



Grim Girl

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Category: Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia, Suspense, Dark

Description: My husband is a serial killer.

I know, because I caught him.

And he killed me.

Now, I'm out for revenge from beyond the grave.

The grave he dug for me.

Watch out, honey. I'm coming for you.

This is part 2 in a dark, paranormal, why choose duology, meaning the FMC will have more than one love interest and does not have to choose between them. This book contains dark themes and mature scenes, and is not suitable for all readers. Content warnings can be found inside the book.

*Written in British English

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Chapter 1

Mortimer

I should have pushed harder to turn him away. I never should have allowed the lovesick puppy to pass, and I couldn't wrap my mind around why I had. He was a nuisance, and now he was going to be an even bigger one.

His love for her was clear to see, and it pissed me off. Not because of his feelings for her, but because I hadn't considered that my ghost girl would have feelings for him in return. Now, as we stood on opposite ends of the basement to one another as we watched the scene unfold, my focus was latched firmly onto her, but I wasn't even sure she was aware of my presence. Her gaze hadn't moved from them, not even to check on the newest girl he had strapped to the other side of the room, another addition to his collection.

It made me feel...Fuck. It didn't matter what it made me feel, because I was fucking feeling. Ever since I had felt her clench around me, her nails digging deep as she fought me for dominance she would never win, her screams echoing in my ears as I ground her into the dirt of her own grave, my damn cock hadn't gone down. In all the time I had been dead, I had never once suffered through the pointlessness of an erection. The pleasures of the body were inconsequential, especially when it was a biological imperative to procreate, and that wasn't something us ghosts needed to do. Our numbers were added to through death, not life.

But perhaps that was the answer. I wasn't a ghost anymore, I was something more. Something powerful.

And so was she.

She was changing everything. Everything I thought I knew was being crushed to dust just from her mere existence.

And it was she was staring at with so much love and concern. The pain etched on her face as she watched her killer murder someone she loved stabbed at something deep inside me. Something I thought I had buried too deep to be resurrected, and yet, somehow, this enigmatic woman had.

As the knife slid across the man's flesh, creating a macabre smile in his throat that was mirrored by the peaceful one on his lips, ghostly tears dripped from my ghost girl's eyes in a waterfall of silvery essence. I could feel the power of them from here, the potential calling to that long forgotten part of me she was so painfully dredging up, and I couldn't stand by and watch for one more second.

I needed to go back to my roots, to the comfort of my existence before her. I needed to kill, to feed on the souls of the damned so I could make myself stronger, to build my power. But more importantly, I needed to erase the emotions seizing my chest, because they were too much. Too overwhelming.

Incapacitating.

What had my little ghost girl done to me?

I wanted more. She was all I could think about. All I desired. All I craved. To feel her wet chill wrapped around my throbbing cock, to see that fire in her eyes aimed at me, her passion and her anger and...

No, that. Anything but that. It wasn't possible. I wasn't capable of such emotion. It would be cruel of me to draw it out of her when I couldn't reciprocate.

So why did I...care?

Fingers and shadows tugged at my hair, yanking the strands in my frustration as I tried to use the pain to pull me back from the edge. I was teetering on a precipice of unknown consequences. The worst part was that I just knew that if I ignored it, if I chose to release her from my fixation and move on to let her exist in peace with Loverboy, I knew I would regret it. Nothing would ever be the same again. I growled, low and vicious, the sound pulled from deep inside my being as I attempted to release this onslaught of feeling.

But of course, it didn't work. Why would it? The only thing that could save me was returning to my normal routine. Hunt, consume, repeat. There was nothing else more important than that.

The shadows thrummed through and around me, calling to the darkest parts of my battered and broken soul, whispering promises of power and strength the likes no mere mortal would ever know.

I felt my lips split in a malicious grin. I didn't want to wait for the right time anymore. I wanted to act. I wanted to take what would belong to me now. I needed the rush of energy of eating a soul to consume me, to light me up from within as it merged with my power to create something more. Something powerful. Something indestructible.

I embraced the ice-cold shadows as they surrounded me, tugging me to my destination with a familiar ease that spoke of trust and synergy. The energy was mine to command, but only because I had proven myself a worthy vessel. Through me, it could flourish. Through me, it had purpose.

And I was about to put it to good fucking use.

I heard her screams turn into pathetic whimpers as she begged and pleaded for it all to stop long before I reached the house. It was just as run-down and shabby as before, possibly more since the woman could barely inhale, let alone clean up. They were in the living room, the woman sprawled at odd angles on the floor amid broken glass from the coffee table, a puddle of blood forming rapidly beneath her. If I didn't already know she was his wife, I wouldn't have recognised her through the bruising and swelling.

My prey stood above her, breathing heavily through his nose, snot bubbling out of his nostrils as he wheezed with a bad case of smoker's lungs, his entire body swaying precariously, no doubt as a result of the countless empty beer bottles littering every available surface, and even the ones that were already occupied.

Fuck, this place was a dump.

I noted the still lit cigarette butt in the chipped ash tray on the windowsill, and decided in that moment to cause a little extra mayhem that usual. Let the silly little mortals run around like headless chickens as they tried and failed to fit the pieces together. Eventually, just like they always did, they would wedge them into a shape of their own choosing to help them sleep better at night, content in their delusions.

But this man was going to die. His wife was almost there. Since she would be ripe for the picking, like a perfectly wrapped gift with a pretty little bow on top, I would consume her soul, too.

I licked my lips, eager for the meal.

The woman took her last, gurgled breath, and it was time.

Separating from her body, her spirit gazed upon the grizzly scene of her murder with a resigned sadness, but also relief. That relief was short-lived when she found me

watching in the corner. She tensed, then forcibly relaxed and cocked her head as she studied me curiously.

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Stupid little mouse.

‘Who are you?’ she asked, then flinched involuntarily when her husband spat on her corpse and proceeded to kick her, screaming at her to get up to make him his dinner. He only became more incensed when she didn’t move, too dumb to figure out he’d killed her.

‘I’m here to take you to where you belong,’ I answered her, enjoying the way she shivered with revulsion at the sound of my voice. It was nothing like the way my ghost girl responded to me, and I was glad for it. The only creature allowed to enjoy my presence was her.

No... Shit. I needed to focus. I needed to purge her from my mind, if only for a moment, and this was supposed to be it. The husband would die soon. It was the only way.

‘Are you an angel?’ she asked, trepidation tainting her hope. She thought she would be carried away to heaven, did she? That wasn’t how this shit worked.

‘No,’ I said, and took even more pleasure when she tried to step away, only to find herself rooted in place, still tethered to her bones.

‘W-What do y-you w-want?’ she stammered, her fear such a sweet taste in the air. Though not as sweet as my ghost girl.

Damn it!

My shadows lashed out in my frustration, latching onto the terrified spirit with their chilling tendrils, wrapping around her, squeezing her, digging in. A few dipped inside of her, using her mortal-shaped orifices to enter her body. She may have been incorporeal without her body as a vessel, but she was tangible enough for me.

I dragged her to me, pulling her close to get a better sense of the energy coursing through her. It was dim, her soul just as broken and battered as her decaying body, and I wrinkled my nose in disgust. She would be more like a bland snack than a full-on meal, but at least she was better than nothing. A tasteless side dish to accompany the shitty main.

Her eyes widened, her fear lapping at me enticingly as I shoved her energy to merge with mine, cutting off her screams.

I breathed in a deep breath that didn't quite hit the spot, and turned my attention to the worthless waste of space still attacking his wife's corpse. I didn't wait.

Even when I materialised in front of him, it took him far too long to notice me. Up close, his stench was even more revolting. His stale breath that reeked of tobacco, beer, and halitosis wafted over me, and if I my stomach had any contents, I would have expelled them immediately.

'You couldn't even brush your teeth,' I muttered in disgust, finally drawing his attention. He stumbled away from his dead wife as if putting distance between them would somehow prove he was innocent, but his shock quickly turned into a threatening glare as he levelled me with a look of pure hatred.

'Who the fuck are you, 'n wha' you doin' in my house?' he slurred angrily.

'I am your end, you pathetic cretin,' I sneered, then lashed out with my shadows to gag and restrain him. I didn't want to hear another word come out of those thin,

cracked lips. He struggled weakly, but even if he weren't drunk out of his mind, he never would have had the strength to resist. I was Power. I was Death.

He was my prey.

I had chosen this territory as my hunting grounds for one particular reason, and that was the river that wound through the land. The majority of the landowners had a section of the river to themselves, and I always killed my prey in the same way. The way I had been killed.

Drowning.

My nerves were wrought enough that I didn't have the patience to play with him like I might have done. I liked watching their fright, knowing I was the cause, and that I would feed on it, but now I just needed the rush of the hunt. The reward after the kill. I needed to remind myself who and what I was, to purge these new thoughts and desires from my mind and body. They were nonsensical. Purposeless. What use did I have for that sort of thing now?

I had made a mistake. My ghost girl was supposed to be entertainment. Another being that could keep me sane throughout the endless passage of time. Yet, she had somehow become more.

I didn't like it.

And so, I took my anger out on this miserable weasel of a man. I let my shadows have free rein as they held him beneath the water, swishing him back and forth, up and down, but never letting his face breach the surface. His limbs thrashed in their grip as he tried desperately to grasp onto something to haul himself out of danger, but it was a useless endeavour. I heaved a long-suffering sigh. Why couldn't he just hurry up and die already?

Finally, blessedly, the thrashing slowed to a stop. A few moments later, the idiot's spirit rose above the water, still spluttering like there was some in his lungs. Idiot.

Without any further fanfare, I urged my shadows to drag him closer. This time, he didn't try to fight. He may have been a little too stunned and was struggling to process, but I didn't care. As soon as we touched, my energy reached out to encompass his before both sucked back inside of me, filling me with the additional power absorbing his soul granted mine.

I breathed a little easier, the breaths filling my lungs not for oxygen, but peace. It was a familiar action that brought comfort, a reminder of a time when life ran through my veins. It still brought peace, and oftentimes clarity, but I found that despite that, my thoughts were still drawn to a white-haired ghost girl that had completely and irrevocably captured my attention.

There was no getting rid of her now, was there? I had made my bed, and now I had to lie in it. I had set all of this into motion with my own actions, and now it was coming back to bite me in the ass.

Or... was it? I couldn't know for certain until everything played out. Whatever the result, I knew I would forever be changed.

The real question was, for better or for worse?

Chapter 2

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Kali

How could I have ever thought Chance was in league with Blake? I'd known the eldest of the two half-brothers for longer, had trusted him implicitly, yet I had let Blake taint our friendship and let it chip away at the trust I had for him. Trust that was earned fair and square.

Not only that, but I'd let my trust issues get in the way of speaking to Rhodes about Bianca, and now she was dead. I didn't actually believe anyone would have shown up to investigate on time to save her, but at least her family, her little sister, wouldn't have to worry and wonder. She'd had concrete answers that would give her the opportunity to heal from losing her sister, especially in such a gruesome manner, but I had let my fears get in the way of that.

I would have to rectify my mistake. I couldn't let my personal fears cause any more harm. Blake was going down, and I would get justice for us all.

But first...

'Kali?'

My smile was weak and wobbly, but it was the only effort I could muster. 'Hey, you.'

His inhale was shaky, and he looked like he was about to collapse. 'Hey, back.'

'He got you, too, huh?' I asked, then immediately wished the earth would open up and swallow me whole. What the fuck was I even saying?

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

‘Kali, I... Shit.’ His voice broke as he tried to move toward me, but he was stuck. He hadn’t quite disconnected from his body just yet. Something was still keeping him attached, and he frowned down at his floating feet in frustrated confusion.

‘You need to accept that you’re dead now, Chance. It’s the only way to move away from your bones,’ I informed him, my voice void of all emotion. I didn’t sound like myself. It was like listening to someone else talk, but my mind was struggling to comprehend all that was happening. ‘Even then, it’ll take some time before you can move very far.’

He seemed rather dumbstruck momentarily before his expression went slack as his mind spun, piecing things together. ‘Are you... buried nearby?’

I nodded numbly. ‘Out back with the other girls.’

He cursed again, glaring down at his younger brother. The man who had now betrayed us both was hacking away at Chance’s body like he did with all of his kills. I wasn’t sure why he cut us into pieces, since he was only burying us in the backyard, but it was his ritual all the same. I had wondered briefly if he would follow the same MO with Chance since he was the complete opposite of his usual victims, but I got more information about Blake with this particular kill than I ever had before. It wasn’t just about the victims, it was about the method. He enjoyed breaking us into smaller pieces.

Sick fuck.

‘How many?’ he asked after tearing his gaze away from the gruesome sight. He wilted where he floated above his body, and I understood from first-hand experience how disturbing it was to witness. It was horrific watching him do that with other

people, but to your own body? If I still dreamed, it would be filled with nightmares.

‘Of his victims?’ I asked, and he nodded the clarification. ‘I don’t know. There have been dozens of us, but I don’t know how many came before me.’

‘Oh, Kali...’

The sheer, unadulterated heartbreak in his voice almost had me crumpling, but I refused to let the weight of Blake’s actions crush me. I couldn’t let them crush Chance, either, because it was clear to see how much he was struggling with his murder, and rightfully so.

‘Later,’ I told him, ending the route he was about to go down before he could go any further. This wasn’t the time to get into things.

But he didn’t seem to hear me. His eyes had latched back onto what Blake was doing to his hollow corpse, and he swayed where he levitated above it all. He was seeing things he could never unsee. I had watched his smile as he’d died, a peace in his expression I was shocked to see, but this was something far beyond the scope of what we as people should ever have had to experience. To bear witness to one’s own mutilation, the desecration of our now-empty vessels after death was its own, malicious form of torture. It bit. It clawed. It tore out the innocence from our very souls and shoved us into a limbo of madness that hovered just over there, not quite tangible but very much present.

Though now, I was almost certain I had touched it, and it had touched back.

I didn’t want that for Chance. Not him. And yet, it was too late. He had joined me in purgatory, condemned to face eternity together wither away into a forgotten memory like the others, or to seek vengeance like me.

Which path would he choose?

Would he forsake me, now that he knew the truth? Would he discover that his own journey disconnected from mine? Or would he stay by my side, my vendetta now ours?

The truth hit me harder than I was prepared for. I didn't know Chance like I once had. I wasn't even sure how long I'd been dead. By the grey dotting his hair and the wrinkles around his eyes, it seemed I had been gone for quite some time. He had visibly aged, and that time spent apart meant I didn't know him as I once had.

We weren't strangers, but we weren't close anymore, either. So, where did that leave us?

I kept my distance as he watched Blake work, needing to offer reassurance but unable to do so. Chance's body was no longer recognisable in the mess. I felt every ounce of my being screaming to reach out to him, but not only because I wanted to comfort him, but because this new power that had awoken inside of me was screaming to be fed. I didn't want to accidentally absorb him like Bianca, so I stayed by the stairs, right beside the cop who was whimpering in the corner, trying to make herself small enough to evade notice.

It wouldn't last. She was his victim, regardless.

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But maybe she could be the one I could finally help. If I talked to Rhodes, or maybe I could find Gloria, I could let them know what was going on so they could inform the police. Except... the woman was the police.

Had they started to put the pieces together? Were they finally onto him?

My current priority was Chance, however. I needed to help him acclimate to his new reality. I would find someone to help when I felt it was safe to leave him for a little while. He wouldn't be able to follow with his essence still tied to his bones. He, in particular, would struggle with that. Chance had always been a wanderer. Free-spirited was putting it lightly. He wouldn't do well being bound to one place, let alone this place, with all its negative energy and malicious intent. This land would have been a prime location for his career as a paranormal investigator, but now that was behind him, and he had become the very thing he had investigated in life.

I wasn't sure how he would handle that. Death was a massive change that took time and patience to come to terms with. Not only that, but he had left so many people behind who loved him dearly. Poor Ashe. Poor Mikey. I wasn't sure how close he and Gloria were now, but I knew that they had got along well before, so she was likely to mourn him, too.

I wasn't completely certain how his parents would take the news. I had a bad feeling that they would be more concerned with the social decline a second disappearance in the family would cause, not to mention their youngest son being responsible.

My lips twitched as I held back my smirk at the prospect of Mallory and Calvin getting what was coming to them once this all came to light, because it would, and

soon. Now wasn't the time to smile, however, so I squashed it before it could spread. I didn't want Chance to think I was taking pleasure in the horrors still unfolding, though he wasn't focused on me.

His spirit was dragged along against his will while Blake compiled the pieces of what used to be his body, ready to transport to the surface to be buried. He wouldn't do so immediately, which he made clear when his cold, soulless eyes found his next victim huddled up in the dark. No one could say he never took an opportunity when it presented itself to him, and he did so now with malicious glee. He dumped the gory mess of Chance's body in plain sight, close enough for her to touch and definitely close enough for her to get a good look despite the darkness of the dingy basement. She gagged, choking on her tears and the bile as it rose up her throat. She bent over as far as she could to expel the seemingly meagre contents of her stomach, but Blake only laughed like it was all one big joke, perfectly tailored for his entertainment.

When he grabbed the shovel from beside the stairs, still muddied from when he'd used it to bury Bianca, we all breathed a sigh of relief. The cop sniffled, still trying to stay quiet and unobtrusive, but it was pointless. She had caught Blake's attention, and she was already in his basement of doom. There was no skating under the radar for her. Not anymore.

What I found the most interesting, though, was that she couldn't see me. She was showing no signs of an ability to sense me, which I took to mean that she wasn't close to death. Not yet, at least. That was the pattern that was emerging. Bianca had noticed me when she was about to die. Rhodes was already dying. So, how was Gloria sensitive to ghosts?

I wasn't sure I would ever fully understand the rules of our existence, especially when they kept changing.

Since there wasn't anything I could do to communicate with the poor woman, I

turned my attention back to the man who could see me, only to find him already watching me. I tried to discern what he was feeling, but his expression was shut down. He was hunched over as if the weight of what had just occurred, what he'd just been forced to endure and witness, was trying to crush him. His eyes were devoid of the light that had drawn me to him all those years ago, instead gazing ahead dully like he wasn't actually seeing anything.

If a ghost could look peaky (more than a ghost naturally was), that would be it.

I was still too wary to take a step towards him in case I accidentally absorbed him, but it was clear he needed someone. I just didn't know how without putting his soul at risk.

'Chance...?' I called out tentatively.

'He did that to you?' he asked in a lifeless tone. The question was expected, but still gutted me all the same. I didn't like to dwell on the specific details of what Blake had done to me. I wasn't like the others. He tortured them, sure, but it was mostly physical pain they had to endure. The worst methods of torture he used on me were emotional. Psychological. He used my love for him against me, twisting everything I had ever known, making me question my entire life, including myself. When he finally killed me, it was only after he had broken me. My mind was in shambles just as much as my body, and I didn't know up from down. I loved him, but I didn't. I yearned for him, yet I burned for his suffering.

I had put the pieces of my psyche back together after my death, but I could never be the same as I was. He had irrevocably turned me into a different person, and I mourned the woman I had been before. Yet, at the same time, I was glad to be rid of her. She was naïve. Ignorant. Gullible. Far too trusting, and pathetically desperate to be loved, enough so that I had latched onto the only source of love I had found, completely ignoring the red flags that I couldn't see until it was too late.

When Chance finally processed his death, perhaps he could see how lucky he was that he had avoided those sick, twisted mind games. I wouldn't bring it up, though. Not unless he asked, and certainly not now.

'My death was brutal, yes,' I admitted guardedly. It was a harsh truth that broke something inside him, but I didn't want to lie. This was my...our reality. There was no easy way to transition into death for us. It was thrust upon us before our time, and we could either let it break us or make us stronger.

I had chosen the latter. Would he? Or would he crumble beneath the malignant power of Blake's actions?

Chance's shuttered expression suddenly twisted with rage, his previously dull eyes burning with the fire of injustice. They latched onto me, and I felt the force of it like a physical caress, the power of his emotions calling to me as like called to like, and I waited patiently, hopefully. His next words would decide everything.

'I want to kill him.' His tone was so low and deadly that it almost reminded me of Mortimer, only his fury would scorch everything in its path compared to Mortimer's biting, icy wrath. 'I want to make him suffer for what he has done. I want him to pay for the suffering he has caused you.'

I blinked, taken aback. 'Me?'

He cocked his head to the side, a curious glint overtaking the fire, though it was no less intense. 'You really don't know, do you?'

I took a step back, suddenly nervous, almost to the point of fright. But I halted my retreat and asked the question anyway. 'Know what?'

He cast his eyes downward as if he were saddened by my ignorance, but then they

lifted again to pin me in place with the depth of emotion shining through. ‘That I would do anything for you, Kali. I would raze the fucking world for you.’

I couldn’t move even if I’d wanted to. I was rooted in place, trapped by the energy rushing between us, eager for more, desperate for the clarity that was coming. I didn’t know if I wanted it. Didn’t know if I could accept it.

But I pushed for the answer, anyway. ‘Why?’

‘Because,’ he began, sincerity shining through, alongside something I was afraid to name, but he was not. ‘I love you. I always have, and I always will. You are the only woman I haveever loved, and I don’t care if you don’t feel the same way. I am yours to command, mind, body, and soul.’

Chapter 3

Chance

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My words affected her, that was for sure, but what that effect was, I couldn't tell. Her eyes widened at my declaration, the truth of them settling over her, and it was likely the only thing keeping her from running. It was obvious to me, as it had always been, that my feelings for her were not reciprocated, but I was okay with that. I was hers, in whatever capacity she decided to keep me.

I meant what I said. I was hers to command, with the exception of sending me away.

I was afraid for a moment that she would run, that the power of my love for her would scare her away, and that I would lose the only thing anchoring me in the moment. She was keeping me from dwelling on the nightmare of my little brother and what he had done to me. I focused on her beautiful face to keep my mind from imagining the horrors Blake had put her through, because I had the worst feeling that what he'd done to me was only the tip of the iceberg. If I stuck around, I was sure I would see more of what he was capable of, but still, Kali was his wife. Whatever he'd done to her, in life and in death, I was instinctively certain was more painful than anything he could have done to his other victims. I suspected that her torture was far more fracturing.

Yet, here she stood, strong even in the face of Death, power swirling around her like shadowy tendrils of pure energy...

Woah. How was she doing that?

'You'll have to teach me how to do that,' I told her, eyes wide with awe.

But she frowned, her head tilting to the side in confusion before she came to some

sort of conclusion. Then, her lips lifted ever so slightly into a morbid smirk. ‘Yeah, I’m a pro at this whole ghost thing now.’

I noticed how she relaxed at the change of subject. She clearly wasn’t ready to go there with me yet, or at all, and that was okay, so I let it slide. Instead, I glanced down at my arms and made a show of lifting them and twisting them in front of my face to see if the shadows would appear on me, or if that was something I had to work up to. There was nothing except a pale, almost colourless tone to my skin. Immediately, I missed my tan, but then I glanced back up at the woman I had missed desperately for the past seven years, and I knew I would give everything up all over again just for a glimpse of her.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked, a single fair eyebrow raising in bewilderment.

‘Um... Checking for shadows?’ It shouldn’t have been a question, but it came out as one anyway.

Her reaction wasn’t what I expected, however. She reared back as if I’d slapped her, and I swore I saw fear flash behind her eyes before her walls slammed down again, blocking out my access to her emotions. I didn’t like that. We’d never not been open with one another.

‘What are you talking about?’ Her tone wasn’t harsh, exactly, but it was demanding.

‘I was just checking to see if I have those shadow things... like... yours,’ I trailed off. I refused to be anything but honest, but I was suddenly wary after a reaction like that. Was that not a normal ghost thing?

She gawked at me for a beat, seemingly lost for words as she stammered before finally finding her words. When she spoke again, her voice was shrill. ‘Like mine?’

I waved a hand to gesture to the tendrils of darkness curling out from her. Wide-eyed, she looked down at herself, then jumped back in shock as she stared at the shadowy wisps that caressed her skin. I realised with startling clarity that she wasn't aware of them, but I couldn't decipher how she felt about it. There was surprise for sure, a little hint of awe, perhaps, and a heavy dose of horror, but she wasn't afraid, necessarily. More like... unsure. She wasn't batting at them like I might have in an attempt to shove them off, but she was holding her arms out like she was afraid to touch them, or perhaps even to move.

Were they hurting her? Did they pose a threat?

'What are they?' I asked her, worry building as my mind whirled with worst-case scenarios.

'I don't really know,' she admitted, her tone small as she took on a faraway look. 'I've seen them on someone else, but I thought they were only a Him thing.'

'Him... like the spirit who was trying to claim you?'

My words snapped her out of her thoughts, and she was suddenly laser-focused on me. Her stare was intense, probing, and a little dangerous. It was a look that I had never seen on her before, and I wasn't sure if I was uncomfortable or turned on. Could I be turned on in this state? Logic dictated that reproduction, and therefore reproductive urges, weren't necessary here, so they shouldn't exist. So why did I feel my cock stirring?

'I'm sorry, he did what?' Her voice was low and deadly in a way that was completely opposite to the woman I had once known. And yet...

Yup. Definitely turned on.

Not the time, Chance, I reminded myself, forcing my rapidly growing erection to go down. It wasn't difficult when my dismembered body was resting in a gory heap of blood, bone, and torn tissue at my feet. Feet that weren't touching the ground, which was another stark reminder that I was fucking dead.

Blake killed more than just my body, he got my damn boner, too.

Bastard.

'Chance,' Kali snapped, jolting me out of my thoughts. I was glad of it, too, but I felt like my mind was on the precipice of splintering under the sheer volume of my emotions. I couldn't decide what to focus on: the betrayal of finding out my little brother had murdered the woman I loved, or that he'd murdered me, or the grief I felt at losing the life I had lost, even if I had planned to end it myself. The anger I felt towards Blake clashed with the relief and love I felt towards Kali, the immense joy I was basking in at seeing her again tainted by the simmering rage bubbling underneath it all.

'Sorry, what?' I asked, our previous conversation forgotten.

'You said he tried to claim me,' she prompted, her bow-shaped lips pursed in displeasure and impatience. I could tell that it wasn't aimed at me, however. Perhaps I had played a part in the impatience with my wandering mind, but I felt that it was mostly aimed towards the other entity. The one that was killing people...

Oh, shit.

'He's been killing people,' I told her. 'That's what drew me and the team down here. We were investigating the deaths. There's been an epidemic of drownings up and down Highway 97 that we suspected was paranormal. Gloria sensed him... Shit, Kali. This guy's bad news, and he was adamant that you belonged to him.'

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She was practically vibrating with rage. The tendrils of shadows writhed as if they were reacting to her anger, flicking out like they were ready to lash out at the perceived threat. I eyed them warily, nervous that they would try to reach for me. I didn't know what they were capable of, but they were radiating an energy that screamed fuck off or die, and I was suddenly sure that they were fully capable of ending me, even in death.

'I don't belong to anyone,' she stated, her voice emanating danger in its deceptive calm.

'Kali...' I began cautiously. I attempted to move away, but I was rooted to the spot. It seemed it was somehow still attached to my body, and panic that I was trapped near it tried to take root, but I shoved it aside. Kali wasn't trapped. She was moving freely, or at least more freely than me. I didn't think she had left the property since she was buried here, but she had managed to move far enough away to run into Rhodes.

That meant I was capable of the same, even if it took a while to figure out how. And I would.

As soon as she caught on to my fear, she calmed down, shooting me an apologetic look. 'I'm sorry, Chance. I didn't mean to be so...'

'Badass?' I finished for her with a smirk.

She laughed, and the sound lit the spark inside of me that had almost completely extinguished in her absence. She filled me with light and love in a way I hadn't felt in far too long, and I fell even harder for her because of it, if that was even possible. I

knew my feelings for her bordered on obsession. No, scratch that. They were obsessive.

‘That’s the first time I’ve ever been called that,’ she smirked. ‘I’ll take it.’

The moment of muted levity was quickly squashed when a sob burst from the cop hiding in the shadow of the stairs. There was a little alcove beside them that she had been chained to, though there was no bed like the one Blake had killed me on. I glanced over my shoulder at it, noting how grimy it looked. Even in the darkness of the windowless basement, I could clearly see the stains. Blood was the most prominent, but I could also see signs of shit and piss from where his previous victims must have released themselves in their fear.

My stomach twisted with a combination of emotions, though the forerunners were rage and grief. My little brother, the one I had loved so unconditionally and who had supported me throughout the years of being cast aside by our parents... How could he have become such a monster?

And how didn’t I see it?

‘Don’t beat yourself up over it, Chance. I didn’t see it until it was too late, either,’ Kali said, her voice filled with compassion and understanding. I hadn’t realised I had spoken my thoughts out loud.

‘I don’t understand how he turned into...that,’ I said, gesturing up the stairs to where a heavily reinforced steel door was shut tight with an obnoxious amount of locks. A lot of time and money had been invested in the perfect little murder room, hadn’t it?

‘He doesn’t fish,’ was all she said.

I blinked. ‘But... All those fishing trips...’

‘Murder trips.’

‘Fuck...’

‘Yeah.’

I met her eyes once again, but the words I was about to say dried up in my mouth as I found myself caught in the lure of her beautiful blue eyes. They seemed even lighter and brighter than I remembered, like they had turned into two orbs of pure ice. It contrasted in an oddly comforting way with the warmth she was currently showing me now, and it took her expression shifting into one of concern to jolt me out of the trance they had put me in.

‘Do you need a minute?’ she asked softly.

‘How did you get here, Kali? What the fuck happened?’

She released a breathy snort from her nose and tilted her head back to look up at the ceiling. It was a derisive move, focused internally rather than at me. ‘I thought he was cheating on me.’

‘You were catching onto his lies,’ I surmised.

‘There were too many fishing trips. I thought it was strange that they got longer each time he went, and then I figured I’d join him on one or something, you know? Just to spend some time together. I was feeling...neglected,’ she scoffed out the word. ‘But when I asked him about it, he shut me down. I could sense that something else was going on, that something wasn’t right, so I started doing a little research. Turned out that the ‘colleagues’ he was going on these trips with didn’t even exist. Or, if they did, they were from the other side of the world. It didn’t even occur to me that he could be doing something as heinous as kidnapping, torture, and murder, so I

followed him. I thought I'd catch him in the act with another woman, and I certainly caught him in an act, though her screams weren't of the pleasurable variety.'

'Jesus... Kali,' I hesitated, unsure how to respond. 'Why didn't you say anything? You never told me you were questioning his loyalty.'

She dropped her gaze back to mine, and I swore I saw guilt flash in them, along with something I couldn't quite grasp. 'I didn't want to drag you into it. You're his brother. I didn't want it to seem like I was trying to make you choose sides, especially when I didn't have any proof.'

'I...' I paused. I was about to tell her that I would have always taken her side, and while that might have been true, I also would have been there to support Blake no matter what. I could see the logic in her secrecy, but that didn't mean I had to like it. Especially with all that I'd uncovered and experienced these past few days.

She shot me a smile that was both sad and understanding at the same time, and I wanted to wipe it off her face and replace it with something much better. Instinctively, I tried to move toward her again, but practically bent in half at the waist when my feet refused to move. My body snapped back up with ease, gravity no longer playing a part in my existence, and it was slightly disorienting. It felt natural, like this was the state of being I was meant to be in, yet it was unfamiliar enough that I knew it would take time before it felt normal.

She waved to where the cop was shivering, tears streaking down her cheeks as she hugged her knees to her chest. 'I should go find Rhodes and let him know what's going on so he can pass on the message to the right people. Someone needs to come out here and help this poor woman before it's too late. I hate to say it, but your death has probably prolonged her life enough to be rescued if we act fast, but I don't want to leave you alone.'

Her words stumped me. I wasn't cruel enough to want the woman to suffer, but every atom of my being was screaming not to let Kali out of my sight. I'd only just got her back. What if she left and never returned? What if I ended up stuck by my bones for all eternity, unable to figure out how to break free while she roamed the Earth, leaving me behind?

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‘Or... I can stay. Just for a little while. She should be fine while you’re being buried,’ she offered, apparently sensing my rising panic.

‘Will you come back?’ I asked, my voice small and uncertain in a way that sounded completely unlike me. It was like listening to a different person speak from my mouth.

She moved as if to take a step toward me, her hand reaching for me, only to drop as quickly as it rose. She stayed in place, the distance between us like a chasm she was too afraid to cross. But why? It was only me. Had I scared her with my declaration of love? It was too soon. I knew it. I should have just kept my trap shut like I always had, but I couldn’t hold it in any longer. Fuck, I hoped I hadn’t destroyed everything.

‘Of course, I’ll come back, Chance. I would never leave you now.’ She grinned, her lips pulling up to reveal two rows of blindingly white teeth that only added to the icy beauty of her pale features as she puffed her chest in a mimicry of mischievous pride. ‘You’re stuck with me. No getting rid of me now.’

I grinned back, though I felt mine was more subdued. I was beyond ecstatic and relieved to see her again, but I had just been murdered by my own brother, a man I had loved and sacrificed for my entire life. I wanted to put it behind me, to accept my death since I had already planned on ending my life anyway, but I couldn’t bring myself to. My passing wasn’t peaceful, and my suffering wasn’t over yet.

‘Could you stay?’

