



# The Golem's Bride

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**Category:** Romance, Fantasy

**Description:** Reginald is not your typical golem. Created to protect innocents during the London Blitz, his form has become refined and perfected over the decades until he looks quite human—but he still lacks that one special spark that would grant him full autonomy. Dejected and ready to be unmade, Reginald agrees to perform one more mission to honor an old friend in exchange for his final rest. Therese LaFontaine did the one thing her grandmother told her never to do—she married in haste, and boy, is she repenting in leisure. Therese's ex-husband was everything she thought she wanted—tall, dark, handsome, mysterious, and ready to show her the world outside of rural Louisiana.

Too bad that Matteo's globetrotting was just a cover for his more sinister activities that didn't just involve underhanded dealings—they involved the underworld itself.

In danger from Matteo's associates, Therese seeks refuge in Pine Ridge where old family friends offer to help hide her with a powerful protector. To keep up the charade that Therese knows nothing of her husband's double-life, she must play the role of a woman on the rebound.

To outsiders, Reginald is simply a sturdy human plumber. Alone at night, Therese discovers her golem bodyguard has powers unlike anything she's ever known. Alone and in hiding, she peels back the cold layers of the golem's heart to find someone worldly yet humble, giving but unyielding, brave yet afraid of what comes next.

He was only supposed to guard her life, not steal her heart. In a charade where love should never bloom, can Reginald finally find what makes him whole? Will Therese truly become the golem's bride?

The Golem's Bride is a steamy standalone monster romance in the Pine Ridge Universe.

**Total Pages (Source):** 62

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## Chapter One

May 1st, 1941

London

“Close its mouth.”

A shaking hand pushed the clay jaw shut. Round eyes glowed as the scroll inside the creature's maw was absorbed. The green glare of otherworldly power connected with each of the men in the basement underneath the Great Synagogue.

“Do you hear?”

A nod.

“Do you obey without question?” A man with a long white beard and small spectacles stepped forward. He was not long for this world and had long ago given up on fear.

The creature nodded again.

“You will take the form of a man, the name of a man, a proper Englishman.” The elderly scholar slapped a sheaf of forged papers into the golem's hand.

The doughy gray texture changed and shifted, narrowing and refining. Blobs became fingers. Round holes became lively and bright, green irises showing gray pupils alive

with intelligence.

“You will speak like a man, a well-bred Englishman, a great teacher whom no one would dare to question. You will take the children whose names you hold aboard a vessel and protect them until they reach New York. Once they have been given into the care of Shuylar Rosen, you will return on the next ship. You are to carry out the task of protecting innocents who espouse our cause until you are unmade. Above all, you are to protect the children of our people.”

The golem nodded again. It wouldn't question the six men in the shadows. It was told not to.

Besides, it liked this job. “Protect?”

“Any in our cause, yes. Any innocents who would preserve life and end destruction.”

Another nod.

“He'll never pass. He's too broad for an ordinary man. He's gray, as well.”

“He will leave when it is dark and foggy. He will remain with the children below. He will learn. He is not mindless clay, this one.”

Another man stepped forward, this one young and dark-haired, thin-faced with a pointed chin and wide, admiring eyes. “He was made with more knowledge and skill than any golem ought to have, Rabbi.”

“That is what this hour calls for.”

Voices whispered, “If he should turn against us—”

“I will not. I will take the children. I will care for them all.” The golem moved unsteadily, proud of the way something was surging through his heavy flesh that made him more alert, more alive. He was not simply animated—he was living. But even as that awareness hit him, something was missing. Some spark. Some deep, quiet part of him that he was smart enough to know he did not possess. Even as he had thoughts, he knew they were not entirely free.

“Good. You are good.” The bright-eyed man, little more than a boy, pressed another paper carefully into his thick fingers.

“Do I have a name?” His deep croak of a voice scared the men farther back. They jumped.

The young one dared to pat his elbow. “A good English name. Let’s call him Reginald.”

“Reginald Levy.”

“No! No, you can’t use that name. No name that will tell anyone he is helping us.” The man with the long white beard shook his head. “We won’t risk it. This is Mr. Reginald Gray—and he may be our salvation.”

REGINALD. THE HUMANSinsisted on calling him that name and speaking to him in English, not the language of their forefathers, a language he knew with some innate wisdom.

They gave commands. Protect the children.

From what? With that same innate knowledge that allowed for understanding of an ancient tongue, he knew children would fear his size and ferocity.

## Page 2

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Until he was taken outside, and red and silver sparks lit up a smoke-filled sky.

Arthur, the youngest of his six creators, hurried him along the streets where sirens wailed. People needed to get inside buildings, but the buildings were falling.

“We have passage booked for ten children,” Arthur whispered. Arthur spoke to him like a man, not a monster, his voice urgent. “You will make sure they arrive in America, where their bombs haven’t reached—yet. That’s the first batch. You’ll come back and get more. I’ll go with you when I can.”

“I understand.”

“Do you understand we have to live until the boat sets sail next week?” Arthur gasped as scarlet sparks burst directly above them.

A building teetered. People screamed. Walls began to fall, and Reginald’s eyes glowed. Something inside woke up.

Protect the innocent. My people.

The strength of a hundred men was in his clay form, and it was easy to catch the wall that zoomed toward Arthur. It was only slightly more difficult to take a hunk of the rubble and hurl it far and high into the night sky. In seconds, they heard the buzzing wail of a plane going down.

Arthur uncurled from where he had fallen and crouched. His eyes were dazed, then happy. “You took out one of the Jerries, my friend!”

“They were harming the innocent.”

“You saved me.”

“You are innocent. You are one of my people.”

Arthur reached out and wrapped his small, warm human hands around Reginald’s massive gray one. “And you are one of my people. Come. There are many more to meet, all more helpless than I am.”

“Where?”

“The Solomon Children’s Home. Rabbi Solomon helps orphans find parents. He’s sent as many as he can to homes in Worthing and Hertford since the start of the Blitz.” Arthur guided him along, looking back over his shoulder. “We’ll have to walk. No trains running this late.”

Reginald kept up easily. “I take the boat to Hertford?”

“No. You take the ones he’s getting now to America.” Arthur’s hushed voice dropped even further. “They’re from Poland and France. The war has already reached them. We’re their last hope. Reginald! Doodlebug!”

Reginald turned his head toward the incredibly loud buzzing thing that came from above.

Arthur was screaming, running into the dark with his hands over his head.

Reginald expanded his chest and moved into the path of the buzzing monster—the real monster.

Pain exploded inside of him, eating through his middle and burning his arms. It felt like his head was flying free from his body for a minute—and then it all stopped.

Arthur was next to him, mouth open.

How had he ended up on his back?

Reginald looked down as he slowly sat up. The hole in his chest was blackened and charred—but already closing. “I need a new shirt.”

“Some of the girls at the orphanage sew.” Arthur pulled him to his feet with a huge, straining grunt. “Come on, friend.”

“Yes. Friend.”

He liked the word.

May 10th, 1941

Southampton

Yvette LaFontaine stood for a long time on the docks before she approached the gangplank leading to the SS *Abundance*. As a member of the French Resistance, she knew that the papers she had sewn in the lining of her skirt had to get to an American agent on board. Her father and brother had already given their lives for the cause. So had her husband.

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But my child will not suffer the same fate.

Yvette twisted the ring on her finger and swallowed hard as she put her hands on her middle. Six-months pregnant. Four months a widow. The men and women who met in the underground rooms of bars and the hidden walls in stables gave her this job because they were certain a pregnant woman would stand less chance of being seen as a threat—and maybe because they felt guilty that Yvette had lost all of her family. Having relatives in America and having met them in London before the war, she spoke English well, and her papers had not been confiscated yet.

Her ticket was one-way for many reasons.

But ships crossing the Atlantic didn't have wonderful odds of arriving. U-boats were ruthless, blowing up cargo ships, passenger ships, and warships alike.

But it was nothing like what they were doing to Paris and London. To Europe.

Dead in the water. Dead on the ground.

Her hand balled into a fist above the place where her son or daughter kicked.

Well. We are going to try. We are brave French stock, you and I.

“Here, mother, let me help you.”

Yvette turned, ready to strike, when a young, thin man took her elbow.



“Don’t be scared. You’re among friends,” he whispered, and marched with her onboard, muddling her into a crowd of children and a hulking, silent figure in an elegantly cut suit.

“I must find a Mr. John Whitehall,” Yvette told her unwitting assistant.

“Your husband?”

“One of our family friends.”

Something passed between them. A knowing look under polite eyes.

“I will let you know if I find him. I’m sure he will spot a woman as lovely as you and rush to your side, madam.” The young man doffed his hat and left with the pack of children and the silent man in gray. He turned back with a bow. “I am Mr. Sloane, Arthur Sloane, if you need assistance while we make this crossing.”

“Yvette LaFontaine. A pleasure.”

REGINALD LIKED THE children. They were not afraid of him, surprisingly. Maybe they understood better than the rest of the world the true definition of “monster.” The little ones clung to him, knowing he would keep them safe. When they cuddled close, trusting him, he felt something deep inside stirring. A place where a soul ought to be. Something grew. When he passed the mirrors in the single cabin they all shared, he was startled to see how his face and form were changing. Every day with the little humans brought him closer to a human appearance.

In the middle of the night on May 11th, or perhaps it was the morning of May 12th, he woke up with a harsh cry, that empty inner pit suddenly searing with pain. Perhaps it was not so empty, after all.

“What is it?” Arthur Sloane, whose true name was Arthur Solomon, sat up as well.

“My creator... My life-giver... Something has happened. But I... I am not unmade?” Reginald whispered, hands patting his solid arms and rock-like torso.

Arthur chewed his lip for a minute, then whispered, eyes skirting over the children. “You won’t be unmade. There were six of us who helped make you. All of us have the final words to end your animation, Mr. Gray.”

“Call me Reginald.”

“Of course. I’m sorry. How about Reggie? I like that.”

“I like that, too.”

“I am one who had a hand in making you, however small. That’s why they sent me with you, and they sent Jacob Cohen far out into the country, to Yorkshire. What you felt... I am afraid it means the worst has happened to one of our number.” Arthur patted a sleeping head beside him on the floor. “But we carry on.”

“We carry on.” Reginald nodded. It was a solid motto. He liked it.

The next morning, wires hummed across Europe and the Atlantic, letting the world know that London had been bombed yet again, and the Great Synagogue of London had been destroyed. Reginald and Arthur did not yet know which of their number had been in the secret rooms below, but that was the only explanation for the searing pain in Reginald’s chest. To distract himself, the golem tried to remember the words of his primary creator, the old rabbi with the long white beard and lively eyes.

Protect the innocent. Prevent destruction. Above all, protect our children.

“You must tell the captain to change course and sail toward Halifax, not New York.  
We are in danger on this path.”

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Arthur blinked. “I can’t just tell—”

“You have to, or this ship will be hit by German missiles, fired from under the water. Do not ask me how I know. I just know.”

Arthur puffed out his cheeks and let out a long sigh. I’ll make them listen. I’ll go now.”

“And find Mrs. LaFontaine. She and her unborn son are not safe. John Whitehall is a double agent. The real John Whitehall is dead. The man on this ship took his identification papers.”

Arthur let out a curse. “How—”

“Do not ask me how. I just know. I may lack a soul, but perhaps that means my mind is keener? Bring Mrs. LaFontaine to sit with the children, and I will keep her safe until we find the right people.” Reginald slowly got to his feet. “I will deal with the false Mr. Whitehall.” The ocean had recently become home to so many bodies. It was time to give the Atlantic one more, one who deserved to join those who had suffered from the destruction of his cause.

