



Gift for My Ghost

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Horror

Description: Can a lonely pair create a new path to love?

Jessica has always felt as restless as the spirits who choose to appear to her. Then an unexpected encounter in the small southern town of Fairhaven Falls changes everything. Now she leads an ordinary life – or at least as ordinary as a girl with a constant ghostly companion can have. But is simple companionship enough?

Leo was trapped in Midnight Manor for many years before a pretty little psychic finally set him free. Now that he's been released, he's discovered that freedom isn't nearly as enticing as the woman who freed him. The more time they spend together, the more he yearns for their relationship to be real.

Who said that love, laughter, and the afterlife couldn't mix? Welcome to Fairhaven Falls!

Total Pages (Source): 36

CHAPTER 1

A cold breeze whispered across Jessica's face, tickling her nose. Still half asleep, she pulled the covers up over her nose, and they were immediately yanked back down as she heard a low, masculine chuckle. Well, that was new. She forced one eye open and saw Leo's familiar figure standing in the corner of her bedroom, smiling at her. As always, her heart did a funny little skip, and she couldn't help smiling back before she gave him a mock frown.

"It's too early."

"No, it's not," he said in that deep voice that always rumbled pleasantly across her skin. "It's almost noon."

"Really? Well, damn, I guess I better get up."

She climbed out of bed, yawned and stretched, then shivered when a cold breeze whispered across her stomach when her short cami top rose up above the waistband of her pajama shorts. Leo was still in his corner, but she gave him a suspicious look.

"Did you do that?"

"Do what?" he asked innocently, but she could see the laughter in his eyes.

"You're incorrigible," she scolded, even though she really didn't mind.

If only he'd actually been able to touch her stomach—not to mention other areas of

her body. The biggest disadvantage of having a ghost... friend was his inability to actually touch her. In every other way, he was perfect. Kind, thoughtful, interesting, not to mention handsome. He'd owned a logging company before he passed but he often worked with his crews and he had the broad shoulders and powerful physique of a man who did physical labor.

Perhaps handsome wasn't exactly the right word. His features were more rugged than classically handsome and his short, dark hair was sprinkled with silver. He'd only been thirty-five when his life had so tragically ended but he hadn't had an easy life and his face reflected it. As far as she was concerned, it only served to make him more attractive.

In all the years she'd spent traveling, using her skills to bring peace to the departed and comfort to the living, she'd never met anyone quite like him. During the ritual in which she'd banished his vengeful ex-wife, she'd sensed something from him that she'd never experienced before—an immediate warmth, a connection—and apparently, he'd felt it too. He was no longer trapped in this location by that vengeful spirit, but he hadn't moved on. Neither had she.

After so many years of an itinerant lifestyle, moving from place to place as the spirits called her, she'd decided to settle down. She'd taken a job managing the restaurant that occupied the ground floor of Midnight Manor and moved into the cozy apartment above. She hadn't admitted to herself at the time how much Leo's presence had influenced that decision.

She had been growing increasingly restless and tired of traveling, but she'd never anticipated choosing a small southern town that was occupied by as many Others as it was humans. But the Others, creatures of myth and legend who had finally made their presence known to humans, were far more accepting of her unusual abilities than most humans. She'd felt at home here almost immediately, but it had been Leo who tipped the scales.

After six months, she was still glad that she had chosen to stay, but the difficulties of her situation had grown increasingly frustrating. She sighed and wandered over to her wardrobe. The door opened as she approached, the hangers sliding apart to reveal a pretty pale green dress sprinkled with tiny white flowers.

It was one of her newer purchases, more fitting her current role than the type of clothing that she had worn as Mystic Madam, but still floaty and feminine enough to satisfy those instincts.

“I take it you’d like me to wear this?” she asked dryly, and Leo smiled at her.

“There’s no point in buying new clothes if you’re not going to wear them.”

He was right, but surrounding herself with layers of cloth made her feel protected, even if the thin fabrics didn’t actually create much of a barrier.

“You will look very pretty in it,” he added gently. The look in those kind brown eyes made her heart skip a beat but she did her best to hide her response behind a mock sigh.

“Oh, all right.”

She took the dress off the hanger and went into the bathroom, firmly closing the door behind her. It too was an artificial barrier. Leo could travel freely anywhere within the building, but he had promised her that he wouldn’t intrude and she believed him. If only most corporeal humans were as trustworthy.

She washed and dressed and studied herself in the mirror. He was right. The pale green color flattered her pale skin and dark brown hair and brought out the hints of green in her brown eyes. Although it revealed the faintest hint of her small cleavage, it was perfectly modest, and the full skirt fluttered comfortably around her legs.

She hesitated a moment then started layering on her necklaces, in addition to the stack of bracelets she never removed. Gold links strung with charms, crystals suspended on fine chains, long strands of beads, a black leather protective amulet. They were her armor, and she felt better as soon as the weight settled around her neck.

“There,” she said triumphantly, as she returned to her bedroom. “Are you satisfied now?”

His eyes flicked to the necklaces before traveling down over the dress.

“You look very pretty,” he said, and she could hear the sincerity in his deep voice.

“I was referring to my obedience rather than my looks,” she said a little breathlessly.

“Can’t it be both?”

“I suppose so,” she laughed, taking refuge in humor as she walked out into the living room.

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Her apartment had previously been occupied by the owner of Midnight Manor. Since he was a vampire, he decorated the place to emphasize that fact—all dark colors and ornate furniture—but he had given her permission to make whatever changes she wanted.

She'd added her more bohemian style to lighten up the original gothic atmosphere. She'd kept the deep purple walls but she'd added an overstuffed couch, upholstered in patchwork velvet, and a Victorian fainting couch in pink silk. His dark dining table had been replaced with a fanciful wrought iron set painted white.

She'd replaced the heavy velvet curtains with multiple layers of sheer white fabric, every one of them slightly different. Candles and crystals covered most of the exposed surfaces, and the air was redolent of the incense she liked to burn.

Her apartment had become her home, her sanctuary, and it never failed to lift her spirits. She chose not to think about how much sense of safety and belonging was due to her ghostly companion.

He shook his head as she started assembling her acai breakfast bowl, but she ignored him. They'd had more than one discussion about her eating habits.

He wandered over to the window, the sunlight turning his body more transparent than usual. In the darkened bedroom it was easier to forget his insubstantial nature than it was in direct sunlight. He was little more than a shadow as she sprinkled chia seeds over the top of her bowl.

"It's a beautiful day," he said, and she could hear the wistfulness in his voice. "I

always loved fall.”

She picked up her bowl and went to join him at the window. Fairhaven Falls was always pretty, but she had to admit that fall was one of the highlights.

The sky was that deep brilliant blue that only ever seemed to occur at this time of year, a shocking contrast to the reds and golds and oranges which filled the town and climbed up the slopes of the surrounding mountains.

From here she could see the wide river that ran along one side of the town sparkling in the sunlight. The river ran from the falls which gave the town its name to the far end of the valley before disappearing out of sight.

A sudden swirl of white disturbed the peaceful surface and she caught the briefest glimpse of a tentacle before the water stilled again.

“Looks like Sam is fishing again,” she said, and Leo laughed.

“I imagine it’s hard to escape a kraken. I almost feel sorry for the fish.” There was another swirl of white, this one close to the small, isolated island in the middle of the stream where Sam lived. “I wonder if he ever gets lonely,” he added.

“I know he’s frequently at the riverfront, listening. But he never shows more than a tentacle, and no one ever goes to visit him.”

“It’s hard to be invisible.”

The sadness in Leo’s voice made her bite her lip as she realized that what she’d just said applied to him as well.

“You don’t think he’s lucky enough to have a pretty little roommate, do you?” he

added, clearly trying to lighten the mood even though she could still feel his sadness.

Impulsively, she threw open the French doors to the balcony letting the cool autumn breeze swirl into the room, fresh and clean with just a hint of wood smoke. Those broad shoulders suddenly stiffened.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” he said slowly. “It’s almost like I can smell the air. But I must be remembering other fall days. It’s not as if I still experience my senses.”

“That’s not entirely true. You can see—why wouldn’t you be able to smell?”

His nostrils flared again and then he bent towards her, his face only a few inches away from her neck. Rationally, she knew that he couldn’t breathe but it felt as if he did, as if his cool breath were traveling down the sensitive curve of her neck. A shiver ran down her spine but it wasn’t because she was cold. Her nipples tingled, stiffening beneath her dress.

“Sweet.”

His voice was even lower than usual, almost growling, and she shivered again as a sudden wave of desire washed over her. It wasn’t the first time she’d reacted to him, but they’d never been quite so close before. If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine that he were kissing her neck. That his mouth could move down across her body. That he could...

She shuddered and took a hasty step away from him, trying to cover her reaction by quickly carrying her bowl over to the sink.

“That’s new,” she said, trying to sound casual. “You haven’t been able to pick up on

scents before, have you?”

He moved over to join her, although he didn’t come quite so close this time.

“No. At least, I don’t think so.” He tilted his head to one side, the way he often did when he was thinking. “But now that I think about it, it may have been happening for a while—just so gradually that I didn’t really notice. But when you opened the doors it was as if autumn came sweeping into the room. Does that mean it will grow stronger? That I’ll be able to experience more?”

He looked so hopeful that her heart ached and she gave him a helpless look.

“I wish I knew, but I’ve never lived with a ghost for this long before.” Or with anyone, but she pushed that thought aside. “I know that some of your other abilities have been growing stronger, haven’t they? Like being able to pull the covers down.”

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She had intended it as a teasing remark, but as she spoke she had a sudden vision of him stripping away the covers, of exposing her body to his view. To his touch.

That's never going to happen, she reminded herself as she looked over at him and gave him a somewhat shaky smile. Her breath caught at the look on his face, and she suddenly suspected that the same thought had occurred to him. Then he turned away, moving back across the room to the open doors and looking out over the town, his back to her.

"I've been practicing, and it does seem to be getting easier."

"Maybe you could practice with scent as well," she suggested. "You could come down to the restaurant."

He was free to move anywhere within the building, although he usually preferred to remain in the apartment.

"Although I would not suggest making yourself visible," she added with a smile.

Then again, with the exception of her human chef, the rest of her staff would probably take it in stride. She had the uneasy feeling that her reluctance for him to make his presence known had less to do with how her staff would react than with her reluctance to answer any questions about him. She couldn't help wondering what her best friend Wendy would have to say about the fact that she had essentially been living with Leo this entire time.

"I might do that," he said thoughtfully.

She smiled at him, then sighed.

“Speaking of restaurants, I’d better go down and make sure everything is ready for tonight. Do you want me to put the television on?”

She’d been leaving it on while she was at work, not only as a source of entertainment, but as a way for him to catch up on the things that had changed since his time. He shook his head, a sudden grin lighting his face.

“It’s not necessary.”

The television clicked on and clicked through several channels before shutting off again.

“I have discovered how to operate the remote control.”

Another change. He’d always had some ability to manipulate objects, although like most ghosts it had been more likely to occur when he was under the sway of some strong emotion. This ability to manipulate everyday objects had gradually been growing stronger.

“What else have you been practicing?”

A book flew off the bookshelf and landed on the counter next to her, the pages flipping open.

“She walks in beauty like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies,” he said softly, reading the poem aloud, and she had the oddest urge to cry.

She couldn’t look at him, afraid of what she might see in his face. Afraid of what he might see in hers.

“I’m glad you’re finding ways to entertain yourself,” she said, pasting a big smile on her face as she hurried towards the door. “I’d better go or I’ll be late.”

He didn’t say anything else and she didn’t look back as she closed the door behind her and hurried down the stairs to the restaurant.

When Damian had converted the old Craftsman bungalow into a restaurant, he’d left most of the rooms intact, choosing to create a series of intimate dining spaces rather than one larger space, and she did a quick survey of each room. The tables were already set for dinner, crystal and silver sparkling on the pristine white linen tablecloths. The flowers in the discreet arrangements on each table were still fresh and the water clear. Excellent.

She headed towards the kitchen just as a stream of curses erupted. Damn. Jack was temperamental, which certainly was not uncommon when it came to chefs, but he was also talented enough that Damian was willing to overlook those bouts of temperament. Part of her job was to smooth over those times with the rest of the staff. Pasting a pleasant smile on her face, she hurried into the kitchen.

The air was filled with a tantalizing mixture of scents from the sauces that were simmering on the stove and the desserts that were cooling on the counter. Jack was fuming at Cody. Cody was the busboy and backup sous chef, a laconic brownie with a scruff of beard and long brown hair tucked up under a red cap.

“Not my fault, dude,” Cody said, holding up his hands in surrender.

Even though they were hundreds of miles from the coast, Cody was convinced he was destined to be a surfer one day.

“Is there a problem?” she asked calmly.

“The mangos are not ripe,” Jack snarled, although he did take a step away from Cody.

Cody looked at her and shrugged.

“I just brought ‘em in.”

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“It is a little late in the season. Perhaps we should go with something appropriate for fall instead? Apples, perhaps?”

“Apples? How pedestrian.” Jack sniffed disdainfully but she gave him a cheerful smile.

“That’s probably true for chefs without your skills, but I know you could transform them into something amazing.”

Jack hesitated, clearly torn between his desire to prove his skills and his reluctance to give up on his grievance.

“Of course, I can,” he said finally, sniffing again, but he returned to work and Cody winked at her.

She lingered a moment longer, watching enviously as Jack bent over one of his pots. No one in any of her foster homes had ever bothered teaching her to cook, and once she was on the road she rarely had a full kitchen in which to experiment. Since she had moved here, Wendy had tried to teach her but her efforts had not been particularly successful.

She was still wistfully watching the chef’s skillful movements when a cold breeze drifted across her neck. Even without the breeze she was so attuned to him that she would have known he was present, but something had shifted between them, creating a new level of intimacy now. It was as if he were actually standing right behind her. As if she could lean back against that broad chest while he put his arms around her. The image was so real that for a moment she could almost feel those

powerful arms wrapped around her.

“Dude.”

Cody grinned, and she could have sworn he was actually looking at Leo over her head, but then he jumped down off the counter.

“Gotta get those apples. Be back later.”

He ambled out of the kitchen as she frowned after him, still convinced that he’d been as aware of Leo’s presence as she was. She flicked a quick look back over her shoulder but he wasn’t visible, even though she knew he was there.

“I need to check on the reservations for tonight,” she said quickly and fled.

CHAPTER 2

Leo bit back a sigh as Jessica fled down the stairs. His little psychic was the most skittish female he’d ever met. She was also the bravest. She had faced down his vengeful ex-wife, despite Alexis’s hate fueled powers.

How could I ever have been such a fool, he wondered as he had many times over the long years of his entrapment. They had met in his last year in college. She was a beautiful woman and he’d been beguiled by her outer beauty. By the time he discovered that her outer beauty concealed an ugly soul, it was too late. She’d told him she was pregnant, so he’d done the honorable thing and married her. Honorable, but foolish.

She hadn’t been pregnant. She just hadn’t had any interest in getting a job, and she’d thought that she could turn him into someone he was not. She hadn’t been successful, and she’d made both of them miserable in the process. At least he had been

miserable. She seemed to derive some type of vicious satisfaction out of pointing out his shortcomings and the many ways he'd failed her.

The move to Fairhaven Falls had been one of those failures.

He'd started a logging business on land he'd inherited from his grandparents just outside of town. Alexis liked the idea of being married to a successful businessman. She didn't like the fact that he'd actually worked with his crews instead of sitting in an office wearing a suit and tie every day.

She also hated the fact that the town was so small. And she despised the fact that so many Others had chosen to live in Fairhaven Falls. He'd offered her a divorce but she refused, although he'd had no idea why at the time. He couldn't bring himself to force her so he buried himself in work instead. She'd found other interests and even though they continued to occupy the same house they rarely saw each other. He'd even moved into one of the upstairs bedrooms.

It hadn't been the marriage and family he'd always envisioned but he'd accepted it. It wasn't until the last year of his life that everything fell apart.

