocence that has my dick throbbing. In a couple of steps, I’m towering over her as she peers up at me from beneath her long dark lashes. I’m eager to have those pouty lips wrapped around my cock, though the need to be inside her damn near has my soul keening.

“Fuck, love. You look sexy as hell right now.”

“She’s a fucking wet dream come to life,” Knox murmurs.

“I know something else that’s wet,” she purrs.

Knox and I share a look. “Maybe you need to put that smart mouth to good use, mate.”

Reaching out, I tap underneath her chin with one hand, stroking my cock with the other. “Open up, love.”

Her lips part, her tongue sneaking out to lap up the bead of precum on the tip.

“No time for teasing, little ghost. Cole needs his dick sucked asap.”

“Yes, sir.”

Without further instructions, she leans forward, the warmth of her mouth enveloping me as she takes me deep. No warm up, no pretense, just my dick all the way to the back of her throat. Her mouth retreats, sucking like my dick is one of those alcoholic ice pops she’s so obsessed with, her cheeks hollowing out, as my head falls back, my hands tangling in her hair, guiding her movements. She lets me set the pace, lets me fuck her mouth as hard and as fast as I need it, her eyes watering as she gags slightly, but when I try to pull back, her delicate hands grasp my ass and pull me in deeper. She swallows, and I damn near explode right then, but I pull back roughly. With her mouth so pink and swollen, it takes every bit of self-control I have not to shove my dick right back between those goddamn lips of hers. But I want something more.

When I look over, Macklin and Knox are standing beside us, naked, stroking themselves as they watch us.

“Mack, up on the bed,” Knox commands. How he knows what I’m thinking, I have no idea, but I’m fucking grateful because I’m damn near incapable of speech at the moment.

Mack swallows but quickly does as he’s told, laying back against the pillows along the headboard, running his hands up and down that fucking monster of his.

I study Fate’s face as she watches us all from her position on the floor. Her pupils are blown wide, and her chest is rising and falling with rapid breaths as the smell of her arousal floods the space between us.

Knox offers his hand, helping her off the floor. “Go to him.”

She doesn’t hesitate. She walks over and climbs onto the bed, crawling to Mack on her hands and knees. Her lace-covered ass taunts me as it sways with her movement. Inside, I’m a riot of need and want, lust and love, but on the outside, I’m as steady as ever as I make my way over to them.

“Echo,” Mack begs, his voice raspy with desire.

“Better take care of your man, little ghost.”

Before he’s even finished talking, her lips wrap around the head of his cock.

“Fuck!” Mack moans.

Positioning myself behind her, I let my fingers run down the crack of her ass, over her pussy that’s soaking wet through the lace. Brushing back and forth over her clit, I play with her over her panties until her hips are bucking

back, begging for more, while she swallows Mack down. I take mercy on her, pushing her panties aside and plunging two fingers inside her. She moans around him and his hands grab her face, holding her down on his cock until she pulls back, gasping for breath. But that doesn't stop her from diving back onto him, letting him take control, letting him fuck her face with a force that has my dick weeping with need. I pump my fingers in and out, following their rhythm until I can't wait any longer.

The lace shreds as I grab a handful and pull. She gasps around Mack but never stops. I let my dick slide along her wet lips, lining myself up and thrusting in, balls deep. Her pussy squeezes around my dick, an orgasm shooting through her as she moans. Mack doesn't let up, bucking his hips to send his dick deeper into her throat than I thought possible as I pull back, pumping into her once, twice, but I don't want this to end just yet. It's heaven.

"Fuck! I need to be inside her."

I pull out, smacking her ass as Mack's hands grip her hips. In one fluid motion, he lifts her up so she's straddling him and pulls her down onto his dick.

"Echo," Mack groans.

"Fuck, Mack." Her breath hitches as her hips start to move, her hands grabbing her breasts.

He squeezes her hips, moving her body faster on his cock.

"Holy shit!"

I look over my shoulder and see Levi and Thad walking through the door, closing it behind them.

Levi grins. "Sorry we're late."

Fate screams in pleasure, her head thrown back as Mack's hips pump into her from below.

"Fuccckkk!" He groans his release, slowly coming to a stop as she falls forward onto his chest.

"If you boys are joining, best hurry it up, yeah?" Knox says, leaning down and lifting Fate off Macklin.

Her legs instinctively wrap around his waist, her arms thrown over his shoulders, as his hand lines up his dick and pushes inside.

She gasps.

"Do you like my dick inside you, little ghost, while you're filled with Mack's cum?" Knox rasps.

“Oh fuck!” she whimpers. “Knox, I can’t...”

“You can and you will. Take it. Take it all, Fate.”

He’s pounding into her while they stand beside the bed, his arms flexing. The slapping of skin on skin echoes through the otherwise quiet room.

“Goddamn, that should not be so fucking hot,” Thad mutters, rubbing his dick.

“Gotta appreciate that man’s stamina.” Levi shakes his head in amazement. “I swear, I’ve never felt this...worked up before. It feels like if I’m not inside her soon, I’m going to shoot my load in my jeans.”

A mirroring thought plays through my head as he says it, my power back in full effect after the swap. I’m both relieved and a little peeved it had to choose now to kick back in.

There are murmurs of agreement as we watch Knox fuck her, his grip on her ass bouncing her up and down his cock.

“Fuck, I’m close.”

“Knox!”

He flings his head back with a roar, and Fate cries out, her body going taut as he grinds into her, milking her for every fucking drop.

He hasn’t even stopped moving when he turns to us. “Who’s next?”

I’m damn near ready to burst, but I’ll wait patiently for my turn, giving the twins a nod when they both look at me. There’s something about seeing my brothers satisfy our woman that is settling something inside me. Soothing me while at the same time stoking my own need to damn near epic levels. At least we get this one chance to be together, knowing that if the world falls apart, we’ll have this moment right here. One last memory to fall back on. And it’s one helluva memory.

Levi takes Fate from Knox’s arms, and when her eyes open, the smile that spreads across her face is a mix of satisfied and sleepy, but the desire is like a livewire sparking behind those beautiful grays.

“You came.”

“Not yet, woman, but we will,” Thad whispers against her ear as he steps up against her back.

She chuckles, the sound warming my soul. “Well, let’s get to it, then, shall we?”

“You got it, sweets,” Levi murmurs against her lips, falling back onto the bed and taking her with him.

She laughs when he nuzzles into the side of her neck while his hips pull

back, the tip of his dick finding her opening before he drives himself in.

“Fuck, Levi.”

“You feel so damn good, sweets.”

“Hell, wait for me, you two.” Thad climbs up onto the bed, straddling his brother’s head as he lifts Fate’s chin. “Need that mouth, babe.”

“I need a better view,” Levi mutters, but Fate giggles as she wraps her mouth around Thad’s dick.

“Why are you over here observing?” Knox asks, his eyes trailing over the three on the bed. “Please tell me this has nothing to do with the aversion to sword crossing thing.”

I chuckle. “No. I’m just taking in the moment.”

He nods in understanding as Macklin walks up to us. “Something about this feels...more intense than usual. Am I right? Don’t you feel it?”

“I do. Maybe it’s the whole life or death thing?” I suggest.

Knox grunts in response.

Yeah, I don’t believe that either. Something more is at play here as we watch Fate grin around Thad’s dick, humming as she swallows him down. He growls, his fists clenching by his sides. Anticipation buzzes through me, my body sensing its turn is coming, and all questions fly out the window. There’s only her.