The young man’s eyes glowed. “You are the best ever made, Reggie. A hero. You’re going to do great things.”

The golem licked his lips. They were drying out. He needed to stand on deck at some point and let the spray from the ocean and the wet breezes heal the cracks in his skin. “Once I do these great deeds, will the empty part of me fill up?”

“Ah.” Arthur licked his lips, too, even though he wasn’t made of clay. “I have heard that golems can attain complete free will. Humanity. Even a soul. But another must give their heart and soul to them first.”

“A sacrifice?” Reggie understood how people feared his kind, then. “No wonder you fear my kind turning against you.”

“No, no. Not a sacrifice. Love. The true love of another. When humans were made, we believe they were not destined to be alone. Adam had his Eve. The Torah teaches that a man and his wife become one. They are no more twain, but one flesh. You would need a bride, my friend. A bride who truly loves you as you are, and... I’m afraid that cannot happen with your kind. A golem is always a golem, and you do not have the souls of humans. Even if I were to make you a mate once we arrived in New York, she would never complete you.”

It was unspoken but obvious that a human woman, a woman with a soul and love to share, would never love a golem. She would be flesh and blood, and he would be lifeless earth.

“So my life will always be empty?”

“No. Your life will always have purpose. But that little spot? I don’t know, Reggie. Maybe other things will fill it.”

Reginald thought of the smallest children who liked to nestle into his arms, poor things, so desperately sick with loss and longing for the families they’d had stolen from them before being smuggled to London, and now fleeing again. Something grew inside him when he comforted them. “Maybe, Arthur. Maybe.”

## Chapter Two

July, 2024

Pine Ridge, New York

“Waterworks Plumbing!” My voice is guttural, almost inhuman.

It’s been over eighty years, but when I first come out of my deep, lifeless sleep, I’m still more beast than human, no matter how well my form holds the shape of a man.

Why did I pick up my phone? I have a cardinal rule—never answer a phone call before my eyes are focused. Plumbers do no one any good when they’re drunk or disoriented.

That’s right. Mighty Golem, the Living Earth, Most Sacred Servant of the Temple, Protector of Innocents, Defender of Lives... is a licensed and bonded plumber, serving Pine Ridge and Broome County.

If my vision had been less blurred, there’s an even chance I’d have just let it ring. The call was from Jakob Minegold, one of my oldest friends—and a man who is notoriously immaculate in his housekeeping and maintenance. I just did my annual inspection of his property last week. If he’s calling me, it’s to socialize.

I don’t want to be social these days.

I’m not heartless (well, no, technically I am), but sometimes I stew. I sink into misery. I’m a monster, living in a community of monsters. It’s peaceful. Aside from taking a weekly shift on the Night Watch, I have no one and nothing to protect. The monsters around me have found love and friendship. Some do marry humans, but why shouldn’t they? They are living things, made of flesh and blood, or at least spirit. They can relate to humans, even create families with them.

They've become whole. It's a reminder that I'm still a thing that was made of magic and clay, a puzzle put together seamlessly, but still missing one piece.

I save people from frozen pipes and backed-up toilets. I think the men who risked their lives and souls to make me would be ashamed of what I've become... and I think I'm ashamed, too.

Minegold is the unofficial mayor of this paranormal-friendly town and the chief supernatural representative. Like me, he assumed his monstrous form during World War II, and for the same reason—to protect the innocent. After years of toil on the battlefields and behind the scenes, he's content with peace, with playing family with his “adopted” children and now a grandchild.

“Reginald? Are you there?”

“What?” I rasp, shaken back to the present, struggling to leave my earthen sleep. It's been harder lately. Some days I don't even wake up.

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“Do you recall the name LaFontaine?”

My mind zooms backwards to a happy time in the midst of war and tragedy. “Artie,” I whisper. “Artie and Yvette.”

“That’s right. Young Arthur Sloane married Yvette LaFontaine in 1942. They had several children, in addition to the little boy Mrs. Sloane already had from her late husband.”

“I remember. He was shot by occupying forces in Paris. Yvette was already a widow when we met her.” A ghost of a smile crosses my lips. I remember the first time I saw Arthur holding her hand at the end of the voyage. I saw the beginning of their romance—but such a thing never happened for me. “Arthur adopted him—a beautiful little fellow. Pierre, they called him. Artie was a wonderful father, but they kept the boy’s lastname out of respect to his father’s heroism and Yvette’s French heritage.”

Bitterness fills me. Artie has been dead for fifteen years. All the men who made me have died. The young children I ferried to safety during the war are dead or elderly. The ones who are left are scattered around the world. I’m only a hazy memory to them, and perhaps that is good. I’m a part of their lives that they associated with terror and loss.

“Pierre LaFontaine reached adulthood, thanks to your protection of his mother and adopted father. He had several sons, and they had children, and they’ve had children... The one who needs our help is Therese LaFontaine.”

“A little girl?” Something inside of me wakes up. I can protect again?



“Not so very little, Reginald. I think she’s in her twenties.”

“Oh. Oh? Why turn to me? What does she need to be protected from?”

Minegold stalls. “It's not long-term. It's a week, maybe two weeks, tops. You don't have to leave town. It is far better that she comes to us. This task will be just... perfect for you. You'll get to use all of your skills.”

“You can stop stroking my ego. What does the job entail? What skills? You want me to guard her and do a full copper refit?”

“Both. Well, not the full copper refit, but fixing up an old house on Ridge View Way.”

“The lady needs me to protect her from a realtor?” There’s only one house on Ridge View Way. The small lane runs past one of the cemeteries in Pine Ridge, and as any supernaturally conversant person knows, you do not build your home on top of someone else’s.

Jakob heaves a deep sigh. “I'm afraid you won't like this part, but as I said, it's not for long. You're going to have to go undercover. There must appear completely unaware and innocent of any knowledge of supernatural doings.”

I look in the mirror. I look like a human. A stocky, barrel-chested human with a square jaw and a square head to match. Bulging muscles and a frame too short to carry them all. It gives my torso a bunched-up appearance that I’m not fond of, but it’s something I can’t change. My skin is light gray. I look like I’m moonburned instead of sunburned. “You want her to seem ignorant of anything paranormal, so you stick her with a supernaturally created being? A golem?”

“Just until the Feds can take her.”

“TheFeds?” That’s the last thing any paranormal being wants to deal with! “That’s not my line of country, Jakob.”

“Nor mine, but you and I both know that the paranormal and normal go hand-in-hand far more often than not.”

“I don’t want to end up in some lab.”

“It’s the Federal Witness Relocation Program.”

“Why aren’t the Feds protecting her now?”

“Because she’s just entering the country today. They need her evidence, and they need her to testify. There’s one brave young lady, according to her grandmother. She is the one who contacted me for help.” Jakob’s voice is surging in excitement. Like me, he lives to play the hero. Unlike me, he has something else to live for besides that. “There’s knows that her ex-husband’s associates will probably attempt to intercept her now that she is back in the country.”

“Where is he now?”

“He was arrested in Europe a few months ago. If he hears that she’s been talking to anyone who twigs as an agent, he’ll take her out. Not personally, I imagine, because he would be the first suspect, but he’ll have it arranged.”

“How in the world do you know all of this?” I demand.

“Her Grandmere!” Jakob rolls the French word off his tongue lightly, something I can’t manage.

“In Paris?”

“In Louisiana. Sloane and LaFontaine educated their children well in the ways of religious and divine protection—what some call good or “white” magic. Therese knows of golems and will have no trouble trusting you.” Minegold gives another sigh. “What she didn’t learn much about was the darker side of magic, the evil things magic can do. When she met a charming young man in New Orleans, she married him—unaware that he was in the earthly employ of demons. He works in human sacrifices, Reggie. If Delgado believes that Therese is not some fluffy innocent, ignorant of his dark habits, she will be his next offering.”

“But... The Feds?” This sounds like a job for the Night Watch, not a lone plumber! We’ve taken down all sorts of evil humans and monsters over the years.

“The Feds are trying to bring down a killer. To you and me, a human sacrifice is only one part of a complex problem. Obviously, a sacrifice is made for power, and the sort of power Matteo Delgado brokers is hair-raising. I’ve been doing some rapid digging—not too much lest I alert the wrong people, but I believe his most prolific clients are among the darkest practitioners in New Orleans.”

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I shudder. I've seen humans who use other humans as currency, as experimental fodder. It is a fate I saved others from—but that was long ago, and the act was simple, if harrowing. Get them to safety, away from evil people. There was an ocean between my charges and their destruction.

Would I be able to protect this young lady if evil were hunting us in our own backyard? "Murder is murder, whatever the purpose. The police should handle this."

"But to the police, there is nothing to connect Delgado to any of his kills. He doesn't have to kill any specific type of person or in any particular way. He travels around the world, a stabbing here, a strangling there, a murder in Venice one month and Montreal the next. Without Therese's evidence, there would be no way to connect a series of random deaths to one man."

"But Therese caught him?"

"Indeed, she did—with her own eyes. Once she talked to her grandmother, her eyes were opened further. She saw that one death was not the end of his crimes. She was able to find out a lot about his activities before she left him in Rome. She called the American police, who, for once, managed to handle things with some degree of success and connected her with Interpol. Interpol agents in Rome were able to get Delgado into a cell on something minor. Now, they must collect evidence before springing a murder charge on him. The odds are slightly in Therese's favor. He's killed so often and in so many locations that he will not automatically assume his ex-wife was the witness. But once his lawyer sees the witness list and the evidence against him... Well, you can understand why a lot of people would keep quiet and say they didn't see a thing."

“I admire her guts, but—”

“Marie LaFontaine, Therese’s grandmother, kept her grandfather’s journals, specifically the parts about meeting you and me in Pine Ridge. Specifically, the parts about you, how you were made, and your oath to protect Arthur’s family and the families of the men who created you.”

I try not to curse out loud.

“Marie told Therese to contact us, that the town could protect her—and specifically that you could protect her. She is the family of one of your creators.”

“I know, but not by blood.” As if that ever mattered to me before.

I can hear the snicker and picture Jakob’s weary expression. “Listen to a vampire, dear boy. Blood doesn’t matter.”

“I... Don’t want to get involved. I want this to end.” The words come out faster than I can think them. “You’re powerful. You know the ways of our people.”

“That’s true, but—”

“Unmake me. If I do this thing for her, unmake me.”

“I can’t! Only someone with the sacred incantations would... The journals.” Minegold’s voice grows ponderous. “I suppose if he wrote about your creation, there’s a chance Arthur Sloane recorded or hid the words of life and the words of ending in his journal. They’d be useless without you there, but he might have left them in writing as some sort of failsafe.”

“Or some kind of mercy,” I whisper. I think back to the days on the boat, the days

where I watched Yvette and Artie start to form some sort of bond and realized I would never have it for myself. “Whether the words of ending are written down or you have to make them as you go, you are powerful. You could do it. I don’t want to go on like this. Over eighty years, and still empty.”

“I know that pain, but there are things to fill it. There are friends, family, hobbies—”

“Not for me.”

“You won’t even try! Lately, you hide away. I never see you in town. Do you even eat these days?”

I skip the questions and criticisms. It’s different for Jakob. He was human once, and he’s never killed an innocent. He still has his human soul. Our positions are different, however similar he may try to make them. “I have tried long enough! Promise me that if I help this woman, you will set me free.” I resist the urge to punch the mirror as I watch my face working, breaking down. Sometimes I wish I would turn to dust, but I haven’t, and I won’t. They built me far too well.