A few years before that his half-brother had come looking for a job. Tim was six years younger than him and they had never been particularly close, but he'd been family. Leo had foolishly assumed that meant he could trust him. Tim had been the one who remained in the office, managing the business side of things—or rather mismanaging it as he'd discovered too late.

His brother was using company funds to pay his own bills and siphoning off money into his own accounts. He was also having an affair with Alexis—an affair that had apparently been going on since not long after he came to town.

If he had loved her, the betrayal would have devastated him. Instead it only made him

feel sick.

Tim had been behaving more and more erratically and Leo had been forced to spend more time in the office. That was when he discovered that Tim was stealing money from the company.

He'd fired him immediately—and that's when he discovered the affair. Alexis had been furious with him and ordered him to take Tim back. When he refused, she told him they loved each other, even though he knew that his brother had been having a torrid affair with his secretary for the past six months.

He'd done his best to warn her, but she hadn't wanted to listen. Just as she never listened to him.

He told her he was going to start divorce proceedings, but that night Tim had shown up at the house ranting about how much Leo owed him.

"I owe you?" he asked in astonishment. "You're the one who's been stealing from my company."

"It should have been my company. Our grandparents should have left the land to me."

He didn't bother pointing out that they'd been his mother's parents, not Tim's mother's. He just sighed, tired of the whole sordid business.

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“Just consider yourself lucky that I’m not prosecuting you for theft. You’re not getting anything else out of me.”

“Fine,” Alexis snapped. “Tim doesn’t need you anyway. He’s twice the businessman you are. We’ll be fine without you.”

“We?” Tim gave a harsh laugh. “There’s no we, you stupid bitch. I’m getting what he owes me and getting the hell out of this town. By myself.” Alexis looked so shocked he almost felt sorry for her, but then Tim pulled out a gun and pointed it at him. “Now give me the fucking password.”

She didn’t even seem to notice the gun.

“You told me you loved me. That you wanted to be with me.”

“Why would I want to be with you? There are a lot younger and prettier fish in the sea, ones who know how to please a man instead of lying there like a rag doll.”

Alexis screeched and flew at him and everything went into slow motion. He saw Tim raise the gun and tried to shove her out of the way. Instead a wave of agony radiated through his chest. The last thing he heard before darkness surrounded him was a second shot.

For a long time, it had been as if he were asleep, a nightmarish sleep with occasional flashes of wakefulness, a faint sense that time was passing. However as the fiftieth anniversary of his death drew nearer, those moments came more frequently. As they did, so did the knowledge that he was trapped, here in the house he had once loved so

much.

Alexis's hatred had wrapped everything in a dark, sticky web from which there was no escape. She had been so angry and so intent on causing harm. When he realized what she was doing, he had tried to counteract her actions, even though he did not have the strength of her hatred.

But then Jessica had come along and freed him. She had called him, her light piercing the darkness that surrounded him. He remembered standing in the circle she had drawn, aware of himself in a way he hadn't been for so long. Aware and warmed by her presence. He'd been cold for so long that even after she had released him, he hadn't wanted to leave the warmth of her companionship.

He'd felt a tug, something trying to pull him away, but he'd looked at her—small, pretty, almost delicate looking despite the strength of her will—and he'd known he couldn't leave.

He hadn't considered the possibility that she might not stay; that she might have moved on. But she had stayed. She'd even moved into his house. She could see him, and the loneliness which had surrounded him for so long vanished.

At first he had been content just with that, but as time wore on, he realized he wanted more. He wanted things he could never have. He wanted to touch her. He wanted to hold her hand when they were watching television, or stroke her hair when she was having a bad day. And more than anything, he wanted to kiss her, to feel those soft pretty lips beneath his.

He'd never really considered the afterlife while he was still alive. If he had, he would have assumed one was no longer troubled by the desires of the flesh. But it wasn't true. He wanted her the way a man wants a woman. His body responded to her nearness. He knew it was an illusion, a memory of an erection rather than the real

thing, but it felt real.

He gave a frustrated sigh and the doors to the balcony flew open again. Damn. His ability to manipulate physical objects intentionally had increased, but as a result, so had the unintentional consequences when his emotions triggered physical events

Although he didn't need to be in physical proximity to close the doors, he automatically crossed the room towards them, then hesitated when something caught his attention. When he had been standing here with Jessica earlier, he'd been too focused on her and the delightful discovery that he could now detect her sweet floral scent to pay much attention to anything else. This time he realized something else.

Usually when he approached the boundaries of the building, he encountered an invisible barrier, as if the air was too thick for him to move through it. He didn't feel it now. Had that changed as well?

He cautiously moved out onto the balcony expecting at any moment to be slammed back into the house. Instead, he made it almost to the edge before the air thickened. There was a certain logic to it. The balcony was, after all, part of the building. But he didn't think he'd ever gotten this far before.

Have I tried before? Or had he just assumed it wasn't possible? Either way, he was grateful for the change and for the wider view out over the town to the mountains beyond.

He loved Fairhaven Falls. When he'd moved here, he'd felt as if he were coming home, even though he'd been born and raised in the Pacific Northwest. Perhaps it was because his grandparents had lived there. Whatever the reason, his love for the town had never changed, despite his unhappiness. In fact, he sometimes thought it was the only thing that had kept him going during the long, unhappy years of his marriage.

It still seemed so familiar. There were a few new buildings, but most of the houses surrounding him were the same ones that had been there when he first moved in. There were a few changes—an addition here, a new roof there, sleek new cars parked in the driveways, and a tree he remembered his neighbor planting, now grown tall and majestic—but overall it still felt the same.

As he smiled down in the quiet street below, a flash of color caught his attention. A small elderly woman was walking briskly down the street wearing a neon green tracksuit so bright it almost seemed to vibrate.

Not a woman, he realized as she drew closer and he saw pale green skin beneath the mop of short white curls. Something about her seemed vaguely familiar, but he couldn't quite place it.

Then she came to a dead halt directly in front. He'd concealed his appearance, but she was looking directly up at him and he was sure that she could see him. Dark eyes, curiously compelling, studied his face.

"It's about time," she said briskly.

He couldn't help himself.

"About time for what?"

She didn't seem the least bit surprised by his response, just wagged her finger at him.

"We're already into October. You'd better get busy."

"Busy doing what?" he asked, then blinked when he realized she was no longer there.

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How could she have vanished so quickly and so completely? Was she a ghost as well, he wondered, then immediately rejected the idea. There had been something so vibrant, so alive about her.

A memory tugged at him, but once again, it eluded him.

And what am I supposed to be doing?

She seemed to think he should know, but there was so little he actually could do. Except to continue trying to strengthen my abilities. Could that have been what she meant?

He thought back to earlier that morning and how much he'd enjoyed teasing Jessica by pulling the covers down. And about that first moment when he'd breathed in her scent, as if he were really standing there next to her. Were the two related? Did strengthening his abilities in one area strengthen other areas as well?

If he could see and hear and now smell, what if he could taste? What if he could touch? He thought about what she'd said about testing his newly discovered sense of smell with the variety of scents in the kitchen.

Should he see how far this newfound ability extended? He hesitated for a moment, then projected himself down into the kitchen. Although he had little difficulty moving within the manor, the fact that Jessica was already in the kitchen made it easier.

He veiled his appearance as he always did in the restaurant, but Cody looked over and grinned at him.

“Dude.”

Perhaps it was because Cody had been present during the banishment rite. Or perhaps it was because brownies were not only resistant to glamour, but also bonded to their chosen places. Whatever the reason, Cody had always been able to spot him. They’d even talked a few times, although fortunately it had always been when they were alone. As far as he could tell Cody had never told anyone else about him. Cody didn’t try to talk to him now, just grinned again before he left the kitchen.

He had materialized directly behind Jessica and he couldn’t resist bending down and breathing her in once again, half afraid it had been a fluke, but he could still catch her sweet floral fragrance.

If anything it seemed stronger, sweeter. Unable to resist, he tried brushing a quick kiss to the curve of her neck, hoping perhaps he could taste her. He could feel her skin against his mouth, but only as a resistance. He couldn’t taste her, couldn’t tell if her skin was warm or cool. And although he could imagine how silky her skin would feel, he couldn’t sense that either.

And yet she responded to his touch. He saw her shiver slightly, her nipples tightening beneath the pretty dress. Not for the first time, he wondered what those tempting little buds looked like—pale pink or dusky coral or somewhere in between. He’d frequently been tempted to spy on her and find out, but he was a man of his word—a ghost of his word—and he wouldn’t violate her confidence.

Then her scent deepened and he had the sudden suspicion it was due to arousal. If his suspicion was correct, then the brush of his mouth against her skin had pleased her. Was it possible?

A pot clattered to the ground as a surge of excitement went through him. Jessica frowned up at him over her shoulder. Even concealed as he was, she seemed to be

looking directly into his face.

Stop that, she mouthed.

He couldn't tell her it had been an accident because he couldn't make himself heard to just one person. Or could he? It occurred to him that it was another limitation that he'd never thought to test.

"Sorry," he said, his voice just barely above a whisper.

Her eyes widened and she took a quick look around, but no one else reacted.

"I don't think they can hear me." A little louder this time, but there was still no reaction.

"I'm just going to go check on tonight's reservations," she announced, hurrying out of the room and into the former butler's pantry that had been converted into a small office.

"What are you doing?" she demanded as he materialized in front of her. "What if they'd heard you?"

"But they didn't hear me. I never thought to test it before but it seems as if I can direct my words specifically to you. And possibly Cody," he added.

"What do you mean?"

"Cody can see me."

She sighed. "Damn. I was afraid of that."

“Why does it bother you so much?”

She looked away from him, pink flushing her pale cheeks.

“He’s not exactly discreet.”

“Isn’t he? You didn’t know that he could see me, and he’s never mentioned it to anyone else.”

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“I suppose not,” she conceded but she didn’t look any happier.

They were only a few inches apart in the small space and he gave in to a sudden impulse, placing his finger under her chin and applying a little pressure. To his utter shock, she responded to the gesture, raising her head to look at him as her eyes went wide.

“How did you do that?”

“I have absolutely no idea. Could you feel my hand?”

“Not exactly. Just a little... pressure, but I knew what you wanted me to do.”

“Do you know what I want now?” he asked, and lowered his head.

CHAPTER 3

Jessica’s heart skipped a beat as Leo lowered his head towards her, his intentions clear. It won’t work, she told herself, but she closed her eyes anyway.

For a moment she felt nothing, then there was a slight pressure against her mouth. A gasp escaped, and then she felt the warmth of his lips against hers, along with a faint but undeniable presence. She had a fleeting impression of a gentle, teasing stroke along her bottom lip before he pulled back.

“Jessica, I-”

Suddenly afraid of what he might say, she hurried into speech instead.

“I don’t understand. You couldn’t do that before, could you?”

He tried to touch her a few times in the first couple of months, but it was as if his hand simply passed through her—an experience neither one of them enjoyed. He shook his head, watching her thoughtfully.

“Is it that unusual?”

“I knew it was possible. I was thrown across the room once when I didn’t prepare the circle correctly.”

“I have no desire to throw you across the room. I want to close the distance between us, not increase it.”

“I know you do,” she whispered. “I wonder...”

She raised her hand to his chest, but it was the same as in their early experiments and she quickly drew it away as he gave a frustrated sigh. There had to be a reason why he’d been able to touch her but she hadn’t been able to do the same.

“Maybe that’s something that will come with time as well. Or maybe we just need to practice,” he added, smiling at her.

He lowered his head again and she eagerly accepted his kiss, but it was the same fleeting sensation. There was a brief moment when she could actually feel the warmth of his mouth against hers, and then her mouth tingled slightly, as if from a mild shock, and he was gone.

The third time, the sensation was so faint she could barely feel it, as if the connection

between them was fading.

“I think that’s enough for right now,” she said finally, and she was sure she wasn’t imagining the disappointment in his eyes. “It’s probably going to take some time.” If it happens at all.

“I’m not sure I have time.”

“Why would you think that? You’re not... leaving are you?”

She couldn’t stand the thought of losing him, but if he was being called to move on...

“No,” he said immediately. “It’s just that the strangest thing happened this-”

Before he could continue, the door to the office opened and her best friend Wendy poked her head in.

“Hey! Are you busy?”

“Never too busy for you,” she said, hoping she sounded sincere.

Wendy was a very pretty, very curvy brunette with an impeccable sense of style. The two of them had met at a convention for bloggers—Wendy wrote about food and restaurants while Jessica wrote about the psychic world—and they had immediately hit it off. They had kept in touch via emails and messages because both of them traveled and they were rarely close enough to meet in person, but then Wendy had asked her to come and help with the vengeful spirit haunting Midnight Manor.

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They'd grown even closer since she'd decided to stay in Fairhaven Falls, but as much as she loved her friend, she couldn't help wishing she'd chosen a better time.

"Would you like to go to..." The words broke off as her friend took another look at her. "Is something wrong?"

"No. Why would you think that?"

She hastily picked up a stack of invoices and started going through them, sure that she was blushing.

"I don't know, you look flushed."

"Maybe I'm coming down with something."

"Oh, I hope not. I was just coming to ask if you'd like to go to the Fall Festival this weekend."

"I don't think I can. You know the restaurant always gets busier when there's a festival in town so Damian usually likes to open up for lunch."

Wendy grinned at her.

"Yes, but this time he's going to manage the restaurant so you can have an afternoon off for a change."

"I don't need an afternoon off. I'm fine."

“Yes, you do. And I’m not the only one who thinks so. Flora agreed with me,” Wendy finished triumphantly, as if that settled the matter. Unfortunately, it probably did.

Flora was an orc but she took after the fairy in her ancestors. Even though she appeared to be nothing more than a harmless little old lady, everyone in town knew better. Flora had her pulse on everything, and she could never resist meddling. Her intentions were always good and it was hard to argue with the results, but that didn’t make it any easier if she set her sights on you. She sighed.

“Why does Flora think I need to get out? I’m perfectly happy here.”

Wendy shrugged.

“Her exact words were that you were an attractive young woman, and you shouldn’t be keeping yourself locked away in some musty old house waiting for the right man to materialize.”

Materialize?She gave a startled jerk. Flora couldn’t possibly know about Leo, could she?

“Of course, Damian immediately took offense to the comment about the restaurant being musty,” Wendy continued cheerfully,“but he agreed to take over. So, that means you’re coming with me, right?”

She gave in to the inevitable.

“I suppose so, although I don’t really have anything to wear.”

“Nonsense. The dress you have on is very pretty.”

“It is pretty, but it’s hardly suitable for walking around outside in the cold.”

“That’s true. Let me think.”

Wendy hummed thoughtfully, and Jessica winced at the speculative look on her face. Wendy loved clothes, and she was always beautifully dressed. She tended to favor vintage styles which flattered her full figure, like the pretty blue polka dot dress that she was wearing now, complete with a ruffled lace petticoat peeking out from beneath the skirt. As much as it suited her friend, it was not her style.

“I could just wear my cloak,” she said quickly. Midnight blue velvet with a sprinkle of tiny stars across the shoulders, it might be a little overdressed for a small town festival but it was warm and safe and concealing. Unfortunately, Wendy was already shaking her head.

“I think we can do better than that. Just leave it to me.” Wendy reached over and patted her hand. “Don’t worry, I won’t pick out anything you don’t like.”

There was a world of sympathy in Wendy’s eyes. Although they’d never explicitly discussed Jessica’s past, she suspected she’d revealed enough for Wendy to understand why she chose to dress the way she did. She gave her friend a somewhat shaky smile and Wendy squeezed her hand again, then grinned.

“And who knows, perhaps you’ll meet the man of your dreams.”

I’ve already met the man of my dreams, she thought hopelessly, as Wendy suddenly shivered.

“Brrr. Maybe we should talk to Damian about getting some storm windows or something. The temperature in here must have dropped ten degrees with that draft.”

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Since she was pretty sure that the draft had been Leo registering his disapproval of the idea of her finding another man, she settled for a noncommittal shrug.

“Now that’s settled,” her friend continued, “I have a few suggestions for the fall menu. Do you have time to go over them with me? Then we can figure out the best way to suggest them to Jack.”