“Oh damn. Hum like that again, woman.”

Levi is pumping into Fate from below, his knuckles white as he grips her hips for leverage. “Fuck, sweets, you’re squeezing my cock just right. Shit. Shit, shit, shit.” His hips buck erratically, faster and harder, pushing Fate forward onto his twin’s dick, causing her to gag as he loses control. “I’m going to...”

He comes with a growl, his hips stilling. Thad pulls back, hopping off the bed and stepping between his brother’s thighs. As Levi pulls out, Thad lines himself up and pushes in, gripping her hips and fucking her from behind with a furious rhythm as she lays on his twin’s chest.

“Oh my ghost,” she rasps.

“I’m not gonna last, woman. You need to come for me.”

“I...I...”

“Now.” He slams into her with a roar.

Her moan echoes through the room for long minutes.

He pulls back, stumbling a few steps to the chair that sits in the corner. Levi sits up, bringing Fate with him. He brushes stray hair from her cheek

and kisses her forehead.

“Your alpha is waiting, sweets,” Levi murmurs in her ear.

She looks over her shoulder, a lazy grin spreading across her face.

“You look drunk, love.”

“Drunk off orgasms. The best kind of drunk.”

Chuckling, I lift her from Levi’s lap, her legs loosely going around my hips. Her dazed eyes meet mine. “You’re exhausted,” I murmur.

“Don’t even think about it, Cole.” Her finger traces along my lips. “I need you.”

She kisses me softly. Sweetly. All the things our relationship is not. It’s made of fire and ice. Of push and pull. Of fighting and making up. But in this moment, this is exactly what I need, I realize. I need her softness. Her sweetness. I need *her*.

“You’re perfect for me. You know that, right?” I let my lips trail along her jaw.

“I’m so glad I chose you to be by my side,” she whispers in my ear. “I wouldn’t have made it through any of this without you and the others.”

“No matter what happens, we’ll always be with you.”

“You promise?”

“Pinky swear.” I raise one hand with a grin, holding my pinky out. It’s so unlike me, but it does exactly what I wanted it to. It lights a twinkle in her eye that I want to remember for the rest of forever.

“Pinky swear.” She curls hers around mine. “I love you.”

“And I love you.”

I walk over to the bed, crawling up and laying her down on the soft comforter. I’m kneeling between her thighs, staring down at her and wondering for the millionth time what she ever saw in me. She looks up, love shining in her gaze. Gently, I lay my body over hers, my forearms holding my body weight as I run my thumb over her lips that are swollen and pink.

“Cole?”

“Yes, Fate?”

“Make love to me?”

My lips brush hers, the kiss a gentle reminder of everything she means to me that I couldn’t put into words if I tried. Her hands skim up my back, and I shift, my dick encountering her wetness. I let the tip slide in and out, playing, feeling her tighten around me, trying to pull me into her body.

“I need you,” she whispers.

“As I need you, love.” With great restraint, I push in slowly, letting the feel of her warmth surround me. Let it fill me up for those moments when there’s nothing but coldness.

Her heels come around my back, holding me to her. A tear trails down the side of her face, and I lean forward, kissing it away.

Our bodies move in perfect synchronicity, our eyes locked, our bond flaring to life.

“Do you feel that?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“It feels...”

“Incredible.”

“Cole, I...” She sucks in a breath, another tear escaping. “I...”

“I know, love. I know.” I kiss her, our mouths now frantic as our emotions take over, pushing us together with a force we can’t deny.

I’m close as I pull back and raise myself up, hooking one leg over my arm, opening her up to me, allowing my dick to slide deeper, hitting a spot that has her back arching and my balls drawing up tight.

“Come for me, love,” I whisper.

She cries out, her body tensing beneath mine, her pussy pulsing around my dick, and I can’t hold back as the orgasm crashes through me. My hips thrust through it, thrusting even as I open my eyes and find total blackness. We’re all here in the ether, the connections between us brighter than they’ve ever been. The threads that connect us are reinforced and strong.

“You’re our light, little ghost.”

“Wherever you go, we follow, echo.”

“We’ve got your back, always, sweets.”

“We believe in you, woman.”

“You’re ours for eternity, love.”

She sucks in a breath, exhaling roughly as tears fall freely from her eyes. “I love you all, so, so much.”

The blackness recedes, and we’re back in the bedroom inside the Gateway.

She smiles through her tears, her eyes landing on all of my brothers that have surrounded the bed. Her hair is spread out over the pillow, and her skin is flushed pink.

I roll off of her, pulling her into me as the others find spots on the bed and get comfortable.

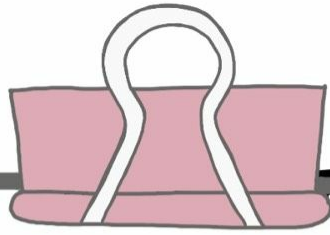
The room is quiet, pensive, as reality comes slipping back in.

Until Fate snorts.

Pulling back, I ask, “What’s so funny, love?”

“We skipped the sexathon and went straight to sexcapade. Holy seepage.”

Groans echo throughout the room, right along with Fate’s laughter.



18. Fate

Ghost Girl Fact #31:

Even when the odds are against us, we will fight for those that don't have anyone to fight for them.

“Knock, knock, you horny bastards. We have a situation out here. You know, like the potential end of the world.”

“Coming, Reg.”

I can feel the stares from five sets of eyes, all trying to judge how I’m feeling. Their worry and fear are almost overwhelming me, but I refuse to let them know that. For them, I will be strong...or at least fake it even if it kills me.

“Fate?” Cole’s low voice has my body reacting despite being utterly spent.

I take a deep breath and look up at him. “I know you’re all worried, but we’ve got this. And when we beat her, we’ll finally be able to make up for all that time she took away from us.”

“What do you want?” Macklin asks, then promptly blushes when five sets

of eyes land on him. He shares a look with the twins. “Is there something you’ve wished for but never thought would be possible?”

I cock my head to the side, studying him. It seems like a loaded question, but this is my sexy nerd. I couldn’t begin to explain how his brain works.

“I don’t know. I mean, I don’t remember actually living. Or dying for that matter. Not to mention I haven’t had much time to think about what I want when this is all over. All I know, in the deepest part of my soul, is all of *you*, and I want us to be happy more than anything.”

“That’s what we want too.” Knox stands, scanning the room for his clothes. “And we better get ready to face your sister now if we want to move on with our happily ever after.”

“You guys always forget you have the super awesome clothing power. Just magic yourself some?”

“I prefer to dress myself like a real man, thank you very much.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “And using your power isn’t something a *real man* would do?”

“No. It’s too easy,” Cole agrees.

“God, this explains so much about the male species.”

“Oh? What is that?”

“You purposely like to make your life more difficult.”

“Yeah, I’m not touching that,” Levi grumbles as he gets up and starts hunting for his own clothes.

With fascinated amusement, I watch them all scatter around the room, picking up shirts and tossing them to each other, finding one sock then searching for the other, scouring the room for their jeans.

When they’re all dressed, I sit up in bed, go ghost, and pop back to the real world in a pair of dark distressed jeans, which honestly probably show more skin than they cover, a white tee with *#GhostGirlGoals* scrawled across the front, and my new four-inch, black Louboutin heels with the red peep toe.