“I am going to pray that you change your mind. But if you do not—then yes, I will help you. We must help Artie’s great-granddaughter first. If Delgado’s goons don’t believe she’s moved on and is living a happy little human life, he will stop observing her and send Hellhounds to finish the job.”

“Where is she now?”

“I spoke to her last night. An undercover Interpol agent will have her on a plane this morning. Early this evening, you and I will meet her at the Binghamton Airport. If she’s not being followed, we will hurry her to that little fixer-upper on Ridge View Way, and you will be the plumber who is there doing a full overhaul on the house. If she’s still got a tail, we will do anything in our power to convince Delgado that she’s

moved on and has no interest in him any longer.”

“Well, what does he think now?”

“Therese didn’t tell him the real reason why she was leaving. She left after staging a big fight and storming out of their hotel in Rome. When she got to the airport, she called him and said that she was done with him, that she married him because she wanted a rich, glamorous life of jet-setting around the world with her playboy husband, but she didn’t realize how lonely and empty it would be. Then, she told him—well, she panicked, I believe.”

“Oh, no. What did she say?” I try not to groan. I value honesty except in extreme circumstances. Artie and I told many lies over the course of the war. I suppose Therese is in a war for her own survival.

“She told him she had met someone else, a sweet, small-town guy. She met a man with a blue collar and a big heart who would start a family with her and put her before his career, who would let her settle down in one place and not drag her around the world.”

“Ooh. And she didn’t think that would make him mad?”

“She knows him better than we do.”

“Apparently not. She was living with a killer.”

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Minegold continues, “She gave her statement in Rome and hurried to London, where she’s been living for several months, cooperating with Interpol and living in a secure flat that’s next to an agent’s. Because of her, they’ve been able to connect a string of deaths to Delgado—only he doesn’t know that yet. They must have a very solid case before they can risk it, especially if they try him for multiple murders and he gets off. Then he cannot be tried again for any of them. For now, they have Delgado on something else—tax evasion or fraud, something like that, I think. Once they hit him with a murder charge, all the excrement will hit the fan. When Therese left, Delgado believed she knew nothing about his criminal or sacrificial activities. After charges are presented—that won’t be the case.”

My admiration for the lady goes up. She must be one cool customer. “So, if she is being followed, I’m supposed to pose as what? Her handler and get her to some safe house? Won’t they think it’s odd that she has a bodyguard if she doesn’t know her husband is a criminal?”

There’s a waffling hesitation in Jakob’s voice. “No, no one must know that you’re the bodyguard. You’re supposed to be the sweet, small-town man she left Delgado for.”

“What?”

“Wear a nice suit, Reggie. You might have to star in an off-off-Broadway production this evening. You play the groom.”

I hesitate. I’m never going to get married. I long for deep emotional connections, but lack the soul to create them. I rarely speak. Women like communication.



But Minegold? He's suave. Elegant. A widower. He knows how to be married.

"Why don't you do it? Take her back to your house, and—"

"I cannot protect her in direct sunlight. I'm too easy to harm with fire or sunlight. You are indestructible. You are also, no offense, far more the picture of a small-town, blue collar sort. You're actually a plumber, for heaven's sake!"

"But I don't know how to fake being someone's brand-new husband!"

"Take her to dinner. Laugh at her jokes! Fix up the house with her. Newlyweds do those sorts of things."

"I would imagine there'd be a lot more laying pipe that's related to consummation than actual plumbing," I snap.

"Then look besotted when you're in public."

I want to refuse, but something sears in my chest.

My oath. To protect.

The promises I made when I said goodbye to Artie Sloane on his deathbed. He always treated me like a person. I told him I would always protect his family. He went with pictures of all his children and grandchildren by his bedside—adopted or otherwise, they were all his out of love.

Maybe I was jealous that a man with such a huge heart made me—and yet never figured out how to give me even a fraction of what he was capable of feeling.

"I don't want to do this—but I'll do it."

“The agents will walk Therese through her paces. You just provide cover and protection that they can’t possibly deliver. They’ll tell us the next steps. I’ll see you at four. Oh, and mazel tov. I hope you and Ms. LaFontaine, formerly Delgado, will be very happy together.”

I hang up and step straight into the shower. I’m going to have to pack. Find my suit and hope it’s not too wrinkled. Oh, yeah, and learn how to look happy. I’m supposedly meeting my new bride this afternoon.

### Chapter Three

“It’s all so sudden!” I keep saying the phrase in a breathless, cheery voice. The level of breathiness indicates how close I am to passing out. Whenever I get too close, Kim Argyle, goddess of an Interpol agent and answer to all my prayers, squeezes my hand calmly and gushes, “You’re doing the right thing! You don’t get a second chance at true love!”

Or some other total bullshit that I no longer believe.

I had a whirlwind romance. When I met Matteo Delgado, I was at a destination bachelorette party in Miami. It was my best friend’s bachelorette weekend, and it was the first time I’d ever left my home state—even though I was almost twenty-five.

That’s right. At twenty-five, I had reached the height of small-town country girl clichés. I had been a cheerleader. I competed in the Miss Bayou Pageant. My college diploma came from Louisiana Agricultural and Career College, where every other degree conferred was in animal science or agriculture. I was one of thirteen people in a class of three thousand who graduated with a computer science degree.

I was bored, horny as hell, and tired of turning down boys pretending to be men. You know the kind, the ones with belt buckles bigger than what’s under the zipper,

tobacco-stained teeth, and deer musk on their work boots.

My mother called me “uppity” and warned me that perky boobs and short-skirt thighs weren’t going to last. In her opinion, I needed to marry a steady local guy who would help me pop out some grandbabies for her before I hit thirty. Even my besties told me I should give the local guys another look and stop drooling over the polished, devastatingly tall, dark, and handsome men on the covers of my Billionaire Bad Boy romance series.

As I sit staring out the tiny airplane window, my mind spins in circles, focusing on my marital mistakes.

My mother was right. (I hate that so much.) I should have stuck to the local guys. Most of them were decent-looking and nice enough. Most of them were superstitious and a little bit sexist. If they’d ever found out that my Grandmere knew about magic and could hex or bless people, they would have crossed to the other side of the street whenever they saw me coming.

Still, I wouldn’t have had to tell anyone my family’s secrets. Heck, I barely knew them until all of this hit the fan. I thought my grandparents were just superstitious.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:20 am*

I could have lived like that and been perfectly safe—and perfectly bored.

But no. I wanted more. Who knew more would come with more terror, more regret, and more grief than you could imagine? (My grandmother, but don't tell her I said that.)

Matteo Delgado was so much more. He was incredibly hot and sophisticated. When I met him at the bar of that Miami hotel, he went out of his way to make sure his attentions were known. Over that weekend, I was wined, dined, and ushered into a world of naughty sex and orgasms that I'd previously thought were fictional. I couldn't believe it when he said he wanted to see me again and promised that he would make it happen.

"He kept his promises," I whisper. Kim pats my hand.

Matteo promised he would prove that he wanted me. Maybe it was just looks or sexual chemistry. I didn't care. Sex and excitement with a man who promised to love me, who steamed into my small town in a limo to whisk me away to propose in Paris? Yeah. I said yes.

Grandmere Marie always told me, "Marry in haste, repent in leisure." She wasn't there in Miami or when he rolled up in a limo. Maybe if she'd been there to look me in the eyes and ask me how much I really knew about Matteo, what kind of future we had talked about, I would have put on the brakes before marrying him.

My heart curls up in a ball. I can see how foolish I was now. He wanted me because I looked the part—a pretty, naive, innocent country girl who would look good on his

arm and provide a perfect cover. No one would believe that Little Miss Innocent would knowingly marry a murderer—and worse.

I would certainly never marry a man who could— I squeeze Kim's hand hard this time. I can't shake the image of what Matteo is capable of out of my head. When I close my eyes, I see him there, in the bushes outside the little private beach cottage we rented. I wasn't supposed to be watching. I wasn't supposed to be awake. But I was, and I heard the angry, hushed argument, I heard the threats, and then I saw the knife flash in the dark. I heard the muffled, gurgling yell as the older man Matteo was speaking to was pushed backward, under the waves.

The tide took out the body—and brought it back again, according to the Italian newspapers.

It wasn't all a dream.

The marriage was a dream—the kind you wake up from.

The pilot tells us that we're going to circle once because of a delay occurring with the plane ahead of us. Passengers all around us groan. "Is that going to mess us up?" I whisper.

"Don't worry, sweetie! We'll still get to Reggie on time!" Kim's mask never wavers. I guess that's why she's the agent. "You're doing great," she murmurs. "Soon you can text Mr.Minegold and tell him we're on the way. That's the name of the family friend, isn't it?"

Reginald Gray and Jakob Minegold. A clay monster and a vampire. A golem and a creature of the night. Yet Grandmere Marie remembers meeting them both when she was a little girl—not that she's ancient now. She's in her seventies.

“That’s right, isn’t it? Reggie Gray and Jakob Minegold?” Kim hisses.

I snap out of the conversations I wish I could have again. The ones where she tells me to wait, and instead of saying that I’m an “old maid” at twenty-five when all of my friends are married, I actually listen to her.

“Hm? Oh, yes! Yes, Reginald Gray.” I picture a slender block of English concrete with no soul and no smile. Well, that’s what I need. A wall between me and Matteo’s men when he finds out what I’ve done.

Kim’s voice turns encouraging. “It’s a good, solid, dependable name. Reggie Gray.”

I decide that I like the name. It’s not exciting or exotic. Matteo had me wrapped around his finger the first time he said his name, all flourishes with his tongue darting around his mouth, making my three-martini brain imagine what his tongue could do to me. I try to imagine a golem’s tongue moving, speaking, and I end up picturing zombie-like groans.

Oh, well. It doesn’t matter. I specifically told Matteo I didn’t care about the lavish trappings anymore—I wanted someone to build a real life with. Solid, stolid, and true. Looks optional.

Tears escape my eyes without warning. I’ll never get married now. I mean, I can pretend to be married to the golem bodyguard for a few weeks before going into the Witness Relocation Program, but once I’m out on my own—I’ll always be on my own. I can’t live a lie with someone. I already spent a year living a lie with Matteo.

“Honey, save the happy tears for Reggie!” Kim giggles and pushes my complimentary champagne into my hand. “Drink that,” she whispers.

I gulp the champagne and blink away the tears. No time for them. It won’t matter if I

never get married again if I die in the next week, anyway. I have to focus on staying alive, which means playing my part. “Kim! You’re going to get me tipsy before we land!” I give a shrill giggle, the kind that will attract the attention of anyone who is eavesdropping. “You don’t need to give Reggie any extra help.”

I put the champagne down and watch the plane banking back towards New York. Kim’s voice and mine drone on mindlessly about the cute little town, sweet, steady Reggie, and how my parents will just love him. I keep smiling and sipping my bottle of water while I’m thinking about the fact that I won’t see my family for years, maybe never again. That if I had been smarter and waited for longer, maybe I would have actually met a sweet, down-to-earth guy who could have given me the same thrills and chills Matteo had.

Guess we’ll never know.

I sigh, trying to make it sound like a happy one. You know who should win awards for acting? The people who live their lives undercover—not the overpriced actors who get to slip back into their real lives when the cameras stop rolling.

## Chapter Four

“She texted. She’s got her baggage in hand, and the Interpol agent will escort her to us.”