This time her smile was a lot more genuine. Wendy had attended culinary school and worked at a very upscale restaurant in New York before becoming a food blogger, and she was an extremely talented cook. Jack had a grudging respect for her abilities but that didn’t mean he wanted advice from her, even if she was mated to the owner of the restaurant. Damian wouldn’t have hesitated to order him to change the menu, but she and Wendy preferred a more tactful approach.

“The secret is to let him think it’s his own idea. What did you have in mind?”

CHAPTER 4

Leo winced as the icy breeze swept through the office. He hadn’t meant to react so strongly to the mention of Jessica meeting someone at the Fall Festival, but the thought of her with another man had triggered an immediate reaction. Guilt gnawed at him as he watched Jessica and Wendy shiver, their conversation momentarily interrupted by the sudden chill.

“Damn it,” he muttered, frustrated by his lack of control.

He could do things now that he’d never dreamed of, but the flip side of those abilities

was that he couldn't always control them, especially under the grip of any strong emotion, and those side effects were growing stronger as he grew stronger. Determined to rectify his mistake, he closed his eyes and concentrated. He visualized warmth spreading through the room, pushing back against the cold he'd inadvertently summoned. Controlling the temperature consciously was a much harder task, like trying to swim against a strong current.

He continued trying to force the temperature to adjust until he felt the air around him shift. The chill began to dissipate, replaced by a gentle warmth that settled over the office like a cozy blanket. He opened his eyes, relief washing over him as both women relaxed. He hadn't realized how much stronger his abilities had become. It was both exhilarating and terrifying.

As Wendy continued chattering about the fair, his gaze lingered on Jessica. Even though he knew he'd veiled his presence, her eyes darted over to where he stood. His heart ached at the conflict in her expression as Wendy teased her about potential suitors—a conflict he understood all too well. He knew it was selfish, but he couldn't stand the thought of losing her. He did his best to send a wave of reassurance in her direction and some of the tension left her shoulders.

Wendy moved on to discussing the fall menu for the restaurant and Jessica relaxed even more. He watched her pretty, delicate face as she laughed, at ease with her friend in a way she very rarely was around most people. She put up an excellent act and he didn't think that anyone realized she always maintained a slight distance between herself and other people. He wished he knew more about her past, but although she'd dropped a few hints here and there, she never wanted to talk about it and he'd never pushed her.

Her fingers absently touched her lips, and he suspected she was remembering that fleeting kiss just as he was—a tantalizing whisper of what could have been. His own mouth tingled with the aftershocks of that brief moment of connection, and a wave of

frustration crashed over him. The kiss had been everything he'd dreamed of and more, but it had been cruelly short. For a heartbeat, he'd felt truly alive again, solid and real in a way he hadn't experienced since his death. The warmth of Jessica's lips, the softness of her skin—it had all been so vivid, so achingly perfect.

But now, as he stood there, incorporeal once more, the gulf between them seemed wider than ever. His heart ached with a longing so intense it threatened to consume him. He'd tasted a fragment of what they could have together, only to have it snatched away in an instant.

Despite that brevity, his body had responded to the kiss as if every fiber of his being had come alive in that moment, defying the laws that usually bound him to his ghostly state. It's just the memory of arousal, he told himself again. No matter how real it felt.

The boundaries of his existence had never felt more confining, but he did his best to control his frustration, afraid of the consequences of letting his emotions run free. Am I being selfish, he wondered again. Here he was, clinging to Jessica and what they had together, keeping her tethered to a man who could never truly be with her. A ghost. A memory. A whisper of what might have been. He'd once dreamed of a loving wife, of children running through the halls of Midnight Manor, of family dinners filled with laughter and warmth, but that dream had faded even before his future had been so violently ripped away from him.

But Jessica... she still had a chance at that kind of life. She was young, vibrant, and so beautiful it made his heart ache. Her whole future stretched out before her and yet, here she was, bound to him by this strange connection between them.

His form flickered, his anguish threatening to make him fade entirely, but he forced himself to stay present, to keep watching as Wendy returned to the subject of the Fall Festival. He saw the way Jessica's eyes darted to where he stood concealed in the

corner, and the guilt in her gaze was unmistakable.

She deserved more than stolen moments and secret glances. She deserved a man who could hold her hand as they walked through the festival, who could dance with her under the autumn stars. Someone who could give her the family she might one day want.

The thought of Jessica with another man sent another surge of jealousy through him, but he managed to control it enough this time that the room remained at the same temperature. He had no right to feel possessive. He was dead, after all. What future could he possibly offer her?

Unless... What if he could do more? What if he could strengthen his abilities enough to be truly present for her? He'd already learned to manipulate objects and to adjust the atmosphere. His sense of smell had returned and now... a kiss. Perhaps there was hope after all. He closed his eyes, concentrating on the energy that flowed through him. He imagined it growing stronger, more tangible.

For a moment, he felt a tingling sensation in his fingertips and then the brief sensation of the wooden shelf behind him against his skin. It wasn't much, but it was progress. As he considered this newfound possibility, he remembered Flora's comment about the beginning of October and he frowned, a vague memory flickering at the edges of his consciousness. There was something important about October, wasn't there? Something he should remember?

He grasped at the fleeting thought, but it slipped away like smoke through his fingers and frustration welled up inside him. Why couldn't he remember? It felt crucial, as if it held the key to... something. He shook his head and turned his attention back to Jessica, watching as she nodded along to Wendy's excited chatter about the fair. The festival. October. Why did it all feel so significant?

The memory continued to evade him and he sighed, returning to his previous idea about strengthening his abilities. He focused on the lamp sitting on Jessica's desk, concentrating on the small light source. To his amazement, the lamp's glow intensified, casting a brighter circle of illumination across the desk's surface.

Her head immediately snapped up, going directly to his location, even though he was still veiled. He'd done it. He'd manipulated a physical object in a way Jessica could clearly perceive. The realization sent a rush of hope coursing through him. If he could affect the lamp, what else might he be capable of? He'd always been able to interact with his environment to some degree, but this felt different. Stronger. More controlled. What had changed? And why now?

Wendy's eyes widened.

"Did that lamp just get brighter?"

"It's an old lamp," Jessica said quickly, but her friend shook her head, a teasing look on her face.

"This is Fairhaven Falls, remember. Looks like the Halloween spirits are getting an early start this year!"

Wendy's words triggered a long-forgotten memory, his grandmother's voice echoing in his mind, telling stories by the fireplace on chilly autumn evenings. She'd spoken of the veil between worlds growing thin as All Hallows' Eve approached, allowing spirits to walk among the living.

The realization hit him like a bolt of lightning. Was this what Flora had meant when she mentioned October? Could it be true? Was there a chance he might actually step through the veil and be with Jessica in a more tangible way? The papers on the desk stirred and he quickly forced down another wave of emotion. He'd never wanted

something so badly.

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He couldn't wait until Jessica was alone again so share this revelation with her. Or should he? What if he raised her hopes only to find out he was wrong? Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that something momentous was on the horizon. The strengthening of his abilities, the unexpected kiss, and now this ancient lore resurfacing – it all seemed to point towards a shift in their impossible situation.

Wendy was talking about the cider doughnuts at the festival, and he found himself imagining what it would be like to share one with Jessica. To walk beside her, hand in hand, feeling the crisp autumn breeze against his skin. To share doughnuts, and mulled wine, and kisses.

The ache of longing intensified, but for the first time it included a spark of hope. If there was even the slightest chance of crossing over, he knew he had to pursue it. For Jessica. For himself. For the future they both secretly yearned for but had never dared to voice aloud.

The only question was how?

CHAPTER 5

Jessica's footsteps echoed softly through the empty restaurant as she wandered between the rooms doing a final check. The dim light cast long shadows across the polished wood floors, and the scents of the evening's meals lingered in the air. The check wasn't really necessary—Cody had left everything spotless as always—but she took comfort in the familiar routine. And it gave her an excuse not to return to her apartment just yet.

The memory of Leo's kiss burned in her thoughts, refusing to fade. She touched her lips, recalling the fleeting warmth, the impossible reality of it. It had been such a brief, tentative touch but it made her feel alive in a way she hadn't felt—hadn't allowed herself to feel—in a very long time.

As she approached the window in the front room, her reflection stared back at her from the dark glass, and she hardly recognized the woman looking back—flushed cheeks, bright eyes, a hint of a smile tugging at her lips. It was a far cry from her usual calm, distant persona. The change was both exhilarating and terrifying. She'd spent years building walls, protecting herself, and now those walls were crumbling.

“What am I doing?” she whispered, closing her eyes.

She'd dealt with ghosts before, helped them move on, but this... this was uncharted territory. Her experiences as Mystic Madam hadn't prepared her for falling for a spirit. Perhaps the only reason she'd even let him get so close was because he wasn't physically present. But if that changed, what would he expect from her?

She turned away from the window, resuming her restless pacing. As she wandered through the restaurant, she couldn't shake off the echo of Leo's presence. It lingered like a phantom touch, following her from room to room, reminding her that she was never truly alone in this place. She'd grown used to that feeling, to the comfort of his presence.

“What if this goes wrong? What if he disappears? What if...” She stopped, her throat tight. The real fear, the one she'd been running from for so long, finally surfaced. “What if I end up alone again?”

In the past she'd managed to convince herself that being alone was safe, protected, but she was terribly afraid that now she would never be able to accept that lie again. Leo had changed that. He had shown her that connections, that intimacy, could be

more than painful. But he was also the one who'd shown her the risks of loving someone who was already gone.

The weight of her conflicting emotions settled over her like a heavy blanket, and she wandered back over to the window, resting her fingertips on the cool glass. Fairhaven Falls looked so peaceful, streetlights casting warm halos on the empty sidewalks as a flurry of fallen leaves swirled down the street. This town had become home as well, an anchor she'd never thought to have. If things went wrong with Leo, she would lose that as well.

A cold draft swept through the room, making her shiver as she cast a startled glance over her shoulder. This wasn't Leo's presence; she knew his energy well enough by now. This felt different, unsettling, and the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. She couldn't shake the feeling of being watched as the curtains moved gently in a nonexistent breeze.

"Hello?" she called out softly, her voice barely above a whisper. Only silence answered.

"It's just your imagination," she muttered to herself, but her years of experience as the Mystic Madam had taught her to trust her instincts. Something was wrong.

She glanced over her shoulder again, half-expecting to see a shadowy figure, but the restaurant remained still and empty. She cautiously extended that sixth sense that she'd spent so many years trying to control. A chill crept over her, and she shivered as the sensation of being watched intensified. It was as though an invisible gaze was piercing the shadows, observing her. She concentrated harder, trying to identify the source, and then it was gone. The restaurant felt as empty as it looked, but the chill of that presence lingered in the air, like the scent of the earlier meals, confirming that she hadn't been mistaken. Someone—something—had been here.

Frowning, she made her way towards the stairs to the apartment. Midnight Manor had been home to more than just Leo, but she was quite sure that she had succeeded in banishing Alexis. And why would another spirit suddenly show up now? Then again, Fairhaven Falls did attract some rather strange inhabitants and the chill she'd felt wasn't necessarily malicious.

Despite her attempts to convince herself that everything was fine, unease was still gnawing at her when she walked into the apartment. Leo was sitting in the big chair by the fireplace, a book open on his lap and looking so real that her heart skipped a beat. He smiled at her, but the smile quickly faded, replaced by concern and her breath caught in her throat. She wanted to run to him, but hesitated, unsure of how to navigate this new territory between them.

"You look troubled," he said softly, watching her.

She nodded, unable to find the right words, and he immediately rose and came towards her. His comforting presence surrounded her as he reached out, attempting to put his arm around her shoulders. To her surprise, she felt the weight and warmth of his touch. It wasn't quite solid, more like the pressure of sunlight on a summer day, but it was unmistakably there.

Without thinking, she leaned into his embrace. The comfort of his nearness washed over her, easing some of the tension from her body, and she closed her eyes, allowing herself to pretend this was real.

"What's wrong?" he murmured, his voice a gentle rumble she could almost feel. "Is this about what happened earlier?"

"Yes, and no. I've been thinking about what happened earlier all night, but I was just checking the doors and..." Her voice trailed off, uncertainty creeping in.

“And what?” he prompted gently.

“I think there was something else down there. Another spirit.”

His body tensed and the temperature in the room dropped. She instinctively shivered, and the warmth returned as his arm tightened around her, the weight of it across her shoulders increasing.

“Alexis?” he asked, his voice harsh.

“No, I’m sure it wasn’t her.” She felt him relax and gave him a rueful smile. “It’s possible I was just imagining it.”

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Except that was what she'd been told in all her foster homes—and they'd been wrong.

“Is that really what you think?”

His dark eyes were warm and perceptive, and she shook her head.

“No. But it didn't last long, and it might simply have been a... visitor to town.”

“Is that possible? Aren't all ghosts tied to the place where they died?”

He had a curiously intent look on his face.

“Not at all. It's most common but it's not the only possibility. Sometimes the spirit is searching for something and sometimes they aren't anchored anywhere but they don't know how to move on.”

He shuddered. “That sounds worse than being trapped—never having a place where you belong.”

“You have a place where you belong,” she said firmly. “Here. With me.”

Impulsively, she reached for him and to her amazement, her fingers connected with a solid form. She felt the powerful expanse of his chest beneath her touch, warm and real. His eyes widened, mirroring her own wonderment, and then his gaze turned heated.

Slowly, he leaned down, closing the distance between them. Her heart raced as his lips met hers, and this time the kiss wasn't the fleeting, tentative touch of earlier that day. This was a full, passionate kiss, his mouth firm and demanding against hers and she could feel it all. Her lips parted instinctively, and his tongue stroked hers, slightly cool but undeniably real, and she could taste apples and something wild and untamed.

She clutched at his chest, her body pressing closer to him as she surrendered to the sensation, to the heat sparking between them. For the first time in so long, she felt alive, every nerve ending singing at his touch. He was the only thing that mattered, the rest of the world fading into the background. The warmth of his body and the scent of apples wrapped around her like an embrace.

Her nipples tingled and she felt the slow, almost forgotten pulse of arousal low in her belly, but then that little voice in the back of her mind reminded her of what he was—a ghost, not a living, breathing man. A ghost who could fade at any moment, who couldn't truly be there for her.

With a gasp, she pulled back, breaking the kiss. Her chest heaved as she struggled to catch her breath, to gather her thoughts. His chest was rising and falling just as rapidly, even though he didn't need to breathe. A choked sound escaped at the thought—half laugh, half sob—and she turned away from him.

“I can't. We can't. This is... impossible.”

She wrapped her arms around her waist, hugging herself protectively, and she could hear him pacing behind her. How could a ghost sound so alive?

“I'm not so sure it is impossible.”

His voice was deep and intense and she could feel the truth of the connection between them, but...

“How can you think that? You died a long time ago.”

“Maybe I died too soon. Maybe my time isn’t over yet.”

Her head snapped up at the hint of hope in his voice.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been doing some research. Did you know that All Hallow’s Eve is a time when the veil between worlds is thinnest? I think it might be possible to cross that barrier, at least temporarily, and I intend to try.”

She turned and stared at him, her heart pounding. He looked so determined, but...

“I’ve never heard of that happening,” she said slowly. “I’m not sure it’s possible.”

“But what if it is? Will you help me?”

“What if it goes wrong? What if I lose you forever?”

Her voice broke on the question and he immediately reached for her, but this time he didn’t make contact and he gave a frustrated sigh.

“I want to be with you, Jessica. I can’t ignore the possibility.”

He looked so hopeful that despite all the years of engrained caution, she found herself nodding.

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“I want to be with you too,” she whispered. “If you really think it’s possible, maybe I could do some research.”

He nodded eagerly.

“It’s worth investigating. And if I’m right, and if the power is strongest at the end of the month, then I want to try.”

CHAPTER 6

Later that night, Leo prowled restlessly around the apartment. After Jessica had somewhat reluctantly agreed to investigate the possibility of him crossing over, they had avoided the subject for the rest of the evening. It should have been like any other evening, and yet it wasn’t.

