



# Justice & Liberty

**Author:** *Sam Burns*

**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Jaycie Jones goes where the wind takes her. From the college her childhood best friend dreamed of, to staying in LA for her girlfriend's job, she's always just drifted along.

Eventually, that led to a dead-end retail job, a cheating girlfriend, and now, a crossroads. Her mother died and left everything to her, including a business back where she grew up: South Liberty, Iowa. When she follows the wind there, though, things aren't quite what she expected, from the gorgeous blonde woman she keeps seeing everywhere, to the grimoire among her mother's possessions. Of all the discoveries she could have made about her mom's life, magic was not one she expected.

Her attempt to build a new home is threatened when a friend is accused of murder, and even the town sheriff looks to Jaycie for answers. Can she fix this disaster, or will her small town dreams shatter around her?

Justice & Liberty is a small town cozy mystery starring one confused brand new witch, two ornery familiars, a small town full of weird characters, and maybe a kiss or two. It is the very beginning of a new relationship, the end of a mean old man, and may be the beginning of something bigger.

**Total Pages (Source):** 59

# Page 1

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The day they put my mother in the ground was gray.

It wasn't a shock. March in Iowa, most days were gray. One year in my youth, the sun hadn't come out once for the entire month. By the time April had rolled around, everyone had been in a terrible mood, a seething mass of humanity, ready to explode in anger at the slightest inconvenience.

Still, it always seemed like funerals should happen in the rain, whether they were in March or July.

Mom hadn't wanted a big thing, so I hadn't invited the whole town out. Hadn't had any announcements published about it.

The town doctor, September Arthur, was there, because she'd been Mom's best friend. She had come straight from the office, still in scrubs, stethoscope tucked into a pocket, and carrying Mom's cat Hex.

Hex, who meowed piteously and threw herself on the ground next to the place where we were burying Mom.

Like she knew exactly what was happening.

I was torn between scooping her up and holding her close to me, and leaving her to her misery, because I understood it. Part of me wanted to throw myself on the ground next to her. Part of me didn't want to be touched by anyone, maybe ever again.

Still, when September wrapped an arm around my waist and held on, I thought maybe more for herself than me, I didn't mind that so much.

"She wanted to call you," she whispered to me. "But she thought she had more time. It was so fucking fast, we just..."

I leaned into her, willing myself not to start sobbing like a baby. Once it started, it wasn't going to stop.

"I understand," I managed to whisper, even though...I didn't, really. But that wasn't their fault. It was because the whole world suddenly didn't make sense.

My mother, pillar of life and health and common sense, had died. She'd gotten cancer and she'd died, and she hadn't so much as called to give me a warning.

How was that even possible?

I would never truly understand why they hadn't told me, other than maybe some misguided notion of protecting me like I was still a child. But how do you protect someone from a thing that's inevitably going to crush them? You can't stop it. A warning might be mitigating. But they'd left me to find out this way, with the call from the hospital to tell me that she was gone.

No chance to say goodbye.

I'd had to book plane tickets from Los Angeles to Iowa, pack a bag, and get on a plane while processing this truth, instead of having a chance to even consider the possibility of it all beforehand.

Footsteps thumped behind us, and I didn't look around. September had been the only person I'd known Mom would want there, so I hadn't even told anyone else what was

happening.

September craned her head around to look, then gave a thin, wan smile. “Timothy. Nice of you to come, even though Maggie wasn’t one of your people.”

“We’re all part of the same flock in the end, no matter what god we worship or don’t,” a smooth masculine voice said. “All human. And Ms. Abernathy was one of the best of us.”

The local minister, I realized when I looked up to find a handsome young man in all black. Despite the fact that Mom wasn’t, had never been, Christian of any flavor. I didn’t know him at all, since he’d come to replace the ancient town minister from my childhood.

At least, I assumed he was handsome. He had a square jaw and dimples, like all those action hero guys everyone swooned over.

Me? I was more interested in the woman who had come up alongside him.

She was nearly, if not actually, six feet tall, but not willowy and slender like most of the tall women I knew. Also, though, not built like a bull, like my girlfriend Tanya was—like someone who’d played years of college softball. She was more like a swimmer, substantial and strong-looking, with wide shoulders, but “broad” wasn’t the right term.

She was also the best dressed person in the graveyard. Or...in town. Maybe in the whole damn state. She was wearing a three-piece suit in all black, down to the black-on-black paisley-embroidered waistcoat, black patent boots that were somehow unsmudged even in the dirt and rain, and a silver-headed black cane.

A cane? That was unusual in a person under sixty, and she was definitely that. Forty

at most, and I suspected less.

Her burnished gold hair, cut short and neat, was the only thing that lessened the stark figure she cut, standing there looking like an actor playing an especially hot incarnation of Death on a TV show.

“Doctor Arthur,” she said to September, her voice smooth and mellow, like dark golden honey.

You will not lust after hot strangers at your mother’s funeral, I admonished myself. But the fact was that I’d never once in my life imagined anyone like this setting foot inside the tiny Iowa town I’d grown up in.

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September smiled at her. “Hunter. How are you, dear?”

“I’m fine,” the woman—Hunter, apparently—said with a pained smile, like talking about herself was the last thing she wanted in the world. Then she turned to me, with intense ice-blue eyes that almost made me shiver. “I’m sorry about your mother. She was one of the finest people I’ve ever known, and South Liberty won’t be the same without her.”

I did not ask how she would know anything about South Liberty, this beautiful woman who did not fit into the tiny town I’d grown up in.

Well, she didn’t fit in any more than I did.

Any more than Mom had, really.

Not that South Liberty had ever really been a town centered on fitting in, in my experience.

None of that was an appropriate funeral conversation, though. “Thank you. I...I wasn’t expecting anyone to be here. Mom wasn’t?—”

“No,” she agreed, shaking her head. “A giant public spectacle wouldn’t have been her style. I just wanted to come and pay my respects. I can go if?—”

“No! No, it’s...it’s fine.” And suddenly, it was fine. Because even if I didn’t know her, clearly, this woman had known my mother.

And being alone had never seemed less tempting.

“I appreciate you coming,” I said to them. “Both of you. I’m sure Mom would have too.”

I leaned down and picked up Hex, holding her tight against me as she burrowed into my chest and mewled. For a long time, we all stood there like that, heads down, considering my mother and her life.

The moment felt different, suddenly, even though I didn’t know Timothy or Hunter. I wasn’t alone. Other people had loved my mother, and now they were missing her too.

For the first time in the four days since I’d gotten the call, the world felt like maybe, someday, things could be right again.

2

I almost stopped at the liquor store on the way home from the airport, but it felt rude to ask the cabbie to wait while I bought vodka.

I was sure he wouldn’t mind, but I’d been raised better than that.

Mom wouldn’t approve.

So I just gave him the address of my apartment building and hoped that we at least had a bottle of wine left from that dinner party in March.

Now, I don’t want anyone to get the wrong impression. I don’t have a drinking problem. It was just that after the longest week of my life, I was ready to get home to my cat, the cushiest blanket I owned, my girlfriend Tanya, and a stiff drink.

Don't tell Tanya, but I wanted them in just that order, too.

For a Los Angeles cab ride, it seemed to fly by in no time at all, and then the cabbie was nodding to me with a "night, miss" and driving off, leaving me in the parking lot with just my purse and my thoughts.

Oh, my luggage?

No, apparently it had gone to Toronto while I'd been flying from the Eastern Iowa Airport to LAX. The airline had promised that it would make its way back, and they'd call me when it arrived. A day or two, they said. A week on the outside.

I was half convinced I would never see it again, and only hoped that whoever found my favorite bra appreciated how awesome it was.

Fortunately for me, I always kept the important stuff in my purse: ID, phone, and keys. So I dug into the quilted bag, grabbing my keys as I climbed the stairs to my front door. I pulled them out, but the little black cat keychain they were attached to caught on the lip of the bag as I tugged, and the keys went tumbling to the ground.

And that was it.

That was all it took to make me cry: a day in the airport, luggage gone on vacation to Canada when I hadn't had a vacation in years, and dropping my keys on the ground.

Well, that and the fact that my mother was dead.

Maggie Abernathy, the woman who'd given up so much to adopt and raise me, was gone.

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I would never hear from her again. Never be able to call her when everything was going wrong and have her soothing voice wash over me, shoving away all the wrong in the world.

I slid down to my knees on the pavement in the breezeway in front of my apartment. Ostensibly, it was to pick my keys up, even though I could barely see them in the waning light and through the blur of tears. For a moment, though, I just knelt there and sobbed.

A plaintive meow was what finally grabbed my attention, and it made me snatch the keys up and try again. Poor Bee probably knew I was out there, and she needed me. I'd be gone almost a week, and it was longer than we'd been apart in her whole life.

Hex had stayed with September in Iowa, and suddenly I wished I'd brought her with me. Like maybe having her there would make things better.

Weirdly, though, when I managed to fumble the front door open, Bee wasn't there to greet me.

"Bee?" I asked the vacant entryway as I closed the door behind me, and there was another pitiful meow. It was coming from the coat closet.

I crossed the entryway and threw the closet open, and a black blur leaped at me. I barely had the mental power left to hold out my hands and catch my cat as she flung herself at my chest, landing gracefully in my arms as though that had been her intention all along. She braced her paws on my collarbones and leaned up to furiously mark my face with her own.

The message was clear: don't do that again.

But also, why had she been in the closet? It had happened once before, and Tanya had suggested Bee had somehow locked herself in the coat closet, but that didn't seem awfully likely. She never went in there, even when I was putting coats away, and besides, it was March in LA. No one was wearing a coat.

"That cat is crying again," an unfamiliar feminine voice said from the direction of the hallway. "Are you sure it's not in here somewhere? I swear it's coming from?—"

A beautiful, wispy blonde came around the corner, wearing nothing but one of Tanya's old jerseys. She made a hell of a picture like that, the jersey coming halfway down her slender tanned thighs, hair flowing loose around her shoulders. She froze when she saw me, my cat in my arms, blinking, then her eyes narrowed.

"Hey," she called back down the hallway. "You said your roommate isn't going to be back until Monday, right? What was his name? Jay?"

The slight emphasis on the word his told me that this query was for my benefit, not her own.

"Yeah," Tanya yelled back, sounding distracted. "Why? You want to stay the rest of the weekend?"

"Jay, I presume?" the blonde said quietly, her jaw tight.

"Jaycie," I half-agreed, and I couldn't help the sob that slipped out with it.

It wasn't for Tanya. I wasn't...I didn't know how I felt about the revelation that my girlfriend of three years was cheating on me, but all I could muster up was a sort of numb irritation, mostly because she'd locked my cat in the coat closet so she could

get laid.

It had been a good choice, though.

Bee probably would have scratched her eyes out.

The blonde rushed to my side, reaching out to take my elbow, but hesitating at the last minute. Her voice was still low as she spoke up, like she didn't want Tanya to hear. "I'm sorry. I...do you want me to go? Or...I think there's tea. I could make some."

Of course there was tea. My tea.

I swallowed hard and nodded. "Tea would be...good. There's a lavender blend next to the electric kettle. Could you?—"

"Of course," she agreed, and rushed off toward the kitchen. I wandered into the living room, sinking down onto the lumpy sofa, the only piece of real, non-particle-board furniture in the room. There was a quilt thrown over the back of it.

A quilt Mom had made me.

I tugged it out from behind me and wrapped it around my own shoulders without getting up. Bee didn't budge from my arms, snuggling as close as she could get and purring like a tiny black motorboat.

For a moment, all I could do was stare off into space.

There was a stranger in my kitchen making me tea. A stranger who'd clearly been sleeping with my girlfriend. A stranger who'd shown me more humanity than that girlfriend.

“ ’Cause you know, my weekend is wide open,” Tanya continued the previous conversation with the stranger, coming down the hallway.

To her credit, she froze when she saw me sitting there with Bee in my arms.

Bee was the only one with violence on her mind. She hissed at Tanya and lunged toward her, only stopped in her quest to draw blood by me holding her tight.

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Tanya sneered at me. “That thing’s a menace. I don’t want it in my apartment anymore.”

The blonde came back out, and...and suddenly that bothered me. I couldn’t keep calling her “the blonde,” not even in my head. I turned to her. “I’m sorry, I don’t know your name.”

“Lyndsay,” she said, bringing me a mug that smelled like heaven, and lowering herself onto the couch next to me. “And I can’t say how sorry I am. I never would have?—”

“Don’t worry,” I interrupted. “It’s fine.”

“Yeah,” Tanya said, smiling, wide and falsely bright. “Fine.”

Did she really think it was fine? She couldn’t possibly. She’d tried to hide the cheating. I was home two days early, so exhausted from planning and executing Mom’s funeral that I’d needed to be back where I felt comfortable. I’d caught an early flight, and it hadn’t even occurred to me to call Tanya and tell her.

She was supposed to be working.

I narrowed my eyes at her and continued. “It’s fine because everyone should want to know if their girlfriend is a cheating asshole.” I turned back to nod to Lyndsay. “But her behavior isn’t your fault.”

Tanya’s smile turned sour at that, and she sighed. “Look, Lyndsay, maybe you should

go. We can get together some other time. I guess me and Jaycie need to talk.”

“Oh no,” Lyndsay said, shaking her head as she leaned forward, almost putting herself between me and Tanya. “I mean yes, I’ll go. But please, definitely do not call me. Lose my number. With prejudice. I don’t want to be cheated on either, and clearly that’s the kind of person you are. I’ll make sure all the other girls at the club know what you did too, so I wouldn’t count on being able to find anything more than a meaningless hookup there from now on. But I guess maybe that’s what you’re into.”

Sometime during Lyndsay’s rant, Bee stopped fighting to get at Tanya, turning back to me and shoving herself deeper into my arms. So I held her against me and took comfort in the fact that this creature, at least, would never betray me.

Lyndsay, finished dressing Tanya down, turned back to me, and in an instant, her gaze went from poison to sympathy. “Is there anything else I can do for you? I am so, so?—”

“Oh come on,” Tanya groaned, and no joke, Lyndsay turned and hissed at her, just like Bee had.

I wondered if the tiny blonde might also want to scratch my girlfriend’s—no, my ex-girlfriend’s eyes out, just like the cat.

“Thank you, Lyndsay, but I’m okay. I can...I’ve got this.” I wasn’t at all sure that was true, but what was she going to do? She didn’t even know me. She’d already been kinder than the situation expected from her. Heck, she probably thought I was crying over Tanya. No reason Tanya would have told her that “her roommate” had been in Iowa dealing with her mother’s death. She didn’t seem to have been honest about anything else, why would she have told the truth about that?

I tried to smile at Lyndsay, but no doubt it was pathetic and tremulous at best.

Across the room, Tanya huffed and stomped back down the hallway, leaving us alone. She returned a moment later with clothes in her hands, shoving them toward Lyndsay. “Fine. Then you should go, so me and Jaycie can figure shit out.”

Lyndsay, bless her, looked to me for my opinion.

I smiled at her. “It’s fine. I can handle her.”

Tanya sighed, like she wassoput upon by the woman she’d brought into our apartment daring to speak to me. She followed Lyndsay to the door, locking it behind her and immediately turning back toward me. “You can’t kick me out,” she announced. “My name’s the one on the lease.”

“Interesting you’d jump to the conclusion I would kick you out,” was all I could muster the brainpower to say. What other conclusion could she have come to, though? It wasn’t as though our relationship was strong enough to weather cheating.

Our relationship was . . . it was . . . heck, I didn’t know.

And Tanya was right, if one of us was leaving, it was me. And me? I had nowhere to go.

“So who will you follow now?” Tanya asked, a sneer in her voice. “Maybe you should have gotten Lyndsay’s number. That’s how you work, isn’t it? Path of least resistance? Always letting other people make your decisions for you, never having to act like a fucking adult.”

I had no idea how to respond to that. It was true, sort of. I’d gone to UCLA because my childhood best friend—and crush—had named it the best school in the country

and waxed poetic about moving to Los Angeles. I'd majored in philosophy because my adviser told me it was a good pre-law choice. Then during college, I'd started dating Tanya, and since she hadn't left LA after school, neither had I.

Never a single choice made because of what I wanted. Always following what people told me I ought to be doing.

Tanya huffed and rolled her eyes when I went quiet, then turned and marched back to the bedroom, slamming the door behind her. So much for "figuring shit out."

I sat on the couch, petted my cat, and drank my tea, thinking about my mother.

"You're really staying with her?" My manager, Estelle, asked me the next day at the shop.

She looked some combination of annoyed with Tanya and disappointed in me. It reminded me of the expression Bee had given me when I'd curled up on the couch to sleep the night before. Tanya hadn't much cared, just rolled her eyes and called me "melodramatic" as she'd passed me on her way to the kitchen.

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Unfortunately, things did not look better in the light of day. If anything, they looked worse.

I shrugged at Estelle. “I didn’t have anywhere else to go. Plus Bee and my stuff are there. I can’t take her to a kennel, and apparently Tanya will lock her in the closet if I leave them alone together. She even said she doesn’t want Bee in the apartment at all anymore. I only left her there this morning because I know Tanya will be at work all day.”

Estelle’s lips pursed. I worried that she was going to march me right back to the apartment at the end of the workday, so she could beat Tanya around the head and shoulders with her giant purse. While I couldn’t let her do it—I didn’t want her to get arrested for assault—it did paint a tempting picture.

Bee would certainly approve.

“So what are you gonna do?” she finally asked.

It was mid-morning and the store was empty, so I was sitting on the counter and she was standing behind it, chatting while she steamed clothes. It was pointless busy work, assigned because the company didn’t want to pay us to stand around when there were no customers.

Me, I was technically still on bereavement leave, but I didn’t have a ton of friends in town that I could go talk to, so the shop and Estelle it had been, even though I was off the clock.

I shook my head and gave a helpless shrug. “I don’t know. I don’t have a lot of choices. I was looking online for a roommate, but that doesn’t seem promising. The best offer I saw in the paper was a poly couple looking for a third. I might be awesome, but I’ve never been much of a unicorn.”

Estelle quirked an eyebrow at me, but didn’t take the bait. “You’re not the kind of girl who does well with roommates anyway. You need your own space.”

“I can’t afford my own space. Not in this town.”

She nodded in agreement. Her family owned a house because her parents had bought it back when real estate in the valley wasn’t as prohibitively expensive. It was why her adult sons still lived at home in their twenties.

For a long time, she worked in silence, thinking. She reminded me so much of Mom sometimes, all quiet and thoughtful. When she looked back over at me, her expression was pensive. “Your mama owned a house, didn’t she?”

I flinched. “I’m so not ready to sell Mom’s house. Or the shop. Even if I were, I wouldn’t know where to start. What about all her stuff?”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” she said, setting her steamer down and coming over to stand next to where I sat, feet dangling. “You’re the first competent employee I’ve found who’ll work for the peanuts this company offers. You know I don’t want to lose you, but this job isn’t good enough for you.”

That was a conversation she and I had often. She would reassure me that I was great, but point out that my philosophy degree was going to waste when a well-trained monkey could do my job. It was true enough, and a job selling clothes wasn’t what I’d envisioned during my years in college. I’d been planning to go to law school, after all.

This time felt different than her usual reminder that I was overqualified. Was she really suggesting?—

“You’ve got a home and a business there, all paid. No high rent, no cheating loser, and a whole new chance at everything. Not many people get that dropped in their laps.”

I wanted to deny it, but she was right. It was the height of privileged arrogance that I hadn’t even thought about moving into Mom’s house and running her shop. Both were completely paid off; the only expenses were utilities and taxes, and the shop had always covered all that for Mom.

“I left Iowa for a reason,” I pointed out, but my voice was as weak as the excuse.

Estelle snorted. “A lot of reasons, I expect, and that whole state seems determined to make even more of them these days. But you’re a grown woman now, not a kid. Whatever prom queen bullied you in high school probably has four kids and a husband with a beer gut by now.”

“It wasn’t like that. I mean, yeah, as a state they’re doing pretty bad, but they weren’t bigots in South Liberty. I was never harassed for being gay. Besides, my high school wasn’t even big enough to have a prom. It’s just—it’s a really small town. And I was kind of a jerk as a teenager.”

I’d spent high school rebelling, and since Mom hadn’t given me rules, my rebellion had been aimless. I’d dyed my hair purple and she’d told me it suited my green eyes. I’d bought a leather jacket at a secondhand store and she’d reminisced about the one she’d once had, and followed up by suggesting I should learn to ride a motorcycle. I’d drawn the line when she tried to tell me where in town to buy pot.

It was embarrassing when your mother was more of a rebel than you.

As easygoing as Mom had been, some of the town had given me the disapproval I'd been seeking. I'd let my hair go back to its natural auburn before I'd left for college, but old Ed who ran the gas station had still called me "the girl with the purple hair" when I'd stopped to gas up Mom's car on the way to her funeral. It had been over ten years, for fuck's sake.

Lucy Beasley had still watched me like a hawk when I'd gone into her general store for a soda, like she thought a grown woman with a steady job was going to pocket a pack of gum.

Estelle was still leaning against the counter watching me, disbelief clear in her eyes, and lips quirked down in disapproval. "All teenagers are jerks. You really think a town is going to hold a little childish nonsense against you? Especially after what you've been through? Or is this about pride? Let me guess, you vowed you'd never step foot back in Iowa."

"No, nothing like that." I waved her off, leaning back and staring up at the shop's stained drop ceiling. "I spent most of college planning to move back. The University of Iowa is less than an hour from home, and I always thought I'd end up there, one way or another. But then I met Tanya, and...plans changed."

She turned up her nose at that. "So she's set you back in those plans a few years. You can do what you were going to do before, now that you know she's not worth it."

I had initially planned to apply to Iowa's College of Law, but that dream didn't hold much interest anymore. I could continue the degree I'd gotten, but I'd seen what the job market held for philosophers, and a PhD in philosophy was mostly going to qualify me for teaching positions. I didn't know if I had the patience to be a teacher, and if not, that would be wasted years and money.

It irked me, but Tanya hadn't been...wrong, exactly. I'd spent my whole life drifting.

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Once I'd moved in with her, all of my plans had altered to revolve around her. Tanya wanted to stay in LA, so I got a job in LA. Tanya wanted us to buy a car together, so we bought a car together.

I couldn't help but smirk at that reminder. The car, after all, was in my name, just like the apartment was in hers.

"I don't know what put that look on your face, but I'll bet it's the best thought you've had all day," Estelle told me. She started shuffling through papers on the back counter, finally holding up two, her crimson red fingernails glittering with rhinestones in the too-bright overhead lighting. "You feel like sandwiches or Thai for lunch?"

"Thai," I answered easily. I wondered if there was a decent Thai place within an hour of Mom's old house. It could be a make-or-break question. I pulled out my phone and searched restaurants near South Liberty, Iowa.

Estelle ordered our usual, and I spent the time checking online reviews for the not one, not even two, but three Thai restaurants that were now within reasonable driving distance of my childhood home. All in Iowa City, no surprise there. I wondered if they hadn't been there before, or if Los Angeles had altered my definition of "reasonable driving distance."

South Liberty was a tiny town, with little more keeping it afloat than a general store, a gas station, and a library-and-museum dedicated to an early resident who had been famous.

It was, however, less than an hour away from the original state capital, Iowa City, which was a college town with a thriving population closing in on a hundred thousand. Also, it was so close to two smaller towns that they had essentially grown into each other: Coralville and North Liberty.

Not that those of us from South Liberty much liked to talk about our sister Liberty. Arrogant big city jerks, the lot of them.

There would be things I missed if I left LA, but the part of Iowa I'd come from wasn't exactly the middle of the wilderness, and it was a bastion of common sense in the state.

Estelle was right. I was ignoring an opportunity that lots of people would kill for. I needed somewhere to be, and Mom's house was sitting empty, her shop waiting for someone to run it.

Being "the girl with the purple hair" wasn't so bad. I'd liked having purple hair; I just hadn't liked the upkeep of having to bleach and dye it all the time.

My phone rang and it startled me initially, since when I was at the shop to work, I didn't carry it on me. Without thinking, I answered it. "Jaycie Jones."

"Miss Jones, we've located your luggage. It seems that it's been sent back to Iowa."

I couldn't help myself. I laughed.

3

Apparently you're allowed to drive a truck that pulls your car on a trailer behind it with no special training or license. At least, the guys at the U-Haul shop didn't so much as flinch at renting the whole rig to me, even though they had to show me

everything about how to hook it up and use it.

I wasn't sure I'd have managed to get my car onto the trailer without Estelle's younger son DeShawn standing atop the thing, motioning me one direction, then the other, then forward, so I'd get the car on straight and into the right spot.

They'd saved my life, Estelle and her sons, helping me with the car trailer, and then even more, with moving the heavy furniture onto the truck.

I'd left the futon in the bedroom for Tanya, since we'd bought it together...and who knew how many other women she'd slept with in it. No, I didn't need any part of that in my future.

But the sofa had been a gift from my friend Teresa when she'd moved to join her family in Australia after college, and she hadn't even liked Tanya.

Driving the truck and trailer was uncomfortable and ungainly, but that car was mostly paid off, and if Tanya was going to be an asshole about the apartment, then I was going to be an asshole about the car. Maybe I'd sell it when I got to Iowa, since I already had Mom's car there, and Mom's was an SUV with four wheel drive, better suited to Iowa winters.

I didn't tell Tanya I was leaving. Didn't warn her that half the stuff in the apartment would be gone, or that she'd have to find someone else to pay my portion of the rent starting in April, just two weeks away.

Fuck her.

I just accepted Estelle and her sons' help to get my stuff into the little moving truck I rented, and then slipped my key under the front door.

No reason to make it a loud, emotional moment. I'd realized at some point that I simply didn't care enough about Tanya to make it dramatic, and in the end, that was a disservice to both of us.

Mom had taught me that love was supposed to be big sometimes, overwhelming and emotional, and if it wasn't that, then it wasn't enough. If I had really loved her, I'd have wanted to tear her hair out for her betrayal, and the fact that I didn't meant I should have left ages ago.

I'd only stayed because it had been easy.

I refused to think about how that made her right, at least about me not choosing my own path.

When we were done packing the truck, I bought everyone pizza, hugged Estelle goodbye, and drove off into the sunset.

Okay, well, not really. I was heading east, so wrong direction for the sunset. Plus it had been just after one in the afternoon so no sunset at all, but whatever.

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It was just Bee and me in the cab of a moving truck, heading off into a new adventure.

I broke the drive into three very long days, partially because I didn't have the money to go spending on a bunch of motels, and partially because what the heck else did I have to do each day? Check into a motel at five in the evening and watch TV all night? No thanks. So I drove till well after dark each day, making it almost to Colorado on the first day, and well into Nebraska the second.

Tanya called the first night, but I declined and then blocked her. No reason to talk to her. What was there left to say? She hadn't cared enough to talk to me either before or after cheating on me, and I hadn't cared enough to stay and try to fix things.

When I pulled into South Liberty, it didn't feel nearly as much like failure as I'd thought it might. Like I'd told Estelle, I had always expected to come back. Less so as time had passed and things had changed, but South Liberty was...it was still home, in a bone-deep way that I'd never shaken.

Mom's home—my home—was just outside of town, an old three-story farmhouse that had existed long before the town grew up around it. It had been remodeled many times over the years, and while it could be wonky sometimes, with slightly slanted old wooden floors and lights that flickered when the rain got bad, it also had modern conveniences like central air and even a video doorbell and electronic thumbprint-activated locks on the doors. I would have to contact Mom's security company to find out about...was there an app for those things?

Fuck me, there was still so much to handle.

But it was the end of a very long day, so it was easiest to start by getting my car down off the trailer, then unhooking the trailer from the truck and setting it aside so that I could get at my stuff.

I turned the truck around in the drive, so that the back was closer to the garage door. That was where I gave up for the night. I wasn't going to carry boxes when I'd spent six hours driving that morning.

I sure as heck wasn't going to figure out how to lift a sofa by myself.

So instead, I got Bee out of the cab of the truck, and we headed inside for the evening.

The electricity was on—one of the things I'd managed to make sure was arranged ahead of time, with a single phone call while driving. The house was on a well, so electricity was the only thing I'd had to contact anyone about.

Bee wasn't the slightest bit put off by our new digs when I set her down—she went straight to the kitchen, where the cat bowls were set out, water still moving through a kitty fountain, got herself a drink, and then went out to sit on the sofa in the living room.

She'd been born on the back porch of this house, and we'd visited more than once, so it wasn't frightening or unfamiliar. I hadn't realized she would remember it, but she clearly did, treating it as though the whole of college and living with Tanya had just been a short interlude, and now we were...we were home.

Maybe that was true.

"The cable isn't hooked up here," I told her, sliding into Mom's old glider. Bee perked up instantly, jumping off the sofa and coming to sit in my lap. She always

liked rocking chairs, but she couldn't rock them herself, so she only ever bothered with them if she was sitting on someone who could.

The cat didn't much care about the cable, not being a television watcher, but half the time I spoke out loud to her just to organize my thoughts. Or maybe I talked to her as though she understood me.

What?

Some people talk to their babies like they understand them, and babies can no more comprehend English than cats. "So I'll have to call the cable company to get a modem hooked up as soon as possible, but everything else is pretty much handled."

Mom had already gotten the year's firewood taken care of, and it was drying against the back of the house. Given the gas heating system we had, it wasn't even necessary, just nice to have firewood for the coldest days.

Bee opened one eye, and I got the distinct feeling I was being judged, then she looked over toward the kitchen. Ah, toward the empty food dish.

"Yeah, yeah, I need to go to the grocery store, but that's easy enough. And we still have some kibble in the truck." I ran a hand through her silky fur, considering the options. Mom had stopped shopping at the local general store a few years back after a personal disagreement with the owner, Lucy Beasley. I couldn't say I especially wanted to go back, since her daughter had been the closest thing I'd had to a childhood bully.

Not that Jennifer had beaten me up or made my childhood hell, but she had been a snobby brat who'd mocked me for wearing "Kmart clothes" and being poor, and then for being a bit of a tomboy in our teens.

Besides, Lucy herself had been one of the only people in town who had been kind of a dick to me since Mom's death, watching me when I'd gone into her store, like I was going to steal things.

Yeah, I thought as soon as I got settled in properly, I would make the trek up to Iowa City for groceries. It was less than an hour away, and they had the good stores. I didn't know how Lucy had pissed Mom off, but screw her anyway.

My mother had been a saint, and if she hadn't liked Lucy, no doubt she'd been right.

I eventually dragged myself upstairs into my childhood bed. That was something that was going to need replacing at some point. I wasn't comfortable taking my mother's bed in the main bedroom downstairs, but I'd spent my childhood in a twin-sized bed, and it was...well, it was a tiny bed. It sucked.

I woke bright and early, and while there was tea and coffee in the house, there wasn't a whole lot else. I'd already run into that when staying at the house for the funeral, but until I could get up to the grocery store in Iowa City, I couldn't do much about it. So I pulled out my phone and crossed my fingers.

Food delivery was available at the house.

Yes!

I pumped my fist in the air and made an order from the closest coffee shop. Sure, it was a national chain of middling quality, but they were willing to send me a bucket of premade coffee, as well as muffins and bagels and cream cheese, so who cared?

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Finally, I headed out to the driveway.

To my dismay, the moving truck was still there, and it had not magically unpacked itself in the night.

Yeah, yeah, magic wasn't real. Whatever. Hope springs eternal and all that.

So I opened the garage door and set to work. Sure, maybe I should keep both cars in the garage, and not fill half of the garage with my stuff, but...well, I hadn't been willing to leave the couch for Tanya, but I also didn't have a place for it in Mom's house. Some of it, like the boxes of clothes, would come inside and go in my childhood closet pretty quick, but a decent amount of it, I had no immediate purpose for.

I supposed I could change the finished but empty attic into an apartment of sorts, but also...who would live in it? Not me. I had less than no interest in climbing two flights of stairs to go to bed every night. Plus, did I really want someone living in my attic? A stranger with a key to the front door traipsing through my home all the time?

Maybe I was still in my LA mindset, but that seemed like a good way to get robbed to me.

I had a neat stack of boxes sitting in the garage, and I'd just uncovered the end of the couch when two things happened. The first, the expected thing, was a delivery person pulling up with my food. I thanked him profusely, and he waved me off, thanking me in turn for the tip I'd left him in the app as he left.

Then, when I turned around, there was a guy standing there.

I almost did that movie thing, where the person shrieks and throws everything in their hands up in the air, but well, he looked so darned nervous, my brain engaged before it could get too scared. Plus I refused to lose the fresh coffee I'd just procured.

He was a teenage boy, for sure, long hair dipping down over one eye as he ducked his head. "Hey. Miss, um, Abernathy?"

"Jones," I corrected. Mom's last name had been Abernathy, but when she'd adopted me as a baby, she'd left my last name Jones. My identity should be what I chose, she'd always told me. It was nobody else's business to tell me who to be. If I ever wanted to change my name, that was up to me. "But it's just Jaycie. And you are?"