“Oh. Good.” I nod to Jakob and stand by the car. My senses are dull. I haven’t had to protect anyone from anything other than a backed-up drain in so long. Something feels off, but I can’t...

“Try to look excited, please. In case others are watching, they should see a man in love.”

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“Well, that’s hard if you don’t have a heart to love with,” I hiss.

“You sell yourself short, my friend. I have seen your love for many things.”

But no one has ever loved me back. So how can I know what love is or if I’ve ever truly felt it? I was told I couldn’t...

I groan, distracted, worried that I won’t be able to do my job. In five minutes, I meet Therese LaFontaine. While I was pacing this afternoon, trying to work up my courage to back out or go through with this, I searched Therese LaFontaine Delgado. I immediately wished I hadn’t.

She was a beauty queen who’d married well. Pretty, a not-quite-perfect smile, naturally blonde hair with highlights that changed depending on the pictures I saw—darker brown in the winter, almost white in the summer.

I’m glad this will be my last mission. Guarding a beautiful woman, pretending to be her lover or even her husband—I look heavenward.

Why, God? Why give me one more reminder of what I could never have?

I try to think generous thoughts. She needs help. That’s what I do. What I was made for. I try to remind myself that she did the right thing, that she came to us for help—well, indirectly.

But going from Rome, Paris, and London to little Pine Ridge? Going from wining and dining to hiding out and helping with plumbing? Then, in a week or two, she’d be



going undercover for the rest of her life? Therese would probably be miserable for the duration of our time together. I could already hear her petulant tones in my head, babbling about the unfairness of having to give up her Porsche and diamond-studded life to find a job in middle-of-nowhere Florida or Kansas just because her husband was evil.

You'd whine, too, Reg.

You're already whining. You're also being a pessimist. It works wonders for not getting attached to people. Maybe the stuff you're whining about is your own fault.

I force myself to forget the way her smiling pictures on my laptop screen seemed truly sweet and adoring when she looked up at Matteo. They had the gall to have pictures on their social media, like normal people. I don't blame her, I blame Matteo. She believed nothing was wrong. It's Matteo who earns my anger. He must be truly overconfident and truly evil, so sure he'd never get caught, so sure he could pull off these sacrifices right under her nose...

I'm suddenly furious on her behalf. Evil bastard.

And I'm mad at her, too, even though I shouldn't be.

Girl had to be an idiot.

Or trusting. Loving?

Remember when you thought love could be like that for you? Remember when you thought maybe it could happen? That one day you'd meet a person who could give and give, and finally give you a piece of her heart—and you'd finally be able to give it back?

That somewhere out there, someone existed who could just love you for you?

It was after the war ended. Little families were clinging together. Men who were maimed and wounded, men who were whole and healthy, it didn't matter. They were getting a chance to live again, to have a life that so many others had stolen away.

I was a hero, wasn't I? I'd done my part. It could happen for me, too.

Right?

Wrong.

Why am I thinking about this?

You've played all kinds of roles over the years. You can play house for a couple of weeks.

"There." Jakob taps my elbow, and I jump.

"Where is she?" I don't see the blonde beauty.

"Not her. There. Those two men." He sniffs, and I see a flash of red in his eyes. "Humans. They don't smell of magic—but they do smell of sulfur dioxide and solvent. Dangerous men."

I turn and follow his gaze.

The second I see the two men, something in me wakes up. Enemy.

The two men wear baseball caps and thick jackets, even though it's warm for September. They lean against a small gray Toyota that needs a wash, eyes

unwavering from the airport's entrance.

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“You can smell magic?” I ask in a whisper so low only a vampire could hear it.

“I can, but only because I’ve used it for so many years now. I don’t like the way they’re looking at the exit.”

“But they’re humans.”

“Yes, well, Delgado must have humans that work for him. If his organization were entirely supernatural, we would get to hear of it. I wonder what Delgado does with the power he gains... He must leverage it to a human organization, somehow.”

“Maybe they’re just waiting to meet someone else,” I say, but I don’t believe it.

Minegold knows that, too. “You know that’s not true.”

“I’m rusty.”

“Lies.”

I growl—and the growl dies away in my throat.

There she is.

God, she’s beautiful—and she’s looking at me.

EVER SINCE I GOT AWAY from Matteo, I have been sure I was being watched. Since traveling with Kim, I’ve let her know when I suspect someone—and each time

she subtly shakes her head and makes me watch to see what's really going on. That man, reaching into his pocket—just a guy who needs a pen. That guy, bending down at the corner—lost an earbud. Stuff like that.

But I lived with a murderer for months, happily ignorant and never suspecting a thing until I saw it with my own eyes.

We've discovered I'm not the best at identifying threats.

But I'm very good at identifying helpers. There's no mistaking the golem that waits for me, even though he looks nothing like what I pictured.

When I exit the automatic glass doors and leave the stale-smelling airport and cross into the fresh September air, I know Reginald Gray as soon as I see him. He's broad-chested and stocky, bald and square-jawed. And gray. I dart a glance to Kim. My family believes in magic, but so do most people who live between the Bayou and New Orleans. My father and grandmother have always told me that most other people can't see it unless they're forced to.

But Kim is so perceptive. So highly trained. She's going to ask why he's gray. A light gray, a soft gray that could almost pass for beige, like a turtle dove's belly.

But Kim is looking elsewhere. Her eyes are welded on a dusty old Toyota and two guys chatting next to it.

"My darling girl!" A tall, lean man with graying hair and a wide-brimmed fedora rushes to meet me. "My dear child! I haven't seen you since you were in diapers, and now here you are, so beautifully grown up!"

"Uncle Jakob!" I gush. (I wasn't the lead in the middle school production of *Annie* for nothing. I can act—a little.) "It's so good to see you!"

“And this is your friend—”

“Kim!”

Kim hugs the vampire, too. I wince and hope she doesn't realize he has no pulse and bone-white hands. She has a gun, after all, and I'm pretty sure Interpol agents would consider vampires a threat. I don't think he'd die if she shot him, but I don't want to find out, either.

I turn my attention to the man I'm really supposed to embrace—the golem. The bodyguard. Generations of promises have tied him to my family.

I pictured the faceless, barely humanoid blobs depicted in old books. He's nothing like that.

Even an unobservant idiot like me can't help but notice how the wide shoulders and densely packed muscles stretch the fabric of the white dress shirt he's wearing. I can't help but stare at his face—perfectly human—ruggedly human, with a square jaw that's slowly easing his lips into a smile as his eyes go wide.

I never thought I would itch to run my hands over a bald head, but I can't deny the prickling in my palms. The whole “tall, dark, and handsome shtick” that was hammered into me by book covers and daytime television just “poofed.”

Like magic.

I'm not supposed to like the way he looks. I'm not supposed to like anyone, ever again. It's not like they'd be safe. It's not like I can ever have a normal dating life.

This man might be the last man I'm allowed to trust, and my job is to act like he's the real deal, the true love kind of man that's worth leaving champagne and caviar for.

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Pretending I want to run to him and snuggle safely into those broad shoulders is the first thing that's been easy in months.

"My love!" He opens his arms.

"Reggie!" I squeal and run to him, arms wide despite the bags banging against my hip.

He's amazing. Doesn't miss a beat. "Therese, sweetheart!" His eyes turn wide and warm, and he holds me to his chest.

SOMETHING IS WRONG.

The second Therese's eyes meet mine, I'm lost in a fog of happy memories that don't even exist. Walking with her in autumn leaves. Dining by candlelight. Laughing with the radio blaring, singing along with the songs at the top of our lungs.

She smiles at me like she's known me forever, eyes shining bright with leftover tears.

I know it's just an act, but when she makes contact with me, she clings, trembling, with her head on my shoulder.

I bury my lips in her hair, whispering, "You're safe. It's all okay."

And the last, tiny spark of hope and life that's carried in the pocket where my soul ought to be fans into a flame. Something in my chest is full.

Therese murmurs, “Thank you,” into my shoulder before she pulls back to beam at me, the anxiety in her dark blue eyes fading slightly. She nods a little, still giving me that adoring, trusting look.

My gut tightens. Her smile is genuine and warm. Honestly, truly genuine. All my senses that usually stay on high alert when I’m tasked with protecting someone relax.

Snap out of it!

The woman is an incredible actress. She gave that same kind of adoring look to Matteo.

Yeah... but she thought he was her ticket to a great future. I’m her ticket to staying alive. Maybe it is genuine.

I don’t know, and it doesn’t matter why she looks at me like that as long as I keep her alive.

Kim giggles next to us as she saunters up, all smiles and relaxed shoulders. She’s a consummate professional, this woman. I know that she’s on high alert, but I think you’d have to have supernatural senses to tell.

“Okay, you two. Save it for the church! Reggie, so good to see you again! You look great. Therese, stop hogging the man candy. You get him for the rest of your life, let me get one hug. Maid of Honor rules.”

I join in the good-natured laughter between the two women, but my mind is racing.

Man candy? Me? I’m not even a man, just man-shaped, wearing my only suit, and I never did find a tie. Under the jacket and stretched white shirt, cracks and fissures in the clay have formed like scars and lines of muscle. I suddenly swallow. I’m glad I’m



not actually marrying Therese, not actually her husband. If I were, she'd have to see this body.

But Kim said man candy? Is that what "normal" people see? What does Therese see?

And, also, is that really the most pressing matter, Reg? No!

Church? Maid-of-honor? I try not to bark out questions. Over the top of Therese's head, I meet Jakob's eyes and notice they're sliding past me—looking behind. Over Kim's teasing laughter, I hear two doors shut.

We're going to be followed.

"Are you ready, honey? Do you need to stop anywhere?" I ask Therese. Should I call her honey? I check her face for signs of annoyance, but there's only relief and a little crease between her eyes that tells me fear is still lurking.

"I have everything I need in my bags. I'm ready when you are."

I'M NOT READY. I'M not ready for the way it feels when I hug the "monster," also known as Reginald Gray, who looks as far from monstrous as possible, minus the skin tone. He's wide and solid. Hugging him feels like slipping into a safe haven. His arms are protective, but his hands are gentlemanly. That is something I couldn't say about Matteo or any of the other jocks I dated in high school and college.

I'm not ready to hold his hand and stroll to a shiny Jaguar in the airport parking lot and sit in the backseat beside him, pulling nervously at the summery white dress I'm wearing under my light pink traveling jacket.

"The gray Toyota," Kim whispers, sitting in the front seat and pulling out her phone.

“I thought so, too,” Minegold murmurs, putting his car in gear. I wonder if Kim will notice that he doesn’t reflect in the rearview mirror or the window. “This place is a madhouse. I will be able to lose them.”

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“Good.”

We stay quiet and tense until Jakob pulls the car out onto the highway. All of us keep sneaking glances out the back window, but so far, the small gray Toyota isn’t in sight.

“We’re good. For now.” Reggie leans back in his seat.

Kim holds up one hand for continued silence and then frantically goes back to typing on the phone in her lap. In a few moments, she casually announces, “We’ve finally found the other end of the money trail. A terrorist group. RACAF.”

“What?” I yelp and wince when the sound bounces around the sealed car.

“The Revolutionary Armed Central American Federalists. They’re small but vicious and getting bigger all the time. Their goal is to destabilize all the individual governments of the Central American countries and create a federalized group of territories under a dictator who rivals Stalin and Castro— Leon Estrada.”

“Leon Estrada? Uncle Leon?” I whimper. “Matt’s godfather?” Matteo talked about his godfather affectionately all the time, but I never met him.