He sat with her as she prepared and ate one of her usual rabbit food meals, and even though he could smell it this time, it didn’t seem any more appetizing. She was obviously preoccupied by his revelation, toying with her fork and abandoning her already minimal dinner halfway through it. He bit back an instinctive protest, trying to remember that she was capable of taking care of herself, then thought of an alternative.

“Would you mind making some popcorn?” he asked casually. “With lots of butter? I’ve missed the smell of it.”

She shook her head but complied, bringing the bowl to the couch as they sat down to watch one of her favorite shows. He watched in satisfaction as she absently ate most

of the bowl, then gave him a suspicious look.

“You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Did what?” he asked, doing his best to keep his expression innocent.

“You knew I’d eat the popcorn.”

“Maybe. Did you enjoy it?”

“Obviously,” she laughed, pointing at the empty bowl before she licked the last traces of butter off her fingers. Watching her pretty mouth close around her fingers made him ache and he shifted on the couch, aware of his cock hardening. He’d always been aware of his desire for her, but after that kiss he craved her the way he’d once craved the air he no longer breathed.

As the episode finished, she stood up and stretched. She’d changed into her pajamas before the show and the movement gave him a tantalizing glimpse of her midriff. His gaze lingered on her pale skin, wishing he could press a line of kisses to the soft curve of her stomach. He must have looked a little too long because he heard her breath catch and looked up to find her watching him, her expression a complicated mixture of longing and hope and fear.

“I would never hurt you,” he said quietly, and she gave a shaky nod.

“I know. I just...”

For a moment he thought she might confide in him, but she only nodded again and fled for her bedroom. Normally he would have followed her, but he decided to give her a little space—and ended up pacing instead. He didn’t sleep, exactly, but usually, once he assumed his position in the corner of her bedroom, he drifted into a state

somewhere between waking and sleeping. That state was impossible to achieve tonight and he finally decided she must be asleep and went to take up his usual position.

She was asleep, but she wasn't sleeping peacefully, her head shifting restlessly across the pillow.

"No," she whispered, her voice oddly childlike, and his heart ached as a tear slipped down her cheek.

He wished he could comfort her, but there was nothing he could do. Or was there? Very cautiously, he lay down on the bed next to her, trying to project the same sense of warmth and comfort as he had earlier. Her body slowly stilled, and then she sighed and rolled towards him. To his shock, her head came to rest on his chest.

He froze, half-afraid he would shatter the fragile illusion, but her breathing remained deep and even. Very carefully, he raised his arm and placed it gently around her shoulders, feeling the warmth of her body beneath his touch. She sighed again and nestled a little closer. His heart ached. If only this was real. If only he could truly have her in his arms, in his bed.

Her breathing changed and he realized she was awake. He started to move away, to lift his arm, but she reached up to put a hand on top of his.

"Don't leave me," she whispered, and he gave a silent nod, holding her a little tighter.

"I'll never leave you."

She relaxed against him, her body melting into his, and despite the impossibility of the situation, he felt his body respond. Her scent surrounded him, sweet and tempting and he could hear her heart racing. He knew she had to feel his erection, hard

and insistent against her, but she didn't pull away and he didn't dare to move. He was afraid to break this fragile connection, this moment of closeness that felt so right.

"Leo," she breathed, the longing in her voice undeniable.

"Sweetheart," he murmured back.

She turned her head until her lips pressed against his throat and he bit back a groan, his cock throbbing as her mouth opened against his skin, hot and eager. The bed sheets were in the way, but he could feel the small curves of her breasts, her nipples hard and tight, pressing against his chest.

He moved his arm from around her shoulder and slid his hand down her side, caressing the dip of her waist, the gentle flare of her hips. The warmth of her skin radiated through the thin fabric, and his fingers slipped beneath the hem of her top, seeking her flesh.

She arched against him, her breath catching, as he explored her body. Her skin was like silk beneath his fingers, and he could feel that too, so warm and alive. He longed to touch her breasts, to cup the soft flesh and tease the taut peaks, but he settled for sliding his hand beneath her top to caress the curve of her back and the delicate lines of her ribs. He could feel the throb of her pulse, the rapid rise and fall of her chest, her arousal clear, and his own body responded in kind.

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He continued to stroke her back, but although he could feel her skin, there was still a faint, frustrating distance between them, an invisible barrier that prevented true intimacy. But the barrier felt as if it were weakening. Her breath was coming in soft, rapid pants, and he could feel the tension building in her body as her heart raced. His own body was throbbing, demanding more.

Her mouth moved against him, hot and desperate, and he turned his head, his lips seeking hers. Their mouths connected in an explosion of sensation. His body felt as if it was on fire, and he clutched her to him, desperate for closer contact. The taste of her filled his mouth as she moaned and her leg slid over his, her body pressing even closer. He felt the wet heat of her arousal against his thigh and groaned, his hand sliding down to squeeze her ass. She moaned again and her hand slid between them, seeking his erection. Her fingers brushed against it and they both shuddered. Instinctively, he started to roll over on top of her. She suddenly froze, and then...

He was back in his usual place in the corner, his body barely visible, and the loss was almost unbearable. She was staring blindly up at the ceiling, her eyes wide and confused... and scared.

“Leo?” she whispered. “Where did you go?”

“I’m still here, sweetheart, back in my usual position. Are you all right?”

“Y-yes.,” she said hesitantly, and then her voice firmed as she sat up and looked at him. “I’m fine. But you felt so real. It was so... intense and then you were just gone.”

He hesitated, then drifted towards her, his body frustratingly immaterial.

“Something happened, didn’t it? Something that scared you?”

She bit her lip and didn’t answer immediately, and he didn’t push. He knew better than anyone how hard it was to revisit the past.

“My last foster home was... not a nice place. Someone I thought I could trust... hurt me.”

He growled, his anger washing through the room. Ice formed on the windows but he managed to keep the air around her warm. She sighed and nodded her head.

“Exactly. I was a little... broken by the experience.”

She gave a shaky laugh.

“I’ve avoided men ever since. Until you,” she added, and he could hear a trace of the old, confident Jessica. “But when you rolled over, it reminded me of him.”

“I would never hurt you,” he said fiercely.

“I know, Leo. But he didn’t start by hurting me.”

The memory was obviously painful and he didn’t ask her for any further details. She sighed again, then gave him a rueful smile.

“I wish I understood why this is happening between us.”

“Because the veil is weakening?”

“I suppose it’s possible, although it’s still a few weeks to Halloween.”

“I can’t think of any other reason—and although I’m sorry I frightened you, I can’t say that I’m sorry that I can touch you.”

She looked at him, her smile still a little shaky, and nodded.

“No, neither am I.”

There was a pause, and then she climbed out of bed and walked to the window, staring out into the night.

“Do you think it’s actually possible?”

He could hear the mixture of both longing and trepidation in her voice and his own heart ached.

“You mean that I can be alive again?”

“Yes.” She hesitated, toying with the edge of the curtain. “Would... would you mind if I consulted a few people?”

“Not at all. Make your calls, sweetheart,” he said gently. “Let’s see if we can find a way.”

CHAPTER 7

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Jessica slept better than she'd expected. She'd been afraid that the old nightmares would return, but perhaps knowing that Leo was watching over her had kept them at bay. She'd also been afraid that he might look at her differently, but he gave her his usual warm smile before she headed off to the bathroom.

As she stood under the shower, her thoughts kept returning to the previous night. She couldn't remember ever feeling that aroused, that needy. She hadn't been afraid at all, just excited, until... She shivered and quickly finished her shower.

It wasn't until after she dressed and looked at herself in the mirror that she realized she'd instinctively chosen one of her old outfits—a skirt with multiple layers of gauzy fabric and a brightly colored tunic layered over a silk cami and a tightly laced vest. She'd added most of her necklaces and pulled on her favorite pair of Doc Martins.

“You look beautiful,” Leo said as she walked out of the bathroom.

“Thank you.”

He frowned, studying her more carefully, and she could tell that he'd realized what had triggered her outfit. His expression softened and he moved closer.

“We'll take this as slowly as you want.”

“If we can take it at all,” she muttered, but he smiled at her.

“Then I'll be happy just spending time with you.”

“Really?”

He started to hold out his hand, then stopped.

“Really. As much as I want to touch you, to be with you, I’m also happy just being with you.” He sighed. “Although I’m obviously not capable of expressing it very well.”

She had to laugh and he grinned at her.

“That’s better.”

She took a deep breath, then lightly placed her hand on top of his. She could feel his hand, big and firm and still roughened by the work he’d done in life, but to her relief it felt safe rather than intimidating and she smiled at him.

“Then you can be with me while I eat breakfast.”

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance you’re cooking bacon?” he asked hopefully, and she laughed again.

“I was thinking of a kale smoothie.”

He gave a mock shudder then smiled at her, and she wrapped her hand around his as they walked into the living area. Maybe she could pick up some bacon for tomorrow.

He opened the doors to the balcony while she made her smoothie and she joined him there.

“Someone saw me yesterday while I was out here,” he said casually, and she almost choked.

“What? Who?”

“I’m not sure. A woman. Small. Curly white hair. Green skin.”

She groaned.

“Flora. I should have known. What did she say?”

“She told me to hurry up. That it was already the beginning of October. That’s what started me thinking about All Hallow’s Eve. Who’s Flora?”

“The town’s resident busybody. She’s an orc.”

“An orc? But she’s so tiny.”

“She has a fairy somewhere in her ancestry. Maybe that’s why she always seems to know more than everyone else—even if she rarely bothers to explain what she knows.” She tapped her fingers on the railing, considering. “I had intended to call a few acquaintances about your... situation, but maybe I should start closer to home and consult her instead.”

“Do you think she knows anything about ghosts?”

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“She knows something about everything, and the fact that she spoke to you probably means she’s already involved.” She checked the time on her phone, then nodded. “I have an hour before I need to be downstairs so this is probably a good time to go look for her.”

“I wish I could go with you,” he muttered.

“I do too.” She hesitated, then put her hand on his shoulder and went up on her tiptoes. “But you can at least kiss me goodbye.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Mostly.

Her heart raced as he lowered his head but as soon as his mouth touched hers, her nerves disappeared, lost in a rush of pleasure. The taste of apples and the feel of his mouth against hers sent desire racing through her body, and she clung to his shoulders to support herself. She could feel his body responding, and she pressed closer against his erection.

He groaned into the kiss but kept it light and undemanding. When he finally pulled away, she could see the strain on his face. To her relief, there was no fear this time—only arousal—but she was painfully aware of how unfair it was to him. She reluctantly let him go and stepped back.

“I’ll see you later,” she promised.

He watched her go, the heat still lingering in his eyes, and she had to force herself to keep moving. She was halfway across the front hall when she realized that Cody was standing in the middle of the front parlor watching her, a broom in his hands. The brownie gave her a thoughtful look, then grinned.

“About time.”

“Time for what-” she began, then gave up. “I’m assuming you have questions?”

“Not at all,” he said cheerfully, but the sparkle in his dark eyes belied his words.

“Are you sure? You’re usually the first to ask.”

He shrugged.

“Nah. Just glad you’re not alone any more. Either of you.”

He strolled off, whistling jauntily, before she could think of a response. Was there anyone in this town who didn’t know her business? Which means I need to tell Wendy, she thought guiltily as she hurried by her friend’s house. Before anyone else tells her.

Her search for Flora proved fruitless. She wasn’t at the inn she owned, or the diner by the river, or her grandson’s bakery. She even checked the tavern at the edge of town, but it was empty except for a few early drinkers, most of them werewolves. They eyed her like she was their next meal and she left as quickly as possible.

Maybe Flora will respond to one of my messages, she thought as she trudged back up the hill. If not, she’d try again tomorrow.

She was almost back at the restaurant when a chipper voice made her jump.

“Looking for me?”

Flora was perched on the stone wall running in front of one of the older houses on the street, looking rather like some exotic bird in her sequined fuchsia tracksuit.

How the hell did I not see her?

“Yes, I was looking for you.” She hesitated, then decided there was no point in beating about the bush. “You told Leo that October was important. Why?”

“Did I?” Flora batted her eyes. “My memory just isn’t what it used to be.”

“You’re as sharp as a tack and you know it. Is there anything he can do to become... real?”

Those bright dark eyes studied her and she fought to keep from squirming, feeling oddly like a child called to the principal’s office.

“You don’t think he’s real, dear?”

“Of course he is. I just meant...” She waved her hand helplessly. “I meant... touchable.”

“Seems to me you’re doing pretty well on that front already. Don’t lumberjacks have the most amazing hands? I remember the first time I ran into one.” Flora sighed reminiscently. “He was an orc living deep in the woods. Hadn’t seen a female in months.” She winked at Jessica. “What that male could do with his hands—not to mention his—”

“You’re changing the subject,” she said quickly. “Can Leo become corporeal again?”

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“Why do you care? You’re not in love with him or anything silly like that, are you?”

Her breath caught in her throat as the realization swept over her.

“I... I...”

Fortunately Flora didn’t wait for a response.

“Then I suppose you’d better go see Gladys.”

“Gladys?” she repeated, still dazed by the previous question.

“You know. Resident witch. Stubborn as all get out.” Flora hopped down from the wall. “Now hurry up. Time’s a wastin’.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you.”

“Always happy to help. Even if I am just the town busybody.”

Flora winked at her and was gone before she could even start on an apology. Damn. She should have known better than to say something like that aloud. Although it wouldn’t really surprise her if Flora could read her thoughts.

She continued down the street, thinking about Flora’s suggestion—although it had sounded more like an order. She knew Gladys was one of Flora’s friends but their paths hadn’t really crossed. She’d heard Gladys was a very powerful witch but as far as she could remember, she looked like any other older Southern lady. Then again,

Flora didn't look particularly dangerous either.

At least it gave her a starting point. She checked her phone and decided she didn't have time to visit the witch right then, but with any luck she could duck out later in the afternoon. She was about to put her phone back in her pocket when she saw a message from Wendy. She'd completely forgotten about her decision to talk to her friend.

Just got back to the restaurant, she texted. Are you coming by?

I have a lot to do today, but I thought I'd bring you some clothing options tomorrow.

She looked down at her skirt and boots, then sighed.

OK. She hesitated, then added, I have a surprise for you.

Oooh. Can't wait. See you then.

She had a sudden vision of Leo appearing behind Wendy. She had the feeling she was going to be answering a lot of questions.

CHAPTER 8

Leo hovered near the kitchen entrance, watching as Jessica greeted everyone warmly. Whatever her private doubts and fears, she interacted easily with her customers, making each of them feel special. She'd even changed out of what he considered her camouflage into rust colored linen trousers with a matching vest over a full-sleeved cream shirt. Her hair was pulled back into a neat knot but a few wisps had escaped to float around her face and she looked beautiful. Radiant. Alive.

As alive as the tall werewolf approaching her station. He immediately tensed. Eric

was the local sheriff and Leo had every reason to believe he was a good male, but that didn't mean he appreciated the warm smile he bestowed on Jessica. Or the fact that she returned it.

"Your table is ready, Sheriff, and your date is already seated. She seemed a little... bothered that you weren't here to meet her so I gave her a glass of champagne on the house."

"Was she rude to you?" Eric demanded.

"No. Well, just a little," she added when he raised a brow. "But I think she thought she'd been stood up."

"You can't stand someone up when you didn't make the date to begin with," Eric muttered. He leaned closer, close enough that Leo couldn't hear what he said, but Jessica's laughter rang out, clear and melodious, even as she shook her head.

A knot formed in Leo's stomach. The way she looked at Eric, with genuine warmth and interest, sent a bolt of jealousy through him.

"All right," she said. "But don't make it a habit."

Make what a habit? Was she already expecting to see Eric again? He also didn't like the way her eyes followed the werewolf as he went to join his date, a striking blonde. A few minutes later, Jessica approached the table where the blonde was now practically rubbing herself against the sheriff.

Once again Leo couldn't hear what she said, but Eric sprang to his feet, muttering a hasty excuse to his date. However, instead of leaving, he ducked into the restaurant office as soon as he was out of sight of the table. Minutes crawled by. Jessica resumed her duties, paying no attention to Eric's presence in her office. What could

he be doing in there?