‘Of course,’ she agreed without hesitation, almost too quickly. Eagerly. It pleased me,

settling one of the many pangs in my chest.

‘Just until I’m buried,’ I confirmed. ‘I know time is precious, and she doesn’t have much left.’

‘I’ll stay with you for as long as I can. Rhodes isn’t far.’

‘Gloria was still there when I left. If Rhodes is... incapacitated, I’m pretty sure she’ll be around to talk to.’

‘Worst case scenario, I can go see Blake’s new wife. She saw me twice, though she couldn’t hear me.’

‘I know,’ I admitted. ‘Dakota showed me the note, and how you’d scratched out his name.’

She smiled, but it wasn’t sad this time. This time, it was full of pride. ‘Smart girl. Hopefully, I can save her from sharing my fate, too.’

‘Our fate,’ I muttered, not to be obtuse but because I needed to speak the words out loud for it to truly sink in.

‘I’m sorry, Chance. I didn’t want this for you.’

‘Don’t be,’ I took a deep breath, purely out of habit rather than necessity. I had no physical urge or need for oxygen anymore, but the motion was familiar and comforting. ‘I had planned on joining you, anyway. It’s not the best way to go, but in a way, I’m glad. I found you.’

She looked absolutely wrecked at my admission, and it broke my heart to see her feeling such pity for me. I didn’t want or need it. ‘Chance...’

‘No, don’t say anything. It’s okay. I haven’t really lived since you disappeared. When Sage passed, there was nothing keeping me there. You’ve always been more of a home to me than any place or person, Kali. I couldn’t...’ My voice cracked as my emotions got the better of me, and I paused to compose myself. ‘I’m at peace with my decision, and I’m glad I’m dead. I just wish it were under different circumstances, but there’s nothing to do about it now. At least now I have answers. I know the truth. I know what happened to you, and you’re here.’

A scraping sound from above interrupted our conversation, and we both shifted to stare at the door.

‘What’s he doing now?’ I asked, feeling nervous despite already being dead. The worst had happened, yet I couldn’t forget the sensation of him cutting my body to pieces. It was an echo of the pain I had felt while alive, but torturous all the same. I had done my best to ignore it for Kali’s sake, not wanting her to see me in pain any more than she already had, but I knew it was all in vain. She knew. There was no use hiding from her.

‘He’s going to move your body. It must be night now.’

‘He’s finished digging already?’

She shook her head, her lips pulling down into a grim frown. ‘No. He’ll finish with you beside him. He just waits until dark to take your body up in case someone trespasses and sees. He’s almost been caught that way once.’

‘Will it hurt?’ I asked, sounding stupid to my own ears, but needing to ask anyway. I could sense that something else was going to happen, and that I wouldn’t like it.

‘It... won’t be pleasant. But I’ll be here the whole time. You won’t be alone.’

‘Great,’ I muttered, then steeled myself for what was to come just as the door opened. Blake stood at the top, the light shining behind him turning him into a creepy silhouette as he just stood and stared down at my mangled body.

‘I’m here, Chance,’ Kali said, though she was already moving away. Her glare remained fastened on Blake as he finally began the descent down the stairs. ‘I’m here.’

And she was. She stayed by my side as he grabbed a piece of me and took it outside, tearing my spirit in two. Each trip left me in more agony, but her voice was a comfort through the pain. Eventually, I was in one place again as he continued digging a hole in the ground. I wondered where Kali was buried, and if I was close to her grave, but I couldn’t ask. I felt untethered, like I was in just as many pieces as my body was, like I would drift apart in different directions and spend an eternity in broken torment.

It only got worse when he dumped me in the hole and began shovelling the dirt on top of me. I felt each grain of soil, each small stone, as it piled on top of me. It was heavy. Suffocating.

But Kali was still here. Her voice was whispering indistinct nothings that soothed me enough to keep me from floating away. She was my anchor. My strength. My light.

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She was the only thing worth holding on for.

Chapter 4

Dakota

Mallory made a rude sound in the back of her throat before she tossed back her hair once again, the action jostling the alcohol in her glass and spilling some over the rim. She didn't seem to notice, or if she did, she didn't care. She was far more focused on the fact that she had seemingly been abandoned by both of her sons.

Well, one. She had burned the last remaining flimsy bridge between herself and Chance, and there was no rebuilding a new one for them. My heart panged inside my chest at the thought. Since my parents had never been particularly caring, I'd stupidly thought that my in-laws might have provided that parental love I had always craved. I thought I had it, but the more I got to know Mallory and Calvin, the more I realised I was like an object to them. To Calvin, I was the woman who would produce an heir for his fortune. To Mallory, I was a doll she liked to dress up and whine to. Neither one took any real interest in me as a person, nor cared for my opinions.

I was used to that, so I learned to live with it easily enough. I was disappointed, but I still had Blake. Yet, he was still nowhere to be found. I was beyond upset at this point. This was past letting my insecurities get the better of me. He had abandoned me, and I was pissed.

I was also increasingly concerned for Chance. I hadn't heard from him since yesterday, and I was sure he was going to call before now. I placated myself by

repeating the mantra that `no news was good news, but my gut was screaming at me that something was wrong.

The problem was, I couldn't figure out what was wrong so I could fix it until one or both men returned, and it was becoming increasingly obvious that I was better off leaving than sticking around for whatever this shitshow had become.

Then again, why should I have to be the one to fix it? Whatever was keeping them away, if it was merely the memory of Kali or something else, it was not my responsibility to make everything go away again. This was a weight that had no right being left on my shoulders, and I refused to let it weigh me down. Chance, I could understand. His love was borderline obsessive. It was like Kali was the air he breathed, and without her, he was suffocating. It didn't escape my notice that Blake's love for her was but a fraction of what his own brother felt, which, combined with his marriage to me, begged the question of why? Why had he run off? Why was he struggling with everything now?

It wasn't fair to me, and I wasn't having it. I could only make so many allowances for his grief, especially when he was supposed to have moved on. I hadn't seen any sign of regret from him before our marriage, but ever since we'd returned from our honeymoon, everything had been different. I couldn't place my finger on it, but I could sense it all the same. It was that horrible, sick, twisting feeling in my stomach that something just wasn't quite right, but there was no real evidence to prove it or to point me in the right direction. I felt more alone now than I ever had before, and I'd spent the majority of my childhood feeling isolated and unwanted.

I had vowed never to let myself fall into the same position again, yet here I was, moping over my missing husband who was moping over his dead wife. It was too much.

I just wanted to go home.

‘Where is that boy?’ Mallory whined, lifting a portable fan to her face and not even bothering to open her eyes. I didn’t doubt she was genuinely curious where Blake had run off to, but she wasn’t concerned in the slightest. Blake had assured me she had been more maternal in his youth, but it was difficult to combine that image with the woman before me now.

‘I told you, he’s fishing,’ I reminded her for the umpteenth time, only to receive an annoyed huff in return.

‘He’s always off fishing, my Blake. Such a mindless activity.’

‘That’s why he does it,’ I mumbled, my patience with this entire situation running thinner by the second.

‘Well, if he’s not back soon, he’ll miss all the fun. He’s always loved skiing.’

I made a noncommittal noise in the back of my throat and contemplated heading back to Rhodes’ house. I hadn’t seen Kali since yesterday, but I was more than curious if they’d had any luck contacting her.

She was another reason for my desire to depart and leave this place behind. I worried my presence was making her uncomfortable, that she was taking the news of Blake moving on hard. She had scratched his name out on the note he’d left me, which led me to believe she was angry with him because of me. I didn’t want that, but I also didn’t want to stick around where my husband’s late wife’s ghost was haunting us. Perhaps that made me selfish, but I trusted Chance would help her move on. He was good at solving mysteries, as his job required, but this was a problem for the police.

Hopefully, we’d all get answers soon so that we could finally put it all behind us and move on with our lives. Or, in Kali’s case, her afterlife. I wanted her to find peace, but I was also woman enough to admit that she had freaked me out a little.

Okay, a lot.

It wasn't every day one experienced evidence of the paranormal, and while from a distance it was fascinating, up close it was a lot more disconcerting than I was comfortable with.

I was more than ready to get the hell out of here and purge these events from my mind.

Yet, I couldn't. Not because I was physically incapable of leaving, but because I felt like I at least owed Kali the respect she was due. I hadn't met her when she was alive, but she was loved by the people I loved, and she had suffered a great deal. So, she was a ghost. So what? Just because I was practically crawling out of my skin at the mere thought of her revealing herself to me again, didn't mean I should just leave her. She was clearly attempting to send a message, though I had no clue why she chose me. Rhodes apparently had the ability to see and speak with her, and Gloria was a psychic and could communicate with her as well. Why me?

If I were being honest with myself, that was the true reason why I hadn't fled like a coward. I was curious. About her, about why she was reaching out to me, specifically. There were so many unanswered questions surrounding her, and the mystery of Kali kept getting denser and more complicated the further we dug.

She was dead, but she wasn't gone. She deserved to be heard just like anyone else.

More than that, she deserved justice.

Fuck, I wanted Blake now more than ever. We were supposed to be partners, yet as soon as things got ugly, though no one was to blame here, he ran. It had me searching through my memories for anything else I had missed or dismissed that could be construed as red flags. Was my husband the man I thought he was?

I hated that I was doubting him. Doubtingus. I hated that he was the cause of it even more. I hadn't expected this from him, and it was so out of character that I was struggling not to take it personally. Everyone always said the first year of marriage was the hardest, but surely they didn't mean this?

My insecurities were running wild, and the longer he was gone, the more I would overthink, overanalyse, and think up the worst-case scenarios. I was struggling more than I had in a long time, and I fought the urge to curl up beneath the cot like I had before. Hiding wouldn't solve my problems, nor would small spaces make me safe.

Tell that to my brain, though, because it didn't want to listen.

'I need some air,' I said, abruptly standing and interrupting whatever Mallory was currently droning on about. I hadn't been paying attention, and normally I might have felt bad about that, but I couldn't bring myself to care. Mallory's grievances were inane on the best of days.

'We're already outside,' she said, confused, finally opening her eyes so she could take stock of my mental state. The way she was looking at me reminded me too much of the way my mother would stare at me as a child whenever I told her about the monsters in the shadows. Like I was a freak.

'Excuse me,' I muttered, then hurried away. She didn't try to stop me, and I didn't want to dig into whatever feelings that brought up, choosing to shove them aside to pick apart later. Now, there was already too much going on inside my head that I needed to sort through. I had to pull up my big girl panties and pull myself together. I could not, would not, fall apart. Not here. Not again.

I rounded the back of the interconnected series of ostentatious tents back to my own. I had been forced to move it further out of the way when Mallory had demanded more space for another 'room', but I was suddenly glad for it. I couldn't see my mother-in-law, and my father-in-law was somewhere inside the maze of colourful fabric. I didn't want to see either of them right now.

For the first time in my life, I actually wanted to be alone.

I pushed the flap to the side with a little more force than necessary, wincing when I

heard a tear, but told myself it was likely nothing more than the zipper. When my gaze landed on the empty cot, only one pillow indented, the reminder of my missing husband was like a punch to the gut, and I decided I didn't care if the whole tent was cut into ribbons. I needed out. I never wanted to go camping again.

I didn't think, I just acted. I pulled out my suitcase and started packing. I didn't bother folding things neatly, choosing instead to stuff everything inside whatever way they would fit. I just needed the necessities. Everything else I could leave behind. None of it mattered, anyway, and if it did, then I would simply replace it.

If there was one thing I had learned in life, it was that everything was replaceable. Even people. And I hadn't felt more like a replacement than I did in that moment.

I zipped up the suitcase so fast I almost caught my fingers. I snatched them out of the way at the last second before taking a deep breath and trying again, but this time with a little more care. My breaths were short and shallow, almost to the point of hyperventilation, so I closed my eyes and took some deep breaths to ground myself, repeating the mantras I had adopted as a child to help me through my anxiety.

Whatever happened, happened.

I am in control of myself, and no one else.

I am not responsible for other people's actions.

The only person who truly cares about me is me.

That last one had tears stinging my eyes, the burn unwelcome. It had been a long time since I'd felt the need to remind myself of that. I thought I'd moved past it, but it seemed recent events had set me back. I was afraid to be proven correct, but the longer Blake stayed away, the longer he went without contacting me, the more my

old trauma resurfaced.

All I was left with as I dragged my suitcase out of the tent, my purse slung haphazardly over my shoulder, were the horrible thoughts running through my brain. I wasn't enough. I would never belong. He didn't love me the way I loved him. I wasn't welcome here. He didn't want me.

Each and every thought was like a knife to my heart, reopening old wounds from when I'd spent my entire childhood believing I was worthless and unwanted. Tossed aside like I meant nothing to the people who were supposed to love and care for me. Ignored, neglected, and constantly endangered. Whatever was happening with Kali and Blake was dredging up all those old feelings until I could barely discern the past from the present.

I had to get out of here before I reverted back to that pathetic little girl who felt the only safe place was a cupboard under the sink, the one that hid and made herself smaller just to survive.

I never wanted to be that weak and helpless again.

A low growl sounded nearby, so quiet it almost went unnoticed. My stride faltered as I left the tent behind, but I was quick to keep moving. With the surge of old emotions, I dismissed it as my mind playing tricks on me, because there was no way I was hearing those sounds again. They were figments of my imagination when I was a child, just more monsters hiding in the shadows. My therapist had told me it was all in my head, and they'd gone away, so it couldn't possibly be them.

But no. There it was again.

Louder.

Closer.

I ignored it, and the chills that skirted up my back. But what I couldn't ignore were the glowing red eyes peering at me from the trees. Their forms were shrouded in shadows, ambiguous enough that if I tried, I could pretend I wasn't seeing anything at all. I could keep sticking my head in the sand and act like nothing was going on, but a flash of long, sharp teeth accompanied the next growl, and I knew I couldn't fake it.

My blood turned to ice in my veins, and I froze in place. It wasn't possible. They were nightmares I'd made up in my head when I was a child to process my trauma; nothing more than my brain turning the bad men into something monstrous so I wouldn't have to see the faces of the people who had hurt me and be scared. If they were mindless beasts with sharp teeth and deadly claws that kept their distance, they weren't people with harsh words, derisive sneers, and iron grips that left bruises on both my skin and my soul. But they weren't real, and the only monsters I knew were people. It had taken me years and hard work to come to terms with that.

And yet, I was seeing them now, the exact same creatures of darkness that had once plagued my every waking and unconscious dreams, and I couldn't deny it even if I'd wanted to.

My monsters were back.

Panic set in fast, and instinct took over. Fear was now controlling my actions, but there was at least a pinch of logic still remaining that allowed me to move in the right direction. I needed to get out of here. I needed Chance. He would know what to do.

I started to run, and when my suitcase snagged on the uneven ground, I dropped it without a second thought, too desperate to escape the beasts that were hunting me from the trees to let something as silly as clothes hold me back. Letting the extra weight go allowed me to push my legs faster, and I sprinted down the gravel driveway

towards Rhodes' house. I didn't slow when it came into view, because I could sense them following me. They were keeping pace, their growls and snarls echoing around me, taunting me with flashes of glowing red eyes peering through the foliage. I never looked right at them, but I could still see them from the corner of my eye.

I slammed into the front door at full speed, knocking the breath from my lungs. I pounded my fists against it and screamed. 'Let me in, let me in, let me in!'

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Suddenly, the door swung open, and I practically fell inside, kicking it shut behind me so hard that it rattled on its hinges.

‘Woah, what the fuck?’ Rhodes asked, hands held in the air as he backed away from where I was bent over, panting heavily.

‘Where’s... Chance?’ I asked through my heaving breaths. My eyes were so wide that the air stung them as I whipped my head back and forth, searching for my brother-in-law. Rhodes, Mikey, Ashe and Gloria were crowding the room, but there was no Chance.

‘He... went next door,’ Rhodes said slowly. Cautiously.

‘Hewhat?’ Ashe shrieked, jerking back like she’d been slapped.

‘What the fuck?’ Gloria joined in, equally as perturbed. ‘What was he thinking?’

‘No... No, no, no. How could he be so stupid?’ Ashe cried, hands pulling at her hair. She looked completely dismayed.

‘Next door...’ I said the words out loud, sounding them out as if it would make sense why that was so bad. But then I remembered that was where Kali was supposedly buried, where she may have been murdered, and my spine snapped straight in alarm. ‘He went after the killer on his own? When?’

Mikey looked like he was going to be sick, and he swayed where he stood. Rhodes gently pushed him to lean against the wall, and the slimmer man shot him a grateful

look before admitting something that turned my own stomach with its implication. ‘A little over twenty-four hours ago.’

‘Wait a minute... I thought he was with you?’ Ashe directed her question to me, unable to keep the accusation from bleeding through in her tone, and I didn’t take kindly to it.

‘I haven’t seen him since I left here yesterday,’ I said, failing to maintain my composure, so it came out snappier than intended. I wasn’t too cut up about it, though, since she was apparently trying to blame me for Chance going missing.

She didn’t seem to care about that, however, because her attention suddenly whipped to the men. ‘Youknew?’

Both men looked at their feet, ashamed that they’d kept quiet, quite possibly to the detriment of their own friend’s life. I wasn’t sure what to do with this information. Selfishly, I needed Chance because if my demons were, in fact, real, then I was going to need all the help I could get. I wasn’t equipped to deal with anything paranormal, and I was scared out of my wits. Now, he could possibly be... I couldn’t even think it.

‘Has anyone called him?’ I asked, my voice shrill in my panic.

‘I’ll try now,’ Ashe said, already pulling out her phone and dialling his number. She put it on speakerphone so we could all hear, but it went straight to voicemail. Either his phone was dead, or...

She tried again. And again. Each time with the same result. I could see her beginning to unravel, and Gloria was quick to usher her away to start damage control. The police were going to need to be involved, especially if he’d already been MIA for over twenty-four hours.

Fuck, this was bad. This was so, so bad.

‘Someone needs to call the police,’ I instructed. I didn’t recognise the sound of my voice. It was flat, like someone had trampled all over my emotions until they were nothing more than flimsy, pancaked remains.

‘We were going to if he wasn’t back by tonight,’ Mikey admitted sullenly, but we both knew that wasn’t good enough. He never should have allowed Chance to run off into danger on his own. If Kali’s killer was next door, and it was the same person responsible for all the other spirits they’d claimed were lingering, then we could be dealing with a serial killer.

And they’d let Chance run right to them.

I had the worst feeling in my gut that told me we weren’t going to be seeing him alive again.

If I’d felt helpless before, it was nothing compared to now.

And when my gaze skimmed past the window, red eyes flashed.

Chapter 5

Kali

I watched Blake walk away, his boots leaving tracks in the dirt beside a single line where he dragged the shovel behind him. He was exhausted from burying his own brother, so much so that he didn’t even try to lift the shovel, and his feet shuffled tiredly back to the cabin. I didn’t miss him when he disappeared inside.

Chance was flickering in and out of existence, his presence unstable, his gaze vacant.

I'd stood by, refusing to leave him as I bore witness to his torment. His stuttered screams would echo in my mind for all eternity, and I was more than willing to accept that burden. I couldn't believe I had considered, even for one second, leaving him to face the pain of this fate alone. I still needed to tell someone about the woman in the basement, but how could I have ever contemplated leaving Chance alone? Perhaps, subconsciously, I was afraid, my own burial like a black mark on my soul that I wasn't ready to acknowledge.

But for Chance, I realised I would do anything, face any fear, and support him no matter what. He was my best friend.

And he loved me.

I wasn't quite ready to face that revelation. I didn't know if I was even capable of feeling the same sort of love I'd felt for him before. I had given up my crush on him all those years ago in favour of giving my all to Blake, and look how that had turned out.

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But I couldn't deny there was still a flicker of something there, urging me to nurse it and nurture it back to life.

Could I, though? Everything was different. I was almost certain it wasn't safe for me to go near him, at least not yet. Ever since Blake had finished the arduous task of burying him, the insistent tugging at my core that demanded I absorb him like I had Bianca had eased, and I wondered if that was the key. I could only absorb someone if they had yet to be buried.

But if that was the case, did that include the spirits of those who had been cremated? Or was it the ritual of a funeral, the acknowledgement of the death that somehow made them immune to this new hunger? Because that's what it was. It was like an empty cavern inside of me had suddenly opened up, begging to be filled. Yet, the other girls didn't call to me like Bianca had. Like Chance had up until he was secured in the earth.

There was too much going on for me to focus on all of it at once, so I needed to prioritise. First, I had to tell someone about the woman in the basement. Then, I needed to focus on discovering what new abilities I seemed to have received through merging with Bianca, and learn how to control them, because that was how I was going to complete my third, and arguably most important task: making Blake pay.

Anything else beyond that could be dealt with once all was said and done, but now that I had my tasks organised in my mind, I could start working through them.

'Chance?' I called softly. His gaze flickered to mine, but it was like he wasn't really seeing me. Whatever was going on inside his head was keeping him trapped there,

and he needed to work through it to come back to me. It would take a while, I knew from personal experience, but the worst was over now. There wasn't anything else Blake would do to hurt him.

'Chance, it's over now. I need to go talk to Rhodes or Gloria and let them know what's happened, but I'll be back soon, okay? I promise, I'll be right back.'

I didn't get a response, but I wasn't expecting one. I hated to leave him like this, but it couldn't be helped. I would just need to hurry back so I could be there for him when he finally pushed through the trauma. I didn't have anyone helping me, so I could at least give him that, but there wasn't really anything I could do for him right now anyway.

I gave him one last lingering look, and let the sadness for his suffering settle for a moment before locking it away to process later, and then I zoomed away. My bare toes skimmed the grass as I levitated towards Rhodes' property, and I delighted in the tickling sensation that I never thought I would feel again. Not only that, but I found, to my immense satisfaction, that I could now not only move more freely, but more swiftly as well. The shackles that had held me in place since my murder were finally falling off, crumbling to dust beneath the strength of my newly heightened power.

It was an intoxicating feeling to be free again, but I couldn't bask in it. There was no time for that now. Rhodes' house came into view, and with only a small smile to show my pleasure at finally being able to do so, I stepped out of the trees and onto his front lawn. However, the closer I got to the house, the more trepidation I began to feel. What if I wasn't wanted there? I was basically about to intrude on this man's home. I might have found him a source of entertainment, not to mention he was very nice to look at, but that didn't mean we knew one another. I was essentially a stranger about to enter his space without permission.

I could wait outside for him to show himself, but I needed to get back to Chance, and

the woman in the basement only had a few more days to live. Blake would ruminate in his most recent kill before turning his attentions onto the cop, so I didn't have the luxury of waiting around. The poor woman wasn't going to escape at least some of Blake's torture, but if I acted now, then maybe she could be saved before it was too late.

With determination bolstering me, I slid through the front door and into a shocking scene.

Ashe was beside herself. Gloria was holding her up the best she could while also looking grim and pale, but Ashe was practically hyperventilating against her wife's shoulder. Rhodes and Mikey were off to the side, plastering themselves against the wall as if to stay out of the way. Rhodes looked a little worse for wear, and I wondered if that was due to whatever was going on or if his illness was catching up to him. Mikey, on the other hand, looked greener than I'd ever seen him. He blinked rapidly as he leaned heavily against the wall, like he was doing everything in his power not to faint.

But it was Blake's new wife – Chance said her name was Dakota – that truly caught my attention. While the other were freaking out, she was alert. On guard. Wide green eyes darted about the room like they were searching for a hidden enemy. No, not the room. They were shooting between the windows, and she seemed to be seeing something that caused the blood to drain from her face; the starkness of her suddenly paler complexion against the darker freckles dotting her skin was even more alarming than Mikey's decidedly green pallor.

She looked terrified.

Rhodes was the first to notice me, though that was due to the fact that he was the only person here who could actually see me. I doubted the others suddenly had the same ability just because I was no longer an ordinary ghost.

‘Kali,’ he said in surprise, his back suddenly straightening at the sight of me standing here. My name on his lips was barely more than a whisper, but it caught the attention of both Mikey and Dakota. Ashe and Gloria were still panicking in the other room, too caught up in their own heightened emotions to hear him.

‘Kali?’ Mikey called out, then turned to Rhodes. ‘You can see her? She’s here?’

Rhodes nodded and took a step towards me, only to halt before he could take another. He looked at me with an odd expression, like he was afraid he would spook me if he got too close. Maybe I had given him that impression with my previous behaviour, but that wasn’t the case. Not then, and certainly not now.

‘Rhodes,’ I greeted back.

‘What are you doing here?’ he asked, but the question earned him only baffled looks from Mikey and Dakota.

I didn’t give them the chance to interrupt, however, because I had the feeling that they were panicking over Chance, and I had the answers they were seeking.

‘I came to give you information,’ I admitted.

‘About Chance?’ he asked hopefully.

‘He’s dead.’

He exhaled a shaky breath. ‘Fuck...’

‘What?’ Dakota asked in a high-pitched voice, her panic and confusion bleeding through. ‘What is it? Is he okay?’

‘She said he’s... dead,’ he informed them, his lips turned down into a grimace.

The news created a domino effect. As Dakota stumbled back like she’d been hit, Mikey bent over and hurled onto the floor. Rhodes simply deflated, closing his eyes and resting his back against the wall. His head tilted back, knocking it against the frame of a family photo as he breathed deeply through his nose. Ashe and Gloria finally noticed that the mood had shifted over here and came to join us.

‘What is it?’ Gloria asked, and I decided I should be the one to answer her while the other processed.

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‘Chance is dead, Gloria.’

She inhaled sharply, obviously not expecting to hear my voice. ‘What? Kali, is that you? What do you mean, he’s dead?’

Her words set off Ashe, who wailed and crumpled to the floor, clutching desperately at her wife’s legs. Gloria didn’t move to comfort her, her own shock and grief rendering her momentarily frozen in place. The sight made my heart clench, and I felt a twinge of shame at how excited I was to have him back, only for the rest of the people who loved him, the people he had left behind, to suffer for it.

‘What happened?’ Mikey finally asked, directing the question into the empty space in front of him while his eyes searched for what he could not find.

‘Blake.’

I didn’t think it was possible, but Gloria paled even further. Rhodes, bless him, looked taken aback and slightly confused, but it all clicked into place for him quickly enough.

‘Fuck, seriously?’

Gloria was shaking her head, refusing to acknowledge the truth of my words. ‘No, that’s not possible. It’s not him. It can’t be.’

‘Not who?’ Dakota asked, her gaze bouncing between everyone but not landing for long before it drifted back towards the windows. She flinched at something outside,

and I craned my neck to see what was freaking her out so much, but there was nothing there.

All eyes turned to look at my ex-husband's new wife, pity and concern shining through. She sensed it and shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, and almost seemed to shrink in on herself under the weight of their stares.

'Blake,' Rhodes answered. He was the only one without any connection to the man, so he wasn't as hesitant to speak the words into existence.

Dakota froze, her entire body tensing while his expression shut down. 'What?'

'Blake killed Chance. And Kali,' he said, his voice strong and firm, though no less compassionate. This was a very delicate situation that, by all rights, he held no responsibility for. Yet, there he stood, acting as a pillar of strength for these people I had once considered friends, refusing to back down in the face of adversity, picking up the pieces where the others could not.

My respect and admiration for this man grew tenfold in that moment, and I could have kissed him.

'The other spirits?' Mikey asked, and he didn't need to elaborate for me to understand.

'He killed them, too.'

Rhodes relayed the message.

'I can't be here,' Gloria finally said, bending down to hook her arms beneath Ashe's and haul her back up onto her feet. I wished I could hug her, too. Ashe and I weren't as close as she and Chance, but she had still been my friend, and I held a lot of care

for her, too. I could hardly stand to see her suffer, so I didn't try to object when they left in a hurry, leaning against one another as they struggled to put one foot in front of the other.

Dakota winced when the front door opened, backing away from the outside like it was going to bite her or something. I took note of the odd behaviour, but didn't dismiss it. Just because I couldn't see what she was seeing didn't mean there wasn't anything there. She didn't strike me as the type to be afraid of nothing.

Rhodes caught my eye and made a gesture with his arm. 'Why don't we sit down and you can tell us everything?'

I nodded, shooting him a grateful smile before drifting over to the living room couch. I didn't sit, instead choosing to remain standing where he could see me. He would need to give them all the information I imparted today, but I couldn't stay long. I had to get back to Chance. My skin felt itchy being away from him when I knew he needed me.

Rhodes and Mikey followed me through, but Dakota stayed put in the entryway. It was like she had turned into a statue, and I knew she was in shock. She would need help. Hopefully, Rhodes and Mikey could divide and conquer, because I was needed elsewhere.

A beeping sounded from another room, which I determined to be the kitchen after a quick glance inside. The team had set up in Rhodes's house, the paranormal investigation equipment and devices spread out on every available surface. Multiple laptops were recording data I couldn't decipher, and a few of the devices lit up and beeped faster the closer I came. So, I stepped back and returned to where Rhodes and Mikey were waiting for me.

'What happened, Kali?' Rhodes asked, pushing for answers, but not unkindly.

‘He has a cabin next door. He kills us in the basement. It’s reinforced and soundproofed, and there are no windows, so there’s no escape. Chance confronted him, but he caught him in the act. He was carrying his next victim inside the house. She’s still there now. You need to tell the police, get them out there before he kills her, too.’

‘Fucking hell,’ Rhodes muttered, his face pinched with stress. ‘I’ve been living next door to a serial killer?’

I nodded. ‘Sorry, Rhodes. I can’t imagine...’

‘No, don’t,’ he interrupted, raising a hand as if to ward off my apology. ‘You have nothing to be sorry for. If anything, I’m sorry. I’ve been right here the entire time, and I never knew... I never saw... Fuck, Kali, I’m so sorry. I just minded my own business and didn’t even knock on the door to be neighbourly, and this entire time he’s been killing...’

I let them process the news for a couple of minutes, but the itch got stronger, and I found myself drifting back in the direction of Blake’s house. Chance was waiting for me, even if he wasn’t fully aware of it. I needed to be there for him. My time here was up.

‘I’m sorry, I can’t stay. I had to leave Chance behind to warn you...’

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That snapped him out of his quiet contemplation. 'No, of course. Thank you for letting us know. We were about to call the police anyway, but now I can at least tell them there's someone to save.'

'She's a cop,' I told him, earning myself a raised brow. 'I think she might have already been onto him or something, but she fits the profile.'

'What profile?' he asked, and I gestured to myself.

'This one.'

His eyes found Dakota where she stood stock still in the entryway, his brows furrowing as his mind whirled with questions, trying to make connections.

'She doesn't fit the profile.'

'Neither did Chance,' I pointed out. It wouldn't matter what she looked like. If she caught Blake, he'd kill her, too. That was likely what had happened with the cop, and she was just unfortunate enough to look the part as well.

He nodded, coming to the same conclusion.

'Okay. I know you need to go, but will you come back?' he asked, a glimmer of hope shining in his eyes that had nothing to do with the situation at hand. It warmed me in places I had forgotten existed in my constant state of numbness, and I knew if I could blush, I'd be bright red right about now.

‘I’ll come back,’ I promised. Whether that was a good idea or not, I couldn’t bring myself to care. All I could feel was the desire to be around this man who had captured my attention in more ways than one; that made me feel things I had long since believed I could no longer feel.

‘Later, then,’ he confirmed with a warm smile. One which I returned.

‘Later, then,’ I agreed, then slid through the wall and sped back to my best friend’s grave.

Chapter 6

Rhodes

There was so much I wanted to ask her, but she was gone before I could put it into words. She wouldn’t have stayed anyway. It was clear to see that she cared for Chance. In the same way? I wasn’t sure. She had married his brother, who had then killed them both, for god’s sake. And even if she weren’t dead, inserting myself into that mess was stupid, yet I couldn’t deny how much it hurt to watch her walk away.

Not that she walked. In my living room, her feet weren’t hidden behind foliage, and I could clearly see the way they hovered just above the ground. She really was a ghost.

A ghost that needed our help to prevent another murder.

What a final adventure to find myself on.

My body ached as I stood from the couch, my muscles still stiff from my most recent seizure. I was more aware of my symptoms than ever, including how limited I now was in what I could safely do. There would be no more driving Bessie, no more running the campsite, and certainly no more living alone. I was doing my best to hide

the worst of it in front of my new friends, but I could feel myself slowly fading away. Each day, I found it harder to wake up and keep going. Kali, alongside recent events, had given me a purpose to keep me motivated for a little while longer, but my time in this plane of existence was quickly coming to an end.

I still needed to call Jessica so she could help me get my life in order before I no longer had one.

But one step at a time.

Dakota was still frozen in shock by the front door, Ashe and Gloria were gone, dealing with their loss privately and in their own way. I had a feeling Gloria was about to whisk Ashe away from the danger, and while I wouldn't blame them for running, it did leave fewer of us to deal with the fallout.

I turned to Mikey, tipping my chin at where Dakota was staring into space. 'One of us needs to help her while the other calls the police.'

He flinched like I'd raised a hand ready to strike him, but nodded in agreement. 'I've got Dakota, if you don't mind calling the cops. I... haven't had the best experience with them in the past.'

I blinked, more than curious about that particular story, but it wasn't my place to pry. If he wanted me to know, he would tell me.