“Okay, yeah. She’s got a point,” Thad commiserates.

“C’mon guys. Plenty of time to practice our powers after we kick my sister’s ass.”

We transport through the vortex to the main chamber and find Reggie, Liv, Nate, Asher, and Rylan standing near the dais, with Sutton and a small group of spirits standing off to the side. Rylan’s arm is around Asher, who keeps glaring at Sutton. If looks could kill, Rylan would be dead. Or at least, deader than he already is. *More dead? Eh, whatever.* He stares back, his face

stone cold stoic like it's made from granite, but his emotions are a mixture of possessiveness, anger, regret, and longing.

Yeah, definitely some work to be done there, but that will have to wait.

"Reg, what's going on?"

"Nate and Asher just got here. They said the situation in the human world is...well, you need to see it for yourself."

The guys and I share a look.

"Where should we go? Chicago?"

"Chicago," they respond.

In seconds, we're standing along Michigan Avenue. The sun is setting in the distance, meaning it's rush hour. But instead of the normal honking and bumper to bumper traffic, cars are at a standstill and people are running down the street screaming.

"What the hell is going on?"

Macklin points off into the distance. "Fate, look."

There's a black mass heading straight for us.

"Mack, please tell me that's not what I think it is."

He runs a hand along the back of his neck. "Uh...well..."

"Shit! I was afraid of that." The blackness is breaking apart, becoming a larger mass that is slowly encompassing the entire city block. "What do we do?"

"Without the book, I'm not sure there's anything we can do." Macklin pushes his glasses up, his eyes scanning the street. I can feel his desperation like a living thing inside me. "This is one city. Imagine what's happening all over the world."

"Knox?" When I turn toward my snarky empath, I can see the lines next to his eyes and the muscles flexing in his jaw. This level of activity has got to be enough to threaten an overload. "Talk to me, sir," I whisper.

"Fate, I..." He swallows. "I'll be fine for now, but I'm not sure how long I can stay here with all of this..." He waves his hand in the air with a noticeable tremble.

"Cole?"

He looks up and down the street as the mass moves closer, individual spirits taking form right before us, their eyes an angry red, just like the red gems in the anima mea rings. My sister is already changing the fates of the souls in the books, pitting them against us.

His icy blues are narrowed in anger. "Retreat might be our only option,

love.”

“Retreat? We can’t leave all these people to fight these...these...*things* on their own.”

The spirits are close enough now that we can watch them target individuals running along the street. Each time a person gets in their path, they engulf the living with their black haze. The person goes completely still until their eyes slowly turn a matching shade of red while their movements become very unnatural, as if they’re nothing more than a puppet on strings. With each and every person that’s turned, I feel the balance of the realms shifting, my powers fluctuating, becoming unstable and harder to control. It’s like a giant game of tug o’ war, and it’s anyone’s guess who will be the winner. For now, I’ve got a firm grip on the rope, but I’m not sure how long I’ll be able to hold on.

“How are they able to do that?” I whisper in horror. “Thad, Levi, any ideas?”

“We could try to take out as many as we can, sweets, but we’re severely outnumbered.”

“For once, the wankstain’s right, woman. We’ll barely make a dent.”

My anger flares and my power ignites as I watch innocent people succumb to the evil created by my sister. Pretty pink electricity skirts along my skin, brighter and more powerful than it’s ever been.

“Fate, we should—”

“No! I refuse to accept defeat, Cole. I have to at least try.”

Closing my eyes, I let my power expand, filling the street until it reaches each and every person who woke up this morning, never imagining their soul would be taken hostage by an evil bitch on a power trip. I can sense their confusion, their fear, their anguish as their souls are held hostage. I let the tight grip on my power slip free, and it shoots out, rippling through the area, encompassing everyone, living or dead, in a wave that knocks them all to their feet.

“Well, well, well, lookie who we have here.” Karma’s voice echoes through the empty streets with a smugness that makes me want to shove my fist into stupid face.

My eyes narrow as the woman I’ve known my entire unlife comes sauntering down the center of Michigan Avenue, dodging bodies that lay passed out in the street.

“I kind of figured you’d have run off with your tail tucked between your

legs at this point, little one. There's no stopping me now."

"I will never give up, Karma." I can feel my guys walking up to stand behind me. They've got my back, and I have never loved them more.

"Aww. You're just too damn righteous for your own good. Can't even see when it's time to hold 'em and when it's time to fold 'em."

"Did you just quote Kenny Rogers right now?"

"Whatever. It doesn't even matter because I have *this*." She waves the book through the air. "You should just make things easy on yourself and give up now."

"You know I can't do that."

She growls. "You and your precious balance."

She's unhinged, which I already knew, but now that she has the book, the power has corrupted whatever hint of sanity she had left.

"Karma, we can work this out."

Her maniacal laughter fills the street.

"It's cute you think you even still have a chance. I'm sorry, little sister. I had really hoped to avoid this, but sadly, there is no other way."

Before I can blink, spirits are manifesting around me, surrounding me. I can hear the guys shouting, sounds of a struggle coming from behind me, but before I can draw on my power, something is wrapped around my neck, shoving me into the back seat of my own mind as Karma's power takes over.

Everything after is a blur. Her transporting us to Torment. Guards surrounding my guys, forcing them to put on cuffs to divert their powers. The drain of my energy as the collar seems to be pulling it from the very depths of my soul, gathering it for...something.

She parades me around like a pet on a leash, showing off her control. Her power. Proving that there is truly nothing that can be done to stop her. I watch it all, a sobbing mess inside the prison of my own mind while everything on the outside is just...blank.

"And the *pièce de résistance*. You, little one, are going to kill those little boy toys you love so much, throwing that precious balance of yours out the window and ending your reign as Guardian, and there is nothing. You. Can do. About it. Look at them. They're so clueless. Fragile. And soon to be *dead*." She boops my nose with each of those words, like they're nothing more than lighthearted banter instead of what they actually are. The weight of countless lives being lost to her darkness. The weight of everything we've fought so hard to stop. The weight of the love that I fear won't be enough to

save us. All piled onto my already tortured soul with no relief in sight.
One thing is now clear...we are truly and wholly *fucked*.

19. COLE

ASSHOLE FACT #9:

FOR THE WOMAN WE LOVE WE'D
GIVE EVERYTHING WE HAVE AND
ALL THAT WE ARE

The blank look on her face, those lifeless gray eyes staring at us as if we're nothing more than mere strangers, is a punch to the gut. The red gem on the collar she's wearing is pulsating with magic. My fists clench by my sides as I watch the woman I love prepare to do the one thing she'll never forgive herself for—if she lives long enough for regrets, that is.

“How do we stop this?” Knox murmurs urgently beside me.

“She won't go through with it. Our woman is still in there somewhere,” Thad argues.

“But she's not in control,” Macklin chimes in. “She's locked inside her own mind.”

Levi shoots a look at Mack. “Nice positivity there, bro.”

Mack glares back at him. “It's true. She's nothing more than a bystander to what Karma is forcing her to do.”

Karma's smirk has me grinding my teeth to avoid saying something that will just make this situation worse.

"Oh, little one, I think they're finally realizing the gravity of the situation now. There's no saving the day. No playing heroes. The resignation plastered on their faces is unbelievably satisfying."

Fate stands, unmoving, as her sister drones on.