"Ryan," he answered instantly. He waved to the nearest house, my only real neighbor, since every other house nearby was either obscured by trees or hills, or far enough away that we couldn't see each other. "Ryan Miller."

I remembered the Millers. They'd been a little younger than Mom, and had never really gotten along with her. Oh, there'd never been a real feud, no police involved or anything. Just a fair amount of glaring when they passed each other in the street.

"Can I help?" he asked, holding his hands out. "Gran saw you unpacking, and said I should come down and help out. Neighborly thing to do and all that."

I cocked my head at the notion. That was not the Millers I remembered from my childhood. It had also just been a couple with a little kid, which, I supposed, had been Ryan at the time. No "Gran" living with them back then.

Still, I'd just been worrying about the darn couch, the one thing I definitely couldn't move on my own. So I smiled brightly at him. "I could definitely use some help,

Ryan. You want a bagel? Or...I think there are some cranberry orange muffins in here somewhere. Do you drink coffee?"

"Does anyone not?" was his incredulous retort.

I laughed. "Come on in. We'll get you some food, then we can tackle the couch. I appreciate the help."

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Ryan helped me most of the morning, and he was a great kid. Drank even more coffee than me and inhaled two bagels, but there was no way I'd complain when he'd also carried more than half the boxes in.

We talked about how things had been going in town since I'd been gone, and honestly...it didn't seem like much had changed. Small towns were always hotbeds of gossip and drama.

Apparently Jennifer Beasley had also moved to LA and gone into movies of the adult variety, and her mother was either unaware or in denial, claiming Jennifer was in "art movies, not like that usual Hollywood trash." I personally was all in favor of both adult movies and "Hollywood trash," and didn't care much for art films, but I supposed I wasn't the right audience for Lucy's angry ranting.

The high school gym was falling apart, just like it had been when I went to the high school, but apparently nowadays the roof was leaking, so things were starting to get dire.

"Sheriff Parker doesn't really do much other than sit in his office, that's what Gran says," he told me, looking mildly confused. "I'm not sure why it matters, since the worst crime we've had in town was that time someone stole an antique carriage wheel

that was nailed to a fence as some kind of, like, decoration? Old man Collins freaked out and said it was worth thousands of dollars, even though it was just a wheel, and really old and gross anyway.”

I lifted a brow at him. “Know who did it, did you?”

He flushed. “No! I mean...if I did, then...then maybe it was just, like, a prank. They left it in his yard a week later.”

I scoffed. “Sounds like when Hillary Grant stole one of the Potters’ cows and...relocated him into the high school gym just after graduation.”

His eyes bugged out. “Grant? Like the dentist?”

“His daughter,” I agreed. “She was three years ahead of me in school, and I thought it was the coolest thing anyone had ever done at the time. But honestly, I could not care less about someone taking and then returning an antique carriage wheel. I could try, but I’m pretty sure I’d fail.”

He laughed at that, his wide shoulders shaking as he nodded. “Plus it was a little funny watching the old guy melt down at the town meeting. He called an emergency meeting over it, because, I dunno, something about a crime wave.”

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“Crime wave,” I said, rolling my eyes so hard they twinged. “The things some people think are life or death issues will never cease to amaze me.”

“Right?” He leaned toward me, beaming, and it was weird, but I figured I’d made my first new friend in town. Super weird that it was a teenage boy, but that was okay.

“As far as Sheriff Parker,” I said, after considering for a moment, “he scared the crap out of us when I was in high school, but that was more than ten years ago. Maybe he’s ready for retirement.”

“He’s pretty old.” Ryan hefted one of the last boxes out of the truck, still light on his feet and ready to keep going, even as I was ready for a nap. “But the only other person who works in the office is Deputy Marsden. Gran calls him Barney Fife, after this old timey TV show she used to watch, cause he’s...not very good at being a deputy, or like...real smart?”

I winced at the idea. I hadn’t watched a whole lot of *The Andy Griffith Show* since it was way before my time, but I was aware of its existence and the reference, and it wasn’t really what you wanted to hear about your only local sheriff’s deputy.

“He’s way cuter than that guy but—I mean—I don’t—” Ryan had frozen in place, blue eyes wide, looking like a trapped animal all of a sudden.

I’d been living in LA, in the middle of the queerest crowd known to man, for too long, because it took me a minute to figure out what had him panicked. When I got it, I affected the most casual shrug possible. “I’ve never been much into guys, but I get you.”

He seemed to entirely deflate, and leaned his whole body toward me even more. “I thought maybe...that is, Mom used to say stuff like that. Like...you know.”

I could imagine what the sour-faced woman I remembered from next door had said about me being a lesbian, but it had honestly never even crossed my radar. I just shrugged again. “Sure. South Liberty is better than average, but it’s small town Iowa. There’s gonna be some bullshit. I’m sorry if you’re having to hear it from your own mom.”

He leaned against the end of the truck, for the first time seeming a little tired. “She doesn’t know. I don’t...the way she talks, how can I tell her? What if she tosses me out? I don’t have anywhere else to go, and like...I have two years left in high school.”

I leaned on the opposite end of the back of the truck, nodding to him. I’d never been worried about telling my own mother about my sexuality, but I knew how this went. I’d had so many friends who’d been through it, with both good and utterly heartbreaking results. “Tell you what, Ryan, if it comes down to it and the worst happens, you come on over, ’kay? I’ve got this whole empty attic that would make a great apartment.”

He blinked at me. “Seriously?”

“Of course. What else are neighbors for?” I waved at all the boxes in the garage. “Besides, I owe you at least one for all your help. And I’ve even got a couch that can go up there.”

He beamed at me, hopping back up, bright-eyed and all fear entirely forgotten. Damn, I did not miss teenage hormones, dragging moods back and forth at the drop of a hat.

I didn’t know about the legality of taking in abandoned minors, but I also didn’t know about the legality of kicking your kids out for being gay. Sometimes people surprised

you with their reactions to things, and there was no reason to go burning that bridge before we even crossed it. No harm in giving the kid a safety net for his own peace of mind, though.

I ordered pizza for lunch, and after he scarfed down half a large pepperoni, Ryan carried the last two boxes into the garage.

“Thanks Ryan, I really do appreciate all your help. And thank your grandmother for me.”

“Will do, Jaycie. Thank you for, um, you know. It’s...it was good. Everything.”

I nodded in return, acknowledging the situation without words, and watching him cross the yards between our houses. A sturdily built older woman opened the door to let him in, turning to nod to me as he passed her, so I waved and smiled at her before heading over to close up the truck.

I wasn’t really in the mood to start messing with unpacking,so I headed inside, closing the garage door behind me. I hadn’t decided about bedrooms at all yet. If I was going to take the main bedroom—Mom’s room—on the ground floor, I’d have to redecorate it, and that could be expensive.

Beds were expensive, weren’t they?

Tanya and I had slept on a futon for a reason, after all.

But I didn’t much want to spend the rest of my life sleeping on my childhood twin size bed, either, so at some point, I was going to have to bite the bullet and buy one.

I wandered through the house, trying not to focus on how empty it felt without Mom and Hex.

Hex—short for Hecate—at least would be back soon. September had offered to take her for good if I needed someone to, but since I was coming back, there was no reason to impose like that. It only seemed right to reunite her with Bee, who was technically her sister, even if they were a decade or more apart in age. Honestly, I wasn't sure how much longer Hex would be with us, since she had to be nearing twenty. No reason to upset her life any more than necessary.

Mom's room, the main bedroom on the ground floor, was just as I remembered it, homey and beautiful. Even if I moved into the room and took her furniture out, I'd have to move it upstairs rather than get rid of it. It was a complete matched set, all hand-carved maple stained a warm golden brown, with navy bedding. The ceiling, too, was painted dark blue, dotted with silver stars. We used to occasionally add a coat of glow in the dark paint to the stars, so they would show up at night too.

It was all just so . . . her.

Fuck.

Suddenly I was crying, sitting on the edge of her bed, and it just...it hit me, harder than ever before, that my mom was gone. Really and truly, and I would never see her again. And she hadn't given me a chance to come home and see her one last time.

Part of me still wanted to be mad at her for it.

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She probably hadn't realized herself, though, and by the time she had learned, it had been too late to do much of anything.

Part of me was furious with myself for going to college in California, and even worse, staying in LA afterward. For missing out on the few years she'd had left. But, well...Mom would never have approved of me giving up anything for her sake.

On a nightstand right next to the head of the bed, there was a glass of water on a coaster, mostly empty. Her old-fashioned alarm clock, the kind that folded down into what looked a little like a book. And an actual leather-bound book with a pen tucked into the front. I picked it up, examining the pen. A Pelikan fountain pen, Mom's favorite, so there had to be an ink bottle somewhere nearby.

With some tiny bit of trepidation, I opened the drawer on the nightstand, but there was nothing risqué in there. Just another book, a bottle of Black Swan in Australian Roses ink, and some assorted medication bottles.

The book on the inside of the nightstand was bigger, and it didn't look like one of the journals Mom had always kept, but tome-sized, complete with a leather strap and buckle to hold it shut. It had the family name—Mom's family name, Abernathy—embossed across the front of it, and it was old enough that the leather had a deep glossy patina. It was gorgeous.

Was it a cookbook? Mom had always been very proud of the family recipes she had, but we'd always used them out of the wooden recipe box in the kitchen.

When I reached for the buckle on the leather strap, I had an odd moment of

hesitation. What if it was private? It would have been odd, given how old the book clearly was, but...well, I wasn't an Abernathy, was I? If it was some ancient family heirloom, did I have any right to?—

Don't be ridiculous, Mom's voice chided in my head. If you want to be an Abernathy, we'll change your name. You're my family. Nothing else matters. If anything, it means even more than if I'd given birth to you. I chose you, button. I love you more than anything else in the whole world.

I fell back on the bed, book clutched to my chest, and curled up there for a long time, unable to do anything but cry.

I finally remembered the book when Bee hopped up onto the bed beside me and started pawing at it, like maybe it had her dinner inside.

"Fine," I mumbled to her, and reached for the buckle again. This time, a strange feeling of acceptance flooded me as my fingers smoothed over the glossy leather and brass. A breeze blew through the room as I got it open, and absently, I thought to myself that I would need to find the window that'd been left open and close it. It rained too much in Iowa for me to be leaving windows open all the time.

The book was definitely old, and it started with something of a list. One woman after another, starting with an Elisabeth Abernathy whose use of the place of the 's' in her name was both odd, since the name usually used a short 's', and dated the book, since that kind of spelling fell out of style hundreds of years ago. Eighteen hundred? Seventeen? They hadn't written dates, these women, but the list covered almost two full pages, and it was clear that each woman had added her own name, because there in the middle of the second page was Mom's name, in her own handwriting: Margaret Ûna Abernathy.

My breath caught, tears streaming down my face, and I couldn't...I just couldn't. I

glanced at the Pelikan, sitting right there, loaded with ink by Mom's own hand, and the absolute rightness of it hit me.

I had to.

I had to put my name in the book.

Before I had even truly connected the thought to action, I was uncapping the pen and scrawling in my very best handwriting: Justice Chesapeake Jones.

And suddenly I could breathe again. I could have sworn that as the ink went from glossy and wet to matte, sinking into the paper, that it flashed with gold light, and suddenly, the air was lighter and my tears were...survivable.

I could do this.

I had lost Mom, yes, but I still had her, in some ways. I had all that she'd taught me, and all of her things that she'd left me.

A book owned by dozens of Abernathy women before me.

Feeling lighter, I turned the page to find the surprise of my life.

Gramarye: All the magical learnings of the Abernathy family, collected.

What the actual fuck?

5

It wasn't a joke, at least not as far as I could tell.

The book was, in fact, an old-fashioned...grimoire? A book of spells, recipes for tinctures and ointments, and notes on useful plants to collect when possible, including how to prepare them for storage and use them later. Some of this stuff Mom had taught me as a kid, so it wasn't even that surprising to find she had it written down somewhere.

But . . .

Witches.

Mom's family had been witches.

Like most sensible modern people, I believed that all the old cases of women being murdered after witch trials had been based on politics and misogyny. I wasn't sure I believed any different now, even with proof sitting in front of me that back then, some women truly had been witches.

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But making ointments for bruises wasn't a bad thing. It wasn't as though page one was all about how to make a sexy deal with the devil while dancing naked in the moonlight. No, it was about where to find the best healing herbs and how to dry them. I might not know all that much yet, but it didn't strike me as all that nefarious.

It was immediately apparent, however, that Mom and all these Abernathy women believed, without question, in magic.

That much was obvious when I flipped to the end of the book to find, yes, a few empty pages, but before that, pages in Mom's flowing script. Recipes for the teas she sold in the shop, to help with sleep and relaxation and pain and other things. All written with detailed recipes, and then, no joke, rituals to make them. Candle burnings and chants and magic words and just...what the hell was I reading?

Mom hadn't been crazy. She'd been one of the most down-to-earth people I had ever known in my life, sensible and smart and—and yet, she had clearly believed in magic.

Before I could stop myself, I grabbed her journal and looked at the last few pages, hoping against hope that she hadn't put her life in the hands of some magic spell, but no. It was all about appointments at the university hospital, and chemotherapy, and...and concern that maybe she should call and tell me, but then dismissing it in the same sentence.

She hadn't wanted to worry me. She had been so certain that she would be fine by the time I came to visit for Christmas, the doctors assuring her that her form of cancer was so very treatable.

But apparently they had missed something until it was too late.

I turned the last page, hoping against reason that there would be something else, but there was...well, there wassomething. It wasn't an explanation, but it might be even better than that. An envelope, folded in half, with my name on the outside.

A letter for me, tucked into her journal? Ouch. Had sheknown that I was such a nosy jerk that I would read her diary?

With shaking hands, I pulled the flap open and tugged the paper out of the envelope. Two sheets. Not nearly enough.

My Jaycie,

The doctors tell me I don't have nearly the time I thought I did; somehow not even enough time to warn you what's happening. I'm not going to have you draining your bank account just to rush out to see a dying old woman one last time. But I do need to speak to you, at least like this.

I know what you're thinking. You've almost certainly found the family grimoire, and you're thinking I was out of my mind. You're probably worried I didn't see a doctor, even though my best friend is one. Funny thing is, I might have had a better chance if I'd looked for a magic cure. Probably not, though. Sometimes, it's just...your time.

And it turns out this is mine.

I'm so sorry, honey. There's so much I should have taught you, but you already know more than you think right now. I taught you how to dry herbs and make the teas. You're a better chef than I've ever been, so some of the old family recipes both in the grimoire and the recipe box have a better chance at getting use in your hands than they ever did in mine. My grandmother's rosemary bread seemed to protect the whole

town from trouble every winter, and she passed out loaves to everyone she loved.

You're a smart girl, and you can handle this. I know what you're thinking, but yes, the magic is real. It's not silly superstition and imagining results that aren't there. If you choose to use it, you can do great things. If you don't, well, I understand that too.

Just know that as I've always told you, you're as much an Abernathy woman as any who've ever held that grimoire before you. It's yours now, to do with as you will.

I love you forever,

Mom

The words on the page blurred at the last few lines, but I was careful not to cry on the paper and make the ink run.

Bee joined me on the bed, curling up against my chest when I sprawled out on the middle of the night-sky comforter.

6

I realized after a while that if I just continued to lay there on Mom's bed, the day was going to be over. I'd just fall asleep there and sleep through the whole night, and it was barely two in the afternoon.

So I dragged myself up, still clutching the grimoire and letter to my chest. Carefully, I tucked the letter back into its envelope and slid it into the journal, and then both of them into the nightstand drawer. It needed to be safe. Whatever else was true in the future, I needed my mother's last words to me to be there to read and reread.

I'd go to the café, I decided.

There was only one “restaurant” in South Liberty proper, and it was a café that served coffee all day and had some simple breakfast and lunch options. I’d already eaten a bunch of pizza, and a cranberry muffin, and had a bunch of coffee, but being around people and having more coffee would wake me up and make me feel human again.

I could take another look at the Abernathy family grimoire there in the light of day, with other people around. Prove to myself that it was real, and not just a hallucination brought on by the stress of losing my mother and then moving a few thousand miles in quick succession. That was a thing, right?

Decided, I pushed myself up, dusted myself off, and headed for the door. Bee stayed on Mom’s bed, and that was okay. The house was as much hers as mine, after all, and it wasn’t like I could take her out for coffee.

It was easy to make the choice between my little car and Mom’s SUV—frankly, Mom’s was nicer. So I slid in behind the wheel and headed out toward town.

What was next?

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I hadn't thought too much about it yet. There was some money in my bank account; enough to take care of me for a few months even if I did nothing, but I didn't want to stretch it out that far. I wanted to get back up on my feet and get back to work.

Just, what did that look like now?

There was the shop, of course, but even though I'd been working at a shop in LA, I'd never envisioned my whole future as a retail drone. On the other hand, if it was my shop, no corporate lackey got to show up from regional and tell me "if you've got time to lean, you've got time to clean." I'd be the boss, and no one could tell me what to do.

On the other hand, what the hell did I know about selling books and tea and...could I even make the tea? I knew the blends, sure, but I didn't even believe in magic. I sure as hell wasn't going to chant in Latin over a bowl of Earl Grey to make it into a sleep aid.

But what else was there?

An idea struck me as I pulled into a parking space on one side of Main Street. I turned the car off and pulled out my phone, dialing a number from my contacts.

"Jaycie?" came the slightly confused response after a moment.

"Hey Gabby. This is . . . terrible and self-serving and all that, but . . . any openings at the old community college these days?"

“No kidding?” my old friend asked, and I heard a creak on the other end, like she’d sat back in her chair. “You thinking about moving back to Iowa?”

I shook my head, but that didn’t help her too much, so I cleared my throat and spoke up. “Already here, actually. Trying to assess my options now.”

“You moved without a job? You?” She sounded positively incredulous, and, well, not without reason. Gabriela Rivera and I had gone to college together at UCLA, and I’d always been the one with the plan. I knew what classes I was taking next semester, what assignments were due for all those classes, and had a year-by-year plan for my whole life.

At least, I had back then.

But then I always let myself be dragged in whatever direction the wind blew.

Gabby had always been one of those seat-of-her-pants people, but then she’d gone on to get her PhD, and now she was a professor in the philosophy department at Kirkwood, the local community college. A place with a pretty great reputation.

“Honestly,” I said on a sigh, “I was working retail in LA. It’s not like I couldn’t do that again if it comes down to it. But if I could be using my degree, that would be better, obviously.”

“Fair enough. I don’t think we have anything, but I can look into it. I’ll ask my department head. The adjunct staff tends to come and go. Entry level philosophy classes aren’t exactly fun to teach, most of the time, and they get used a lot as general electives by people who literally couldn’t care any less about philosophy.”

I knew that. It was one of the reasons I’d never wanted to go into teaching. A bunch of sleeping, probably hungover students at eight in the morning every Monday wasn’t

my idea of a good time.

But what else was I doing?

Not going to law school, that was for sure.

“I get you,” I promised. “And I know it’s not a great time to be asking about a job, middle of the spring semester. I just...my mom died. And Tanya was cheating on me. So I moved home, and now I’m trying to figure out what comes next.”

Gabby scoffed, and there was derision in her voice when she spoke again. “Of course she was. Fucking Tanya.” She paused again, sighing. “Look, I think teaching eighteen-year-olds philosophy is your personal nightmare, but I’ll ask about what we’ve got going on. My department head is a good guy, and I’m sure you’d get along. Meanwhile, we should get together for dinner sometime. You living down in that tiny podunk town of yours?”

It was my turn to scoff. “You’re living in a city that constantly stinks of burned oatmeal. You’ve got no room to talk.” Cedar Rapids, home of the local community college, also held an enormous cereal factory, and as long as I’d lived in the area, the whole city had reeked of that plant and its products...among other unfortunate things.

She needled back. “How many restaurants do you have there in South Nowhere these days? Oh, still none?”

And that was it. We both burst into laughter.

“How did we meet in LA, and we’re now living in a place that doesn’t even have a decent club within a two hour drive?”

“Three, really,” I corrected. “You’d probably have to go to Chicago. It’s not like Des

Moines is a great club town.” I shook my head, checking my rearview mirror to make sure no one was coming, and climbed out of the car. “Anyway, I’m at the single sort-of restaurant here in South Nowhere, about to go in and get some coffee. You know how I feel about being that jerk who yammers on her phone while ordering.”

“Ew, same,” she agreed. “Like I said, I’ll talk to my boss. Either way, I’ll get ahold of you, and we should have dinner soon. Non-sorority solidarity and all that.”

We had another laugh over the old college issues we’d bonded over, and I hung up as I walked into the coffee shop, trying not to think about how if everything went well, I was about to end up a teacher. Ugh.

7

Walking into the coffee shop felt like walking into my own past. Walking into...home. The old house hadn’t been that yet, because it was missing Mom, but The Unique Bean? It was still perfect.

## Page 13

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One of the most beautiful women I'd ever known stood behind the counter. Chestnut brown hair in natural waves that fell more than halfway down her back. Soulful brown eyes. The only person I knew of that looked not just okay, but damn near elegant in nothing but leggings and a T-shirt.

And the way her face lit up when she saw me...well, that was pretty amazing too.

"Jaycie!" My childhood best friend, Sabrina Collins, literally hopped over the counter to throw herself across the room at me. She wrapped her arms around me and pulled me against her so tight that there was barely enough room to breathe.

It was hard to mind that. She was so sweet, so kind, and so...home.

Ironically, she was also one of the reasons I'd run so far away for college.

Hard to stay close by and watch your best friend get into one bad relationship after another, toxic guy after toxic guy, especially when you were more than halfway in love with her. Funny, how looking at her now, there was none of that childhood longing. Only a soft, gentle nostalgia.

"Hey Bree," I said, laughing as she swung us around in a circle. "Good to see you too."

"I was afraid I'd missed you entirely," she said when she pulled back. "I'm so sorry about Maggie. They told me you were in town for the funeral, but I couldn't get there that day. Granddad was—you know, he was being Granddad. And by the time I dropped by the house the day after, no one was home."

I bit my lip, nodding. I did know her grandfather. He was the person she and her sister had been living with since her parents had died, and frankly, he was a jackass. I hadn't been surprised by Ryan's story about him calling an emergency town meeting over a fence decoration, because he'd always made things dramatic when we were kids too. Sabrina went on a date, and he accused her of "catting around" and said if she got pregnant he wouldn't help.

I hadn't gone out of my way to see her while I was in town for the funeral in part because it would have involved being around Ephraim Collins. I hadn't even thought about it that much, to be honest. Sure, Sabrina had been my best friend, but that had been high school. It had been a lifetime ago.

More than that, all I'd been thinking about at the time had been Mom and funeral planning. "I was only here for a few days after she died. But...but I'm back now. Back in town for good. Probably."

I wasn't sure why I felt the need to qualify the statement, but in the moment, I did. After all, if I couldn't find a job, or South Liberty was different from my somewhat idealized childhood memories, then eventually I'd have to leave.

It was hard to imagine now, selling Mom's house and business, but everything was so up in the air. I had no idea where I would land.

Sabrina, clearly ignoring my qualifier, made a high, excited sound. "Oh my god, really? That's so awesome. I've missed you so much."

"Me too," I agreed, smiling ruefully at her exuberance. "I would have come to see you before, but?—"

"Oh no," she denied, shaking her head wildly. "You were here for Maggie. I would never expect you to worry about me in the middle of that. I'm just so glad you're here

at all.” For the first time, a little self-consciousness crept into her expression. “I’m sure you’re used to nicer stuff than Mom and Dad’s old coffee shop these days.”

As she always did when she spoke of her parents, she reached up to rub the tiny gold pendant on a chain around her neck. It was shaped like a coffee cup, a gift her father had given her mother when they had first opened The Unique Bean.

Long before they had died when we were thirteen. If anyone in town knew just what I was going through with losing Mom, it was her.

Dragging myself back to the conversation at hand, I shook my head. “I mean, national chains abound in LA. They’re okay, I guess? Nothing special like here.”

“Aww.” She linked elbows with me and walked us both up to the front counter, leaning over it. “Walter? Walter, come meet Jaycie.”

My stomach plummeted at that. I didn’t know a Walter, but...it wasn’t my imagination, okay? It wasn’t even leftover teenage jealousy. My best friend had the worst taste in men.

The very worst.

One in high school had hit her once. Another had pressured her to have sex when we were fifteen, and yet another had been cooking meth in a shed behind his parents’ house. Maybe it was that the men available in a tiny town were limited and less than ideal, and maybe it was that I didn’t think any man would ever be good enough for Sabrina, but the end result was the same.

It never ended well, for anyone.

Especially that first one, since I’d beaten the crap out of him right in front of

everyone who attended our high school. The principal had been livid and called Mom in for a meeting, but when I'd explained to her why it had happened, she'd shrugged and told him he could suspend me if he wanted, and her response would be to bake me a cake and tell me to take the week off because she was so proud of me.

Okay, so maybe that one had ended well for me. But not Sabrina or the douchebag who'd put his hands on her.

His nose was never going to be straight again.

Still, I hadn't even seen this one yet. I should try to give him the benefit of the doubt, right?

A man came out of the kitchen, rubbing his hands on a towel, and I had to give her credit, this one didn't immediately scream "I'm a jackass." He was sort of nondescript looking, average height and weight and looks—blond hair, blue eyes, and just...everything about him did scream "I'm a generic average guy."

He might as well have been one of the pictures already in a frame when you bought it.

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“Walter,” Sabrina sang, leaning halfway across the counter to leave a smacking kiss on his cheek. “This is my best friend in the whole world, Jaycie Jones. Jaycie, this is my boyfriend Walter.”

He smiled at me, albeit a little awkwardly, and held out a newly dried hand. “Jaycie, huh? It’s, uh, nice to finally meet you, I guess.”

I shook his hand back, and if my smile was a little frozen and disingenuous, well, Sabrina didn’t seem to notice, and that was all I cared about.

“Could you make Jaycie a flat white for me? Oh, and heat her up one of those pain au chocolat. Those are her favorite.”

Impossible to deny that, since well...chocolate croissants. What wasn’t to love? Admittedly, given how tight my jeans were these days, I should maybe love them a little less, but whatever. I had no one to impress.

Meanwhile, Sabrina remembered exactly what I liked from over ten years ago, and that was...it was so nice. The baristas I’d ordered that same exact thing from hundreds of times in LA had never remembered me. They sure wouldn’t have remembered it after over ten years apart, only seeing each other once a year at most.

Walter nodded and set to work with the espresso machine as Sabrina led me over to a table in the corner, pressing me into a chair and then pulling a second one up next to it.

“So,” she said, turning all her attention on me, bright smile on her face. “Are you

reopening Maggie's shop soon?"

I winced and bit my lip. "I hadn't really thought about it. I mean, how much business did she really do?"

My mother had run what I realized in retrospect had amounted to a witch shop. She sold those ointments and salves that I'd seen recipes for early in the grimoire. The teas she'd added to the book herself, which she sold by the ounce out of apothecary jars. Books about spirituality that ranged from Wicca to Buddhism to things I didn't know anything at all about. Crystals and goddess statuettes and tarot cards and all the trappings of modern non-standard spirituality.

"The shop gets tons of business," Sabrina insisted. "Heck, I need like three pounds of that lavender Earl Grey. Though honestly, business here in The Unique Bean has slowed down since the shop has been closed. People come down from Iowa City just for Maggie's teas, and they'd stop and buy a coffee while they were here." Then she frowned. "I mean, not that my business is your responsibility. I'm not trying to be passive aggressive or?—"

"I get it," I assured her, patting her hand. "I don't feel guilty. That's actually good to know. I had no idea. I haven't looked at the books, or—hell, I haven't even been over there yet. I guess I should, since I own it now. The keys are on Mom's ring somewhere, I'm sure, and I remember the security codes, unless she's changed them."

"But you—you're staying, right? You said you had moved back. What are you going to do if not run the shop?"

"I was thinking about trying to get a job at Kirkwood. I mean, I can't teach at the university since I never got my Master's, but?—"

“Oh please, you could teach anyone,” she dismissed. She always had been my biggest cheerleader, alongside Mom. She’d been the one to convince me to go to school in California, not just by saying UCLA was the best possible school anyone could go to, but by telling me I deserved more than going to the closest state college I could get into.

There was no reason to explain to her how colleges chose staff, because none of that would change her mind. Sabrina was just entirely on my side, without reservations, even when I didn’t really need the support.

It was nice to remember that I wasn’t alone in the world now that Mom was gone. There was Sabrina. Her sister Charlotte, just a year older than us, had always been a good friend too. There was Mom’s friend, September. There had been a few other people in high school, and I couldn’t imagine all of them had left town permanently.

Walter carried over a cup and plate, dropping them off in front of me with pursed lips, his eyes trained on Sabrina. Were they fighting? He sure seemed annoyed. “So, how long is your friend in town for?” he asked her, without even looking at me.

Sabrina, innocent and slightly oblivious as she always was in situations like this, beamed at him. “She’s staying! Isn’t that great?”

For a moment, he just blinked at her. “Staying. Yeah, great. Congratulations, Jaycie. You know, Bree, I could use some help with the dishes if you’ve got time.”

Sabrina frowned at him, watching him turn and leave, every line of his body stiff. Was he angry that she was going to have a friend around, or just mad she was sitting with me instead of working?

After a moment, she turned back to me, sighing. “I guess I better go help him. He really hates doing the dishes.”

“Happens to the best of us,” I offered back, but honestly, I had no idea what the heck I was talking about, because I had no idea what they were talking about. It didn’t feel like it was about the dishes, somehow.

The dishes had never been such a loaded subject in my universe.

“It’s so great to see you, though, Jaycie. My number is still the same if you want to call, or I’m usually, you know, here.” She bit her lip, standing from the table and slowly backing toward the kitchen instead of hurrying. “Anytime.”

I smiled and nodded to her, but really, I was confused as hell. Did she need help? Was Walter cooking meth in the back?

No, I’d have been able to smell that.

“That guy is possibly the most useless creature ever born,” a smooth voice said nearby, and I...I knew that voice.

Hottie—err, Hunter, from Mom’s funeral. I turned to look around, and realized I’d missed her sitting there at one of the tables because she’d had an actual newspaper spread up in front of her face. She had pushed it half aside so I could see her now, and she was looking at the kitchen door, shaking her head, pale eyes sharp and assessing.

I sighed, because of course he was useless. “She has the worst taste in men. Like seriously, the worst. I was just wondering if maybe he was cooking meth in the back.”

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Her shoulders drew forward and the newspaper trembled as she laughed. “What, like he’s Walter White? Funny thought, but no, I think there’s a minimum competence level for cooking meth without drastic accidents, and he’d never reach it.”

I smacked my hand over my face as my cheeks flamed, shaking my head. “No, not a TV show reference, though that’s...funny. Just, once in high school this guy she dated was doing that.”

Hunter dropped her head back and laughed aloud. “Let me guess, Barry Potter? Kid was always a miscreant in the making.”

Good to know that Barry’s reputation had preceded him. On the other hand, I did wonder how Hunter would know—“Wait, Hunter. Hunter Grant?”

She finally set her paper down, inclining her head and shoulders as though we’d just been introduced. “Eldest child and biggest disappointment of the Grant clan. And you are Justice Chesapeake Jones, daughter of the delightful Maggie Abernathy.”

I blinked at her use of my whole name. It wasn’t that I hated my name—the opposite, actually. I had always liked having a weird name no one else had. It was just that most people called me Jaycie and never knew the rest.

“That’s me,” I agreed. I decidedly did not tell her that I’d always thought the Grants’ oldest child, Hunter, had been a boy. She was ten years older than me, and clearly, my eight-year-old self had been missing out when she left town for college. “But I’m guessing you don’t work at the dentist’s office with your father.”

She curled her nose in distaste at the very thought. “Thankfully, no. I am, for the moment, marginally retired.” Inclining her head forward and tapping the head of her cane, which was propped against the table, she gave a nonchalant shrug. “Car accident stateside did what the IED in Fallujah couldn’t, and the agency offered me a desk or early retirement. I’ve always been a stubborn asshole, so I chose the latter. Figure I can find something better on my own.”

I didn’t know who “the agency” was, but the way she said it sounded vaguely ominous, like she’d been some kind of black ops secret agent kind of person. It was...surprisingly sexy, considering I’d never been much into any of those spy TV shows or movies. But they always starred some beefy guy who did and said vaguely sexist things, and still had every woman within a hundred miles trying to fall into his bed.

Not really my thing.

The sexiness here was probably just Hunter herself. She was in another suit, because clearly the woman knew what made her look good. This one was deep navy blue with a matching waistcoat, and a paisley tie in all shades of blue, the very lightest of which matched her eyes.

I shook myself out of what had been a blatant pause—a pause during which I had obviously checked her out. When I looked back at her, far from anything I might have expected, she winked at me.

Oh.

Oh my.