Suddenly, the blonde woman stood up, her chair scraping loudly against the floor. She stormed out of the restaurant, her heels clicking angrily on the hardwood as heads turned to watch her dramatic exit. A few minutes later the office door opened, and Eric emerged. He made a beeline for Jessica, leaning down to whisper something to her. She threw her head back, laughing, and the sound pierced his heart like a dagger.

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A wave of despair washed over him. How could he possibly compete with someone like Eric? The sheriff was everything Leo couldn't be anymore—alive, warm, able to touch and be touched. The fact that she seemed so at ease with the other male was a stark reminder of the barriers that separated him from the world of the living.

She'd told him that Flora had advised her to seek out the local witch, although she hadn't been able to visit her yet. But while he was aware that witches existed, the idea that one might be able to help him seemed too far-fetched to believe.

And if the witch couldn't help him, what future could he offer Jessica? A life of whispers and fleeting touches, forever on the fringes of the real world? Eric could give her so much more—companionship, a family, a normal life. As a wave of jealousy and despair washed over him, the candles on all of the tables flickered. Damn. He had to get out of here before he lost control.

He headed blindly for the back of the restaurant. Without thinking, he pushed through the back door and found himself on the patio. He froze, stunned. This was the farthest he'd ever been from the house.

The cold night air drifted past him, carrying the scent of leaves and woodsmoke, and for a moment, his anger dissipated into wonder. Twinkling fairy lights adorned the patio, casting a soft, magical glow over the empty tables and chairs. The night was cool enough that no one had chosen to sit outside, but he could imagine it in warmer weather, with the tables filled and music drifting out from the restaurant. The thought of the life that was happening all around him, a life he would never truly be part of, sent a wave of frustration through him.

What if Eric was Jessica's chance at a normal life? A life filled with warmth, touch, and the possibility of a family? His fists clenched as an icy breeze made the lights sway back and forth.

But even as these thoughts tormented him, a new fear crept in. What if his newfound abilities—the increased physicality, the ability to affect the world around him—were only temporary? He remembered Flora's warning about time passing. What if all of his abilities vanished after All Hallow's Eve? The thought of losing these new connections to the physical world, of being unable to touch Jessica again, even for a moment, was unbearable. Yet, the idea of her choosing a life with someone like Eric was equally painful.

He strode back and forth across the patio several times before his gaze snagged on the huge vine sprawling across the pergola. He'd planted that vine decades ago, when his hands were solid and warm with life. Now the trunk was as thick as his arm, a living testament to the relentless march of time.

He'd spent so much time in this garden, escaping from the unhappiness filling the house, but everything had changed and grown. Everything except him.

The realization hit him like a physical blow. Unless he could find a way to grow and change alongside the living world, life would inevitably move on without him. Jessica would move on.

He was so lost in his despair that he didn't register the soft footsteps approaching until a voice broke through his brooding.

“Are you all right, dude?”

He turned to find Cody standing at the edge of the patio, his usually mischievous eyes now filled with worry, and something inside him snapped. All the frustration and

jealousy he'd been bottling up came pouring out in a torrent of words.

"No, I'm not all right," he growled. "How can I be? I'm stuck here, watching Jessica live her life while I'm... what? A ghost of a man who can't offer her anything real?"

He paced back and forth, his words tumbling out faster and faster. "And then there's Eric. Alive, solid, able to make her laugh and touch her without fading away. How am I supposed to compete with that? I'm jealous. God, I'm so jealous it's eating me alive. Which is ironic, considering I'm already dead."

"Chill out, dude. There's nothing going on between Jessica and the sheriff."

"She hid him in her office! And I saw them laughing together."

Cody sighed.

"She was just helping the dude out. His pack keeps trying to set him up, but he's not into it."

"Because he's into her?" he snapped.

"Nah. He doesn't want a mate at all." Cody's gaze sharpened. "He can joke around with her because he knows she's taken."

"He knows about me?"

"Nah. At least I don't think so. But he can tell she's involved." Cody shrugged. "Wolves are good at that sort of thing."

Leo's shoulders sagged. "Is she taken? She's alive, and I'm not. I'm trapped in this fucking house, just a shadow of the man I once was."

He sank into one of the chairs, giving the garden a brooding look. Cody hesitated, then took the chair next to him.

“You’re more than a shadow,” he said firmly. “And I know how hard it can be to be stuck like this.”

“How could you know?” he snapped.

“Brownies can be bound too.”

“You mean like when they serve a family?”

Cody laughed, but it wasn’t his usual cheerful laugh, and there was no mistaking the bitterness behind it.

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“If only. I’m not lucky enough to have that kind of binding. No, I mean when someone tricks them into a bond, and they can’t leave, no matter how bad things get.”

Cody’s eyes darkened, and he stared off into the night, lost in memories.

“You can’t leave the manor?”

“I didn’t mean here.” Cody shook his head, then grinned, back to his usual self. “Quit feeling sorry for yourself, dude. You’re into her. She’s into you. It’ll all work out in the end, even if she gets a little skittish along the way.”

Cody’s perceptiveness startled him, but he was right. The last thing Jessica needed was him going all possessive on her.

“I’ll try and be patient,” he promised. “Which will be easier if Eric has gone. Has he?”

Cody grinned.

“Yep. It’s safe to get back in the water.”

He laughed and rose to return to the house. As they reached the door, a sudden chill ran down his spine, and he paused, glancing back at the garden. The once peaceful scene now seemed ominous, shadows stretching like grasping fingers in the darkness. What had changed?

He searched the darkness but couldn’t find any reason for his sudden unease. Shaking

off the chill, he followed Cody into the warmth and light of the restaurant, leaving the unsettling darkness behind.

CHAPTER 9

Jessica's stomach fluttered nervously as she walked down the street towards the address Cody had given her for Gladys. She'd asked for a phone number as well so she could make an appointment, but he'd just grinned at her.

"Not listed. Better just to show up."

Not that she'd really needed the address she decided as she drew closer. The witch's cottage was painted a striking purple, although it was practically hidden behind a lush garden overflowing with flowers, most of which should have already turned dormant.

Just as she reached the gate in the pretty picket fence, it swung open and a tall black man came rushing out, muttering to himself.

"Impossible female." He suddenly noticed her and caught the gate, giving her an apologetic nod. "I'm sorry, my dear. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going."

Now that she had a chance to look at him more closely, she realized he was a good bit older than her, his dark curls peppered with grey, but he was still remarkably handsome. More importantly, he had a kind face and she found herself smiling at him.

"No harm done. Is something wrong?"

He sighed.

"Only the same thing that's been wrong for years. I keep hoping it will change but

sometimes I feel like Sisyphus, rolling the same boulder up the hill over and over.”

She could see the sorrow in his eyes despite the humor in his voice and impulsively put a sympathetic hand on his arm, then immediately reeled back. Damn. She was usually more careful about making sure her shields were up before touching people. He started to reach out to steady her, then stopped.

“What did you see?” he asked quietly, and she shot him a surprised look.

“What makes you think I saw something?”

His eyes twinkled.

“I am not without some small powers myself. Do you see the future or the past?”

“There have been times when I have seen both—and other times when I have seen nothing.” Her psychic powers had always been more erratic than her ability to communicate with the departed.

“That is often the way,” he agreed, watching her face. “Perhaps we could discuss it over tea?”

“Thank you, but I was on my way to see Gladys.” She hesitated, then added, “Do you know her?”

“Intimately,” he said dryly, then hesitated. “I am not a fan of looking into the future, but do you have any words of advice based on what you saw?”

“I’m afraid not. It was just a flash of you. And a woman in purple.”

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“Was it Gladys?” he asked eagerly and she reluctantly shook her head.

“I’m afraid not.”

“Ah well. I will retreat and return to push the boulder up the hill another day. It was a pleasure meeting you, my dear, and the offer of tea is always open.”

“Thank you. I hope the boulder rolls more easily in the future.”

He bowed his head and strolled away, moving with the ease of a much younger man despite the crystal-topped cane he carried in one hand.

“Are you coming in or not?” a voice demanded from behind her.

She turned to find Gladys standing in the doorway of the cottage, her arms folded over her ample chest. Gladys was a plump, attractive older woman with silver curls and unusually penetrating blue eyes. When Jessica had seen her in the past she’d generally been smiling, but she definitely wasn’t smiling now.

“I’m coming in. If that’s all right with you?” she asked hesitantly.

Gladys sniffed, then turned and marched into the cottage but since she’d left the door open, Jessica decided to follow her. The front room of the house was exactly what she would have envisioned from the outside—bundles of dried plants hung from the ceiling beams; crooked wooden shelves lined the walls, covered with an astonishing variety of objects; and there was even a cauldron suspended over a fire in the fireplace.

“Back here,” Gladys snapped, and Jessica followed the sound of her voice through a doorway, then blinked in surprise.

She’d entered a remarkably contemporary kitchen with sleek white cabinets and pristine white countertops. The only things marring the clean lines were the colorful tea set Gladys was arranging on a tray and the vines that flowed from the shelves around the window to the top of the cabinets.

“In or out?” Gladys asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Out,” the other woman announced and picked up the tray, carrying it through the kitchen door and into a small, enclosed courtyard, also lush with flowers. She plunked the tray down on a metal bistro table, then poured them each a mug of something that smelled delicious.

Jessica took the mug obediently, then sat quietly as Gladys took a few moody swigs of her own mug before finally sighing.

“Sorry. You caught me at a bad time.”

“I’m sorry. Should I come back?”

“No, I might as well get this over with. Flora told me you were coming. Said you have some foolish idea of resurrecting a ghost.”

Gladys peered at her over her glasses and Jessica raised her chin.

“That’s exactly what I intend to do.”

“And I suppose you know how to do that?” the other woman asked dryly.

“Well, no. I was hoping you could help me, but if you’d rather not I’ll find someone else.”

She started to rise but Gladys laughed.

“Oh sit down, child. No need to take offense.”

She took her seat again and sipped the tea. It was hot and spicy, and left a pleasant burn as it slid down her throat.

“What kind of tea is this?”

“Eye of newt,” Gladys said blandly, then laughed again. “You should see your face. It’s a combination of things from my garden with some additional cinnamon. Plus some fire whiskey to give it a little kick.”

“It’s very good.”

Gladys gave an almost reluctant nod of approval, and topped off her mug. The liquid was still steaming despite the cool air, but perhaps the fire whiskey was responsible for that as well. They sipped in silence as the autumn sunlight warmed the small courtyard. The scent of flowers filled the air, mingling with the spicy scent of the tea, and a bird trilled from a nearby tree. An unexpected sense of peace settled over Jessica, the tension of the last few days easing, and she was smiling when she finally put down her mug.

“Thank you.”

Gladys's eyes twinkled.

"You needed a moment of calm, child. Now, let's talk about your ghost. Are you both sure you want to do this?"

"Yes," she said firmly, and Gladys hummed thoughtfully.

"You do understand that if he were to become corporeal, there would be nothing binding him to this place? He would be free to leave."

And she would be alone again. The old fear raised its head, but she did her best to push it aside.

"I don't believe that would happen, but at least he would be f-free." And I would be happy for him.

"Very well. Wait here."

Gladys disappeared inside the cottage but the peaceful courtyard was no longer sufficient to calm Jessica's nerves. She forced herself to remain patiently at the table until the older woman reappeared, carrying a worn leather book.

"The Grimoire of the Veil," she announced, placing it carefully on the table. "I believe it holds the answer to your... unique situation."

Gladys flipped rapidly through the yellowed pages before stopping at one with a complicated design etched in a brown ink that looked suspiciously like faded blood.

Jessica bit her lip but remained silent as Gladys leaned over the page and ran her finger over the words.

“This is the one. The ritual will need to be performed at midnight on All Hallow’s Eve, using this diagram. I’ll make a copy of it for you and give you this list of ingredients.” The older woman peered at her over the top of her glasses. “You have performed similar rituals in the past?”

“Yes, although I’m usually helping spirits on their way, not trying to get them to stay.”

“Then you understand that everything must be done precisely as instructed? Any mistake could have devastating consequences.”

“I understand,” she said quietly.

“There’s one more thing,” Gladys added. “The ritual will require a sacrifice.”

Her heart skipped a beat, her excitement faltering.

“A sacrifice?” she repeated, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Nothing comes without a price, child. To bring a spirit into our realm, something of equal value must be given up.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes,” she insisted, her voice steady despite the nervous flutter in her chest.

“You need to understand that a sacrifice doesn’t always mean something physical. It could be an emotional offering, something deeply personal.”

A shiver ran down her spine. What she might have to give up. The comfort of her independence? Or perhaps something even more profound? Her powers?

For a moment, doubt crept in, whispering insidiously in her ear. What if the sacrifice was too much? What if she wasn't strong enough? But then Leo's face appeared in her mind's eye. His gentle smile, the warmth in his eyes, the way he made her feel safe and understood. He was worth whatever price she would have to pay.

"I understand."

Gladys studied her face for a moment, then nodded.

"Very well. Then let us begin."

CHAPTER 10

Leo hovered at one side of the living area as Jessica poured her friend a glass of wine. She'd told him that she planned to tell her friend about him, and he couldn't decide if he was more pleased that wanted to reveal their... relationship or nervous about her friend's reaction. Or both.

"I brought you three options for tops and three for bottoms," Wendy said. "For bottoms we have jeans, this skirt, and leggings."

She held up each one as she spoke. The jeans had small flowers embroidered around the hem, very similar to what had been popular in his time, and he could easily imagine the way they would cling to her long, slender legs. He shifted uncomfortably as his cock began to respond to the image. The skirt would come down to her calves, but it too would hug her curves, and he saw the uncertainty on her face.

Wendy must have seen it too, because she placed the clothes on the chair and sat

down next to Jessica.

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“Do you want to tell me why this is so hard for you? You don’t have to,” she added quickly. “But maybe it would help to share.”

He didn’t think Jessica was going to answer, but then she straightened her shoulders.

“Someone... hurt me once and he said it was my fault. Because of the way I dressed.”

That despicable bastard. He did his best to control his anger but an icy breeze still swept around the room. Wendy didn’t seem to notice, her eyes fixed on Jessica.

“Oh, sweetie, I’m so sorry. You know he was wrong, don’t you?”

Jessica nodded and tried to smile.

“Intellectually, yes. Emotionally, it’s a little harder.”

“Is that why you don’t like being touched?” Wendy asked softly.

“It’s not that I don’t like being touched, it’s just that if I’m not prepared I sometimes... see things.” Another shaky smile. “It made my childhood rather difficult until I learned never to tell anyone.”

“Is that what made you decide to be a medium?”

“It’s not exactly the same, but once I discovered I could communicate with the departed it seemed like a logical choice.” Jessica’s smile was stronger this time, and she cast a quick glance in his direction. “And I actually enjoy it.”

“Because they can’t touch you?”

“That’s not always a good thing,” she said quietly, looking at him again, then sighed. “Which I suppose brings us to what I wanted to tell you. You remember when I banished Alexis—the female ghost?”

Wendy shuddered.

“How could I forget?”

“There was someone else there too.”

“Yes, I remember. The husband. A big man who looked tired and sad.”

“That was Leo. Or perhaps I should say, that is Leo.”

“Does that mean he’s still here?”

Wendy didn’t look as surprised as he expected, and Jessica gave her friend a puzzled look as well.

“You knew?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but I wondered sometimes. You never actually said you’d banished him. And you have been spending a lot of time up here,” her friend added with a smile. “Are you going to introduce us?”

“Of course.”

Jessica looked at him and nodded, and he pulled aside the veil concealing him. Despite her assurance, the other woman’s eyes widened as he materialized.

“Wow. That was a little faster than I was expecting. Have you been standing there the whole time?”

“I have.”

“Isn’t that kind of like spying? And does that mean you could have been there when Damian and I-” Wendy’s cheeks turned fiery red and he hastily shook his head.

“I usually stay up here. If I go downstairs, it’s to be with Jessica.”