"I will finally get everything I want. I'll have the Gateway. I'll have your title. And I'll have the prestige and power that comes with it. Add my readymade army, and it will be amazing. Sadly, I won't get your men, but I'll have plenty of my own to choose from."

"This is completely fucked up," Thad mutters.

Karma's hands go to her hips. "So, here's how this is going to play out, boys..."

"If anyone has any ideas, now's the time," I whisper.

"Your lover here is going to be a doll and kill you all with a blast of her power. I'd love to drag it out a little, torture and screams are kinda my thing, you know, but sadly we're out of time for fun. Once you're all dead, I'll kill her and assume control over the Gateway while maintaining my own realm as well."

"What about Destiny and the Isle of Light?"

"Oh, that goody-two-shoes will get what's coming to her, but that will be a walk in the park once I get Fate out of the way. Destiny's a lover, not a fighter, after all, and once all of the Gateway's power funnels into me, I'll be nearly invincible."

"Wait. That's it!" Macklin exclaims softly.

"Please tell me that big brain of yours has come up with a way to get all of us out of this alive," Knox pleads.

Mack's grimace is not exactly the reaction any of us were hoping for. His eyes dart to each of ours then hold on mine.

"If she gets control of Fate's powers, the world is as good as gone. I've calculated the odds, and unfortunately, it looks like there is only one option."

We all wait with bated breath.

"Spit it out, Mack."

"We push our powers back through the connection, directing them to Fate so she's stronger than Karma."

"That sounds like a damn good plan. Why so glum, bro?" Thad asks.

"By doing so, we'll be giving up our bonds. Giving up the very things

that tie us to her. Once our powers are gone, there will be nothing keeping us here.”

“That’s a valid reason,” Levi mutters.

“I feel like there’s more you’re not saying.” My eyes haven’t left the two women up on the dais, one that my soul is already mourning the loss of, the other who is rambling on through her evil monologue that no one is paying any attention to.

“I’m not sure Fate will survive the unexpected power dump while she’s wearing that collar. If she does, she’ll barely be able to control it, and there’s a good chance she’ll...”

“She’ll what, Mack?” Thad demands.

“The power will build until it’s too much for her body and then...”

“Are you telling us she’ll explode?” Knox asks in a horrified whisper.

“Not explode. More like...vaporize with the sheer magnitude of her power.” It’s like the words suddenly register because his eyes widen in horror. He rushes out, “But it’s only a theory. I can’t say for certain what will happen.”

We all fall silent. My mind goes over our options, which are admittedly slim. One - we sit back and let the woman we love kill us and then be killed in turn which also damns the world to Karma’s rule. Two - we give up our bonds and potentially Fate’s life to save the world.

“Now, I’m not an unreasonable woman,” Karma drones on. “I’m willing to let you all say your goodbyes before she kills you, but if you do anything stupid, my men have weapons trained on every last one of you and orders to kill all of you on the spot, which will really ruin my amazingly perfect plan, but such is life. Or death.” She shrugs then waves her finger in the air, causing the collar around Fate’s throat to dim slightly. “Make it fast, little one. I’ve got people to do and things to see.”

Fate’s eyes clear slightly, and for the first time in hours, the sparkle that I’ve come to love is once again present. Her whole body sags, exhaustion washing over her features as she pales at the sight of us.

“Guys?” she rasps, swallowing harshly. A tear escapes, rolling down her cheek, quickly followed by another. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

I’m in front of her, arm wrapping around her waist to take on some of the burden, my thumb brushing the wetness off her face. “Don’t, love, it’s not your fault.”

Her eyes meet mine through her tears. “I can’t fight it, Cole. I’m not

strong enough.”

“By no fault of your own, little ghost,” Knox butts in. “We all know that without that collar on, you’d have her begging at your feet.”

“I need you to do something for me.”

“Anything, love. You know that.”

“Find me on the other side.”

I want to tell her we won’t need to worry about that, that we’ll figure this out, but I find I can’t lie to her. If these are our last moments, then I want her to know the truth. *My truth.* That I will never leave her, no matter what. My eyes search hers. “There’s nothing that could stop us from tracking you down. Not even death.”

“I love you,” she whispers.

My forehead meets hers, and my voice is hoarse when I reply, “I love you too.”

Our kiss is soft, but it says all of the things neither of us can put into words.

Knox is suddenly beside us, pulling her to him, smashing his lips to hers in a bruising kiss, imparting one last pleasurable punishment before we face our end.

He pulls back reluctantly, her lips chasing after his. “I love the hell out of you, little ghost.”

“I love you too, Knox.”

Her head turns, eyes meeting Macklin’s. He steps up to the two of them, gently prying her out of Knox’s hold with unshed tears in his eyes. “Echo, I...” A single tear spills over, and he swallows roughly.

“I know, Macklin. You did everything you could.” She traces the furrow between his brows. “I love you. Always. You’re my echo.”

He nods, tears falling in earnest now as he wipes the back of his hand across his face.

Fate attempts to step toward Thad, stumbling, but Levi is there to catch her.

“I’ve got you, sweets,” he murmurs, wrapping her up in a hug.

Her weak arms wrap around his neck, and they stand there in the embrace, drawing comfort from the other. Thad steps up to her back, holding them both, and I hear the sob she fails to hold back.

Thad’s voice is soft as he whispers against her ear, “We love you, woman. Forever and always. In this life...”

“And the next,” Levi finishes.

“I lo-love, y-you guys t-too,” she manages.

Fucking hell. Regret is something I rarely experience, but it rushes over me, wave after wave battering against my normally stoic demeanor.

Life is remarkably short, and this time around, I can finally understand what that statement means. We only just managed to get her back, and we’re already losing her again. There are so many things that we didn’t get to experience. So many things I wish I would’ve been able to tell her.

“Gah. You all are just sickening with all of that mushy nonsense. Thank god your time is up.” Her finger once again waves through the air, and Fate straightens, her eyes dimming back to a blank stare. “Now, be good little boys and go stand in the middle over there.”

When we don’t move, the cuffs on our wrists shoot burning pain through our bodies.

“Motherfucker!” Thad growls.

I take a deep breath, willing my body to relax after the shock.

“Move. Now,” she demands.

We all slowly make our way over to the center of the room.

“Macklin, how do we make this happen?” I whisper.

“Find your power inside you and then find the thread tying you to Fate. Focus on pushing all of your power down that thread, to her.”

I search inside myself, finding the shining bundle of power that Fate gifted me centuries ago when she chose me to be by her side. It’s as beautiful as she is, and just as prickly. Every time I try to get a grip on it, it rears up, all feisty and fierce. I grin, finding that it soothes me in a weird way. Because this is us, this constant battle, the back and forth. Why would this small piece of her be any different?

Next, I find the shimmering silver thread that connects me to her. It reminds me of the way her gray eyes would spark with love and anger at the same time whenever she fearlessly faced off with me, not at all intimidated by my size or grumpy nature.

I love you, Fate.

Closing my eyes, I imagine my power skimming along the thread, forging a path straight for the love of my life. It seems to take hours before the last bit of it is moving along the connection. As it leaves my body, I look up, seeing the bright pink spark of power flaring brightly in Fate’s wide eyes. Tears are trailing down her face as her mouth opens in a silent scream. Her fingers

begin to spark, pink trails of electricity skirting across her skin.