Bad Jaycie, you just got out of a terrible relationship. You do not want to get into a rebound fling with someone who lives in South Liberty. Especially not someone who

seems so...much.

Finally, I cleared my throat and tried to get the conversation back on track. “Are you really expecting to find that ‘something better’ in South Liberty?”

She laughed at that, shaking her head. “No, not really. Iowa City maybe. Or more likely, online consulting. But I’ve only been back a few months. I’m still giving myself time to get through the regular physio and”—she winced as she shifted her left leg—“other stuff. Speaking of which, I’ve got a vested interest in that willow bark tea your mother used to sell, if you do reopen. Or just if you’ve got some lying around.”

Car accident, she’d said. It didn’t take much to imagine all that came from a thing like that. So I just nodded, and didn’t prod the subject any further. I would check for the tea when I went to the shop, which quietly moved up on my to-do list.

I didn’t want to let conversation die, though. I wanted?—

Her eyes fell to the book I’d carried in with me, and filled with interest. “Family heirloom?” she asked.

“Family heirloom,” I agreed, running my hands over the smooth leather. I bit my lip, looking up at her. She had known Mom. Known her well enough to care about her, and even show up at her funeral. Apparently, she thought that her pain relieving tea—the willow bark kind—was good. Plus there was just something about her that made me feel safe, which was weird. Not that beautiful women usually made me feel unsafe, but this was something new and different. I swallowed and looked back up at her. “I guess, um, Mom believed in magic? And it’s a book about...magic...stuff. In the family.”

Her pale blue eyes narrowed, and she looked down at the book for a moment. “A family heirloom indeed, then. Not that anyone in South Liberty would be surprised at

the idea of your mother being magical. Nearly everyone in town swears by one of her teas or another, even if it's just the Earl Grey with lavender." She lifted her teacup, as though to indicate what was inside, and offered another wink. "They serve that here in the shop, call it a lavender fog, with lavender honey and milk. I should figure out how to make that myself too, since I spend a small fortune on the stuff here."

Not so much as a blink at the magic thing, let alone laughter or disgust. Huh.

I tore the pastry in half, offering her the plate with the remaining half. Something about the idea of both of us getting our fingers sticky and then licking them clean was...

Gah. I needed to not do that, not think that.

No rebounds.

She gave me a wicked smile, like she could read my mind, and shockingly, she took the offered treat.

"I would seriously think about reopening the shop, if I were you," she told me as she tore a strip off the croissant. "Even if you hire someone to run it, I think it could be a good investment. Almost everyone in town loves the place, and as Sabrina said, people drive down from Iowa City for it." She stuffed the flaky pastry in her mouth, followed by the fingers that had been holding it, pulling them back out slowly, shiny with the moisture from her tongue.

Bad.

Bad Jaycie.

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As far as the shop, it sounded like a lot of trouble, hiring someone to run it for me, but really, what else was I going to do? Sell the building? Liquidate the stock? No, I was going to have to give Mom's shop some serious consideration. Not least because it was Mom's. How could I do anything but continue it, when I had already lost the woman herself?

"I'll think about that," I agreed. "Don't suppose you want to run a shop, do you? Seems like it might be a bit of a let down after the, um, agency."

She chuckled at that, but then shook her head. "You shouldn't hire me. Not because you'd have to worry about cartoony supervillains burning the shop down, but because I'm terrible with people. I'd run off your clientele inside a week." She leaned in, pursing her lips. "Apparently, I'm abrasive and aggressive."

I swallowed down the words that tried to push themselves out of my throat, about how she could be as abrasive as she wanted with me, or that I liked aggressive women, because "aggressive" was just society-speak for a woman who knew what she wanted. There was nothing I liked more than a woman who knew what she wanted.

Nothing at all, in the whole world.

Not even chocolate pastries.

When she changed the subject to Mom, and we fell into comfortable conversation about the shop and business in South Liberty, well, it didn't get better. A beautiful woman who liked tea. Who liked me. Who was easy to talk to and so sexy my brain

kept trying to melt every time I looked at her.

She was wearing a pocket watch, complete with chain, for fuck's sake. How was that so hot?

And yet, there I was.

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The shop was right next to The Unique Bean, one of the reasons I hadn't doubted Sabrina for a moment when she'd said it brought her business. I'd just always assumed it was the other way around, since everyone loved coffee.

I approached it with some trepidation, I had to admit, staring up at the old ornate sign on a hook over the door. It was old-fashioned but also not, like so many things in South Liberty. Mostly, the people and their attitudes. Sure, people had given me shit for dyeing my hair purple in high school, but no one had ever said boo about me being a lesbian, and well, I rather thought the latter was more important.

The sign had carved scrollwork on the edges and was painted to look like it was made of rolled up paper. In impeccable handwriting across the middle, it declared itself to be "Tea Book and Candle." Mom had always called it TBC, which she'd found funny, for some reason.

Mom joke, maybe.

I looked through the keyring I'd gotten from her, not certain which was the shop. They were all pretty standard six-pin keys, except for one, which I knew went with the padlock she'd kept on a chest in the house.

Hm. I ought to have a look inside that. I'd never been particularly curious about it

before, since I'd assumed she'd kept things like birth certificates and such in it, but given the existence of magic, maybe it was something a little less benign.

I shrugged, grabbed the first key that came to hand, and turned it. It worked.

Huh.

After going in, I turned and relocked the door behind me, then headed for the back of the shop where the alarm was beeping. Fortunately for me, the code was the same as it had been for years. Maybe I should change that. I didn't think anyone other than Mom and I knew it, but you were supposed to change them periodically anyway, weren't you?

Ah well, a problem for another day.

Once the alarm was off, it was just me and the shop. Even more than the house, the shop was a relic of my mother. She'd chosen where every single thing in the building went, what objects were on each shelf, and what was and wasn't important.

The cash drawer had the usual hundred dollars change she'd started every morning with. Well, the eighty-seven dollars in paper cash led me to believe that, but I wasn't going to sit there counting pennies half the afternoon.

It was like the whole place was just sitting there, waiting for me to flip the lights and unlock the doors. No work necessary before getting started, just go for it.

I scanned the huge glass jars of tea, and noted a few that could use refilling. The bedtime tea was always in high demand, so it wasn't a shock it was mostly empty. Also the willow bark Hunter had mentioned, because who liked being in pain? I reached for a bag and poured the last remaining into it, using cursive to write out 'willow bark tea' on it, then setting it on the counter. I'd take it over to Hunter before

I went home if she was still at the coffee shop.

It wouldn't be pathetic at all, to carry a bag of tea around for someone I barely knew.

Which reminded me, Sabrina had said something about wanting three pounds of lavender Earl Grey, which was, I thought, more than Mom had ever kept in one of the jars at a time. I knelt down to look in the cupboards below, where she kept extra stock, and right in front was a huge paper bag labeled "lavender for Sabrina," with a date just a few weeks earlier.

I opened it up, glancing inside to make sure it wasn't just lavender but the actual tea, and the scents of bergamot and lavender flooded my senses. Lovely. I could see why it worked for Sabrina's shop.

I added it to the willow bark tea on the counter. Maybe I'd get lucky and they would both still be over there.

Other than that, well...I was in a shop that specialized in spirituality books and stuff, wasn't I? For the first time in many years, I wandered through the store, looking at the books Mom had deemed worthy of her shelves. It was an interesting selection. Multiple religions, multiple views on each. A few of those books that appealed to young people interested in Wicca. Nothing that stood out to me as serious, not in the way of the family grimoire. I wondered if I ought to grab one of the "Spirituality for Dummies" style books regardless, just to see what I could learn. I'd never taken any of it seriously before, and Mom had never pressed me into any kind of belief, so I'd be starting from zero.

Finally, after scanning the shelves for a long time, I grabbed two books. One a clearly academic endeavor about trying to wade through modern spirituality, and one cute book about "goblin life" just because the aesthetic appealed to me. I didn't think it was going to be world-changing, though, and if it tried to convince me to go

mushroom-foraging, I'd skip that, since I was precisely the kind of person who'd pick the wrong mushroom and end up dead.

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Heck, I didn't even like mushrooms.

I had just set the books on the counter with the tea when a noise caught my attention. A knock on the front door. I turned and had to blink against the bright light coming in the front windows, since the back of the shop was quite a bit darker, but after a moment, I recognized Mom's lawyer, Martin Hayes.

I sighed and went over to unlock the door.

This was the problem with the shop. People assumed that just because I was in there, it meant they had a right to bother me.

I motioned the man in and relocked the door behind him. He was in his sixties at least, probably nearing seventy, and I'd been expecting him to retire since my childhood. I'd also never much liked him—too stiff, his face in a constant expression of displeasure. But he wasn't my lawyer, he was Mom's.

On the other hand, he was the only lawyer in South Liberty, so there was that.

I'd find one in Iowa City, I decided in that moment, watching him take off his gloves and fold them neatly before tucking them into a pocket. It was March, for fuck's sake. Who was still wearing gloves? They were probably driving gloves, like he was a hundred years old and expected the old timey steering wheel in his Model T to slide right out of his grip.

He surveyed the shop for a moment, and something about the assessing expression set my teeth on edge.

My shop. Mine.

Which was a bit feral as positions went, particularly since I'd spent much of the morning wondering if the place was more trouble than it was worth to me.

Hayes gave me a grim smile as he finally turned back to me. He reached into his suit jacket and retrieved a large manila envelope. "Sorry to bother you," he said, inclining his head. "I'm sure you have quite a bit of work to do, after Mrs. Abernathy's sudden death."

Mrs., even though Mom had never married, and had been nothing resembling a Mrs. to anyone. He might as well have just referred to her as Madame Abernathy, the title was so stiff and nonsensical.

No reason to bother explaining all that to him, though.

"I suppose I do," I agreed, still unwilling to get into a conversation about what I intended to do with the shop. "Can I help you with something, Mr. Hayes?" I pointedly looked at the envelope.

I didn't want to be rude, but I just wanted to take care of whatever he wanted and get rid of him, so I could get back to what I'd been doing. Or literally anything else.

"Of course, of course. Just some last paperwork on the estate. It's not a farm or anything, so no millions of dollars in equipment. Nothing that will take too long." He opened the folder, flipping through the pages. "You were her only beneficiary, of course, so anything that remains will go to you, as I'm sure you're aware. I'll just need you to sign off on this."

He stopped on the last page and tapped on an empty signature line, then tugged a pen out of his top pocket, holding it out to me.

I stepped forward and looked at the page he wanted me to sign. There was nothing on it, really, no information about Mom or the estate or anything. No, whatever it was, the full document was about ten pages long, and I didn't doubt, in legalese.

My friend Teresa was a lawyer, and things couldn't be so different in Australia than the US, could they? I'd take pictures of the pages and send them to her, ask her to read them over before I went signing anything. I smiled at him and flipped the papers back into a single pile. "Thank you, Mr. Hayes. I'll give these a read and get them back to you as soon as I can."

His smile went a little flat, and he sighed. "Miss Abernathy?—"

"Jones."

That, too, got me a sigh, as it so often did. "Miss Jones, then. You understand I can't set things into motion for you to receive your inheritance until you sign the paperwork? Technically, you shouldn't even be in here. Or in Mrs. Abernathy's home."

I lifted a brow at him. "I'm not sure how much better I can help you out here, Mr. Hayes. I'll sign the document as soon as I've read through it. If you'd like to try to kick me out of my childhood home in the meantime?—"

"Of course not," he said, sighing like I was just too dramatic and annoying for words. "I'd simply like to get this handled as soon as possible. I'm sure you know my payment is tied up in the estate as well."

That? Well fuck him, honestly. "Sorry my mother's death has been so inconvenient for you. Like I said, I'll handle it as soon as possible and then I'll drop into your office. I'm sure it won't take long."

He looked aghast at my bluntness, and like he wanted nothing so much as to snatch the papers back and run off. It was so Midwestern, and frankly, the biggest part of Midwestern life I had not missed. Politeness mattered more than kindness, and openly showing emotions was like growing a second head.

Well, the people of South Liberty had mostly been fine with Mom being blunt and unafraid of her emotions, so they would learn to deal with me being the same. I'd learned it from her, after all.

He pursed his lips, glancing back down at the papers and up at me, but sighed and nodded, turning to leave.

I walked him over, since I had to unlock the door for him and then lock it again behind him, but neither of us said another word as he left. Thank fuck. I didn't want to really lose my temper with an old man.

Maybe no one in town knew Mom was a witch and they might take issue if they did, but getting a reputation as a bitch, well...that was another thing entirely, and like Hunter had said, not good for business.

After Hayes left, I was still ready to blow a fuse, so I went back to stare aimlessly at the book wall for a while longer. Books were always calming, unlike douchebag lawyers who cared more about getting paid than lovely women who had tragically—and recently—lost their lives.

I grabbed a book at random and started reading, not really processing the words as much as skimming them, letting the familiar patterns of black and cream soothe my mind.

Slowly, I became aware that it was a book on how to read tarot cards, something I'd known how to do since I was a child. I might not have ever believed in magic, but it didn't mean that I didn't know thoughtful reflection was a useful tool.

I was just getting into a charming explanation of how no one got to tell you how to read your cards, and your instinct was always right, when there was a tapping on the front door.

Again.

I turned, ready to huff in anger or ignore whoever was bothering me this time, but...well, it was Mona Brighton, one of the lunch ladies down at the local elementary school. I couldn't count the number of times she'd seen me coming and replaced the standard mushy gray-green canned peas that were part of lunch with literally anything else. Not because I was allergic. Just because she knew I hated them.

I wasn't going to be mad at a sweet old lady who went out of her way to help kids.

So I set the book aside and went to the door, again, unlocking it and pulling it open.

She was wearing a T-shirt and capri pants with sandals, despite it being about fifty degrees outside, and even more weirdly, carrying a chicken in her arms. She was also biting her lip, downcast and immediately apologetic when I opened the door. "I'm terribly sorry for bothering you, Jaycie, I'm sure you're busy, but I saw you were in here, and I had to come ask. I...I can't seem to sleep without that tea your momma made, not with how my feet are always hurting these days. Is there any chance I could bother you for some?"

"The bedtime tea?" I asked, and she continued to stare at the ground, but she did nod. I remembered quite vividly that while it was mostly empty, it wasn't entirely gone. "Just a second," I told her, turning back to the main counter, sliding behind it and grabbing one of the paper tea bags. I poured what remained into the bag, just a few ounces, wrote the name of the tea on the paper, and turned to head back to the door. "This is all I've got left right now. I haven't really...that is, I've got the recipes, but I've never made it by myself. I don't know if I'll be as good at it as Mom was."

She gave me a wide, watery smile, nodding. "That's how we all feel when we lose our mommas, sweetheart. I promise you, you'll do fine. She was so proud of you."

My breath caught at the very thought of it. Of Mom telling people she was proud of me. "Thank you Mona. I...I'm not sure what I'm going to do yet, but I'll try to keep up with the tea. Promise."

I held the bag out to her, expecting a whole conversation about money, to which I intended to tell her that I didn't have the point of sale system up and running, so I couldn't take her cash. More than that, I expected her to tuck the chicken under her arm to take the bag, but instead she sort of...switched the items, like she was Indiana

Jones and I was a booby trap in an ancient tomb.

Suddenly I was holding a chicken, and Mona was standing there with a little bag of tea in both hands. “Thank you so much, sweetheart,” she said, beaming at me.

Then she turned and walked away, leaving me holding a fluffy orange chicken.

What the hell had just happened?

10

There was a chicken.

It was a golden orange color with beady black eyes, and didn’t seem the least bit stressed out by being handed to a stranger and carted off for a car ride.

The ridiculousness of it all kept running circles in my head as I carried the thing out of my shop. As I put it in the backseat of my car. As I drove, glancing repeatedly into the rearview mirror to look at it.

A chicken.

What the heck was I supposed to do with a chicken?

It had been intended as payment for the tea, quite clearly.

But what did I know about chickens?

Was a few ounces of tea even worth a chicken?

How much was a chicken worth?

I felt like somehow, I'd gotten the better end of this deal, and I should give Mona some more tea, except...what the hell did I even want with a chicken?

I pulled into the garage, and leaving the door open, took the chicken out of the SUV's backseat and walked outside with her. All chickens were "her," right? If it were a boy, it'd be a rooster, and that would be obvious, and probably annoying, what with the noise.

I walked around to the backyard, which was thankfully fenced in, at least mostly. But...well, an industrious chicken could get out of that fence, I was pretty sure. It was made up of wooden slats, and they had gaps between them, so I was pretty sure a chicken could figure that out.

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While I was staring around my backyard, feeling as lost as I'd ever been in my life—where did a chicken live? What did it eat?—I heard a screen door slam, and looked up to see where the noise had come from.

The Millers' house, unsurprisingly, and the older woman who had sent Ryan over to help me. I smiled tentatively at her, and she...well, she was headed straight for me. She was also smiling, so I didn't get the immediate urge to run away and hide in my house.

Besides, she had sent Ryan to help me.

She couldn't hate me, right?

She marched right up to the fence, then cocked her head as she watched me standing there with the chicken. "You okay honey? You're looking a little lost out here. Thought I'd come see if I could help."

I held up the chicken before me. "I don't, um..." How the hell did I even say it? "I gave Mona Brighton some of Mom's tea, and she gave me a chicken. I have no idea what the heck to do with a chicken."

She nodded sagely, looking at the chicken, then finally holding her hands out over the fence, as though for me to hand it over. I gladly complied, giving the incredibly docile creature to her.

She looked it over a moment, then nodded. "Mona raises a fine bird. She always sells eggs at the farmers market on the weekends, and they're good ones. This lady here is

an adult, couldn't say how old exactly."

Then she . . . handed it—her—back.

"What do I do with it?"

The woman gave a giggle, but covered it up quickly. "Sorry, I just...your face."

"No arguments here. If I look half as ridiculous as I feel, I'd be laughing too if I were you. I don't know if I've ever been so confused in my life. Did people often pay Mom in livestock?"

"They did," the woman agreed. She reached across and petted the chicken like it was a freaking cat. "Can't say the animals ever stuck around here too long though. I guess I always figured your mother was sacrificing them and reading their entrails or some such."

I clutched the chicken tighter against me until it made a slightly dissatisfied cluck, horrified at...wait, she knew. She knew that Mom was a...a witch. She had to, or why would she think anyone would do such horrible things to an innocent little chicken?

I loosened my grip and tried petting the chicken myself. It was...very fluffy.

"No," I told the woman. "I don't think Mom would have, and I definitely will not be sacrificing any chickens, not even for the purpose of knowing the future. Nope, nope, nope."

She grinned at me, shaking her head. "Well if she's getting on in years," she said, motioning to the chicken. "Most people would say she's for the stewpot anyway."

I took half a step back, this time careful not to squeeze the chicken too hard.

“Absolutely not. She...I don’t want to kill her, I just have no idea how not to. Like, what do chickens eat?”

“Anything they can find. Or layer feed from the supply store. Or vegetable scraps from the kitchen. Or all three.” She motioned up the hill toward her own home. “We let them forage in the spring and summer, but still give them chickenfeed. You can give them fresh fruits and vegetables, too. We always give them anything that’s not going to get eaten before it goes bad.”

They had what looked like a tiny barn near their house. The door on it was open, and while I watched, a chicken walked into it.

“You’ll also want a coop. It’s a good place for them to lay eggs, and someplace safe for them at night or when it rains. They can run expensive, though, if you’re not going to keep a lot of chickens.” She leaned on the fence, watching her own chickens wander the yard, pecking in the dirt and moving with their cute little chicken waddle. “Honestly, it’s a little expensive either way. I always laugh at those city folk who think they’re going to keep chickens to get cheap eggs.”

I wanted to ask her “then why do it?” but I doubted there was a good answer for that. Just like why she’d been okay with the notion of Mom killing a bunch of chickens to tell the future or whatever.

“She’ll probably be okay on the back porch for a bit,” she went on, motioning to the screened area on my porch. “But it’ll be a pain to clean. I can give you some of our chicken feed, but I recommend getting over to the supply store sometime soon if you’re planning on keeping her.”

I thanked her, and thanked her again when she brought me a can of chicken feed from her own supply and explained how much to give a single chicken every day, but I thought she didn’t understand the issue, not really.

It wasn't that I was "planning on keeping" a chicken or chickens. I just had no freaking idea what else to do with them if they were given to me.

Finally, when she left me on my own—I was going to have to ask Ryan her name when I saw him again, because it felt weird to think of her as "Grandma Miller"—I took the chicken up onto the porch.

"Okay, we're going to have to come to an understanding," I told her, setting her down as I closed the screen door. I looked around and almost immediately, my eyes lit on an old newspaper sitting on a side table. I pulled it out and spread it, setting it in an empty spot next to the door. "I would appreciate it if you only poop there, for now. I'll try to get you a chicken coop as soon as I can, but I...well, like I said to our nice neighbor, I have no idea how to take care of chickens. I'll do my best if you do, though."

As though she understood me, she immediately walked onto the newspaper when I stepped away from it, looking around at the floor beneath her feet for a moment. Then she shat on the prominent picture of a politician's face right below the headline.

I grinned at her. "Good girl!" If that didn't deserve a little food, I didn't know what did. "I think I'm going to call you Laverne. How does that sound?"

She seemed unruffled either way, just wandering around the porch, looking at everything. It seemed safe enough to me, and I hoped she wouldn't peck her way through the screen and leave, but well, what was I going to do if she did?

I was still trying to decide what came next when the front doorbell rang.

11

Bee met me at the back door, giving a pitiful meow as I came in, like maybe she'd been left alone for years instead of a few hours. I sighed at her. "I was going to the coffee shop, Bee. I don't think you're supposed to take cats into restaurants. That's why we always order in for dinner."

She meowed again, this time indignant, and I swore I could almost hear words in it. It was why I talked to her—frankly, I got a better conversation out of her than I ever had out of Tanya. Sure, she was a cat, but she always held up her half of a chat. No huffing and going silent or ignoring me for hours because a baseball game was on.

"You can come with me to the shop tomorrow, how about that?" I leaned down and scooped her up into my arms, and she came happily, leaning up to rub her face against mine, like maybe I needed a reminder of who I belonged to.

We went through the house toward the front door like that, and oddly enough, Bee started purring as we approached. Maybe she was expecting dinner, even though I hadn't yet ordered anything for delivery.

But no, when I made my way to the door and opened it up, everything was suddenly clear. A furry black torpedo launched itself at my chest, and suddenly I was holding not one, but two inky black cats, and they were all over each other, marking and licking and purring so loud it felt like a bass beat in my chest.

For a fraction of a second, I wondered how Bee's sister Hex had rung the doorbell, but then my brain engaged and I looked up to find September standing there smiling at me. Or, well, at the cats who were all over me and each other.

"Hi, Jaycie," she said after a moment, reaching up to scratch Bee's head with her perfectly manicured mauve fingernails. "And hello to you as well, Beelzebub."

Bee leaned into her and purred, even though she usually only heard her whole first name when she was in trouble. I supposed it made a difference that I called her Beelzebub Frances Jones when she was in trouble, and in a considerably sharper tone.

"It's good to see you again, Doctor?—"

"Please, honey, call me September. You've known me since you were one, and you're not a child anymore. No reason to worry about proper manners." I nodded, and she held up a reusable bag. "I've got some kibble and cans of food I've been giving her in here that I thought you could use. I may have a menagerie, but she was the only cat."

Menagerie.

"You," I gasped. She lifted a brow but kept quiet, so I went on. "You're what Mom did with the chickens."

She laughed. "Oh boy, already getting those, are you? I kept telling Maggie she needed to build a coop and keep some for herself. I mean, eggs are always useful, right?"

It was a fair point. Besides, I kind of felt like Laverne and I had already bonded, at least a little. So I didn't rush September back to the porch and insist she take the chicken away. Instead, I nodded. "A coop. Where exactly does one find one of

those?”

She laughed; a low, musical sound, and I realized how much I had missed her over the years I'd been gone. She'd been Mom's best friend, sure, but she'd always been the best. I'd seen her as my physician for many years, and she was just...like a cup of cocoa on a winter morning. “There are a couple of feed stores in Iowa City, and they always have them. You'll have to put it together yourself, though, since they come in a big box with instructions. It's not like you could fit it in a car already put together anyway.”

I blinked a moment, then nodded in understanding. It couldn't be that much harder than Ikea bookshelves, could it?

Still, I didn't want her to just hand me Hex and some food and then skedaddle. “I don't have a lot of food in the house, but do you want some tea? Or, um, I could order food? It's been ages. I know you were at the”—I swallowed hard, struggling to even say the word funeral, so skipped it instead—“last week. But we didn't really get to talk much.”

She smiled brightly at me, and I could have cried for how much it reminded me of Mom in that moment. Not that I was going to use September as some kind of Mom-replacement, but it was really nice that I still had her. That she was around, and I could ask her about chicken coops. “Sure, hon. How does fufu sound? There's a new restaurant in Iowa City, and they actually deliver here.”

“Absolutely delicious,” I declared. Tanya hadn't liked anything more exotic than pastrami, so I'd mostly only eaten other things at work with Estelle. It was nice to be able to order all things spicy or non-American whenever I felt like it. Besides, fufu, in Iowa? I'd never imagined to see it. “They don't happen to have egusi stew, do they?”

“As it happens, they do,” she said with a smile as she pulled out her phone.

An hour later, we were sprawled out on the living room sofas with our dinners, cats draped around my shoulders, cuddled up together like they'd never been apart.

"How has Hex been?" I asked September, reaching up to run a hand along the back of the cat in question. While Bee was entirely black, Hex had a little white star on her nose and a single white sock on her back right leg, so it still wasn't hard to tell them apart.

September smiled sadly over at Mom's cat. "Missing Maggie. But she's healthy enough. Like a horse. I'm no vet, but I swear she's going to outlive us all. Be out there stalking mice on her own after the fall of civilization."

I grinned back. "Hey, not alone. She'll have Bee with her."

At the mention of her name, Bee lifted her head. She looked down at my dinner, then deciding it wasn't something I could share with her, lowered it again and went back to sleep.

September smiled at that. "It's good to see them back together. I know Hex missed her."

I had to swallow hard not to say something about Mom in that moment. Unlike Bee and Hex, I'd had a choice in that separation, and?—

"So, are you planning on reopening the store? I know you used to run it for Mags sometimes back when you were in high school, so you know the basics, at least. And she was never a math person, so I'm sure she has her books set up as simply as possible."

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I'd taken a glance while in the store that afternoon, and it did look like the accounting had been as simple as it ever could be with a business.

"I...well, it's a ready-made business, so it's hard to turn my nose up, even if it's not really what I'd planned for. What is it they call it? Turnkey? It's...it's not like I actually planned for anything. I'm mostly qualified to teach, and I'd rather eat tree bark and live at the reservoir than become a substitute teacher, which is the easiest option." I blinked, biting my lip. "Not that I think subs are bad. They just have way more patience than I do."

She laughed, shaking her head. "Just like your mom. No one thinks you look down on substitute teachers just because you don't want to be one, sweetie. It's a ridiculously hard job, and most people don't want to do it."

"I talked to a friend about maybe Kirkwood."

September cocked her head one way, then the other. "Fair enough. It's a good school. And you get more students at community college who know what their education costs than you do at Iowa, so they're probably more likely to take classes seriously."

"Didn't you go to Iowa?"

She grinned at that, and suddenly she looked like nothing so much as a mischievous teenager. "I did. And my parents paid every dime of it, so I was awful and irresponsible as a nineteen-year-old college student. Besides, that was before a college education cost more than a new house, so different times." She waved dismissively. "But either way, you should think about the shop. A lot of people in

town counted on Maggie and her teas and such. They'd be very disappointed if you came back and didn't reopen."

This, then, was an excellent chance to get another perspective on the magic thing. I bit my lip, leaning toward her. "About that. The teas and stuff. You know...I found the family book with the recipes for them, and..."

For the life of me, I couldn't figure out how the hell to continue the statement, and tell her what I meant.

Clearly, though, September knew what I was talking about, as her lips quirked up on one side, a smile growing and growing, though she was trying to hide it. Finally, she chuckled, shaking her head. "Do me a favor, will you dear? If you have a daughter, tell her. Tell her everything. Raise her with all this. I will never in my life forget when Maggie's mother died. We were in college, and she showed up at my apartment with you in one arm and the book in the other, horrified and convinced maybe her mother had been in need of mental help." She lifted her tone to an approximation of my mother, "Magic, Sep. Mom believed in magic. It's crazy, right? What the hell am I supposed to do with this?"

I slumped back down, pulling my takeout container closer and stuffing my face with food so I wouldn't let all my questions spill out together. The realization that Mom had still been in college when she adopted me featured in the list of questions at least as heavily in magic. Why would anyone do that?

"I kept telling her to tell you," she went on, shaking her head sadly. "So you wouldn't have to deal with this as a surprise with no guidance, the same way she did. But she seemed convinced that there was a reason not to tell you. Convinced that doing it the same way her mother did was right. I suspect it's more a throwback to a time when women might be murdered for being healers, so keeping the younger generation in the dark for as long as possible was the way to go. Plausible deniability, you know?"

It made perfect sense. Once, women had been murdered, magic or no, just because people wanted to control them. Keeping your daughter in the dark about real magic protected her from attack. Or at least, it tried to.

I rather hoped that was never going to be a concern again, so instead, I focused on the important part. “So you...you believe in magic?”

Her return smile was so warm I could almost feel it. “I do, sweetheart. Oh, I think when you get sick you should go to a doctor, and so did your Mom. Vaccines are good science and everyone should get them. People are responsible for their own behavior. But also, a little magic couldn’t hurt the world. Your mother’s bedtime tea just has a little edge over taking pills to get to sleep at night. I’ve recommended it to dozens of patients over the years.”

And that, well...it was convincing in a way that none of my internal monologue had managed. September, a woman who’d spent her whole life in school, educating herself, going so far as medical school, believed. And more than that, she didn’t think it conflicted with being a woman of science.

“I don’t know if . . . what if I can’t do it?”

She scoffed. “You’re Maggie’s daughter in every way that matters. You can do anything you set your mind to.”

That, too, was settling.

Maybe...maybe I could do it. I’d never imagined running Mom’s shop, but at least in part, it had been because I’d never imagined a day she wouldn’t be running it herself.

So maybe I would give it a shot. It wasn’t like I had anything better to do while I waited for word from Gabby.

September was a lifesaver in all ways, so as she was leaving, she also offered to have her kids take the moving truck up and drop it off at one of the locations in Iowa City, and I wasn't going to turn that down. After all, my only plan had been to take it up and then pay for an Uber back to the house, and that was a pain. So instead, I just handed the keys to her and called the store to warn them that the truck would be dropped off the next day.

And that was that, move completed. Sure, there were still boxes in the garage, but I couldn't just hop back into the truck and leave again. There was something final about going to bed knowing that in the morning, the moving truck would be gone.

12

Come the next morning, I went out to check on Laverne, and it looked like she'd kept her mess relegated to the newspaper. That was nice, and rather unexpected. I'd never imagined myself to be the chicken whisperer.

Was that even a thing?

I let her into the back yard and tossed some chicken feed out, like Ryan's grandmother had told me to do, and Laverne went right to work pecking it up. Perfect.

At least my brand new chicken wasn't going to starve to death today.

I went back inside, made myself a cup of coffee, and fed Bee and Hex while I drank it and considered my next steps. There were already cat dishes in the shop, because Mom had been taking Hex there every day for many years, so it wouldn't be difficult to have them both with me. I went and grabbed the bag of kibble September had brought the day before, figuring I'd take the rest of it to keep at the shop, so everyone could have lunch.

Well, everyone but me.

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I wasn't a picky eater, but kibble was a bridge too far.

My choices, if I didn't want to make the drive to Iowa City and back, were quite limited. I was already planning to drop into the coffee shop to grab a drink and pastry for breakfast, and I could have even more sugar from there for lunch. That seemed...healthy. Alternately, the general store had some basic choices I could grab and take to the shop, like tuna or crackers or...well, at least as many choices as you'd get in the average convenience store.

I didn't love either idea, but I didn't want to drive an hour before starting work for the morning, so the general store it was.

"Okay guys," I told the cats, wiggling the bag with the kibble. "Off to the shop with us, I think. I have to stop for food, so you'll have to be good in the car for a few minutes. Think you can handle that?"

They both gave me the unimpressed blank stare of a cat being asked a question it couldn't care less about. I nodded. "Yeah, me too."

Fortunately for me, they were both comfortable with what came next. They followed me out of the house without hesitation or complaint, and waited while I locked the front door and headed for Mom's SUV. When I opened the passenger door of the car, they both leaped right into the seat and planted themselves there, like taking a car ride was an everyday occurrence, and that was good too.

I did not need to be cat-wrangling while leaving for the morning.

They curled up together on the passenger seat while I made the two-mile drive into town, parking in Mom's old favorite spot outside the shop. I turned to them. "Okay guys, I'm going to the general store"—that elicited a grumbly annoyed sound from Hex—"and then the coffee shop"—an interested chirp from Bee—"and then we'll head into the shop, okay? For now, both of you just stay here."