'Oh, sure. That's fine. Why don't you take her up to the spare bedroom, and I'll call the cops down here?'

'Yeah. Sure. I can do that.'

I watched as he took a shaky breath, tears shimmering in red-rimmed eyes, and I

could see the pain he was also suffering through and the loss of his friends. The betrayal he must have been feeling keenly right about now wouldn't be helping matters, either, but he was composing himself enough to make himself useful.

I thought back to the interactions I'd witnessed between him and Chance over the past couple of days. I'd known something was going on, and it wasn't hard to figure out that Chance had been planning to commit suicide to join Kali in the afterlife, especially since we had all seen undeniable proof that death wasn't the end. Mikey must have been preparing himself for the loss for a while now, though not like this.

Whatever Blake had done to his brother in his last moments, I wasn't sure I wanted to know, but I knew it wouldn't have been good. Not when he'd been caught red-handed.

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I was suddenly very glad that I hadn't asked Kali about the details. However they'd died, I was sure it was horrific if they were still lingering. From what I'd gathered from their paranormal investigations, spirits that lingered had died brutal, painful deaths before their time. I didn't know what would happen to me once I died, but it brought up the questions. Would I be earth-bound like Kali and Chance? Or would I move on? Was my cancer considered an unnatural cause of death by The Powers That Be, or would I move on, never to see Kali again?

I blanched at that thought. The mere concept of never seeing Kali again was one I didn't ever want to consider. Every atom of my being rejected the idea, like she was wherever I was meant to be. It sounded insane, even in my head, but I couldn't shake the feeling that meeting Kali was fate, and she was my future. Whatever that future looked like.

God, when had I become such a sap? I barely knew the woman, yet here I was, spouting nonsense about fate bringing us together. Dying really did change a person in mysterious ways.

Mikey headed over to Dakota like a man walking to the gallows, and I didn't blame him one bit. I couldn't imagine what she was going through, to learn that your spouse, the person you loved enough to tie yourself to for the rest of your life, was a murderous psycho. Not to mention, he had already killed one wife and now his own brother. The complete and utter betrayal she must have felt. I would bet all that I had that her entire life no longer made any sense, that she was floundering amid the rubble and chaos her husband had wrought.

And this was only the beginning.

I stood aside and watched as Mikey coaxed her up the stairs. She didn't react, still shut down, trapped inside her own mind. She was almost completely catatonic, but she did allow him to lead her up the stairs. When I heard the door to the spare bedroom shut, that was when I pulled out my cell phone and dialled 9-1-1.

'Nine-one-one, what is the address of the emergency?'

'It's at my neighbour's property,' I started, and then rattled off the address, followed by my name and phone number when they asked next.

'And what is the emergency?'

'I have reason to believe my neighbour is a serial killer, that he's just killed his brother, and that he has another victim in his basement.'

The conversation went on, and I was asked question after question. I provided a rough description of Blake, and of Chance and Kali. I couldn't give them details about why I thought he was a serial killer, but they seemed to be taking me seriously enough. They assured me an officer was en route to the property to check out my claim, and that another would be dispatched shortly to speak directly with me.

Now, all I had to do was wait and stay on the phone until the officer arrived.

I kept expecting Mikey to rejoin me, but he stayed upstairs with Dakota the whole time. When the doorbell rang, I hoped it didn't disturb them, but I swore I heard a door upstairs creak open before slowly snicking shut again, and still no sign of the other man.

There was a single officer waiting on my porch, a thumb hooked into his vest and shades perched on his nose, obscuring his gaze. With his hair artfully styled to look perfectly mussed and the bulge of his muscles evident even beneath the bulky

uniform, he was one of the coolest guys I had ever seen. Young and attractive, yet with an air of superiority that could only come from enforcing the law, I kind of wanted to be him.

I could feel his stare even if I couldn't see it, and if his pursed lips were any indication, he was not happy. To be here interviewing me, or for some other reason?

‘Mr Emeric?’ he asked, to which I readily confirmed.

‘Yes, sir. That’s me.’

‘You’re the man who called in about a potential serial killer living next door?’

‘Yes, sir. Blake Dodd.’

He hummed, the sound both thoughtful and wary at the same time. ‘My name is Detective DeLuca. I’m here because I have a few questions for you, Mr Emeric. May I come in?’

I opened the door wider and stepped back to allow him the room to walk past. ‘Sure. Of course.’

I led him through to the living room, where he settled himself on the couch without needing to be asked. I remembered when I’d had the confidence to just make myself at home wherever I went, and I took a moment to miss those days before I refocused back on the present. There was no point in dwelling on what used to be.

‘Would you like something to drink?’ I asked. ‘Water? Coffee?’

‘A glass of water would be great, thank you.’

I hurried to the kitchen to fill him a glass, then rushed back to place it on the coffee table in front of him. Then, I settled myself into my favourite armchair, releasing a breath of relief that my aching bones could have a moment of respite, and waited for him to start the conversation.

He didn't start right away, instead choosing to slowly sip at the water. He'd kept the shades on, glaring at me through the mirrored lenses in the silence. I could see myself in them, and I wondered if it was a tactic he imparted during interviews and interrogations to make the other parties nervous. I could see how it would work, especially when faced with our own guilt through the reflection of ourselves in his sunglasses, but I wasn't swayed. His methods wouldn't work on me, especially considering I wasn't at fault here. I had done nothing wrong, and I had nothing to hide.

So, I simply sat back, made myself comfortable, and waited for him to make the first move. Time was of the essence, but I got the feeling he wouldn't respect me or my answers if I caved first. He was one of those types, and it was clear to see he was sceptical about this visit.

Finally, he placed the glass back on the table, but not before he dragged one of the old, largely unused coasters in front of him. The coffee table was old and abused, ring stains littering the surface alongside chips and dents. I wasn't fussed about adding more, but he seemed to be changing up his tactics into something a little more respectful of the home he was in.

Interesting.

'So, Mr Emeric. Why don't you tell me a little about why you believe this... Blake Dodd, was it?' he asked for clarification, and only continued when I nodded. 'What makes you believe he's killing people?'

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I cleared my throat, unsure how much to reveal without making my information seem less credible. The police, especially around these parts, weren't particularly keen on using the paranormal as legitimate evidence, so I had to tread carefully. I couldn't risk him leaving and dismissing me and my claims because I told him a ghost told me.

'A new friend of mine had reason to believe there were... dead bodies buried next door, killed by the owner. He also had reason to believe that the owner was his brother.'

'This friend. What's his name?'

'Chance Weiss.'

He hummed again. 'You said they were brothers?' I dipped my chin in confirmation. 'And do you know why they had different last names?'

'I believe they were half-brothers,' I admitted.

'And what reason did Mr Wiess give to back up his conclusions about his brother?'

'Blake's wife, Kali, went missing seven years ago. She was recently declared legally deceased, but Chance...' I paused, trying to find the best words to describe the investigation without bringing up the paranormal aspect of things. 'I don't know everything, but he said he was going to check out the house next door. He left yesterday morning, but he hasn't come back.'

Another hum. I tried not to let it get under my skin, but I could see just how little this cop believed of my story. Was this a waste of my time? Was that poor woman trapped in the basement going to die because he wouldn't take me seriously?

'And the woman you claim is being held in the basement? What can you tell me about her?'

I shrugged. 'Not much. She fits the victims' MO.'

'Which is...?'

'Pale features. Like, as white as you can get. Platinum hair, pasty complexion, that sort of thing. Ghostly.'

He paused, his pen hovering over the pad he'd been using to write notes, and his eyebrows rose at my choice of words. 'Ghostly.'

'Or close to. I don't know. That's really all the information I have. I just know that Chance is dead, there's a woman in the basement who's next, and there are a bunch of dead bodies buried in the yard.'

'And how did you come across this information, Mr Emeric?' he asked, suspicion colouring his tone.

Shit... I didn't have an answer for that. Not one that would work.

'I was told,' I replied, choosing to keep things vague. I should have known it wouldn't work in my favour.

'By whom?'

‘Uh...’ I drawled, stumped. ‘That’s... a little complicated.’

‘Then simplify it for me.’

I sighed. I’d backed myself into a corner here, and I didn’t know how to get out of it. So, I chose to go with the truth. He would either believe me or he wouldn’t. Either way, I would have done what I could.

‘A ghost told me.’

He levelled me with a deadpan look. ‘A ghost told you.’

I nodded decisively. If I was doing this, I might as well go all in. ‘Correct. Kali Dodd, to be specific.’

‘Kali Dodd, the wife of the supposed serial killer who’s been missing for seven years and presumed dead?’

‘That’s the one.’

He grunted, and I couldn’t tell if that was better or worse than the humming.

‘Look, I’m new to all of this, but I’m not far off the grave myself, and it seems that since I already have one foot on the Other Side, I can see ghosts now.’

His eyebrows rose again, not expecting that information. ‘How so?’

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I pointed to my forehead. 'Glioblastoma. Inoperable. Only got a few weeks left to live, if that.'

'I see. I'm sorry to hear that.'

I shrugged off the pity I could feel emanating from him. 'It's fine. Not the first time I've had cancer, but it will be the last. I've made peace with it. My point is that I understand this sounds a little... out there, but it's true. Kali and Chance are dead, but there is a woman who needs help. That's why I called. Thisfucker needs be behind bars before he can hurt anyone else, and his victims deserve justice.'

He leaned back and lifted his shades so we could finally have an unobstructed view of one another. His eyes were squinty, and a dark brown shade that blended into the pupils and made his eyes look black. And beady.

'You truly believe what you're saying,' he said disbelievingly.

'I do. I know it sounds insane, but it's the truth. A serial killer is living next door, and he's just murdered my friend, and he's about to murder someone else. Iknowit.'

He studied me in silence for a few minutes, and I let him. I let him see how serious I was, how desperate I was for him to believe me.

But I wasn't that lucky.

He leaned forward with a sigh, resting his elbows on his knees as he levelled me with a concerned expression. 'Mr Emeric, I hate to ask this question given your... delicate

condition, but how sure can you be that this isn't a product of your brain tumour?'

I blinked at him, taken aback by the question. He thought I was hallucinating, that it was all in my head?

'Look, Detective. I know how insane this sounds, and I know how this looks, but I swear to you, this is real. I'm not making it up, and it isn't my imagination running wild because of a tumour in my brain. I get seizures and dizzy spells, and sometimes my memory isn't that great, but this isn't a case of forgetfulness. My cancer has no bearing on the information I have given you, beyond allowing me to communicate with the dead woman who told me.'

But I could tell I had lost him.

He stood, eyeing me up like he felt sorry for me, but not like he believed me.

'Thank you for your time, Mr Emeric, but I should be going now.'

I huffed a sad breath, disappointment dragging me down. 'You're going to regret this when she dies. When you realise you could have saved her.'

His next words, however, were so unexpected they shocked me to my core. 'We have recently opened an investigation on Blake Dodd. Your statement today will be entered as evidence against him, even if it is circumstantial. I understand your concerns, and however your information may have been obtained, unconventionally or otherwise, I can assure you it will not be dismissed. Thank you for your time, Mr Emeric, and I wish you the best of luck in battling your cancer.'

He let himself out, and only once the sound of his cruiser trailed off into the distance did Mikey make his appearance.

‘They were already onto Blake,’ he stated, just as shocked at these turn of events as me.

‘You heard that?’

‘I heard it all. I thought he was going to run, not admit that Blake was already under investigation.’

I hummed, then grimaced at the reminder of the detective’s favourite frustrating response.

Mikey stared off into the distance in the direction the detective had left. ‘Don’t cops usually work in pairs?’

‘Oh, yeah. I think so. Maybe his partner was waiting in the car, or they split up to investigate next door?’

‘Hmm. Maybe.’

I dismissed that line of thinking. It wasn’t my business who DeLuca worked with, and I had more pressing matters to concern myself with.

‘How’s Dakota?’

‘Sleeping. She crashed as soon as I tucked her in.’

I ran a hand down my face, the stress giving me a headache. Or maybe that was the tumour. It didn’t really matter where it came from, only that it hurt. ‘Poor woman. I can’t imagine what must be going through her head right about now.’

‘Nothing good,’ he said glumly.

‘No.’ I heaved a world-weary sigh and settled my exhausted body back into the cushions. ‘I wouldn’t expect so.’

Chapter 7

Mortimer

My entire existence was spinning into turmoil. I had never felt so unsure, so... inadequate before. I was the top of the food chain. I was to be feared. And yet, one woman had changed everything.

There she stood, keeping her distance from the man she so clearly harboured feelings for, keeping him safe from the risk of absorption. But, despite her fears, she stayed. She wouldn't touch him, remaining just out of reach, but she was using her presence to soothe and comfort the newly deceased man as he suffered through the torment of an undignified burial.

What had this man done to deserve such unconditional devotion? Why did he have to look at her like a man in love, like he would walk through the fiery pits of Hell if that was what she asked of him?

And what was this odd, pinching sensation in my chest that had been bothering me since he'd been captured and tortured? No, that wasn't what had caused it. It was the expression of pure, unadulterated anguish on her face as she'd watched him suffer. But why did I care? He was nothing to me, and she was... What was she?

I didn't like not knowing almost as much as I hated this fucking incessant feeling poking at my chest cavity. It wasn't natural. I had to make it stop.

Buthow?

Killing didn't work. Absorbing the energy of those spirits also didn't work. And they always worked. What changed?

It was the woman. Kali. She was the common denominator in everything that had gone wrong. Ever since I'd first laid eyes on her, she had turned my world upside down. Part of that I would willingly admit was my own doing, but I hadn't anticipated the extent to which she would change me to my very core.

I thought I had known who and what I was. I had accepted that. Revelled in it, even. I was not a good man. Perhaps I had been when I was alive, but death had turned me into a monster, and I was glad for it. No one could hurt me if I was the one doing the hurting.

But there she stood, gutting me with a single look, and it wasn't even directed towards me.

I considered absorbing the man, but something told me that wouldn't go well if I wanted to keep Kali around. Because at the end of the day, she was mine. I had already claimed her, and I wasn't giving her up for anything or anyone. I was too deep into this now to turn back, anyway.

And despite the irrevocable changes I was facing, I wouldn't take back what I'd done. She was the future. My only way forward. I'd set this into motion, and I would see it through to the very end.

When the little murderer was finished packing the newest addition to his collection of graves, he sauntered off. That must have been what my ghost girl was waiting for, because she mumbled a few words to her friend, then darted away towards the trees. I admired her as she left, and the shadows nowtwisting and twirling around her form, adding power to her movements that she hadn't had before.

I couldn't help but smile, pleased at how well she was taking to the transformation. It was obvious that she was clueless about her new reality. She didn't know what she was, but she would find out soon enough. I would be here to help her through the transition, to teach her how to harness this new power that would allow her to take her revenge.

I would be for her what she was to this new man. The man who had drawn all her attention away from me. I wasn't sure how that was possible after the moment we had shared. I had been inside her, pushed her to climax, claimed her with my phantom seed. It was a transcendent experience. Even now, my cock twitched as heat pooled low in my belly at the memory, my body eager for more. And yet she still looked elsewhere.

He was important to her, that much was obvious, but how much? And how? What did she want from him? What did he want from her? And where did I fit into the equation? I had figured out that I would need to carve my place inside her world, but how could I do that when her head was so easily turned?

Perhaps, while she was gone, I could take the time to get some of those questions answered.

I didn't approach him immediately, choosing to stand back and observe before I decided on what action to take. Destroying him would hurt my ghost girl, I know that without a doubt, and while the option was appealing, the idea of hurting Kali caused that pinching in my chest to grow and spread into a full-bodied torment. The very concept of causing her pain was repulsive to me on every level, so hurting him was out.

Perhaps I could hide him, but that begged the question of where. Plus, there was no guarantee my ghost girl wouldn't eventually find him. It could be a temporary solution until I found a better one, but again, losing him in any capacity would hurt

her, and that was not an option.

So, then he would just have to tag along for the ride. A pet, perhaps? Yes, I liked the sound of that. I could bind him with my shadows to prevent him from causing any trouble, and she could keep him. That would make her happy.

I smiled, pleased with my decision, and drifted closer for a better look. I wanted to see just what exactly I was up against, without the blood, gore, and life impeding my examination. Wavy brown hair framed a square face, his jaw defined and sharp enough to cut. Dark blue eyes gaze forward vacantly, framed by thick black lashes that seemed to make the colour stand out even more. The more I studied his face, the more I realised how attractive he was. I could see what fascinated my ghost girl, and when my scrutinization landed on full, pouty lips, an image flashed through my mind of Kali pressing hers against them, licking, sucking, devouring with a bruising intensity, and I wanted to punch the right of his handsome fucking face.

Kali's lips were mine to taste, and he couldn't have them.

I stepped back to put some distance between us, but also get examine the rest of him. He had a muscular build. Broad shoulders, tall, strong. He had clearly taken great care of his body, honing his strength into something that would attract even the most prudish of people, but I could also see that it wasn't all for show. This man was used to manual labour, and I didn't need to watch him move to know that he was capable of impressive feats.

I got it. I put myself in my ghost girl's mind and saw him through her eyes, even if it was difficult to stomach, and I saw what she must have seen. A male worthy of her attention. Of her affection.

A praiseworthy adversary, indeed.

I was going to have to work harder to secure my claim on my ghost girl. I may have had more power than him, but that meant nothing when the prize was a woman's affections.

I froze.

Was that what I was after? Her affection? I had moved the chess pieces into place so I could ensure I would have her as a companion, though the terms of that companionship were ambiguous and vague even to myself. But perhaps I was merely too shortsighted to see things for what they truly were. I was attracted to Kali. I wanted her for myself. And I was lonely. This existence was a solitary one, but it didn't have to be. I had chosen to forego any form of companionship for fear of being hurt again. I had been killed by my wife's lover, after all, a betrayal that cut twice as deep and had ended in my demise.

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Until I had risen from the ashes and claimed my revenge.

But once that was over, what was left? The answer was a resounding nothing. I had been accruing more power, killing evil wherever I could just to give myself a purpose, but it wasn't enough. That was clear to me now. I needed more. I wanted more. I was ready to let someone else into my world, but to what extent?

The answer was obvious. I wanted it all. I wanted to open myself up again, to feel what I had once felt, what had been stolen from me by my wife's infidelity. And my ghost girl was one of the few who knew the sharp sting of that sort of betrayal. Her husband didn't cheat, but he certainly deceived her worse than anyone ever could, in a way only he was capable of.

I wanted the kind of unrestrained and unconditional loyalty, the like of which I had never had before. I wanted the reassurance of a partner who would never leave me, would never destroy us for the sake of another.

With startling clarity, I realised that was where this pang in my chest was coming from. I had decided my ghost girl would fill the hole left behind by my wife's betrayal, but everything was already beginning to fall apart, just as it had before. I was not the only man in her life, nor would I ever be, because she had already given a piece of her heart to another. And I could never change that.

How could I fix that?

The answer was unclear, but I had time. I would figure it out. Kali was mine, and I wasn't giving her up that easily. I refused to let fear destroy what I was trying to build

for myself yet again, but I would learn from my past mistakes. I would need to do things differently this time around.

I would not...could not fail.

I sensed her long before I saw her. My ghost girl was coming back, and I knew now that forcing her to stay at my side would not work here, so I let my shadows enshroud me in their protective embrace and merged into the darkness. They pulled me away to a safe distance where I could watch without disturbing the scene. I wanted to see how things would play out. I needed to know how to proceed.

I detested not being in control, but these revelations had given me some of that control back. I knew what I needed to do, or at least how to figure that out, and that knowledge provided a sense of comfort and clarity that soothed the rough edges of my nerves that had been keeping me in a state of discord since I'd first discovered my ghost girl.

I could breathe a little easier now that the chaos in my mind was more organised. I settled even further when she came into view. It didn't matter how many times I saw her, Kali's ethereal beauty was like a shot straight to the heart. And the groin.

I would have her again. She would fall apart on my cock like a good girl for the rest of eternity.

I couldn't wait.

Chapter 8

Kali

The longer I sat with a slowly coalescing Chance, the less this new energy running

through me called out to his. The more solid he became, the less he flickered in and out of existence, the more secure I felt being near him. Soon, I felt it would be safe to touch, though that was still far enough away that I refused to test our luck.

Waiting with him gave me the time to ruminate over everything that had happened. It was obvious that I was no longer an ordinary ghost. What I was specifically, I still had no idea, but I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Bianca had given me all of herself in a bid to provide me the power I needed to take our vengeance. Now, I just needed to figure out how to use it. After a while, I determined that the shadows dancing around my skin were a physical manifestation of that energy, the strange new power that I had received by fusing with Bianca.

And with that realisation, I finally figured out Morty's secret. Chance was right that Mortimer must have been killing those people, but now I had discovered his motive. He was sucking them up, adding their essences to his stores of power to grow it, cultivating the energy into something magnificent, albeit terrifying.

But I had already suffered through one murderous bastard, and I wasn't about to add another one to the list. Mortimer was a problem I didn't know how to solve, but I would need to in order to keep both myself and Chance safe.

But safe from what, exactly? My body heated at the memory of the way he'd fucked me into the grass, the newly required ability to feel all of those sensations again driving me to heights I had never before experienced. A part of me wanted to do it again. I'd never had a hate fuck before, but it was definitely something I was willing to repeat if the opportunity arose.

My gaze flickered back to Chance, and guilt threatened to swallow me whole. Here I was imagining fucking another man, a murderer, no less, when the man I had secretly loved for so long was right there, suffering after just confessing his love for me amidst the most heartbreaking of scenes. Still, my thoughts drifted to yet another

man, this one still alive and very much engraved in my brain. Rhodes. Sweet, beautiful Rhodes, with his floppy curls and bubbly personality. His brilliant smile flashed in my mind, and I wanted to see it again. I wanted to do more than just look, too.

I was going to Hell. If I wasn't already there.

Casting all thoughts of other men aside, I refocused on Chance. He was moving a bit more now, which was more than what I had been capable of after going through the same trauma. He was strong, stronger than I had ever been. I took comfort from the knowledge that he would make it through this okay. He would be irrevocably changed, but he would survive.

Well, that wasn't the right word. Or was it? We weren't alive, but we weren't gone, either. This was merely a different plane of existence, a new form of life that did not require a body and sustenance. Or, at least not the same type of sustenance. The shadows gently caressing my skin were proof that we could still consume for energy, only with a different result.

Maybe, now that I had broken through the barrier that had contained me to my grave, this existence wouldn't be so bad. Maybe I could finally carve out a little slice of happiness, of peace, that I couldn't have whilst trapped.

Hope, unlike anything I had ever experienced before, filled me, patching up the cracks and chips of my soul that the circumstances of my death had caused. With Chance here, I no longer felt so alone. There was potential, possibilities in abundance, and the innocent joy only freedom could provide.

Yes, I decided. Everything would be better now.

With a smile tugging at my cheeks, I settled in for the long haul as I waited for my

best friend, the man I had loved for a lifetime, to come back to me.

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I had dozed off. Boredom had quickly overtaken the excitement of newfound hope, and my brain had shut down. I didn't dream because I didn't sleep, but I had found myself in a state of consciousness-limbo.

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The sound of an approaching vehicle, the tires crunching over the gravel, snapped me out of it. It wasn't Blake. He was still here, his SUV parked out front like usual.

A visitor, then?

A quick glance at Chance proved he was still out of it, so I risked venturing away for a bit to see who it was. My curiosity was sated at the sight of the black and white of a police cruiser. The blue and red lights on top were off, but still reflected brightly beneath an afternoon sun. I wasn't sure how long I had spent sitting with Chance, but it couldn't have been that long.

I couldn't be in two places at once, and Chance was more important than anything right now, so I chose to stay where I was rather than chase after the police. For now, I could hear what was happening. The creak of the cruiser's doors as they opened, then the rattling slam as it was closed. Gravel crunching beneath two pairs of boots. The crackle of radios overshadowing unintelligible voices.

'Police,' a man's voice called, and there was the thud of a fist banging against the door. 'Open up!'

The front door opened on creaky hinges that screeched with the effort.

'Officers, how can I help you?' Blake's sickly sweet voice, the very same one that had hooked me all those years ago, trickled over to me.

'Sir, are you Blake Dodd?'

‘What is this about?’ he asked, blatantly avoiding the question.

‘We received a call about a possible crime in progress at this residence. May we come in?’

I could practically hear Blake’s teeth grinding from here, and I smiled. Good. Let that panic set in, Blake. I hope you’re fucking sweating.

‘I’m not comfortable with that unless you explain what this is about.’

‘We already have, sir. We have enough cause to enter the premises without a warrant. Don’t make this harder than it has to be. Now, are you going to let us in, or do we need to enter with force?’

Blake huffed, not bothering to hide how put out he was, but the door screamed obnoxiously as he opened it wider. ‘Knock yourself out. I’ve got nothing to hide.’

Liar.

Blake’s confidence set off alarm bells inside my head. I was suddenly very sure that they wouldn’t find anything. He had reinforced the door to the basement and soundproofed it all so well that all he needed to do was push a cabinet in front of it to hide its presence. There weren’t even any windows to prove there was a basement level either. The police would look around, find everything in order, and then leave. Their fellow cop was not going to be rescued today.

Fuck.

I listened, silently seething as the police searched the cabin, only to exit within a few minutes.

‘Everything seems to be fine, here,’ another officer said, also a man. ‘Sorry to have bothered you, sir.’

‘It’s not a problem,’ Blake said, back to that sickly sweet voice that made me want to hurl. ‘You’re just doing your job, and I’m happy to help.’

‘Have a good rest of your day,’ the first cop said, and then they climbed back into their cruiser and drove away.

He was going to get away with it.

No...I wouldn’t let that happen. The police might be useless against him, but he wasn’t immune to me. It was clearer than ever that I would need to take matters into my own hands.

But first, I would need to get stronger. It had taken far too much energy to scratch out Blake’s name on that note. I needed to be able to do more, inflict more damage, to make him believe he was going insane. Well, more insane than he already was.

Years of planning accumulated inside my head, fantasy after fantasy pushing forward, just begging to see the light of day. I was more than happy to put them to good use. Eager, even. I had been waiting a long time to see Blake pay for his crimes, but it was so close now I could practically taste it.

And I was going to be the one to make him suffer.

Chapter 9

Chance

Ifelt like I was suffering through the worst hangover in history. You know the one,

where you didn't know what day it was, you couldn't tell what hurt, but everything did at the same time, the world was spinning out from beneath your feet until your entire body jolted because it felt like you were falling. And then there was the memory loss, the inability to determine what had happened or why. The constant nagging in the back of your mind that something was missing, that you were forgetting something important, but it stayed just far enough out of reach that you couldn't quite figure out what it was.

I was currently stuck in the forgetfulness stage, and my head hurt too much whenever I tried to piece things together, so I simply stopped trying. Maybe I'd feel better after a bit more sleep...

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Kali balanced the bucket of popcorn on her knees, already stuffing her mouth full of the buttery kernels. The screenswitched over to another preview as I settled myself into the chair beside her. Apparently, the movie theatre was going to be showing some sort of children's movie sing-along in the near future, but I wasn't paying enough attention to it to discern which one. Not that I cared. I was much too focused on the girl to my right. A girl I wouldn't be taking to some stupid sing-along.

I watched her from the corner of my eye, her profile catching the light from the screen in a way that made my heart skip and flip and other acrobatics inside my chest.

'You want some?' she asked, tipping the popcorn bucket precariously towards me. I reached out to steady it before she spilt it all over me, and she gave me a sheepish smile. 'Sorry.'

I shot her a cheeky grin. 'No harm done. That's what I'm here for.'

'To catch my blunders before they become messes?'

I lifted a shoulder in a shrug and mumbled beneath my breath, 'Among other things.'

She didn't hear me over the surround sound of the previews, but I decided to take her up on the offer to share. Reaching over to grab a handful, she moved in at the same time, and our fingers brushed. It was quick, just a fleeting moment of contact, but it sent a spark through me that settled right in my dick, which twitched with the threat of hardening right for her to see. It wasn't the first time Kali had made Chance Junior

want to wave hello, and I was now impressively adept at diffusing the situation before she saw something she would regret.

I wasn't delusional enough to believe she would have feelings for me, especially since Blake chose that moment to join us, sitting on her right and taking her hand in his. She sent him a smile that I wished she would aim at me, and I shoved the handful of popcorn into my mouth to give myself something to do. Third wheeling with my best friend/the love of my life while she was dating my little brother wasn't exactly my idea of a fun time, but I didn't begrudge them their happiness.

Much.

I was happy they were happy. I just wished it wasn't at my expense.

Thankfully, the movie started, and both of them turned to watch the movie, the only sign of their intimacy their intertwined fingers. They were at least respectful of my presence whenever we hung out together. I would give them that.

???

The ballroom was plagued with the kind of chaos that could only come from drunk relatives. As I watched Gran try to twerk despite her double hip replacement, I did my best to fade into the background. The last thing I wanted or needed was someone trying to talk to me while I was nursing a broken heart.

I was hiding behind a vase of vibrant flowers, their strong perfume tickling my nose. Laughter rang out above the pounding music, and silverware clinked as people picked at the buffet.

I had managed to remain here through sheer willpower alone, keeping my emotions locked down tight so as not to ruin the big day. I didn't want to be that guy, the one

everyone pitied because he'd just lost the love of his life to another man. And not just any man, but his little brother. I knew I'd lost my chance to confess my feelings for Kali when we were kids, but being forced to watch her walk down the aisle towards Blake was a special brand of torture.

She's been radiant.

I'd been miserable.

I was even more miserable now as the music changed to something slow and meaningful, the speakers announcing the first dance for the newlyweds. They looked so happy, all beaming smiles and staring tenderly into each other's eyes. The way they clutched at each other tore me to pieces, and I had to look away. Tears blurred my vision for the umpteenth time today, threatening to spill over despite my attempts to keep them at bay. I squeezed them shut, willing the moisture back inside so no one would see.

Pieces of me had chipped away over the years as I'd watched Blake and Kali get closer. Witnessing them fall in love was bittersweet. Sweet for them, bitter for me. But I loved them, so I kept my mouth shut and smiled, shoving my feelings as far down as they would go. But today, I shattered, my hopes and dreams lying in bloody, splintered remains that only I could see.

In direct opposition to the luminous smile splitting Kali's face, mirrored by my brother and those gathered to witness their union.

They were married. The woman I loved with every fibre of my being had married my brother.

I was too late.

I used the moment to slip out unseen, unable to bear it a single moment longer. I had lost her, and now, there was nothing left for me here. Just the echoes of what could have been had I not been such a coward.

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My surroundings were slow to come into focus, so much so that I couldn't determine where I was through the foggy haze obscuring my vision. My head was fuzzy, like someone had reached into my skull and scooped out my memories, leaving behind nothing more than a static buzz. I felt... untethered was the only way I could think to describe the sensation, like if I wasn't careful, I'd float away into the aether.

I felt it before I saw it. A frigid caress, freezing me where I stood. It felt like it was carefully, delicately turning me into a statue made of ice; painfully, painstakingly piecing me together until I was solid once again, and I was helpless to do anything other than stand here and take it.

And yet, there was something about the gentle way it stroked me, despite its blisteringly cold temperature, that was soothing. Like a finger tenderly stroking down the length of my body, easing the strain and relaxing my muscles. A promise of safety.

And then came her voice. Beautiful, melodic, and familiar. Just as chilling as her touch.

She slowly came into focus, the blur of colours surrounding me narrowing into the most breathtaking sight I had ever seen. White hair that cascaded down her back in soft waves. Equally pale skin that looked oh-so-soft to the touch. Crystal blue eyes that shone with warmth despite their vibrantly frosty shade.

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Pink, pouty lips that I had fantasised about tasting for as long as I could remember.

Kali...

‘Chance?’ Her voice was light, tentative, and utterly soul-crushing.

My mouth opened to say her name, but no sound came out. I wasn’t suffocating, but there was no air to move through my vocal cords. In fact, I wasn’t sure I even had any. I felt weightless and insubstantial, so much so that I was surprised I could feel anything at all.

‘It’s okay,’ she soothed, compassion and understanding shining through in those big blue eyes. ‘It takes a while to feel like you’re coming back to yourself, but you will. You’ve already done so well.’

Internally, because that was all I was capable of at that moment, I preened at her praise. I wasn’t sure what I was doing well, since I felt like I was doing the exact opposite, but I decided to take her word for it. Her approval meant everything.

Fuck, I was such a sap. My obsession with her had risen to new heights. It didn’t matter if I never got to kiss her, to feel her writhe with pleasure beneath me, or feel her slick heat clenching around my cock. Those were irrelevant, physical sensations that paled in comparison to the strength of my love for her. Sure, they would have been a pleasant bonus, but there was nonessential. My love was unconditional, and her reciprocation was not necessary. I was hers, pure and simple.

Another trail of ice proceeded a stroke down my arm, but she didn’t move. It took me

a moment to realise she wasn't stroking me with her hands, but with those intriguing shadowy tentacles that clung to her frame. I knew then that they were a part of her, an extension of her being that coalesced into a physical manifestation of dark tendrils. She seemed to be controlling them. No, that wasn't quite right. After watching her for a few more moments, I could see that she wasn't controlling them so much as they were responding to her. Her thoughts? Her emotions? I didn't have those answers, but I didn't much care. The result was the same. Little by little, piece by piece, I was coming back to myself, and her gentle ministrations were softly nudging me into place.