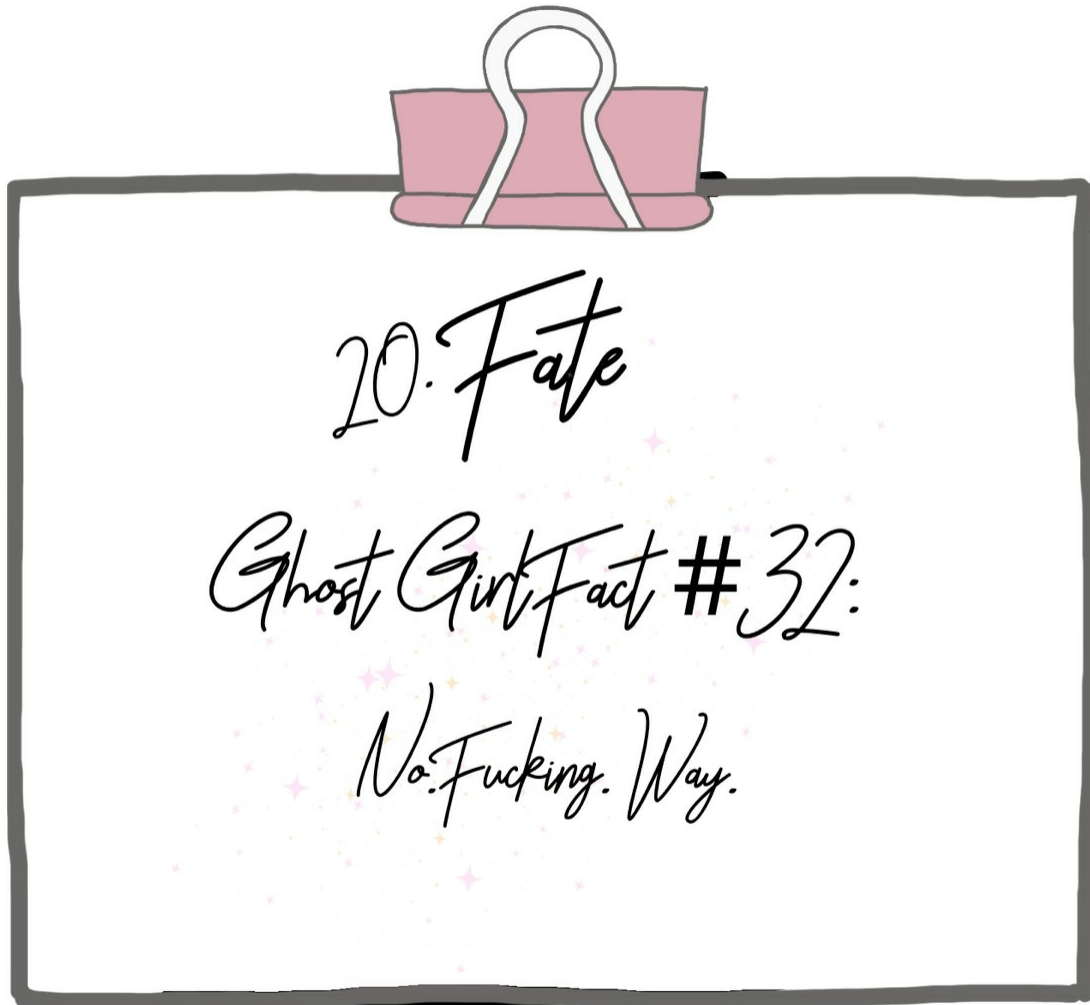
“No!” Karma screams. “What are you doing?”

I risk a quick glance at my brothers and see them staring at the woman we all love. I know the moment we’ve given all we have. Our physical bodies disappear, the Gateway walls visible through their bodies.

Karma’s eyes cut to us, her furious eyes widening when she sees what we’ve done.

“No, no, no! You can’t do that!”

My ghostly eyes meet Fate’s once more, and in the second before my soul is forced to depart, I watch utter fury and power consume her. The collar breaks apart, the red gem exploding into millions of tiny shards. Karma’s eyes are panicked as Fate aims the full force of the expanding power straight at her sister, the bitch’s skin seeming to shred with the sheer force of it. Fate’s roar of anger and sorrow, along with Karma’s pain-filled wail, is the last thing I hear before everything goes black.



Silence. Darkness. Nothingness. That's all that surrounds me. An absolute lack of anything and everything. My body is weightless, floating through the ether with no purpose or destination, and I can't find it in me to care. I'm numb, both physically and mentally.

I died. *Again*. No...for *real* this time. Sure, it was mostly on our own terms this go round, but death came at a much greater cost than I had anticipated. *They* had to die too. Just that eensy weensy thought causes a pang in the place where my heart would be. If it were still beating, that is. Odd, how I can feel *that* particular loss but nothing else.

Because they loved you.

The sudden voice is like a shout inside my brain, and I cringe after being surrounded by soundlessness for so long. *How long has it been, anyways? Days? Weeks? Months?* Time stopped mattering once they were gone.

Who's there?

I can sense the raised brow and haughty attitude.

Oh, right. You again.

Don't sound so excited.

I'm sorry. It's ever so great to hear from you, I say with barely concealed sarcasm. ***Why are you here, exactly?***

Because of you.

Me?

Yes. You are my single greatest achievement, yet you haven't been able to fight through this particular situation on your own.

I snort. ***Some achievement I am. I died. Twice. Why would I fight it this time around?***

Trust me, there is no one else that would have carried the burden as well as you have. Your fight and determination are legendary. You are truly an inspiration.

Are you sure you've got the right girl? Because right now, from where I'm standing...er...floating...I was a whopping failure.

I can feel her amusement rather than see it, but *feeling* anything is like coming out of a cold winter and having the sun on your face for the first time. Amazing.

You didn't fail. You succeeded. Superbly, I might add.

I failed them.

They loved you, she repeats.

And I loved them.

I know. It was that mutual love, the everlasting kind, that made what I'm about to do possible.

What do you mean?

I'm sending you back.

I balk. ***I don't want to go back.***

But you must.

No. I shake my head. If tears were possible here, they'd be trailing down my cheeks. ***Fuck.*** This feeling is the worst because it reminds me of them. All we went through and all I lost. ***I can't.***

You can.

Not without them.

They'd want you to be happy.

But I can't be. Not without them, I repeat.

The world needs you.

I'm pretty sure I've done my duty. The world will have to get by with someone else. I've got nothing left to give.

Mmm. She hums. ***What about Reggie and Liv?***

What about them?

They need you too.

The thought of my friends sends another pang through my non-beating heart. ***They have each other. I made sure of that.***

You did. But they miss you.

Truth be told, I miss them too. But seeing them every day, knowing I'll never again have what they have? My eyes snap shut, and I shake my head.

I can't, I rasp.

What about Nate and Asher? They could use your help navigating this new relationship they're developing. Lord knows Asher is going to lose her patience if Nate keeps treating her like a little girl, especially with all of those potential suitors of hers lining up for their chance at winning her heart.

I snort, the sound echoing in the quietness. ***Poor Asher.***

You mean poor Nate if Asher loses her temper.

I laugh, which feels...odd. When was the last time I smiled, let alone laughed? ***With them,*** I realize. I feel a distinct wetness on my cheek and lift my hand, encountering a trail of tears I didn't think were possible in this place.