I refrained from explaining myself and why I was going to break Mom's moratorium on the general store to the cats. That would be silly, right? Even if magic was real, they were still cats.

The general store hadn't changed since I was a teenager, let alone in the last week. It was a little bigger than your average gas station, and didn't have gas pumps, but other than that, there were striking similarities. Slightly overpriced, bare minimum options, and standing vigil over it all, Lucy Beasley, aging blonde wannabe-town-matriarch.

"Well, well, well," she said when I walked in, and that was...well, it was downright weird. She and I had never been besties, and her daughter had been kind of a jerk to me in school, but it wasn't like we'd even known each other well enough for her to have an opinion about me.

"Mrs. Beasley," I answered, as respectful as I could manage. The shop's office had a mini-fridge, so I figured I would buy some bottles of water, some crackers, and maybe if she had a cheese option, that would be just fabulous.

This was going to take two minutes, in and out.

How bad could it be?

She was quiet, if sour-faced, as I looked around, grabbing the water and then searching for food options that didn't seem designed for a six-year-old's lunchbox. Cheese and crackers spelled with a z? Probably not. All the goofy-named individually

packaged snack cakes with as many preservatives and as much sugar as they could fit into plastic wrapping? Also no.

Even if they were tempting.

Mmmm, chocolate.

Plain old crackers, check. Cheese...well, I was firmly of the opinion that actual cheese never ever came in a can, which meant the only option was string cheese. Okay, I could live with that. Maybe I'd prefer a nice cheddar, but that old saying about beggars and choosers wasn't wrong.

I could buy some cheddar when I got up to Iowa City that evening. The co-op had always had an amazing cheese selection.

So I came up to the front with my water, crackers, and string cheese, setting them down in front of her, and tried offering up my best smile. "Good morning."

Her sour face didn't change for a second, but she gave me a nod. "Suppose you're back to stay?"

"I am," I agreed. The ruder she got, the more chipper I seemed to become, and if she kept going, I was going to explode into cartoon characterhood at any moment. "Headed over to look through the shop and see what comes next. To be honest, I never planned to take it over."

She gave a decisive nod. "Good. It's about time we got rid of that godless monstrosity."

I blinked, staring at her a moment, and the whole excessively pleasant persona fled me all at once. Godless monstrosity? That was the kind of thing people had said in

centuries past, that had ended with my own mother not telling me magic was real, because they were afraid assholes would murder them.

“The bookshop?” I asked, not bothering to try to keep the incredulity out of my voice. “The bookshop is a godless monstrosity.” The store had dozens, if not hundreds, of books on spirituality. To call it godless was nonsense.

“That woman never went to church a day in her life,” Lucy insisted.

“Because she wasn’t a Christian. I didn’t realize that was a crime now.” I stared at her, and while I would never have the benefit of my mother’s piercing black eyes, I thought I could mimic her bitchface pretty well, even if it was with green eyes.

She curled her nose, like something smelled bad, and looked me over. “Suppose I shouldn’t be surprised she raised you like that.”

“Open-minded and well-mannered? Yes ma’am, she did. She was the finest woman ever born, and I fully intend to do my best to carry on her legacy.” I dropped a twenty on the counter when the total came up at just under twenty dollars. Then, I grabbed my water in one hand and other stuff with the other, shoving it into my jacket pocket as I stepped back. “I’ll be reopening the bookshop as soon as possible. Just like Mom ran it. Just like she’d have wanted. As long as I’m alive and business continues to be excellent, I’ll keep right on running the shop just like Mom did.”

Head high, I swept out of the store. I probably looked ridiculous, but who fucking cared? What kind of utter bitch was mean about someone else’s newly dead mother?

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I still wasn't even sure I wanted to own Tea, Book and Candle, but that didn't matter anymore. Even if I got a different job for myself and had to hire someone to run the shop, I would. No one was ever closing the shop, not as long as I had a say in it.

I just had to figure out if I could do the things Mom had. Make the tea, and more than that, make it...magical.

I decided to head into the shop next, so I went back and let the cats out of the SUV, grabbing the bag of kibble as I went.

Like we'd always done exactly the same thing, the cats followed me to the front door as I unlocked it, and once it was open, alarm chirping in the back, headed to their own corner, where there was a cat bed that was actually a dog bed, an enormous cat tree taller than me, and food and water bowls set up. I turned off the alarm and put my purchases away, promising myself that I would do the same thing Mom had done, and never set foot back in Lucy Beasley's damned shop.

Iowa City had one of those enormous superstores these days. I could buy what I needed in bulk and never run out of food again. That and a water filter, since the shop had running water in the bathroom sink, it just needed filtering to be drinkable.

I grabbed the teas I'd set aside for Sabrina and Hunter as I headed back out a moment later. I hadn't made it over to the coffee shop before it had closed the day before, so I just had to hope they would both be there now. Where else was there to be in South Liberty at this—or really any—time of day? “I'm going to lock the door, so don't set anything on fire, you two.”

The cats didn't move, but a little sound like a sneeze came from their corner of the shop. Or, dare I think it, maybe a scoff?

The coffee shop was busy, no surprise, since it was prime on-the-way-to-work time. Most of South Liberty's residents worked up in Iowa City, so they dropped in for a little commute caffeine, and then headed up I-380 toward the city.

I wasn't too worried about the wait, though. I didn't need to get to work, and wasn't on anything resembling a schedule. There was still a paper note taped to the front door of TBC that said temporarily closed, so no one was going to come banging on the shop door the moment the clock turned over to nine.

Or, there might be, but they could screw off. We were closed, and I had work to do before we could reopen.

Walter was working on the register when I got to the front, and gave me the most unimpressed look I'd ever seen on a human being's face in my life.

Seriously, what had I ever done to this dude?

"What do you want?"

The customer who'd just ordered her triple redeye mocha with extra whip turned and looked at him, a little shocked and ready to be offended, and when she saw he was talking to me, her forehead creased in confusion, glancing back and forth between us.

Sabrina's chipper voice came from behind him, happy as ever, even way too early in the morning for anyone to be in a good mood. She always had been a morning person, the weirdo. "Flat white and a pain au chocolat, silly. Have you forgotten already?"

His jaw clenched, but he looked away and started typing into the register.

“Don’t be silly, Walter, we don’t charge Jaycie,” she said, over enunciating my name for emphasis. She tossed her head in a way I knew was habit designed to get her hair out of her face, even though working the espresso machine as she was at that moment, her hair was tied back so it didn’t get in the way. Also, maybe health code something something. She turned her brown eyes and smile on me, so bright her cheeks dimpled. “How are you doing this morning?”

I ignored Walter, smiling over his shoulder at her. “Good, you?” Then I hefted the giant bag of lavender tea. “Brought the tea you wanted. Mom had the lavender ready to bring over already, even had your name on it.”

She set a to-go cup aside and came up to the front counter, a beatific smile on her face, hand pressed to her heart. “Thank you so much. How much do we owe you for?—”

“Oh please, like you’re going to say you don’t charge me, then I’m going to demand money for tea.” I set the bag on the counter and shoved it across toward her.

She beamed, reaching across and picking up the bag, carrying it like it was a baby.

It was like nothing had changed in our lives, even though technically everything had. We could easily be seventeen again, her working the afternoon in the coffee shop and me heading over to help Mom in TBC, but not until I got a coffee.

Mom had always rolled her eyes and said if we sold tea, maybe I should drink tea instead. I’d never been able to tell her I liked the tea better, I just went into The Unique Bean because I wanted to hang out with Sabrina. Now, especially in the morning, I was as addicted to coffee as most everyone else, but maybe I’d have to start making tea to drink in the shop.

“We should have lunch sometime,” Sabrina told me, leaning forward.

“Sounds good,” I told her. “Lots of restaurants in Iowa City, we can meet up there if you’ve got a day off. Still closed Sundays?”

Walter huffed, motioning behind me. “If you don’t mind, there’s a line?”

And while he was a jerk, he wasn’t wrong. I didn’t want to be the kind of douche who held up people trying to get to work.

Sabrina rolled her eyes and winked at me. “Give me a call later, we’ll make plans. Sunday is good. We’re usually open in the morning, but I can still do lunch.”

My business with the shop mostly concluded, I turned to the tables, scanning them. There was the group of older ladies who hadn’t changed too much since I was in high school—just now they were actually older ladies, and when I’d been in high school, I had only thought they were. There were a handful of people in seats I didn’t recognize at all, which was a bit of a surprise.

Most everyone was hovering around the pickup counter waiting for drinks.

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But there, in the back corner, was Hunter. She was sitting with Timothy...was it father, or was that only for priests, not for...heck, I didn't even know what he was. Lutheran? Protestant? Was that the same thing? He was wearing all black like he had at Mom's funeral, but he didn't look at all like a dour church official. Like the guy he'd replaced had, always. We'd always called him Father Mason, and he'd constantly looked like someone had pissed in his dinner.

Timothy was smiling at Hunter, and as I watched, he laughed at something she said.

She looked...perfect. As usual. This morning her suit jacket was slung over the back of her chair, revealing a crimson waistcoat, and she wasn't wearing a tie at all, the buttons at her throat open, revealing inches of smooth golden skin at her neck. When she threw back her head and laughed, it bared even more, her clavicle peeking out of the space the open buttons revealed.

"She's sin-gle," came the singsong whisper from behind me—Sabrina. When I turned to look at her, she was holding out a cup in my direction. "And one of the best people in this town. I highly recommend her. Just...be careful. She's also got a bit of a reputation."

I lifted a brow at her, and she shrugged.

"You know how it is. She's gorgeous and smart and dresses well, in South Liberty. Plus, you know, bi, so everyone is prey."

I rolled my eyes. "Seriously, Bree? Prey? Besides, there's nothing wrong with being bi. Bi women are the best."

“Not saying there’s anything wrong with it.” She threw up her hands, defensive. I’d given her enough speeches about things like that, she knew when one was incoming. “Just saying, you know, she’s dated like five people since she’s been back in town. Less than two months. I don’t think she’s looking for serious, and serious is your specialty.”

She wasn’t wrong about that. Plus Hunter was sitting with Timothy. Father Timothy? Were they dating? I thought it was just Catholics who weren’t allowed to date, and we didn’t have a Catholic church in South Liberty.

I’d feel weird interrupting a date, even to give her tea, but at the same time, it was the middle of a weekday morning. Who was on a date at that time?

So I took my coffee from Sabrina, and the bag with my pastry, and turned to march over to where they were sitting. Hunter noticed me when I was still halfway across the room, and it was like the rest of the shop fell away. Those ice-blue eyes on me were the whole world, and she was so focused. So intense.

A roguish smirk fell onto her lips, and she lifted her chin to greet me. “Hey Jaycie. How are you this morning?”

“How nice to see you again, Miss Jones,” Timothy said, smiling over at me, but I couldn’t seem to look at him properly. That would have required me to break eye contact with Hunter.

By the time I found my brain again, I was sure it had been too long, too awkward, as per usual. “The tea,” I said, because again, awkward, then cleared my throat. “That is, you said you liked Mom’s willow bark tea, and when I went over to the shop, this was all we had left, so I thought I would pack it up for you.”

I transferred my own pastry bag into the same hand as my coffee, and reached into

my purse for the small bag of tea, then held it out to her.

Her smile this time was less smirk and more genuine pleasure. “Thank you so much. This really is the greatest stuff known to man.”

“Don’t I know it?” Timothy said. That was odd. Was being a preacher painful? I supposed it might involve standing a lot. “She made one for inflammation that might actually be saving my life. She dropped off half a pound of it...ah, before. She knows how much it helps me.”

And that, finally, got my attention off Hunter. “The ginger turmeric?” I asked.

“That’s the one,” he agreed. “I know it seems ridiculous, but Doctor Arthur has been able to reduce my medication since I started drinking it every day.”

I blinked, nodding, even though I had no idea what we were talking about, not really. That seemed to be happening to me a lot lately.

Still, if he was seeing September, I trusted that his health was in good hands. “Well then, I’ll make sure we have it available when...when I reopen. I’m not sure if I’ll be the one running the shop, but I’m planning to reopen it. Even if I have to hire someone else to do it.”

His smile was lovely, and I suspected all the girls in town swooned over him. Well, the ones who liked boys.

“I, um, I better get over there. I’m working on getting it all ready for reopening. I just wanted to stop and give you that, since you’d mentioned it,” I said, motioning to Hunter, ducking my head.

She reached over and grabbed my hand, squeezing it. “Thank you, Jaycie. Really,

thanks. I appreciate you thinking of me.”

Fuck, the things a confident touch did to my brain.

I just nodded, silent, and slipped out before I made a spectacle by throwing myself bodily at her.

I was almost numb, stunned, as I headed back over to the shop. It wasn't just that Hunter was unbelievably hot, though that was certainly true. It was Sabrina, pointing me at hot women, like old times. It was maybe-Father Timothy, asking after the tea and the store.

It was belonging here in South Liberty.

Because I really did.

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The bookstore was in immaculate condition, which wasn't a huge shock, all things told. Mom had always been very good at keeping up with details. The bookstore had been like a second home to her, and she'd always kept a tidy home.

I had a moment to wonder about the electricity being on in the shop, but it was resolved as soon as I started going through Mom's paperwork on her desk.

In the weeks before her death, she'd transferred everything over to my name in the shop. Electricity, internet, water...setting it up so that a transition to me running the place would be entirely seamless.

Even the point of sale setup had had me as the owner of the system with the login I'd used way back in high school, so nothing would change. Paperwork would be mailed to me at the house, and sent electronically to the same email address I'd been using most of my life.

Part of me wanted to shake my mom and point out what a mess that would have been if I hadn't come home, hadn't planned to start running the shop myself, but also...It wasn't as though I could have just gone back to my life in LA and left the shop dormant and house empty. Sure, I'd gone back right after the funeral thinking I would do exactly that, but I hadn't been thinking clearly at the time.

I certainly hadn't been planning to reopen the shop, but as it turned out, all I would have to do for that was just...turn the lights on and flip the sign to open.

Although...there was the matter of the teas I was out of.

I'd been carrying Mom's book around with me as though it was a security blanket, so I'd stuffed it in my purse that morning. With no small amount of trepidation, I fished it out of my bag, along with the keyring, carrying both to the storage room door in the back of the shop. I tried each key till I found the right one to open the locked door.

A chilly breeze seemed to blow out of the back room, and I...well hell, I couldn't tell anymore if it was my imagination or reality.

I'd been in that storage room before.

It was just a room, dammit.

I pushed the door open and marched inside, and . . . froze.

As a kid, most people learn that you can test if a battery still has a charge by touching your tongue to the end. And this was...it was like that, but as though I'd somehow dipped my entire body into the end of a battery. A strange buzzing electric feeling, filling me up, giving me goosebumps, and making the hair all over my body stand on end.

It got worse as I went to the center of the room, and my gaze was drawn down...to the worn old wool rug Mom had over the main part of the floor. I'd always thought it was because the original hardwood floors in the old building were freezing in the winter, but a suspicion struck me, and I reached down to grab the end of the rug, pulling it up.

There, laid into the wood in neat metal lines, was a five-pointed star surrounded by a circle, the center part of the star big enough for me to sit inside.

Holy crap.

A noise grabbed my attention, and I looked up to find that the cats had joined me. They lazily sauntered into the room, both coming to sit at the edge of the metal circle, looking up at me expectantly.

“I don’t...I don’t know how to do this, guys. I don’t even know if there’s a ‘this’ to do?—”

Hex meowed at me, long and low, and instead of just “meow,” I heard “Kittens always start slow. It’s okay.”

I blinked, staring at her as she leaned down to sniff at the circle.

Bee blinked at me, then turned to Hex and also meowed, and this time I heard a younger, slightly annoyed voice insisting, “Hecate, I think she understood you. That’s not fair. She’s supposed to understand me. I’m her familiar.”

Hex gave a long-suffering sigh. “She can understand both of us, silly. She has the magic now. It just took a little time to settle in.”

I collapsed to the floor in the middle of the circle, staring at both of them in utter shock.

In front of me, Bee gave a little bounce. “What are we going to do? Magic? Can we curse Tanya? Make her toenails all fall out?”

I blinked in shock, but also, I wasn’t the one Tanya had locked in the coat closet, so it was understandable Bee was still pissed at her.

“I was...I was gonna make tea. We’re out of bedtime and willow bark.”

“Those are easy,” Hex announced. “I’ll get the lavender. Bee, you get the

ashwagandha.”

Bee turned and stared at her for a moment, as though shocked. “How the heck do you spell that?”

“I don’t know. It’s an ‘a’ with a bunch of letters behind it, and it’s brown.” Hex motioned with her head toward a spot on the storage shelves, then turned and hopped up to a different shelf, returning a moment later with a bag of lavender clutched in her teeth. When I sat there, continuing to stare at her, she nudged me with her head, dropping the bag in my lap. “You should get the container, kitten. And the candles, and find the page with the spell.”

I had no idea what else to do, so I...I did what the cat told me to. Wasn’t that a mindfuck? “Definitely going to end up in the hospital,” I mumbled to myself as I opened the book, searching the last handful of pages for—there. Bedtime tea. White tea, lavender, ashwagandha, and a handful of other ingredients. Oddly, while most comparable teas had chamomile in them, Mom’s recipe didn’t. Mostly, I suspected, because the woman herself had despised the flavor of the little yellow flowers.

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Now was not the time to question my mother's perfectly good recipes, though. Spells? I mean, I was supposed to light a candle and say a chant in the middle of a...a spell circle. That made it a spell rather than just a recipe, didn't it?

The cats helped me gather what I needed, and I grabbed the huge glass jar from the front of the shop, measuring out and adding the ingredients to the empty container.

When everything had been added, including a sprinkle of "consecrated moon water," whatever the heck that was, I took the jar and sat with it in the circle. There were lit candles at the points of the star, and the chant was simple enough, not like, Latin or Gaelic or anything I didn't already know how to pronounce. Almost a little limerick about offering friends a good night's sleep.

"Remember to infuse it with your intention," Hex told me, sounding wise beyond anyone's years, let alone a cat's possible lifetime. "Spells don't do anything if you don't mean them."

I thought back to Mona Brighton, and how I very much wanted the sweet old lady—and everyone else who drank the tea—to have a good night's sleep, while I read the chant—three times, just as Mom said to in the book.

For a moment, it felt as though all the air in the room was rushing inward, toward the tea, the candle flames leaning toward the jar, but then...nothing. The room was just as it had been, and nothing of note had changed.

I looked up at Hex and Bee, who were sitting just outside the edge of the circle, looking at the tea. "Is that...it?"

Hex looked up at me and gave the kitty approximation of a shrug. “I think so. It’s just tea, it’s not like it’s a powerful spell.”

“We should try some,” Bee suggested, and Hex sighed at her.

“So you want to take a nap right now? Who am I kidding? You always want to take a nap.”

“Oh. Good point.” Tentatively, Bee stepped in close, sniffing the jar of tea. “Smells magical to me. I think it’s good.”

Somehow, I suspected she didn’t know much more about it than I did.

On the other hand, Bee could talk. At least, she could talk to me. “So this is...normal? You two talking?”

“Sure,” Hex agreed. “Maggie always talked to me. And now you have the magic, so now you can.”

The magic.

I wondered if maybe Maggie hadn’t told me about magic because there was a limit. Maybe only one person could be magical at once. That seemed odd, but it was possible. I still agreed with September, and if I ever had or adopted a kid, I’d tell them as soon as I could.

“And we can do spells,” Bee said, sounding considerably more excited about it than her sister. But then, Hex was a good twenty or more years old, and Bee was barely half that, so it sort of made sense she had more energy. “We could curse Lucy Beasley so that her nose hair grows three feet long overnight and she has to cut it every day.”

I had to cover up a laugh at that, because I wasn't going to do it, but the image was...well, damn it, it was funny.

And that woman had talked shit about my mom, so screw her.

“Okay, well let's get this one back on the shelf and see about the willow bark tea, all right?” I grabbed the jar in both hands and headed out to the front of the shop to put it away. I worried a little about trying out untested magic on strangers, so maybe...maybe I would take some of it home and try it myself before I opened the shop up. Same for the willow bark, not that I was in pain. Maybe if I put in a day's work and cleaned the whole store, I'd be achy enough for it to help at the end of the day.

Even as tidy as Mom had left everything, a good dusting wouldn't go awry, and maybe an air purifier in one corner. So after making the other tea, which went much the same as the first, with just a little more weird random wind whipping about, I grabbed the ladder and the duster and went to work, reacquainting myself with the shop's inventory as I worked.

This wasn't so bad. I could do this.

And my cat could talk. And Mom's cat too.

Hopefully, I was not in the middle of a nervous breakdown, making up magic and talking cats as I went.

I was, in fact, exhausted and achy when I went home, so I took samples of both teas with me. The willow bark steeped just like I remembered, and had the same slightly bitter and astringent flavor from my childhood, which I actually rather liked. I sipped at it while leaning into the fridge, unimpressed with what little I had in there.

Takeout leftovers, all of it, and not much of any one thing.

Suddenly, my eyes focused on the bagels, and nothing had ever sounded as delicious as a cinnamon swirl bagel with cream cheese. I heated one up in the toaster and smeared it with more cream cheese than any person could possibly need, then licked the extra off my fingers.

There was no jam in the fridge, which was a disappointment. But there had to be jam somewhere. Where had Mom kept the extra? The basement. I stumbled down the basement stairs, the room dark even though I'd flipped on the light before heading down, and found...the shelves I remembered, filled with all Mom's canned fruits and vegetables. The washer and dryer. Some empty shelves. A desk and chair. One of the two lights in the ceiling fixture burned out, which was why it was so dark.

I turned to take in the rest of the basement, and realized...I'd spent my whole childhood thinking Mom was storing extra stuff for the shop in the basement, but that wasn't it at all. It was more witch stuff. Funny, because Sabrina and I had always played at apothecary there as kids.

Or as witches.

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Old glass jars filled with things we didn't recognize were perfect stand-ins for eye of newt.

I looked down at the floor and found another thin woolen rug, so I turned up the edge with my toe. Silver lines inlaid to the hardwood floor, and unless I missed my guess, it was a bigger circle than the one in the shop.

Holy crap.

Mom was a witch.

I was a witch.

Magic was real.

Cats could talk.

I turned and grabbed the first jar of jam that came to hand, realized it was actually a jar of asparagus pickles, and reached for something red instead.

Beets. Dammit.

There, raspberry jam, recognizable by the tiny seeds, and on top, it did in fact say raspberry jam. Thank goodness.

I took the jam and the beets upstairs, because who didn't love Mom's pickled beets? When I almost stumbled on the last step, I paused, looking at the cats, who were

waiting for me at the top of the stairs, looking concerned.

Weird.

That was weird, wasn't it?

I put the beets in the fridge as I slurped down the last of the willow bark tea, then I slathered a layer of jam on top of my bagel and finally went to flop down on the couch in the living room.

That bagel was possibly the most delicious thing I'd tasted in my entire life, even if I ended up with more cream cheese and jam on my fingers.

I rolled my head to look at Hex and Bee as I licked my fingers clean, beaming at my cats. Both of them were staring up at me like I was a very large and perplexing kitten. "Is it possible this tea takes too much pain away? I feel a little?—"

"High," Hex told me. "You're high. Maybe you should add more tea that doesn't have the magic on it, to reduce the effect. You don't want to get arrested for selling the stuff. And maybe...only drink half a cup of the other kind to test it out? You don't want to sleep all tomorrow or something."

Huh.

Probably a good plan.

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I went with half a cup of the bedtime tea, and that was good. Clearly, I didn't know my own strength yet when it came to this whole magic thing, because I fell asleep with the teacup still a quarter full, crashing out even on my tiny childhood bed, and

not waking till close to eight, which was late for me.

The cats were sitting on either side of me as I opened my eyes, watching me with...well, interest or concern, I supposed.

“Are you alive?” Bee asked, standing and climbing onto my chest as I opened my eyes. “You seem okay.”

“Of course I’m alive. What did you think, I was a zombie?” I froze for a moment, considering. “Are zombies real?”

“We were mostly concerned you would oversleep, so this is good,” Hex said, glaring at Bee. “Yes, zombies are a thing, but nothing you’ll ever have to deal with. That’s not the kind of magic you practice.”

That was...good, I supposed. I didn’t love the notion of anyone raising zombies, but if it were a huge problem anywhere, I suspected it would have been on the news by now rather than just fiction. That was why I hadn’t believed in magic, after all. It wasn’t common knowledge, and as much as people loved stories about magic and ghosts and huge conspiracies, it just wasn’t realistic. People weren’t that good at keeping secrets.

I sat up, ready to drag myself out of bed, expecting to feel like I was fifty years older than I was, but there was no residual pain. No aches, no tiredness refusing to slide off.

Holy crap, no wonder Mom’s teas were so popular.

Hex had been right, though; I needed to dilute the magic ones I’d made with extra non-magic tea. That would work, right?

I had to hope, since I still had no freaking idea how magic actually worked.

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So instead of dragging myself out of bed, I hopped up, dressed, and went down to eat the last bagel in the house. I really needed to get to the grocery store that night. I'd been planning on opening the shop that morning, a sort of trial run to see how it went, but maybe I should go to the grocery store instead.

Or maybe I'd go get some coffee and make a choice after that.

No reason I needed to be in a rush to get things figured out, other than the fact that my bank account was getting a little pitiful. I really did need to check out the paperwork the lawyer had left with me, and see what else there might be. Mom had always been a saver, so maybe there had been some money in savings I could live off of until life came together.

Or maybe I was just procrastinating, when it would be easy to just...open the store.

Either way, I hopped into Mom's SUV with the cats, who both stared suspiciously at the sky, which was gray and threatening rain as we drove into town. Then I let them into the shop, turned off the alarm, and relocked it before heading over to the coffee shop.

There was a line of almost a dozen people, and the place was busier than it had been before, all the tables full. But there was something else going on this morning. Something...wrong. Something strange and charged and...was it possible for a place to feel angry?

The women in line in front of me were whispering to each other, and Walter on the espresso machine seemed to be banging everything around loudly. Sabrina was on the

register, and she looked pale and wan.

She looked like she was about to start crying.

What the hell?

One of the group of three women in front of me turned away from the counter toward her friends next to her, her lips pursed. “Well she certainly looks like someone who might have done it.”

“Maybe that other granddaughter,” one of her friends whispered back, so loud I suspected half the shop heard it, even though it wasn’t quiet in any corner of the place. “The one who lived with him. Abby-something.”

A deep, irritated sigh nearby caught my attention—and the gossiping women’s too, as we all turned to look at who it was.

In the front corner of the shop next to where the line formed, there was a smallish single table with two cushy orange chairs, and only one of them inhabited. It was doubtless the least popular table in the place despite the nice chairs, because every single person who came in walked past it. If you wanted to people watch, it was great. If you wanted to work or have a conversation, not so much.

Sitting in the chair was Hunter Grant, yet again. How did I keep missing her? She was unmissable.

Maybe she was magical.

Today’s suit was dark gray with a royal blue waistcoat and matching shirt and tie the color of her eyes. She was looking at the gossiping women, lips twisted in utter disgust, and while I couldn’t blame her, I had kind of wanted them to keep talking. I

wanted to know what the heck was happening.

“Maybe,” she said, her tone dry and more than a little snide, “we should wait for someone who is in a position to do so, to determine that a crime has actually been committed. You know, before we go blaming people for it? Ephraim Collins was ninety years old, ladies, and he drank more than I do, which is frankly rather impressive. I’m not sure if you’re aware of this, but sometimes, old people die.”

They all stared at her open-mouthed for a moment, then the one who’d been whispering sputtered something incomprehensible about rudeness.

Me? I slid into the empty seat across from her. “I don’t know, I’ve heard spite can be a preservative. Never know how long someone unpleasant might manage to live.”

She was taking a sip from her teacup as I said it, and her shoulders trembled with laughter. “That, my dear, was absolutely cruel. I love it.”

I laughed, leaning toward her with a smile. There was a sudden thump, a paper cup being shoved down on the table, about as hard as one could slam a paper cup on a wooden table, and I looked up to find Walter staring at me with pursed lips. “Flat white. We don’t have any extra pastries today.”

Then he marched off. Well, first he shot Hunter a narrow-eyed glare, then he marched off.

“He just gets more and more pleasant every time I visit,” Hunter said, tone amused more than offended, and I turned to find her watching Walter go. She looked back at me after a moment. “He’s cute, I suppose, in that generic all-American athlete way. Decent ass for a straight boy. He seems to dislike you even more than me, though.”

One of the gossiping women sniffed at her. “Didn’t you go to college on a basketball

scholarship?”

She smiled up at the woman, again spreading her hands. “I should think that would make me uniquely qualified to make such a statement. I’ve been that generically attractive but ultimately uninteresting person.”

That made me laugh, but for the deadpan delivery, but also because Hunter could not possibly have ever been uninteresting. I sniffed at, then sipped my drink, and it didn’t seem wrong. Plus Walter was working where people could see him, so I doubted he’d spit in it or anything. “I have no idea why he hates me,” I told her. “Maybe because I’m not interested in his ass.”

Hunter gave a deep, melodramatic sigh. “Oh, break the poor little boy’s heart why don’t you? No boys at all?”

“Nope. They’re just too high maintenance for me.”

She pursed her lips, but then sighed and nodded, taking another sip from her cup. “Fair. Men are certainly more difficult to please than women. More emotional too. I just can’t resist a fine ass, whomever it might be attached to. Can’t say I blame you for avoiding them, given the opportunity.”

“So . . . what’s going on?”

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She sat back in her chair with a sigh, dropping the teacup into its saucer. “Ephraim Collins died last night. And unfortunately, no one in this town has anything better to do than gossip about what might have happened to cause it.”

I scowled at that. “But . . . like you said, he was ninety. Or . . . something like that.”

Ephraim had been Sabrina’s grandfather. He’d been a horrible, cantankerous old man for as long as I’d been alive. Sabrina’s parents had borrowed money from him to open the coffee shop, and he’d held it over them right up until their deaths.

Then, when Sabrina had turned eighteen and wanted to take over the shop, he’d done the same to her. Obliquely promising to leave her the shop in his will, but only if she bowed to his every whim in the meantime.

Frankly, while I would never assume that adorable ray of sunshine Sabrina would be involved in a murder, I also wouldn’t have blamed her if she had. Her grandfather was eminently murderable.

Hunter, not seeming put off by my sudden silence at all, leaned in and put a hand atop mine. “Hey, Pat Parker may be tired, and way past ready for retirement, but he’s a good man. He’s not going to just let some gossips push a murder charge onto Sabrina.”

The sheriff. Of course Hunter knew him.

She’d been in “the agency,” whatever that was.

Still, I sighed and nodded, letting her conviction convince me. Surely the wheels of justice wouldn't railroad someone as innocent and sweet as Sabrina into jail for a crime she couldn't possibly have committed.

That couldn't happen.

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As hesitant as I'd been to leave the coffee shop, I'd had a plan for the day, and I couldn't just ignore it because I was worried about Sabrina and any investigation into her grandfather's death.

Besides, it wasn't as though sitting there in the coffee shop worrying actually helped anyone.

So I headed back over to Tea, Book and Candle with my coffee, ignoring the lack of pastry. I'd had that bagel before leaving the house, after all.

At nine sharp, I flipped the lights on and turned the neon open sign in the window on. Then I remembered the "closed till further notice" paper on the door and rushed to take it down, as though people wouldn't be able to tell that it was no longer valid when the open sign was on.

Maybe I'd put it up again at the end of the day. We'd have to see how things went. If running the shop was as simple as I remembered, well...maybe I'd be okay.

Tanya's complaints about me just going with the flow rose up in my mind, as though to remind me of my failings.

Was it so bad, to let the world lead you?

I'd always said before that it had never led me wrong, so why not trust in the universe? But well...Tanya's existence in my life proved that theory incorrect. Sometimes the world did lead you wrong, and you had to either make a better choice or suffer a cheating girlfriend.

I spent the first half hour after the store opened cutting the two teas I had made with equal amounts of non-magic tea, hoping that would be enough to fix its excessive potency. The front bell rang just as I was setting the second container back on the shelf, and we were in business.

Literally.

As though floodgates had opened, I wasn't alone in the store again for the rest of the morning.

Three hours later, when the last person cleared out, I sat down in one of the chairs next to the book section with a sigh. My feet were killing me, and I was definitely going to be taking some more of that willow bark tea home with me.

That was, if we had any left by the end of the day. I'd already sold almost half of it.

It was a Thursday, for fuck's sake, and barely noon. Who was out shopping?

All of South Liberty and apparently half of Iowa City, given the constant stream of customers.

Hopefully it was just a glut of people who had been waiting for the store to open, or who were curious about Mom's passing—though I hadn't been asked any questions about that, only offered condolences by a few people I knew from my childhood. Either way, if the shop kept being that busy, I was going to have to hire someone to work with me, because this was too much.