My heart melted into a Kali-shaped puddle at the realisation that she was essentially nursing my form back together, carefully helping me rearrange the pieces of my soul until they resembled a Chance-like shape. She was saving me, supporting me in a way no one but her ever had, only this time there was no competing with another man. Her attention, her affection, was solely on me.

She had never been more beautiful to me than in that moment.

She had never felt more like mine.

Chapter 10

Rhodes

Water sluiced over my body in a steady stream of heat and massaging pressure. My muscles relaxed, bit by bit, as I let the shower work its magic and release the tension from my shaky and abused body. A body that was betraying me, yet again.

I'd had another seizure, though this was one less of a full-on fit and more of the absent type. The only reason I knew it had happened was because of the time I had lost. It felt like I had woken up after sleeping in an awkward position, my entire body

achy and stiff while my head pounded like someone had taken a sledgehammer to my skull. I'd been disoriented, confused, and my tongue had felt too big for my mouth. With a herculean effort, I had managed to roll over, reach out my arm, and snag my phone from where it had fallen to the floor. The last thing I remembered was the cop leaving the house, and suddenly it was mid-afternoon the next day.

I couldn't even recall making my way up the stairs to my bedroom, let alone tucking myself in. It must have been Mikey, whom I'd discovered had slept in the guest room in the armchair beside the bed. I'd stumbled my way down the hall to check on them, curious if my slow memory was correct and I still had visitors, or if my brain was too muddled and had accidentally combined separate scenarios.

I was glad it wasn't the latter.

My mind drifted back to a particular, fair-haired ghostly, and my cock twitched at the memory of seeing her without anything obscuring her from me. There were no trees and bushes, no shadows, and certainly no seizures that hid any part of her from my view, and I was finally able to see her in her exquisite entirety.

Heat pooled deliciously in my lower belly, my cock now standing at full attention as I pictured those perfectly pouty lips that just begged to be nipped and sucked. And that body. All those delicious curves teased and tested my desire to be a gentleman. I wasn't even sure if it was possible for me to touch her or if I'd fall right through, but by god, I wanted to. I wanted to run my fingers through that long, silky hair. I wanted to trace the dips and curves of her breasts, her hips, and fuck me, her ass. So plump, my teeth ached to sink into the bountiful flesh.

It was clear that before she'd died, she had taken great care of her body. Her curves were the perfect balance between muscular and soft, in such a way that enhanced the strength that lay beneath. She was toned, but still fleshy enough to jiggle in all the best places.

I couldn't remember the last time I had ever wanted anyone as much as I wanted her. Kali was... perfection.

My brain conjured up an image of her on her knees before me, her pink lips wrapped around my sensitive head as she sucked and licked. I wondered if she would enjoy the way I tasted, if she would spit or swallow, or if she would prefer if I forewent spilling my seed down her throat in favour of painting her in streaks of white.

Pleasure pulsed through my shaft and squeezed at my balls. I ached. My need for her had never been stronger, and I couldn't resist sliding my hand down my front. I paused at my chest, flicking my nipples in an attempt to drag out the pleasure. I wanted to feel how good she could make me feel without even needing to touch me. She didn't even have to be here to undo me, and I swore that thought alone almost made me lose control.

How could someone like her even exist? Her strength, her perseverance. Even death hadn't cowed her. She was still fighting despite having lost the biggest fight of them all. But was it? There was more to this story than I knew, and life didn't end at death. It was a mystery I suddenly wanted to solve, not for my sake, but because I needed to know that regardless of what happened to me, wherever I ended up, she would be okay. She had Chance now, and while that thought was comforting, I couldn't help the stab of envy that jolted through me. Lucky bastard.

But at the thought of Chance, the image in my head suddenly changed. No longer was Kali just on her knees for me, but she was bent over, her ass in the air as she presented herself to Chance. And fuck, what a stunning pair they made. I imagined his cock to be long and thick, the head an angry red as he strained to contain himself before he blew all over her back, before he'd even had the chance to be inside her.

I imagined him notching his crown at her hot, wet slit, and slowly pushing in. She would moan, the sound reverberating down my cock and settling in my balls. I

twitched so hard my hand flew down to grip the base in an attempt to stop myself from blowing. My orgasm was just there, so close. Too close. I didn't think I would ever had the opportunity to fuck Kali, let alone spit roast her with her brother-in-law. I wanted this to last.

My hand coasted up my shaft, my palm brushing against my most sensitive spots, and I couldn't withhold my groan of pleasure if I'd tried. I did it again, enjoying the way my cock pulsed in time with my fast beating heart. My breaths came out in harsh, shallow puffs as I slowly coaxed my pleasure even higher.

Eventually, when the ache became too much to bear, my other hand skirted lower until I was cupping my balls, rolling them between my fingers and squeezing to try to ease the discomfort.

Not yet. Not yet...

But imaginary Chance thrust into Kali from behind, so hard she choked on my cock as it slid further down her throat, and tears sprung to her eyes as she held my gaze from beneath her low-lidded lashes. It threw me right to the edge until I was teetering, a gentle breeze all it would take to push me over.

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It wasn't a gentle breeze that did it. I could hear it inside my head like it was happening in real life, the way Chance would shout out his release as he pumped his seed deep inside her womb. The way Kali would scream around my thick, throbbing cock as she clamped down on him.

The way she would suck every last drop clean from my tip.

And I came.

I came so hard, my vision whited out, and my knees buckled. I crashed to the floor of the shower, crumpling beneath the spray as wave after wave of pure pleasure spurted from me and onto the tiles, mingling with the water as it ferried it down the drain. I was left, panting and bruised from the fall, but completely spent and utterly satisfied. If sex with Kali was anything like what I'd imagined, whoever got the pleasure would be one lucky fucking guy.

Just as my sight was returning to me, my heart rate finally slowing down, a knock sounded on the bathroom door.

'Rhodes? You okay, in there?' Mikey. 'I heard a scream and a thud.'

'Yeah,' I called out, pleased when my voice didn't break with how weak I felt after the power of that orgasm. It had wiped me out. Literally. 'I just slipped in the shower, but I'm okay.'

'You sure?' he asked, hesitant, and his concern for me felt good. It had been a long time since anyone besides Jessica and Davey had truly cared about my well-being,

but even they had their own lives to live and couldn't watch over me every second of every day. And I wouldn't want them to.

Still, it brought a smile to my face and warmth to my heart I hadn't felt since before my parents had gotten sick.

'Yeah, man. I'm good.'

'Okay, well, shout if you need us.'

What a sweet guy. No wonder he was shy. I would bet he'd been taken advantage of a lot in his youth before he'd learned to hide himself away.

'Will do,' I called out, then relaxed back against the tiles after I heard him walk away. I reached up, still sprawled on the floor, to turn the shower off. I stayed put for a while longer, just letting the steam swirl around me for a while longer as I air-dried as much as was possible. The orgasm was incredible, and more than needed, but it had taken a lot out of me. I felt myself lagging, my eyelids drooping, my shoulders slumping forward. I needed to rest and recuperate.

And what a fucking blow to the ego that was. Soon enough, I already knew I wouldn't even be able to get it up. This could potentially have been my last orgasm, or even my last boner.

Wait... Nope. It wasn't. I was already getting hard again while I reminisced. Kali's face flashed in my mind once more, stirring my arousal right back up. At least that was something.

I finally moved when I started to lose sensation from my ass and below, my skin peeling away from the tiles after getting stuck from sitting here for so long. I didn't know how long, but the extractor fan had already removed the steam, the mirror was

no longer fogged up, and the air was chillier than it should have been right after a shower.

It took a lot of effort to pick myself up, then even more to wrap the towel around my waist and drag my feet back to my bedroom. As soon as I reached my bed, I practically fell onto my mattress, damp towel still in place, and promptly fell asleep.

???

A large hand on my shoulder gently shook me awake, and I groaned as my eyes were forced open by the action. Light streamed in from the window, the curtains still open because I had crashed before I could close them last night. I could tell from the brightness currently assaulting my senses that it was some time in the afternoon, since my bedroom faced westward.

‘Hey, Rhodes, I’m sorry to wake you,’ a soft-spoken male voice I belatedly recognised as Mikey’s began, ‘but the police are at the door, and they’re asking for you.’

‘The... police?’ I slurred and blinked my eyes blearily at the older man.

‘Yeah. They’re... well, you’ll just have to come down and speak to them yourself.’

I heaved myself into a sitting position. ‘That doesn’t sound good.’

Mikey looked away, a slight blush dusting his cheeks that confused me until I felt the breeze against my balls and realised I was still in my towel, and I had just accidentally flashed him when it came loose.

‘I told them you were asleep, but they said they’d wait,’ he spoke to the wall.

‘Right. Let me throw some clothes on and I’ll be right down.’

He jerked his head in a sharp nod, then promptly exited the room, leaving me to get dressed in peace.

I was slow-moving, my body aching, my joints and muscles stiff. I was still recovering from my last seizure, and I hoped I didn’t get any more today. They were becoming more and more frequent, and with each one that I felt coming on, I wondered if I would survive it. I didn’t know how many more I could take before my body finally gave out on me, but I was determined to at least hold on long enough for the police to latch onto Blake as a suspect. I knew that once they caught his scent and took our claims seriously, they would eventually gather enough evidence to put him away. Kali and Chance, not to mention all of the other victims, deserved their justice, and I was in a unique position to help them get it.

But only if I didn’t die first.

I was more aware than ever that it was a race against the clock. Cancer versus serial killer. It could have been a Netflix documentary.

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By the time I had thrown on a shirt and a pair of sweatpants, I was huffing and puffing from the exertion. I missed being able to work out, but it wasn't an option for me anymore. I didn't want to think about how skinny I would be by the time I died, but I kind of hoped I'd go before there was nothing left of me besides skin and bones. My body had fluctuated for my entire life, depending on the state of my health. Whenever I was kicking cancer's ass, I lost muscle mass due to the chemotherapy and radiation therapy, but I always gained it back again as soon as I had enough energy to hit the gym.

I wouldn't be getting that opportunity this time, and whilst I had made peace with that, it didn't mean I had to like it.

I loved my muscles.

I slipped my feet into my slippers, then shuffled my way downstairs, where I was greeted by the sight of Mikey waiting with two policemen, neither of whom I recognised. One was short and stout, obviously the kind of cop of preferred his doughnuts, with greying hair and a thick layer of stubble lining his undefined jaw. The other was taller, skinnier. Lanky. His hair was thinning, and he tried to hide it with the world's most obvious combover, but all it did was highlight the issue. Neither one of them sat or spoke, both choosing to stand in the doorway of the kitchen. The taller one kept glancing behind him at the expensive setup of laptops and ghost-hunting devices.

The silence was almost oppressive, and Mikey's entire frame sagged as he breathed a sigh of relief when he noticed me approach.

‘Officers,’ I greeted, my voice croaky. I told myself it was due to my exhaustion and nothing else.

‘Rhodes Emeric?’ the shorter one asked, stepping forward with a no-nonsense expression hardening his rounded features.

‘That’s me,’ I confirmed. ‘How can I help you, gentlemen?’

‘You were the individual who called about a potential serial killer living next door, correct?’ the short one asked.

‘Yes. I’m the one who called.’

‘We would like to ask you a few questions, if you’re willing. Normally, we would prefer to take you down to the station to conduct the interview, but we were informed of concerns over your health, so we dropped by instead. I hope you don’t mind.’

I held in the sigh that begged to be released. I had a bad feeling that things were about to spiral out of control, and not to our benefit. ‘Not at all,’ I responded, gesturing to the couch before settling myself into my armchair. ‘Ask away.’

They sat down and placed a briefcase I had missed in my initial perusal on the coffee table between us. Then, they present me with an image that had my eyebrows disappearing behind my hairline. It was a photograph of a case file, the name Bianca Devlin scribbled on top. It was closed, the details of its contents hidden from my view. What caught my attention was the note that was resting on top, scribbled in a messy script that took a moment for me to decipher, but it all of a sudden became clear why these cops were in my house.

Blake Dodd killed her. Not the only victim.

‘Mr Emeric, this note was left on top of a file of a missing person. One that looks remarkably similar to another missing individual whom you have recently called the police about, who is also connected to the man accused. Are you aware of this connection?’

I leaned back into the cushions, my gaze stuck on the name of the man killing people right next door for who knew how many years. ‘I was only recently made aware that Kali was Blake’s wife. I know she went missing seven years ago, was pronounced legally deceased earlier this year, and that he remarried.’

The shorter officer hummed thoughtfully while the taller one pulled out a notepad and a pen and started jotting notes. ‘The other name you mentioned was Chance Wiess, correct? Blake Dodd’s older brother?’

‘Half-brother, but yes. He went next door to investigate a couple of days ago and never returned.’

‘You knew Mr Weiss?’

‘Not well, but yes. I knew him.’

A grunt was my only response.

‘And can you give any insight into how this note appeared on top of this file, on the desk of the detective assigned to the case, in the middle of the day, inside a bustling police station?’

I shook my head, sensing the accusation, but afraid to draw attention to it. ‘I’m sorry, but I don’t.’

They didn’t look convinced. ‘Do you have any idea who wrote it?’

‘No.’

‘Are you aware that the official assigned to this case, Detective Juliette Benson, was recently declared a missing person?’

I inhaled sharply as the knowledge hit, the puzzle pieces slotting together. ‘No. Does she by any chance have blonde hair, blue eyes, and generally fair features?’

That caught their attention, though they attempted to hide their reaction. ‘Yes. She does.’

‘Then she must be the woman he’s holding in his basement,’ I surmised for them.

‘Please, remind us. How is it you have all this information?’ the tall one asked, piping in for the first time. There was an emotion that flitted behind his eyes before he shut it down again, but it looked remarkably like fear. He cared about Detective Benson.

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‘I already told Detective DeLuca what I know. If you have any more questions, you should talk to him.’

‘Sir...’

‘Am I in trouble?’ I asked, cutting him off. They exchanged a loaded look that did not sit well with me. ‘Am I under arrest?’

The tall officer snapped his notepad shut and stuffed it and the pen back inside their relegated pockets on his vest. Then, they both stood up and levelled me with a serious look that was intended to intimidate, but didn’t do much more than annoy me. Fuck, this wasn’t looking good. I didn’t care what happened to me, but these men were so obviously looking in the wrong place for their answers. I was under suspicion, but for what?

‘I think that’s all we need for now, Mr Emeric. We’ll be in touch.’

They reached the front door before the shorter one turned back to me, a glare fixed firmly in place. ‘And don’t leave town, Mr Emeric. It won’t look good for you.’

I didn’t release the breath I’d been holding until after they let themselves out. Mikey perched himself against the arm of my chair, his own gaze bearing the weight of this new development. We’d known it was a risk to inform the police about what was going on, that it could somehow come back to us in a negative light. But I hadn’t actually expected it to go the way that it had.

Some mysterious person had already informed them that they had a serial killer in the

midst, and they had provided a name. By involving myself, all I seemed to have accomplished was painting a target on my back. But who would come for me, and for what reason?

I just hoped this didn't derail whatever investigation was already underway, because not only would Kali, Chance, and the other victims not receive the justice they deserved, but Blake's next victim wouldn't make it out alive.

This got a whole hell of a lot more complicated.

Chapter 11

Kali

Chance was my fucking hero. There was nothing else to say about it. He had pulled himself together after facing the most extreme torture anyone could have ever endured in record time. He wasn't the same man he had been before – that much was a given – but he also wasn't whimpering and cowering. He hadn't debated whether he would fight for his place in this plane or dissipate into nothingness.

He had stayed.

He hadn't left me.

My heart, or whatever was left of the cold, dead thing that was no longer beating inside my chest, clenched. If it were still beating, I knew it would have skipped a beat. Or a few. I had managed to successfully smother the love I felt for Chance since meeting Blake, but that flicker of a flame had never quite burnt out. Now, as he sent me a smile that revealed straight white teeth and crinkled the corners of his eyes that held so much love and affection in a single look, that tiny little flame roared back to life with so much force I feared it would burn me to a crisp.

‘Kali,’ he whispered my name like the sweetest of prayers.

‘How are you feeling?’ I asked, desperate to turn the attention away from me.

‘Better. I think.’

I made a noise of agreement in the back of my throat. ‘It gets easier with time.’

He tilted his head to the side, his eyes losing their focus as he turned his attention inwards. I could see him taking stock, calculating his own sense of being and the newness of what he had become. Perhaps he was even ahead of the game and would use this moment to more firmly redefine himself. A process which had taken me until recently to accomplish. In fact, I still hadn’t fully reached any sort of particular goal. If I were being honest with myself, I was still floundering.

What comes next?

That question hadn’t plagued me until now, but there it was, burrowing deep and refusing to leave. What happened after I got my revenge? Would I be satisfied? Would I find peace? I hadn’t thought that far ahead, and though it didn’t have any bearing on my decision to enact vengeance against the evil that had stolen so much from me, it did make me pause.

When one purpose ended, how would I find another? All I saw ahead of me was an endless expanse of nothing.

No, not nothing. I saw Chance.

It hit me, then with so much force it almost knocked me over. It was so obvious, I couldn’t believe I hadn’t seen it until now. All my hopes and dreams coalesced into this one moment of clarity, and I knew I had to seize it before it slipped from my

grasp. Chance would be my new purpose. I could resolve the mistakes of the past. He could be my future, the way he was always supposed to be before I'd let my doubts and insecurities get the better of me and I'd turned away from what was meant to be.

Because I knew, gazing upon his handsome face that I never believed I'd be lucky enough to see again, that we were always the end game. No matter what came next, we would face it together.

Or so I hoped. He could very well decide I wasn't worth the hassle and move on without me. I would have deserved it, after all. I'd destroyed all that we could have been without ever giving us a chance to discover that for ourselves. I had been too much of a coward to come clean about my feelings, to confess my wants and desires, or to be the woman he deserved. Instead, I had chosen false promises and a mask, because it was easier to stomach than the truth.

That epiphany rocked me to my core. It changed everything. Yes, I'd been naïve and ignorant, desperate even, when it came to Blake, but I couldn't place all the blame on him. Well, I could, but where would that have left me? I needed to acknowledge the part I'd played in all this. I had stuck my head in the sand and refused to see what was right in front of me, not because I was incapable, but because I hadn't wanted to. I hadn't wanted my life to be anything less than perfect, because that was what my parents had had. They had loved each other so much, had built a life together, raised a family, and had even died together. They were the true definition of soulmates, and I'd wanted that for myself.

But I'd been afraid of it as well. I'd been afraid to lose it, just like they had lost everything when they'd died. They had been stolen from the world far too soon and had left devastation in their wake. But by that point, it had already been too late for me. I had made my choice, and it wasn't true love. It was refusing to take the risk.

I wouldn't deny either one of us for a single moment longer.

The words I had held in for so long burst out of my mouth in a flurry of emotional diarrhoea. And once I started, I couldn't have stopped if I'd tried.

'Kali, I-' he tried to speak as he attempted to close the gap between us, only to halt at the sudden barrage of words falling out of me. Words I was sure he never expected to hear, especially when I hadn't answered him before.

'I love you, too, Chance,' I began, keeping my eyes on his so he could see the truth in them; the depth of my feelings for him. I wanted to look away, to hide away for fear that he would no longer love me the way he had claimed, but I wouldn't do that to either of us. Not this time. Not ever again. 'I always have, and I'm so fucking sorry. I chose the coward's way out, because Blake was safe. Or, I thought he was. I never could have imagined... but that's beside the point. I have loved you from the moment we met, and I have loved you every day since, and I was the dumbest bitch to ever walk the earth, because I gave up without ever letting you know. I never should have let you go without a fight, without telling you how I'd felt all those years ago, but I didn't think...'

'You didn't think I felt the same way,' he finished for me, his voice quiet, contemplative, and so full of understanding I wanted to both cry and lash out at him. I didn't deserve his compassion. Not after the life I'd forced us both to lead. Not after the betrayal we'd both suffered through.

But he wasn't wrong. 'You're right,' I agreed lamely. 'I didn't think you felt the same way, so I didn't put myself out there, which is so fucking stupid because it's you, and I

just...' I trailed off, fidgeting with my fingers as I broke eye contact. I was burning up again, but this time it was out of shame.

God, I was nervous.

But I shouldn't have been. This was Chance, for fuck's sake. He had never and would never hurt me. He was the safety I had been searching for in Blake. I wanted to go back in time and slap some sense into my younger self.

'I get it,' he said, softening even more as he slowly moved closer, a fire blazing in his steady gaze. 'I was afraid to tell you, too. I thought I would lose you, that you could never love me the way I loved you. I guess... we were both wrong.'

I sniffed, my eyes stinging from the phantom welling of tears. But they weren't so phantom after all, because, impossibly, I felt it when they spilled over and left tracks down my cheeks.

Chance stepped closer, crowding into my space, and cupped my face in his hands. His thumbs wiped away my tears as he tilted my head up to capture me with his gaze. A gaze so full of tenderness and brimming with love that I wondered if maybe I hadn't died the first time. Maybe I was insane, because no one had ever looked at me the way he was looking at me now.

Like I was his beginning, middle, and end.

'Don't cry,' he whispered, his breath ghosting over my lips. He was so close now that it wouldn't take much to close the distance between us, to slant my lips over his and seal our words with action. 'I'm here. I'm not going anywhere, and you're never leaving me again.'

He said it all with such certainty, like being together was the only option moving

forward, that I didn't have a choice but to believe him.

I studied the grey and green flecks in his ocean-blue eyes, the colours swirling together with his emotions. I licked my lips, my tongue accidentally brushing against his mouth and giving us both a taste of what we had denied ourselves all this time. My breath hitched as I watched his pupils dilate until they took up all the colour in his eyes, leaving only a thin ring of dark blue in their wake.

I didn't know who moved first. Perhaps we had moved together, but there was no longer any space between us. The kiss was barely a touch of our lips at first, testing the waters, allowing the other to change their mind one last time, because once we did this, there was no turning back.

But what started as a tentative brush of our lips quickly deepened, neither one of us capable of holding back for one second longer. His hands moved from where they cupped my jaw to cradle the back of my head, his fingers tangling in my hair as he held me in place with a firm intensity that belied his fear of what would happen if he let me go. He didn't need to fear anything, though. I was his. No more hiding. No more pretending. I wasn't going anywhere.

When my arms rose to wrap around his neck, anchoring him to me just as tightly, it broke that last frayed thread keeping our passion contained. The world around us dissolved until there was nothing but the two of us, our fingers grasping at each other's hair as we opened our mouths, our tongues meeting for the first taste of forever.

I clung to him, desperate to get closer. My hands grasped at his shoulders as I revelled in the way his body plastered to mine, our passion forming a heat between us that I could feel all the way to my toes. So much was being said without words, our bodies speaking for us everything we had struggled to say before, and everything we still needed to say. I liked this way better, though. Words shmords. I wanted his lips

devouring me, his body moving against mine and stoking the flames of our desire even higher. Hotter.

Fuckingscorching.

It was raw, unrestrained, and full of promises neither of us had been brave enough to make before.

I never wanted this moment to end.

We didn't even need to break apart. Our breaths may have been coming in hot, heavy pants as we breathed each other in, but we no longer needed air to survive. If we chose to, we didn't ever have to stop.

He kept one hand on my head, firmly securing me in place, but the other began a new trail of electricity as he smoothedhis calloused palm over my back to settle on the curve of my ass. He squeezed and pulled me impossibly closer, grinding his rock-hard length against me and turning my thighs into a slick waterfall.

He ground himself at just the right angle to send pleasure shooting up my spine, and I moaned into his mouth. 'Fuck, Chance. You feel so good.'

'Kali...', he moaned right back. 'Oh, Kali.'

'More,' I demanded, pushing my hips into his in a desperate bid for more friction.

He didn't pull away when he asked, 'Are you sure?'

'Yes. Fuck, yes. I want you, Chance. I want you inside me. I needto feel you.'

'I've wanted this for so long,' he murmured, almost like he was talking to himself.

His voice was low, hoarse, and filled with unguarded vulnerability. 'Tell me this isn't a dream,' he whispered against my lips. 'Tell me this is real, that you're really here.'

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My heart clenched at the sheer desperation and hope tangled in his words, and I pressed a hard kiss to his lips in response. 'I'm here, Chance. This is really happening.'

He sighed into my mouth, his breath cool like freshly fallen snow. 'Then I want to feel you too.'

'Do it. Fuck me, Chance. Make me yours.'

I shivered at the pure lust and yearning in his expression, the way he closed his eyes and practically melted into me at my consent. I had never felt so desired, so wanted.

The shadows twisting around my form got to work as soon as my mind was made up, and stripped me of my clothing in record speed. One moment I was covered, and the next I was bared before him. My nipples brushed tantalisingly against the soft material of his shirt, but a second later, even that was gone, the shadows dissipating his clothing just like they had mine. I probably should have been more concerned about the fact that we no longer had any clothes. I didn't even know how they appeared on us, but I had a theory that they were a manifestation we conjured, a familiarity we used to tether us to this plane.

But I didn't care, and as soon as those thoughts hit my brain, they were immediately dismissed as the stunning sight of a naked Chance standing before me took over every inch of brain space. Broad shoulders gave way to thickly corded muscles, phantom blood pumping through his veins that were visible under the bronzed flesh of his forearms.

My eyes tracked the dips and valleys of his muscles, from the prominent swell of his pecs, the hard squares of his abs, all the way down to his hips where a perfect V pointed like an arrow to the most beautiful cock I had ever seen. I couldn't help but compare it to Blake's. My ex-husband's dick was long, thick, and straight, and I'd once believed it couldn't get more aesthetically pleasing than that. But oh, how wrong I had been. Chance blew him straight out of the water. His was thicker, slightly longer, and curved up just so at the end in a way I knew would hit all the right spots without him even trying. His head was already glistening with clear fluid seeping from his tip, surrounded by a red, swollen head that I knew would stretch me so delectably as he pushed inside of me.

'Fuck, you're so beautiful. I could stare at you all day,' he said, his tone so worshipful I almost felt self-conscious enough to cover myself up. Yet, his words made me feel sexy and powerful, and I wanted him to see me. I never wanted anything to get between us again, and that included clothes.

'You're the most beautiful man I have ever seen,' I admitted breathlessly, the awe in my tone mirroring his.

'I need to touch you, Kali. I need to feel you wrapped around my cock.'

'Then come here,' I ordered, arms spread to the side as I offered my body for him to take. I didn't care what he did to me, as long as he did something.

I didn't expect him to fall to his knees, his gaze still fixed firmly on mine despite the fact that my throbbing pussy was now level with his face. I gasped when his hands rose to grip my hips and pull me closer, and I spread my legs eagerly without needing to be told. Still, he didn't look down.

What could he possibly see in my face that was more interesting than my dripping pussy?

I got my answer, though, and it tore me apart in all the best ways. ‘I want to watch your reaction when I taste you for the first time, goddess.’ The pet name sent shivers skirting up my spine. Combined with the way he was kneeling before me, in that moment, I truly felt like a goddess being worshipped by her most devoted priest.

And then, eyes latched onto mine to truly send the message home, he buried his nose into the space between my legs and inhaled deeply. A groan rumbled through his chest, and his eyes threatened to roll back in his skull, but he refused to break our stare-off.

He teased me for a few more moments, kissing and nipping at my inner thighs and ignored the place that was begging to feel any sort of relief. Until finally, finally, his tongue darted out and licked a slow line from my opening to my clit. We both moaned, then, which dragged out even longer when he circled my clit with a light, taunting pressure.

‘Fuck, Kali. You’re the best thing I’ve ever had in my mouth. I could eat you out all day, every day, and never get tired of you. Your flavour is the only one I want on my tongue, ever again.’

I couldn’t respond because he was suddenly devouring me like a starved man, like my juices were his first drop of liquid after days in a scorching desert. I whimpered, my legs almost giving out as he brought me to the edge faster than anyone had before. It was all I could do to stay standing, and I was only succeeding in that because he was holding me upright. As soon as he removed his hands from where they splayed across my ass, I knew I would crumple to the floor in a puddle of my own desire.

My hands grasped at his hair, desperate to hold onto something as he drove me wild with his talented tongue. He sucked, nipped, nibbled, and stroked me closer and closer to the edge, only to pull back before I could fall over. He was edging me, the bastard, and I both loved and hated it.

‘Please, Chance. I need to come,’ I begged, my voice whiny and breathless even to my own ears.

He didn’t respond with words. Instead, a dark chuckle rose up from his chest and vibrated through my core. My legs shook with the sensation, but I didn’t get what I wanted. My orgasm was still just far enough out of reach that frustration got the better of me, and I tugged sharply on his hair, dragging him closer so I could ride his face and do it myself.

Except, he wasn’t having that. He wanted to maintain control, and he pushed me away with a surprising amount of strength, considering he had only just pieced himself back together again.

‘Ah, ah, ah,’ he admonished, his tone alight with dark promise. ‘That’s my job.’

I whined in complaint, but he must have seen the need in my eyes because he finally took pity on me. He delved back in and brought me to the edge yet again, but this time, he didn’t stop or slow down. This time, he kept going, flicking his tongue faster, sucking my clit harder. When he scraped his teeth against my overly sensitive bud, I fell apart.

My orgasm tore through me like a tornado of electricity, my entire body tensing and shaking as wave after wave of ecstasy coursed through my previously empty veins. He filled me with so much pleasure, his mouth an unrelenting force as he tongued me through my release, refusing to relent even as I shuddered with the aftershocks.

And then it happened again.

My first orgasm must have invigorated him, because he kept up his magical ministrations as I fell apart on his face one more time, a silent scream lodged in my throat as I tipped my head back and let it run its course. I didn’t have any other

choice. I was physically incapable of anything other than letting him push me over the edge. I was putty in his hands, my body, mind and soul submitting to him fully as I thrashed against him.

The pleasure was almost too much.

‘Fuuuuck,’ I yelled, my voice hoarse when my throat finally loosened enough to use it. ‘Fuck, Chance. Oh, god. I can’t...’

He placed one last, soft kiss to my bruised pussy and pulled away. I immediately mourned the loss, but I wasn’t kidding when I said I couldn’t handle any more. My walls still fluttered and clenched painfully around nothing, despite the overstimulation.

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I needed to feel him moving inside me, or else I would burn to ash where I stood.

‘Kali,’ he whispered my name, then licked my juices from his face, savouring the flavour. With him still on his knees before me, even though he was holding me up, it felt like he was praying to me, like he was giving himself to me in every way possible. In that moment, any doubts that still lingered about us were purged from existence. Just as much as I belonged to him, he was mine.

Chapter 12

Chance

The sweetest ambrosia coated my tongue, and I rolled it around my mouth, enjoying the flavour of the woman that owned me, mind, heart, body, and soul.

My mind was still attempting to wrap itself around the fact that I had just had my mouth on Kali’s cunt, that I’d devoured her as she rode my face until she came not once, but twice. And I’d done that to her.

My cock twitched painfully. It was so hard, so heavy with desire, that I swore it was about to fall off if I didn’t put it inside her soon. Luckily, it was clear that I wasn’t the only one suffering. She may have orgasmed twice, but she was still so eager and ready for more.

Fuck, I loved her. And I loved how she couldn’t get enough of me, just like I couldn’t get enough of her. How was this even happening? How was this ever real? Every teenage dream, every adult fantasy I had ever had, had revolved around her, and here

she was, soaked and throbbing and swollen from my tongue, and she wanted more.

The sound that tore from me was animalistic. Feral. I needed her more than I had ever needed anything or anyone before. And the realisation that I could have her almost made my cock explode, and neither of us had even touched it yet.

The look in her eyes as her gaze dipped lower, the way her pupils blew out and her chest rose and fell faster as she took in the weeping head and straining shaft, told me we would be rectifying that any second now.

‘I want to taste you too, Chance, but I don’t think I can wait,’ she admitted, her voice tense with the effort of holding herself back. That wouldn’t do. That wouldn’t do at all.

‘We have forever to explore each other, Kali. Right now, I need to feel you clenching around my cock as I drive myself as deep inside you as I can reach.’

Her head nodded up and down so fast that I worried she would give herself whiplash – could ghosts even get whiplash? And then she was on me. The chill of her body was slightly disconcerting since I was used to heat, but there was no heat in our bodies anymore. We didn’t have blood pumping through our veins, nor did we need to regulate our internal temperatures. But once I got used to it, I realised I liked it. It was different, and certainly not how I had imagined my first time with Kali would feel, but it was perfect.

It was us.

Her breasts pressed against my chest as she tipped her chin up to capture my lips with hers. The kiss was unhurried despite the desperate need coursing through us both to join our bodies fully. I was momentarily dumbstruck by the ferocity with which she threw herself at me, and it was all I could do to catch her and hold her to me, taking

her weight into my arms. She was the one who wrapped her legs around my waist and notched my cockhead at her entrance. She was the one who sank down, uniting us in a way I never thought would become a reality.

She didn't waste another moment. There was no letting her adjust. Instead, she impaled herself on my cock all the way to the base, her cunt gripping me so tightly that my vision whited out. I didn't stumble, though. My feet weren't on the ground, and gravity had no bearing on us here.