There are too many memories... Cole's icy stare, Knox's domshell, Macklin dimples, Thad's snark, and Levi's amazing hugs. A sob escapes.

Fate, they'll always be with you.

My brow furrows, not that she can see it. ***That's what people always say when the good guys die. It doesn't help, ya know.***

She sighs. ***I know.***

We both sit in comfortable silence for a moment...until she tries again.

They'd want you to do this.

I cross my arms across my chest like a petulant toddler. ***Well, they're not here, are they?*** That last bit comes out more sob than speech.

She sighs again. ***I thought you'd figure it out on your own, but you haven't. You're a stubborn one, I'll give you that. But you've given me no choice.***

I metaphorically sit up and take notice. What's she going to threaten me

with? I'm already dead.

They left you with a gift. A very precious one, though it wasn't exactly intentional.

An unintentional gift? Why does that sound exactly like my guys?

Yes. One that they'd wanted to give you for a very, very long time.

My mind races over conversations and stolen moments, trying to figure out what the guys could have left for me. Knowing them, it's a secret stash of alcoholic ice pops or an expensive bottle of wine, neither of which sounds appealing at the moment, and that's saying a lot, right?

Well, what is it?

The gift of life.

Pssh. I've already told you, I don't want it.

I'm not talking about yours.

Then whose?

I swear I sense her frustration rising. My face scrunches up as I try to figure out what this crazy lady is talking about. I wait a beat, but it appears she isn't going to say any more. I scour my brain, send my senses out, testing everything around me. When I find it, my heart beats for the first time in...I don't know how long, steadily picking up pace.

Oh my ghost! But...how?

One hundred years ago, they came across this secret and were going to surprise you with it on the night you died.

My eyebrow raises, and she just rolls her eyes.

The first time.

That night in the cave...

Yes. They were going to tell you that night. You had become so sad. They knew how badly you wanted this, so they found a way to make it happen for you. Their love is beyond my own comprehension, then and now.

Tears spring free, and I suck in a breath. With a shaking hand, I cover my slim belly, a sob escaping. Old Fate wanted this enough that the guys planned a special evening just to tell her about it. Does that mean they wanted it too? I...well, it's not that I *don't* want this. I hadn't even realized this was a possibility. And now, I'm so damn grateful to have this piece of them to keep with me always, even if I wish with all my heart they could be here to experience this with me.

Did they know?

I can sense her shaking her metaphorical head. ***No. Macklin stumbled upon it again in the book and didn't realize that saying the spell out loud even just once, without your presence, would activate it. He inadvertently gave you a miraculous treasure.***

The teeny tiny heartbeat pulses inside me, as if commending his or her daddies on such a gracious gift. I smile.

You deserve this, Fate. And so much more. But this is a good start. It's time to go.

I don't...I can't...

You can. And you will.

I take a deep breath in and release it. They gave me the most precious gift of all, but how am I going to do this alone?

Are you ready?

I hesitate briefly before nodding, unable to speak actual words without risking losing my shit completely. It's not just about me now. It's about the itty bitty life growing inside me. Part of them that will forever be with me.

I feel a soft touch on my hand.

You're going to make an excellent mother, Fate.

Your daddies loved you, little one. I'll make sure their memories are kept alive for you always.



A bright flash of light has me covering my eyes. When I pull my arm down, I realize I'm standing in the middle of the Gateway's main chamber. The candles are glowing with soft light, and my soul sighs.

We're home, little one. I softly caress my belly, my heart soaring with a love that astounds me.

The door to the office is open, with light spilling out onto the sparkly tiled floor. Forcing my feet to move, I make my way toward it, hoping Reggie and Liv might be in there. I can't wait to see them. It feels like it's been years, but for all I know it's been hours.

The wall of photos catches my eye, specifically, the new additions that weren't here the last time I was in residence, and I can't help but take a quick detour. I need to see them, happy and alive. Remind myself why I'm back here. Remember these stories to tell our child when he or she asks about their

fathers.

I scan over the numerous images, my finger trailing along Macklin's smiling face as he sits, chuddling with me in his desk chair. Then my eyes scan over the twins and me, Thad's face buried in my neck and Levi's wide smile with his arm wrapped around my waist as my head is thrown back in riotous laughter. I chuckle, tears rolling down my cheeks, at seeing Knox lounging on the sofa in the study, head thrown back in pleasure from that first ghostly hand job. Then there's Cole. Staring straight at the camera with his trademark scowl, his arms holding me closely while I look up at him with a fierce love in my eyes.

I swipe the tear off my cheek and take a deep breath. Letting my hand fall to my side, I vow here and now to never let anyone forget these men. They will live on through my child and me, and everyone will remember their names.

With a deep sigh, I make my way toward the light.

Entering the room, I exhale shakily. There are so many reminders of them here. Thad's shoes by the sofa. Levi's extra hair ties on top of my desk. Macklin's books scattered on the end table. Knox's half-empty glass sitting on the bookshelf. Cole's jacket slung over the back of the chair.

The fireplace flares to life, my emotions beyond my control.

I am strong. I can do this. I am strong. I will do this.

That's my new mantra, and I put it on mental repeat.

The stillness in the room shifts, the hair on the back of my neck suddenly standing on end. I can feel eyes watching me, but when I quickly turn around, there's no one there. I scan the room, my eyes narrowed in warning.

The lights flicker, and the fireplace goes cold.

The temperature in the room drops, and I can't stop the shiver from wracking my body as I exhale and see my breath in the frigid air. The bulbs in the desk lamp explode, quickly followed by the lights in the wall sconces which begin to shatter in progression.

"You have no idea who you're messing with here," I growl menacingly.

A chuckle echoes through the quiet room, and I freeze. *No, it can't be.*

The furniture in the room starts moving on its own, parting as it clears a path between whatever is heading my way...and me. My feet slowly start to reverse, afraid if I move or blink or even breathe, I'll lose whatever the fuck this connection is that's happening right now.

The backs of my legs hit the sofa, and I let my unsteady body collapse.

Until this moment, I was so focused on my grief and everything I had lost that I wasn't paying attention to the room around me. The sadness, the hope, the relief, the *love* that's swirling around me in a crazy cocktail will have me punch drunk in a matter of seconds if I let it.

The first soft touch against my cheek has me sucking in a breath. It trails down my chin, over the front of my throat, and I barely hold back my sob. Across my collarbone. Over my left shoulder and down my arm. It pauses on my inner elbow, swirling in a circle, and a hot tear burns a path down my skin. When the touch reaches my hand, it whispers over my knuckles and down to my fingertips that are resting on my inner thigh. I hold my breath, knowing what comes next but not really believing this is happening. Am I hallucinating? Is this some sort of weird flashback?

Who knows and who the fuck cares.

The ghost of a touch trails up my inner thigh, moving with unerring accuracy up the seam of my jeans, directly over my lady bits that are practically weeping at this point. Both figuratively and literally, mind you. Up and down, small bursts of current trail over my flesh, and I suck my lower lip in between my teeth to stop myself from moaning out loud.

The amusement hits me first, then the unfiltered, raw desire, and I open eyes that I don't remember closing to stare at the nothingness in front of me. But it's not empty. I can feel him. My eyes dart to the right and to the left, and I can sense the rest of them too. My body is wound tightly with too many feelings to untangle them all, and the tears fall faster.