I ran a quick total on the point of sale device, and found that I'd made over five hundred dollars. Yeah, if that kept up, I would even be able to afford to hire someone. So, two someones, if I wasn't going to run the shop myself.

When my cell phone rang just as the door opened and more people came in, I sighed. Still, I checked the screen and found a local number I didn't immediately know, so I picked up. "Jaycie Jones."

"Miss Abernathy," came the somewhat tremulous ancient voice of Martin Hayes, completely ignoring how I'd answered the phone. "I'm sorry to bother you, but we need to move forward with Mrs. Abernathy's estate. If you've signed the papers?"

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:24 am*

Fuck me sideways, I didn't even remember where I'd put the damn papers. Kitchen table? I looked around behind the counter there in the shop and didn't find them. I was pretty sure I'd taken them with me when I had left the store, so...“I'm working on it, Mr. Hayes. I'll get them back to you as soon as I possibly can.”

He heaved a great, put-upon sigh, but seemed to resign himself to the fact that I wasn't going to rush over to his office to hand the paperwork over right that moment. “Well when you drop them off, the office takes checks. We don't accept credit cards or cash.”

My first thought was that was ridiculous, because it wasn't nineteen-fifty, no matter what some people wished. No one in actual business today refused to take credit cards. They'd go out of business.

Second was...wait, I owed this man money? I'd never hired him for anything, and never intended to. Why would I owe him anything at all?

“Understood,” was all I said, before hanging up without even telling him to have a nice day.

How very un-Midwestern of me.

Maybe somehow, Mom hadn't had any remaining money, and I needed to pay him to handle the will. Was that a thing? It seemed somehow wrong, the notion that I could owe anything based on actions not my own, justbecause I was the “beneficiary” of an estate that was in the red.

Except that clearly, Mom's was not. There was the house and the shop, and Mom had never been one to live beyond her means, so I couldn't imagine a universe where she'd died in debt.

And yet, he'd implied as much, hadn't he?

I should have called him back, demanded answers. Or at least hunted down where I had put the paperwork he'd left for me to go through.

Instead, I was once again inundated with customers, and didn't have time to do anything but help people.

By the time five rolled around and I could flip off the open sign, I'd sold so much tea that I was worried about running out of things the next day, and the lawyer was nowhere near my top priority.

First was starting an order of the ingredients to make more of the most popular teas, because I wasn't out of stock, or even close to it, but if things kept going the way they had, I would be out of everything in under a week.

So I spent an hour closing things down, running end of day reports, and then making new teas in place of ones that had run out during the course of the day. I kept with the pattern I'd used on the first two, making a batch, using Mom's...spells...and then cutting the stuff with as much non-magical tea on top.

Fortunately, a few of the popular ones didn't even require magic—just dried peaches and ginger, or lavender and bergamot oil.

After that, sprawled out in a chair in the office—so no one would see me inside and knock to be let in even though the shop was clearly closed, as three people had tried to do so far—I pulled out my phone and dialed Gabby.

“Hey J,” she answered on the second ring. “I...really hope you’re not calling me hoping for good news on the job front.”

I winced, even though I honestly hadn’t been sure why I was calling her. Just because I wanted to talk to her, I thought. “That bad, huh?”

“You’ve seen how things are, I’m sure. There are actually people out there—people in power—arguing that education is a terrible thing, and leaving everyone ignorant and gullible is the way to go.” She let out a sigh, and a chair squeaked in the background. “Not that I wouldn’t love to work with you, but we’re having to justify our existence as a department right now. And it doesn’t help that too damn many of my colleagues are taking it as some sophist bullshit challenge and acting like if only we’re clever enough, we’ll convince people of facts they’re denying.”

Ouch. Well, I couldn’t say I wasn’t well familiar with the type, having gone through an entire degree in philosophy myself. “Have you reminded them that the Greeks executed Socrates?”

She burst into laughter at that, so mission accomplished. “I miss you, girl. We should have dinner.”

“Tonight? I just finished up in the shop for the day. I’ll bring you some tea, and we can meet halfway between us, at that great Indian place by the mall.” I had to go to the store anyway, so I could do both with one trip into the city that way.

“That sounds amazing, yes please. I need naan like I need oxygen. Meet you there around six-thirty?”

“Done,” I agreed. “I even promise not to bother you about a job for the rest of the night. I think...I think maybe I was trying to decide whether I need to hire someone to work in the shop, like, right away, because it turns out Mom’s place is hopping.”

We chatted some more as I cleaned up the office, and then hung up as I headed out, stopping only a moment to package up some of Mom's relaxation tea, since it sounded like Gabby could use it.

I would put a "now hiring" sign in the window the next day, I decided. I didn't know about hiring anyone in South Liberty, but well, my choices were limited. I wasn't going to be able to handle that many more days like today on my own, which was both good and bad at once. I could make a living this way for sure, but also...well, it was exhausting.

I didn't want to live my whole life on willow bark tea, no matter how well it worked.

16

I had to run back to the house, if for no other reason than to drop the cats off, since as much as I was willing to take them anywhere, they weren't welcome in restaurants.

"But you'll bring me rice pudding," Bee was demanding as we headed home and I told them my plans. "I want the rice pudding."

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Hex sighed at her, ever the long-suffering older sister. “It’s mostly milk, it’ll make you sick to your stomach.”

“But I like it,” Bee whined.

“A little,” I agreed. “I’ll bring you a little bit. But Hex is right, and you shouldn’t be eating it.”

“You eat ice cream even though it makes you sick sometimes,” Bee argued, determined to have her say, even if it was by way of something as irrelevant as an ice cream headache. Maybe I’d turned her into a sophist while getting my philosophy degree.

Great.

All thoughts of the argument fled my mind when I turned up my driveway, though, and found a cop car sitting near the house. What the heck?

Like the cops in South Liberty didn’t have enough to do today, looking into Ephraim Collins’s death. Why would they be bothering me? I sure hadn’t killed him. I hadn’t even seen him since I was a teenager, mean old mostly-shut-in that he’d been.

So I pulled up and parked in my driveway, casual as possible, then hopped out and let the cats out the passenger side, though I kept an eye on the cop car as I did so. While the cats were hopping out next to me, a tall older man stepped out of the sheriff’s car.

Literally, then, it was the sheriff’s car, because this was Pat Parker, the man who’d

been sheriff in South Liberty for as long as I remembered. He looked a little like an old movie cowboy, with thick silver hair and what might even qualify as a handlebar mustache in the same shade. He was tall, but not one of those scarily tall guys, maybe just under six feet.

His smile was warm, and it did calm me somewhat. He wouldn't smile at me if he were here to give me trouble, would he?

"Miss Jones," he said, and his tone was all aww-shucks—he even ducked his head. "Not sure if you've heard about all the hubbub in town today, but it seems that Ephraim Collins went and got himself poisoned."

I blinked in shock for a moment. Was he...was he saying I had something to do with it? No, he wouldn't smile at a murder suspect, would he? Maybe he'd been poisoned with one of Mom's—one of my—teas.

"I do hate to be a bother," he continued, "but sometimes your mother, Miss Abernathy, that is, would help us out a little around the station with situations like this."

Situations like this.

Murder? I couldn't remember the last time we'd had a murder in South Liberty. If that had ever happened.

As though reading my mind, he winced. "Well, mostly with situations a little less dire admittedly, but she was a great help, and I wanted to come by and see if—if maybe you were open to offering a little aid and direction to the sheriff's office, times like this. Using those special skills, like your mother had."

Help. He was asking me, random citizen, to help him solve a murder. Because

Sabrina's grandfather had been poisoned.

I blinked for a moment, just staring at him in shock, but then...what could I say? No? Oops, I'm not actually much of a witch like my mom was, so I don't know what I can do?

That was the issue, really. I had no idea what I could—or couldn't—do. Not the first clue. So before I agreed to do anything, I needed to figure out just what I was able to offer in a situation like this.

Assuming that was what he was asking.

But...what else could he be asking me for? I had a degree in philosophy, not criminal justice. Not forensics, or whatever science it was that cops got their degrees in.

I'd been quiet too long, though, and the cats were looking up at me like I had gone nutty. "I'll, um, see what I can do," I finally told him. "I'm not Mom, but I'll do my best. Should I just come down to the station, or..."

He beamed at me, like he'd been offered a gift, and with the white mustache and hair, well, it put me in mind of Santa Claus, even though the sheriff didn't look like he'd ever so much as seen a bowl full of jelly. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a card, holding it out to me. "You can," he offered, "but I'm not always there. This is my number. You call anytime, day or night, and I'll be happy to hear from you."

Gingerly, I reached out and took the card, like it was a snake that might bite me. It just had his name and title, along with a number for the office, and one that was labeled "cell." And just like that, I had the sheriff's personal phone number.

Weird, and kinda squicky.

But he'd always seemed like a decent person, if not ever the one I most wanted to see. So I nodded and slid the card into the outside pocket on my purse. "I'll let you know if I learn anything," I promised.

I didn't know if I expected to learn anything, but I certainly would tell him if I did.

"Much obliged, Miss Jones," he answered, tipping his hat, and we were right back to that initial cowboy impression.

He went and climbed back into his car, and drove away as the cats and I watched.

I was just turning back toward the house when motion nearby caught my eye. The neighbor—specifically, the woman I remembered from my childhood. She was stalking through her yard with purpose, right up onto my grass, where Laverne was picking her way through the leaves looking for...whatever it was chickens looked for.

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The woman met my eye as she snatched up my chicken, and then turned and marched back up toward her house.

Did...did she know she'd stolen my chicken? Was she convinced, like the other woman of the house had been, that if she left Laverne in my clutches, that the poor bird would be sacrificed for some kind of bizarre ritual to see the future? I could hardly blame her if that were the case, though the hostility was unwarranted.

Ryan was standing in the yard nearby, watching the woman I assumed was his mother as she marched right up to their chicken coop and shoved my chicken inside, closing and latching the doors behind her. He turned to look at me, confused, turning toward the coop, then me.

I headed over to the edge of my yard, so I wouldn't have to yell to have him hear me. "I'm going to buy a chicken coop and put it together this weekend. You up for helping with some manual labor? I'll pay you in food and cash, obviously."

He beamed at me. "Sweet, I'm in. Need me to bring tools?"

"Um...maybe. I think Mom had some stuff in the garage, but it couldn't hurt, to be certain."

He laughed, but gave me a nod as he turned to head back up the hill toward his house. "I guess we'll just keep the one in our coop till then?"

"Sounds perfect to me," I agreed.

“Sorry about Mom, by the way. She’s just . . . really opinionated about . . . everything.”

I waved him off, because while I was pretty sure his mother was a jerk, there was no reason he needed to apologize for it. He wasn’t the one stealing chickens and glaring at near-strangers like they were the ones in the wrong as they did it. “Nothing you need to worry about. See you Saturday.”

“Saturday!” he called back, smiling as he did so.

Was it weird that the best friend I’d made in town so far was a kid?

Well, and then there was Hunter. I wasn’t quite sure how to classify her yet, other than that she was someone I had to do a lot more thinking about.

Thinking about a gorgeous woman. What a trial.

17

Gabby and I met in the parking lot of the Indian restaurant, hugging and smiling like a couple of weirdos before heading inside.

I was once again annoyed with myself for not coming home sooner. Gabby was awesome, and I had missed her terribly. She’d always been a better friend than Tanya had been a girlfriend. We could have gone to grad school at Iowa together, and...well, no point in obsessing over what was finished and couldn’t be changed now.

We sat and ordered, chatting about nothing in particular, as we’d always done. The state of the world, local issues, random new songs we both liked. It was like being back in college, but somehow better than that.

“How’s your mom?” I asked, as the specter of my own mother’s loss leaped up in my mind, reminding me of its existence.

Seeming to understand where I was coming from, she winced. “She’s good. You know how she is. Calling all the time, demanding to know when I’m going to give her grandchildren. Like she’ll ever see them if I do. She still hasn’t setfoot in Iowa once, just expects me to drop everything and go back to California three times a year.”

I cocked my head, considering. “Thanksgiving, Christmas, and . . .”

That elicited an eye roll. “Mother’s day, of course. What kind of daughter doesn’t visit her mother on the very day invented for mothers?”

I cringed at the idea of the attached guilt trip, and while I now wished I had visited my mother three times a year every year—or even more—I could see Gabby’s point. Travel was expensive, and most of us didn’t get much time off for those holidays. I was glad Mom had never given me those guilt trips. “Maybe you should buy her a ticket here for the next one. Seems like something she might do to you, if she wanted to you visit.”

“Hm. You’re not wrong. Maybe I should. It’s the best chance I have of seeing her ever again. And she’s alone in that big old house since Papa died, so she ought to come visit.” She paused and gave a sharp, decisive nod. “Good thinking. This is why I always liked having you around. You know how to deal with Mom better than I do.”

I ducked my head, and found myself looking forward to seeing Maria again. She was a wonderful woman, who had always wanted a huge family, but she simply hadn’t been blessed with a hundred children the way she had wanted. Instead, she’d practically taken in every friend Gabby had brought home. I’d visited her occasionally after Gabby had left LA, but as in most things, I’d let Tanya’s opinions

lead me, and she hadn't liked Maria, so I'd rarely gone.

"How's Bee?" Gabby asked as our food came, grinning over at me.

I scoffed. "Opinionated as ever." I almost mentioned Bee's plans for revenge on Tanya and Lucy, but well...explaining to my friend that I was having full conversations with my cat required more than just my word. Should I tell her? September had believed Mom, and she was a doctor, while Gabby's vocation was a good deal softer, if no less serious.

Still, if I was going to tell her, I wanted to do it at home, where maybe I could prove what I was saying, not just sound like a person who needed to be checked into the local mental hospital.

So instead we talked about what we'd been doing for the last few years. I lamented about how I had done nothing with my degree, and she sighed and told me that honestly, I wasn't missing out on much. Sure, some students were a delight, but that was rather rare. We discussed my lack of interest in following through on a law degree, which she understood, and she admitted that she'd considered getting her doctorate, not because she wanted to take more school, but because the earning potential was quite a bit more.

I did get some kheer to go when we were finished, since I'd promised Bee I would. Just, like I'd also said, I wasn't going to give her a lot of it.

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As we headed out of the restaurant, I glanced around. “You don’t know where I could get a chicken coop, do you?”

She froze, like a character in a sitcom, and slowly panned to look at me. “You’re joking. Jaycie, you barely even wanted to sit on benches that’d had pigeons on them. Tell me you’re not planning to buy chickens. I know you’re living in the middle of nowhere, but come on.”

“It’s...not exactly that,” I hedged, even though it really was. There were going to be chickens in my life, and I was trying to embrace it. It was just that I didn’t seem to have a say in it. “Thing is, someone paid at the shop with a chicken, and then left before I could say I don’t, you know, accept birds as currency. Besides, she was my old school lunch lady. I wasn’t going to tell her she couldn’t have bedtime tea.” I groaned and leaned against my car, burying my face in my hands. “It’s not that I want chickens, it’s just that Mom’s best friend tells me this wasn’t an unusual thing, so I kinda want to be prepared.”

“Prepared for chickens.”

“Prepared for chickens,” I agreed, peeking through my fingers at her, waiting for judgment, but instead she descended into laughter.

“Damn, I missed you so much.” Then she motioned behind us. “There’s a big box hardware store over there. I’d say you’re on your own, but honestly, I gotta see this.”

So we both went over to the hardware store in question. I wasn’t expecting to find anything, even though September had told me I could find one. But I’d definitely

been in the same kind of store out in LA, and had never once seen a chicken coop there.

But one question to an employee and we were looking at not just a single chicken coop, but an array of them.

“Exactly how many chickens are you expecting?” Gabby asked, trying hard but mostly failing to keep a straight face as we looked at the choices.

I scowled at her. “How the heck am I supposed to know how many people are going to try to pay me in chickens? Or how often? Or how long chickens live?” I blinked, staring at her. “Oh my god, I’m going to be overrun by chickens.”

We finally chose something based on the ability to fit the box into my SUV, and then Gabby offered to come down to South Liberty with me to help unload it. “I can help put it together too, but that’s going to take forever, so not tonight. Saturday, maybe?”

“The neighbor kid is also gonna come by on Saturday to help, if you want to join us,” I agreed. “We’ll have a party. I’ll order pizza.”

“Well if there’s free pizza in it for me, I’m definitely in,” she agreed, grinning.

She was lovely and patient enough to go to the grocery store with me too, before we drove back down to South Liberty. We set the enormous heavy box inside the garage to await Saturday, and I hugged her again before seeing her off, her muttering about calling her mother to tell her that I was going to have chickens. Maria Rivera had taught me how to make the fabulous recipes she served on every holiday, all the while lamenting that Gabby didn’t want to learn how to make her tamales. I suspected I was going to get a call from her suggesting what I could do with fresh eggs, and I started planning what recipes I could ask for.

Flan, for sure.

Maybe...maybe I could make tamales and flan for the holidays. I could invite Gabby over. And Sabrina and Walter if I had to, and...well, Hunter Grant had family in town, but maybe I could invite her anyway. Maybe even Father—or maybe not-Father—Timothy.

Tanya and I had never done much for the holidays, and I had missed having a big get-together with great food.

So maybe, if Tanya had been so right about everything, it was time to forget about that whole life. Time to move forward without letting anyone else decide things for me.

Time to do what I wanted.

18

I dragged the groceries inside and set them on the counter, and as I turned away from the fridge after putting the butter away, my gaze caught on the driveway.

The driveway, where earlier that day, the sheriff had parked and asked for my help.

He'd been talking about Mom, of course, because somehow she'd helped him with...well, I wasn't sure what. His job, though, clearly.

Bee and Hex joined me as I worked, Bee leaping up onto one of the kitchen table chairs and staring speculatively at the stuff on the counter. "Tuna?"

"Of course," I agreed, and since I was thinking about it, I grabbed a bowl and put a few spoonfuls of kheer into it for her. "Here, your pudding. That's all you're getting,

though, because Hex is right, and milk isn't good for you."

I looked to Hex, raising a brow. "You want some too?"

She considered for a moment, then heaved a great kitty sigh. "Yes."

So I gave her a bowl with a little pudding in it too.

And then, not gonna lie, I ate the rest myself. It wasn't that much better for me than it was for them, but it was delicious.

"So," I told them after I finished putting all the food away. "The sheriff wants my help with this investigation." Hex hadn't seemed surprised at all by his presence, which agreed with my presumption that it had been common for Mom. I ignored that and went on. "Any idea how I could help the sheriff find a murderer? I don't even, like, know anything about what happened, so I'm not sure how to help."

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“Maggie would always look through the book and see if anything stood out that seemed helpful,” Hex told me. “Then later, when she got older, she sort of had things memorized, so she knew what there was that might help. Truth tea, or a karma spell, or once, she summoned a ghost. That was fun.”

I blinked down at her as I picked up the empty kheer bowls.

Summoned a ghost?

That was . . . something.

My mind immediately strayed to not just summoning a ghost, but to summoning my mother’s own ghost.

It probably wouldn’t help with the investigation into Ephraim Collins’s death. Even if she’d disliked him as much as anyone else in town, Mom clearly hadn’t killed him. But...I could talk to her.

Get that moment that I’d been thinking about so much since the hospital had called me. That one last chance to talk to her.

So when I sat down on the couch, covered with cats bathing themselves after their treat, I might have been a little overly focused on that idea.

Summon the Unembodied Spirit, the page I found called it. Unembodied. What a weird word.

It seemed to fit the circumstances, and...well technically, I should probably be looking to summon the spirit of Ephraim Collins. He was the victim. If anyone knew who had murdered him, it'd probably be him, right?

Except I didn't even know how he'd died, other than the sheriff said poison. That could have been anything from his dinner to forcing him to swallow pills at gunpoint.

I couldn't believe that Sabrina had killed anyone. She was full of sunshine and puppies, and didn't have violence in her.

Her sister, Charlotte, didn't even live in South Liberty anymore, and no one had mentioned her visiting, so it wasn't likely to be her. She'd moved to Chicago to become a nurse and never come back. Not only had her grandfather had no reach or say in things there, but I imagined given their population, Chicago also needed rather more nurses than South Liberty.

I wondered if anyone had even told her he was dead. Sabrina might have; I knew they spoke on occasion.

He'd probably disinherited her when she'd gone, though, so I wasn't sure how much difference it all made to her. He'd threatened Sabrina with the same when she'd said she wanted to go away to college. That if she left town, he would sell the shop and disinherit her.

Sabrina hadn't cared all that much about the money, but she had cared, deeply, about the shop her parents had built.

His other granddaughter, Sabrina's cousin Abigail, was considerably older than the sisters. She was Ephraim's long-dead older son's child, and when we'd been tiny kids starting kindergarten, she'd been graduating high school. She had to be in her forties now, and she...well, I didn't know her.

I wouldn't have blamed her either if she had killed him, though.

It was clear to me now, with hindsight, that she'd gotten the same threats about being disinherited. Instead of staying in town to save her parents' beloved business like Sabrina, or leaving because she didn't give a damn like Charlotte, Abigail had stayed right there in the house with him. Not just stayed in South Liberty, but lived with the man her whole life. Worse still, for most of my childhood, he'd treated her more like a housekeeper than a granddaughter.

More than once when I'd been visiting Sabrina as a kid, I'd caught him yelling at her over cold coffee or dust on shelves.

I gave a deep sigh, setting the book aside, and looked at the cats. "You know, guys, I'm never going to be pro-murder, but like...are we even sorry Ephraim is dead? Why am I trying to help find his killer at all?"

Bee considered, giving me what looked like a confused little kitty frown, as she clearly agreed with me.

Hex, on the other hand, gave another deep, put-upon sigh. "Because if it's a murder, and the sheriff coming to you for help said that it is, someone is going to jail for this. It's not about the mean old man anymore. It's about the innocent people who might go to jail, or have their lives ruined, in the aftermath. Someone sank the boat. It was a terrible boat and no one misses it, but the wake it's left behind it might drag down any number of innocent people. We don't want that."

That was an excellent point, and I didn't have any counterpoints. Maybe we'd get lucky, and Lucy Beasley would have done it. She could go to jail, and it'd be a net win for the town.

Just the thought gave me a little jolt of shame, though. Ephraim had been awful, but

murdering him was too much. I didn't even much like the death penalty for killers, and no one had ever claimed the old man was that.

Still, the murder part was done, and I wouldn't be sorry to be rid of that mean old woman who'd maligned my mother as well as a man who'd made my best friend's life difficult.

I looked back down at the spell on the page. Unembodied Spirits. Maybe everyone on the other side could chat together, and Mom's ghost would, in fact, know who had killed the old man. It seemed very in character for her to have been keeping an eye on the town, after all.

Who was I kidding? I just wanted an excuse to summon up the ghost of my mother. I missed her.

If it didn't work, or she didn't know anything about Ephraim Collins, I could do something else later. Magic didn't seem to be finite, so I could try more than one thing.

And sometimes it was okay to do things for myself, wasn't it?

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:24 am*

I headed down into the basement, carrying the book with me. I had all the ingredients for the spell, though I was going to have to look into how to replenish things like “unicorn hair,” which did look like something that might sprout from a mythical beast’s head—iridescent and shiny, with the texture of very fine hairs. I hadn’t been a horse girl as a teen, but I was pretty sure horse hair wasn’t supposed to be that fine and soft.

The process was simple enough: gather ingredients, sit in circle, read spell—just like when I’d made the tea. Seemed almost impossible to mess up, in fact.

I measured everything I needed into a bowl as the spell said to do, then rolled the rug to one side, uncovering the pentacle on the floor. The bowl went in the middle of the circle, and then lit candles at the points, where there were already bits of wax clearly used to anchor previous candles.

I was careful as I went, measuring the ingredients to the gram with the scale, and putting the candles in precisely the right spots. Then I sat myself in the circle with the bowl and book in front of me, and started.

Unlike the one for the tea, this spell was in Latin, so I made good use of my college Latin skills to pronounce the words of the spell correctly. Thank goodness for Latin classes. I didn’t remember it all well enough to speak the language, so I didn’t know what half of it meant, but I remembered enough to get the pronunciation right.

As I read the last sentence, the bowl of ingredients seemed to spontaneously—and without heat—combust, filling the room with white smoke.

That was when I realized that nowhere had the spell required me to say whose disembodied spirit I was trying to summon. Sure, I'd had Mom fixed in my mind the whole time, but there hadn't been a place to add her name or anything. I thought maybe the spell had been intended to summon a parent, since "custos" had been in the words, which I knew was Latin for...sort of, guardian. It was the root of the words custody or custodian. It was about caring for a person.

That would have been Mom, right?

Was the spell only for summoning the ghosts of dead parents? That seemed weird.

I coughed as I inhaled a mouthful of smoke, but...was it even smoke? It didn't burn my lungs, just felt more heavy and wet, like I was walking through a fog bank. I waved a hand in front of myself, trying to dissipate it, then paused, wondering if that would screw up the spell.

Too late for that, I realized as the fog cleared in the next few seconds, leaving me questioning whether I'd imagined it all up entirely.

Except no, the smoke had definitely been there, and the bowl was now empty.

Also, apparently I'd already screwed up the whole spell entirely.

Because that was not my mother. That...was a transparent teenage boy. He was looking around, confused, and when his eyes finally found me, his brows shot up. "Who are you?"

"Who am I? Who are you? You were supposed to be my mother."

He looked down at himself, as though expecting to have morphed into a middle-aged woman, then shook his head. "Obviously not."

Obviously.

He was...well, it was weird. He looked a lot like most goth teenagers in my experience. Wearing baggy black jeans with a freaking wallet chain and a loose black Nirvana T-shirt, a lip ring in his bottom lip, his hair clearly dyed blue-black rather than naturally that color, since his eyebrows were some lighter shade—probably dishwater blond, but light enough that it was hard to tell. But something about the shaggy cut of his hair was odd. Like...well, unstylish, sort of. Old-fashioned?

I hesitated to call it that, since it wasn't like he looked like an extra from Grease with a giant pompadour or something. On the other hand, that kind of thing had come back into style, hadn't it?

I didn't really know men's hairstyles all that well.

Heck, I didn't know women's hairstyles. I just trimmed my split ends sometimes and that was it. So maybe I was wrong.

It was always popular to like Nirvana—it had been since before I was born.

I sighed, dragging my thoughts back to the actual situation. "I'm Jaycie. Who are you?"

He struck a defiant pose, hands on hips, and looked at me for a moment, before giving a sigh. That was weird. He was translucent. Transparent? What was the difference? Anyway, he definitely didn't have lungs, and didn't need to be sighing.

"Deez," he finally said.

I lifted a brow and felt very much like my own mother in that moment. "Deez? Deez. Yeah, right. Don't get me wrong, my name is fucking Justice Chesapeake Jones, I

have all the sympathy for a weird name, but your name is not Deez Nuts.”

His expression went slightly disappointed, but then sly. “Okay, fine. It’s Dez.”

“Not Seymour Butts? Mike Hawk?”

He laughed at that and shook his head. “No, it’s really Dez. Desmond, but who the hell wants to be called that?”

“That’s...fair. It’s why people call me Jaycie. Not that Justice bothers me, but still, awkward.”

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“No joke,” he agreed. “My girlfriend Journey gets shit sometimes. Old man Potter goes on about her parents being hippies, but whatever. Not her fault her parents weren’t boring assholes who named their kids John or Mary.”

That was rather similar to how I felt about my own name, so I nodded. On the other hand, old man Potter? The only person I could think of who’d ever been called that would have been Barry Potter’s grandfather, and he died in...well, when I was in grade school, I thought. He’d been the last one to actually farm on the Potters’ land.

I sat back, then remembered I was sitting on the floor inside a pentacle and sighed. Standing, I motioned for him to follow me. “Okay, so clearly I got this spell wrong. I was trying to summon the ghost of my mother, and you are not her.” I stopped, considering, and turned back to scrutinize his face. “Your last name isn’t Abernathy, right?”

“Aber—like Mags? No, I’m not related to her. She went to school with me, though.”

Mags. Went to school with me.

Holy shit.

I stopped at the bottom of the staircase, scrubbing a hand down my face and looking at him. “What year do you think it is, Dez?”

He cocked his head at me, and somehow, even though I could see the wall behind him, I could tell that the color drained out of his face. “Nineteen-ninety-four. Why?”

Fuck me.

I sighed and shook my head, motioning again for him to follow me. “I have bad news.” I considered the Nirvana T-shirt and added, “And worse news.” As someone who’d been born in April of that exact year, I knew all too well what Dez was in for.

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Dez was gone when I woke up, which was actually...too bad. He’d been a nice guy, and for the second time since arriving home, I’d enjoyed the company of a teenage boy over anyone else I could have chosen.

It was weird, and maybe said something about my sense of humor that I found Deez Nuts jokes funnier than most current comedies, but I didn’t care enough to do any self-reflection.

Deez Nuts jokes were funny.

Dez and I had chatted for hours, from Kurt Cobain’s death to the modern era and all the nonsense in between, from the grotesque to the sublime.

But then I’d fallen asleep talking about smart phones, and when I’d woken still on the sofa, I’d been alone.

I supposed that wasn’t a terrible thing, since what was I going to do with an unembodied spirit hanging around forever? But also, I was inexplicably sad about it.

Didn’t matter. After all, Dez hanging around wouldn’t make him any less dead.

Clearly that idea to solve the murder hadn’t worked, so it was time to regroup and try again.

Well, no, it was time to open the store for the day, and then later I'd try going through the grimoire again for a different answer. There had to be a spell that would help me find out who killed Ephraim Collins. Preferably one that worked as I intended it to, didn't just summon up the closest random ghost.

Dez had been shockingly relaxed about the idea of being dead, but well, he'd been learning the whole world had changed, so why not? It was probably like being dropped into Middle Earth or something like that, things were so different than they'd been in ninety-four. Being dead was only a small part of the overwhelm.

Maybe it was easier to be dead in a world where so much had changed.

The cats and I ate breakfast before heading out to the SUV and driving into town. I went through the usual rigmarole of opening the shop and turning off the alarm for them before heading over to the coffee shop.

Someone tried to slip into TBC as I was leaving, even though the open sign wasn't on and it was almost an hour before we were supposed to open, but I set them straight easily, and also pointed them in the direction of the coffee shop. They might as well get something nice for themselves if they were going to wait for me to open up.

The line for coffee was as bad as it had been the day before, and the feel of the place was still way off, lots of whispering and staring, like Sabrina and Walter were the rare animals in a zoo exhibit. Heck, I even felt a little bit bad for Walter, even if he'd been a jerk to me.

Still, I stood in the line, waiting my turn to order.

The line continued to grow behind me, so I didn't think much of it when the bell above the door jingled. Not until the whispering in the place amped up to a fever pitch, and whoever had come in pushed right past me—past the whole line.

It was a young man in a deputy uniform, his head down and shoulders slumped.

“There’s a line, Deputy Marsden,” Sabrina said to the guy as he reached the front counter, trying and failing to sound like her usual chipper self.

That brought his head up, and he met her eye. I side-stepped enough to get a good look at his face, and he looked...sad.

That wasn't good.

"I'm sorry Miss Collins," he said, then dropped his head again, sighing. "But, um, I'm afraid that I have to ask you to come over to the station."

"We're a little busy right now, Alec," she said back. Her voice had gone soft, almost pleading. "Middle of the morning rush."

He ducked his head and said, "I know, Miss Collins. I'm awfully sorry, but I'm afraid I'm gonna have to insist."

The whispering crested like a wave, everyone determined to tell their neighbor their opinion on what was happening as Sabrina came out from behind the counter, taking off her apron as she went. She huffed, sighing at him and waving off the staring masses. "Come on, people. My grandfather died. It's only natural they want to ask me about it."

"Then why did you kill him?" Lucy Beasley—of course it was Lucy—asked from her spot by the counter, where she was waiting for a drink to be made.

Sabrina rolled her eyes. "I would never kill anyone, Mrs. Beasley. Don't be ridiculous. I'm sure they just want to ask me about speaking to him the day he died."

"Arguing with him, you mean," Mrs. Beasley shot back, smug and obnoxious.

Did she like anyone in town? Anyone at all?

The woman who ran the local museum, an older redhead I'd only ever known as Miss Joyce, scoffed. "Ephraim Collins was an ass. I argued with him the day he died, and no one's accusing me of killing him."

That...wasn't surprising, really. The Joyce family and the Collins family were the only people in South Liberty who had any money, and for some reason, they'd always been at odds with each other.

"Were you at his house, Miss Joyce?" the young deputy, Marsden, asked.

Miss Joyce frowned, but shook her head. "He was out of his house, driving again, that horrible contraption of a car. I called the sheriff, because there's no way he had a current driver's license. He could barely even see anymore."

I remembered the "contraption" in question. It was close to a hundred years old, and I thought maybe a...Rolls Royce? It was hard to say, and frankly, I didn't know a single thing about cars.

"So what do you need to ask me? Can't we just do this here?" Sabrina asked the deputy.