“And I always know when he’s there,” Jessica added quickly.

“So you’re friends?” Wendy’s eyes narrowed. “Or is it something more than that?”

Jessica cast him a somewhat helpless glance, then nodded.

“It’s more.”

“And you didn’t tell me? Why not?”

“I don’t know exactly. I think I was afraid that if I told anyone, it wouldn’t be real. And then, of course, there’s the obvious problem that he’s a ghost.”

He moved across to her, longing to give her his support but knowing she would resent it if he tried to speak for her. Instead he sat on the arm of her chair and took her hand. She looked up at him gratefully and his heart warmed. Wendy cleared her throat and they both looked at her.

“I’m assuming you’re looking for a way to fix that,” she said, and Jessica nodded.

“I’m going to attempt a ritual on Halloween night to try and make him corporeal again. But it’s a very complicated ritual with a lot of unknowns, and I can’t promise it will succeed. Even if it does, it could be only temporary.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Wendy asked immediately and Jessica smiled at her.

“No, but I appreciate the offer.”

“You know if you’d told me, I wouldn’t have been so busy trying to arrange a date for you for the Harvest Festival.”

“You didn’t—did you?”

“Kind of, but don’t worry, I’ll call it off. Which means you don’t have to try and freeze us out, Leo,” she added sternly. “At least I assume that’s you?”

Oops. He hadn’t shielded his reaction to the date suggestion as well as he should have.

“Sorry,” he said quickly, closing his eyes and concentrating on the temperature. It returned to normal much more quickly this time and he knew that Jessica had noticed as well.

“That’s better. But you are still going to come to the festival, aren’t you?”

Jessica hesitated. He wanted her to say no, but he couldn’t keep her tied here forever.

“You should go,” he said instead, and Wendy beamed at him. “It would be good for you to get out.”

“I get out,” she protested weakly, but they both ignored her.

“Then that’s settled.” Wendy stood up and gave them both a determined look. “And I want you to keep me updated.”

“Of course.”

“I’ll leave the clothes for you to think about, but I’ll understand if you don’t want to wear any of them.”

Jessica stood too, following her friend to the door, then gave the other woman a quick hug.

“Thank you for understanding.”

Wendy’s eyes were suspiciously bright, but she gave her a cheerful smile.

“That’s what friends are for. Just let me know that you’re okay, okay?”

“Every step of the way,” she promised.

As soon as Wendy had disappeared down the stairs, Jessica came back and collapsed on the couch, smiling at him.

“That went better than I expected. I was afraid she’d be mad at me for not telling her sooner.”

“Would you have been angry if she’d done the same?” he asked, and she immediately shook her head.

“Of course not.”

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“Then why did you expect her to be angry?”

“I don’t know. I suppose I’m used to people being angry when they find out I haven’t told them something.”

He sat down next to her and reached for her hand, relieved when he was able to grasp it in his.

“Life hasn’t been very kind to you, sweetheart. But hopefully that’s changed now.”

“I think it has.” She gave him a shy smile. “Can I kiss you?”

“Anytime,” he said so fervently that she laughed.

She hesitated, then moved over to sit on his lap. They both gave a sigh of relief as his body remained solid and she settled down against him. Despite her question, she didn’t do anything for a moment except put her head on his shoulder, her hand tracing a lazy pattern across his chest.

“Can you take your shirt off?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never tried.”

He concentrated for a moment, and then her hand was resting against his bare skin.

“That’s convenient,” she said breathlessly, but she didn’t stop exploring him.

The feel of her small fingers against his skin had the inevitable effect on his body and her eyes widened as his cock flexed beneath her ass.

“Oh!”

“Do you want to move?”

She wiggled experimentally and he bit back a groan before she gave him a mischievous smile and deliberately slid a hand down his chest towards the waistband of his jeans. He caught her fingers, bringing them back up to his chest.

“Let me touch you first,” he murmured.

She bit her lip, then nodded and leaned her head against his chest. He stroked one hand lightly over her back as he kissed the top of her head, then bent down to kiss her mouth. She opened to him immediately and as his tongue explored her mouth, he cupped her breast, careful to keep his movements slow and gentle. Even so, he felt the shiver of response that raced down her spine. He broke away from the kiss, watching her face as he undid her vest and the buttons on her shirt. Her cheeks flushed but she didn't protest.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered, running his finger down her neck to the gentle swell of her breasts over the top of her bra. She shivered again, her eyes fixed on his face and the longing in them made him catch his breath.

He undid the clasp on her bra to reveal her small, perfect breasts, her nipples already tight pink peaks.

“Beautiful,” he murmured again and bent down to take one nipple into his mouth.

She made a soft, startled sound, but when he started to pull away, she put her hand on

his head, holding him in place. He smiled and tugged a little harder on the tempting peak. She arched against him, pressing closer to his mouth. He continued to suck and lick while his thumb circled her other nipple. A low, throaty moan escaped her lips and her fingers tightened in his hair.

He took her other breast in his mouth and her breathing increased. She was rubbing her ass against his cock now and he had to force himself not to thrust against her, afraid of scaring her. But her need was mounting, her body growing flushed, her movements restless. He slowly slid his hand beneath her skirt, the fabric loose enough that it was easy to reach between her legs. The thin fabric covering her cleft was already damp and she cried out again as he gently cupped the damp silk.

“Too much, sweetheart?”

“N-no.” She didn’t sound as certain as he would have liked and he started to pull away but she immediately protested. “No, don’t stop.”

“I won’t,” he promised. “Not unless you tell me to stop.”

He moved his fingers lightly over the thin silk again, and she parted her legs to allow him more access. When he finally eased beneath the damp fabric and touched her directly, she was hot, wet, and swollen, and he groaned at his own long-denied need.

“May I put a finger in you, Jessica?” he whispered. She didn’t respond and he lifted his head to look at her, to find her eyes half-closed. “Answer me, sweetheart.”

“Yes,” she whispered, her cheeks flushing a delightful shade of pink.

He kissed the corner of her mouth as his thumb found her clit, massaging it gently as he slowly slid one finger inside her. Her body clamped down on it, so snug and tight that he could barely move. The thought of that tight grip around his cock made him

groan and she opened her eyes.

“Is something wrong?”

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“Nothing at all,” he assured her, then bent his head to suck on the tempting line of her throat as he increased the pressure on her clit, matching the movement of his thumb to the gentle thrust of his finger and her cunt started to pulse, gripping him in rhythmic waves.

Her eyes widened in shock, and then she threw her head back, grinding against him as she shuddered in his arms. His cock throbbed, demanding to be released, to bury himself in that same glorious heat. But she was too small, too tight, and herefused to hurt her. Instead he continued to kiss and caress her as her climax ebbed and her body went limp. He reluctantly eased his finger out of the tempting warmth, then licked it clean. Her taste exploded in his mouth, salty, sweet, and delicious and she blushed crimson again.

“Did you like that?” he asked, and the red deepened. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“I didn’t... do anything for you,” she said, her eyes dropping to the erection still straining against his jeans.

“Watching you come in my arms is all I need.”For now, anyway.

“But-”

“You have to get back downstairs.”

“I could stay a little longer,” she whispered, reaching for him, and the temptation almost overwhelmed him.

“If you did that, it would be a lot longer than you planned. And I want you to be sure you’re ready before we go any further.”

“I suppose you’re right.” She sighed and stroked his bare chest again. “How does this work? Should I get you another shirt?”

“I don’t know,” he said, then concentrated, and the shirt reappeared. “I’ll have to practice that.”

“Me too.” She looked down at her unbuttoned shirt and vest, and her naked breasts and blushed again. He loved the way the color rose so easily to her cheeks.

“Allow me.” He carefully fastened her bra then buttoned her shirt before kissing her again, unable to resist the appeal of her soft, pretty mouth.

She was breathless again when he finally let her go.

“You need to go now, Jessica. Before I forget about being a gentleman and keeping my hands to myself.”

“You can touch me,” she said breathlessly. “I want you to.”

“And I will,” he promised. “But not now.”

After giving him a reluctant nod, she slipped off his lap. He rose too, adjusting his jeans to try and relieve the pressure, then followed her to the door.

“I’ll see you later.”

“Yes.” She smiled up at him, then blushed and looked away. “Thank you, Leo. Thank you for showing me what I’ve been missing.”

“My pleasure, sweetheart.” He kissed the top of her head. “Any time.”

CHAPTER 11

A week later, Jessica hummed happily as she gathered up the empty vases from the tables. In spite of her concerns about the upcoming ritual, it had been a wonderful week. Leo had been fully present when they were alone together and they had been able to kiss and touch and explore. That very morning he’d finally persuaded her to let him taste her and she’d discovered just how wonderful his mouth felt against her. Her cheeks heated at the memory of his dark head buried between her legs and she decided that washing the vases could wait until the morning.

Although there had been a few times when she’d started to panic, he was so attuned to her that he quickly pulled back before things went any further. He never seemed impatient or frustrated, even though he’d kept his jeans on the entire time. He’d let her touch him over them, but he’d refused to remove them, assuring her he was content to wait, despite his very large and obvious erections.

She thought she was ready to take that next step and she was trying to decide on the best way to convince him when she heard a faint whisper, chilling and unintelligible, drifting through the air. She paused, heart pounding, and glanced around the dim room, feeling a shiver run down her spine. The sound seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

“Leo?” she called out softly, hoping it was just him playing tricks but deep down, she knew this was different. The whisper lacked his warmth, his playfulness. This was cold, alien, and deeply unsettling.

She carefully put down the vases she was carrying, her hands trembling slightly. The feeling that something sinister lurked within the walls had increased over the past week, even though it wasn’t like anything she’d experienced before.

Her years as a ghost hunter had exposed her to all manner of supernatural phenomena, but this... this was different. It felt not only malevolent but personal, as if it were directed specifically at her. Her eyes scanned the shadows in the corners of the room, half-expecting to see something materialize. The whisper came again, louder this time, sending goosebumps racing across her skin. She backed away slowly, her breath catching in her throat.

“What are you?” she whispered, her voice barely audible. The silence that followed was deafening, broken only by the pounding of her own heart. And then...

A cold, clammy touch brushed her cheek and she stumbled backwards with a startled gasp. She couldn't help the shudder that racked her body or the tears that filled her eyes.

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“Jessica, are you all right? What is it?” Leo appeared, worry etched on his face.

“Something... touched me.”

She shuddered again and he immediately wrapped his arms around her, warm and comforting, the familiar scent of apples surrounding her.

“I don’t want you down here by yourself anymore,” he said firmly as he too scanned the shadows. “Maybe it would be better if you stayed with Wendy—”

“Absolutely not. I’m not going anywhere without you.”

He looked down at her fierce expression and smiled.

“All right, sweetheart. Whatever it is, we’ll face it together.”

His smile vanished as a ghostly form began to take shape in the shadows. It was indistinct, more of a suggestion than a fully realized apparition, but his reaction told her everything she needed to know. His eyes widened in recognition, and she saw a flicker of old pain cross his features.

“It’s Tim,” Leo whispered, his voice tight with a mixture of anger and fear. “My half-brother.”

She gave him a shocked look.

“Your murderer? Why is he here?”

“I don’t know,” he said grimly. “Didn’t you say that if a spirit isn’t tied to one place, it’s usually because it’s searching for something?”

“Yes, but what?”

“I don’t know. Unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Unless he’s gaining strength too as Halloween approaches.”

“The ritual,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “What if the ritual doesn’t bring you back? What if it brings him back instead?”

The words caught in her throat, the fear of losing Leo threatening to send her spiraling into panic.

“We won’t let that happen,” he promised, but she could see the uncertainty in his eyes.

She glanced back at the shadowy form of Tim, which seemed to be growing more substantial by the second. Would he be able to materialize enough to interrupt the ritual? The air around them crackled with malevolent energy, and she suspected they were running out of time.

She jumped when a chair toppled over, and a water glass followed, shattering into a thousand glittering shards on the hardwood floor. She flinched, instinctively stepping closer to Leo as chaos erupted around them.

Tim’s shadowy figure flickered in and out of vision, his features growing clearer. He might have been handsome once, but the malice on his face turned it into a grotesque

mask of hatred.

“What are you doing here?” Leo demanded, pushing her gently behind him.

The lights flickered and dimmed, casting eerie shadows across the room and raising the hair on the back of her neck.

“Owe me...”

The words were little more than a moan but they filled the room, sending shivers down her spine as the suffocating weight of panic began to settle over her, constricting her chest and making it hard to breathe. She clutched Leo’s shirt sleeve, trying to control her breathing.

“I don’t owe you anything,” Leo growled. “You took my wife, my money, and my life.”

“Land...” the voice moaned again, and then it was gone.

Tim’s form disappeared, along with the heaviness that had filled the room.

“He’s gone,” Leo said, but she shook her head.

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“I don’t think so. He was expending a lot of energy and he probably has to refill it. I think he’ll be back.”

“Can you banish him? The way you did with Alexis?” he asked as he guided her rapidly towards the stairs.

She should clean up the broken glass, but it would wait until morning.

“I don’t know.” Relief washed over her as they reached the safety of their apartment, even though she knew it was a false sense of security. Physical barriers wouldn’t keep him out. “I’ve only dealt with one other untethered spirit and in his case it was simply a matter of finding out what he wanted. What did Tim mean when he said land?”

“I inherited the land we logged from my mother’s parents. Apparently he always resented that, even though he wasn’t related to them and never met them. I wonder if he thought he’d inherit them after I died?” he added thoughtfully.

“He didn’t?”

“No. Under the terms of my will, the land went into a conservation trust. But it doesn’t make any sense. It’s not as if they’re any use to him now.”

“I know, but that doesn’t seem to matter. If someone is fixated on something when they die, it can be enough to keep them on this plane. Do you know what happened to him after he killed you?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think we should find out. Maybe that would help us get rid of him.”

She did her best to sound positive, despite the dread creeping down her spine. Even if she could figure out how to banish Tim, the effort might drain her so much that she wouldn’t have the strength to complete the ritual for Leo. But if Tim was still around when that happened, she had a horrible feeling that he would try to come back instead.

Leo reached for her hand and drew her down on the sofa next to him.

“Sweetheart, you’re stronger than this. We need to confront him together. We won’t let him win,” Leo said, his voice firm yet gentle.

“But what if the ritual makes everything worse?” she whispered. “What if I fail?”

He gathered her in his arms, his touch reassuring and comforting. “You won’t. You are the most capable person I know, and I believe in you. We can do this together.”

A small smile touched her lips at the determination in his voice.

“All right,” she agreed. “But where do we start?”

“Let’s start by finding out what happened to him,” he suggested. “And maybe you could go and talk to Gladys again tomorrow.”

Having a plan, even such a nebulous one, helped calm her fears, and her hand didn’t shake as she reached for her laptop. It didn’t take long to find the information.

“He died six months after you?” she asked, shocked. “He killed both of you and then

he died before the year was up?”

“After driving my company into bankruptcy,” he said grimly, as he read through one of the articles. “And it doesn’t come right out and say it, but he looks like he was on the verge of being arrested for Fraud.”

“Maybe that’s why he was so fixated on the land—he thought it would have solved his problems.”

He shrugged. “It might have helped, at least in the short term, but I suspect he would have gone through that money just as quickly. Although I doubt we could convince him of that.”

Remembering Tim’s malevolent stare, she shivered.

“No, I don’t think so either. And the land isn’t something we can find or display. I once had a spirit who wouldn’t move on until I persuaded his daughter to display his collection of matchbox cars,” she added when he gave her a confused look.

He smiled for the first time since they’d encountered Tim.

“I had a collection like that once. But it wouldn’t have been enough to keep me here.” He gently stroked her cheek. “Not like you.”

“You give me too much credit.”

“Not at all. I think you’re amazing.”

The warmth in his eyes was enough to dispel the lingering chill, and she leaned against his shoulder.

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“You’re the most wonderful man I’ve ever known. I don’t ever want to lose you.”

His smile widened as he lowered his mouth to hers and she shoved her worries aside for the moment, determined to enjoy their time together.