Wherever here was... But that was a mystery for a later time, when the woman I had loved from afar for so long was finally bouncing herself up and down on my thick, hard shaft.

'Oh, fuck!' I shouted, the sensation of her wrapped around me in every way almost too much for my poor little dead heart to bear.

'Yes,' she hissed, then took my bottom lip between her teeth and sucked it into her mouth. She held me in place, the tips of our noses brushing as her gaze captured mine and trapped me in place. All I could do was hold her as she pushed herself onto me over and over again.

'I'm not going to last,' I warned her, gritting my teeth as I feebly attempted to stave off my impending orgasm.

'Come inside me, Chance. Paint my womb with your cum. I want to keep you inside me forever.'

It was more than I could take. Her words tipped me over the edge, and my cock swelled bigger than it ever had before, wedging myself even tighter inside her before spurt after spurt of my seed pulsed from my hole to make its home deep within her core.

I screamed out my release, and she finally released my lip from her teeth to do the same. Her orgasm prolonged my own, the fluttering of her walls switched off any remaining brain function right before she clenched down on me so hard she sucked me in further, and it felt like she was trying to tear my dick right off my body and make her cunt its new home.

The mere thought of being inside her forever set off another, smaller orgasm, but it was no less powerful.

We shuddered against each other, Kali clinging to my frame while my hands held her in place as I cupped her pert ass, a perfect handful in each palm. My hips jerked involuntarily with the aftershocks of my climax, wedging me deeper inside her. She moaned, her forehead tipping against my shoulder as she continued to slowly rock against me. Neither one of us attempted to pull away, my cock nestled inside her like it was where it was always meant to be.

‘I love you so fucking much,’ I said, my voice barely higher than a whisper.

‘I love you, too, Chance. I can’t even tell you how much.’ She pulled back to level me with a serious look, her blue eyes like two spheres of ice that pinned me in place. ‘I can’t begin to say how sorry I am. For everything. Words will never be enough, but I can show you. I promise, from here on out, I will do everything in my power to prove to you how much I love you and how sorry I am. I never should have chosen Blake. It always should have been you.’

I winced at the reminder of my little brother. The man who had not only stolen Kali from me all when we were teenagers, but had kidnapped, tortured, and killed her. And others.

And me...

Nothing could have prepared me for that blow, but I couldn't bring myself to be too upset right now. Not when I had Kali in my arms, both of us still joined in the way only a man and a woman could.

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‘You have nothing to apologise for, goddess. We both fucked up by keeping our feelings a secret. What happened with Blake... I...’ I paused, those old insecurities pushing forward, demanding to be acknowledged.

I let myself slide out of her wet channel. I dropped her back to her feet and put some distance between us, not because I wanted to – every atom of my being screamed at me to hold onto her and never let her go – but because I needed the answer to this question more if I was ever going to move past it.

My voice cracked with emotion as I asked the question that had haunted me for the entirety of my adult life. ‘Why him, Kali? Why Blake?’

Her shoulders drooped, and she caved in on herself like she didn’t want to think about it, but this was a conversation long overdue. I couldn’t back down. Not now that I’d laid myself bare in front of her, my vulnerabilities exposed for her to do with as she pleased.

‘Do you remember the first time you invited me over to your house?’

I nodded. ‘That was the first time you two met.’

‘I thought when you asked me over, inviting me into your space, introducing me to your family, that we were finally going to move past our friendship into something more. But then... well, you sort of ignored me. I kept trying to get your attention, to brush up against you, anything to get you to see me as more than a friend, but it was like I was suddenly invisible to you. I didn’t know what changed, and everything went back to normal between us the next day, but I couldn’t shake the certainty that

you didn't want me the way I wanted you.'

'Kali...' I started, but she cut me off with a shake of her head.

'No, let me finish.'

I slammed my mouth shut and waited for her to continue, my heart bleeding as I raged internally at how stupid and oblivious I had been as a teenager. She'd been right there, and I'd let her slip away like sand through my fingers.

'When I left, I sat outside and cried. Blake found me. He sat with me. He didn't ask what was wrong, didn't try to make me explain myself. He just held me. Then he told me I was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, and whoever made me cry like that didn't deserve me. He made me feel seen, and I guess I sort of just... latched onto that.

'He made it clear that he wanted me, and it felt good to be wanted.'

I let her explanation settle inside me, my own inaction a festering wound that her words ripped open with cutting precision. But there was one thing I still wanted, no, needed to know.

'Did you love him?'

Her smile was sad, and it told me everything I needed to know without the words that came out of her mouth next, the very words I dreaded and tore my heart straight from my chest. 'Yes. I did love him.'

I swallowed thickly. 'More than me?' I joked weakly, but it didn't have the effect I expected. It seemed to set her off, and she glared. But I could tell that it wasn't directed at me. She was suffering through her own traumas, dredging them up just for

me.

But when she turned the full force of her anger on me, it took my breath away. She rounded on me, closing the distance until I felt like I was simultaneously as small as an ant and as tall as a mountain. I preened under her attention and wilted beneath her rage.

‘I have never loved anyone the way I love you, Chance. What I felt for Blake was but a fraction of what I feel for you. What I’ve always felt for you. No one, not even Blake, could compare to you. What I had with him, at least for me, was nothing more than a band-aid on the gaping wound that you left behind. He was my attempt to get over you when I thought we would never be more than friends, but you have always been it for me, Chance. And fuck me for ever making you doubt that.’

And with that one speech, she reconstructed my entire being. The truth in her words, her open expression, the way she was so angry at herself for everything we had missed out on, the pain of choosing the wrong path, filled in every hole, smoothed out any imperfection, until I felt more whole than I ever had while I was alive. In one fell swoop, she had dissipated all of my insecurities, answered any question, and batted away all of my lingering doubts.

This woman was mine just as much as I was hers.

But the feelings of warmth and sheer joy her declaration had brought forth were quickly doused when another voice interrupted the moment. A voice I recognised well from the spirit box, right before he’d tossed it at us and smashed it against a tree.

‘I thought I told you, she’s mine.’

Chapter 13

Mortimer

My cock ached painfully as I watched the scene unfold before me. I was hard all throughout their declarations of love, the sexual tension between them a physical thing that even managed to touch me, and I climaxed with my ghost girl both times the man's mouth made her come. Still, I remained stiff and needy, my entire body throbbing in time with his thrust when they finally came together.

Even now, I was still hard and ready, eager to take the woman I had claimed as my own. And yet, despite already having informed the man of my claim, he still dared to fuck her right in front of me.

But that wasn't what had pissed me off. Their coupling was the hottest thing I had ever seen, and, surprisingly, it didn't chafe the way I thought it would. No, what truly sent me into a rage was the way they held each other so tenderly, the love between them so blatantly obvious for anyone to see. They were so wrapped up in each other that neither of them had even noticed I was here, and that was unacceptable. I was not the kind of monster that would be sidelined without a fight.

The whole scene made me realise something I wasn't willing to admit, yet they were forcing me to regardless. I might have claimed Kali for myself, but she hadn't accepted that claim. Not yet, anyway. But more than that, she wasn't truly mine. I held no real power over her, yet there she stood, wrapped around her lover with his cock still buried inside her where mine had been not so long ago, clinging to each other and irrevocably tying their souls together, and I wasn't a fucking part of it.

She held all the power here, and I wasn't used to it. I didn't like it. I held more strength in the tip of my pinkie finger than both of them combined, and yet, she was the one who had burrowed herself so deeply beneath my skin and hooked herself in place so securely that removing her would be like cutting off a limb. Somehow, she had become an essential part of my being, and I had no fucking idea what to do with

that.

For some inexplicable reason that I couldn't even begin to fathom, my heart lurched when the man let her down and put space between them, his expression downcast and guarded while hers twisted with unrestrained rage.

What the fuck had he done?

Fury like I had never felt before had me surging forward, and without me making the conscious decision, I was storming towards them, ready to defend her. Against him? For him? Shit. What the fuck was I doing?

I forced myself to stop before I inserted myself in a situation I had no place being in. If I shoved my way between the two, I could end up making a fool of myself. A concept that was completely foreign to me, and something I had never cared about before. I was uncomfortable with how much I did care all of a sudden, so I did the only thing I could think to do and shut that shit down.

However, while I was stuck in my head, I completely missed their argument. They had come to some sort of resolution, and they inched closer as if to return to their embrace at any moment. Witnessing them gaze lovingly into each other's eyes set off an explosion inside my chest. Something that felt remarkably like jealousy and possession.

My back-and-forth emotions were giving me whiplash, and it was the only explanation I could give myself for what I did next.

'I thought I told you, she's mine.'

Both of them whipped around at the sound of my voice, and I knew it shouldn't have shocked me, but I was simultaneously pleasantly surprised and immensely annoyed when he stepped protectively in front of her.

‘Who are you?’ he demanded, his voice strong, stronger than it should have been this soon after his disrespectful burial.

‘I’m your worst fucking nightmare if you don’t get your filthy fucking hands off what’s mine,’ I growled out, stalking towards him with my deadliest glare fixed in place.

Kali pushed forward then, putting herself in front of her little boyfriend with her own glare ready to burn me to ash.

‘Morty,’ she said in greeting, the conversational tone and the nickname in direct opposition to her protective stance and wary scowl. I was stunned into silence at the way she’d shortened my name, like we were more familiar with each other than we were. But I liked it. A warmth seared in the centre of my chest at the prospect that perhaps we weren’t as far away from her accepting me as I’d thought.

‘Morty?’ the man asked, disbelief colouring his tone.

My eyes snapped to his, all the previous warmth I felt dissipating in an instant at the new nickname coming from his mouth. It only felt right coming from my ghost girl.

‘His name is Mortimer,’ she explained to him, though she kept her sights set firmly on me.

‘What a name...’ he mumbled under his breath, earning a scathing slap from Kali. Her defence of me and my name put out the fire his insolence had sparked just as quickly as the match was struck. This woman...

‘And how do you know him?’ the other man asked, and I took great pleasure in the strain in his voice. Perhaps I wasn’t the only one here who was so obsessively possessive over my ghost girl. A problem that would need to be rectified. And

promptly.

‘He’s... well...’ she stammered, and I wondered how she would explain me. ‘He’s sort of stalking me, I guess.’

I blinked.

He blinked.

Kali’s head whipped back and forth as her gaze bounced between us, her bottom lip caught distractingly between her teeth. My thoughts bled of anything that didn’t revolve around what I wanted to do to that lip, and I found myself leaning forward, ready to replace her teeth with my own.

The ghost cleared his throat, also caught up in the beautiful sight, and it snapped me out of the spell she had woven so expertly over me. My cock protested with a sharp twitch, desperate to push inside her once again, but I couldn’t let those thoughts win. I had never let my dick overrule my thoughts and actions before, and I certainly wasn’t about to let it start now.

Fuck. This wasn’t me. I needed to get a hold of myself.

‘I’m merely ensuring the well-being of what belongs to me,’ I stated simply.

I bristled at her scoff.

‘I don’t belong to you,’ she said, almost convincingly, but with the way she fell apart around my cock, we both knew that wasn’t true.

‘I’ve already claimed you, Kali,’ I said, deciding that using her name would be more prudent for getting my point across. I wasn’t an unreasonable monster.

She huffed, exasperated. 'You can't claim a person, Morty.'

I arched a brow and tipped up the corners of my lips into a knowing smirk. 'No?'

She hesitated, probably sensing that she was going to lose this argument. Still, she held her ground, and my cocked twitched at her bratty glare. I wanted to plunge my cock into her mouth and fuck the expression right off her face.

'No.'

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I chuckled, but it wasn't a humorous sound. It was taunting, full of every dark promise my claim had made. She wanted to learn the hard way? Fine. I was going to enjoy bending her to my will.

'Perhaps,' I began, slowly floating closer, enjoying the way her breath hitched and her eyes widened at my approach, 'you have forgotten that your little boy toy can't help you, my sweet, naïve ghost girl.'

Her scowl deepened, but she didn't back away as I planted myself before her, barely a breath between us. She looked up at me, eyes so wide and vulnerable that I felt the need to sully her stronger than ever. I wanted to erase the light inside of her until there was nothing left but the shadows, so she could spend eternity with me inside of them.

Yet, much to my confusion, the thought of dimming any part of her caused a physical pang to shoot throughout my body, the power of which was so intense it almost crippled me where I stood. What was this girl doing to me?

'You don't own me,' she tried again, but her petulance only succeeded in turning me on even more. I wanted to bend her over my knee and spank her bratty little ass. I wondered if now she had ascended to a higher state of being her ass would turn red, or if she wasn't yet powerful enough for that. I was more than willing to find out.

Breaking her until she submitted to me was going to be the highlight of my existence, second only to when she did so without being told. I had a feeling she would always have a bratty streak, however. She didn't like not being in control, so I would need to show her that any control she handed over to me would be her choice, so much so

that she would hold all the power regardless of how I manipulated her body and her pleasure.

Fuck, I was so hard my cock wasweeping. I could already tell that if my clothes were no longer in the way, a string of clear, sticky fluid would be waiting. I didn't even care if the other man bore witness. In fact, the thought of him watching me fuck my ghost girl almost sent me over the edge. It was so hot that my shadows thrashed and writhed like they were trying to get away from the heat.

Or, perhaps, they were simply eager to join in. They twitched against me, reaching out for Kali before snapping back to me as I used every ounce of my willpower to keep them under control. They wanted to wrap around her, bind her, and pin her down so I could do with her as I pleased. But not yet. She would have to earn it.

'I'll tell you what,' I started, leaning down so our noses barely brushed. I felt her breath puff against my lips, cool and icy just like her eyes, and oh-so-fucking sweet. I didn't bother to contain my groan, my desire reaching new heights when his pupils blew at the sound. She knew I wanted her. She wanted me just as badly.

I refrained from flicking my smug gaze to the other man, choosing instead to maintain eye contact with the only one of us here that mattered.

'What?' she asked breathlessly, and my heart skipped and jumped inside my chest like an excitable fucking puppy at the fact that I was able to coax such a reaction from her.

'I won't touch you again, ghost girl. Not until you beg me to.'

I stepped back to level the man with a contemplative look. He was practically vibrating with rage, but that wasn't all I saw flash behind his dark blue eyes. He was enjoying this, even if he wasn't quite ready to admit it.

Interesting...

‘You can keep your little boyfriend,’ I offered, quite magnanimously, considering the circumstances. ‘But only if you behave.’

She made a sound in the back of her throat that was both affronted and turned on. ‘Excuse me?’

I grinned, the expression less one of happiness and more a baring of my teeth. A warning she would do well to heed.

‘You heard me, ghost girl. You came apart on my cock once already, but once will never be enough. You’re mine. And I’m willing to share, but only if you behave.’

Both Kali and the ghost man wore mirroring expressions, their mouths opening and closing on silent gasps as they attempted to process the rules I had just implemented. Their gobsmacked expressions quickly transformed, however, when my words finally hit. Kali looked ready to tear me a new asshole, though the fire in her eyes was a combination of both her rage and her desire. She was stunned into silence as they battled it out inside her mind, so I gave her a moment to figure out which one to choose by settling my attention back on the man.

He was glaring at me now, his eyes darkening to an even deeper blue that reminded me of the darkest depths of the ocean. I could tell that this man was just as vast, just as dangerous if he chose to be, but I had only seen the surface of what this man was capable of. He was strong. He was worthy of his role in her existence, if the speed at which he had recovered from the unsanctioned burial was any indication.

Perhaps – and this thought caught me off guard even more than my sudden interest in Kali had at first... but perhaps I could have more than one companion. Could it be possible that fate had gifted me not only a lover, but a friend?

A family?

The concept was foreign, and, quite frankly, terrifying. I hadn't wanted a family since the one I had tried to build in life had come crumbling down around me. But Kali wasn't Victoria, and her ghost friend wasn't James. I didn't feel like they would betray me, but was I truly ready to take that risk? Would I ever be?

I knew that my window of opportunity would close if I didn't take it now. I could build a family, no longer have to wonder this realm alone, and find purpose and companionship with them both. Or, I could let them go, keep my heart closed off to the potential of being crushed yet again, and spend eternity with nothing and no one but myself and my shadows.

It had been enough for me thus far... but had it?

The answer was clearer now than it had ever been. No. I had merely been existing, my thoughts and actions stuck in the rut of kill, grow my power, and repeat. After this taste of what it would be like to no longer be alone, it wasn't enough. Not anymore.

But something was still holding me back. There was still one more wall that refused to fall, one that even Kali had failed to penetrate. Could I give her the chance to break it down, to burrow herself into my core where she would stay for the rest of eternity? Could he?

Only time could tell.

'Why?' the man asked, shocking me enough that I had to force my expression to remain neutral and my feet to remain in place.

'Why what?'

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He folded his thickly corded arms across his broad chest, and I couldn't help but admire the sheer strength he emanated. I imagined the way they would flex as he used them to bring her pleasure, how they would look as he wrapped them around her smaller frame. The sight of them together was already stunning, but without clothes? It was a beautiful vision, one I hoped I could see one day soon. He would be a good match for my ghost girl, indeed.

'Why do you want her? Why Kali? I'm pretty sure I already asked that, and you just told me to leave, but I'm not going anywhere. So, why?'

A part of me chafed at being questioned, but a larger part admired his gumption. He was wary, that much I could see. He wasn't a stupid man, but his concern over being around the most dangerous predator in this realm was overridden by his protectiveness, and I couldn't help but admire him all the more for it. He wasn't backing down in the face of adversity, and a spark of respect flickered to life.

I wasn't one for making concessions, but I saw no reason not to answer his question. Man to man, I could at least afford him that.

The words tore from deep inside my blackened soul. 'She is everything.'

I watched from the corner of my eye as Kali's stance relaxed, her expression softening as my confession struck her where it mattered most. It was an admission I had even struggled to acknowledge to myself, and I wasn't ready for its impact. I couldn't watch their reactions when my own was a swirling vortex of fears and insecurities that had long since been buried, yet were now forced back to the surface. I didn't want them. I was stronger than them. I was better.

Except, they didn't go away. They threatened to crush me to dust and then whisk me away in a tornado of destruction.

I couldn't be here.

I couldn't do this.

Kali's mouth opened, ready to respond, but I had already let my shadows drag me away somewhere safe, somewhere far away and secluded, so I could file down the jagged edges of my emotional wounds and piece myself back together without an audience.

I needed to be stronger than this. I needed to overcome the scars of my past before I could ever fully accept them, or for them to accept me. If that was what I chose, I still hadn't decided.

But my most concerning vulnerability was a lot more pathetically personal. I couldn't allow either of them to see me so weak. So pathetic. So dismally unworthy.

Victoria's words pushed forth, the memory of her voice, the sneer as she looked down upon me, the glee in her eyes as her laugh reverberated off the walls of my skull. It was a sound that hadn't plagued me since I'd taken my revenge, but it came back now with so much force I couldn't stop it no matter how hard I tried. I felt sick. It hit me like a knife to the heart, a reminder of the man I had once been. The words she had uttered right before she'd destroyed me.

Who could ever want a vile, worthless coward like you?

Chapter 14

Kali

I couldn't move. I could barely even think. All I could do was stare dumbly at Chance, who stared right back.

He was the first one to snap out of it, his thick black eyebrows arched in shock and confusion. And, goddamn it, hurt.

'So... You and him, huh?'

I fiddled with my fingers, suddenly very afraid that I'd fuck it all up with him before we'd even been able to get started. Again. 'Um, kind of.'

He inhaled slowly, his eyes shut tight and his head tilted up to the sun as he worked to ground himself, and I hurried to explain.

'We sort of hate fucked.' I choked on the words, embarrassment and shame working hard to close up my throat so I wouldn't have to say it out loud, but he needed to know it wasn't what Mortimer had made it out to be. 'I didn't think he would take that to mean I belonged to him, or... whatever that was. But I swear, Chance, it was nothing more than that.'

He huffed out a humourless laugh. 'You?' he asked, tilting his chin back down so he could meet my eyes. 'A hate fuck? Kali, that doesn't sound like you.'

Despite my best efforts, I bristled at the admonishment. 'I'm not the same woman I was before I died, Chance. You were alive, I was dead, and Morty was there. I don't know why he thought he could come here and stir shit up, but it didn't –'

'No, don't,' he interrupted, and I slammed my jaw shut with a clack of my teeth. 'Don't say it meant nothing, but it obviously meant something. At least to him. And I know you, Kali. I know your heart. You've never been the type to fuck for the sake of fucking. You don't fuck around with people's feelings, and there's no way in hell

you've changed so much that you're no longer you at a fundamental level.'

I didn't know how to respond. Fuck, he was right, but I was reluctant to admit it. Morty terrified me, but in a way that made my core clench and my thighs slick. Denying it was only hurting us both more than necessary.

My shoulders slumped as I released a sigh of defeat, fear and shame warring for dominance inside me. 'You're right. It wasn't nothing, but I meant it when I said it was only a one-time thing.'

His smile was small and sad, but there was no condemnation in his gaze as he held my eyes, only love and acceptance. 'This isn't how I thought things would go, but I should have known the universe would throw us another curveball.'

I opened my mouth, prepared to deny it, but he held up a hand to cut off my protests before they could escape. 'Seriously, Kali. It's okay. I'm trying to wrap my head around it, but it's not really my place to judge you. You've been through a lot, he was there when you needed someone to be there, and it's clear whatever's going on between the two of you isn't over.'

'There's nothing else going on, Chance, I swear,' I tried again, but he didn't believe me. Hell, I should have just kept my mouth shut, because even I didn't believe me.

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‘You wanna keep lying to yourself, goddess?’ he teased, and my anxiety eased a fraction at the return of the pet name. It gave me hope that I wasn’t too late to fix this.

‘I’m with you, Chance. You, not him.’

His arms wrapped around my shoulders, and he pulled me to him. I went willingly, snaking my own arms around his trim waist and clinging to him like he might disappear if I let go. It was a real possibility.

‘I’m not letting you go, Kali,’ he spoke into my hair. ‘Whatever that was all about with him, I don’t think he’s letting you go either.’

I huffed into his chest. ‘That’s not really how these things work,’ I mumbled, my voice muffled by his muscles.

He chuckled. ‘We’re dead, goddess. I doubt we have to follow the same rules as when we were alive.’

I pulled back to look up at him, a frown scrunching my forehead. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘It means we make our own rules now. I’m not going anywhere. Even if you decide you don’t want me anymore, you’re stuck with me. You have always been my forever, Kali. I can’t give you up.’

Tears stung my eyes and spilled over without my permission. He bent down to press his lips against my cheeks, kissing them away.

‘I’m not giving you up either, Chance. I love you.’

His smile, though small, was so bright I felt it might set me on fire. ‘I love you, too.’

‘Good,’ I sniffed.

I felt it all the way down to my toes when he pressed a kiss to my forehead, and the sensation brought attention to the fact that I was still very much naked. And so was Chance. I pulled away, enjoying the sight while amusement bubbled up inside of me. He arched a brow when a giggle escaped.

‘What?’

My response was to drag my finger down his abs, circle the base of his cock, then reach under to cup his balls. He moaned when I gave them a gentle squeeze, grinding himself into my palm.

‘We’re still naked.’

He hummed in agreement.

‘We got caught.’

Another hum.

I pulled my hand away since he didn’t seem capable of forming sentences when I played with him, and he groaned in protest. ‘No. Don’t stop.’

I grinned against his firm pecs, pressed a kiss to his perked nipple, then pulled away. ‘Morty caught us in the act, and then stirred up drama while we were naked, Chance. And he didn’t even bat an eye.’

He rolled his lips into his mouth and gave me a look that told me I was a bit slow to catch on. 'He was hard the entire time, Kali. He liked what he saw and told us as much.'

I felt the muscles in my face twist in confusion. 'What?'

He laughed then, loud and boisterous, in a way he hadn't since we were kids, and I couldn't help but beam back. 'How can you be so clueless?'

'Hey!' I smacked at his impressively large bicep, enjoying the sting. I wondered then just how much he could feel. I hadn't been able to feel anything until Bianca, yet he seemed to be worlds ahead of me in terms of this whole ghost business. He was a natural.

Grinning, he captured my hand in his and brought it up to my lips to kiss my knuckles. His lips lingered, soft and cool, and I melted at the gentlemanly gesture. That was one thing he had that Blake never did, and it turned my stomach in knots.

'Kali, I'm pretty sure you have two boyfriends now, and neither one of us is planning on giving you up to the other.'

I blinked at him, my jaw dropping to my chest. 'What?'

He chuckled again, enjoying my dumbfoundedness. 'You know, I'm not completely sold on him, but if you saw something worthwhile in him enough to fuck him, then I'm sure there could be worse brother-husbands out there.'

'B-brother-husband?' I stammered, then shook myself out of the stupor. 'We're not married.'

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He scoffed. 'So? We're dead. We can make up our own rules. If you want him... well, I guess I'll just have to deal with it, because he seems pretty keen to share.'

'Share.' I said the word slowly, sceptically. I let it sit on my tongue, tasting it. Considering it.

He nodded confidently, like it was already decided. 'Yup. Share.'

I studied him for a while, curious about what was going on in his head. His expression was open and inviting, and there didn't seem to be any hint that he was freaking out. Just me, then. I decided to take it one step further and test the boundaries of whatever this was he was asking me to do. What Morty apparently expected me to do.

'And what if I wanted more men in this growing harem of mine?' I asked, tipping my lips up into a cheeky smirk.

His head tilted to the side as he considered me, then comprehension dawned in his eyes. 'Rhodes.'

Fuck. He knew me too well. There was nothing I could hide from him, because he could see right through me.

I decided to play it cool. If he was being honest about... whatever this weird arrangement was turning out to be with him and Morty, then maybe he could accept Rhodes as well, if the bubbly man was interested, of course. It could all be nothing more than talk, and besides, I didn't even know what would happen to him once he

passed. His body was already giving out, and he didn't have much time left, but his death would be different from mine and Chances. From what I assumed was Morty's, too. All the ghosts I had ever met – albeit I had only met the ones Blake had killed before Morty came along – had been murdered. For all I knew, Rhodes could pass on to a different realm, and this conversation would be null and void.

I didn't want to think about that, though. Selfishly, I wanted Rhodes to stick around. I wanted him to want me back. And, since we were being honest, I wanted him to be a part of whatever this was. I couldn't lie that I was intrigued. I had read books about polyamorous relationships, but I never thought it could be possible in reality. That kind of stuff just didn't work out. Too much jealousy, or one person spreading themselves too thin while trying to appease multiple lovers. I couldn't see how this could work without anyone getting hurt in the process.

'I suppose I should have seen that one coming,' he teased, though it was more thoughtful, the joke turned inward towards himself.

'How so?' I asked, unsure why he would think a romantic escalation to my new friendship with Rhodes would be an obvious conclusion.

He smirked like he knew a secret I wasn't privy to, and he was about to blow my mind. 'He got this dreamy look in his eyes whenever he thought about you. And he's an attractive man. It shouldn't have come as a surprise that you would be interested in him, too.'

I gave him a sheepish look, unsure how to respond. This entire conversation was so far out of my comfort zone, and my attempt to test the waters had not only been enlightening in the most unusual of ways, but it had totally backfired on me. I had tried to put Chance in the spotlight, but he'd dodged it artfully by shining it on me instead.

His smile softened from teasing to understanding, and finally, there was nothing but love and acceptance once again. 'Rhodes is a good guy. I think I've only known him as long as you, though I did spend a bit more time with him given the circumstances. But my point is, I would consider him a friend. I would be honoured to share you with him.'

I giggled nervously and fidgeted awkwardly, feeling weird in my own skin. The absurdity of this entire conversation was making me uncomfortable in more ways than one. Notably, with the ache between my legs every time he mentioned sharing. My mind kept conjuring up different positions I could find myself in between two of the men, or even three of the men apparently vying for a place in my heart. I couldn't speak for Rhodes, but Chance was a shoo-in, and Morty... I wasn't sure he was going to give me a choice in the matter.

'I don't know what to say,' I admitted shyly.

'You don't have to say anything right now, goddess. I am here to worship you like you deserve for the rest of our lives. Or... well, I guess not lives, but you get the point. Anyway, my point is, we have a long time to figure things out. You don't have to come to any decisions today, or even tomorrow, for that matter, but I'm in this a hundred per cent no matter what you decide.'

'I fucking love you, goddess. I have spent the past seven years wandering aimlessly, without any real direction, because you weren't there. Now I have you back, and more than that, I have you, and there isn't a single force in this world or the next that could tear me away from you. You are my purpose, goddess. Without you, I cease to exist.'

I had no words. My heart was more full than it had ever been. We may have been dead, but that only made this all the more powerful. Chance was, unbelievably, mine. I was his. There was no path forward where that changed, and I couldn't be more

thankful for him than in this moment. He was every dream I'd ever had come true, and I couldn't believe how lucky I was.

But I didn't know how to get those feelings from my heart to my mouth in words, so I chose a different method instead and kissed him. Hard. Passionately. I pushed all of my love for him into that one kiss and prayed like hell that he understood.

Fortunately, he was a smart man and caught on quickly. He plastered the front of his naked body against mine, fusing us in an embrace born from more than just passion. It was years of longing, or yearning for what we thought was out of our reach. It was countless nights lying in bed, fantasising about a moment just like this. It was a union that went beyond vows and ceremonies and legal documents declaring us a unit.

His cock was hard again, and I felt its heavy weight pressing against my stomach, but he ignored it. This wasn't about that. We could fuck and make love and whatever else we could call it any other time. This was about answering the call we were too scared to acknowledge when we first had the opportunity.

This was us accepting our second chance.

No more taking him for granted. No more ignoring my feelings, or his. No more pretending to be anything other than what we were always meant to be.

A family.

And if we wanted to extend that family, then what was the harm? We were the core: steady, sturdy, and unbreakable. No matter what happened from here on out, it was us against the world.

Chapter 15

Rhodes

The sound of glass being placed on a wooden surface near my head roused me from sleep, though not all the way. I ended up in some strange limbo haze where my brain was inching itself back towards consciousness while my body remained unmoving, out of my reach. I thought I managed to twitch a finger, but I could have been wrong.

My ears, however, were working well enough that I could pick out the voices and the vague sense of words that gradually came into focus. The voices I deduced belonged to Mikey and Dakota, but it took a moment for me to understand what they were saying. A few words trickled through the hazy fog. Words like police, Chance, missing, and Blake. It wasn't difficult to figure out the topic that had worked them into a tizzy. Well, Mikey, at least, sounded calm, like he was trying to soothe Dakota while she spiralled into a panic. Her voice was high-pitched and harried, anxiety choking off most of her words.

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She was afraid. Mikey was trying to reassure her, but she wasn't listening. She seemed to be in such a state of distress that she couldn't physically listen.

'Kota, you don't have to go anywhere you don't want to. You never have to go back to him. I swear, if that's what you choose, you won't be left out in the dark,' Mikey pleaded with her in a soft, yet urgent tone.

'He's going to kill me like he killed her. And even if he doesn't, he's not the only monster after me. I'm not going to survive this. I'm going to die. Oh, god, I'm going to die.'

Her hysteria finally drew me the rest of the way out of unconsciousness, my eyes blinking open blearily. I could move now, but it was slow. Sluggish. It took more effort than it should have just to sit up.

I glanced over to see that a fresh glass of water had been placed on my bedside cabinet, ice floating at the top and condensation turning the sides opaque. I watched as a drop accumulated on the side and slid down, its pace slow and leisurely. I was jealous. My pace may have been slow, but it was anything but leisurely.

Dakota's voice climbed even higher, and nothing Mikey was doing to try to help was working. They were just outside my door, which was still open a crack, just enough for me to see the way Mikey was embracing Dakota, like he could physically hold all her broken pieces together before they could fall off completely.

I was panting by the time my feet hit the floor. The effort it then took to stand almost knocked me right back out again, but I staved off the wooziness with sheer force of

will. I stuffed my feet into my slippers and shuffled painfully over to the door. When I reached it, I wanted to smack my forehead when I realised I hadn't taken a sip of the water before making this journey. My breaths were heaving, my throat was dry and raw, and it felt swollen as I swallowed the small amount of spit in my mouth in a feeble attempt to create some lubrication.

All it did was cut off my lungs for far too long, my entire neck aching after the effort. Swallowing had become harder and harder as of late, the action more like my throat was closing up than pushing sustenance down, my tongue sitting heavy in my mouth like it was the first part of me to have died, and I was losing the will to keep trying.

When I finally succeeded in swinging the door open after a few failed attempts of my hand not grasping the handle properly, I was able to take in the full scene before me. Dakota was on her knees, her face twisted into a forlorn expression with wide, wild eyes darting in every direction like she was waiting for something to jump out of the shadows to devour her whole. Her hands were tangled in her short, red hair, and they yanked at the strands so harshly I feared she would tear her scalp from her skull.

Mikey had positioned himself beside her, with no sign of his usual timidity as he kept his arms wrapped securely around her. He was whispering soothing nothing into her ear as he rocked them back and forth, and it was such a powerfully intimate scene that I felt like I was intruding just by standing here. They looked like a couple. Albeit where one was drowning and the other was her life raft, keeping her afloat, but a couple all the same.