He glanced at her neck, then up to her face. "Where's your necklace?"

Tellingly, her hand went to her neck, checking, and she went pale. "I . . . I don't . . ."

"We found it in his office," he whispered to her.

I doubted he was supposed to be explaining their evidence to the suspect, but it was good to know. Sabrina losing her necklace at her grandfather's house only proved she'd been there. Probably on the day he died. And apparently there was some proof they'd argued.

It didn't mean she'd killed him. She'd argued with him every week when we were kids.

Heck, family was supposed to argue, weren't they?

The door opened again, and the deputy went stiff, looking behind him, but calmed instantly. "Ms. Grant," he said with a nod, as Hunter walked in.

It was weird, and it made no sense at all, but something in me unwound to see her there. Hunter would help. I didn't know how or why, but...she'd worked for "the agency," hadn't she? She knew how to deal with things.

She lifted a brow at the deputy, but stepped out of his way, nodding, and we all watched as he led Sabrina out.

There was a loud metallic slam behind the counter, and I turned back to find Walter throwing things down.

"Everybody out," he announced, almost the moment the deputy and Sabrina were out of sight.

"But my coffee," Lucy Beasley said, sounding scandalized and pressing a hand to her chest.

He scowled at her, entirely unimpressed. "You were just here looking for gossip, and...and you found it, didn't you? You never come in here. So go back to your store. You got what you came for."

He came around the counter, waving everyone out, looking downright angry.

Oddly enough, he didn't shove me and Hunter out. Just everyone else, whether they

had coffee in their hands or not. Even the ones carrying ceramic cups, looking confused and harried. I supposed those kind of cups were cheapish at a restaurant supply store, if they had to replace them.

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But...I turned to him. “No one else works in the shop at all?” I assumed that was why he was kicking everyone out, anyway.

“No one,” Hunter answered for him, nodding.

And that was all I really needed to know. The man couldn’t be expected to run a whole coffee shop on his own. It wasn’t like Mom’s shop, with just the register to worry about. Someone had to make drinks too. One person couldbarely do it all in the off hours, but the busy times? No chance.

I frowned in thought, crossing my arms over my chest, and turned to him. “You know all about how everything works? Open, close, bank drops, paperwork, ordering?”

He was still scowling as he turned to me, but when he found Hunter and me facing him, he just...went lax. “No. I mean, most of it. But Sabrina did all the paperwork herself. And...” he looked away, head down, but then seemed to brace himself, drawing his back straight again. “What if me keeping the shop open only makes things worse? If...if she’s found guilty of killing him, she can’t inherit the shop. So any money I make here will only make everything more complicated with his estate, won’t it?”

Hunter cocked her head, squinting at him. “You think she did it?”

“No!” The response was almost explosive, and the main result was that for the first time, I had a twinge of real like for Walter. “Of course she didn’t kill him. But people are accused—and probably convicted—of murders they didn’t commit all the time.”

Which was probably fair; I honestly didn't know the statistics on that, but it was why I was fundamentally opposed to the death penalty.

"You get paid a salary?" Hunter asked him.

"Yeah."

She nodded. "You should probably keep working so you can keep getting paid. You're going to need money to hire a lawyer."

He groaned and slumped back against the counter. "We make coffee. Even with the whole take from the shop every day for the next month, I don't think we could afford a lawyer."

"You're also going to have to hire someone to help you run the place while Sabrina isn't here," I said, wincing. "Which is no easy feat in South Liberty. But no one could expect you to run the place yourself."

He turned to look at me, his expression utter confusion. "I—I thought you beat her boyfriends up. I thought, like, maybe you didn't like, um?—"

Hunter interrupted his words with her deep husky laughter, which...damn that was hot. She was...wait, no, I had to defend my honor.

"I only ever beat up the one who hit her," I insisted. "I don't know what the people in this town say about me, but?—"

"It was her grandfather. He said . . ."

For some reason, he didn't seem to want to explain what her grandfather had said, and well, I'd mentioned that Ephraim Collins was an ass, right?

A huge ass.

Hunter leaned in, as though she had to impart a secret. “Let me guess, the big bad lesbian was coming back, and Sabrina was secretly also a lesbian, so they were going to screw around behind your back?” The words were all in English, but together, they made about as much sense as a squirrel water skiing show. Walter winced, glancing over at me but not saying a word, which was answer in and of itself.

I stared at him for a minute, mouth open, before snapping myself out of it. “You—you know Bree is straight, right? She’s not even bi. No women at all. I mean, I had a huge crush on her in high school, but that was years ago, and it was never anything. She’s not even my type, now that I’ve figured out what that is.”

I got a whiff of oak moss, and realized Hunter was closer to me than before. “No?” she asked. “Not into brunettes? How about blondes?”

I could feel my lips curving into what I dearly hoped was a flirty smirk, even as distracted as I was by the whole mess of a situation. “Love all the hair colors. Prefer women I don’t have to worry I might accidentally snap in half.”

Walter huffed and seriously, stamped his foot in annoyance. It didn’t get less weird when he spoke. “Okay, you know what, this is really pissing me off, because this is actually cute, you two, but can we focus? Sabrina is in prison.”

“Jail,” Hunter corrected, turning to him. “And you’re right, people get convicted of things they didn’t do, but that’s not going to happen here. First off, Sabrina’s a very pretty white girl, and secondly, we’re not going to sit here and let it happen. Also, I know someone who can fix your bookkeeping issues and who knows how to run a restaurant, if you’re willing to work with her.”

He blinked repeatedly, then shook his head. “Are you joking? You’re telling me you

can fix everything, and you're worried I won't be okay with it?"

"She's not what you'll be expecting."

"I don't care if she's the queen of England. If she's in, she's hired. I'm sure Sabrina will agree. Does she know how to work an espresso machine?"

"She does," Hunter agreed. "She worked her way through college as a barista, and she's a certified public accountant. She's just having a hard time finding a job right now."

"Send her to me," he said. "You're vouching, she's hired. It's not like there's a giant pool of applicants around here for me to look into. But...for now I really am closing. I can't run the place by myself."

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He finished turning the lights off and flipping off the open sign as Hunter made a call, and then...then, he went back to the espresso machine and returned to the front with cups for both Hunter and me.

Ducking his head, he handed me a paper cup with myname on it. “Flat white. And...sorry. I let the old man get into my head. He really was the biggest jerk ever.”

I waved him off, then lifted my coffee up to take a deep sniff of that perfect, rich scent as I explained my dismissal. “He used to threaten to sell the shop every time Sabrina annoyed him when we were kids, just because he knew how important it was to her. I’m well aware of him being an ass, and I shouldn’t be surprised he was concocting half-truths that involved me.” With the cup halfway to my lips, I paused, frowning. “Honestly, maybe it’s good we didn’t figure things out before he died. If I’d known about it, maybe I would have been a suspect. I don’t have a lot of patience for that crap, and everyone in town knows it.”

At that, Walter frowned back, drawing his shoulders in, almost hunching over. “If we’re looking for someone else, maybe I should be a suspect. I mean, maybe I only want to be with Sabrina for the money.”

Hunter turned back toward us, sliding her phone into her pocket and accepting the drink cup he handed her. “If that were true, you’d be catching the next greyhound out of this town right now, since like you said, she can’t inherit if she’s found guilty. Heck, you don’t even know if he left her anything. We should probably start the investigation there.”

Start the investigation, she said. Like there was no question the two of us would be

looking into what had happened.

“The sheriff asked for my help,” I admitted. “I just hadn’t found anything yet. I’ll have to look for a new angle on what might have happened, I guess.”

Hunter nodded, interested, her eyes sharp.

Meanwhile, Walter was confused. “What did he think you could do?” he asked.

I shrugged, because the sheriff hadn’t said exactly, and I still didn’t know what was possible. “He didn’t say. I guess my mom used to help him with stuff.”

Even though it wasn’t a proper answer, he seemed to accept that, nodding.

Behind us, the door rattled, and rattled again a second later. Some random townsperson demanding to be let in, even though the open sign was off.

Hunter motioned to Walter. “You should put a paper on the door saying you’re closed today. Rita will be here this afternoon so you can meet her, and then you can make plans. For now, maybe...maybe we should go over to Tea, Book and Candle, so we don’t have to deal with door shakers and rubberneckers.”

Walter nodded, but motioned to the back. “I need to do dishes and stuff, but I’ll be here if you need me. Or if you think of anything. Or if, you know, I can help. I know I’m not a genius or even close to it. But if it helps Sabrina, I’ll do anything you want.” He glanced around, then ducked his head. “I know I’m lucky to have her.”

Hunter just smiled at him, then tucked one of her arms through mine and led me to the front door, unlocked it, and we went out onto the street.

“The coffee shop is supposed to be open,” a disgruntled voice said, but I didn’t really

have the attention to pay someone who wasn't even my customer. Not when Hunter Grant had her elbow hooked through mine and was looking down at me with those ice-blue eyes, smiling like I'd done something very right.

"Not today," she said to the customer, without looking away from me.

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We turned to head down the sidewalk, and Hunter still didn't move her arm away. Just the feel of it there gave me a warm fuzzy feeling in my middle.

Maybe it was nothing, and she was just being friendly. Or maybe, as Sabrina had implied to me, she was a bit of a player who'd sleep with anyone, and it didn't mean anything.

But maybe it was something else.

"Hey Jo," she called, raising her voice, and it took me a moment to spot Miss Joyce across the street, who had paused and turned to look at her, one brow raised over her ceramic coffee mug. "Yesterday, were you only fighting with the old man about how he shouldn't be driving?"

"At first," she said, nodding, then sipping from her cup. "Then of course, because he was an asshole who couldn't resist taking a swipe, he made some comment about how his family was the real backbone of South Liberty, because money was always more important than politics."

Hunter scoffed. "Which is exactly how his family got cut out of their own logging business. Too focused on the trees to see the forest, and their own partners squeezed them out. Money is politics."

Miss Joyce spread her arms and lifted her shoulders. “Preaching to the choir, there. But it never mattered to him. He just liked picking fights. With anyone, about anything. I think it’s the only way he was capable of engaging with other human beings.”

Hunter laughed at that, and I could feel the vibrations of it all the way into my own chest. I couldn’t help smiling as well, because I suspected Miss Joyce was right. I’d never once seen Sabrina’s grandfather have a civil conversation with anyone. Even when I’d said hello to him when I was a child, he’d just humphed and turned away.

“He had been saying things like that to Jo since she babysat me when I was a kid,” Hunter told me as we continued toward the shop. “I remember him stopping us on the street once when I was six, and she’d just gotten me an ice cream. He started laying into her about how worthless her great-whatever grandfather was because he ‘brought the wrong element into this town,’ when the fact is that the guy literally founded the town. Just another argument on the same thing he’s been an ass to her about since she was a teenager isn’t a reason for her to kill him, assuming she’s telling the truth.”

“Do you think she’s lying?”

She considered for a moment, then shook her head. “No, not really. That’s the problem with this whole thing. I was surprised to hear he’d been killed at all. Sure, he died, he was old. But everyone in South Liberty has hated him for years, and the people who have the most motive have put up with a lot. But it’s not like people to break the status quo if they don’t have to. Sabrina was fine. She had no reason to suddenly kill him. Sure, he threatened to disinherit her weekly, but he was never going to actually do it unless she left town, in which case, she wouldn’t have cared. And Sabrina is smart enough to know that.”

“He liked Walter enough to talk to him,” I added. “He never said a word to me in the years I was his granddaughter’s best friend, not even the kind of douchey stuff he said

to Walter.” I turned and unlocked the shop door when we got there, holding it open for Hunter then heading in myself and locking it behind us.

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“He wasn’t much of a fan of women.” Hunter crossed to the chairs next to the bookshelves and motioned to one, while sitting in the one facing it. She set her coffee cup on the table next to her, ignoring it for the time being. “I think his second wife left him a long time ago, and he never forgave our entire gender for her fortuitous escape.”

I couldn’t hold down a chuckle at the notion, but also, good for her. Well, except that she’d left at least one child—her own—to be raised by the old monster. Saving yourself was reasonable, admirable even, but saving yourself to the detriment of innocents...well, that was something else.

“But what we need to find is something that changed,” Hunter said, then leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees, and met my eye with her intense gaze. “Because Ephraim and this town have been in an awkward stasis for decades, and while everyone disliked him, no one even went out of their way to avoid him. No one disliked him enough to kill him.”

“So for someone to have killed him, that needed to change, for at least one person.” I considered, and then nodded to myself. That actually made sense. I didn’t think like an investigator, but when Hunter spelled it out like that, it seemed obvious.

She finally sat back, picking up her coffee cup and taking a sip. “Technically, the best suspect I can think of is my own brother.”

I seated myself in the chair she’d pointed at, sipping at my own drink. I had to admit, Walter made an excellent coffee. “Why your brother?”

“He’s working with my dad these days. Last year he billed Collins for some dental work, and the old man decided it cost too much and he wasn’t going to pay. So Hayden sent the account into collections. The old man threw a fit and threatened to sue. It was a big old nothing burger, because no lawyer in their right mind would take up the case, and Martin Hayes is spineless, even for a lawyer.” She stared blankly at the wall of books, then shook her head again. “Nope. No chance, not even as annoying as it was. I mean, Hay harassed me for months when I decided to join the military out of high school, because good Quakers don’t kill people.”

“Quakers?” I...sort of asked. I knew there were a lot of Quakers in the area, but honestly, I didn’t know all that much about them.

“My whole family,” she said, in a tone that said she was agreeing with me. “And since Quakers are pacifists, it’d have to be something more impressive than an unpaid dental bill to make my brother violent. Last violent people in my family line were Barclay and Edwin Coppock. Well, and me, I guess. But I agree with my dead cousins. Sometimes you have to set aside a belief in order to protect a more important one.”

Her dead cousins...it all came back to me in a rush. The brothers who’d accompanied John Brown to Harper’s Ferry in eighteen-fifty-nine. One had died there and the other had escaped back to Iowa, only to have the governor of Iowa refuse to arrest him, allowing him to escape into Canada. They had been local folk heroes, at least in the eighteen-hundreds, and we’d learned about them in school. Hunter meant setting aside their belief in pacifism in order to protect human rights.

A worthy trade, in my opinion, but I wasn’t a pacifist.

“I mean, honestly, I didn’t suspect your brother to begin with. Maybe I’m being naive, but he’s a dentist. I’ll bet he has a lot of obnoxious customers he’d like to smack, but people would talk about it if he did it.”

She laughed, nodding. “Yeah they would. One of the many reasons I didn’t go into the family business. That, and I think sticking my fingers into the mouths of strangers is kind of gross.”

I lifted a brow. “Only people you know?”

“There’s at least got to be dinner first, right?” She smirked back, and I wanted very much to lean into her. I wished I had a sofa in the shop suddenly. She scrunched her nose, and somehow still managed to be the sexiest thing in town. Maybe the whole damn state. “Besides, people like Lucy Beasley go there. Imagine sticking your hands in her mouth.”

I cringed, but then considered, cocking my head. “I mean, at least she’d have to shut up?”

We both had a good laugh at that, and it lasted longer than the rather weak joke should have warranted. But then, there wasn’t a whole lot to laugh about in the situation, and we hadn’t gotten anywhere figuring out who killed Ephraim Collins. Still, it was...good. Hunter would help me figure everything out.

Even if I had to go through every spell in my family grimoire to get there.

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We spent most of the morning and afternoon discussing half the population of South Liberty, their ties to Ephraim Collins—or rather, their standing beef with him—and whether it seemed likely they’d have killed him. Or in some cases, whether it was remotely possible for them to have killed him.

“It would help if we actually knew what he died of,” Hunter said, sitting back and watching me flip the store’s open sign to closed. We’d eaten lunch together in the

shop, just some sandwiches that Walter had brought over after he'd cleaned up the coffee shop, and I was considering asking her home for dinner.

Was that weird? Was it too fast? Too much like a date when we were supposed to be investigating a murder to help my childhood best friend?

She'd put her arm through mine earlier. That meant she was interested, right? She was definitely interested in women, but I was pretty sure that—that I was going to keep torturing myself with it until I knew for sure, because what if I made a move and I was wrong?

Terminal embarrassment.

I'd always suspected I would die of shame over my own awkwardness. It was one of the reasons I let the world lead me, instead of jumping into new things. No rejections if you let everything come to you.

I was still stewing in my head over whether Hunter was actually interested in me, like a kid who was about to write a note that said "do you like me? y/n," when I remembered something.

"Sheriff Parker said it was poison when he came to my house. He said Ephraim got himself poisoned. Does that help?"

Hunter frowned, then shook her head. "Not really, unfortunately. Not unless it was some kind of rare, hard to get poison."

She opened her mouth to continue, but engine noise grabbed both of our attention to the front. That was...loud. No one I knew of in town drove a vehicle that made that much noise, unless someone had lost their muffler.

Hunter, on the other hand, brightened, grabbing her cane and using it to push up out of the chair. She winced a little, and I wasn't sure whether it was her injury, the inactivity of the day, or both. None of my business unless she offered to chat about it, though, so I just raised a brow at her. "Does someone in town drive a car like that now?"

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“Not a car,” she explained as she headed for the door. “And honestly, the extent to which Rita’s motorcycle is going to piss off Lucy is just a little bonus.”

I choked down laughter, and started to understand exactly why Hunter had recommended this particular friend with a bit of a caveat. A motorcycle. That was awesome.

We got out onto the street, Bee and Hex trailing behind, in time to see...well heck, I didn’t know how to explain it. Hunter’s friend Rita was like a combination of a sixties “greaser” and a pinup girl. She was wearing leather pants that were fitted to her very nice, very long legs, and a bright red shirt that was tied under her ample breasts to show off a near-six-pack midriff. When she took off her helmet and shook out her hair, the impression was doubled. Bright red lipstick on perfect cupid’s bow lips, and superlong sable hair sort of tied up with a bandanna.

She grinned at Hunter, waving, then looked over to me, and her eyes trailed over all of me like we were at a club. It was...well, actually it was a little nice. Apparently even though Tanya wasn’t into me enough to not cheat, other women found me attractive. She stepped off her bike and dropped the helmet onto the seat, heading toward us. When she spoke, her voice was a little deep and raspy like she had a lifelong smoking habit. “Hunt, you sly fox. I knew there had to be a reason you were moving not just back to Iowa, but into the ass end of nowhere.”

Hunter grinned right back. “Believe it or not, Jaycie was a pleasant surprise.” Then she looked over at me, leaning in to bump my shoulder with hers. “But just in case we’re doing the playground thing, dibs, for the record.”

Rita laughed; a beautiful, smoky sound, and my cheeks flushed hot.

Dibs?

Dibs on . . . on me?

Holy crap.

I guess that answered once and for all whether Hunter was interested. Didn't it?

Rita stuck her hand out to me for a shake as she continued talking to Hunter. "O-kay. I guess. Buzzkill." Damn, her grip strength was something else. I wished I had a handshake that firm. "Nice to meet you anyway. Jaycie, was it?"

"It is," I agreed. "Justice Chesapeake Jones."

She blinked, cocking her head, then nodded. "Wicked. I like it. Rita Moran."

"It's nice to meet you, Rita. We really appreciate you coming into town on such short notice. I...actually, I should probably talk to you for myself sometime. I'd been thinking I was going to have to go into Iowa City to find an accountant, since I don't know anything about...anything."

"Jaycie just inherited her mother's business," Hunter explained, motioning behind us to the shop. Just hearing the words, there was the oddest moment of mental derailment.

Mom.

My mother's business.

Because my mother was dead.

Like oh, you forgot for a minute? Here, here's a knife to the gut to remind you.

Rita, though...her deep brown eyes went liquid and soft, and suddenly her hand, still holding mine, squeezed in a different way. "I lost my mother a few years back too. I'm so sorry."

I tried to keep my snuffle subtle and nodded to her. "Thank you."

"I'd be happy to help out with accounting, obviously. I can do the job, or I can teach you to do it for yourself, whatever you want." She glanced up at the shop, considering, then nodded. "Shouldn't be too complicated. But you said a coffee shop on the phone, Hunt?"

Hunter lifted her chin in acknowledgment, then looked down toward the coffee shop. As though summoned, Walter had come out and was headed toward us.

Across the street, Lucy Beasley was standing inside her shop, at the front window, glaring at us. I smiled bright and waved to her. She scowled and turned away, clearly trying to hide the fact that she'd been staring.

Hunter tried to hide laughter in a cough and failed entirely, and Rita turned a curious look at us. "Town busybody," I explained. "Thinks our business is her business, and she should get a say."

"I know the type," Rita said with a sigh and rolled eyes. "I grew up in Cedar Rapids, but it's a small town in a lot of ways. Everybody I grew up with knew I was home and out of the army, and they all had an opinion on it, even before I started back into school."

“What made you choose accounting?” I asked, because frankly, I couldn’t think of too many worse things in the whole world.

She shrugged, unaffected by the face I was making. “I was always good with numbers, and it seemed like the kind of thing that would lead to a steady job. And it probably does, most of the time. But I graduated this winter, and...it’s not exactly the ideal time for anyone to be looking for a job. Let alone a trans woman in Iowa.”

I blinked for a moment, absorbing the statement, then nodded. “I honestly can’t even imagine. Of course, I’m not qualified for real jobs to begin with, but that’s my fault. Philosophy major.”

Rita laughed again, and the sound was infectious, so we were all laughing as Walter came up to us.

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“Is this your friend who can help?” he asked, voice hopeful, biting his lip. “I was looking at the books, and I...I can do the ordering. That’s actually pretty simple. But I couldn’t figure out Bree’s accounting thing. Something about quick books? But it didn’t look very quick. It looked...complicated.”

“QuickBooks is pretty standard small business accounting software, I can do that,” Rita told him.

He seemed to deflate, and I worried for a second he was so relieved he was going to collapse right into the pavement. “Did...did Hunter tell you the shop is going to be part of an inheritance, and right now they think she killed him, so maybe?—”

“Hunter said someone needed my help and there was a job involved, at least short term. Did she tell you I’m a trans woman?”

My heart hurt for a moment at the renewed hesitation on her face. I was unfortunately familiar with the need to come out constantly, but it had to be way worse for her. Coming out as a trans person was downright dangerous.

Walter? He squinted at her in confusion. “No. But why would she? That’s none of my business.”

I reeled for just a second, staring at him in shock. “Holy crap,” I muttered, and everyone looked over at me. “Sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean to—I just—Sabrina is dating a decent person. First time ever.”

Next to me, Hunter choked on nothing and then had a coughing fit. Walter stared at

me, wide-eyed, mouth opening and closing. Rita? She laughed again.

Hunter finally managed to get her coughing under control and shook her head. “For the record, I was more worried about the motorcycle. I grew up in this town, and it’s...it’s not your average small town.” She motioned over toward the town museum. “Jo Joyce always says it was because of her great-great-great-great-great grandfather, Justinian Augustus Joyce, who founded the town. He was some big political figure back in the day, before coming to Iowa to settle down. I guess he promoted being...for lack of a better term, weird. When he came west, he brought carnies and sex workers and, shock of shocks in the middle of the nineteenth century, Irish people along with him to settle here. Whatever it was, I’ve never, not once, gotten shit in this town for being the butchest bi bitch they’ve ever seen.”

I shrugged, but nodded. “I still get reminded I had purple hair as a teenager, but I’ve never heard boo for being a lesbian.”

As though summoned by the conversation, Ed Kelly, who ran the gas station, walked by as I was saying that. He scoffed and waved at me. “You decided to have purple hair, kid. Nobody decides who to be. Only what they do. Besides, not many people blessed with auburn hair, and you went and dyed it purple. It was a shame.”

I sighed. “But it was almost fifteen years ago. Could we give it a rest?”

He shrugged, but gave me a slightly disapproving look nonetheless. “I suppose, if you’re not gonna do it again.”

When I turned back, Rita was looking me over, considering. “Not that it’s anyone’s business but yours, but he’s kind of right. Your hair is gorgeous, it would be a shame to cover it up.”

I sighed and threw my hands up.

Hunter once again draped an arm around my shoulders. “I like purple. Whatever floats your boat, that’s what I say.” Once again, she was my favorite person in the world. “Okay, so Rita and Walter are gonna go back to The Unique Bean and get started. I’m sure there’s employment paperwork and stuff to be done there, and if Walter doesn’t know how that works, I know Rita does. I’m going to go see the sheriff for a minute, because I want to know what kind of poison they used to kill Ephraim. It probably won’t, but it might make a difference to the investigation.”

Bee, finished not being a part of the conversation, stood up on her back legs to scratch at the side seam of my jeans, while complaining loudly. “I’m hungry. I want to go home and eat.”

Behind her, Hex sighed and I swear, rolled her eyes. I didn’t even know cats could do that.

“Looks like you need to get to cat feeding,” Hunter added, chuckling. I looked up at her, surprised, wondering if somehow she’d understood Bee. Instead, she shrugged. “I don’t speak cat or anything, but that’s a demand if ever I’ve seen one.”

Fair enough.

“Meet you at your place after I talk to Pat?” she asked. Then gave a little wince. “He’s gonna be too damn happy I’m sticking my nose into this thing.”

“Sounds perfect,” I agreed instantly to the first sentence. “Should I order dinner? Or, I mean, I can cook. I just haven’t been lately.”

She smiled at me, and it didn’t look too much like she was putting up with my nonsense. No, it was more of a smile like maybe...maybe she liked my nonsense. “How about I pick something up? Any allergies?”

“Sounds amazing, and none whatsoever. Though I don’t like mushrooms.”

“No mushrooms, check. Be there in about an hour. Maybe a little more. Pat likes to chat, and he keeps trying to talk me into running for sheriff when he retires.” She tapped her cane against the sidewalk. “Like this doesn’t disqualify me.”

Rita, who was still standing there, snorted. “Please. You could drop that thing and kill all three of us before it hit the ground. Any town should be so lucky. Especially a town that prides itself on being weird anyway.”

Hunter didn’t respond to the suggestion, just smiled at Rita, then Walter, and then...well, she didn’t smile at me so much as she...smoldered. The intensity in that gaze almost made me want to lean against the side of the nearest building and fan my face with my hand. My panties definitely melted under its heat.

Then she turned and headed toward the sheriff’s station.

“Damn,” Rita said as she walked away. Then she grinned and called after Hunter. “Hate to see you go but love to watch you leave, sir.”

Hunter laughed, sashaying a little more prominently for a few steps, and Rita was very right. How was anyone in the world that hot?

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“Seriously?” Walter asked. “Is it...I’m sorry if this is rude, but is it a lesbian thing? I always thought she was terrifying.”

“She is,” I agreed. “It’s one of the hottest things about her.”

Rita nodded as she turned back to him. “She could kill you with her pinky. It’s sexy as hell. I dunno if it’s a lesbian thing. I thought everyone found dangerous hot.”

Walter blinked, then shook himself. “Sorry, I...my girlfriend is a golden retriever crossed with a ray of sunshine. I guess I just don’t get it.”

Rita considered, then nodded. “Fair enough, and good choice. I love a nice ray of sunshine. Now if you’re really interested in working with me, let’s do as the lady said and get to it? I’m sure we can get you all sorted in no time.”

“And you can really work an espresso maker?” he asked as they turned to go. “Because I...I mean, I don’t want to dodge working or anything, but the machine hates me. You know how they have personalities? This one’s whole personality is ‘Walter is an asshole, let’s burn him’.”

Rita laughed, but answered in the affirmative anyway. “I sure can, sugarbuns. I can also make a concha that’ll knock your socks off, if you need baking done.”

He made a small hopeless sound. “Crap, the pain au chocolat. Sabrina makes them. And the muffins. And the?—”

Their voices trailed off as she assured him that they would manage, and that if

Sabrina made the dough, there was probably even some already finished in the fridge.

I blinked a few times, and just...“Does it feel like everything is changing?” I asked the cats.

“Everythingischanging,” Hex answered. “Everything is always changing, but right now your whole life is in transition. You’re deciding what it’s going to be next with everything you do.”

Once again, it harkened back to Tanya’s poisonous words about me letting life take me wherever it went, and not making any of my own decisions. Was I doing that again? Was it a bad thing, if I was?

I kind of liked where life was taking me, just then.

Besides, Hex said I was deciding. That was me doing something, not just drifting. Maybe sometimes it was possible to do both.

We headed for the SUV, and home, so I could feed the cats...and wait for Hunter and dinner.

22

The cats made a beeline for their dishes once we got into the house, which was a funnier sentence when it was just Bee making a beeline, but still.

I followed along behind them, opening the food bag and dropping a handful of food into each of their dishes.

“Would you guys prefer those canned wet foods?” I asked as they started chowing down.

Bee made a face at me. “No way. Food should be crunchy unless it’s stolen from a human plate. Besides, those wet ones give me the runs. It’s gross.”

“Dude, did that cat just talk?” came the stunned voice from behind me.

I spun, shocked and terrified, to find . . . Dez. “You’re back.”

He shrugged, that kind of utterly careless gesture only a teenager can make properly. “I guess. I didn’t know I left, but you were gone and it was light out all of a sudden. I tried to turn the TV on, but it looks like I can’t touch stuff. But who cares about that? Your cat talked.”

“They can talk,” I agreed. “But other people mostly don’t seem to understand them.”

He cocked his head, leaning down and looking at Bee as she inspected him in return. “That’s pretty cool. Is it all cats, or just the cats of people who can also summon up...ghosts or whatever?”

Now that was an interesting question. Oh, not because of the cats, but because he’d implied that maybe he wasn’t a ghost at all.

“All cats who are familiars,” Hex answered, finally looking up from her food. “Which I’m pretty sure means all cats could. Though it’s probably good some aren’t. I knew this orange guy once...let’s just say I doubt he’d have had anything clever to say.”

Dez burst out laughing, and well...that actually was funny. Wasn’t it? Orange cats did have a bit of a reputation.

Meanwhile, I was still focused on his comment. “If you’re not a ghost, what do you think you are?”

He shrugged. "I dunno. I mean, my parents were scientists. They raised me an atheist. I didn't think there was anything after death. So this is all a surprise. Maybe I'm just, like, an impression. A little echo of energy. Or maybe my parents were wrong, and now I'm stuck in, like, purgatory or something because I was never baptized into whatever religion was right."

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“That doesn’t seem right. Even if there is a single correct religion, that means that the vast majority of people aren’t in it, either now or throughout history. Any god that made most people with no intention of letting them get into his afterlife club is kind of a shitty god, don’t you think?”

He considered, then nodded, but he didn’t actually seem convinced I was right, just that my point was valid. It reminded me of college, the debates I’d had with my classmates, and...maybe it was callous of me, since we were talking about his existence, but it was...fun. I had always loved that part of philosophy. And besides, in the end, we were talking about everyone’s existence, mine included. I just wasn’t in the same part of it as he was.

He had none of my moral quandary, and continued on without hesitation. “On the other hand, you’re assuming if there’s one true religion, it’s a just and fair one. I’m eighteen and dead. How is that just? Kids die of cancer every day. Totally unjust. And you can’t convince me there’s a reason for that.”

“Wouldn’t even try.” I wasn’t in the habit of trying to convince people of things I didn’t believe, after all. So I just shrugged and turned to the sink to get a cup of water to add to the cats’ fountain. “For whatever it’s worth, I don’t think there is one true religion that wouldn’t give an innocent eighteen-year-old a place in their afterlife just because he didn’t know about it when he was alive.”

“Thanks. I like to think not, too. But if there is a heaven, or Elysium or...whatever. Maybe I’m actually there. And this me is just an echo, or, like, a copy on a floppy disk or something. Maybe the real me is receiving his reward or punishment or whatever.”

“I suppose there’s no way to know if you don’t already,” I answered. I got myself a glass and filled it with tea from the fridge, feeling the sting of not being able to offer a guest a drink, but it would have been rude to offer when I couldn’t actually give him a drink. “But the fact that you’re here means we can literally never know, so the only sensible way to proceed is to treat you as though you’re the only you. Besides, even if we knew you weren’t, you’re a person, with human feelings. Aren’t you?”

He actually stopped and thought about it, his eyes darting back and forth, before nodding. “Yes. I...I worried about that last night, because it seems like I’m really chillabout being dead, and you’d think I’d be freaking out, you know?”

Damn. The guy was maybe the most sensible person I’d ever met. I’d thought the same thing, but I wouldn’t have expected him to. He was the one who was dead. “I think I would be freaking out if I were in your shoes, and you’re eighteen. It’s not an age known for lots of calm and consideration.”

“Yeah, except I don’t have a body anymore. No more orders from hormones, you know? So I was thinking about it, and like, I’m still worried about stuff. I was thinking about my girlfriend, Journey, and whether she was okay. She didn’t have anybody else. Her dad was real sick, so she was taking care of him. Then maybe I go and die and leave her totally alone.”

Shit.

That was terrible. I froze, turning to look at him, but not sure how to respond. There wasn’t exactly a condolence card for one’s own death, let alone something as complex as worrying about the people you’d left behind.