“Mhm. Delgado was rumored to be Estrada’s godson—not that you would know his connection to this organization.”

“I never even met him. He didn’t come to our wedding, but he sent us a lot of travel vouchers,” I gulp.

Kim doesn't look up and doesn't look surprised. "Estrada runs everything from his mobile fortress and never comes ashore if he can help it. The travel vouchers were probably his way of sending Delgado out to complete his hits."

I sneak a look at Reggie, who stares straight ahead. We know there are other purposes for Matteo's kills, but it's just easiest to kill two birds with one stone here.

Ugh. What an ugly metaphor. I shudder, and Reggie pats my hand, his large, cool palm completely covering mine.

"We cannot lead them right to our safe house," Jakob says.

"Hell, no. Half the fishing boats and shipping freighters in the Panama Canal region are paying protection money to the RACAFs. Whether the men following us are sent by Delgado or Estrada, it's bad news."

"Why are they following her?" Reggie's voice is a low snarl that rivals the engine.

"To see what she knows. Who she talks to. We need to make a little detour, kids." Kim finally looks up, but her hands are still flying over her phone screen. "Mr. Minegold, you know where the Federal Courthouse is in Binghamton? On Henry Street."

"If you take her to a courthouse, those men will open fire."

"We're going to go past it. Farther up the block is Christ Episcopal. Pull into the parking lot there. You two are going to go get 'married.' In reality, agents are going to take your statement on camera, Therese. This is a smart move. It means there's a chance you won't have to testify in court in person. You can get into hiding faster with less chance of having to come out of it." Kim shifts in her seat.

Both Minegold and Reggie stiffen. I see them exchange a glance before Reggie nods.

“What else could happen? There is something you’re not telling her.” Reggie demands, his grip tightening on mine.

“Well... Delgado is a wanted killer, and he’s on Estrada’s payroll. Not to mention, there’s some kind of nepotism and relationship there, as Estrada’s godson. Estrada is a much bigger fish than your ex, Therese. I’m afraid... You have to catch the biggest fish you can. Delgado killed a handful of people. Estrada ordered the deaths of hundreds, not to mention drug running and human trafficking. If the feds have good evidence that can put Delgado away, they might convince him to plea bargain—or even turn on Estrada.”

“Estrada would kill him,” Reggie growls.

“Not if he’s in the Federal Witness Relocation Program, too.”

What? Matteo could go free? He could be walking around pretending to be someone else, while I’m walking around pretending to be someone else? What if he walks around right into me?!

“How did you find all of this out?” I ask, head spinning. “And why didn’t you tell me before now?”

“So you wouldn’t back out. Isn’t that right?” Minegold asks sharply, shooting a poisonous look at Kim.

My cool, calm handler doesn’t turn a hair as I look at her with worried eyes. “That’s not all. We finally got positive identification on a third victim. Three with ties to Estrada and RACAFs.”

“So, the target on Therese’s back is much larger, now,” Jakob says in a frosty tone, his lilting accent so incongruous with the harsh words.

“If you guys can’t handle it, I can see what I can do when we get to the church.” Kim’s tone is no longer fun and friendly.

This is a job to her.

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I'm a job. She's not my friend. I'm evidence, like a bloody knife or a fingerprint.

Oh, God. This is more dangerous than I ever imagined.

I look between Jakob and Reggie.

I could get these men killed. Maybe not killed, in the case of a golem, but destroyed. I know they're hard to destroy, but it has happened. What if he's ruined or broken because of me? What about Minegold? What happens if they haul him out in daylight? What right do I have to ask other people to risk their lives for me?

I'm not even paying them anything. Are the Feds?

I don't know what they're paying them, but it can't be enough. "Thank you so much—for picking me up." I look at Kim, who is frantically texting on her phone in the front seat.

"It's safe, the car isn't bugged. Ran a sweep." She holds up her phone, and I see that she's not texting, she's running some sort of program that makes lines of code dance across the screen.

"I could have told you that," Minegold says, voice still frigid. "This is my personal vehicle."

"And you were out of it for more than ten seconds. I had to check. Estrada's men have been known to move incredibly fast. Uncannily fast."

Hm. Uncannily? Another word for magically? Is that what Matteo was making kills for? To help other criminals be better at their horrible jobs?

Minegold sighs. “The church, then, Therese?”

“I don’t see a lot of options at this point?” I sigh right back at him. “Oh! Oh my gosh, I didn’t even like... introduce myself for real. I’m Therese.” I look at Reggie. Do I shake his hand? Does one do that with golems? Or with the undercover monster-bodyguard I’m supposed to “marry”?

“Therese, I’m Reginald. Call me Reggie if you like.”

He has the very faintest trace of an English accent, just like Grandpa Artie. Admittedly, he died when I was pretty young, but I always loved that accent. “Got it, Reggie. You can call me Teri. Most people do.”

“Teri. You’ve had a crazy few months, I understand.” He nods.

I want to joke that I can tell he was British-made with that gift for understatement, but I don’t know if one jokes with golems. “That’s putting it mildly.” I look at Kim again. She nods, meaning I can talk freely. “Want the five-minute story? Or should I skip it? Is this one of those ‘the less you know, the better’ deals? I don’t want to put people at risk. I... I just didn’t know who to ask for help, and my grandmother always said—.”

“You can tell me anything you want. It won’t change the mission, which is to keep you safe.” Reggie hesitates, then pats my hand.

“Well, I guess the first thing to know is that I didn’t know Matteo was involved in anything shady. Kim knew more than I did.”



“I was already in Rome, tracking the man Delgado killed,” Kim jumps in. “Not that it makes Matteo some kind of hero, but he was meeting with one of his godfather’s lieutenants. Turns out, the man was starting to get power-hungry, and Delgado personally took him out for questioning Estrada’s orders and feeling out others to see if he could stage a coup. I told Therese that this was partly my fault. If I had been faster, Matteo wouldn’t have had a chance to meet him or for things to turn deadly.”

“That’s nice of you, Kim, but you can’t sugarcoat it. Matteo killed that man. He killed him because he was rocking the boat of a violent organization that my husband was already in.” The word husband leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I used to love that word, to savor it. I finally had one—and such a great one, or so I thought. He spoiled me with luxuries, travel, and sex. I never had to work (even though I sometimes wanted to). I never had to plan or scrimp and save (a first for the women in my family).

Wow. Never realized what a vapid little rich bitch you were becoming, did you, Teri? Just show up and look pretty, and make sure you had plenty of makeup and everything was waxed the way he liked it.

I wince in my seat, putting my hands to my temples as if I can squeeze the memories away. How did I not realize that I wasn’t being spoiled, I was being “displayed”? Worse, used as a cover, maybe a human shield. No one suspects a man dancing with his wife inside a club one minute of murdering someone outside of it the next!

My strangled sob won’t stay in my throat any longer, and it bursts out in a frustrated, miserable noise.

“Hey, you don’t have to talk. Let’s see if I’ve got it,” Reggie says in his steady baritone voice. “You met a guy who seemed great. He was involved in some bad business that you didn’t know about. It turned violent. You witnessed it, Kim helped you navigate things, and you’re going to meet your new handler at the church. Once

you've got your deposition taken care of, they'll build you a safe new life. While you wait, you'll get to enjoy a few days in Pine Ridge. This is just a break between two chapters." His voice is deep and calm, like a still pond.

Tranquil.

Something in me relaxes for the first time in months.

"Well, that's the nicest way I've heard it put," I admit with a little laugh. "And who are we meeting? Interpol? FBI? CIA?" I've talked to so many people that I've lost track.

"U.S. Marshals, hon," Kim says, patting my shoulder. "Like I said, if all goes well, you might not even have to testify in court. Delgado might cop a plea before this even gets to trial."

I nod and lean back against the passenger's seat. "How much time do you think he'd get?"

"Depends what they can connect him to." Kim shrugs and checks her lipstick and hair in her phone's camera.

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I lick my lips as they dry out without warning. The murder Matteo committed seems like the biggest crime to me, but it's funny how that's only the tip of the iceberg. I don't want to think about how many people this terrorist organization has killed. I'd never even heard of them except for brief soundbites on the news—and now that I think back, it was strange how Matteo always used to shake his head and sigh before changing the channel. “Too ugly for such a pretty face. You'll get frown lines, baby.” That's what he would say, and I was glad to agree.

That doesn't even touch on the magical side of it—the fact that these murders were made to support more evil.

Was Matteo in league with actual devils? Were they ever around me? Did they ever possess him? Could I have been sharing my bed, even my body with—

I can't think about this anymore.

The uncertainty of the past makes me want to faint in the present, but I'm trying to hold it together.

“Connecting him to the terrorist group is important—more important than one human life,” Reggie mutters as Minegold checks the side mirror and shifts lanes.

“I h-have something that might help. I didn't think about it before.” I feel stupid. I feel like a pretty, stupid, brainless “dumb blonde” right now. That's exactly what Matteo wanted. That's why he picked me, courted me at the speed of light, and married me after a whirlwind romance. I've been playing a part this whole time and didn't even know it.

I'm not going to be stupid another minute.

“Well, at least you thought of it now. What is it?” Kim asks. She tries to give me an encouraging smile, but I can read the naked curiosity in her eyes. She needs the details. The evidence.

Hey, we both want him behind bars. I don't blame her for looking eager.

“I was only thinking about evidence that he was a murderer. I told the police—or whatever agents I spoke to—about the night of the murder, how I saw and heard him, what I could remember of the conversation.” I stop talking and shake my head, trying to swallow. It's still surreal. You don't think you're going to see a man you're sure is a big, sexy teddy bear murder someone and dump the body in the ocean right outside your hotel room.

When I freeze up, Kim urges me on. “He made some stupid moves that night, Teri. I've had to deal with a lot more scumbags than you. They can get overconfident—especially when they've been doing it for a while without getting caught.”

The thought stabs me, just like Matteo stabbed that man on the beach. How often had he done this? Could I have saved someone's life if I'd been more observant? Had I been asleep or just out of earshot for other murders?

“Look, you can't change the past. You need to stay sharp and focused on what happens next, not what happened then,” Reggie tells me in a voice that's gruff, but not unkind. If he thinks I'm a naive trophy wife, at least he has the good manners to hide it.

“I have a copy of his hard drive on the USB I have in my purse.”

Kim curses and turns all the way around in her seat as Minegold maneuvers us down an exit ramp through a bottleneck of traffic. I'll be so glad to get off the highway.

"Therese, you said you have his hard drive? And you just now thought that it might be important?"

Reggie gives Kim a pointed "Shut up" glare.

In a gentler tone, he inquires, "Didn't the police ask if there was anything of his that you could turn over to them?"

"Yes, but I was thinking about the murder, and I didn't have his clothes or the knife or anything. I didn't know about some terrorist organization until now!" It's my turn to glare—but then I second-guess myself. Maybe they did ask me. They asked so many questions at first, and they asked things over and over again, until I felt like I was the criminal. My voice is unsteady as I feel like I have to defend myself. "They searched through my phone to read any texts he'd sent me and stuff like that." I blink hard. I don't want to cry, but this whole thing has been so overwhelming, and it's probably going to get worse. I may have had fun pretending to be a spoiled trophy wife, but I'm not some weak little princess. I'm the daughter of hard-working, feet-on-the-ground types. My dad manages a tractor and farm supply store, for God's sake.