I decided it was best if I left them to it. There wasn't anything I could do anyway. Not when I was about to collapse any second now with my legs struggling to hold up my weight, but more than that, I didn't know them well enough to insert myself between them. I had only met Dakota a few times, and none of them were particularly happy scenarios. Her entire life was falling apart in the worst way, and I was nothing more than a stranger who had somehow gotten stuck in the middle.

So, I inched the door closed to give them a sense of privacy, glad that neither had seemed to notice me, and shuffled back to bed and the glass of cool water awaiting me.

My energy today was so depleted that I had nothing left to give after sipping at the water and tucking myself back in under the covers. As soon as I was horizontal, my eyes closed and sleep dragged me under once again.

???

The next time I came to, the sun was setting, and I wasn't alone. There was another body in the bedroom with me, one that was more familiar to me than any of the guests I had inadvertently taken in.

His back straightened when he saw me move, his large, broody frame rising from the chair in the corner to perch at the edge of my mattress.

'How are you feeling?' Davey asked, concern lowering his gruff voice even further than usual.

I groaned, the sound weak and pathetic even to my own ears. 'I've been better,' I joked half-heartedly.

He grunted, unimpressed.

I huffed a shallow sigh. 'Help me sit up?'

He did so without a word, hooking his hands beneath my arms and hauling me up. He steadied me with one hand while the other adjusted the pillows, fluffing them and stacking them to ensure I was comfortable. It wasn't the first time Davey had taken care of me like this. He had been my parents' best friend and had been there for me

throughout all of my cancer phases since I was a kid. When my parents got sick, he stepped up when they could no longer help me. He helped me take care of them before both of us no longer had the capacity to care for them and ourselves. He had his family to take care of, and once I had made the decision to place them in a care home, I had ushered him back to where he truly needed to be.

I didn't want to be a burden anymore. He deserved freedom from watching me constantly fade away, then bounce back, only to go through it all again. It wasn't fair to him, which was one of the reasons I had chosen not to undergo treatment this time. I could have fought for more time, but there was no chance of getting better. I was going to die, and I was ready.

And I kind of hoped Kali and Chance would be there to greet me when I passed over. I liked the idea that I had people waiting for me, that I wouldn't be alone. That I wouldn't have to push people away anymore to keep from hurting them when I inevitably died.

People like Davey, who was watching me with a sheen in his eyes I knew he would deny if I brought attention to it.

'Better?' he asked, and both of us ignored the way his voice cracked.

I hummed my confirmation, but the sound was small, like a breath more than a voice.

'I'll get you another glass of water,' he said after the silence between us ran on a little too long. Normally, I would have broken it with a joke, but I no longer had the energy even for that. My body was giving out quicker than I thought it would. When he left the room, I took the moment of solitude to feel sorry for myself. I had missed my short window of opportunity to do the things I loved the most one more time, and now I was going to be stuck in bed until my rapidly decaying body finally let my soul free.

When he returned, he settled back on the edge of the bed and, rather than pass the glass to me, he manoeuvred a straw in front of my mouth. I wrapped my lips around it and sucked only enough for a trickle to enter my mouth. I swallowed it down and rested my head back against the headboard, gulping painfully.

‘You need more,’ he said, but I shook my head.

‘I’m good.’

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‘Just one more sip, okay?’

I didn’t argue. I let him put the straw back up to my lips and sucked a little bit more. The chill was nice. Refreshing. And over to quick when my mouth heated it up in an instant. Still, I swallowed, then took another sip when he wiggled the straw in front of me one more time. Eventually, though he wasn’t satisfied with the piddling amount I had managed to suck down, he gave up and placed the glass on the bedside cabinet. I could reach it if I tried, but my arms felt too heavy to move.

‘How’s the business?’ I dredged up enough energy to ask.

‘Fine. Same as always.’

The corner of my mouth twitched in the memory of a grin. ‘Don’t need my pretty smile to bring in the customers, huh?’

He snorted, the sound loud and unattractive enough that I coughed out a short laugh. ‘The show goes on, kid.’

I didn’t want the silence to extend the way it had before, so I asked him about his family. I was genuinely interested in the answer, but I had never been one to sit in awkward silence. My role had always been to fill the quiet with noise. If there was sound, there was life, and I breathed all of it in as much as I could. My entire life had been filled with small moments that, to me, were big. Children’s laughter at a playground might have been background noise to others, but it was a reminder to me that though I would never have that for myself, others were lucky to experience the extension of life and the joy of building a family. The sun rising on a Monday

morning might have filled others with dread, but for me, it was another day to live to the fullest, to experience all that life had to offer. I never took a moment for granted.

I listened with rapt attention as Davey regaled me with stories of his daughters, his wife, and the life they led. He told me about their dog, Perry, and how he had peed all over the neighbour's flowers again, setting off yet another neighbour war that he took great pleasure in despite the animosity it wrought. I listened to him talk about his wife, Gina, and the countless hobbies she was picking up that drained their bank accounts, but I could see in the way his eyes crinkled in the corners that he didn't mind, because his wife was happy.

His gruff voice was relaxing in its familiarity. Davey wasn't one to talk much, but when he did, it was always something worth listening to. I was one of the very few people he was so open with, and I took comfort in the fact that his life would go on just fine without me. He would have the campsite to keep him afloat. He had his family to keep him on his toes. He had his daughter's lives to look forward to as they grew into women and started families and careers of their own.

Yeah. He was here because he cared, but he didn't need me, and that gave me peace.

His growly cadence lulled me to sleep, and I drifted off again with acceptance of my fate.

Chapter 16

Dakota

My gaze tracked the large, grumpy chef as he left the house for the third time today. He had been checking in on Rhodes more frequently as the poor man's health continued to decline. Rhodes hadn't gotten up out of bed for a few days now, relying on the rest of us to care for him while his body failed. It was heartbreaking to watch,

but caring for him had given me something to focus on, something good that had absolutely nothing to do with my still missing husband.

Mallory and Calvin had left not long after Florence had stormed off home in a huff. Chance turning her down had caused a strange tension between my in-laws, but I didn't have the capacity to care. Not when their son was a fuckingmurderer, and they either knew and did nothing, or were completely oblivious to the monster they had raised.

The more I thought back on Blake's behaviours, the odd little things here and there that I had dismissed as nothing more than a quirk, or a bad mood I had believed was the result of an off day at work, everything was coming together to form a gruesome picture of death and carnage, of secrets and betrayal, and my heart fuckinghurt.

The police had shown up to question Rhodes again, but he had been asleep, and no one wanted to disturb him. His nurse, Jessica, had also come by to visit a few times. They spoke at length of responsibilities that needed to continue on after his passing, and I learned that his parents were still alive but sick, too, residing in a nearby care home for full-time care with their dementia and Alzheimer's. He had no siblings, no cousins, no real family to care for him, and though Jessica and Davey tried their best, they both led busy lives and couldn't be there for him twenty-four-seven. So, when all the others left, I elected to stay behind.

More went into that decision than helping Rhodes, however. The police had also been in contact with me, and I chose to stick around to help with their investigation. They had convinced me that it was prudent that I act ignorant, that staying in the campground (or close to) would project the image of the concerned wife. So, Mikey had helped me move my things into Rhode's spare room.

He was such a sweet man. He had parked his RV in Rhodes' driveway, where he had decided to stay for the duration of the investigation. He claimed it was because of

Chance and Kali, but while I didn't doubt that for a second, I could also see how he worried about me. He fussed over me like a mother hen, constantly checking in to make sure I was okay. He wouldn't admit it out loud, but I knew he chose to stick close for me. He could have stayed at the campsite, but he had chosen to move himself as close as possible, and I could have been more grateful for him. In a strange turn of events, he had become my rock in this whirlwind of chaos and heartbreak.

He sat by me now, both of us sipping coffees at Rhodes' kitchen table, the spread of paranormal investigation equipment spread out in front of us. Mikey had set up different devices all over the property, though the bulk of it remained within the wooded area that separated our property from Blake's secret lair. My mind kept conjuring up images of what it looked like. Would he be nondescript, a typical house on a large plot of land that looked picturesque, just like everything else in his life? Or would it be creepy, rundown, and offensive to all the senses?

The picture I envisioned oscillated between the two. Sometimes, they took off so far in one direction or the other that I got the sense of either false safety or pure dread, but other times, they merged. Those were the images that struck me the most. A pretty little house on a well-manicured lawn, surrounded by the green of the trees and the trickle of the Little Deschutes River running lazily through the property. It was inviting. It was a lie. Because inside, it was a house of horrors. Blood stained every surface, dripping down walls and pooling in puddles, seeping through the floorboards and filling the space with the scent of iron and rot. I pictured severed body parts taxidermized and displayed proudly on the walls: head, legs, arms, even a case full of fingernails and locks of white hair, a perfect match for Kali's.

The worst ones were the nightmares. I wasn't me, I was her. Kali. Bound and gagged and held hostage in some sort of torture chamber. The dream would always be the same. Blake would run his fingers tenderly over weapons and other torture devices, humming a haunting tune beneath his breath as he carefully chose which tool to use to cause the most harm. It was a different tool each time. Sometimes it was a knife.

Others, a scalpel. A chainsaw. A machete. A medieval contraption straight from the horrors of the past.

He would stalk closer to where I was bound in the centre of a room, a surgical mask covering the lower half of his face, but I could see the malice in his eyes. They would crinkle at the corners like he was smiling behind the mask, and I knew, I justknew,that even if it was a dream, that was how he looked to his victims before they died.

Smug.

Powerful.

Evil.

I shivered in my seat, the memory of last night's nightmare refusing to budge no matter how hard I tried to distract myself.

Mikey noticed. Of course he did. He was always watching, always making sure I didn't crumble into a pathetic mass of tears and snot like I had a few days ago. The news had taken a while to hit, but when it had, I couldn't handle it. I had completely fallen apart, becoming nothing more than a blubbing mess of heartbreak, terror, and sheer disbelief. I had cycled through the stages of grief quickly, though, thanks to Mikey. He had been a steady presence, and the only reason I was a remotely functioning human being at all these days.

'You okay?' he asked, his quiet, timid voice soothing the jagged edges of my frayed nerves with ease.

I sent him a small smile I hoped would bolster my lie. 'Yeah, I'm okay, Mikey.'

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He didn't believe me, though. He never did. 'Another nightmare?' he asked, seeing right through me like always. He had an uncanny ability to read me like an open book, even when I tried to close the cover and lock it up tight in a cage of lies and fake smiles.

What I liked about him the most, however, was that he never called me out on my bullshit. Instead, he let me lie and tried to make things better by finding some way to take my mind off it all. Now was no different.

'D'you wanna come with me to check the thermals? I think the wildlife got to them in the night.'

I nodded. 'Sure. Let me just get ready and check on Rhodes, and I'll meet you out front in half an hour?'

'Sure thing,' he said, dipping his head to hide the blush that spread across his cheeks. He was getting better and conversing with me. It was easier for him when I was in a mindless state of anxiety, but since he had pulled me out of it, he had returned to being that same shy man who had followed Chance around like a little puppy.

I felt guilty for how much energy he was spending on making sure I was okay when he had just lost one of his lifelong best friends. I had always admired their friendship, even if I hadn't fully understood it until now. Chance was the brooding type, but he had a heart of gold. He was protective of those he cared about and didn't have time for the people who proved themselves unworthy of his time and affection. Mikey, however, was the complete opposite. He was timid, reclusive, and nerdy. He didn't stand up for himself like Chance had, but he was loyal, and kind, and so damn sweet

it made my teeth ache, but in the best way.

I wasn't sure if he had latched onto me as a means of replacing the friend he had hidden behind for so long, or if he was just using me as a distraction for himself, but I had to remind myself that he was grieving this loss, too. He had lost just as much, if not more, than me, because at the end of the day, what I'd had with Blake had been nothing more than a lie. Mikey's friendship with Chance was genuine. Hell, even his friendship with Kali was more real than my own fucking sham of a marriage.

At least he hadn't been used as a mask to hide the ugliness he didn't want the world to see. Truthfully, there wasn't anything ugly at all about Mikey. His personality matched his outward appearance. Sure, he was nerdy and a bit gangly, but he had kind eyes and soft features that gave him a beauty most men would have been called gay for, but he pulled it off.

And despite his shy, introverted tendencies, there was a strength to him that lay just beneath the surface, hidden from those who refused to look any deeper, but so clear to see if you just paid attention.

Mikey was truly one of a kind. A sparkling gem in a sea of sharp, bland, grey rocks.

I quickly bounded up the stairs to grab a towel from the linen closet on the landing, then headed straight for the shared bathroom a few doors down. It was a simple room, with a shower-tub combo, a large mirror over a double sink, a toilet with seat of seashells cast in resin, and an ocean theme that was cliché but pretty, nonetheless. Everything was in shades of light blues, patterned with either seashells or seahorses, but it wasn't homely.

What mattered the most right now, though, was the hot water. I turned on the shower, stepping away from the spray as it came out ice-cold, and stripped while I waited for it to heat up. I realised that I forgot my clothes back in the guest room, but I didn't

think much of it. Rhodes wouldn't be up, and Mikey would be waiting downstairs, so there would be no one to see me make the quick journey from the bathroom to the bedroom.

I showered quickly, only waiting for the water to heat up enough that I would freeze to death under the stream. I didn't wash my hair, instead throwing it into a bun on the top of my head to keep it dry and out of the way as I quickly rinsed the sleep from my body, and I was out in five minutes. The bathroom hadn't even had the chance to fog up.

Once I was back inside the bedroom I had temporarily claimed as my own, I threw on the first clothes I picked out, which just happened to be jeans and a tank top, kept my hair up in its messy bun, slipped my feet into my sneakers, and headed across the hall.

I knocked lightly, afraid to wake him if he was sleeping, but wanting to give him the option to send me away if he wasn't. When there was no answer, I gently pushed open the door and peered inside. The curtains were closed, dimming the brightness of the light that was trying so hard to illuminate the space. It was a typical boy's room, with a navy blue comforter, a TV atop a chest of drawers, and a gaming system beneath it. There was a small bookcase in the corner that held mostly trinkets, though there were a few well-worn books shelved for good measure. Posters lined the walls of obscure bands I had never heard of, and a surfboard was propped up in the corner beside a snowboard. Pictures lined the surfaces of a smiling couple that must have been Rhodes' parents, and I could see the love they held for one another.

He may have suffered from cancer his whole life, but Rhodes was lucky. He'd grown up with a family that had loved him, had cared for him to the best of their ability, and provided him with a good life in spite of the hardships they faced.

And yet, despite the evidence of a life well-lived, it was empty. The lump beneath the

covers was unmoving, lifeless, and I hurried over to press my fingers against his neck, only removing them with a sigh of relief when I felt the faint pulse beneath my fingertips. He was just sleeping, but I was preparing myself for coming in one of these days to find him gone.

He moaned in his sleep, his voice croaky and weak. A full glass of water sat beside the bed, a plate of largely untouched food beside that. He had taken a few bites of the simple buttered toast that Davey had taken up for him before he left, but most of it went uneaten.

I was concerned about his lack of appetite, not to mention how much trouble he was having swallowing. I feared one of these days I would walk in to find him choking on his tongue or something, but that wasn't all that I feared. His seizures were becoming more frequent and took more out of him each time. Lately, they had been mostly absent seizures compared to full-on fits, but I wasn't ignorant enough to believe that was a good thing. His body was giving out on him, and quickly. He didn't even have enough energy to spare on his symptoms anymore.

Now, he mostly just slept. The rest of us did our best to help ease his last days with as much dignity as possible. Yesterday, he had wet the bed while Davey was visiting, and we worked together without a word to clean him up. I stripped and remade the bed while Davey helped him to the bath.

I'd cried myself to sleep that night, and if Mikey's puffy, red-rimmed eyes the next morning were any indication, he had, too.

I checked him over one last time, looking for any signs that he needed assistance before I left him alone for a few minutes, and released a sigh of relief when I found nothing wrong. No bed wetting. No vomiting in his sleep. No messes to clean up. He was safe for now, so I let him be.

Mikey was right where he said he would be when I came down the stairs, waiting by the door as he held it open for me.

‘How is he?’ he asked.

‘As well as can be expected, I suppose,’ I answered sadly.

Mikey’s gaze drifted to the stairs, sadness permeating his aura. But then the door closed behind him, jolting him back to the present, and he shot me an apologetic look.

‘You ready?’

‘Yup,’ I answered, purposefully putting a little more brightness in my tone than necessary in an attempt to lighten the mood. He did enough of that for me lately, it was time I did the same for him. ‘Lead the way.’

I followed dutifully behind him as he led me into the trees, sticking close by as the shadows cut at my already frayed nerves. I tried not to jump at every rustle of the leaves or snap of a twig, but I couldn’t help but scan the darkness for signs of red, glowing eyes. I shouldn’t have come out here, not with how paranoid I had become, but I was trying my best to act normal. I didn’t want my life to be ruled by fear. I had overcome enough hardships and was currently going through the most hellish situation I could have never even fathomed. I wasn’t about to let hallucinations of a childhood fear break me now.

I was stronger than that, goddamn it.

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Mikey didn't say anything about my jumpiness, but he did stick close to me. So close, in fact, that we were practically fused together. Our arms brushed with every movement, until eventually I couldn't take it anymore and grabbed his hand, tangling our fingers together. He blushed again and still refused to comment, but when he squeezed my hand back and didn't let go, I knew it helped him feel better, too.

'It's just over here...' he said, picking his way carefully over a fallen tree trunk and guiding me over.

I noticed what the problem was as soon as we were close enough to see it. He had strapped one of the devices to a tree, and something had nibbled through the rope so it dangled precariously above the ground. Mikey removed a bungee cord from a pocket in his cargo shorts and quickly tied the little metal thing back in place. He stuffed the broken rope in his other pocket as he stepped away to examine his handiwork, then checked the device for any damage. The light at the top blinked whenever he moved closer, but he didn't seem concerned, so I didn't ask. Any data it recorded was sent straight to his laptop, so he only needed to come out here for maintenance issues like this.

'Okay,' he said, then smacked his hands against his thighs. 'That's that problem solved.'

I watched him expectantly, curious where he would lead us next, but he merely stared back like a doe in headlights.

'Oh... that was it?' I asked, unsure why I was sad. I wanted to get out of these woods, but I also enjoyed the work that Mikey did. His career fascinated me, even if I was

wary of the scarier aspects. I was quickly coming to see that spirits and entities weren't all that scary, but it was the stories behind their deaths, the prospect of being haunted, that truly sent the shivers of fear skittering down my spine.

It hit a little too close to home.

He shrugged, glancing away with a sheepish blush staining his cheeks yet again. 'That's it. Sorry it wasn't more exciting.'

'Oh, no,' I rushed to object. 'It's not that. I just thought...'

'If they'd captured anything worthwhile, I'd tell you. I just thought... maybe... You could use a walk.'

I tried to smile, but I was sure it came out more like a grimace. 'A walk sounds good, but I think I'd prefer to get out of the woods...'

'Oh, sure,' he said, eagerly moving back the way we came. Unfortunately, he was a little too eager and didn't see the root poking out from the ground. His toe got caught, sending him flying, and he landed face down in a nearby bush.

'Ow...' he said, and I rolled my lips into my mouth in an attempt to stave off the laugh that threatened to burst out of me.

'Are you okay?' I asked when I was certain my voice wouldn't give away my amusement. He was easily embarrassed, and I didn't want to send him running because he thought I was making fun of him.

'Just a bruised ego, I think,' he said, dusting himself off and avoiding my eyes. If his complexion got any redder, I was concerned he'd pass out from too much blood rushing to his head.

He didn't look at me for the rest of the walk back. He didn't let me get close enough to hold his hand again. He waved a half-hearted goodbye when we got back to the house, then we went our separate ways.

I didn't want to look too closely at why I felt like I was losing him, and why that sent a lightning bolt of panic through my veins.

Chapter 17

Kali

Chance was frowning, his frustration evident as he tried unsuccessfully for the umpteenth time today to move away from his grave.

'This is useless,' he said with a huff, and I couldn't stop my smile from spreading it I'd tried. He was so fucking cutewhen he was out of his depth. He had always been in control of everything around him. His home life wasn't the best, so he tried to make everything else go his way. It wasn't often I saw him lose his cool like this.

Plus, thatpout. I just wanted to take it between my teeth and give him something else to focus on. Something that would take the edge off.

Unfortunately for me, he was too determined to be deterred, even by the prospect of sex. He couldn't stand the fact that he was unable to move anywhere, that he couldn't even get his feet to move, and that,apparently, left me vulnerable. It wasn't like I hadn't been a ghost forseven yearsor anything, but he was being a bit boneheaded about the whole thing.

I kept trying to convince him he should give himself some grace – it had taken me months, if not years, to succeed in what he was trying to force himself to do now – but he wasn'tlistening. I tried to be patient, but there was only so much I could do

before I lost it with him, too.

‘I’m going to check on the woman again,’ I told him. I had been taking brief stints away from him for several reasons, one of which was Blake’s next victim. I was trying to see if I could communicate with her somehow. The cops had already been informed, and if they weren’t going to do anything, then the job fell to me.

I wasn’t cut up about it. Quite the opposite. Chance kept calling me a hypocrite because I was doing the same as him, except I was pushing and testing the boundaries of my new abilities. He was just trying to create one out of thin air under the guise of being a better bodyguard, but I didn’t need one of those. What I needed was to make myself strong enough to interact with the living realm, because I was itching at the bit to start making Blake’s life a living hell.

That started with figuring out a way to release the poor woman currently trapped in his basement. Since she was a cop, she could get those empty-headed coworkers of hers to pull their thumbs out of their asses and actually do something.

Though now that I thought about it, if Blake were to get arrested, I would need Chance to have the ability to move around freely so we could follow in his wake. We could be his unrelenting, waking nightmares if we couldn’t get to him.

Okay, perhaps I was being a little unfair to Chance. He was doing his best in a shitty situation, and I was the one preaching about giving him some grace, after all. I should be extending him the same courtesy.

Damn it.

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I drifted up, my feet lifting even higher into the air as I levitated my face closer to his, then pressed a lingering kiss to his lips.

‘You’ve got his, baby,’ I whispered into his mouth. ‘You’ve already come so far in so little time. I know you can do this.’

‘Only because of you,’ he told me, not an ounce of levity in his gaze. ‘If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be as far along, and we both know it.’

I sighed, melting into him for a moment. We held each other, basking in the ability to do so. It still sent my head spiralling into incredulity to think that my wildest dreams were finally coming true. We’d just had to die first. Go figure.

‘Go check on the cop,’ he told me, gently pushing me away from him and towards the house. I let him, albeit reluctantly. I wasn’t quite ready to let him go, but while we had all the time in the world, she didn’t.

‘I’ll be back in a bit,’ I told him, floating backwards so I wouldn’t have to take my eyes off of him for as long as possible. It still didn’t seem real that he was here, that he was mine, and every time I left him for any length of time, my anxiety went through the roof. My brain kept telling me that it was all in my head, that I would head back to his grave only to find there wasn’t one dug there, that he was still alive. And I was still alone.

And then there was the guilt I was grappling with. I was happy that the man I loved was dead. What kind of sick bitch did that make me? But, at the same time, I was well aware that death wasn’t the end. It was just the beginning of a new chapter,

something that I was beginning to realise might just be more fun than being alive, if these new abilities were any indication.

I had discovered I could do more than move freely and coil shadows around my fingers. In fact, those shadows were where the real power came in. I could fold them over me, turning me invisible. I could use them to pull me through the darkness at speeds I struggled to wrap my head around. One moment I was here, and the next I could be an entire state away. I hadn't tested the boundaries of that ability, but there was an innate knowing that if I took another soul into myself that way I had Bianca's, I would only grow more powerful.

And that was how I came to understand Morty without him even being around. He hadn't returned after catching me and Chance in the act the other day. I could feel him, but it was like he was circling us, waiting for the right moment to pounce. I was worried about him, too, much to my chagrin. Chance was right in that I had grown to care for my shadow man, and that he was mine just as much as Chance was.

And, yes, okay, I was his, too. But I wasn't ready to just give myself over to him on a fucking platter. He still needed to work for it.

And to do that, he needed to come back.

I could sense which direction he was in, but I didn't want to push him by tracking him down. He was free to come and go as he pleased, and it wasn't my place to force him to stay. He'd made his claim, and while I still needed to stake mine in return, it was obvious that he wasn't quite ready for that leap just yet. It was one thing to be possessive over someone, and another thing entirely to acknowledge that those feelings went far deeper than that. I'd let him have his time alone.

I could already tell he would need a lot of it, anyway. He was definitely the silent, brooding type, the kind to stalk someone from the shadows. The very shadows he just

so happened to have the ability to manipulate.

But I also wanted him back, if only so I could pepper him with questions. I had learned quite a lot on my own, but it would be a lot quicker if I had him to teach me. I got the feeling that he wouldn't do so willingly, however. He had stepped back to let me figure out how to harness the energy that had been so slippery not so long ago. I got the sense that he wanted me to flourish, and he wanted me to claim that victory for myself.

The hard way.

But, I had to give it to him; the hard way was infinitely more rewarding and satisfying than being handed the answers. He didn't want me to cheat, and I respected that. Didn't mean I could wish for a cheat sheet now and then, though. I would have loved for at least one thing to fall into my lap.

I phased through the house, the wall now blocking my view of Chance as he watched from where he was stuck. My heart lurched at the sudden thought that he might never unstick himself, but I pushed those thoughts to the furthest recesses of my mind. It wouldn't happen. He would free himself just like I had, and we would take out revenge together.

It was the only option.

I didn't immediately head to the basement. When I entered the house, Blake was right there, pottering around the house like he was livening it up for polite company. It was such a strange sight that it stopped me in my tracks, curiosity momentarily overtaking everything else.

During our marriage, I was the caretaker. I ensured he was pampered after his long hours at work, kept the house clean and tidy, and cooked all our meals. He brought

home the money, and I kept the house a home. I suspected the same could be said for his new wife. Dakota.

I wondered how she was faring with the news. She'd been there when I'd broken it, after all, and she had already been struggling with something. My heart bled for her. She didn't deserve this. From our brief interactions, I could tell she was a kind-hearted soul. She had even tried to comfort me, though it wasn't necessary. She had mistaken my attempts to communicate Blake's secrets as anger that he had moved on.

To be fair, she wasn't far off, but not in the way she'd assumed. He wasn't allowed to move on. He wasn't allowed to get a new wife and live his picket-fence dream while the rest of us suffered beneath the crushing weight of his secrets. He was leading a double life, and I would crack that fucking mask if it was the last thing I did.

So the fact that he was cleaning, actively freshening the place up, and even lighting a scented candle on the coffee table (I could smell it now, and it was some horrible, bland vanilla scent that was more cardboard and chemicals than sweet), was disconcerting to say the least.

What the fuck was he doing? Was he expecting company?

I watched with morbid fascination as he stood back and surveyed his work. He decided one of the cushions on the couch needed a bit more fluffing, but then he was satisfied. What he did next was even more concerning. He hurried to the bedroom and stood before the full-length mirror to check himself out. He smoothed out non-existent wrinkles in his slacks, brushed off invisible lint from the shoulders of his dress shirt, adjusted a silk tie I recognised as one that I had bought him for one of our first Christmases together, and even messed with his hair until he thought it sat just right. It was the same routine I had seen him perform many times during our marriage, particularly before we went on a date.

Oh...

Oh, hell no.

I silently raged as he took a deep, steadying breath, like he was nervous, before nodding once, satisfied with the way things looked. This was the one place on Earth he didn't have to keep up appearances, yet there he was, doing just that.

What the fuck was going on?

Luckily, I didn't have to wait long to find out.

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A knock came from the front door, and Blake hopped about like he was excited. Excited for what? Who was here?

He rushed to the door, took one more deep breath, then opened it to reveal...

Dakota?

He'd invited his wife here?

Dread sank low in my belly as she stepped through, her gaze darting about the place with a scrutinising eye. She was taking everything in with a stoic expression, refusing to give away what she was feeling, though it was clear she was unimpressed. I had a feeling that was with Blake, though, not the house.

'Babe,' he greeted with a blinding grin that didn't fix the dead look in his eyes. Now that I had seen it, there was no unseeing it. He would always be the monster now. 'I'm so glad you're finally here.'

He stepped back to let her further inside, and though he was too focused on closing the door behind her to see it, I caught her flinch when the lock clicked before she hid the reaction behind her enigmatic mask.

'So,' she began, turning in a slow circle as she took in the old, mismatched furniture and the overall cosiness of the place. I had to admit, it looked good. It reminded me of those cabins you could rent out in the woods, the ones with roaring fireplaces (his wasn't lit) and chandeliers made from antlers. It screamed money, but in an understated way.

It also screamed masculine, but in a decidedly overstated way.

I side-eyed the taxidermized stag head mounted above the fireplace with distaste.

So did Dakota.

‘This is where you’ve been,’ she finished, a hard note to her voice that had Blake’s eye twitching, though he covered it up quickly enough. He was struggling with having her in his space. His two worlds were never meant to collide. The last time it had happened, he’d picked one over the other, and it wasn’t the pretty one.

I surged forward, getting in his space. He didn’t notice, not even when my shadows lashed out like they wanted to wrap around him and squeeze until he popped. He rubbed his arm like he felt the chill of my presence, but otherwise didn’t behave like he knew I was there.

Dakota, however, was fixated on the action. Her nose flared, the first sign of emotion she’d dared to display in front of this man with his false smiles and pretty, meaningless words.

‘Yeah,’ he sighed out the word like it was a relief to finally reveal his murder den, though he had trussed it up to look innocent enough.

Lies. Lies. Lies.

‘This is where I go. The river out back lets me fish without being disturbed by anyone else.’

She hummed, the sound full of doubt. He seemed to miss the way her voice shook, but I latched onto it. She was acting, too.

What was her plan here?

‘Why hide this from me?’ she asked, letting the waver in her voice out as tears glistened in her eyes. They didn’t spill, but they didn’t need to. The impact was the same. He didn’t feel guilt, but he knew the cue to start pretending he did. He rushed to her, cupping her face tenderly in his hands. She flinched away, the action involuntary, but thankfully, it only looked like she was angry, not afraid. Her cover was still safe.

‘Baby, it’s not like that. I swear,’ he began, pressing a kiss to her lips that, to anyone else, would seem sweet and caring. I shuddered with revulsion. Dakota couldn’t, however, so she pushed him away and turned her face so he could see the way her nose wrinkled in disgust.

‘I didn’t think we had any secrets, Blake,’ she said, her voice dull like she was hurt. Who was I kidding? Of course, she was. Loving Blake was a one-way trip to eternal torment, and she was only just skimming the surface of what that meant.

‘I’m sorry. I know this looks bad, but that’s why I called you over. I know I fucked up, and I shouldn’t have left like I did. You deserved better than that.’

When she faced him again, she let a little sliver of her rage show through in the quiver of her bottom lip and the fire burning in her eyes. ‘And this place, Blake? Why the fuck would you keep an entire house a secret from me? I’m your wife,’ she snapped, and I internally cheered her on. It was good to see she had a backbone and that she wouldn’t let him walk over her like a doormat. It wouldn’t do her much good against his alter ego, but I was relieved to discover she was a fighter.

She wouldn’t take this lying down. Perhaps I could even use that to my advantage.

Maybe, if I could figure this whole shadow power thing out, we could help each

other.

‘I know. It’s not what you think, I swear. Just let me explain. Please?’ he begged, and it was so believable even I almost fell for it. Thankfully, Dakota wasn’t stupid enough to, either.

‘You have five minutes, and then I’m walking out that door, Blake. Convince me you’re not an asshole.’

Ha. I liked her.

‘I bought this place as soon as I had access to my trust fund,’ he began, and I settled in for this explanation, too. I wanted to hear it. It was a mystery I had yet to solve.

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‘I wanted a place for myself that no one else knew about. A place to escape to when everything became too much. Medical school was so stressful, and I was married straight out of high school. I felt like I didn’t have anywhere to go where I could just be alone, so I bought this place.’ He extended his arms as if to say Look at how awesome it is. Look at how smart I am.

Dakota folded her arms over her chest and tapped her foot impatiently. He still hadn’t given her a good enough explanation for why he had kept this place a secret from her, and she wasn’t giving an inch. He realised this, too, and dropped his arms to swing lamely by his sides.

‘Well, when I was with Kali, she didn’t like it when I went fishing so much. She didn’t like me being all alone in the middle of the wilderness, and she always wanted to come with me. I hid this house from her so I could have somewhere to escape to that she couldn’t follow. I know it sounds bad, now that I’m saying it out loud, but she had places she could go if she wanted to be alone. I didn’t. This was my safe haven. My refuge. The one place in the world where I didn’t have to be perfect. The perfect surgeon. The perfect son. The perfect husband.

‘I guess, even after Kali went missing, I didn’t want to give it up. This place became even more of a haven for me when she was gone. I didn’t have to sit in that big house all on my own. At least here, I was used to the quiet. And when I met you, it was just a habit, you know? Coming here wasn’t meant to be this dark secret. This isn’t a secret hookup pad. Actually, you’re the first person I’ve ever brought here.’

Yeah, right. More like the first person he’d ever brought here with the intention of leaving alive.