He sighed and slumped onto the sofa, and for the first time during the very serious conversation, seemed very much like the teenage boy he was. “Being dead is lame.”

I winced away, frowning, and realized that had actually been a thing they said in the nineties. “Whoa there, cowboy. That’s no longer slang, I’d suggest cutting it out.”

He looked confused a moment, frowning at me. “What? What is? Why?”

“I...you know what lame means, right? Like, having a permanent injury to a leg?”

Again, I got the blank stare.

“Oh come on, you’re smart, you know that. And you wouldn’t use other injuries or disabilities as an insult, would you?” I waved wildly at him, like maybe he was just misunderstanding that I meant him. Then, I realized the other thing that had been popular slang in the nineties. “Also, I’m a lesbian, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t use ‘gay’ as an insult either.”

“Dude,” he whispered, eyes going wide, and for a second I thought he was shocked by the fact that he was sitting across from a lesbian. Then, he breathed out all at once, even though he was a ghost and didn’t actually need to breathe at all. “I never even thought about that. That’s...that’s so shitty. Why did we even say that?”

“Because it was slang. Everyone said it, so you did too.”

He scrunched up his whole face like he’d just bitten into an apple and realized it was made of wax. “My mom would be so ashamed. She used to say that thing, you know? The mom thing.” He affected a slightly higher tone, I assumed mimicking his mother. “If all your friends were jumping off a bridge, would you do that too?”

I chuckled and nodded. “Yeah, my mom said it too. Though honestly, my best friend was more responsible than me, so Mom stopped bothering with it sometime in middle school.”

That distracted him from his deep thoughts, and he laughed.

That was when the knock on the door came, and I froze.

Hunter.

Crap.

23

Dez blinked at me a couple times, then looked toward the door. “You gonna get that?”

“She’s, um, here with dinner,” I admitted. “I thought you were gone.”

“Oh. Oh shit. Are you on a date?” He hopped up and took a step toward the door, like he wanted to answer it, then paused. “You want me to hide? Does she know you summon ghosts? Or like, would that be bad? Is it against some witch rules or something to summon ghosts? Or for anyone to know you can summon ghosts?”

I held up both hands, but before I could respond, the knock came again. So instead of answering the questions, I headed for the door, deliberately not thinking things through too hard.

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When I swung the door open, the first thing I smelled was...“Is that pad Thai?”

“It is,” Hunter agreed, holding up a huge plastic bag. “And massaman, and some red curry with duck, since I wasn’t sure what you’d like.”

For a second, all I could do was blink in shock. “You didn’t know what I would like, so you...literally brought my three favorite things in the world.”

That brought out her gorgeous grin. “Well then let me in and we can split them, because they’re my favorites too.”

Too soon to ask her to stay forever, I told myself. We are not a stereotype. We have restraint. Besides, we just returned the moving truck.

Also, I had the ghost of a teenage boy in the living room that I had to answer for.

Dez poked his head around the corner. “Pad Thai? In South Liberty?”

Hunter cocked her head at him, squinting into the odd angle of light coming through from the living room, then looked back at me. “Neighbor?”

I sighed. Okay, I had to explain this. “Come on in. It’s a long story.”

Still, even knowing there was a teenage boy in my house, she followed me, straight through to the living room. When she got there, she stared at Dez, mouth agape, for just a second. “You’re a ghost.”

“Maybe,” he agreed. “Jaycie and I were just talking about that.”

“The spell I used to accidentally summon you called you a disembodied spirit,” I offered then paused. “Or wait, an unembodied spirit, I think.”

Hunter turned to me. “Accidentally?”

I winced. “I was...kind of trying to summon my mother. I thought she’d be able to help figure out who killed Ephraim Collins. But mostly, I...wanted to see my mom.”

Her eyes went soft at that, and she came across the room, dropping her cane against a chair and the bag of food onto the coffee table, then wrapping an arm around me and lowering both of us onto the sofa together. “I think that’s understandable. So how did you get the ghost of—” She broke off and looked over at Dez, her eyes widening as they focused on him properly.

“Dez Reilly,” he offered.

She leaned back against the couch, nodding. “Yeah, I know. Hunter Grant.”

He leaned back like he’d been struck. “Hu—Hunt? Holy shit, Hunt, look at you. You’re all grown up.”

She nodded, swallowing hard, and wiped a tear from her eye. “Yeah. I...I don’t even know what to say, Dez. I’m sorry.”

That seemed to confuse him, which I immediately realized was a miscommunication. She was giving him the in-person condolence card, and he’d already shown me that he didn’t really need or want that.

He handled it fine, though. “Sorry for what? I mean, I’m dead, yeah? But I doubt you

killed me or something. You were just an adorable little ankle biter Jojo used to watch.”

Jojo?

My girlfriend Journey.

Miss Joyce.

“Dang, though, I’ve been dead a long time. I mean, Jaycie kinda said so, I guess I died before she was born.” He frowned, biting his lip a moment before asking, tentatively, “Is Journey okay?”

“She is,” Hunter agreed. “She, um, she never dated anyone else after you. But she’s still here. Running the museum like she always wanted to.”

His eyes went distant for a moment, then he nodded. “I guess it’d be silly to see her. I mean, even if she hasn’t dated anyone else, I’m still kind of a kid, and she’s not anymore.”

“That would make it weird to try to rekindle your relationship,” Hunter corrected. “It wouldn’t be silly to want to see her. Though...I don’t think she believes in magic, so that might be a bit of a shock.”

Hunter gave herself a full body shake, then turned to the bag of food she’d set down. “If you’re around for a while, though, maybe we should give it some thought. Jaycie, you want to start with the soup, the noodles, or the curry?”

She was on what was maybe a first date, during which we’d been planning to investigate a murder. I was a witch, and I’d summoned the dead boyfriend of her childhood babysitter into my house. She’d brought me literally three of my favorite

foods in the entire world.

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And facing the murder, the witch, and the ghost, she was calmly pulling a bowl of soup out of the takeout bag, offering it to me along with a spoon.

“Marry me,” I said.

She still didn’t run for the hills, just smiled, pressed the soup into my hands, and winked. “That depends, do you have some more of that tea in the fridge?”

24

The only real conclusion the three of us came to, other than that it sucked to be able to see but not eat the pad Thai, was that we didn’t have a lot to go on.

Ephraim Collins had been poisoned with antifreeze, which didn’t really narrow the suspect pool at all, since there was no one who couldn’t get their hands on that. Anyone could walk into an auto parts store with twenty bucks and walk out with a gallon of the stuff, and especially in Iowa, lots of people did.

Hunter didn’t leave till almost midnight, and we had agreed to go see Sabrina’s cousin Abigail the next day. Not because either of us thought it was likely she’d killed her grandfather, but because if anyone knew his movements the day he died, it would have been her.

On the other hand, we’d made those plans for the afternoon, because as I had explained to Hunter, I had other plans in the morning.

Namely, there was an eight a.m. knock on my door, and whether it was Ryan or

Gabby, it was time. Time for building a chicken coop.

It was Ryan, and weirdly, he was carrying not one, but two chickens. I recognized the orange one as Laverne from our short time together, but he was carrying a second white chicken, and frankly, looking confused.

“Hey Jaycie,” he said, awkward as hell. “I’m, uh, this is weird, but...Gran said she’d like some of this stuff your mom used to sell at the shop for, um, getting rid of spiders?”

Peppermint oil, my brain instantly offered.

I looked at the white chicken in his arms.

So did he.

“For a chicken,” I said.

He winced. “I, um, I guess? Or we can just trade me helping you build the coop for?—”

“It’s fine, Ryan. Apparently some people in South Liberty paid my mom with chickens. I just really hope there are no other livestock involved. If someone brings me a goat, we’re gonna have a problem.”

He rolled his lips under his teeth to try to hold back laughter, but it was a losing battle, and a moment later, much to the chickens’ consternation, he was roaring with it.

I sighed and shook my head. “Can Laverne and Shirley wait in the yard until we have the coop put together?”

“Sure,” he agreed. “Though, um, maybe we should put them on the west side of the house. Not that they’ll stay there, but trying to keep them away from Mom seems like a good idea.”

I snorted a laugh, then shrugged. “Honestly, I’m not sure what I did to piss your mom off, but I remember she hated Mom, too.”

“She used to call her a witch. I guess because she didn’t go to church? So I guess she thinks you must be a witch too.” He shrugged apologetically, and went to set the chickens in the yard on the west side of the house, where maybe his mother wouldn’t see them.

I winced, because, well...I was a witch. And Mom had been one too.

What was so wrong with that, though? We weren’t living in the dark ages when church people murdered women for being different than them. Hell, most of the women they had murdered had been exactly the same kind of Christians as themselves anyway.

I went to open the garage door so that we could bring out the chicken coop stuff, and met Ryan in the garage door just as Gabby was pulling up in her car.

I decided to bite the bullet and just give it to him. I was going to lie about it, after all. “I am a witch,” I told him. “Obviously that’s an issue for your mom. I get it if you?—”

“Like a Wiccan?” he asked, more interested than scandalized.

I frowned at that, because I wasn’t going to claim a religion I wasn’t a part of, but also...I didn’t know that much about Wicca, to know if it was related to what Mom had passed to me. Mom had never mentioned it, though, which meant it probably

wasn't related. "Honestly, Ryan, no, probably not Wicca. I hardly know anything about Wicca. I'm not really religious at all. Just a witch. You know, healing herbal teas and essential oils to keep the spiders away, that kind of thing."

"Since when are you a witch?" Gabby asked, coming up the drive, looking bemused.

I thought of her hyper-Catholic mother and worried for a moment, but I still wasn't going to lie. "I got it from Mom. I mean, you know she sold tea and stuff at the shop. It's just...what it is. She was a witch, and so am I."

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Gabby stared at me for a moment, as though trying to see something deeper, maybe some philosophical bent to the endeavor, then shrugged. “Okay. As long as I don’t have to go to church for it, I’m good.”

Ryan scoffed, turning to the enormous box the chicken coop parts were in and starting to open it. “Wish I didn’t have to go to church. Reverend Tim is fine and all, but it’s so boring.”

Reverend Tim, then. Not Father Tim. Good thing I hadn’t called him that.

Also, clearly Ryan also didn’t give much of a damn about witches or Wicca or whatever.

I elbowed Gabby in the ribs as we watched Ryan start pulling parts out. “If your mother wouldn’t disown me, I’d introduce you to Reverend Tim. It’s hard for me to judge, but I’m pretty sure he’s cute.”

Ryan turned the best “bitch please” face on me that I’d ever seen. “Reverend Tim is a fucking snack. I’d say too bad he’s straight, but he’s also way too old for me.”

“Is he?” Gabby purred. “Maybe I’ll have to convert.”

“Absolutely not. I’m going to try to get your mother’s flan recipe, and there’s no way she’ll give it to me if I’m introducing you to hot Protestants.” I stepped forward, holding out my hands and starting to take things as Ryan pulled them out of the box. They all had little stickers with part letters on them, so we arranged them on the garage floor in order, and then got started.

Putting the thing together wasn't all that hard.

No, correction:with Ryan's help, it wasn't all that hard. He'd clearly been raised to know what he was doing with tools, and he'd brought a cordless electric drill that made short work of almost everything, Gabby and I mostly handing him parts and holding things in place for him.

"I thought that was going to be a much bigger disaster than it was," Gabby said, almost pouted, as Ryan finished the last few touches. "I didn't realize you'd brought in a ringer."

Ryan smiled over at her, pulling up his shirt to wipe his sweaty face.

"Holy hottie, Batman," came the all too familiar voice from the open door between the garage and the house.

I turned to frown at Dez. "Strangers in the house, Dez. You really think it's a good idea to show yourself to everyone?"

He was still staring at Ryan's bare chest, which...I mean, guy, and teenage guy at that, and I supposed since he'd been dating Miss Joyce in the nineties, bi or pan teenage guy. "Sorry," he said, not sounding sorry at all.

Ryan slowly dropped his shirt back into place, at first returning the favor and checking Dez out. Then he paused and looked closer. "Are you...is he see-through?"

I sighed and buried my face in my hands.

"Oh yeah," Dez agreed. "I'm a ghost. Sort of. Maybe? We're not sure? But Hunt says I really am dead, so there's that. Car accident in January ninety-four."

“Ninety...” Ryan trailed off, leaning forward, staring at Dez. “Holy shit, you’re Desmond Reilly. Your picture is still up in the big case in the high school. Baseball hero, blah blah blah.”

“Seriously?” Dez seemed dubious. “It’s been like, over thirty years.”

“You’re underestimating how much everyone who came after you sucked.”

Dez considered for a moment, then nodded. “Fair enough. I mean, the last time we’d won anything before my years was back in the seventies, so why not?”

I’d been about to agree that none of the boys had been any good at any sports during my stint at the local high school when a hand gripping my shoulder, hard, pulled my attention off the conversation at hand.

Shit, I’d forgotten Gabby.

I turned to see her staring at Dez, mouth open and eyes wide. She didn’t look terrified or angry, though. She looked fascinated. Excited even.

Suddenly, she started shaking my shoulder and turned to me. “Proof of the existence of the soul, Jaycie. Souls are real!” She was almost vibrating as she turned to me, and literally pushed up onto her toes once, like an excited kid. “And you weren’t screwing around. You’re actually a witch.”

Like that was an afterthought.

“I am. I hadn’t intended to use Dez as a show-and-tell because he’s a person, but, um, yeah. I’m a witch, here’s Dez. We actually had a debate last night about what he is. You know, whether he’s actually a human soul.”

And suddenly, we were revisiting that conversation. Ryan and Gabby agreed that clearly, Dez was a human soul, because what else would he be? Well, that was Ryan's argument. Gabby's was a little more involved, what with the years of training in debates on that very subject.

We only stopped long enough to order the pizza I had promised, and go out into the side yard to stake down the chicken coop, setting Laverne and Shirley inside, so they would know it was theirs now.

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Well, I didn't know how smart chickens were, but I tried to tell them, at least. Ryan didn't seem too worried about whether they would know where to go, so I tried not to worry either.

"Feed them here in the morning," he said. "They'll get used to it quick enough. If Mom tries to make off with one of them, I'll bring 'em on back. I think...she thinks she's protecting them?"

"Your grandmother said she thought Mom was sacrificing them to read their entrails or something horrific like that," I told him. "Honestly, if she thinks that, I kinda don't blame your mom."

He made a disgusted face, but nodded as well.

We ate the pizza, and I once again felt bad that Dez couldn't have any, though he seemed really pleased at the extra company. Me? I was still stunned. Two more people who knew I had a ghost in my house, and they just...accepted it. Like it was nothing.

There hadn't even been any screaming or panic.

I supposed it helped that Dez had introduced himself by hitting on Ryan, which made him seem less like a scary ghost and more like any regular bisexual teenage boy. Given the appreciative looks Ryan kept shooting his way, he hadn't much minded, either.

That couldn't be headed anywhere good, since Ryan's parents didn't know he was

gay, and Dez was, well, dead.

Still, it wasn't my place to tell people how to live their lives. Unlives? Whatever. Dez had been eighteen when he died, and Ryan was an autonomous human being, and frankly, with Sabrina in jail for her grandfather's murder, I had bigger things to worry about than whether two teenage boys had an unsustainable crush on each other. Or how awkward that was going to be if we ever added Dez's forty-something former girlfriend into the mix.

Hunter showed up just as I was returning from the basement with a spray bottle of peppermint oil and water for Ryan's grandmother. "You've got to shake it up every time you use it," I told him, even though I was sure his grandmother was well aware, since she'd specifically asked for the stuff.

Gabby, meanwhile, let Hunter in, and was giving her a twice-over that would have made most lesbians I knew blush. Not Hunter, though. She just smiled at Gabby and stuck out her free hand. "Hunter Grant."

"Gabriela Rivera." As she shook Hunter's hand, she turned and wiggled her eyebrows at me. Then, in the world's most awkward—for me—stage whisper, said, "This one's much hotter than Tanya."

"Who's Tanya?" Ryan asked, like any sensible person in the situation would have, and I sighed.

Hunter, though, just smirked. As a rule, I didn't like smirks, or people who smirked. Somehow, though, on her? Well, she broke all the rules. Every passing expression was hot. She leaned toward Ryan, casual as you please. "I'm guessing Tanya would be an ex."

"Theex," Gabby stressed. "And a cheating asshole."

The sheer disdain that crossed Hunter's expression was breathtaking. "Cheating? On Jaycie? I'd ask you what the hell was wrong with her, but I guess I shouldn't question my own good fortune."

I wouldn't lie, it was...nice? That seemed like a silly word for it, but it was nice.

"Now, as much as I hate to break up what smells like a great pizza party, Jaycie and I are supposed to go see Abigail Collins this afternoon. Unless plans have changed?" She looked at me, guileless, as though waiting for a response.

Like it was fine if my plans had actually changed.

Like I was allowed to make my own decisions.

It smacked me right between the eyes in that moment. Tanya had been such an ass about me letting life drag me along, but she had also never asked my opinion. Never given me this opportunity to say "no, that's not what I want."

And Hunter, Dez, and I had made that plan together last night. She hadn't come up with it all on her own.

I wasn't without agency at all. I had just sometimes let myself be led when I shouldn't have.

"Nope, that's still the plan." I turned to Gabby and Ryan. "But I still owe one of you some cash for helping out."

"You don't have to do that," he said, but I shook my head, grabbing my purse on the entry table and pulling out...three hours of work, so forty-five dollars. Minimum wage in Iowa was still less than that, I was sure, but?—

I froze for a moment, staring at Ryan. “Are you interested in an after-school job? Would your parents even allow that?” He blinked, then glanced at Hunter, then Gabby, like he was wondering if I’d been talking to one of them instead of him. “At the shop,” I clarified. “I need help at the shop. So I guess your mom would?”

His smile was adorable, and a bit of a relief. “Heck yeah. Dad’s been bugging me to look for a summer job for ages, because he says I need to save for college. You need somebody? I’m there. I can probably work in the afternoon even after school starts again, just gotta keep on top of homework.” He grinned and glanced back at Dez. “I’m not some kind of baseball hero, after all. No scholarships coming my way.”

Gabby burst into laughter that sounded almost hysterical, and I couldn’t blame her. The last week of my life had been...beyond all things I’d ever considered possible. “I have to get home and grade terrible term papers. It’s been amazing, and we should definitely do this again, sans chicken coop.” She leaned in and hugged me tight. “I am so glad you’re here, J. It’s going to be as exciting as ever to have you for a friend.”

I wanted to deny it, but...witch. Ghost. Superhot Hunter Grant. Murder, even though Gabby didn’t know about that part.

Nope, life really was just that exciting.

The Collins house was very impressive, even if it wasn't in the best repair. I wasn't even sure why it wasn't in perfect repair, because everyone knew Ephraim Collins had been a rich old bastard. He'd hung his money over Sabrina's head for years, or else she wouldn't have stayed in South Liberty.

His antique Rolls Royce was in better shape than I remembered, black and shiny as though it had a fresh coat of paint only recently.

Interesting, since Jo Joyce had been right, and I was sure he shouldn't have been driving anymore. Heck, once when I was a teenager, he'd mistaken me for her, even though she was like, almost twenty years older than me. His vision had clearly been failing him for years, so the fact that he'd been driving was downright dangerous.

Abigail Collins answered the door when we knocked, and it was odd to me, to think she was that age as well. The same age as my mother. I had always thought of Abigail as positively ancient. That or some kind of ageless non-entity, because of the way she'd slipped into the background of her own life.

It had been deliberate, I realized, when she answered the door in a beautiful lacy white dress, and...smiled. I didn't think I'd ever seen her smile before. Oh, pained smiles, or reassuring ones, sure, but this was a real smile.

This was a woman who was free, for the first time in her entire life.

"Hunter Grant and Justice Jones. I must say, I did not expect you two to be the ones

investigating this thing.” Then she stepped out of the doorway and motioned us in, rolling her eyes. “Though I suppose obviously it wasn’t going to be Pat Parker, was it?”

Hunter chuckled. “You know Pat’s wanted to be retired since the day he got elected, and that was...hell, I was a kid, I don’t even remember exactly when it was.”

She laughed, and it was a tinkling, musical sound. Abigail was as beautiful as Sabrina, I realized, somehow startled by the information. “Can I get you some water? Lemonade? I don’t have any soda in the house.” She paused, leaning her head hard to one side. “How is soda these days? I haven’t had one since I was a kid. Maybe...maybe I’ll buy some when I go to the grocery store.”

Hunter gave a shrug. “I like it. Cola’s a bit of an acquired taste, but you’d probably be safe starting with something lemon lime, or ginger ale.”

“I’ll do that,” Abigail agreed. Then she spent a moment staring off into space. “And a cake. They make those chocolate cakes, and I always thought they looked delicious, but—well, you know. Everyone knows.”

I’d have expected that a person saying something like that would sound angry, but Abigail didn’t. If anything, she sounded slightly abashed, as though she had something to be embarrassed about.

Since I didn’t think she had a damned thing to be ashamed of, I shook my head. “Cheesecake. The co-op has these cheesecakes. With chocolate ganache and raspberry topping. They’re life-changing.”

Hunter considered for a moment, then nodded. “True. The co-op. They also make an incredible key lime pie. Best I’ve had this side of the Mississippi.”

“I’m going to gain forty pounds,” Abigail announced, like it wasn’t a horrible thing, but a life goal.

And hell, good for her. I mean, assuming it was good for her and didn’t cause her any health issues.

We all worried too much about our weight and not enough about things that mattered way more, like our mental health and self-esteem.

She got us both glasses of lemonade, and took us back to a room she called “the solarium,” which made me think of Victorian manors, or maybe the game Clue. But no, that was “the conservatory,” wasn’t it?

Ephraim Collins, killed with the antifreeze in the solarium.

Regardless, it was weird and formal and not a room most people had in their house.

“Do you think I killed him?” Abigail asked, and still, her tone was conversational, not aggressive. “I’m a very reasonable suspect. Last will I saw, I get more of the money than anyone else, and the house as well. Though he kept threatening to disinherit both Sabrina and me in favor of Charlotte, since she”—she affected a gravelly voice—“‘made something of herself, unlike you two.’ I think he’d have done it, if he could have gotten her to reply to a single message he sent her.”

Hunter huffed in irritation, and I only just held myself back. He’d forced them to stay, disallowed them to go to college, and then belittled them for not doing it? What a complete tool.

Part of me sympathized with whoever had killed him. It was justified a dozen times over, by multiple people. Multiple lives he’d ruined.

“We don’t think you did it,” I told Abigail. I hadn’t asked Hunter’s input, but we had agreed last night about the fact that something had to have changed for there to be a motive. Beside me, Hunter nodded, and it bolstered my confidence. Take that, Tanya. My voice stabilized into something that sounded bizarrely like a strong, independent woman as I told her, “What we think is that something had changed recently, and that’s at the heart of what happened. That’s why he was killed.”

Abigail considered for a moment, sitting back in her chair and thinking.

“You know what? It did. Well, maybe not a major change, but it was something new. I’ll be right back.” She got up and headed out of the room, and Hunter looked down at me, those bright eyes completely capturing me in their gravity.

“That was...really hot,” she said, then bit her lip. “I really hope you don’t mind, but I suddenly have the near-uncontrollable urge to do this.”

Slowly, so very slowly, she leaned toward me. Her hot breath across my lips almost made me arch into her, gasping for my own breath as she completed the movement and finally touched her lips to mine. Just lightly, just brushing them together, almost a tickle of a movement, and somehow, I’d never before realized just how sensitive lips are. Every tiny motion went shooting through me like lightning bolts as she rubbed her lips across mine.

Once.

Twice.

“Oh! I’m terribly sorry. I?—”

Hunter pulled back, laughing. “It’s your house, Abigail. You’ve got nothing to be sorry for. I’m sorry I was trying to kiss someone on your couch.”

Abigail shook her head resolutely. “You shouldn’t be. It’s been too long since this house saw a single positive emotion.” She pursed her lips, looking behind her, like maybe someone was listening in from the doorway, and I wondered how often she’d ever been allowed to have private conversations in her entire life. “Do you know why they think Sabrina did it? Because she argued with him the night before he died, and that old monster grabbed the necklace her mother left her from right around her neck. He broke it, and it was still here on the floor of the office. They think Sabrina killed him because he was an abusive bastard.” She gasped in a deep lungful of air, looking away from both of us and just breathing for a moment. “They don’t understand, none of them. Charlotte maybe could have done it. But me? Sabrina? We never could have killed him. We were never strong enough for that.”

A shiver wracked my whole body at the words, and I... “No. Absolutely not.” I shoved myself up and walked over to her. “I’m not saying you should have killed him, but don’t sell yourself and Bree short like that. It’s not a crime, not to be assertive. We’re all trained from childhood that we shouldn’t be. You’re not a bad person because you learned what they were teaching you.”

“You two didn’t. And look at you?—”

“Look at me,” I agreed. “I just caught my girlfriend cheating on me and moved back home to Iowa. Being assertive doesn’t fix everything. If you want to learn it, you totally should. But it doesn’t make you a better person, or necessarily a happier one.”

With that, she crumpled against me, crying onto my shoulder. “It’s ridiculous. I hated him. I shouldn’t miss him.”

“Emotions aren’t that simple,” Hunter said, coming up beside us and resting her free hand on Abigail’s back. “You’ve lived with him your whole life. You’re allowed to miss him. For the broken habit of being around him, if nothing else. For what he could have been to you, if he hadn’t been such an asshole. For a thousand reasons, and no one gets to judge any of them. If you didn’t miss him at all, that wouldn’t be anyone’s place to judge either. No one had your relationship with your grandfather but you.”

For a long time, we just stood there like that, Abigail crying on my shoulder, and Hunter, eventually braced against the back of a chair, rubbing circles between her shoulder blades.

Eventually, she pulled herself back, breathing deep and giving us each a tremulous smile. “Thank you. I...just thank you. Both of you.” Then she reached into a pocket and pulled out an envelope. “This arrived for Grandfather the day after he died, and I thought it was odd. I would have given it to Sheriff Parker, but he hasn’t been back since they took the body away, even to ask me if I killed him.”

She handed it to me, so I looked it over. A letter from a law firm in Iowa City, postmarked the day before the murder. Huh. I looked up at Hunter. “Do you know Dooley and Franks? I don’t recognize the firm name.”

She quirked a brow, but didn’t look especially impressed. “Ambulance chasers, basically.”

“They have a commercial,” Abigail piped up. “Grandfather used to watch some reruns on television, old mystery shows from the seventies. I’m sure he saw it.”

That was when I remembered. “I thought Martin Hayes was your grandfather’s lawyer.”

“He was,” she agreed. “That was why I thought it was strange. Things have been a little tense since Mr. Hayes told him he couldn’t”—she glanced at Hunter, then away—“suesomeone for slander. So I wondered if maybe he was planning to try to do that again. Maybe even?—”

“Hayden?” Hunter asked, but there was more amusement in her voice than annoyance. “I mean, we can ask if he’s been served papers or anything. I’m gonna be honest, though, even if my brother were that angry, I picture him as a chihuahua. Tons of bark, but too small to get much leverage even if he tried to bite. I can’t see him actually poisoning someone. Plus with him, there actually is the issue of opportunity. He was working that day, and it’s not like the old man would have invited him in for a drink if he’d showed up at your door.”

“No, that’s true,” Abigail said, sighing. “Honestly, I don’t know. We didn’t have any guests at all that I saw the day Grandfather died. I just...I wish he’d stop ruining lives. He’s dead. He shouldn’t be able to do that anymore.”

Hunter pushed off the chair, giving Abigail’s back one last firm thump, and smiled at her. “Serious, Abigail, stop worrying about this. We’re going to figure things out, and the only person who will get in trouble is whoever actually took the law into their own hands. You and Sabrina will be fine.”

“I should talk to her about Charlotte,” she said, sighing and drawing back into herself as she let go of me. “Grandfather cut her out of his will, but that’s not right. She’s family. We should make sure she gets a share of the money. She might even need it

more than we do, living in the big city.”

That was...well, frankly, it was the opposite of what you saw in all those mystery shows where people killed each other over inheritances.

It was like I’d told Estelle, though: it was South Liberty. A town originally populated by outcasts and weirdos, and a town that took care of its own.

The best kind of town.

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The letter—yeahyeah, we weren’t supposed to open it, sue us—was just a confirmation of an upcoming appointment. An appointment that would have happened the day after Ephraim died.

Hunter called the office, and unsurprisingly, they wouldn’t give her any information, even when she sounded super official to me, and said she was working with the sheriff’s office and investigating Ephraim’s murder. I’d have been convinced. They told her she would need a subpoena if she wanted anything more than a confirmation that yes, he’d had an appointment with them.

She shrugged it off after she hung up, seeming unsurprised by their lack of interest in helping solve his murder.

“People are cutthroat. There’s nothing in it for them to help find his murderer. It’s possible they don’t actually know anything, too.”

I scowled at the notion as I pulled into my driveway. “Then they should say so.”

Hunter smiled, leaning over the center console and brushing her lips across my cheek.

“I like that you still think people might care about justice. It’s...”

“Naive?”

“Admirable. Being jaded isn’t a good answer to the world’s problems. You’re something else, Jaycie. No wonder Justice is your name. You’re faced with magic and somehow summon Dez Reilly from the ether. You lose your mom and start building a family around yourself—a family she’d have been damn proud of, for the record.” She reached over and took my hand in hers, squeezing tight. “I was starting to think maybe coming back to South Liberty was a mistake, but...that was wrong. This is exactly where I want to be. I just want to be here with you. With Rita and Abigail Collins and Reverend Tim and the fucking ghost of my childhood babysitter’s boyfriend. This is the last thing I ever expected, but it’s...it’s magical.”

And then she kissed me.

I always thought that whole “sparks flew” thing was reserved for romance novels and movie special effects, but this kiss was really, truly perfect. Her lips were soft, like she used ChapStick regularly, and she was gentle but not remotely tentative, and it added up to the sexiest thing ever.

I leaned right back into her, and before she even had the chance to deepen the kiss, I did it myself, opening my mouth, reaching out to run my tongue over her lower lip until she opened in return.

Not letting life lead me anymore, I decided to myself, and pushed forward, plumbing the depths of her hot mouth, practically climbing over the console to get closer to her, and she responded exactly in kind, wrapping her arm around me and pulling me against her, our breasts pressed together between us, so hard I could barely breathe,

and it just...it didn't matter.

Who needed to breathe? I had the taste of Hunter Grant on my tongue. That was all I needed in my entire life.

We broke apart finally, both of us gasping for air, and she licked her lips, like she was trying to commit the taste of me to memory. "Fucking magical," she said again, her voice slightly raspy this time, and then she dove back in for another kiss.

I suspected we'd have gotten a lot farther than that, except that I leaned forward too far and my hip hit the car horn, making both of us jump and then dissolve into laughter.

We slid apart and she shook her head, face full of wonder. "I never thought I was going to make out in a car again after I got out of college. You keep doing unexpected things, Justice Chesapeake Jones."

"I'd say unexpected is my middle name, but you know...it's Chesapeake." I grinned back. Glancing to one side, I saw Dez standing in the front window watching us and looking amused. Jerk.

How the hell was I ever going to get Hunter into my bed, when I had a permanent house guest, and one I was responsible for summoning?

On the other hand, I didn't have a bed for it either. Just my childhood twin, or Mom's bed, and I was not up for having sex in either option.

I sighed and frowned. "I need to buy a new bed." Hunter lifted a brow in question, so I explained. "All I have are Mom's bed or the twin I slept in as a kid. I've been using the twin since I got back. Or the couch."

“We can go to my place for dinner next time,” she offered, a sly smile tugging at the corners of her lips. “I’m renting that little pink cottage just off Six, and I have a king sized bed.”

“It’s a date,” I agreed, and leaned back in to kiss her once more.

We broke apart more quickly that time, though she stopped in the drive, kissing me again while we were both on our feet, before getting into her car to leave. “I’m going to look into this lawyer a little more. See what else we can do with them. Meet you in the café tomorrow morning?”

“I sure hope so,” I agreed. “We can have dinner. After, you know, spending the day investigating.”

Damn, was I a terrible person for wanting to get laid while Sabrina was in jail? Probably. But we weren’t leaving her there. We just didn’t have proof she hadn’t done it yet. The arraignment was on Monday according to Walter, but he had no idea how they were going to cover bail.

I kept hoping that we’d have her out before it came to that.

It just wasn’t right, having Sabrina deal with any of this, when I knew in my bones that she was innocent.

I watched Hunter pull out of the driveway, feeling like a teenager who’d just gone on a first date.

When I got inside, I held up a finger at Dez and the cats. “Not a word.”

He threw up his hands defensively. “Wasn’t gonna say a word.” Then his expression turned amused. “I mean, I always knew Hunt was gonna be a heartbreaker. But damn,

she's good."

"Hopefully she doesn't go breaking any hearts," I mumbled, tossing the letter onto the counter. "Since mine would be the one on the chopping block."