With an effort, I try to explain. "We'd been traveling since we got married. Matteo called it our extended honeymoon and promised that after our first anniversary, we'd return to Miami. We'd still travel, but that would be our home. Anyway, knowing that this year was going to be a big deal, we took a ton of pictures using both of our phones. I've been bugging him—I mean, I had been bugging him to share all the honeymoon pictures he had on his phone. He told me he needed his phone for business at a second's notice, but if I wanted to sift through pictures, he'd do a bulk download to his computer and share the folder with me. Well, I saw him doing

something with the phone and his computer shortly after we arrived in Rome.” I turn from Kim to Reggie. “We had a place on a private beach on the Tyrrhenian Sea. Gorgeous pictures of the sunset! Anyway, one of the days when he went out without his computer, I realized he hadn’t shared them with me yet, so I thought...” I shrug. It’s silly, but I still feel guilty about it, even though I know what Matteo did is so much worse. “So I thought that since he was dragging his feet and got so pissy when I nagged him that I’d just take matters into my own hands. I downloaded his hard drive onto my USB and intended to get the pictures later.”

“Clever girl!” Kim crows, making me jump. My nerves are going to completely splinter soon. I just hope that when it happens, it is in someplace private, like a bathroom with the door locked and the shower running—and then I realize that I’m going to be sharing living space with a bodyguard for a week or two.

Straitjacket City, here I come.

“What’s on it?” Reggie gets straight to the point.

“I don’t know! It’s been in my purse for weeks. Looking at pictures from a gorgeous worldwide vacation that turned out to be a ‘perk’ of marrying a murderer isn’t really a soothing activity.”

“Fair.”

“Don’t be hard on yourself, Teri. You kept your head more than most people in your situation, and trust me, it’s a situation I’ve seen all too often. Did Delgado have another laptop?”

“No. Not that I know of... But what do I really know about my ex-husband? I thought he loved me. You can’t love someone and lie to them like this...”

Reggie's hand brushes mine in an awkward half-pat. “Those two things aren’t necessarily connected, Miss—”

“Call me Teri, please. I’m ‘marrying’ you, remember?”

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“Back to this new evidence. If he didn’t have a second laptop, then there are probably some records that connect Delgado to the terrorist organization or his kills.”

Kim breaks in, voice quivering with excitement. “This might push him to accept a plea bargain deal and incriminate other people in the organization.”

“Look at that. Luck is on your side.” Reggie gives me a sideways smile, just a little one in case it breaks his face, I guess.

“Hey...Minegold?” Kim’s voice pokes a hole in the bubble of calm I was building.

“I see them.” His voice is still smooth and glacial. “I’ve noticed them for several minutes.”

“See who? Noticed what?” I ask.

“Well, we weren’t being followed—but we just picked up a tail.”

“God, I’m going to need a pacemaker after this,” I whimper, clutching my chest. My heartbeat gallops along. Is the guy going to shoot out our tires? Drag me out of the car? Do I end up like the tires? “If anything happens, it’s the little yellow flash drive in my purse. In the inner pocket,” I hiss, fumbling for my bag. The strap is wrapped around my ankle in the car’s floorboards.

“Honey, no one is going to shoot anyone with me around,” Kim pats her hair, the other hand on her hip. I’m betting something deadly is concealed on her person.



“Delgado isn’t going to want you dead. That would look far too suspicious, especially after he learns you spoke to the police. If you turn up dead, they’ll look hardest at him and his connections. He’ll want to pressure you to change your story, say you were lying or drunk and confused.” Reggie speaks in a low, even voice as the highway turns into a smaller four-lane roadway. “Whoever is on our tail now is most likely from someone above Delgado in the organization, and they want to make sure that you’re not shooting your mouth off about anything but the murder. That’s small potatoes to them. Won’t impact their day-to-day operations for long.”

“I’m...oddly comforted.”

It’s funny, but I am. Matteo tended to talk down to me, that whole “Don’t worry your pretty little head” stuff. I admit, it was nice while it lasted, but it had begun to wear on my nerves. Reggie’s calm, factual answers, combined with the fact that I believe he won’t let anything happen to me, are refreshing.

And attractive.

Why couldn’t I have met a guy like that before I met Matteo?

You wouldn’t have realized how great he was. Don’t trust first impressions, Therese. Look what happened the last time you let yourself get swept off your feet!

Chapter Five

How can I feel so happy, upset, and annoyed at once?

When I focus on Therese, my “radar” is broken. I should have sensed we were being followed long before the car was visible to Minegold, even if he does have vampiric vision.

It's her fault. Near Therese, all my instincts to protect and comfort focus on her. It's like she's the moon and everything else is one tiny star in the distance.

What a foolish turn of events—allowing myself to feel anything soft and warm when I look at her, when I imagine shielding her in my arms or running away with her to keep her safe from anything even remotely evil.

And now I'm angry, too. Angry at myself and angry at what I see when Jakob pulls the Jag into a parking lot at Kim's direction.

“What the hell is this?”

The church isn't closed off for a wedding. The parking lot is half-full.

“There aren't supposed to be guests, are there?”

Teri gives Kim a panic-stricken look. “You didn't say anything about wedding guests! Who are these people?”

“I don't know anything about it! Maybe there's a funeral in the chapel. Or maybe we're in the chapel. The Feds can control a lot, but not death.”

“That's not comforting,” Therese whimpers.

Minegold parks in the lot of the Holy Redeemer Episcopal Church on Henry Street. The car tailing us continues past. Teri breathes a deep sigh and finally pulls her short, French-tip nails out of her thigh.

I shouldn't be looking at her thigh.

But, as thighs go, that's a nice one. It's not plump, but it's not skinny, either. I could

easily cup my hands around it and— I mentally slap myself to get those thoughts out of my head.

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“This has to be the feds making a show. I hate when I get a handler who couldn’t make a career in theater.” Kim’s eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror. “I’ll go in first and see what’s going on.”

That’s code for making sure we’re not walking into a trap. The car that was behind us is back, sneaking into one of the spaces farthest away.

Before Kim can get out, a beaming man in a neat suit comes to the side of the vehicle. “The bride and groom! The maid of honor and best man! Wonderful, wonderful! Therese, my dear! You look wonderful.”

Therese gives me a nervous look before laughing joyfully. “So good to see you! I’m glad you could make it!”

Kim and I are swept up in a throng of other middle-aged men in dark suits sporting big smiles, smiles so wide and guileless that only a pro would know they were fake.

KIM AND THERESE DISAPPEAR into a private little room on the right side of the chapel, and I go into the one on the right with two strangers who are slightly less paunchy and bald than the first handlers we met.

I hear the chatter out of the earbud from the guy sitting beside me. Someone (I’m pretty sure it’s the guy who followed us) just tried to get in the building and was told the chapel is currently occupied for a private wedding. He got shunted off to the church’s office in the larger main building, but I’m betting he’ll either go back to his car or circle around the building.

“Elaborate,” I finally say to no one in particular.

“This? Cost a couple thousand dollars and a few dozen agents. Do you know how much cocaine and illegal cargo Estrada and his Revolutionaries have trafficked in the past six months? Enough to let everyone in here retire. If Delgado’s ex can give us something...” he trails off with a hungry look and then takes me in, eyes not sure if they approve or not. “You’re the private security company, the bodyguard?” An agent a few years younger than me asks.

“Yep.”

“Military contractor?”

“Special forces. Intelligence. Former.” Retired is the best word for what happened, but I can’t tell how this person sees me. Presumably young enough to be a viable groom and security for their witness. Former sums it up well enough. I’m no longer needed. I’m not in service, beyond repair, like one of the ancient washing machines I sometimes try to help the older ladies of Pine Ridge fix.

“Shame. So you went with private security?”

“Yes, private security.” I can’t tell them about my ancient connection with Therese’s people or my more recent connection with her family. I definitely cannot talk to him about Pine Ridge, the Night Watch, or what a human would need to be protected from in my hometown.

He looks around the room and leans over, “This is a pretty cushy job. I would have taken it myself, but they said it would compromise my identity as an agent...” He tsks and shrugs.

“Very cushy, yes. It’s loads of fun keeping a witness alive while you sort out if she

has to testify and start her life over.” My accent comes out more, and my voice is clipped and harsh. Like I said, I’m not good with small talk.

I go get a cup of coffee from the machine in the back of the room. How long do we have to stay here? How long is a convincing wedding ceremony? Depositions can take hours. I know more about debriefings and depositions than I do matrimony. I guess that could be said of most men in my position, but—

Wedding rings. Do we have rings? Do we need them? Yes, we need them. Even the young asshole who thinks being a bodyguard for a witness in a murder-terrorism case is a swish job is wearing a wedding ring. True, it could be part of the look, but I don’t think so.

How does anyone in the military or police world get attached to another human after they’ve seen how humans turn on each other? How can they put the ones they love at risk?

I think about all the happily married monster-human couples I know as I try not to fidget. They love each other (I assume). They are capable of feeling that spark that mutes the ugliness of the world. They have that spark that makes them alive, that makes them love, that must make them immune to the realities of fear and loss.

I was made without that spark, yet I’m sitting in a church in my good suit, waiting for the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen to be my wife, one to whom I will pledge my life. Pledging my life to a cause isn’t anything new. But for once—someone will return that pledge and forge that bond—even if it’s an act.

I told myself I’d never be in this situation, not after years of half-hearted hoping, yet here I am.

It feels terrible and not terrible at the same time. Confusing.

A little nagging voice in the back of my head keeps telling me that the worst part of this whole thing isn't the danger or the charade we're playing—it's the fact that it will all end in just a few days.

"THAT'S IT."

I blink and clutch my bottle of water. I wanted coffee, but between my nerves, my sweaty hands, and the white dress, I opted for the beverage that won't stain. "That's it?"

"We'll schedule a meeting with you on Tuesday or Wednesday once we have a chance to go through this and discuss things with the relevant parties. Then, we'll schedule your WITSEC orientation time in D.C."

I bite down a frown. I want to ask questions. I don't like the way these "relevant parties" aren't specifically named. I know what WITSEC is—the United States Federal Witness Protection Program. But D.C.? Why D.C.? What exactly do I do in orientation?

Is this one of those "the less you know, the better" cases? "Where will we meet?"

"At the rental property where you and Mr. Reginald Gray are staying. In a few days, four of us will come for dinner, posing as friends with housewarming gifts." My handler, Agent Wharton Powell, smiles in a reassuring way. "The USB device you've given us is immensely helpful. It contains detailed financial transactions and records that we have to examine more closely." He hesitates, and I see his eyes travel over me in a way that I'm used to.

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His expression says, “Look at her. She’s pretty. How can she be smart, too?”

We have self-driving cars and actual fucking robots—how are so many guys still surprised that a woman can have both beauty and brains? I didn’t like it when the jocks in my school or the fertilizer heads at college gave me that look, either. Matteo never gave me that look. He was always absolutely enthralled with me—but he expected me to fill my days with spas and shopping.

“Something wrong, Mr. Powell?” I ask, cursing myself for not realizing that Matteo’s actions consistently spoke louder than words.

Maybe I’m stupid after all...

“How did you manage to download his hard drive?”

I frown, sitting back down and trying not to release a sudden scream of frustration. “Thought we were done, Powell?” “Well, Matteo had taken a lot of pictures on his phone.”

Agent Powell stops me, hand waving as if he can erase my words. “No, no, no. Not that, Ms. LaFontaine. How did you get the hard drive on the USB?”

“I had a high-capacity USB. I knew we were going to travel around the world, so I wanted to have plenty of storage space for the movies and pictures we took.”