‘And that’s supposed to make me feel better?’ she asked incredulously. ‘You spout out some bullshit sob story about needing a getaway from your perfect life, and you just expect me to believe you’re not doing something wrong here? Blake, come on. I wasn’t born yesterday. People don’t just hide whole houses on tens of acres of land if they’re not hiding something.’

She paused to take a breath, glancing away from his stricken expression that I wanted to claw from his face.

Liar. Liar. Liar.

‘Who is she?’ Dakota demanded, and the pieces fell into place. She knew the truth, so either she was in full-out denial or she was keeping up the act. Fuck... was she wired, or something? Whatwasher goal here?

He risked getting closer again, grabbing her hands in his in a way that I was sure he meant to come across as tenderand pleading, but was really controlling and manipulative. She tensed at his touch, and he tried to soothe the reaction like he was trying to convince her that no other woman had touched him.

Too bad for him that she already knew that.

She looked locked in place, like he was binding her wrists like he bound his victims, and her face paled as the blood drained from her cheeks.

‘I promise, baby. There is no other woman. Or a man, if that’s what you’re thinking too. You’re the only one for me. You’re my wife, and I love you. I don’t want anyone else, and I swear, you’re the only woman that has ever been here before. I don’t want to hide it from you anymore, and I never should have in the first place. I see that now. Please, baby. Please forgive me.’

Chapter 18

Kali

Blake had taken Dakota for a tour of the property. He was leading her through the small copse of trees to where the river wound through the rear of his land, pointing things out here and there like he was genuinely excited to show her. Like he was actually happy she was there.

I stood by Chance, who watched on with a thunderous expression. He was protective of Dakota. I wasn't sure how close they were, but she was his sister-in-law. She was family.

'What the fuck is he doing?' Chance snarled, his entire body vibrating with anger he was forced to contain, not because he didn't want to attack Blake, but because he physically couldn't do anything.

'Showing her around,' I supplied helpfully.

He huffed and nudged me with his elbow. 'You know what I mean.'

I gave in at the helplessness he was radiating with every useless breath. 'He's covering his tracks. When the cops looked around and found nothing, not to mention the cop he's holding captive in the basement, he must have figured out that they're onto him.'

'But why bring her into it?' he asked, dismayed. He was a protector, and he couldn't protect anyone right now. It was easy to see how much his inability to help was eating at him.

'Because she's his alibi. Just like I was. She's the mask he puts on for the rest of the

world. If she says he's a good man, people will believe it. If she says there's no murder basement, the cops will stop digging.'

'He's showing her there's nothing to find,' he deduced, anger and frustration warring for dominance.

'Exactly. Blake is smart. Too smart. He's planned for this for a long time. He doesn't intend to get caught.'

'We have to stop him,' he said, growling his conviction.

'We will. He's not going anywhere just yet. Whatever his plans, he won't go through with them until he's sure he's in the clear. Let's just keep practising and pushing ourselves to be stronger, and we'll make him pay.'

He deflated, though his glare was still drilling into the back of Blake's head. 'You're right. I just...' He ran his fingers through his hair, tugging on the strands in his frustration. 'I hate this. I hate him.'

I wrapped my arms around his waist and rested my head against his shoulder, letting him use me as an emotional anchor. 'Me too.'

His head twisted to face the house, and he worried his lip between his teeth at whatever thoughts were running through his brain. 'How is she going to survive if he won't go down there?'

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I pursed my lips, trying to come up with a solution to the very question I had been thinking. ‘I don’t know. I don’t think she’ll get out of this alive if I can’t find some way to help her. I need to figure out a way to get her something to eat. Or at least some water.’

We devolved into silence, stuck in our heads, while our minds whirled with potential solutions to this new problem. I had never had to worry about the welfare of his victims before. I knew they were going to die, and that they would suffer immense pain beforehand, and there wasn’t anything I could do to help.

But now, I could help. I could touch things. Move things. I just needed to gather enough strength to sustain the ability without it costing me so much energy. But how?

I knew how, but I didn’t like the answer.

‘You said Morty was killing people, right?’ I asked Chance.

He grimaced. ‘Shit. I forgot about that...’ He tucked me in tighter against his body, like he could shield me from the danger Morty posed. Except, I didn’t think he posed any danger to me. Not physically, anyway. Emotionally, I had a feeling that man was going to wreck me. I could only hope it was in a way I could appreciate.

‘Don’t worry about him. That’s not why I asked.’

‘Then why?’

‘I think that might be how he’s so powerful. He can do things that are so far out of

my ballpark, and I'm sure he has even more tricks hidden up his sleeves, but absorbing souls seems to be the way to get access to more power.'

'You think he's killing people to what...eattheir souls?' he asked, completely aghast.

I tried not to bristle, the sensation of Bianca's energy like a warm hug inside me. But was it the same for Morty?

'It's how I broke free from my grave's pull,' I admitted. 'His last victim, Bianca. She could see me. I tried to help ease her passing, but she sort of just... fell into me. I don't know how to describe it. She's not gone, and I can feel her inside me, but she seems content to just... I don't know, buzz around in the shadows. Her energy gave me the boost I needed to break thetether holding me here. Maybe the only way to get stronger is to take in more energy the same way?'

Chance was looking at me with a strange expression I struggled to decipher, and I worried he would think poorly of me with that information, so I hurried to explain.

'I think she wanted it, Chance. I didn't eat her or whatever. I don't know, I can't describe it, other than she was happy to let me take over. Shewantedthis. I didn't force her to disappear, and she's still here, just in a different way.'

The elaboration seemed to relax him, and he accepted my story with a thoughtful hum.

'Is that the only way I'm going to get unstuck? I have to...absorbanother spirit?'

'I think so.'

'How?' he asked, a new frustration making him tense up again. 'There aren't any close enough for me to absorb, and I'm not comfortable doing that without consent.'

‘I don’t think you can take the energy of a ghost unless they’re fresh,’ I mused out loud. ‘It’s why I didn’t touch you after you died. I had to let you settle into your new reality, and that somehow made you too... I don’t know, tangible?’

‘Huh.’

‘Yeah.’

‘But that still doesn’t help us. There are no newly dead people around,’ he pointed out.

‘That’s what I’m here for.’

We both spun at the sound of Morty’s voice behind us. He had snuck up on us again, and it was really starting to chafe. I should have been paying closer attention, but I’d let my thoughts take precedence yet again.

‘You need a collar or something. With a bell,’ I sniped, but he only smirked in response.

‘I’ve brought gifts.’

It was only then that I noticed the two spirits cowering behind him. They were bound and gagged in his shadows, and he dragged them forward for us to see, presenting them like the most precious gifts he could have offered.

It was a sickening realisation that that’s exactly what they were. They were power. They were freedom.

They were crying.

‘What did you do?’ I demanded accusingly.

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He remained unbothered, though, and merely shrugged. 'I killed them for you.'

I inhaled sharply, feeling Chance tense even further beneath my touch. 'Why?'

Morty shot me a look that told me that was the most stupid question I could have asked, and he wasn't going to deign to answer.

I switched up the question. 'Why them?'

His sneer when he looked at them, the expression so full of disgust, eased something within me. The something that worried I was in too deep with a monster even worse than Blake. And perhaps I was, but at least this monster seemed to be on my side.

'They are scum, and did not deserve to live.'

'What did they do?' Chance asked, and we both needed the answer.

The shadows lifted up the ghost on the right. 'He preys on children. Little boys or little girls, it didn't matter to him.' The shadows lowered him only to lift the other one instead. 'And this one likes to make his employees get on their knees for him if they want to keep their job.'

Chance and I shared a look that spoke more than words could say. Morty wasn't out there killing innocents, he was ridding the world of evil one kill at a time, then using those kills to charge up his power. It was brilliant, and a bit morally grey, but I was okay with that. It seemed Chance was, too, because he levelled Morty with a determined look.

‘Give me the paedo. Kali doesn’t need that stain inside her.’

His request pleased Morty, and he handed over the bastard in question with a grin splitting his cheeks. It made him look boyish. Young. Still a man, with his short, thick beard and a very obviously grown body, but I realised then that I had viewed him as a sort of ageless being. Now, I could see that he was just a man who had figured out how to be more. A man who had been murdered, just like us, and way before his time.

When the spirit was in front of Chance, I waited for something to happen, but nothing did. He glanced at me uncertainly, then back at Morty. ‘Uh... What do I do?’

‘Just touch him. You’ll suck him right in.’

I scowled at my shadow man. ‘I don’t know whether to thank you or throttle you right now,’ I ground out through clenched teeth, earning me a wide-eyed look from Mortimer that was more innocent than I had ever seen from him before.

‘What?’

‘You made me figure it out on my own, yet here you are, handing Chance the answers like it’s nothing. Why did you makemejump through hoops, huh? Fucking asshole.’

Chance snickered beside me, though he did try to stifle it. Still, I turned my glare on him as I pouted at the unfairness of it all.

‘I need to know you were worth my time. You proved that you are,’ Morty said simply, like his words didn’t fill me with pride and set off fireworks in my belly.

‘Oh.’

He moved the other guy in front of me. An offering. His expression was expectant, and I sent him a grateful smile. Look at him. He was so freaking cute. Chance may have been the protector, but Morty? He was the provider.

‘Thanks, Morty.’

If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he blushed.

With one more glance towards Blake and Dakota, Chance decided he had waited long enough. He extended his finger and just sort of poked at the guy that was struggling desperately against his shadowy restraints. I would have laughed, but the shadows retracted as the spirit suddenly flickered in and out of existence, and then converged at the small point of contact, streaming into Chance like a genie in a bottle, only in reverse. And it was a fingertip, not a spout.

I wasn’t given the opportunity to watch for long, because Morty pushed my own gift closer until we touched, and then the same thing happened. He folded in on himself until he was nothing more than a swirling vortex of energy, like wisps of white mist that I sucked into me without further fanfare. It was quick, over in an instant, but I felt the barrage of his memories as he attempted to fight the pull of my own energy. It was a short battle, one that I won easily, but I didn’t want his memories. I didn’t want to experience the evil he had spread throughout his life.

With Bianca, she had been kind. Good. Her memories were welcome, and I’d accepted them out of respect for her and her sacrifice. This guy... he wasn’t warm like she was. He felt slimy. Sickly. Poisonous. I knew that if I ever tapped into his consciousness, I wouldn’t ever be the same again. So, with great effort, I constructed a wall between us. It made his passage into me more difficult, like trying to suck a drink through an obstructed straw. It hurt, and my shadows whipped about me as the pain tried to take over. It dropped me to my knees, but I bit back the scream that threatened to force itself from my throat and took it. I would rather have a short

moment of physical pain than an eternity of this fucker's memories plaguing me like persistent nightmares I would never be rid of.

I grunted as the pain sharpened for a fraction of a second, and then sagged when it ended. I felt both exhausted from the ordeal and reenergised at the same time, and I tilted my head up from where I knelt to see how Chance was doing. Alarm shot through me when I saw him floating horizontally above his grave, a few feet in the air. Air which swirled around him, sucking in one small tendril of shadow. Then another. And then another, until there were enough to cover him in a protective sphere.

Blake and Dakota rushed past, though I didn't spare them a second glance. The wind was whipping around them so harshly that they had to push through it to get back inside, but I couldn't bring myself to care that what was happening was affecting the living realm so intensely. Chance's eyes were closed, his face slack. He was unconscious, which was not a natural state to be in after death. Sleep's purpose was to mend the damage done to the body during the day, but we no longer had physical bodies to heal.

'He's okay,' Morty said, closer than I expected him to be. He placed a steady hand on my shoulder, which I covered with my own.

'Did this happen to me?'

'Yes. Though I'm sure the memories you received were a lot more pleasant than the ones he's currently experiencing.'

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My heart clenched, afraid for him. He didn't deserve to live the life of a rapist, especially one that targeted children. Even if those memories weren't his own, I remembered how Bianca's felt as they twisted with mine. I couldn't tell whose memories were whose until I woke up again.

'It will take some time for him to complete the transformation. Perhaps it would be prudent to use that time to test your new strength.' Morty's words made sense, but that didn't mean I wanted to hear them. The thought of leaving Chance alone to go through this wasn't an option, but it didn't have to be.

I tore my eyes away from the swirling black mass of writhing shadows that were slowly creeping closer to Chance's prone form, compressing around him like they were trying to tether themselves to his soul.

That was exactly what they were doing, I realised in awe.

There were no shadows obscuring Mortimer from my sight. His handsome face was bared for me to see, his strong body on full display. He was naked, his cock jutting out like an expectant friend eager to greet me after years apart. I arched a brow, amused at his offering, but that amusement quickly shrivelled up when my gaze met his.

Dark eyes bore down on me with an intensity that felt almost too much to bear. He wasn't joking around. He wasn't hiding behind his shadows. He was showing me exactly who he was beneath the surface.

He was offering himself to me.

I've brought gifts.

No, not just me. Chance may not be able to see him right now, but this offering was for the both of us. He was proving his worth, stripping himself bare and revealing himself in the most vulnerable way he could. His cock was hard, but it wasn't begging to be touched. It was a message. A silent, beautiful declaration.

I rose, levitating higher so we were on the same level, and met his eyes with an intensity of my own. Then, I slanted my lips over his and sealed my acceptance of him with a kiss.

Chapter 19

Dakota

As soon as we were back inside his murder house, Blake and I both tried to fix our dishevelled appearances. I was able to smooth down my clothes and my hair with ease, but I couldn't stop shaking. I felt it. Felt them. Something had happened, and Chance and Kali were involved.

I just knew.

Blake wrapped an arm around my shoulders and guided me to the kitchen table, where he sat me down. 'Fuck, baby, you're shivering. Just sit tight. I'll put on some tea.'

I kept my eyes on him as he pulled out a kettle, filled it in the sink, then set it to boil on the stove. He pulled out two mugs and stuffed them with tea bags. They were generic black things that mirrored the complete lack of emotion he had so successfully hidden until now.

Everything in this place was just... off, like something wasn't right. It was like the house itself was whispering its secrets, angry at how deeply it had been desecrated by the evil residing within. Like it, too, wanted justice.

When Blake had first called, I hadn't picked up. I'd panicked and dropped my phone, cracking the screen in the process, but I didn't care. That was fixable. Blake wasn't. Mikey had been the one to calm me down yet again, then he'd convinced me to contact the police and clue them in. Rhodes had mentioned that the first officer who had spoken to him, Detective DeLuca, was the one who was looking into Blake, that he was taking this investigation seriously. The other officers were merely called out to the scene and hadn't found anything, which wasn't helpful. They needed someone on the inside to get them the evidence they required to put him away.

So, I'd called Detective DeLuca with the number Rhodes had been given, and we'd set up a meeting. He came over to the house, and the four of us sat down together to discuss what to do next. DeLuca had informed us that his partner had received a mysterious note that had appeared out of nowhere on her desk, and that he hadn't heard from her since she decided to look into it. The general consensus was that Blake either had her or he had killed her when he realised she was onto him. If she was still alive, action needed to be taken soon before that changed.

That was when we'd come up with a plan. I needed to keep up the pretence of a spurned wife, but give him hope that we could fix our marriage before it fell into shambles. I would keep an eye out for anything suspicious, search for any sign of where he could be keeping the women he took. Or where he killed them. Detective DeLuca suspected he would be using the same space for both.

He sat beside me when I called Blake back and instructed me on what to say and what to do, and when Blake invited me over to his secret murder house, I reluctantly agreed.

The only thing that kept one foot moving in front of the other was that this wasn't just about me. I was in danger, and Blake needed to be behind bars where he couldn't hurt anyone else, but it was more than that. It was justice for Kali. For Chance. For all those women he had kidnapped and murdered, stealing them from their loved ones forever.

It was those thoughts that gave me the strength to keep going, to see this through.

What I hadn't expected was how hard it was. Obviously, I knew this wasn't going to be a walk in the park, but I hadn't anticipated how it would feel. I was angry with Blake. My heart was broken, smashed into a million pieces that I knew would never be whole again. There were too many shards, the puzzle too great to ever complete.

But what hurt the most was how much I wanted to believe him. When he explained why he had the house and why he'd kept it a secret, it all sounded so simple, so believable, and I had almost caved. But then I saw her again. It was just a glimpse, a reflection in the glass of a picture frame hanging on the wall behind Blake's head, but she was right there.

It brought everything back into startling clarity, and I pulled up my big girl panties and did what needed to be done. Now, sitting at the table while he fetched me some tea because he thought I was cold, my heart clenched again. Grief threatened to consume me. Rage roared inside my veins. It was all a fucking lie, and I hated that I still loved him.

It wasn't something I could turn off at the top of a hat. And, unfortunately, those feelings brought a desire to bury my head in the sand, to ignore everything I had learned and pretend that everything was normal. That he loved me.

But I'd seen that dead look in his eyes. His smile might have reached them on a surface level, but now that I knew where to look and what to look for, there was no

hiding the cold, dead emptiness she hid inside.

This was a man who did not feel. It was a mask. An act. A character he played.

My husband wasn't real.

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I had fallen for the lie, and now I was mourning the loss of a man who had never even existed. It was like falling for a loveinterest in a book, only worse, because this wasn't a book. This was real life,mylife, and I couldn't just pick up another book and find a new character to escape in.

I was alone. I had always been alone. And that was the most painful part to accept. I thought I had found my happily ever after, my Prince Charming who would whisk me away to a life of love and wonder and adventure. Instead, it was like I'd eaten the fruit and drank the wine, only now the veil had been pulled away from my eyes and I could see it for what it truly was: rotten and stale, covered in maggots and mould.

I wanted to throw up.

A high-pitched keening noise dragged me out of my head and back into the hell I was currently living in. Blake quickly removed the kettle from the heat and poured the boiling water into the mugs. He placed one in front of me, and I reached out my hands to warm them on the heat it offered. I wasn't cold because of the temperature; I was cold because there was nothing left in my life to keep me warm.

The mug burned my palms. I didn't bother to move them.

'Kota, babe, are you okay?' Blake asked, the false concern making me want to scream. But I didn't. I tilted my lips up into an impersonation of a smile and forced out the biggest lie of them all.

'I'm fine.'

I couldn't tell if he believed me or not, but he seemed to accept the answer because he moved on like nothing had even happened.

'So, what do you think of the place? It's great, right? Cosy, with all this land, and the woods, and the river. Isn't it perfect?'

A perfect cover.

'Sure. It's nice.'

'Maybe we could vacation here this winter or something. You should see it with the fireplace on. We could set up a bonfire out back and make s'mores, then we could spend the night in front of the fire, building up a heat of our own.' He winked suggestively, and I had to actively fight the urge to toss the hot liquid in his face.

I swallowed down the bile that rose up before I answered. 'I think that sounds lovely.'

Was my tone too dull? Could he tell I was lying? Did he even care?

I was fucking this up. I couldn't afford to screw up our chances before I got the evidence DeLuca needed to put him away. I hadn't seen anything that could lead to somewhere he could keep someone prisoner. I hadn't heard a peep from anyone else. No screams, no scratching, or banging, or pleading for help. If there was someone here, they were so well hidden I wasn't sure I would be able to find them in time. I had the worst feeling that in order to get anywhere, I would need to keep putting myself in harm's way and stay the night. The other problem with that was if there was someone trapped here, Blake wouldn't be seeing that they were fed while I was around.

I needed to call DeLuca and ask him what to do. I didn't think I could make that

decision myself.

I was saved the trouble of trying to figure out how to do that without Blake noticing when my phone rang, making me jump. I got up to grab my purse from where I'd left it by the door, and pulled out my phone. Mikey's name flashed on the screen, and I answered before I could think better of it.

'Mikey? Is everything okay?'

'You should get back here, Kota. It's Rhodes.'

My heart dropped into my ass so fast it almost dragged me down with it. 'I'm on my way.'

'What's going on?' Blake asked, joining me in the entryway.

'I've been staying with Rhodes,' I told him, panic infusing in my voice.

He frowned. 'Who?'

'The guy who owns the campsite. Chance and the others hung around his place for a while for their investigation. Something about a lot of activity in the woods behind his house. But Rhodes has cancer, and he's dying. When everyone left to go back home, I stayed behind to take care of him because he doesn't really have anyone else. He doesn't have much time left.'

'And Mikey,' he said in a dangerous tone. I thought he might have been trying to seem jealous, and there was a definite possessiveness as he glared me down, but it wasn't out of love. No, he was worried someone else might be trying to move in on what he considered belonged to him, and he wasn't going to tolerate that.

It was a reaction I had seen from him before, but back then I thought he really was just jealous. Now I knew better, it scared me. He was dangerous. Unpredictable. I had to tread carefully here, or else I could endanger Mikey by accident.

‘Mikey stayed behind because he’s waiting for Chance,’ I said, doing my best to hide the way my voice quivered on his name.

‘Oh. Where did Chance go?’

You know exactly where he went, you sick bastard, I wanted to scream at him. Instead, I forced my shoulders to lift in a shrug. ‘I don’t know. Something about following a lead.’

‘Well, I’m sure he’ll be back soon, then you can go home.’

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Right. Home. With him. Fuck.

‘Anyway,’ I said, backing away. I hoped it looked like I was just eager to get back to my dying friend and not that I was running from him. The last thing I wanted was for him to take chase. Monsters did that, right? Chased their prey?

Like hell was I going to be his prey.

‘I need to get back. Something’s wrong with Rhodes.’

He looked like he wanted to argue, but then he pasted on his most agreeable smile. ‘I’ll come with you.’

‘Oh, that’s not necessary,’ I tried to protest, but he wasn’t having it.

‘No, if your friend is dying, you should have the support you need. I’ll be right with you from here on out, honey. I promise, I’m not going anywhere again.’

Fuck. Shit. This was not in the plan.

But what choice did I have?

‘Okay,’ I agreed, shooting him what I hoped came across as a sad but grateful smile.

‘Lead the way,’ he said, ushering me out the door. When he locked up behind us, just before the door closed, I saw something. Just a glimpse. It could have been nothing, but it could have been everything. Scuff marks on the floor by a large bookcase that

covered an entire wall. Floor to ceiling. But it was a little too big for the scant number of books and trinkets that lined its shelves.

Had he pushed it in front of something? Was that where he was hiding the detective?

Was that where he killed them?

When Blake took my hand in his, it didn't feel like the romantic gesture it used to be. It felt like he was holding me in place, his grip the shackles around my wrist that kept me an unwitting prisoner. Those same fingers that sliced into people, that stole their lives, and god only knew what else, felt like burning coals of doom. It didn't bother me before when he was just a surgeon, but now...

I shuddered.

He tugged me closer, wrapping an arm around me and rubbing up and down my free arm to create heat from the friction. It was a fruitless effort. 'You're still cold.'

I snuggled into him, hating the way my body relaxed against his, even if it was just out of habit. 'It's been a long day.'

'I'm here, honey. I know I went a bit MIA, but you have me. I'll always be here for you.'

The promise in his words was meant to be reassuring, but after everything I had learned, it took on a menacing tone.

When the glowing red eyes peered out at me from the shadows of the trees, I couldn't decide which monster was worse. The creatures of the night that stalked me every move, or my husband.

Chapter 20

Rhodes

I was drifting.

It was calm here. Peaceful. Quiet.

I wanted to stay.

The switch-up was immediate. Once that decision was made, everything changed. I felt the snap of the string that tethered my soul to my body. I felt the sheer relief of releasing my hold on the living realm, and the warm acceptance of the realm of the dead as it welcomed me home.

More importantly, I felt strong again. No longer did my sickness drag me down. No longer was I bound to my bed, unable to move. I felt lighter. Brighter.

I knew it was so cliché to say it, but even though I had just died, I had never felt more alive.

Sounds rushed through my ears with startling clarity. Scents invaded my senses with a strength that almost knocked me off my feet. I could feel the warmth of the sun as it cast its rays over my skin. I could taste the sweet cleanliness in the air. And the sights were spectacular. Colours so vibrant and full that it took my brain a moment to process the sheer beauty of it all.

Yet, when I looked around, it was to see the familiar sight of my bedroom. I was still home, but things weren't as I left them. My body lay empty and unmoving beneath me, surrounded by people bustling about. Davey was in the corner speaking with Jessica. Mikey was there, too, but he looked tense. I saw why when my gaze caught

on Dakota. She had been such a blessing in my last moments, caring for me in a way no one had since before my parents got sick. But it was the man standing beside her who made me freeze.

Blake.

He was here. In my room. With Dakota.

He was staring down at my corpse with a dead expression. There was no emotion there, just emptiness that flared every instinct inside of me. His hand was wrapped tightly around Dakota's like he was holding her hostage, and he kept darting his gaze to where Mikey sat in the chair in the corner, like he was preparing to start a brand new hunt, and Mikey was his prey. With the way Mikey kept stealing no-so-surreptitious glances at Dakota, I got the feeling Blake was considering using her as bait.

He needed to leave. Now.

I surged forward, ready to physically drag him from my house if I needed to, but got the shock of the century when instead of my hands landing on him, they went straight through. I tumbled down, down, down, through the floor, passing through the bottom storey, and ended up in the crawlspace beneath the house.

'Well, that was fun,' a light, lyrical voice teased from behind. I whipped around, and there she was.

'Kali!' I grinned, more than happy to see her.

'Hey, Rhodes. Sorry about your death.'

I waved her condolences away. 'Don't be. I've been waiting for it to happen so I can

do this.'

Then, without any preamble, I threw my arms around her smaller frame and gave her the biggest hug ever. The very hug I had dreamed of for weeks now.

She chuckled, her arms lifted to wrap around me and return the embrace. 'You're feeling better, then?'

'Much,' I mumbled into her hair. Fuck, she smelled good. Like ice cream on a chilly winter's night. It always tasted better in the winter, for some reason. 'This helps.'

I felt her smile against my chest. 'Glad I could help.'

'I'm so glad I can finally touch you,' I said, sighing happily into the embrace.

'Okay, okay,' another voice said, and glanced up to find Chance stalking towards me. 'Break it up, bud. That's my woman, you know.'

I didn't listen to him. I was happy that he and Kali seemed to have found each other again, the right way this time, but I wasn't letting her go. She belonged right here in my arms.

'Uh... Rhodes?' she called out, her voice muffled by the way her face was shmooshed against my chest.

'Yeah?'

'You gonna let go?'

'No.'

She huffed like she was annoyed, but her arms tightened, pulling me closer. I grinned at Chance, but he just rolled his eyes and joined the hug.

‘Oh, hell yeah,’ I beamed. ‘Group hug!’

Chance’s rumbling chuckle vibrated through us all, followed by Kali’s squeal when he lifted us into the air, squishing her between us.

When he put us back down, I reluctantly released her and stepped back into Chance’s embrace, leaning against him while he wrapped his arms around her from behind.

‘I hope your passing was smooth and painless,’ he told me, and my smile immediately fell from my face.

‘It was peaceful. But yours wasn’t, was it?’ I wasn’t a question.

‘Not particularly, no.’

‘You can move freely,’ Kali commented, eyeing me with a scrutiny I was all too eager to welcome. So much so that I lifted my arms, struck a pose, and did a little spin.

She whistled. ‘Nice.’

‘I’m feeling a bit left out now,’ Chance pouted, but it was all in good fun.

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‘Nah, man. I’m sexy as fuck, but you’re next level,’ I told him, and his responding grin was blinding.

‘Damn right.’

‘Okay, you two. Morty’s waiting on us.’

I blinked. ‘Who the fuck is Morty?’

Chance smirked and jabbed a finger into her side, tickling her. ‘Her second boyfriend.’

I was already shaking my head in denial. ‘No way. I’m boyfriend number two. Right, Kali? Tell him.’

They shared a loaded look, and I was pleasantly surprised that I could understand what was being said in the silence. Kali was blushing, which looked like strawberry sauce drizzled over her pale, creamy features, and I wanted to lick it off to see if it tasted as sweet as I imagined. Chance, though, he smug. His look screamed I told you so, and Kali wacked him half-heartedly on his bicep.

‘Oh, shut up.’

‘Iamboyfriend number two, right?’

Her gaze found mine, suddenly vulnerable and a little nervous. She was so fucking adorable. ‘I’m totally keeping you,’ she told me, a cheeky grin lifting up her plump

pink lips.

I was in front of her in the blink of an eye. ‘And I’m totally going to kiss you now.’

Neither one of them protested when I lowered my face. My lips claimed hers in a passionate kiss that she returned with just as much vigour. Her sweet little body ground against mine, and I realised Chance was pushing his hips into hers, getting off on watching us together.

That, in turn, sent me into a head-spiral of lust. My cock rose, aching in its stiffness, and I dry-humped her like a fucking animal. I had waited weeks for this. Fucking weeks. I’d had to die just to get a single taste of her, and now that I had, I wasn’t holding back. She was it for me. I was hers. I knew this with all the certainty in the world.

Was it insane? Probably. But who the fuck cared? This woman was mine, and I was claiming her before anyone else tried to take their piece. Three boyfriends, and I had yet to meet the second, but if he was good enough to win her over, then I liked him already.

When she moaned into my mouth, I couldn’t take it a second longer. I had to have her, and I had to have her now.

But Chance yanked her away from me, my lips momentarily kissing air where they were once moulded to hers. My eyes snapped open, and I glared at the man for daring to put a stop to where that was leading.

‘What the fuck, man?’

‘Morty.’

‘Oh, shit,’ Kali said breathlessly. ‘We need to go. Morty’s kind of... um...’

‘A psychopath that happens to be in love with our girl here, but that love doesn’t necessarily extend to us,’ Chance finished for her, levelling me with a pointed look. I quickly got the hint.

‘Right. Introductions first, then fucking. Got it. Let’s go.’

He was shaking his head when I zoomed up through the ceiling and ended up in my living room. Chance and Kali were quick to follow, and they led me outside to where another man was waiting. A man covered in swirling shadows with a glare fixed on his black, bottomless pits that passed as eyes. He was attractive in the way a moth might be attracted to aflame. Common sense said stay away, but there was something about him that drew you in anyway, even against your better judgment.

I could totally see why Kali wanted him, not to mention the benefits of having someone like him on your side. Talk about a secret weapon.

‘Thanks,’ I whispered to Chance from the corner of my mouth, and he chuckled under his breath, amused, yet there was an undertone of tension that told me if this guy didn’t like me, I was no matter how hard I kicked and screamed in protest.

‘Don’t thank me yet.’

Yeah, that didn’t sound good for me at all.

Chapter 21

Mortimer

And there he was. The bane of my fucking existence. The one that started it all.

Kali and Chance were leading him right to me, and I couldn't help but take him in. He looked different from when I last saw him. He had lost some weight, but he was still trim and looked strong. Stronger than he had any right to look after he'd just died of cancer.

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What I didn't understand was how he was still here. I had watched countless individuals succumb to illnesses, terminal or otherwise, and none of them stuck around. Their spirits moved onto a different plane, one where they could find peace. Murder victims such as myself, Kali, and Chance were stuck in this particular plane because it was the closest one to the living realm, and afforded us the best opportunity to take our peace for ourselves. Most people called it Limbo. I just called it home.

The puppy bounded over, his excitement over being dead baffling, but there all the same. I glared at him, willing him to back off before he came any closer, but, of course, he didn't heed my silent warning. Instead, he shoved his hand towards me and grinned.

'Hi. You must be Morty, Kali's other boyfriend. I'm Rhodes. It's nice to meet you.'

I batted his hand away with a shadow, sneered at him, then shoved him out of the way so I could check over my ghost girl. She looked radiant as always, her snowy features glowing beneath the midday sun. She looked like an ice sculpture that was ready to melt, but kept her form out of sheer spite.

Fuck, she was stunning.

When she looked up at me with those big blue eyes, I was the one that fucking melted.

'Hey,' she greeted, her voice soft, a tender tone that spoke to the blackened heart inside my chest.

‘Hi,’ I said back, then snatched her from Chance’s arms and into my own, crashing our lips together in a ferocious kiss. A claiming kiss. The puppy might want her, but he needed to know his place.

We were not friends.

My ghost girl tangled her fingers in my hair to pull me impossibly closer, the kiss turning bruising while she moaned into my mouth. A groan rumbled in my chest, and it was quickly mirrored by another behind me. I didn’t bother to check which man was enjoying the show. In this moment, Kali was mine, and mine alone.

‘Fuck, Morty,’ she panted breathlessly against my lips, her cool breath deliciously sweet on my tongue.

‘I’m going to fuck you,’ I said, the only warning I was willing to give. ‘Right here, right now, in front of those men who think they have the right to touch you, too. I’m going to show them exactly who the fuck you belong to, ghost girl.’

She tipped her head back, bearing her neck as she tugged at my hair to fuse our mouths back together. Our tongues tangled, fighting for dominance that we both knew I would win. I dragged my lips away from hers to nibble my way down her jaw. I paused at her throat, scraping my teeth over the soft flesh that begged to be marked, and, without warning, I bit down as hard as I could. She yelped as my teeth broke skin, but she didn’t bleed. Shadows swarmed the wound, knitting it back together, but as mine met hers, they left a black mark where my teeth had been. A visual claim that made my soul sing and my cock weep.

‘More,’ she demanded, tugging at my hair once again, only this time it was to pull me away. ‘Fuck me, Morty. I want it hard and dirty. Make me scream.’