"Nah, she's a good kid." He stopped and considered the words, then looked at me again. "She's, like, way older than me now, but I can't stop seeing her as a six-year-old who told me one day she was gonna swipe my girl. Is that weird?"

I shrugged. "Is anything about this situation normal? You're a ghost living with someone who wasn't born till after you died. I...I'm sorry about this."

That seemed to catch him off guard, and he came over to lean on the counter next to me. I wondered absently how he did that, since he couldn't turn on the TV. "Sorry about what?"

What? He couldn't be serious. "About summoning you up against your will, and how you seem to be stuck here. You get like, eight or ten hours a day off, and then you're just...back. Every day so far."

"Dude, no way. This is fun. Besides, what's the other option? I'm dead. It's not like you're dragging me away from my lucrative life as a pro baseball pitcher. Which wasn't going to happen anyway, for the record. I was good for small town Iowa, but I was gonna be lucky to keep a college scholarship with it, let alone go pro after that." He made a face, then shook his head. "That's the bad part about having scientists for parents. They're always being 'rational' about everything, and won't let a guy dream big."

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“Screw that. You were gonna be the next...Cy Young.” I paused, considering. “He was a pitcher, right?”

He laughed at that, burying his face in his hands. “Yeah, like eighty years ag—no, like a hundred. Jesus, more than a hundred years ago. But he was a badass. I’ll take that. But for real, don’t feel bad. Hot neighbors, murder investigations, Hunt as a grown ass adult who seems like the scary badass she always wanted to be. This is really cool, and I’ve got nothing better to be doing.” He leaned down and looked into the fridge when I opened it. “You should make Mag’s chicken and dumplings. Her mom used to make that, it was killer.”

I considered for a moment, then shrugged, because why not? I’d gotten everything I needed for it. So I started pulling ingredients out of the fridge. “Not sure why you want me to do this, since it’s just kind of torture.”

“Eh, I have a great imagination. So, tell me about the investigation.”

We talked about the meeting with Abigail as I cooked, him mostly nodding along and watching my every move as I worked.

I concluded with the law firm and their lack of interest in the situation, and he gave a gusty, if imaginary, sigh at that. “I dunno, man. People suck, no matter what year it is.” He leaned over the pan with the chicken and vegetables in it, taking a deep breath, like maybe he could smell what I was making, and then, not looking the least bit disappointed that he hadn’t been able to smell it, turned to me. “What about magic?”

“What about it?”

He gave me that disgusted teenager eye roll. “You could do, like, a spell or something. To find the killer.”

I gave him my best quelling look, but honestly, I was thirty and childless. I was never gonna be Mom, no matter how great my role model on that had been. “I tried magic, remember? That’s how you got here. I’m just...I’m only starting out. I didn’t even know magic was real till this month.”

“Sure, which is why you can’t quit now. Maybe you didn’t get the ghost you wanted, but you didn’t fail. Besides, you and me both know summoning the ghost of your mom wasn’t you trying to solve a murder. It was summoning the ghost of your mom. I’d have done the same thing if I were you.” He turned and pulled himself up onto the counter and while my instinct was to tell him to get his ass off my kitchen counter...his ass wasn’t physical. He wasn’t going to get anything dirty. “So you should go back through that book and see if you can find a spell that will actually help find the killer.”

As much as I wanted to deny it, he wasn’t wrong.

I had a history of trying things, and when I wasn’t immediately good at them, giving up and never doing them again. Crochet, guitar, sports of any kind...the trail of dead hobbies in my wake was prodigious.

Magic was...well, it couldn’t be like that. First off, because I’d already had some success, so I was good at it. But mostly because if I was the only person I knew who could do it, didn’t that mean I needed to? Not doing it felt irresponsible.

So after I plated up my dinner, I sat with Dez in the living room and we went through the book, page by page, looking for a spell that would specifically help with our

situation.

“Make Her Sorry She Crossed You,” I read the title of a spell aloud.

“Daaamn,” Dez said, then gave a low whistle. “Witches are so badass. You should totally use that on your ex. Gabby said she cheated on you, didn’t she? She totally deserves that.”

“Deserves what, though? Is it going to make her skin break out, or is it going to make her fall and break her neck?”

He cocked his head one way, then the other, and finally shrugged. “Who cares? I mean, I guess you don’t want to kill her, but she can’t be sorry if she’s dead, so it probably won’t do that.”

It was a fair point, but not what we were looking for, and not really something I felt a need to do. I didn’t need revenge against Tanya. It was enough to be rid of her.

“He’s right,” Bee agreed from her bed across the room, half asleep and grumbly. “I still say we should find a spell to make her toenails all fall out. Or her hair.”

Ignoring her and turning to the next page, I sighed. “Find That Which is Missing.”

“That could work,” he said, and I wasn’t immediately sure whether he meant the spell I’d read, or Bee’s suggestion about Tanya’s toenails. “Also, again, witches are cool. None of that ‘love spell,’ ‘luck spell’ crap from movies. Nope, painful specificity only. That’s what I’m talking about.”

“That one we saw earlier was a little bit of a generic luck spell,” I said, fanning back through the pages to find the one I meant. “Best Day Ever. It looks really complicated, though, and the text specifies it doesn’t work for gambling. I wonder

what it does work for.”

“Best outcomes for stuff you were going to do anyway, maybe? Maybe useful for, like, weddings and stuff. Exams. First day at a school or job.”

I went back to the one he’d said sounded like it would help. He wasn’t wrong, exactly. Clues. Clues were missing. But didn’t you have to have ever had them, to find them? “We can come back to that if we don’t find something better,” I hedged, instead of plowing forward.

On the very next page, there it was. “Find That Which is Required.”

He jumped out of his seat. “Bingo!” Then he paused, looking at me, as though he was waiting for me to say something pessimistic. “Right?”

“Right,” I agreed immediately. “It sounds perfect. Let me just see if we have the stuff for it.”

We did, and I wasn’t sure if I was grateful or nervous.

Still, I dutifully put together the list of ingredients, and realized that to some degree, the spells were mostly the same. At least, the simple ones. Find the ingredients, put them in the ritual bowl, blah blah blah, candles and chanting, the end. It seemed simple.

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On the other hand, the last one seemed simple, and it definitely had not been. Or at least, the results hadn't been what I'd expected, even if the spell casting had been simple.

This one at least had a little bit of fill in the blank where I had to explain what I needed the object for, so that was something. It was also in English, like the ones for the tea, so thank goodness for that.

Dez and I talked it through, and decided that since proving Sabrina innocent was the main goal, but we also didn't want to end up with a different innocent incarcerated, I would say in the spell that the object was needed to find Ephraim Collins's murderer. It seemed loophole-free, but I supposed there was only one way to find out.

The spell went similarly to the previous one, except that the ingredients didn't disappear in a spray of steam or smoke, but a blinding flash of light.

Dez and I stared into the empty bowl, and...well, no clue to the murder had appeared out of nowhere. I frowned, but he held up a hand. "The spell said find that which is required. Not magically summon it. So maybe the spell is just going to make sure you find it when you run across it naturally. Like Journey used to say when I got annoyed, you just have to be patient. It almost always worked. Almost."

I frowned, but nodded. Maybe I should ask Abigail if I could wander through their house the next day, to see if I stumbled over a clue-by-four.

Too late to be wandering over there and bothering her tonight, though, so instead I turned on the TV and queued up one of my favorite TV shows from the last decade,

smiling over at Dez. “You’re gonna like this.”

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“You shouldn’t have stayed up till two in the morning watching television with your friends,” Hex nagged me as we headed out toward the car, to go to the Collins house. It was Sunday, so technically I didn’t have to go to the shop at all—Mom’s hours had been Monday through Friday only, and frankly, after having run the shop for most of the week, I knew why.

It was exhausting, even more than my previous retail experience. Maybe it would get better when I had Ryan’s help in the afternoons, but at least the first week had left me wrung out.

Maybe it was the fact that I’d had to remake magic sleep tea four times. Maybe that much magic tired me out.

“Dez is not ‘my friends,’ he’s one friend. And he’s thirty years behind on TV, Hex. I’m doing a service here.”

She wasn’t wrong, though. I wasn’t going to tell her I was a little grateful Dez had disappeared at two a.m., not because I’d been happy to pause our marathon, but because in retrospect, I had needed the sleep.

I opened the passenger door for the cats, then went and climbed in the driver’s side. I scowled and looked away from the blinding rearview mirror. Freaking sun, always up so early in the morning.

“Ugh,” I whimpered. “Why is the sun?”

Hex just sighed, but Bee lifted herself onto the center console. “Really? Were you

drinking last night when I wasn't looking? You're acting hungover, but I didn't see you drink. The sun isn't that bright."

She seemed genuinely concerned, so I looked down at her, and the light coming at me from behind was so bright I had to flinch.

Wait.

Behind.

Behind me was...south. The sun came up in the east, unless the laws of nature had changed overnight, so the sun couldn't be coming into the car from that direction. I turned again toward the backseat, half expecting someone to be sitting there with one of those painful blue-white halogen flashlights to shine in my eyes.

Once I'd blinked my way through it, I determined that no, there was no one there, and more, no source of light. Except for a manila envelope sitting on the back seat that was shining like it was auditioning for the role of the new sun.

"Stop that," I muttered to it, and instantly, the light was gone.

What the hell?

Find That Which is Required.

The spell had ended with a blinding flash of light, and then blinding light had enveloped this thing, only to stop when I told it to.

I opened the clasp and pulled the papers out, and that was when I remembered where I'd put the papers from Mom's lawyer.

It was a copy of Mom's will, then some other papers clipped together with one of those black clippy things.

But what the heck could that have to do with Ephraim Collins's death?

I decided I wasn't going to figure it out while sitting there in the car, so I looked at the cats. "Change of plans, guys. I'm gonna go to the coffee shop to check in and read this. Maybe...maybe Mr. Hayes put the wrong papers in here, and there's something about who Ephraim was planning to sue instead? Either way, I'm not going to go to the Collins house and ask Abigail if she'll let me and my cats in so we can sit there and read papers. It was weird enough I was going to bring you there at all. So do you want to go to the shop, which isn't open today, or back in the house?"

"Home," Bee said instantly. "But can you open the back window before you go? I want to go on the porch and watch the chickens."

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Hex rolled her eyes, but agreed with her sister that she'd prefer to stay home, and I let them back into the house before setting off for the coffee shop.

The coffee shop was open and booming with business, and frankly, it seemed to have more life than usual. Not that I'd ever tell Sabrina that, but I also remembered one time when she'd suggested to her grandfather that they play some quiet music in the background, and he'd threatened to sell the shop instead of letting her "ruin it."

On this particular morning, they were playing swing music over the speakers, and it wasn't even quiet or in the background. There wasn't a single annoyed-looking customer, though.

No, if anything, people were smiling whom I wouldn't have expected that from. Ed Kelley. Helen Potter.

Hell, Walter was smiling.

It was a little less of a smile than the others, but his girlfriend was in jail, so that made sense. When I walked in, he smiled and called back behind himself, "Flat white and a pain au chocolat for Jaycie."

Aww, he remembered.

"Hey hey, J," Rita said from her place at the espresso machine. "Want that heated up?"

"Only if you've got the time. This place is hopping."

She grinned in return and did a little dance. “Well who wouldn’t want to be at the best coffee shop in Iowa? Walter said that when she gets back, Sabrina is going to redecorate. That she always wanted to do the place up in tropical colors, but the old bastard wouldn’t let her. Well we don’t do ‘won’t let her’ anymore. Do we, Walter?”

“We do not,” he agreed. “And never again. Nobody in a healthy relationship ‘lets’ anyone do anything, they only decide if they can live with it or not.” He said the words like he was quoting from a textbook he didn’t entirely understand, but also, his face and voice were utterly earnest, so I found myself unexpectedly charmed. Especially since I was sure he hadn’t been the one standing between Sabrina and changing the coffee shop around.

Rita reached out and pulled him in for a little side hug, beaming at him. “See?” she told me, as though we’d had extensive conversations on the topic. “He can be taught. Best kind of man, that.”

Sitting at the small table near the front counter, Ed Kelley nodded to him. “Best way to live your life, young man. Listen to what the lady says. Life’s always better when the people around you are happy.”

I blinked at him, stunned for a moment. This was the man who’d held purple hair against me for over a decade?

This couldn’t be reality.

But then...I glanced around, gauging the business of the shop—no line—and deciding they could probably spare a moment. “Hey Rita, how are you with legalese?”

She scrunched her nose. “Not...great, but I can try if you need something parsed. Why, what’s up?”

I looked to Walter, and he smiled and waved both of us off. So Rita came over to sit with me, and I pulled the documents out of their envelope again. “There’s something in here that’s going to get Sabrina off. Don’t ask how. I don’t know. I just know this is important.”

So I handed her the bottom document, and I started reading Mom’s will.

The will was...well, it was as I expected. She’d left me everything, and specifically named most of it. House and business, but also, bank accounts that were specified, along with the amounts that should be in them, which was...well, I’d been worrying about my dwindling savings, but if I had that money, I’d be just fine.

The car, the cats, a safety deposit box at the local bank...there was just so much stuff. A lifetime worth of it.

By the time I hit the second page I was crying like a baby, even as impersonal as it all was, written there in computer font in black and white.

“Son of a bitch,” Rita said, and when I glanced up she looked...disgusted? “This lying son of a—you didn’t sign any of this, did you?”

“I...no. I told him I’d have to read it first. Why?”

“Smart girl,” she assured me, reaching over to pat my shoulder. She dropped the paper down and pointed at a line. “He’s trying to charge you for ‘back owed fees,’ but he never says how much they are or what they’re for. Never says who owes him, but real carefully doesn’t say your mom owed him squat. It’s all bullshit. Smoke and mirrors.”

Back owed fees?

Slowly, I nodded. “He did mention me needing to pay with a check. Said his office didn’t take credit cards. Seemed ridiculous to me.”

She looked back up at me, shaking her head. “No, honey. He’s not asking for money. Right here, it says you’re forfeiting ‘the business, building, and land it is located on’ in lieu of paying the fees.”

I blinked, staring in absolute astonishment. “That’s...that’s got to be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. How much could Mom have possibly owed him?”

“Did he defend her on a murder charge?” Walter asked, coming over and looking at the papers. “Because he told me he doesn’t do that. Said I needed to find someone in Iowa City.”

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“As far as I know, all he did for her was this,” I said, holding up the pages I’d been reading. “Arrange her will.”

“Honey, you need to find yourself a different lawyer and sue the pants off this asshole.”

Find a different lawyer.

Sue.

I blinked, leaning back in my chair as realization washed over me.

“Martin Hayes killed Ephraim.”

The whole shop went silent around us.

A second later, Ed Kelley’s voice said, first muffled, then a moment later, again and clearer. “How do you figure?”

“He was Collins’s lawyer for years. He’s everyone in town’s lawyer—he’s the only lawyer who lives here. But last month Collins made an appointment with a new lawyer. A shark up in Iowa City with a reputation for suing people. He’s threatened that kind of thing before, but never followed through, because who’s going to follow through and sue someone over nickel-and-dime stuff? A couple hundred dollars for a dental bill you think is bull? That’s not worth the thousands of dollars it takes to bring a real case to court.”

Walter, bless his heart, was confused. As much as it turned out he wasn't a terrible person, he also wasn't very bright. "Then what's worth suing over? Was Hayes overcharging him for something?"

"Wasn't he rich?" Rita asked. "If Hayes had control of any of his money..."

"Or a lot of it," I corrected. "And just maybe, Ephraim found out that it was gone. He couldn't sue Martin Hayes using Martin's help. So he had to go find a new lawyer."

"Which will be proven through when the sheriff subpoenas the records of Dooley and Franks in Iowa City," Hunter said, looking windblown as she stood in the shop door, grinning. "Collins told them what he wanted to see them about. Then Pat will just have to find out where Hayes bought the antifreeze. There's an auto parts store on the south side of Iowa City, I'd start there. They've even got a convenient camera in the parking lot."

She pressed her way through the mass of people in order to drop into a chair across from me. "How did you figure it out?"

I held up the papers Hayes had given me. "He was trying to steal my inheritance from Mom by making me sign away the shop. I figured there had to be a reason he needed that much money, and was willing to be so brazen about it. Plus like I said, why else hire a new lawyer? The old one was the problem. How did you figure it out?"

She gave a wicked smirk and it made me want to lean across the table and kiss her. "Dooley and Frank at law are much more accommodating in person, as it happens, especially when you know a guy. Took me about thirty seconds with the front desk computer to find the notes their secretary took."

I pushed up out of my chair. "I guess we better go see the sheriff."

“Think he’s coming to see you,” Ed said, waving his phone around.

A moment later a harried Sheriff Parker marched in, phone pressed to his ear with one shoulder, trying to write in a tiny notebook with both hands.

“Dooley who now?”

28

We went back to the sheriff’s station, Parker himself insisting to everyone at the coffee shop that they keep quiet about what they’d overheard, and Hunter looking at him like he was out of his mind.

Keeping a bunch of small town people from gossiping?

Good luck.

For good measure, Sheriff Parker turned and looked back at them as he dragged Hunter and me out with him. “If you keep us from catching the killer and getting little Sabrina Collins free, you’re gonna feel like a heel, aren’t you?”

Behind us, there was silence in the coffee shop.

It turned out that it was hard to do a whole lot on Sunday morning.

The banks were closed, the Collins family accountant’s office was closed—everyone was closed.

Oddly, everyone except Martin Hayes’s office was closed.

“By the time we get hard evidence about the family finances, Hayes will have heard

about that little scene in the coffee shop,” the sheriff grumbled after calling the accountant for the third time.

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Even Dooley and Franks were closed, which made me wonder how Hunter had gotten her information.

“So how do we catch him before he catches which way the wind is blowing and runs for it?” Parker asked, like we were the law officers in the room instead of him.

Hunter squinted at him. “You don’t think you’re overestimating his ability to do that? The man’s nearly seventy years old. Running isn’t what people that age do, let alone ones who’ve lived their whole lives in Eastern Iowa. At the very least, he’ll be bad at it and you’d track him down easy.”

“He’ll try though,” Parker insisted. “Nobody’s just gonna sit there and wait to be arrested.”

That made sense to me. “What if I met with him?” I finally asked. “Maybe I could draw the truth out of him.”

Hunter pursed her lips, like that was her least favorite idea, possibly ever, but she didn’t speak up against it.

I held up the papers he’d given me. “At the very least, I can raise some major ethical points about this. He’s trying to steal Mom’s shop from me.”

Funnily enough, now that it was out there, on the line, I found that I very much didn’t want to lose the shop. I’d been enjoying running it, and maybe it wasn’t what I’d gone to college for, but it wasn’t like teaching philosophy to undergrads had been my life’s great goal either.

Sometimes it was okay to go where life took you.

Sometimes, life took you to the right place.

You just had to accept that with intention, not simply because you didn't feel like fighting it. This wasn't staying with Tanya in LA because she didn't want to go to grad school. This was...this was one hundred percent what I wanted.

Martin Hayes would pry Mom's store from my cold, dead hands.

Screw that guy.

"I can meet with him and wear a wire. You have a wire, right? What is a wire, even? Just a recording device? Anyway, I can try to get him to tell me why he's trying to steal my shop. At least we might get something incriminating, right? Enough to put him in jail until you can get the proof you need from the accountants or whoever?"

They didn't like it.

Heck, I didn't like it.

But it was better than nothing, so they agreed to it.

Wearing a wire was less awkward than I'd expected, but maybe that was because of modern technology. I'd expected a whole lot of wires taped to me—which I had not been looking forward to at all—and...well, movie stuff, you know?

But it was a lot simpler, and a lot smaller, than that.

I also didn't have the slightest urge to insist that Martin Hayes's secretary talk into my boobs, like an awkward character in a comedy.

She gave me a weird sneer when I walked in, like I was a bad person by my very existence in their office. Or maybe that was just her face, because it didn't change when I told her I needed to see Mr. Hayes, or when she buzzed him on the intercom.

I wasn't especially shocked when he had her tell me to wait.

I wasn't even surprised when I sat there for the next hour in his uncomfortable waiting room chairs, in silence. I played a random sudoku game on my phone, which I was good at, but that always felt like cheating, since unlike the paper version, it wouldn't let you put the wrong number into a space at all.

There was a buzz on her desk, and the secretary pushed a button. "Yes, Mr. Hayes?"

"You can go ahead and go home, Phyllis. Oh, and send Miss Abernathy in."

I sighed at his continuing to get my name wrong, but at this point, there was no reason to bother correcting either of them. I wasn't going to have these people in my life for any longer than absolutely required, and that time limit was directly related to the microphone inside my shirt.

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The secretary waved me back even as she grabbed her purse, clearly ready to be finished working for the day. She did shoot me a sort of confused look as she went, as though this wasn't at all a normal thing, but she didn't let that stop her from making her escape.

I opened the door, and left it hanging wide open as I marched into the office, manila envelope in hand. What it contained was actually copies of the original papers he'd given me, since the sheriff had been hesitant to let them go. He didn't know anything more about contracts than I did, but he kept muttering something about how they

“should be” illegal.

Which was fair. Cheating someone out of their inheritance should be illegal.

Somehow, I doubted it was.

He glanced up at me, then back at a book sitting on his desk. “Please make this quick Miss Abernathy, I’m really quite busy. Did you finish that paperwork?”

I scoffed. That seemed like a good start, to let him know this conversation wasn’t going to be quite as simple as stealing from me, legally or otherwise.

He didn’t react to the noise, and I didn’t think it was because he was hard of hearing.

“I read your papers,” I told him. “Or should I say, this complete attempted rip-off?”

He turned a sour look up at me, nose and lips scrunched like he’d been sucking on a lemon.

Is that why it’s called a sour face?

Darn it brain, stop that. No time for distractions.

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re on about, Miss Abernathy.” In a stilted, affected way, he reached over to a tray on his desk and pulled some papers out, holding them in front of himself and pretending to read.

Pretending, because his eyes didn’t move to scan the words. No, they just sat there, glued to the middle of the pages.

“You’re trying to steal my mother’s business from me.” I tried to keep my tone flat,

unaffected, but still, my voice shook. Even though I knew he wasn't going to succeed, it was a painful thing to think about.

It was his turn to scoff. "Steal, Miss Abernathy? I'm simply trying to recoup my costs."

"What costs? Writing the will? I have no doubt you charged my mother for that. If not, I'd like proof."

He scowled at me. "You cannot prove a negative, Miss Abernathy."

What the hell was with him saying not only my name, but the wrong name, over and over again? Was he well aware he was wrong and just trying to piss me off, like it was a deadname or something? Little did he know, I'd have never been offended by having Mom's name, and hadn't specifically chosen not to have it.

"Oh, I think you could. Bank records go back a long way. I'll just bet it would take about ten seconds to find where Mom paid you in them. You're just trying to squeeze out extra money for some reason, when you're not entitled to it. And not a little extra money. Hundreds of thousands of dollars that you're in no way owed." If he was going to go out of his way to make me uncomfortable, I was going to return the favor. So I slumped into the chair across from him and threw my feet up on his sturdy wooden desk.

His whole face pinched at the thump of my feet hitting wood, as though I'd hit him, not a mere object. "You have no idea what I'm owed. Probate is an incredibly expensive process, and?—"

"And probate fees are paid out of the estate." I had no idea if he was right about fees at all, but it wasn't even the point we were arguing. It was him trying to muddy the waters. "If there were any fees, you'd have them. You wouldn't be trying to trick me

into signing my rights to my mother's store away."

"The bank owed fees," he stuttered, but then sort of trailed off. His face transformed in that moment, from an overwhelmed, nervous old family lawyer, into a shark. A man who knew exactly what he had been doing.

Oh, it wasn't like, possession, or an alternate personality or anything.

No, he was just dropping the act.

"Fine then, don't sign the papers," he told me, voice as chilly as the hardwood floors in Mom's house every winter. "You can write me a check for?—"

"Also no. Anything you were owed, you've been paid. I have no doubt at all about that. You're just trying to access money you couldn't before. A whole lot of it." My lack of respect seemed to really be setting him off, so I decided to push it even further. "So tell me, Marty, what's the problem? Why do you need hundreds of thousands of dollars as fast as possible? Lawyering not pay well anymore?"

He bared his teeth in an honest-to-gods snarl for a second before controlling himself, then shoved back in his chair, breathing deep. "You know so much. Why don't you tell me?"

"Why don't you tell me about your visit with Ephraim Collins the day he died?" I asked.

He bared his teeth again. "The day before. I was in Iowa City the day he died. I don't know what you're talking about."

"You have an alibi, or you don't know what I'm talking about, which is it? Besides, what difference does it make which day you visited?" I dropped in the information

Parker had given us while planning this charade, just to pull Hayes along. Leading the witness, I thought they called it in court. “After all, you just had to put the antifreeze in his hip flask, and eventually he’d drink it. So much better it took him a day after your meeting, so you could pretend it didn’t have anything to do with you, right?”

“You can’t prove that,” he insisted. “The son of a bitch drank himself into a stupor every single day. It only makes sense if I’d poisoned his flask, he’d have died the day I visited him.”

“But you were too clever for that, Martin,” I said, dropping my feet to the floor and leaning forward, giving him a sly smile. I actually had no idea how he’d managed that, but he seemed proud of it, so I offered him the chance to show off. “Weren’t you?”

One corner of his lips twisted up in a smirk. Too bad smirks wouldn’t count for shit in a court of law. Also, they couldn’t be seen on recorded audio. But Martin? He didn’t let me down. “I brought a bottle of expensive whiskey for my visit, and left it there on his desk. I knew he’d drink it right away. Probably wouldn’t get back to his disgusting Hawkeye vodka flask until the next day.”

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I shook my head, frowning. “But how did he not notice the taste? Pretty sure antifreeze actually tastes better than cheap vodka.”

He shrugged, casual and careless, like it no longer mattered what he was telling me. That was...concerning, to be honest. Unless I had been lied to by Hollywood my whole life, it meant that Martin Hayes had just decided to kill me. “The ass burned out his taste buds years ago. Why do you think he was choking down ten dollar vodka when he was a millionaire?”

“I always figured he was just cheap. Besides, was he a millionaire anymore? He was pissed at you for a reason. A reason that I think led to you trying to steal Mom’s business from me before it got noticed. You wanted to sell off the shop and try to replace what you stole from him, right? At least some of it.”

He reached over to a drawer on his right, and naive me, I thought he was going to pull out some papers that showed whatever point he wanted to make.

Nope, gun.

Just like a Hollywood stereotype.

“There are still millions in the damned Collins accounts,” he snarled, gripping the gun so tight I worried he might accidentally shoot it. Rather, shoot me with it. “But the cheapskate noticed a few hundred thousand, like they meant anything to him. He was going to go to a different lawyer. Thought I’d been mismanaging his investments. Can you believe that? Decades of working for him for peanuts, and that’s how he thanks me. He was going to fucking Dooley and Franks to sue me for

mismanagement.”

“And if they’d done that, they’d have gone through the finances and discovered it wasn’t actually mismanagement, but theft,” I said. That...all made sense.

“But this will work,” he shifted gears, smiling bright, and I realized that somewhere along the line, Martin Hayes had broken. He was so convinced that the world owed him something, that he didn’t comprehend he might not get exactly what he wanted.

What he thought he deserved.

“Boys will be boys” really fucked guys up, hardcore.

“You’ll ride off into the sunset, but not before signing over the shop to me in lieu of back-payment. I’ll replace the money. Everyone will be just fine.”

“And of course, by ride off into the sunset, you mean you’re going to murder me, like you murdered Ephraim Collins, and steal even more money. Still planning to let Sabrina take the fall for your murdering her grandfather, too?”

He waved the gun around, like my words were an annoying gnat he could dismiss. By waving a dangerous firearm around like a jackass.

“Going to murder me right here in your office?” I asked, pretending nonchalance. “Because I gotta tell you, that doesn’t seem too smart. They can find traces of blood, no matter how much you scrub them. Since I just announced to the whole coffee shop that I was coming down here to talk to you, this is the first place they’ll look if I go missing.”

He frowned at that, but only for a moment. Then he motioned, again with the gun, toward a door in the back of his office. “Out, then. We’ll go out into the country. I

can weigh you down and throw you in the reservoir.”

I quirked an eyebrow and didn't bother mentioning the issues with that plan, since he was, at least at the moment, giving me what I wanted. We were leaving his office. It would give the sheriff a chance to stop us, hopefully without degenerating into a hostage situation.

The back door opened right into a small parking area, and for a moment, I panicked. No one would know we were going out the back, and he'd get away and?—

Movement next to me caught my eye, and I saw the sheriff standing there in the alley behind the building, looking as calm as he ever had.

He wasn't what was moving, though. I spun to find Hunter right beside the door. She'd stuck her cane out between me and Martin Hayes, flipping it up to smack him right in the gun hand, sending it up in the air as he pulled the trigger, shooting at random. I heard a bullet ricochet off brick as Hunter grabbed Hayes by the throat with one hand and disarmed him with the other, tossing the gun on the ground at Sheriff Parker's feet.

Sheriff Parker, who, calm as you please, pulled a baggie from his pocket and picked up the gun.

“You all right?” Hunter asked me from where she was holding Hayes against the door, turning concerned blue eyes on me. Her gaze raked me from top to bottom and back, searching for damage.

“I'm fine, just a little shaky.” I wanted to lean in, to grab her and kiss her, but she was restraining a murderer, so I also didn't want to do anything that might let him get away.

A moment later, as though he'd read my needs—or maybe more like he was actually doing his job—Sheriff Parker returned, flipping out a pair of handcuffs as he walked. “Martin Hayes. You're under arrest for the murder of Ephraim Collins, and for kidnapping Miss Jones here.”

It was cute, how he stressed my last name. Like he might be giving Hayes information he didn't have.

Hunter handed the bastard over to the sheriff, and then turned toward me in time to receive a Hunter-seeking human missile. I clung to her, wrapping my arms around her middle as I breathed hard.

Kidnapping. I had, in fact, for just a second, been kidnapped. Held at gunpoint.

And Hunter, action fucking hero, had stopped the asshole.

She didn't even have a say anymore.

I was going to date the hell out of her.

### epilogue

It turns out there are kind of rules about what you can feed chickens. No raw meat, or potatoes, or avocados—not that those last were allowed in my kitchen. Flavorless green slime, yuck.

Either way, I gave them all the veggie scraps I could, as well as chicken feed, and then let them wander and make their own decisions every day. Laverne and Shirley were still on their own so far, but I fully expected that someday soon, they would have friends.

I wondered if lady chickens would be offended by being named Lenny or Squiggy. Or if I should buy roosters.

Eh.

I finished feeding the ladies, then headed for my—for Mom's SUV. I still hadn't sold my old car, but it turned out that Ryan was looking for a car to buy now that he had a job, so I thought I just might cut him a deal on it.

The neighbors were in their yard as I reached the car, all four of them. Gran and Ryan both waved to me, and I smiled and waved back. The husband, whose name I still didn't know, lifted his hand like he was going to wave too, smiling, but his wife slapped it down.

That woman had issues.

Hopefully she didn't take them out on Ryan or her mother-in-law.

The cats were staying home, preferring to laze on the back porch on such a lovely day rather than deal with the inevitable business of the shop on a Saturday morning.

I'd added four hours on Saturdays, and an extra hour every weekday evening, because Tea, Book and Candle was constantly busy, and seemed to get busier every week. I'd pressed some extra bedtime tea on Mona Brighton the next time I'd seen her, and eventually she'd come back and declared it even better than my mother's.

I was officially a hit.

I parked in my usual spot, tamped down the pang that rose on thinking that really, it was Mom's parking spot, and headed toward the store.

Lucy Beasley, who had just come out of the coffee shop, crossed the street to avoid coming near me on the way back to her own store. I rolled my eyes and turned back toward the coffee shop, catching the eyes of Journey Joyce, who met my gaze and rolled her eyes in Lucy's direction as she headed toward the museum for the day.

Sabrina was right back where she belonged, in The Unique Bean. She wasn't behind the counter now, though. She was out chatting with customers. Walter was taking orders, and he looked up from the person he was talking to and nodded to me in acknowledgment, turning his head slightly to look at Rita, at the espresso machine, and said, "flat white and a pain au chocolat?—"

"For Jaycie," Rita finished, turning to wink at me. "Sit down, chica, I'll bring it over."

So I did. I went and sat across from the hottest woman in all of Iowa, leaning over to press my lips to hers before taking my seat. "Hey gorgeous. What's on the docket for today?"

She kissed me back, then grinned. “Thought I’d follow you over to the shop, so Pat might not find me to give me his usual speech today. Anything fun happening at the shop?”

I waved a hand airily. “You know how it is. Always magic to perform. Tea to make. Hot girlfriends to make out with.”

“Sounds like my kind of shop.”

“Mine too,” I agreed. “My kind of life.”

Because it was. Home, in a way I hadn’t even known.

It was the best place life had ever led me.