“No, I mean—”



Kim stands up, a sharp, sour tinge in her voice. “Therese is a computer science major. Do you honestly think she couldn’t clone a hard drive?”

Oh. That’s it. Powell didn’t want to know how or why I did it—he wanted to know why I could do it.

Powell is suddenly very interested in packing papers away. “Of course, of course. I forgot your background. Now, let’s get you out of here. Heatherington, go get Mr. Gray and let him know that Ms. LaFontaine is ready.”

Kim strides ahead of me and stops short.

I peer around her shoulder. Two men in dark suits are entering the church, ushered in by a confused woman who is so frail that she shakes when she walks, and her head swivels from side to side as she takes in the chapel through thick lenses.

“This is the Gray-LaFontaine wedding, gentlemen.” She sits abruptly in a pew, her aged voice carrying through the small chapel. The two men sit next to her.

My stomach slips down to the region of my ankles.

“Uh. What’s happening?” I whisper.

“Plan B. Heatherington, get the groom. Ms. LaFontaine? Smile and grab some of those fake flowers.”

I CAN’T BELIEVE THIS. One of the agents takes his place at the small organ and begins playing Pachelbel’s Canon. That’s not the part I disbelieve, since most of it is only the same handful of notes played over and over. No, what I can’t wrap my head around is that this is really happening.

Kim walks out holding a handful of white roses and leaves that I recognize—both side rooms must have matching vases full of fake flowers. She approaches me with a glowing smile that belies the worry in her eyes.

The Wedding March begins, and everyone rises, including the old dear sandwiched between two confused-looking thugs. If I had to guess, I'd say she's the church secretary and that she led those men to the chapel after they were denied admittance, understandably confused. I'm certain the Feds didn't tell any unnecessary personnel that the wedding was an excuse to interview a witness for a deposition, and the church was the most believable meeting place.

This charade is taking improv to a whole new level. The young agent who I passed the time with is now standing next to me with a broad smile, trying to make this whole thing look "normal."

Therese walks out, beaming, eyes smiling, the remainder of the fake flowers making a pink and white bouquet in her arms. Her handler gives her away with an enthusiastic smile as another suited stranger takes his place behind the lectern and opens with those dread words— "Dearly beloved."

Wait, what? Are we actually going to go through with a fake wedding in front of Delgado's goons (or maybe Estrada's spies)? I don't even know what to do! I don't have a ring! Out of habit, I slap my breast pocket and find the kippah that I wore to someone's wedding or bar mitzvah still inside. I swallow hard and put it on. I look the part—but that still doesn't solve the ring issue.

Kim takes her place across from the "best man" and me. Something gold flashes in her hand, and she passes it to Agent Asshat.

In a fog, Therese stands next to me, and I take her arm, feeling her wet palm on mine. I squeeze because that's what you do when there's a woman in crisis. You comfort.

(At least if you're me.)

I hear a five-minute “sermon” on loving, honoring, respecting, protecting, and how it's wonderful that “Therese and Reggie found each other after struggles in love.”

I blink once, and Jakob Minegold is standing before us, reciting the sheva brachot with a strained look on his face.

I meet his eyes, trying to keep my face impassive as a feeling of elated panic consumes me.

This shouldn't be happening.

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But it is.

“The rings, please.”

Asshat pushes something into my palm, and Kim does the same for Therese. They’re rings all right—hoop earrings. My eyes dart up to Therese’s ears and see that they’re bare. I smile at her, and there’s a chuckle in my voice as I parrot back vows, trying to sound smooth and sincere.

I’m going off-script. “Therese, you’re amazing. There’s no more beautiful, brilliant woman in the world. I’m lucky I found you. It’s my privilege to love, honor, cherish, protect, and respect you.” I fight the urge to look over my shoulder and see what’s happening in the congregation.

This is a show. They’re the audience.

I can’t act!

This is a mission. You’re undercover. You can do that. You were made for that. You’re doing your sacred duty again, and it has been blessed. Let’s see how Therese does.

I say that, but there’s no true question in my mind. In my gut, I know she’s going to be amazing.

I shiver while forcing my body to be still. I’ve never felt like this about anyone, let alone a woman. I trust her as I trusted her ancestors, my life force bound to hers by

ancient magic that bullets can not break. I hope my somber expression reads “groom who takes his marriage seriously” as opposed to “bodyguard in conflict.”

“Reggie. The second I met you, I felt so safe and secure. You were the stability I’d been searching for. I’m lucky I found you. It’s my privilege to love, honor, cherish, comfort, and respect you.”

I’m absolutely not tearing up. I’m just impressed as hell, that’s all. Therese didn’t miss a beat. Artie would have been so proud of how brave she is. It’s only that sense of pride that makes me reach to gently cup her cheek. That’s what I tell myself.

She beams at me and catches both of my hands in hers. With a tremulous smile, she pushes one of her hoop earrings over my ring finger. I see her lips twitch as she feels my finger shrink and elongate to fit the hoop.

A wayward part of my brain suddenly wonders if she’d appreciate the way my body can change and shift to suit any purpose. Golems are uniquely malleable. Designed for the needs of those they serve.

I swallow. Do not think of serving her, Reginald. Not like that.

“You may kiss the bride.”

A split-second hesitation is all I can afford. It wouldn’t be normal for a groom to check the room or hesitate in showing affection to the woman he’s just claimed to love and who just claimed him right back.

Doesn’t have to be flashy. Just go for it.

JUST DO. DON’T THINK.

It had to be my imagination, but Reggie looked like he was moved to tears during the strangest wedding in history. No notice, no real bouquets, hoops for rings, and a preacher who was ordained by the Marshals, not the church. Mr. Minegold, oddly enough, seemed to be the most authentic part of it all—except for what I’m feeling in my chest.

And the kiss. The kiss is the only tangible thing that’s real.

My lips slowly lift and press to Reggie's as they sink down. My mind takes a much-needed break from stress.

He’s a really good kisser. Matteo was an absolutelysinfulkisser who made me feel like any minute, public nudity was about to occur. The X-rated movie thrill was nice, but also not my speed when I wasn’t on my third drink. Reggie's mouth is slow, steady, and firm, pressing my lower lip between his and nuzzling into me for a second before we separate.

I want more of that. There’s a startled look in his eyes, like he knows what’s going through my head.

Blushing bride has an entirely new meaning.

“Mazel Tov.” Mr. Minegold places a cloth (I think it’s his pocket square) over a glass—the vase that formerly held fake flowers. I guess vampires really are fast.

He places the cloth-covered glass at Reggie’s feet, and Reggie takes a deep breath and stamps on it.

Everyone claps and rises as Minegold beams and ushers us away from the front of the church. The cheering continues as we walk down the wide center aisle.

Two men in the back get up and leave, and a short, stooped older lady dabs at her eyes with her long, floral sleeve. “A beautiful wedding! God bless!”

“Thank you!” I hope God listens to that old lady. We’re going to need all the help we can get.

## Chapter Six

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:20 am*

“I don’t want to freak you out, but I’m going to cry—or barf.”

My new “bride” begins our married life with such tender, loverlike words. I sigh and look around Minegold’s Jag. He’s still standing outside the vehicle, eyes darting as he searches for danger. “Well, there’s nothing in here that would make a good bucket. As for the sobbing... here.” I pull off my tie. “Use this.”

Therese stares at me for a second before she takes the tie with her slender fingers. “Thank you. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“What are you sorry for? Crying after a big, stressful event is a perfectly normal reaction. You’d be surprised how many strong men—and even monsters—I’ve seen tossing their cookies after a hard night of fighting, of seeing death, even if it’s something evil in a kill-or-be-killed situation.”

“That’s just it.” Therese dabs at her eyes using the back of her hand. My tie stays in a puddle in her lap. My mind briefly wonders what it would be like to put my head on such perfect thighs and have her stroke my brow while looking down at me with those beautiful, adoring eyes. “I am so sorry that I got you into this mess. I’m sorry that you have to stick with me for a week or two while they find out if I’ll need to testify. I’m sorry that Kim is gone now and that I’m officially someone else’s problem.” She shudders. “I don’t ever want to retell my story again—and I’ll probably have to. I can’t imagine getting on the witness stand in front of Matteo. Estrada has to have powerful lawyers. They’ll rip me to shreds. I don’t even know if my hard drive evidence will be admissible.”

One doesn’t live for decades serving justice (and servicing leaky pipes) without



learning some things about the human court systems. “Oh, I imagine it will be. It was on your device, and you acquired it in good faith during the marriage. He specifically told you that he had photos for you on his computer. Did he ever show you anything else on that laptop? For instance, did he ever pull up a picture of a place you two might go out for dinner or ask you to look at a take-out menu, something non-work-related?”

“Sure, sometimes.” Therese shrugs. “That was the only laptop he ever used during our travels.

“Then you make the case that this was a computer you both used—even if you used it very sparingly. Since your pictures were on his hard drive, your case is even stronger. He had your property, and you had his. You were just sharing, like married people do.” My throat feels oddly tight around the words. I can't imagine this lady sharing anything with a demon-serving, murdering terrorist. “Can I ask you a question?”

Therese's tone is a bit sharp. “I'm not just a pretty face and a nice pair of legs! I have a degree in computer science. It isn't hard for me to clone a laptop, and I knew Matteo's password.”

“That's another point in your favor if it comes to a trial. Somebody doesn't give you their password if you're not allowed to access their device. Also, I wasn't going to ask about your abilities, more like your motivation. Why not just download the photos? Why take the entire hard drive?”

“Well, Matteo had multiple profiles on that computer, labeled ‘Matt Home’ and ‘Matt Away.’ We were traveling. So, even though he had business meetings in every city we went to, we still had lots of time to hit the beaches and do couple-y things. I wasn't sure where he put the photos because they were personal photos—but they were taken while we were away.” Therese heaved a deep sigh. “Hindsight is twenty-twenty. I heard that growing up and never got it. There were lots of things I didn't

understand about Matteo, down to little things like not really knowing where the boundaries of married life and business crossed for him. I didn't want to dig through his computer, so I figured I'd download the entire hard drive onto my USB, find the honeymoon pictures, and then delete everything else."

The way Therese blushes when she says 'honeymoon pictures' makes me wonder if there were some pictures that were definitely meant for Matteo's eyes only. It doesn't help that I'm still in shock from the way she kissed me with a blend of softness and eagerness.

Stick to business, Reginald Gray. I use my full name in my head, scolding myself as I used to do when bombs were falling and children were screaming. Focus. "Okay. This situation is terrible, but it could be worse. We're going to the 'burbs, not a third-world country or a terrorist stronghold."

"We need to move now," Jakob suddenly springs into the driver's seat. His fast movements don't translate to the car. There are no peeling tires or burning rubber. The Jag pulls out and purrs away.

"What's wrong?" Therese's voice is choked.

"Nothing. I intend to keep it that way by staying one step ahead of them," Minegold replies cheerfully.

I glance out the back window. I suspect we'll still have a tail, but a little ways back. The car has some basic protections around it, but they still found it earlier—or was it Therese they honed in on across continents and oceans? It makes me wonder if something has been imprinted on Therese herself—a binding spell? A curse?

Certain spells don't respect laws of the courts and pieces of paper. A divorce isn't necessarily respected by magic—especially dark, possessive magic.

There are people in Pine Ridge who can easily help us detect such a spell. Even if our odd wedding didn't break Matteo's hold, maybe it will be enough to distract Therese's tail long enough to put distance between us. After all, even if the wedding was unexpected by us, it had the right trappings for onlookers—a bunch of strangers in suits, the music, the flowers, and even rings.