‘Jesus Christ,’ the puppy said, his voice dripping in lust and awe. That’s right, pup.

Watch how she falls apart for me.

The clothes she'd made appear earlier suddenly dissipated at her whim, and the ones she'd insisted I wear were quick to follow. I needed us skin to skin, every inch of her milky white flesh rubbing against mine.

'I don't want to wait,' she said. 'I want you so deep inside me I'll feel you there forever.'

My grin was vicious. Feral. Completely unhinged. But who was I to deny such a delicious request? 'As you wish.'

I plunged into her in one hard thrust, both of us revelling in the pain the intrusion caused her. She was wet enough to take it, though, so I pulled out and thrust in again, this time even harder. Our pubic bones banged together painfully as I set a punishing pace, and she met me thrust for thrust.

Our moans and groans mingled in the air between us, our bodies building electricity that shot out in the form of our shadows. Mine clutched at every inch of her, while hers did the same to me. When I used one to tease her rear hole, she bit my bottom lip with a smirk and sent hers to do the same to me.

My pace hitched as the sudden sensation, and I was momentarily shocked at her bold move. No one had ever touched me there, not even when I was alive. It felt... good. Surprisingly so.

I wanted more.

'That's it,' I growled into her throat, flicking my tongue out to taste the mark I had left behind. 'Fuck my ass while I fuck you.'

‘Oh, fuck,’ she moaned, and eagerly complied. Her shadows teased my untouched entrance, stroking and flicking at the hole that had never been open for anyone but her. Mine copied her motions. Each brush against my asshole I matched with one against hers. And when she tested the waters and dipped one just barely inside me, we both released a shuddering groan. It pushed in further, so I pushed mine further into hers, and together we set a slow, yet no less punishing pace as our shadows joined the fun.

It was an odd sensation, having something inside me, but I fucking loved it. Her shadows hit a spot I never knew existed, and I cried out from the bolt of pure pleasure that quickly spread through the rest of my body. Her sounds became more frantic, her shadows matching her energy, and I was suddenly struggling to keep up.

She was fucking relentless.

‘This is the hottest thing I have ever seen,’ the puppy commented again, and this time he received an agreeable grunt from Chance.

‘Deeper,’ I demanded, and Kali, eyes half-lidded with lust and anticipation, both of us teetering on the edge, complied. She thrust so far inside me her shadows thickening to spread my hole even wider, that my hips lost their rhythm and my shadows took on a life of their own as they fucked her as in tandem with my cock inside her tight little cunt.

‘Spread her for us,’ Chance suddenly demanded. ‘Let us see you fucking both her holes.’

His words were a challenge, one I was more than willing to meet. I withdrew from her pussy, but kept my shadows in her asshole hers remained deep inside me. I flipped her around so that her back was to my front, then kicked her legs open wider so they could better see what I was doing.

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My lust kicked up a notch at the idea of them watching me bring her pleasure, that they could see just how thoroughly I could wreck her.

This new position made for new rules. With my shadows still inside her ass, but her pussy now at the wrong angle for my cock, I added my throbbing member to her ass and left her pussy empty, enjoying the way she whined in protest.

‘I need you to fill me. Please,’ she begged. Fuck, she begged so prettily.

My gaze caught on the pup’s and an idea formed. One that I should have been upset about, but instead, impossibly, it turned me on even more.

‘Come here, pup,’ I ordered, and he hopped to comply so quickly I couldn’t help but smirk. ‘Fuck her pussy while I fuck her ass. I want to feel your cock sliding against mine while we fuck her together.’

‘Oh, shit. You can’t say shit like that man. I’ll blow my load before I can put it inside her.’

Chance chuckled, moving to stand beside us. He met my gaze with a determined one of his own. He wasn’t backing down, and he wasn’t about to be sidelined. Not when we were all about to come together for the first time.

‘Fuck her mouth,’ I ordered, and he smirked.

‘Oh, I intend to.’

So that was how it was going to be, huh? Two brats. Strangely, it was the puppy who was the only one being good. Interesting.

‘Oh, fuck yes. I want you all inside me. Now,’ Kali demanded, her body quaking against mine. She plunged those shadows of hers deeper inside me again, twisting them around so they continuously hit that fucking spot that had me seeing stars. My eyes rolled back in my head, and I released a groan of pure, unrestrained pleasure.

‘Do that again.’

Her answering chuckle was husky. ‘Gladly.’

Our sounds of pleasure were joined by the puppy’s as he slid home inside her. The tight squeeze his cock created felt incredible. Almost too incredible. And when he started moving, Kali and I both melted beneath him.

Chance chose that moment to slide his cock past Kali’s lips, cutting off her scream of pleasure as he slowly inserted himself all the way to the hilt. Her throat bulged with the intrusion, but she seemed to enjoy the way she began bucking between us and desperately suck on the cock in her mouth was any indication.

‘I’m not going to last,’ the puppy informed us through clenched teeth, fighting hard to stave off his impending orgasm. ‘Holy shit, this feels too good. You’re squeezing me so tight, baby. And I can feel Morty’s cock scraping against mine through your wall.’

Chance picked up the pace of his own thrusts, his brows pulling together as he, too, fought to drag this out for as long as possible.

Kali wasn’t having it, though. I could feel her start to flutter around me and the pup, close to losing it herself. She pulled away from Chance’s throbbing length long enough to speak. ‘I’m so close. I want all three of you to come with me. Come inside

me.'

Then she sucked him back down her throat with so much force, Chance cried out and spilled his seed straight into her stomach. She took another of her shadows and twisted it around the puppy's body, flicking at his hole while she plunged in and out of mine.

Suddenly, Kali clamped down on our cocks so hard that we were trapped inside her, and I fell apart at the same time as the pup, both of us spilling inside her as she milked us dry with wave after wave of her own orgasm.

We collapsed in a pile, each of them falling on top of me, but I didn't mind as much as I thought I would. With Kali pressed against me, it felt... right. Like they were meant to be here, too. She was the sun, and we were merely planets in her orbit.

'Fuck me,' the pup said breathlessly.

'Pretty sure that's what I just did,' Kali replied sarcastically, and it tore a laugh from my chest.

'Get off,' I ordered the men, though I kept my arms around Kali when she tried to move, too. 'Not you.'

'I thought you were going to show them who I belonged to,' she teased, drawing another dark chuckle from the recesses of my being. Only she could succeed in bringing light back into my dark existence.

'He did,' Chance answered for me. 'You belong to all of us, goddess. He just needed to figure it out for himself.'

She tipped her head back to look at me, a question in her eyes. I didn't answer, but I

didn't deny his words, either.

She pressed a kiss underneath my jaw, then nipped at my chin before pulling away. I was reluctant to let her go, but the animalistic part of me was satiated for the time being. I felt solid in what we had, in my claim over her, and I was no longer threatened by the two men standing before me, cocks still hard and jutting out so close to my face that I had to resist the urge to snap my teeth at them.

'Come on,' she said, her shadows swarming around her for a moment before they parted to reveal the clothes she had conjured. I didn't complain, however, because even clothed, she presented a mouthwatering sight. A black jumpsuit clung to every dip and valley, emphasised every sensual curve, and I couldn't stop staring.

'Fuck, goddess. You can't wear that and not expect us to fuck you again,' Chance admonished, though there was no heat in his tone. At least none of the angry variety. There was plenty of lust.

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‘You are the most stunning creature I have ever laid eyes on,’ the pup said, completely in awe of our ghost girl.

I froze.

Ours.

I tested the word around in my head before deciding that I liked it. Yes, she was ours.

But no more. Two other men were more than enough. Anyone else who tried to get close to her would find themselves wiped from existence before they could even blink.

‘Where are we going?’ Chance asked as we pulled ourselves together.

She jerked her thumb in the direction of the pup’s house. ‘Back inside where all the fun is.’

All three of us stopped in our tracks at her words, and it took her a second to notice we weren’t following like obedient dogs. Hell, even the actual obedient dog of the group was scowling at her just as hard as the rest of us.

‘What?’ she asked, brows pulling together in confusion.

‘Are you saying we aren’t fun enough for you?’ the puppy asked, mock hurt colouring his tone.

She giggled. ‘Well, if the shoe fits.’

I growled, stalking closer while Chance matched my pace on the other side. ‘Was what we just did not enough for you, brat?’

She shivered beneath our collective wrath, but it wasn’t out of fear. No, she was enjoying this. Teasing us. ‘I don’t know. Was it?’

My palm hit her ass with a resounding smack that echoed through the open space. She gasped, then moaned, and practically melted beneath my hand. Then, I turned back to face the other two men who had somehow wormed their way into my world, a malicious smirk curling up my lips.

‘It looks like we need to up our game,’ I told them. ‘Our bratty little ghost girl wants more.’

‘Oh, you’re in for it now,’ the pup teased, and it broke through the rising tension. She giggled, but she was wary now as her eyes darted between us. She would learn soon enough what it meant to poke the bear. I was more than up for the challenge, and so were the others.

Chapter 22

Kali

Despite the most indescribably delicious ache throbbing in every part of my body, I had a job to do.

A job that was well overdue.

The guys followed behind me when the mood turned from playful and sensual back

to serious. They could sense my need for vengeance, and they were supporting me in that quest. It wasn't just mine, either. Chance deserved to take his pound of flesh, too, and I was more than willing to let him join in.

I had no set plan, and I didn't think we really needed one. With the police no longer an option, I wanted to fuck with him. I wanted to make him feel the fear he'd made us feel when he cut our lives short far too soon. I wanted him to look me in the eyes and know that he'd fucked him.

I wanted him to fucking cower beneath our wrath the way he'd made so many women plead and beg for mercy, only to be denied for the sake of sating his sick desires.

'What shall we do first?' Rhodes asked, rubbing his hands together with a wicked grin that made him look like a cartoon villain.

'Get Dakota out of the line of fire,' I said, and that dimmed whatever amusement he felt over the situation. I enjoyed his bubbly personality, but there was a time and a place for it, and this wasn't it.

'Right. How are we going to do that?'

We all turned to watch her cry on Blake's shoulder as Rhodes' body was carted away by the coroner. Mikey was close by, looking very much like he wanted to tear her away from him and comfort her himself, but he wisely held back.

'I don't know, yet,' I admitted.

'What about DeLuca?' he asked, and we all turned confused eyes on him.

'Who's DeLuca?' Chance asked.

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‘The detective. The partner of the cop Blake kidnapped.’

Morty snorted. ‘That’s always how it ends. The cops catch the scent, dig a little deeper, and the killer starts to make mistakes. He’s a fucking idiot for kidnapping a cop. He should’ve just accepted that his run was over.’

‘Seen a lot of serial killers, have you?’ Rhodes asked, half joking, half not.

Morty shrugged off the question, focusing his attention back on the gathering of living people milling about in front of us.

‘Okay, then,’ Rhodes trailed off, shifting to put me between him and my most surly boyfriend.

That seemed like the wrong word for what this was between us. Boyfriends were for the living, for those dating around with the intent to settle down and start a family. These three men surrounding me surpassed that. They meant more from the very beginning. Chance and I had been building towards this for so long, it was a wonder we hadn’t given in before now. Morty and I were kindred spirits, choosing one another because there really wasn’t any other choice. We were inevitable. And Rhodes? Fuck, he was just a ray of sunshine that balanced us out. With my thirst for vengeance, Morty’s obsessive tendencies, and Chance’s possessive overprotectiveness, we all needed someone like Rhodes. He rounded us out, turning us from a chaotic mishmash of lust and violence into something beautiful, something in tune. With him, we made sense. He was the reminder we needed that there was more to exist for once this was all over.

‘What can this detective do to help us?’ I asked, unsure where he was going with this.

‘We can head on over to the station and enlist his help, or something. Right?’

‘Um...’

‘I already did that,’ Morty stated, stunning me so much that I actually took a step back.

‘What?’

‘I was the one who left the note.’

‘No way. Really?’ Rhodes bounced excitedly on the tips of his toes. ‘That’s so cool! You’ll have to teach me how that works. I haven’t figured out how to not fall through things yet.’

‘You are not like us. You will have to find your own way,’ Morty told him so bluntly that Rhodes flinched like he’d been slapped.

‘What the fuck is that supposed to mean?’ he demanded, clearly hurt by Morty’s dismissal of him. In fact, I was about to lay into him myself, but then he explained.

‘You weren’t murdered. Your death was a natural consequence of your illness, and it was your time. Our deaths were abrupt, violent, and an act of betrayal. We were not meant to die, which is why we are stuck here in Limbo.’

‘Limbo,’ Chance repeated, the epiphany hitting us probably harder than it should have.

‘So... how am I here, if I’m not supposed to be?’ Rhodes asked, and it was a valid

question that I wanted the answer to, as well.

‘I don’t know. By all rights, you should have passed on to a different realm, further away from the living,’ Morty answered, but he seemed to be getting bored with this line of questioning, because he stalked away to the other side of the room.

‘Well, damn. That just gave me more questions than answers,’ Rhodes mumbled with a pout.

I placed a hand on his arm in an attempt to comfort him, but he grabbed me and pulled me into yet another one of his bear hugs instead.

‘I don’t care why I’m here, because I’m here with you,’ he murmured softly against my hair.

‘I’m glad you’re here, too, Rhodes. I had hoped you would stick around.’

‘Like I could ever leave you. I was yours from the moment I first saw you,’ he said, and I melted into him, winding my arms around his trim waist to squeeze him back.

‘Let’s focus on what we do know,’ Chance said as he slung an arm over both of us, tugging us both into his side. ‘Blake needs to be taken care of, and Dakota needs to be removed somewhere safe so she doesn’t get caught in the crossfire. We can talk to the detective if we need backup from the living, and we can interact with the living realm now that our power has grown.’

‘How’d you grow it?’ Rhodes asked, ever curious.

‘By consuming the souls of the damned,’ Morty answered from across the room, and I snorted at his dramatic response.

‘Wait, really?’

‘Kind of, but it’s a little more complicated than that,’ I told him.

‘Okay. There’s a lot I need to figure out, apparently, but I’m here for it.’

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Chance chuckled and ruffled his hair, earning him a scowl from the youngest of my men.

‘So... what, we divide and conquer?’ I asked.

‘Actually, that might not be the worst idea,’ Chance said, and then we promptly lost him to his thoughts.

‘I can go back to the police station,’ Morty offered. ‘I know where to find the detective.’

‘And then what?’ I asked. ‘To what end?’

‘No, she’s right,’ Chance chimed in again. ‘If we want to fuck Blake over as much as possible, the police are the last thing on the list. If we call them in too soon, we could lose our opportunity to really make my little brother pay.’

My heart clenched with sadness for him when he spat out those words with so much venom that even I felt sick.

‘So we hold off on going to the detective. We just need to figure out how to separate Blake and Dakota, and how to get the cop out of the basement.’

‘The basement?’ Rhodes asked, disappointment twisting his face into a sneer. ‘Seriously? He has a murder basement in his secret murder house? What a fucking cliché.’

‘I know,’ Chance agreed. ‘I was pretty let down when I found out, too. I expected something more... elaborate from him.’

‘I don’t know what you guys are talking about,’ I scoffed. ‘His murder basement is creepy as hell, completely kitted out, and even has a reinforced door. There’s no escaping, you’re stuck down there for days, possibly even weeks with nothing more than the torture tools hanging on the wall to keep you company, a lumpy mattress, and a bucket to shit in. There are no windows. No hope. No nothing except Blake and pain.’

They were silent for a beat as they absorbed the hint of what I’d been through at his hands.

‘I’m sorry, Kali,’ Rhodes said, stroking a hand over my hair. ‘I didn’t mean it like that, and that was super insensitive of me. Forgive me?’

I sighed. My anger wasn’t directed at them. Not really. ‘There’s nothing to forgive. I just...’

‘Need to make him pay for what he’s done,’ Chance finished for me. ‘Yeah. Me, too.’

‘Then let’s stop yapping and get started,’ Morty interrupted, annoyance causing his shadows to flick at the tips like the tails of hundreds and angry cats.

‘Dakota first,’ I reminded him, and though he rolled his eyes at me, he acquiesced.

‘Fine. Where do you want me to take her?’

‘Take her?’

He huffed at my question, but I was still stuck on the fact that he could move entire

people, and up until recently, I struggled with making a breeze. ‘Yes. I am a powerful man, Kali. I can wrap her in my shadows and drag her through the darkness to wherever you choose.’

I blinked, then blinked again, until I finally snapped myself out of it. ‘Uh,’ I stammered. ‘How about we don’t do that?’

He growled out his frustration and threw his hands in the air, his shadows twisting around him like they were preparing to carry out the deed regardless of my decision.

‘I don’t want to scare her any more than necessary. She’s going through enough as it is. We can at least afford her the courtesy of not dragging her around in the shadows. I don’t think she would appreciate that very much.’

‘Fine,’ he snapped, though I could see he saw the reason in my approach.

‘However... if you can do that, maybe we’re focusing on the wrong person?’ I mused out loud.

Chance barked out a laugh. ‘Of course. Why didn’t I think of that?’

‘Uh, care to clue in the rest of us?’ Rhodes prompted, an adorably baffled look on his face that made me want to shower him in kisses.

Later, I promised myself.

‘While I’m considerate of Dakota’s wellbeing, I don’t particularly care about Blake’s,’ I told him.

‘Ah,’ he chuckled, catching on. ‘I like it.’

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I smirked at Morty. 'Care to do the honours?'

His responding smirk was filled with promises of blood and death. 'Gladly,' he said, repeating my own response from when he'd asked me to fuck him deeper. A fire roared throughout my body at the reminder, which must have been his goal because he looked remarkably pleased with himself as he reached out with his shadows towards Blake.

'Where to?' he asked.

'I think the murder basement is a pretty good place,' I mused, looking to Chance for confirmation, which he readily gave.

'Poetic justice,' he said, violence shining through in his stance. He looked ready to pounce on Blake himself when he turned back to face the man in question, but I figured he might enjoy watching this part over participating.

When we were all focused on Blake, Morty finally struck. Blake yelped as his arms were suddenly bound by what to him would have been an invisible force, his face twisting in both confusion and outrage.

'What the fu-'

His words cut off as Morty dragged him through the shadows, his sudden disappearance grabbing the attention of both Dakota and Mikey. They were the only three left in the house after Rhodes' body was removed, and now they were down to two.

‘Holy shit.’ Mikey staggered back, wild eyes scanning the room for any sign of another attack.

Dakota, however, was smart enough to figure it out. ‘K-Kali?’ she stammered. I moved so she could see my reflection in the mirror hanging by the coat rack. Her gaze went straight there, already anticipating where to find me.

Only, I wasn’t the only one she saw.

Tears sprang to her eyes as all three of us lined up for her to see. ‘Chance? Rhodes?’

Mikey let out a shaky breath, tentatively moving to stand beside her and peer into the mirror, but it was obvious straight away that he couldn’t see what she saw. Another mystery that begged to be solved, but would have to wait for another time.

‘Stay there,’ Mikey directed the order to the mirror. ‘Let me go get my spirit box.’

He hurried away, and while I was eager to get back to the murder basement – we were all antsy, if our fidgeting was any indication – we stayed put.

Meanwhile, I tried to smooth out my expression for Dakota’s sake. Her eyes were darting between the three of us with increasing velocity, and I worried she would make herself dizzy.

‘Breathe,’ I said, hoping she could read my lips. She could. She took a deep breath, then another, until she had calmed herself down.

‘What did you do with Blake?’ she asked, but Mikey wasn’t back yet, so we couldn’t answer. Chance held up a finger as if to say Hang on a minute, then we stood around awkwardly while we waited on Mikey.

Chance scooted in closer, resting his chin on my head, then Rhodes took that as his cue to wrap an arm around my waist and press a kiss to my temple. Dakota's eyebrows disappeared beneath her hairline as she took in our dynamic, but then a sweet smile ticked up her lips.

'You're happy?' she asked, and the three of us nodded, our own smiles splitting our faces. The only one missing was Morty, but we would meet up with him as soon as we could.

Mikey finally turned up then, quickly noting how relaxed Dakota was compared to when he left, and it gave him the space to relax as well. Still, his movements were hasty and jerky as he set up the spirit box.

We let Chance speak first, since we knew he was who Mikey needed to hear the most.

'Hey, Mikey. Kota.'

Mikey's inhale was sharp and stilted, like he couldn't quite gasp in enough air, and his airways kept closing up when he tried. 'Chance,' he choked out, tears already spilling over his cheeks.

'Don't be sad for me, Mikey. I'm exactly where I need to be.'

Our friend released a sob that he tried to stifle behind his hand, and Dakota was quick to wrap him in a comforting hug. 'You're w-with K-Kali?' he asked, struggling to push past the urge to keep sobbing.

Chance grinned, even though Mikey couldn't see it. 'In more ways than one, my friend.'

That brought out a watery laugh, and then Dakota told him the rest.

‘Rhodes is with them, too. They’re all together.’

Rhodes let out a noise of protest from the back of his throat. ‘We’re not all together. We’re just all with Kali.’

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‘Oh,’ he said, taken aback, then let out a bark of laughter that bordered on hysterical. ‘Oh, man. That’s... kind of epic. Go Kali.’

I couldn’t help it. I giggled. ‘Thanks, Mikey.’

‘Where’s Blake?’ Dakota finally asked, glancing anxiously over her shoulder like he might appear out of nowhere, just like he’d disappeared.

‘Her other boyfriend took him back to the murder basement,’ Chance explained, and Mikey stammered at the news.

‘Another one? Sheesh, Kali. I think you’re my fucking hero.’

He blushed bright red when Dakota cast him a sidelong look, but he didn’t run away. That was a good sign, right? He needed someone in his corner, especially after losing Chance. He and Ashe were only close because of their connection through Chance, and without him there, I feared they might drift apart. Already, she was nowhere to be seen. Not that I blamed her. She and Gloria had booked it out of her as soon as they caught the first whiff of danger. Good for them.

‘What are you going to do with him?’ Dakota asked, dragging the conversation back on track.

‘Make him pay,’ I said simply. They didn’t need to know that details. That would only haunt them. At least this way, they knew that he would suffer, and that we would ensure he couldn’t hurt anyone ever again.

‘We should really be getting on,’ Chance said, and I agreed. Mikey and Dakota were alive, and they needed to let us go now. They knew we were okay. Happy, even. They knew we were about to get justice from the man who had wronged us all. Except maybe Rhodes. Lucky bastard.

And it was time for us to let them go, too.

‘I miss you guys,’ Mikey blurted. ‘And I love you. You, too, Kali. It’s not been the same without you.’

‘Live your life, Mikey,’ Chance said, his own voice cracking with emotion.

‘And you go live your afterlife.’

We stepped away from the mirror, breaking the connection, and kept our words to ourselves until we were out of range of the spirit box. We made the journey back to Blake’s cabin slowly, keeping the pace like we were taking a leisurely stroll. This was it. This was what I had been waiting for, for seven long years.

It was almost over.

Chapter 23

Kali

Morty was pacing impatiently in front of the house when we arrived.

‘Finally,’ he snipped, then waved offhandedly towards the house. ‘I tied him up so he wouldn’t touch the woman.’

‘Oh, shit. I forgot about her,’ I said sheepishly. ‘We need to let her go before we start.’

She doesn't need to see what's about to happen.'

'I love this whole bloodthirsty but moral thing you've got going on,' Rhodes said, completely serious. 'It's fucking turning me on.'

I laughed.

'Okay, Loverboy. Save it for after,' Chance teased, shoving the younger man in jest.

'Okay, okay. Sheesh.'

Morty turned on his heels and stormed back inside the cabin, and I followed close behind. Chance and Rhodes ribbed each other for another minute before also following, the mood quickly turning far too sombre for jokes.

When I phased through the door, the first thing I noticed was that the bookshelf blocking the door to the basement was still in the way. So, with a mixture of eagerness and trepidation, I sent out my shadows to see if I could pull it away. At first, they simply moved through it like anything else, but then they caught on. I let out a slow breath, concentrating on what I needed to do next. I had practised a little with Morty, but only small things. A stick. A rock. A patch of grass. Nothing this large.

'You've got this,' Chance said, stepping up beside me and sending out his own shadows to assist. Together, we were able to make headway. It was a slow, arduous process, but I was proud of what we were accomplishing. Up until Morty flickered into existence in front of us, impatience twisting his features into a scowl, and moved the thing the rest of the way like it weighed little more than a feather.

'You bastard,' I snarled. 'I had it.'

He seemed to realise his mistake, and his entire demeanour softened. 'Sorry,' he

mumbled. 'I know you had it. Next time, I won't interfere.'

His apology blew the hot air right out of my sails, and my anger deflated. 'It's fine. Thank you for finishing the job. It was taking a while.'

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‘Well, I’m impressed,’ Rhodes chimed in, interrupting the moment with his bright smiles and giddy attitude. ‘But maybe we should table this conversation for after we torture the serial killer, yeah?’

Then Morty produced a key, seemingly out of thin air, and unlocked the door.

Immediately, we were assaulted by the screams and shouts of a rabid Blake, but any satisfaction I felt from it was dimmed by the accompanying whimper of fear. I couldn’t even begin to imagine how terrified the woman must have been. Not only was she trapped down there with a serial killer, but she was surrounded by ghosts that she didn’t know weren’t there to hurt her.

‘Morty, can you get her out, please?’

He grunted his agreement, shot down the stairs, and a second later, the woman appeared at the bottom. She was trembling so hard her knees were knocking together, and she struggled to find purchase on the railing to help her climb the stairs. Morty, seeing the look in my eyes, rolled his before gently lifting the poor woman into his arms. She screamed, and I didn’t blame her, because some invisible dude was hauling her around, but she soon quieted down when she realised we weren’t going to hurt her. Morty placed her just outside the front door, gave her a gentle but insistent nudge, and then promptly ignored her.

She didn’t immediately run away. Instead, she seemed to find her backbone and straightened her spine, her eyes searching for what she wouldn’t find. She came to the right conclusion, however, because she threw out a shaky thank you, and finally stumbled down the driveway and away from the place that had become her own

personal hell.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, enough light streamed through to highlight the glorious sight of Blake shackled to the bed, just like I had been. Just like Bianca, and Chance, and all the others before us. His hands were bound so tightly I could already see the way his hands had turned purple, the circulation cut off enough to cause damage on its own without any interference from us. Perfect.

His lip was split with blood smeared across his cheek, and one look at Morty showed his smug expression. He flexed his fist, and I smirked. Who was I to deny him taking liberties with the piece of shit?

‘Who are you?’ Blake called out, unable to see us but determined to take back the upper hand. He always did need to be in control, and I was enjoying watching him rage at losing it. ‘Show yourself!’

‘Can we?’ I asked Morty, and he nodded.

‘I can. I don’t know about you, but you can try.’

‘How?’ I asked, excitement making me giddy. Finally, after all this time, I could force him to look me in the eyes while he realised that he’d lost.

‘Just focus on your intent. Same as everything else. The shadows will respond, or they won’t. You won’t know until you try.’

I took a deep breath and held Chance’s steady gaze. ‘Okay. Here goes...’

My shadow sprang to action as soon as I projected my thoughts. The next thing I knew, Blake choked on a gasp, his head rearing back in utter shock.

‘Kali?’

I grinned, pleased with myself. I didn’t know how long I could hold it, though, so I decided to make this part quick.

‘Hey, Blake. Thought you got rid of me, huh?’

‘I killed you,’ he stated, confused.

I nodded sagely. ‘You did. And you buried me in the backyard like a dead hamster. How... quaint.’

He flinched as I took a step closer, and I bared my teeth in a vicious grin. ‘This isn’t possible.’

I couldn’t help it. I laughed. It was a deep one from the belly, and it echoed tauntingly around the room. ‘You think you’d know better. Your own brother made a career out of it, after all.’

He snarled. ‘Fuck you, you bitch. I killed you. You can’t do anything to me.’

‘No?’ Another step closer. ‘And how did you get here, then, Blake? Chained yourself in your murder basement, did you?’

He spat, a big glob of saliva hitting me square in the face, then he reared back like he was truly terrified of something. It wasn’t hard to guess what. Both Chance and Morty had made themselves visible, and both of them wore thunderous expressions that promised pain and retribution.

‘No...’

‘Hello, brother,’ Chance spat the word out like it was poison. ‘Oh, how the tables have turned.’

Blake laughed then, the sound completely unhinged. ‘You finally got the girl, did you, Chancie? I bet you think you’ve won, but how can you win anything when you’re dead?’

Chance smiled, slow and deadly, and Blake’s mirth died down to nothing.

‘I think you’ve already figured out the answer to that question, you worthless waste of space.’

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Blake sniffed and turned his face to the wall. 'Get on with it, then. Whatever you want to do. Kill me, if you must. I'm not afraid of death. Clearly, it will only give me the freedom to hunt you down once again.' He turned back to face us, a creepy grin splitting his face. It was like a mockery of everything he had done to make himself appear the perfect man. The doting husband. The attractive doctor. All of it boiled down to this one moment where his mask was finally off, and he was ugly.

'I'm going to enjoy every moment of it. I'm going to make you wish you'd never crossed me. You'll always be looking over your shoulder, because you'll never be rid of me.'

Morty snorted. 'Please. I'm going to enjoy devouring your rotting soul. It might be the most revolting soul I'll consume, but the power you'll give me?' He chuckled. 'I can't fucking wait.'

'Who the fuck are you?' Blake asked, apparently only now noticing him for the first time.

'To a pathetic worm like you? Your worst fucking nightmare. You think you're so big and strong because you played god while you were alive? Well, guess what. When you're dead, I'm the beast you need to watch out for.'

After his speech, I couldn't hold onto the energy anymore, and it snapped back into place, removing me from Blake's sight. Chance followed quickly after, and after one last look filled with all the dark promises, Morty released his hold on the living realm, too.

‘Okay, this is kind of fun to watch,’ Rhodes said. ‘I mean, I know I don’t have a real stake in this, but I’m kinda turned on. Can you make him bleed now?’

I shot him an incredulous look, Chance laughed, and Morty ignored him like he wasn’t even in the room.

‘Okay, okay. I’ll shut up and enjoy the show. Continue.’

‘I didn’t realise you were so... dark,’ I commented lamely.

‘There’s a lot you still get to learn about me, baby. I’m full of surprises.’

‘I don’t fucking doubt it,’ Chance muttered, waved for me to get on with whatever it was I wanted to do to the man that had hurt me so irreparably.

I grinned, my fingers twitching with anticipation as I studied the tools hung on the wall. I picked up Blake’s personal favourite, and my grin widened alongside his eyes. He was finally realising what was happening here, that he no longer held any power.

That we’d won, and he’d lost, and now he was about to pay for his sins.

I breathed my first real breath in so long at the first sound of his screams, peace filling me up, smoothing out all the jagged edges his torment had caused. And with the help of the three men who had come to mean so much to me, who had formed this beautiful, fucked up little family, we slowly cut the cord on Blake Dodd’s life.

His spirit rose above his body like an avenging angel. He didn’t wait to lunge at us, but a deep growl pierced the air, and it didn’t come from any of us.

We all turned to face the open door, and the sight we were greeted with was terrifying in ways I never could have imagined. Three beasts the size of horses stalked down the concrete steps, one after the other, lips pulled back in a feral snarl that revealed row

after row of jagged, yellowed teeth.

But that wasn't what scared me the most.

I stumbled back into Chance, who then fell into Morty, dragging Rhodes with us as we scampered to get away from the searing flames. Because these beasts didn't have fur. No, they were made directly from the pits of hell, the fire so hot I whimpered in pain despite the distance.

But they weren't looking at us.

Their hungry, red, glowing eyes were latched firmly onto Blake's spirit, who was now trembling above his body. He tried to pull away, but he was just as stuck as the rest of us were, his spirit still attached to his bones. He couldn't run even if he'd tried.

The beasts stalked closer, their heat so strong I feared I would combust just from looking upon them, but it was like we weren't even there.

Then, as one, they lunged at Blake, teeth tearing into his skin and snapping bone. We all heard it when they forcefully tore apart the tether that connected him to his body, and then they were dragging him up the stairs, taking turns ripping off chunks of his flesh. And arm here, and hand there. They shredded him as they ran.

But that wasn't the end of it. Just when I thought they would disappear, Blake's agonised screams fading into the distance, they turned around and pinned us with a look that shook me to my fucking core. There was an intelligence there that told me coming across these beasts again would not be in our favour. They were letting us go. They had caught their prey, and they had no need for us.

Finally, fucking finally, they released us from the prison of their hellish eyes, and bounded away on long legs tipped in deadly claws.

‘What. The. Fuck?’

Rhodes. Of course, it was Rhodes who would pluck up enough courage to speak first.

With a sob stuck in my throat, I whipped around to throw my arms around his neck, only to freeze, fear stabbing through me in a way it never had before, not even when Blake had tortured me. Not even when he delivered the final killing blow.

‘What?’ Rhodes asked, his eyes wide with panic. ‘What is it? Kali, baby, you’re freaking me out.’

I couldn’t speak. My throat was too constricted with fear for any noise to escape. Instead, I lifted a shaking finger and pointed at his eyes.

His red, glowing eyes.

Morty, ever the eloquent one, broke the silence this time.

‘Well, I guess that answers that question.’