CHAPTER 12

Halloween

Leo watched the golden light of dawn filter through the curtains, casting a warm glow across Jessica’s face. He stroked her cheek, relishing the softness of her skin beneath his fingers and hoping desperately that he would still be able to touch her tomorrow.

“Today is the day,” she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

He heard the uncertainty in her tone, the slight tremor that betrayed her fear, and wrapped his arms around, attempting to comfort her—and himself.

“We’ve come this far,” he said softly. “Whatever happens, we face it together.”

She nodded, but her eyes remained fixed on the ceiling, and he could almost see the thoughts racing through her mind, the doubts and fears that had plagued them both in the days leading up to this moment. Tim hadn’t manifested again, although he’d continued to make his presence known—overturning tables and breaking glasses, causing whatever damage he could.

Frustrated by the vandalism and concerned that someone might get hurt, Damian had

decided to close the restaurant until after Halloween. He knew that Jessica felt guilty about that as well, but he thought it was a sensible decision. Unfortunately, it had also given her more time to worry.

Although he did his best to hide it, he shared her fears. What if the ritual went wrong? What if it brought Tim back instead? He resolutely pushed his doubts aside, concentrating on the woman in his arms as they lay there, watching the sun climb higher in the sky. For better or worse, today was the day that would change everything.

At last she sighed and wiggled free.

“Time for breakfast.”

He watched appreciatively as she stretched, the pale strip of skin it revealed when her top lifted as enticing as ever. His cock, already swollen from having her in his arms, flexed against his jeans. If they hadn’t been part of his ghost form, he was sure he would have worn a hole in them by now.

Instead of getting dressed, she pulled on a short, silky robe and headed for the kitchen. He followed, smiling appreciatively when she pulled out a package of bacon. The tantalizing aroma of sizzling bacon soon filled the air and he leaned against the counter watching her move about the kitchen, her movements as precise and graceful as ever.

“Has Gladys given you any more information?” he asked.

Jessica had been to see the witch several times since Tim had appeared, but Gladys hadn’t been particularly helpful. She sighed, her hands trembling slightly as she flipped the bacon.

“Just the same warning not to let Tim distract me.” She shook her head, spatula pausing mid-air. “What does that even mean?”

“It just means we have to stay focused,” he said softly. “I know you can do this, sweetheart.”

Her shoulders relaxed slightly at his words and she turned to face him, searching for reassurance. He held her gaze, pouring all his love and faith into that look.

“I’m scared,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. “What if something goes wrong? What if—”

“We can’t think about the ‘what ifs’ right now,” he said gently. “We have to believe that this will work. And if it doesn’t, we’ll just try again next year.”

He hated the thought of spending another year in limbo. Every year the world drifted further away from anything he understood, but as long as he was with her, he would find a way to cope. Her expression lightened a little.

“That’s true. This doesn’t have to be our only chance.”

Unless Tim ruined everything. He suspected that she was thinking the same thing but neither one of them mentioned it. He cupped her cheek gently, then opened the French doors leading out onto the balcony and walked out, smiling at the now familiar feeling of the cool morning air. He pulled in a deep breath as the scent of fallen leaves and woodsmoke tickled his senses. It was a perfect autumn day, the sky clear and blue overhead.

As he glanced down at the quiet street below, he felt an odd pull toward the edge of the balcony. He approached it cautiously, expecting to feel the usual invisible barrier, but there was no resistance. He stretched out his hand, watching in disbelief as it

extended past the balcony's edge.

His heart, though long silent, seemed to leap in his chest. Was it possible that he could actually leave the manor? That he could explore the town, walk beside Jessica in the daylight, interact with people...

He did his best to temper his excitement, afraid to get carried away, but he couldn't help imagining the possibilities. Was it possible that his situation had changed, even without the ritual?

Before he could decide, a familiar figure appeared on the street below. Flora, clad in a bright orange tracksuit with "Witch, please" scrawled across her chest, her arms crossed and an annoyed expression etched on her face. His excitement dimmed slightly at her disapproving look.

"I feel... different," he said. "Like I can actually leave this place."

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Flora's eyebrows shot up, her annoyance morphing into exasperation.

"Of course you can! It's All Hallows' Eve." She shook her head, as if explaining something obvious to a child. "Just remember you need to remain strong, especially with Tim around."

Damn—another one of those cryptic warnings. He opened his mouth to ask for more details, but Flora had already vanished, leaving him frowning down at the empty street.

Before he could decide what to do, Jessica came to join him on the balcony, carrying a plate of toast and bacon. Without thinking, he reached out and snagged a piece of bacon, bringing it to his lips. As he bit down, a burst of flavor exploded in his mouth, and he couldn't help but moan in appreciation. Why hadn't he thought to try this before? Then again, perhaps it wouldn't have worked before today.

The excitement of being able to interact with the physical world swept over him and he grinned at her.

"Almost as delicious as you," he teased.

She'd been giving him a shocked look, but now she smiled back, echoing his mood and he made another impulsive decision.

"I think we need to take a break," he said firmly.

"A break? What do you have in mind?" she asked as he gently nudged her towards

the door.

“Let’s explore the town—just you and me.”

“But how?”

“Apparently I’m free to move around today and I want to take advantage of that opportunity.”

“But the ritual,” she said hesitantly.

“Isn’t going to change. You’ve been over it a hundred times and everything is as ready as we can make it. I think we should just enjoy our time together.”

In case it was their last chance.

She bit her lip, then finally returned his smile.

“All right. I’ll go and change.”

When she returned, his breath caught in his throat. She was wearing those embroidered jeans he loved so much, the ones that hugged her curves just right, and a soft green sweater. She’d even removed all of her jewelry except for a single necklace. He knew how much courage it had taken for her to dress like that and he wanted to sweep her into his arms and kiss her, but he knew if he did they might never make it out of the apartment.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, then held out his hand.

She placed her hand in his and they walked down the stairs and out the front door. He half expected to be slammed back inside but nothing happened. The crisp autumn air

swirled around them and he felt a surge of exhilaration. Freedom. He glanced down at Jessica and she smiled at him, her eyes sparkling with excitement. As he looked down, he realized that he didn't look entirely human. His skin had a faint bluish shimmer, not transparent, but not entirely solid either.

For a moment he hesitated, but then he shrugged. This was Fairhaven Falls and they had seen far stranger things.

Main Street, a wide road lined with a mixture of two story brick storefronts and converted houses, already bustled with life. Laughter echoed from nearby cafes, and the aroma of freshly baked pastries wafted through the air. Every building was adorned with pumpkins and shocks of wheat, with cartoon witches—and ghosts.

Three of them floated in front of the hardware store, their sheets fluttering in the breeze, and they stopped to admire them.

“I don't see much resemblance,” she teased. “They're much too small.”

He laughed and they continued down the street, stopping to admire each display and breathe in the scents from the floral arrangements. Small children of every type were already wearing their costumes, their faces painted and smiling, and they bought bags of candy to distribute as they walked. They purchased muffins from a huge, glowering orc and he moaned appreciatively as he took a huge bite.

“This might be the best thing I've ever put in my mouth. Well, the second best thing,” he amended and she blushed.

“Grondar is an amazing baker. Did you know he's Flora's grandson?”

“That giant male? It's not possible.”

“It’s not only possible, but apparently her husband was just as big.” She dropped her voice and leaned towards him. “And she’s all too happy to describe his assets. In detail.”

“Which I definitely don’t need to know,” he said firmly, and her laugh rang out, clear and bright in the morning air.

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Despite the looming threat of Tim and the uncertainty of the ritual ahead, he made a conscious decision to push those worries aside. Today was about them, about cherishing every precious moment together. He wanted to memorize every detail of Jessica's smile, the way her hair caught the sunlight, the sound of her laughter mingling with the town's band when they reached the Town Square by the river.

They stood at the water's edge for a while, watching a few dedicated fishermen floating slowly down the river. Sam was nowhere in sight, but he found himself looking at the island and wondering about the other male. Was he as lonely as Leo had been?

Perhaps she sensed his mood because she squeezed his hand.

"I have an idea. Why don't we get some food and go up into the mountains a little way for a picnic?"

"I think that's an excellent idea and I know just where we should go."

She gave him an inquisitive look but he only smiled at her and she rolled her eyes.

"Fine. Keep it a secret—but you're going to have to tell me how to get there."

Half an hour later they pulled off the main road out of town, following a dirt road that wound into the forest. Most of the leaves had fallen, carpeting the ground with red and gold and brown but enough remained to dance in the breeze as she pulled the car to a halt.

“Was this your land?” she asked softly as the quiet of the forest surrounded them.

“It was, and there’s somewhere I want to show you.”

He picked up the picnic basket and the blanket, then took her hand and led her a short distance into the woods and up a small incline to a wide, flat boulder. From here they could see the whole town spread out below them and catch a glimpse of the Fairhaven Falls tumbling down the rocks.

“It’s beautiful,” she said as he spread the blanket on the sun warmed rock.

“Not as beautiful as you are.”

She turned to smile at him, radiant in the sunlight, and he forgot all about their picnic. Instead he sank down onto the blanket, pulling her down on top of him, and captured her mouth, kissing her hungrily. Her body arched against him as their lips met and her sweet, familiar scent surrounded him.

She sat up suddenly but before he could protest, she stripped her sweater off over her head and unfastened her bra, before giving him a challenging look.

“I’m not taking anything else off unless those jeans come off. It’s time.”

His cock throbbed so hard he could barely think but he forced himself to wait.

“Are you sure? You don’t want to wait until after the ritual?”

“Yes, I’m sure and no, I don’t want to wait.”

She rose to her feet, her fingers hovering over the top button of her jeans. They were trembling slightly but she raised a challenging eyebrow.

“Well?”

His clothes vanished, relief surging through him as his cock was finally released from the tight confines of his jeans. She froze, staring at him, her pretty lips parted.

“Do you want me to get dressed again?”

“Don’t you dare.”

Her hands were shaking even more now, but she fumbled the buttons open and slid her jeans down her legs, followed by her blue lacy panties.

“You’re so damn beautiful,” he murmured, his voice rough with desire. “You’re all I’ve dreamed of, all I’ve ever wanted.”

She gazed at him with those big, dark eyes and he felt something tighten in his chest. Not just lust, not just passion—something deeper, more profound. He held out his hand and she took it, allowing him to help her back down on the blanket.

Her nipples were tight pink buds and he could already see a gleam of moisture between her thighs, but her body was tense and she jumped when he trailed his hand gently down her side.

“We’ll take this as slowly as you want,” he promised. “You can trust me.”

“I know.”

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Her body started to soften, leaning into his touch as he kept up the slow soothing strokes.

“That’s it, sweetheart. Just enjoy the moment. Let me love you.”

He lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her again, drinking in her taste as he carefully explored her slender body, seeking out the places that made her shudder. When he finally parted her legs and touched the delicate pink of her folds, she shivered.

“Is this all right, sweetheart?”

“It’s perfect,” she whispered.

The scent of her arousal grew as he stroked her swollen flesh, his thumb circling her clit as she arched against him. Her wet heat was intoxicating and he couldn’t resist moving lower, probing at the tight clench of her entrance. He carefully slid one finger into her but when he tried to add a second, her body tensed and she shook her head.

“It won’t fit,” she said frantically.

He pulled back immediately and brought his hand to her face, stroking gently along her cheek until her muscles relaxed again. Only then did he move his mouth to one of her taut, pink nipples. She gasped as he licked the sensitive bud, then sucked it into his mouth. Her fingers slid into his hair, holding his mouth to her breast as he licked and sucked, returning his hand to her leg and gradually working his way back up to her thighs.

He kept up the soothing strokes until she relaxed against him, then he carefully returned his finger to the tight, swollen flesh of her pretty cunt. His finger slid in easily and her hips rose eagerly to his touch. This time, when he tried to add a second finger, her body yielded, stretching to allow him to enter her and he groaned. If it felt this good to have his fingers inside her, what would it be like when it was his cock? But he wouldn't rush her.

He increased the pressure on her clit, and her hips arched again, meeting each stroke of his fingers. When he felt the first ripple of her climax, he carefully added a third finger. A shocked gasp left her lips, but she immediately tightened her grip on him, her small breasts quivering as he continued to work her, demanding her climax. Her breath was coming in frantic pants as she writhed against him, so wet that her arousal coated his hand. When she finally came, she cried out and he felt the waves of her orgasm pulse against his fingers.

"Leo!" she cried, her head falling back, her entire body lost to the pleasure washing over her.

He kept his hand in place, continuing to stroke her until her shudders finally slowed, and then he gently withdrew. The sight of his wet hand, the evidence of her pleasure, had his cock jerking and he couldn't help imagining how it would feel to be buried in that hot, tight little cunt. He took a calming breath, focusing on the moment and the woman in his arms.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?"

"I'm wonderful," she murmured, her eyes still hazy and unfocused. "I didn't know it could feel like that."

"I'm glad I could please you."

“You do,” she said, then frowned. “Wait. What about you? I should... should I reciprocate?”

“Only if you want to.”

Her cheeks flushed, but her eyes dropped to his erection and she nodded. He stretched out next to her and she sat up to study him, her eyes wide with interest.

“It’s a lot larger than I remember,” she said thoughtfully, reaching out a hand to touch his length. Her fingers were cool against his heated skin as she stroked him tentatively. It felt so much better than he remembered, but then, he hadn’t touched another in so many years that all of the memories were dimmed by the reality of her soft hands on his body. He let out a strangled moan and her gaze flew to his face, her eyes anxious. “Does that hurt?”

“No, it feels amazing. Don’t stop.”

She didn’t, her touch growing more assured, but he wanted more. He wanted her.

“Come here, sweetheart.” He drew her towards him, bringing her hand to his chest. “You can touch me anywhere. I’m all yours.”

Her eyes brightened as the implications of his offer sank in and she explored him with a gentle but eager curiosity that had him on the edge of exploding.

“Enough,” he said, pulling her hands away. “It’s time. If that’s still what you want?”

She hesitated and he steeled himself to let her go, but then she gave a determined little nod. He gently rolled her onto her back and settled over her. She tensed, and then relaxed, her small, soft body a perfect contrast to his. A perfect match.

“I’m going to take this as slow as I can,” he assured her, and he did, entering her in slow, shallow thrusts despite his urge to bury himself to the hilt.

His body was trembling, his need straining the limits of his control. She was too tight, but the pleasure on her face told him that he was causing her no pain. He continued to work himself in and out of the snug sheath, feeling her stretch and flower open for him. She was hot and slick and so tight he thought his head was going to explode.

“Are you ready for more, my love?”

She nodded eagerly and he let his weight sink down, pressing her into the blanket. He couldn’t hold off much longer. He tried to hold his thrusts to a shallow, gentle rhythm, but his hips were already pumping harder, faster. He tried to pull back and her eyes met his, wide and dazed with desire, and something inside him snapped.

He drove into her, his cock stretching her and filling her completely. Her body tensed, but then her hips rose to meet him, her delicate nails digging into his back. She was so small beneath him, so perfect. Mine, he thought fiercely. Mine to love and protect. Forever.

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He thrust again, deeper this time, and she cried out, the sound echoing through the forest as she quivered around him and his control shattered.

His climax exploded through him, the ecstasy almost unbearable in its intensity. His vision blurred, everything fading to darkness except for the small, soft female beneath him. Nothing else existed and nothing else ever would. He wrapped himself around her, determined to keep her with him as his cock spasmed, sending pulse after pulse of liquid fire into her waiting body until he collapsed against her, utterly spent.

“I love you,” he whispered, and her arms tightened around his neck.

“I love you too.”

He must have slept, because he opened his eyes to the sight of the sun setting behind the distant mountains, painting the sky with brilliant orange and gold. Jessica was cradled in his arms, a sleepy, satisfied smile curving her lips.

“Welcome back,” she murmured.

“I didn’t mean to leave.” He brushed his lips against hers. “How do you feel?”

“A little sore, but wonderful.” She smiled and placed a kiss of her own on his lips, then sat up. “We should get back.”

“I wish we could stay here forever, just the two of us.”

“I know. But we have to do this.”