The touch becomes more intense, its power lighting up every single nerve inside of me that had been dead without them. My head falls back, my breathing erratic as I near the edge of an orgasm I never saw coming.

"Oh my ghost," I moan, my eyes closing as a burst of power circles my clit. I explode faster than a box of fireworks on the fourth of July as the power continues to pulse through me, taking me higher and higher, until I can't take any more. My head shakes back and forth, my fists clenched around the sofa cushion as if it could ground me in the here and now. Slowly, I come down off the high, conscious thought returning along with a flood of tears.

"Open your eyes, little ghost."

His voice is the single best thing I've ever heard in my entire unlife. I do as I'm told, slowly lifting my head to find a pair of hazel eyes staring intently back at me as he kneels between my legs.

“I owed you one,” he says with a smirk. The next thing I know, I’m wrapped up in him, his arms wound around me so tightly I would shatter if I was a lesser woman. But I’m not. I’m his. *Theirs*.

“Sharing is caring,” Thad singsongs just before he steals me away from Knox, pulling me up and into his arms. His mouth is on mine in a flash, and we kiss like a pair of horny teenagers that are on borrowed time. Hell, for all I know, we are, and I’m going balls to the wall while I can. If I had balls, that is.

The warmth of another body is sliding in behind me. *Fucking yes! Twin sandwich for the win!*

“Can’t forget about me, sweets.” Levi pulls my face away from his brother and consumes my mouth with his. Thad doesn’t seem to mind as he nibbles his way up my neck. The moan that escapes is entirely too inappropriate for public consumption. Good thing we aren’t in public.

“No time for a sexathon, you two. Some of us are waiting patiently over here.”

I chuckle against Levi’s lips, and the twins slowly pull back.

“Fucking nerd,” Thad mutters as Mack takes a couple steps toward us.

“Fuck, I missed you, echo.” I launch myself at him, his arms catching me and twirling me around. When we finally come to a stop, his hands cradle my face and he drops the sweetest kiss on my lips.

“I missed you too, sexy nerd.” My voice catches, and he kisses my forehead before reluctantly letting me go.

When I turn, I find a pair of icy blue eyes glaring at me. Cole is standing with his arms crossed over his chest, his famous scowl plastered on his face.

“Took you long enough.”

My head cocks to the side. “I’m sorry. I was kind of dead.”

“So were we, but you don’t see us taking our sweet ass time to get back, now do you?”

My brow raises. “God, you’re such an asshole.”

His sexy ass smirk as he stalks toward me has my girly bits gearing up for round two. Horny bitches.

“And you love me for it.”

“I do. I really, *really* do.”

His fingers trail down my face as if he’s memorizing every line and curve. When his eyes meet mine, the intensity there rocks my soul.

“No more dying, love.”

“Never again,” I readily agree. “But how are you all here right now? Not that I’m complaining or anything.”

“Nate,” he says. “He ran in right as everything exploded around us and managed to capture our souls before they crossed over. With some help from Asher and the Gateway, he found a way to tether us here until you returned. But it took you for-fucking-ever.”

“How long was I gone?” I ask, looking around at the men who have surrounded us.

“Three months,” Macklin responds.

“Huh. Well, that’s better than a hundred years, right?”

The entire room groans.

“For fuck’s sake, woman. Three months in ghostly limbo was hell with only these asshats around to fuck with.”

I arch one brow. “Ten years with *no one*, babe. I’ve got you beat.”

“Right. My bad.”

“We’re here to stay, little ghost. Maybe now we can finally catch up on some much needed R&R.”

“Well, about that...”

“Oh god. What did you do?” Cole mutters.

“You don’t get to point the blame finger at me this time, Ass-Cole. It’s more like something *you* all did.”

“What is it, Fate?” Macklin asks, pushing his glasses up.

“You know how the universe loves to throw shit at us?”

“Ahh hell. What sort of crazy ass mess do we have to clean up now?”

“Oh, there will be messes alright. Just gotta get through the next six months or so before they arrive.”

Knox’s eyes narrow. The twins just look confused. Cole looks grouchy, nothing new there. But Macklin’s eyebrows shoot up. Leave it to my sexy nerd to work it out first.

“Really?” he asks, hope and excitement flooding through the room. “How?”

“Really! Seems as though someone read a spell out loud and activated it without knowing.”

His eyes are wide, and I can feel excitement and worry whipping through him.

“I—”

“It’s okay, Mack. I’m happy.”

“You are?”

“Thrilled, honestly. More so now that you’re all here.”

Knox is studying me with an intensity that I’ve missed so fucking much. I know the moment he senses the little one as his eyes widen. “No fucking way!”

“Yes, way.” I smile through teary eyes.

“What the fuck are we missing?” Thad grumbles.

Levi shrugs. “Fuck if I know, bro. Something about a spell...”

His eyes widen at the same time his brother’s do. The twins share a look, then their eyes dart to me before they simultaneously jump in the air, whooping at the top of their lungs.

“Someone want to fill me in?” Cole demands.

“How do you feel about being called Daddy, Cole?”

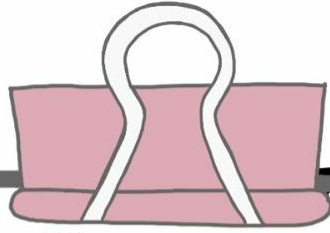
“That’s more Knox’s thing, love.”

I step up to him, meeting his icy blues straight on, and whisper, “But it won’t be me calling that out.”

The realization flashes over his face. Disbelief. Fear. Excitement. Love. So much fucking love.

He grabs me around my waist and smashes our lips together. For the first time in a hundred years, I realize there’s nothing standing in our way anymore. We’ll finally get the happily ever after we deserve.

Peace out, #GhostGirlProblems. Peace. Out.



Epilogue: Fate

Ghost Mom Fact #1:

just when you think you've finally got this unlife thing down, the Universe is all like... Hahaha!

You're so gullible!

Three Years Later...

“Macklin!” I shout, loud enough for the entire Gateway to hear me.

No, I most definitely didn't sign up for *this*. I want to cry and shout and stomp my foot, but I know damn well none of that would do me any good.

I rematerialize in the office, which looks exactly like it has since I found it for the second first time...with the exception of the dollhouse in the corner and a basket of toys that sits empty, the items strewn throughout the room. My guys are all here, not paying me any attention whatsoever. Instead,

they're focused on the little girl currently riding Thad like he's her own personal pony as he gallops away from his twin, who, much to my surprise, has Mack on his back as they chase after them. Cole and Knox are...well, I'm not entirely sure what the hell they're doing. They're both frozen in place, not moving a muscle.

Our daughter's long dark hair is a mass of waves flying through the air, her laughter one of the single best things I've ever heard in my life.

I want to maintain my anger. Hell, who am I kidding? I'm fucking fuming over here. But the sight of my fearsome guys playing with our little girl threatens to turn me into a puddle of goo...even if they were *supposed* to be helping Nate try to find his missing brothers. So I cross my arms, attempting to gain some control over my wayward emotions.

Fucking hormones! You're the ones that got me into this mess in the first place.

"Ahem!"

They all freeze. Well, except for Cole and Knox whose eyes swivel to me but otherwise remain unmoving.

"Mommy!" She bounces off Thad's back, and I hear him grunt as she runs for me, jumping into my arms.

"Hey, baby. You having fun with your daddies?"