He sighed and helped her to her feet. They dressed in silence, then he pulled her into his arms again.

“Whatever happens, I will find a way back to you.”

“I know,” she whispered. “I love you, Leo.”

“Then it’s time to go home,” he said. “Time to fight for our happiness. Together.”

CHAPTER 13

Jessica’s heart pounded as she stepped carefully over the boundaries of the diagram they had drawn. They had chosen the back parlor as the site for the ritual because it was as close as possible to the center of the house. All of the furniture had been cleared away, leaving only the diagram sketched on the floor, the candles burning at each intersection, and the herbs carefully arranged around the perimeter.

The flickering candles cast eerie shadows across the room, and the ancient symbols drawn in salt on the floor seemed to pulse with an otherworldly energy. She glanced at Leo, his body shimmering slightly in the darkness, and felt a surge of determination. She wasn’t going to lose him now.

“I’m not going anyway,” he said softly, echoing her thoughts.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and centered herself. The scroll with the words of the incantation shook as her hands trembled but when she opened her eyes and began to read, the words rang out clear and strong. The air around them thickened, the shadows deepening as a chill breeze began to blow. The candles burned brighter, their flames taking on an unearthly green hue. She could feel her hair dancing in the air and the air crackled with power.

Leo's body began to glow, and she forced herself to keep chanting even though she had a sick fear that the spell was going to rip him away from her. She felt a pull deep in her core, as if the ritual was drawing on something within her, but her voice never faltered. The candles flickered more intensely, their flames stretching towards the ceiling.

A gust of wind swept through the room, extinguishing several candles and her breath caught in her throat, but she kept going, her voice growing louder to combat the rising noise around them.

The symbols on the floor began to glow, pulsing in time with her heartbeat. She reached out, her fingers brushing against Leo's and his hand closed firmly around hers. The room seemed to spin around them, reality blurring at the edges, but she focused on their connection, anchoring herself with his touch.

Another fierce gust of wind tore through the room, extinguishing several more candles and plunging parts of the space into darkness. She faltered for a moment, her heart skipping a beat as Tim's shadowy figure materialized in the darkness.

His eyes gleamed with malice, his gaze locked on Leo. His lips twisted into a snarl as he advanced towards them. But Leo didn't even look at him. All of his attention was focused on her.

"Keep reading, sweetheart," he said calmly.

She forced the rest of the words to emerge from a suddenly dry mouth, her hand gripping Leo's for all she was worth. The shadows in the room deepened, the remaining candle flames burning even more strongly.

"You think you can just get rid of me?" Tim sneered, his voice dripping with venom.

Still holding tightly to her hand, Leo turned towards his half-brother.

“Leave,” he ordered. “Your time here is done.”

“I’m not leaving until I get what’s mine!”

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Tim advanced on them, his figure flickering in and out as if he was struggling to maintain his form, but his malevolent expression never faltered.

The wind swirled more violently now, sending the salt flying and scattering the candles. Despite the chaos erupting around them, she forced herself to focus on the ritual, chanting steadily. Tim was only a few feet away from Leo now, a triumphant smile on his face.

“Nice of you to arrange a body for me, brother dearest. I’ll be sure and put it to good use. Starting with the witch.”

Panic threatened to overwhelm her at the lust and cruelty on his face and her voice faltered for a second, but then Leo’s hand tightened around hers, lending her his strength. She could feel his love flowing through her, an unbreakable bond that Tim could never sever. Her voice grew stronger, and Tim’s advance halted. He was still smiling, his eyes gleaming with triumph.

“I’m not going anywhere, witch.”

“Yes you are,” she said firmly as she came to the final line of the spell.

A surge of power coursed through her veins as she channeled all of her strength into the bond between her and Leo. Streams of shimmering light erupted from her hands, forming a protective barrier around the two of them. The light intensified, creating a brilliant shield that pushed back against Tim’s darkness. Her entire body trembled with the effort of maintaining that light, but she refused to give in.

Tim swore as the light began to consume the darkness surrounding him.

“No,” he cried desperately. “You can’t do this to me. You owe me...”

She could see him struggling, but his efforts were in vain. The light was relentless, swallowing him up until nothing remained except a dark, swirling mist. Then the mist vanished and he was simply... gone.

Nothing remained of his malevolent energy and peace settled over Midnight Manor. The veil between worlds had closed, sealing their victory.

Her strength faltered and her legs gave way, sending her tumbling to the ground, but Leo was there to catch her in a very real, very solid embrace.

“I’ve got you, sweetheart.”

“Did... did it work?”

He smiled down at her.

“I believe it did.”

“Are you sure?”

He took her hand and placed it over his chest. Beneath her fingers she felt the steady beat of his heart and the rise and fall of his breath.

“Very sure.”

“It actually worked.”

“Of course it did. I knew you could do it.”

She looked around at the chaos of the room. The candles were scattered, the herbs and salt mixed together in a dirty pile, but there was no sign of the ominous energy that Tim had brought with him. “And we banished Tim.”

“Yes,” he said grimly. “He’s gone and he can’t come back.”

“Thank goodness,” she said and burst into tears.

“Shush, my love. Everything is all right.”

He gathered her closer and rocked her gently.

“I was so afraid the ritual wasn’t going to work.”

“But it did and I’m here. And we’re together.”

Her tears slowed, and she raised her head to look at him.

“You really are here. Alive. And so very, very real.”

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He was as handsome as ever, his brown eyes warm and his mouth curved in a gentle smile, but he was more solid than he had ever been before. She touched his face, relishing the scrape of his evening stubble beneath her fingers.

“And I’m all yours,” he promised. “Forever, if you’ll have me.”

“Of course I’ll have you.” She threw her arms around him, clinging to him desperately, so wonderfully warm and alive. “I love you.”

He kissed the top of her head, then tilted her face up to his.

“I love you too. Forever.”

He kissed her then, a sweet kiss, full of love and promise. She sighed happily as she let herself sink into the kiss, but then she felt his cock jerk against her leg and she laughed as she pulled back.

“That part of you is working too?”

“It most definitely is.”

“In that case,” she said, her hand stroking his chest. “I suggest we go upstairs and celebrate.”

He laughed and carried her away.

“I can see why you enjoy this, Flora.” Gladys sighed happily, moving away from the

window as the two lovers left the room. “That was quite satisfying.”

“I do have a knack for it,” Flora said modestly. “Not that everyone listens to me.”

“Don’t you start that again,” she snapped. “That ship has sailed, wrecked, and sunk to the bottom of the sea.”

“So? They even managed to retrieve pieces of the Titanic.”

“No,” she repeated, and quickly changed the subject. “I am rather disappointed they managed to banish that nasty spirit without any help from us. I was looking forward to cleaning house.”

“That’s the power of love.”

She groaned and took Flora’s arm. “Come on. Let’s go celebrate.”

“You go on ahead. I have something I have to do.”

“You’re not starting in on another poor couple already, are you?”

Flora gave her a look of limpid innocence.

“Would I do that?”

“Yes.”

Her friend laughed. “Fair, but in this case, it’s more of an... investigation. Jessica said something that reminded me of someone I haven’t heard about in years. Which is rather odd when you think about it.”

“Considering you like to know everything about everybody, it is.”

“Exactly. So I thought I’d take a little look. I’ll come over to yours later—unless you have company.”

“I won’t,” she said firmly, but Flora was already gone.

She sighed and started back towards her house. This late at night, most of the houses were dark, but Jack o’lanterns still glowed on the occasional porch step and a few lights were still on. The wind sent leaves scurrying down the street and she shivered. Normally she enjoyed Fairhaven Falls at night, but tonight she just felt... alone. Damn Flora and her insistence on digging up the past.

I made the right decision, she told herself, but as clouds scudded across the moon and another flurry of leaves skittered down the empty street, it was harder than usual to believe.

Nonsense. She squared her shoulders and marched off down the street, never noticing the tall figure watching her from the shadows.

EPILOGUE

Six weeks later...

Jessica shook her head as another of Eric's dates stomped out of the restaurant. Every she-wolf who'd met him for dinner had been tall, fit, and attractive, but he hadn't shown the least interest in any of them. Just what was he looking for?

She waited a few minutes to make sure the woman wasn't coming back, then knocked on her office door. He came out immediately, giving her a sheepish look that sat oddly on that hard face.

"I'm sorry to keep asking you to do this for me."

She shrugged.

"I don't really mind, but I'm surprised it keeps working. You'd think they would have figured out by now that you always have an emergency whenever you're corralled into one of these dinners."

"They're too competitive. None of them would ever admit that I left them."

"Surely some of them are friends?"

"Not really. The pack hierarchy is too important. Someone is either above you or below you and you don't want to give either one of them an advantage." He smiled at her horrified expression. "Which is why I am quite happy to be away from it all. Unfortunately, she—they—aren't prepared to accept my departure."

“She?”

He sighed. “My mother. She has... ambitions for me. She’s convinced that as soon as I’m mated I’ll give up this foolish business of being sheriff and return to the pack. Hence the parade of what she considers eligible females.”

“So find your own girlfriend. She can hardly expect you to have dinner with her picks if you’re already dating someone.”

An odd expression crossed his face before he firmly shook his head.

“No thank you. I prefer to be a lone wolf.”

“Ahroo,” Cody howled softly as he came up to them, then grinned at Eric. “Not gonna happen, dude. A wolf needs his mate.”

“Not me,” Eric said firmly before turning back to her. “Are you and Leo coming to the Christmas festival, Jessica?”

“Of course. He loves being able to move around town so freely now. He’s determined not to miss a single festival.”

“Then I’ll see you there. Good night.”

“Bye.”

She watched him leave, then gave Cody a curious look.

“Did you mean that? About a wolf needing his mate?”

“Yep. And I don’t think I’m the only one who thinks so,” he added quietly, nodding

at the front dining room.

Flora and Gladys were sitting at the table in the bay window but Flora was looking outside, a speculative look on her face. Oh Lord. If she had Eric in her sights, he was definitely doomed. Or blessed, she amended with an internal smile, just as Flora looked over at her. Those dark eyes studied her for a moment, and then Flora smiled, a slow, satisfied smile, before turning back to the window.

She couldn't possibly know. Could she?

The door opened again and Damian swirled in in a cloud of dark cloak, his arm tucked around a pink-cheeked Wendy.

"You're off the rest of the evening," he announced in his usual arrogant tone.

"I am? Why?"

Wendy giggled.

"Don't ask, just go. Don't you have someone waiting for you?" she added when Jessica hesitated.

"Well, yes, but..." She looked around and saw that Flora and Gladys were beaming at her, Cody was grinning, and even Damian was smiling. "Why do I suddenly feel like this is a conspiracy?"

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“Because it is.” Wendy tugged her out from behind the host stand and pointed her towards the stairs. “Now go.”

She laughed and went.

Her breath caught when she opened the door to the apartment. A fire was burning in the fireplace and all of her candles were lit, casting a warm glow over the room. Leo was waiting for her by the fireplace. He was wearing his usual jeans but he’d swapped out his flannel shirt for a crisp white shirt that accentuated his broad shoulders and muscular arms.

“Leo, this is beautiful.”

“I’m glad you like it.” He gestured towards the fire, where a bottle of wine was breathing next to two glasses and a basket covered with a white linen cloth. “Come and join me.”

“I didn’t realize you had a romantic streak,” she said teasingly as she went to his side.

“Neither did I, but it seems to be emerging. I blame you for that.”

He put his arm around her waist and she leaned against him, loving the warmth of his touch. He hugged her back, then picked her up and carried her down to the rug with him before pouring her a glass of wine.

“How did it go at the cabin today?” she asked, watching the firelight play across his face as he opened the basket and began cutting up an apple.

The land trust which he had created had included a provision that allowed him, and his descendants, to build on the land and he'd been working on a house for them. As much as they both loved Midnight Manor, they also wanted a place of their own. He was doing most of the work himself, but it wasn't uncommon for a volunteer to show up and help him, with Eric as his most frequent assistant. The big werewolf enjoyed both working with his hands and being out in the forest without having to worry about pack politics.

"It's going very well. If you don't mind roughing it a little, I thought we could spend Christmas there. Just the two of us."

"I think that's a wonderful idea." She took a deep breath. "Although technically it will be the three of us."

"I don't understand. Do you want to invite someone else?"

He looked so confused that she couldn't help smiling as she reached for his hand.

"I suppose you could say that."

She placed his hand over her stomach, watching his face anxiously. She was almost positive that he'd be happy about her news but it was going to be a shock. When he finally realized what she was telling him, his eyes lit up.

"A baby?"

"Yes, Leo. We're going to have a baby." Her smile faltered slightly. "Are you happy?"

"Happy?" He gave a joyful whoop and pulled her onto his lap. "Sweetheart, this is a miracle. A wonderful miracle."

He kissed her, his mouth firm and demanding, and she responded eagerly, opening to him. His tongue swept inside, warm and demanding, and her body melted at his touch. Arousal spiraled through her, leaving her aching and needy, and her hands tightened on his shirt.

But when she tried to pull his shirt up, he broke the kiss.

“Wait a moment.” His eyes glowed down at her. “What kind of mate would I be if I didn’t take care of you first?”

Before she could respond, his mouth was on hers again, kissing his way down her neck to the valley between her breasts.

“I love you, Jessica.” His voice was a low, possessive rumble as he took one taut peak into his mouth, rolling it between his teeth. She moaned, her hands clutching his head, and he growled his approval, his hand covering her other breast, his thumb brushing her nipple until she was squirming impatiently against him.

“Leo!”

“You’re so beautiful. And so sensitive,” he murmured approvingly as he turned to her other nipple. “I can’t wait to see how responsive these are going to be.”

His mouth closed over the tight bud and she shuddered, her hand reaching instinctively between them, desperate to touch him. He abandoned her breast long enough to strip off first his clothes, then hers.

She sighed with pleasure as he kissed her again with nothing between them. Her nipples brushed against the hard wall of his chest, sending sparks of pleasure straight to her aching pussy.

He kissed his way down her body, exploring her with fingers and tongue until he reached the place where she ached for him most. He parted her thighs, his eyes glowing as he studied her wet, swollen folds. Then his mouth was on her and she cried out as his tongue delved deep.

He growled in response, the sound vibrating against her sensitive flesh and sending her flying, her back arched, her body shaking. He continued licking her, more gently now, waiting until the last tremors had shuddered through her body before he moved back up to kiss her and she could taste her own sweetness on his lips.

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Her hand slipped between their bodies again and he growled approvingly when she grasped his cock, her hand sliding up and down the thick length of it until his growl became a groan.

“Enough, love.”

His eyes blazed into hers, then he positioned himself to enter her. She was slick and wet and ready for him, but the long, hard thrust of his cock still stretched her almost to the point of pain. His gaze locked on hers as he began to move, his strokes hard and fast and demanding, the pleasure building and building, her breath coming in frantic, urgent pants. He changed his position, his cock rubbing against the sensitive button of her clit with every stroke, and she exploded into a shattering climax, her body shuddering, her vision sheeting white as the waves of ecstasy rolled over her. With a final hard thrust and a low, drawn-out cry, he joined her, and she felt the warm rush of his seed inside her as his cock jerked and pulsed.

He collapsed down on her, then immediately rolled them over, tucking her against his chest as he pulled the blanket over them both, the warmth from the fire keeping them snug. She snuggled into his arms with a contented sigh, and he leaned forward to press a kiss against her hair.

“I love you, Leo.” Her words were a little muffled, spoken against the comforting warmth of his chest, but she felt his arms tighten around her.

“And I love you. You’re the best thing that has ever happened to me. Even death couldn’t prevent us from being together.”

She swallowed hard. Sometimes, she was still afraid that he would be taken from her. That the magic that had brought him to her would prove to be temporary. But he was already lifting her chin to look deep into her eyes, the familiar warmth of his skin reassuring her.

“Forever, sweetheart,” he said firmly. “I won’t let anything take me away from you. I promise.”

And he sealed his vow with a kiss. Forever, she thought as she lost herself in the kiss. From All Hallow’s Eve to every night beyond, bound together by the power of love—the truest magic of all.