Her light gray eyes are alight with excitement. "Yup. I'm a princess who escaped from the bad guys."

"The bad guys, huh? Would that be Mack and Levi?"

She nods eagerly, her curls bouncing.

I hoist her up on my hip, hit with a sudden sadness that she's almost too big for this now, and point at Cole and Knox. "What about those two over there? What did they do?"

"They got hit by the laserbean and were frozened."

I grin. "I think you mean *laserbeam* and *frozen*."

She scowls. "That's what I said."

I withhold my chuckle. *Like father, like daughter*. Of course, she also inherited Knox's snark, her love of learning from Macklin, and the twins' inappropriate sense of humor. Though her potty words are more like *poop* and *fart*, thank god.

She gets this faraway look in her eyes then turns to me. "Uh oh. Someone's in twouble."

I hear Thad mutter, "Why is that always so damn creepy?"

Lilith can talk with the spirits in any realm, and guess who's the lucky one that always gets to deal with it since my guys are all wimps. It pretty much creeps them all out. We've got her working with Uncle Nate since finding a way to block her power was a big flop.

Her name is perfect for an adorable bundle of energy, but still has that whole underworld sort of vibe to it as well.

"Lily, why don't you go find Auntie Liv and tell her all about your adventure. I bet she's got some ice cream hidden away just for you."

She claps, wiggling out of my hold. "Auntie Liv has ice ceam!"

"Yup. Tell her I said Mommy needs a minute with your daddies."

"Otay!" She squeezes my legs before running for the door.

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

I patiently wait while she goes and hugs each and every one of my guys, who, mind you, are still frozen in various positions around the room. Then she runs out without a backward glance.

Suckers. They're wrapped around her little finger. Have been since the very beginning. Imagine big bad Ass-Cole dressed up in fairy wings and glitter. It happened. I have the pictures to prove it.

My arms cross once more as they pick themselves up off the floor.

"What's up, love?" Cole asks, straightening his crooked faux hawk.

"Macklin has some explaining to do."

"Me?" my sexy nerd asks.

"Yup."

Thad chuckles as he pulls his hair back into a man bun. "What'd you do this time, Mack? Another experiment on one of the trinkets go rogue?"

"No, I...I don't actually know what I did this time." He pushes his glasses up his nose.

Knox appears at my side, his hand skimming down my cheek as he no doubt tries to work through the myriad of feelings coursing through me right now. His hand stills.

Bingo!

His wide hazel eyes find mine, and then he promptly bursts out laughing. Oh, sure, he's pretty damn excited, but he's also figuratively pissing his pants over the hilarity of it all too. *Jackass.*

I glare at my snarky empath. "I don't find this funny, Knox."

His hands are on his knees as he basically loses his shit. "Oh, little ghost, it's fucking hilarious. Amazing...but hilarious."

I growl. Of course he finds it funny. It's not *his* body ready to blow up like a hot air balloon. *Again.*

"What the fuck is going on, Fate?" Cole asks. He's getting angry because he's out of the loop, and a small part of me fills with glee at that. At least I'm not the only one off-kilter here.

"We all talked and were in agreement. Lilith needs a brother or sister. Fine. Spell me up." I narrow my eyes. "Brother. Sister. Do either of those words end with an S?"

The room is silent. The twins look confused, their heads darting to glance between all of us.

Mack steps forward. "Well, no. They're singular, echo."

"Exactly." My hands land on my hips.

"So...you're pregnant!" Mack deduces, excited. "Wait. Not singular...which means...oh my god."

"Yeah, sexy nerd. You can't even say it. Imagine how *I* feel right now."

Then I see his shoulders shaking and he pushes his glasses up his nose again, his hand dropping to cover his mouth.

Thad and Levi's eyes go wide.

"It was my turn to read the spell, right?" Thad asks, looking at his twin.

Levi shakes his head. "No. It was mine."

"Well, I read it."

"Uh...so did I."

Realization dawns in their seafoam-colored eyes before they give each other a proud high-five followed by a round of excited laughter.

My power sparks. Shitheads. This is so not funny. *I can't imagine how their poor mom must've felt squeezing those two big fuckers out her hooaha. My girlie bits won't be the same after this. Wonder if I can go ghost when it comes time for labor and delivery?*

"You're pregnant?" Cole asks, smiling for once as he walks up and wraps his arms around my waist. "Aren't you excited, love? I thought this is what we all wanted."

"Oh, it is. But you missed the fine print there, alpha."

He scowls, and I swear to ghost it's like looking at a male version of Lily.

"I didn't know, echo. I swear. It's not like there's a manual on Spell Insemination. Or any way to make the twins actually listen to directions, apparently."

Him and Knox burst out laughing again. I'm going to knee them both in

the balls. Take care of that magical baby batter they've got swimming around in there.

"Wait." Cole releases me, scanning my body as if it will tell him the secret. When our gazes meet again, the fucker smiles, his icy blues eyes glinting in the light. "Twins?"

I nod. "But you all don't get it. I'm way too delicate—" Someone snorts, and I glare at the lot of them. "...To have two giants taking up residence inside me. You remember the cravings and swelling and back pain, and did I mention *cravings* with Lilith? Imagine that times two."

Levi comes up, tugging me to him. "You're going to be magnificent, sweets. I love when you're all round and glowing with our baby."

I sniff dramatically. There's a real possibility that I'm going to burst into tears. "But I'll be as big as a house."

"And we will love you anyways," Thad whispers from behind me.

"And we'll pamper you with foot rubs and breakfast in bed," Knox adds as he closes in beside us.

"Well...that doesn't sound too terrible." *Sniff sniff.*

"And we'll all chip in to keep Lilith on schedule and occupied, giving you plenty of time to rest. After all, you'll be growing two of our babies inside you," Cole adds from the other side as he stands beside Macklin.

Macklin leans forward and kisses my cheek. "We love you. Always. No matter what."

"You all will owe me lots of orgasms between now and waddling like a penguin."

"Done!" they agree in unison.

Sniff. "Can we start now?"

They all grin.

Knox grabs my chin, his eyes heated. "What do you say, little ghost?"

"Pretty please with an alcoholic ice pop on top?"

"Please...what?"

"Please...*sir*," I purr with a smirk.

His mouth meets mine in a kiss that lights my soul on fire as a pair of hands grabs me from behind.

If these are #GhostMomProblems, I'm here for it!

Author's Note

Thanks for sticking with the Ghost Girl series and loving Fate and her guys as much as I do. Way off in the future (no scheduled date quite yet), we'll be seeing a whole other side to the Ghost Girl universe because Asher's getting her *own story*. Keep reading for a bonus scene to get a first-person glimpse into Asher's head. If you thought Ghost Girl problems were bad, wait until you see what Death's Daughter has to deal with.

About the Author

Sinclair Kelly is a paranormal & contemporary romance author who writes to give all of the feral characters in her head a voice. She's fluent in sarcasm and dry humor. She lives in sunny Arizona with her loving husband, three adorably exhausting kids, and a feisty Australian shepherd puppy named Havoc. She loves reading, writing, coffee, vodka, tattoos, wine, donuts, broody asshole book boyfriends, badass FMCs, sangria, and all of the friendships she's made since she began her writing journey.

Want more Sin? You can find her here:

<https://www.sinclairekelly.com>

<https://linktr.ee/SinclairKellyAuthor>

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Twist of Fate

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