Therese follows my gaze. "I don't see them."

"Good," Jakob's voice is jolly—but anyone who knows him would know he hasn't dropped his guard.

"Do you think they bought it? The wedding?" Therese whispers as if we might be overheard.

"The wedding ceremony was a surprise, but having them witness it might actually be very helpful. Seeing is believing." I cough. I saw it. I almost believed it.

Stop that.

"That touch with your hoop earrings was brilliant. You'd make a good field agent, Ms. Macgyver," Minegold praises with a laugh.

"Right." I slip the gold hoop off of my finger. "I don't think this would stand up to a closer inspection. I'm sure I can find—"

Therese does a little hop in the seat next to me, looking genuinely excited and happy.

Something in me... sparks.

Sparkles.

No. It can't be.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:20 am*

I smooth my jacket as she speaks, hand lingering over the center of my thick slab of a chest, wondering if you can feel the moment you grow a soul.

“My grandfather’s ring and my wedding ring! I still have my wedding and engagement rings in my luggage. I didn’t know what to do with them. And my grandfather left each granddaughter some jewelry; I got his ring. It’s simple and thick, but it could be a wedding ring. They don’t have to match, right?”

“Right.” My throat is constricting again. I don’t want her to wear Delgado’s ring! At the same time, I feel humbled to wear something of her grandfather’s, something from the Sloane and LaFontaine families, even if it is just part of the show. “Good props,” I say before I can fall farther into my own head.

Minegold clears his throat. “All right, you two. I’m afraid you will have to do more than just disappear into the house. If those men found you once, they may find you again. Pine Ridge is a close-knit little town, and the paranormal community is particularly tightly woven.”

“So... Won’t they know that Reggie is just helping me out? That it’s all fake?” Therese asks.

Ugly words. All fake. I try not to release the dull, angry groan that sounds so monstrous. Instead, I cough. “Jakob and I didn’t tell anyone anything. There was no time.”

“And Reggie hasn’t been feeling well. He’s been lying low all week and being quite antisocial all month,” Jakob exposes my sulking cheerfully. “I expect a good many

people will believe that he was involved in a tempestuous online romance that culminated unexpectedly—with me serving as best man as he wedded an old family friend.”

Therese’s sweet smile melts me. I look at my hands, worried they may truly start to lose their shape as I feel warmth rush through me. “I do feel safer than I have in months with the two of you—old family friends.” She puts a hand to her throat as her eyes well up. “I feel like Grandpa Artie is watching over me. I know he’d say I couldn’t have chosen better.”

A better bodyguard or husband? Both? I can’t speak. My mind is whirring too quickly to make words.

“Indeed! So, let’s get your backstories straight. Therese, Reggie can follow your lead. You’re the one who has to play the part convincingly when you venture out in public. If Delgado or Estrada continues to keep tabs on you, you can be sure that the goons will report back.”

“I never met Estrada... Well, I don’t think I did.” Therese shakes her head suddenly, a dark frown on her face, changing her sunny beauty into something dangerous. “I joined Matteo on so many ‘business dinners’ at fancy restaurants. Oh God, I could have been shaking hands and eating prime ribs with murderers and drug dealers!”

I don’t have the heart to point out that there’s no maybe about it. “Let’s focus on why you broke up. What’s the story you’ve been using?”

At that, Therese is silent. She crosses her legs and wraps her hands over top of them, knuckles pale. “The truth?”

“Yes. To me, always. I won’t lie to you, either.” My voice is suddenly stern. “We’re partners. Survival and safety depend on honesty and trust. You can trust me with your

life, Therese, as your family has always trusted me.”

The sparkle fans into a single flame, dancing inside some previously unknown, uninhabited spot. My sacred oath. My sacred duty. This is beyond mere satisfaction. This feels like... life. Alive again! Like finding home—for the first time.

Is it my imagination, or does she squirm when I put on my “monster” voice? Not in fear. Could it be... What is the word? A turn-on?

No, of course not.

“First of all, an honest man is suddenly the most attractive man in the world. Secondly, if we’re married now, you’ll have to call me Teri most of the time, or people will think we’re superformal. Not my style.” Therese —Teri, I correct myself— laughs and sinks back, hands falling into her lap.

“Teri, then. What has your story been so far?” I ask. I love how at ease she seems with me at this moment, as if the world wasn’t so harrowing, as if we didn’t have a third party listening. She turns her head towards mine and gives me a crooked smile.

What is that tired old expression I always scoffed at? “As if we were the only two people in the world”? Yes. It’s like that.

“Okay. The truth is, Matteo Delgado swept me off my feet and spoiled me rotten... but there wasn’t a lot of substance. There was just fun. Whenever I started to feel unsettled in my marriage, I told myself that it was wrong of me. I should be so grateful to have a handsome, attentive husband who gave me what I said I wanted—travel and excitement, more than a small agricultural town in rural Louisiana could offer. Then, I started to get bored. I didn’t have friends who could relate to my life, and I didn’t make any as we moved from city to city every few weeks. I asked Matteo about doing some freelance work or even being a secretary for

his company, and he said I couldn't. Our schedule was too unpredictable, and his company had no openings. It was... it is clear now, but it wasn't then. I was unhappy because I'd become what everyone called me—just a pretty blonde ex-cheerleader trading on my looks. I was a trophy wife. He was my trophy husband, too.”

“You don't have to take your share of the blame, Teri. Most pretty young couples start out like that, full of freedom and appreciating good looks and attention.” I pretend to have experience.

She calls me on it. “You sound like an old man who's ‘seen it all.’ I guess... I guess you've probably had a lot of relationships since you don't age, huh?”

I clear my throat. “I've never been married. Or anything close to married. But, I've been protecting people for a long time. I'm an expert in human nature.” How anyone who talked to her for any length of time could ever have thought she could be fobbed off with trinkets and travel is beyond me. I've known her for a few hours, and I can already tell that she's always thinking, always curious, and always looking for the brightest and best bits of the world. Delgado probably married too hastily, too. I bet he didn't realize how incredible she was before deciding she was the perfect, insipid cover.

“An expert, Reginald?” Jakob asks from the front seat, his gentle voice holding a teasing note.

“I should have known I'd get called on that. Okay, honesty time. I'm an expert, not from any fancy degree, but from a long, hard life watching the worst and most evil natures of humans as well as witnessing the most loving and heroic ones. I've seen war criminals who commit atrocious acts and widows who would share their last bit of bread with refugees they took in. I've seen people I love age and die while I stand still. I've seen monsters fall in love and have families. I've seen a lot of the world, and I've started to notice patterns. I was made to protect and serve, and I learned to



identify threats. Those instincts have been sharpened over time.”

Therese makes a choked sound. “Reggie... I’m so sorry. You’ve been through so much because of what my family did—and now I’m asking for one more favor.”

“The worst parts were a long time ago. Years and years.” I smile broadly, like the memories don’t hurt. The body they gave me couldn’t be destroyed—but the mind could be scarred. I don’t know if that would have mattered at the time, as all humans were earning the same scars, and they were far more fragile.

Jakob mutters something under his breath in Polish. I don’t bother to translate it as Therese grabs my hand suddenly. “Like time could heal all of that! Time might numb things, but they still happened. I... I hope this assignment is one of the better ones you’ve had to deal with,” she whispers.

“This assignment.” That’s right, Reggie. A role. A ruse.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:20 am*

When she holds my hand and we just talk, pouring out the deepest bits of ourselves so quickly, I forget it's an act.

What would it be like to be married to Therese for real? Those sharpened instincts I spoke of tell me I could not find a truer, kinder person. Better than just sweet or kind—she invokes a kind of whole-hearted trust that I haven't felt since I traveled through London with Artie Sloan.

"It's a good assignment," I say gruffly.

It's more than that. It's a dream that I always told myself would never come true. And it won't. Even if I can trust her, even though she's sweet and kind, she wouldn't want me. Would never love me. And let's be honest... I don't know if I could ever truly love someone, even if they loved me first.

THE HOUSE IN PINE RIDGE is adorable—in a "Major Fixer Upper Way." It's a small one-story rancher with more wide, green lawn than actual house. It looks like it was constructed ages ago, with peeling siding and a sloping slate roof. It would seem dull if it weren't for the abundance of flowers and the wide, arched windows. Oh, and the cemetery in the distance certainly adds a lot of... atmosphere.

"Welcome home. We'll figure out more of 'our story' inside. Uh. Do I pick you up?" Reggie asks as Minegold drives away, promising to bring Reggie's van over in a few minutes.

"Oh. You don't have to." I would love it if he did. The only physical contact beyond a handshake that I've had has been with Reggie, Mr. Minegold, and Kim, and now

Reggie—bulky, musclebound, bald bodyguard Reggie is the only one that's left. My love language is touch, according to an internet quiz. Matteo never left me hungry in that aspect.

"I think we should. Really sell it." He nods, factual.

In the car, I told him (and Mr. Minegold) about my life with Matteo and how it had really begun to dull, about the comparisons I'd made with my friends who had chosen a simpler life with solid, working-class husbands. I told them how I threw a fit on the phone and said I had met someone else, a small-town man who would give me a home, let me work, and let me be a real wife and mother. Someone who would start a family.

Matteo had made it clear children were far, far, far away, but I had always dreamed of being a young mom who had the time and energy to grow a big family. I didn't tell Reggie that last part, of course.

"Well... It'll look convincing in case anyone's watching."

"In this town, you never know," Reggie sighs and steps close to me, ignoring my bags for a minute. "Tell me if I'm doing this right."

"Never done it before? Oh, I mean—never been married before," I chuckle nervously as his hand lands in the small of my back. Why does he feel so good? So solid and soothing? He's made of clay, isn't he? Why does he suddenly seem so much more alive than Matteo ever did? "Good plan!" I say, far too eagerly.

"That's right—well, not before today."

I love his sense of humor. What is wrong with me? I'm sure someone would say this is all part of the "damsel in distress meets knight in shining armor" dynamic that I

apparently enjoy. Matteo saved me from small-town rural life. Reggie is saving me from Matteo.

“Well, then I’m the expert on honeymooning and newlyweds. We should be disgustingly affectionate. Never stop touching. Uh. You know, at least in public.” Why did I say that?

Maybe because it’s the truth? I want someone to hold me and hug me? I’m a big baby who shouldn’t have married in a hurry, and now I need someone to keep the bad dreams at bay?

“As long as you’re comfortable. I never had a chance to practice. Golems are built to fight and die—not to find love and happy endings.”

I’m so mad at people I don’t even know. Maybe I’m just focusing my anger on something outside of myself so my own guilt can have a break. “I’m sorry that’s part of the deal. Can’t you have both?”

He shrugs. “There’s a first time for everything, I suppose.”

There’s a pause. Sweat trickles down my neck. “It’s humid tonight. I thought it would be cooler in the mountains.”

Does he feel it, too? The heavy, desperate urge to touch? I lick my lips and feel another trail of sweat forming between my breasts.

“I can get those old AC units working in no time.” He points to the windows on the side of the dark gray house.

“So handy.” I beam. Matteo knew how to work a corkscrew—and a knife. My daddy could fix everything from a tractor to an accordion.

“Thank you, I intend to fix this place up so it matches my beautiful bride.” Reggie bends his knees and lifts me into his arms as if I weigh nothing. My feet leave the sidewalk, and I’m floating. “Welcome home, Mrs. Gray.”

“Thank you, Mr. Gray.” Sell it, he said? I held the cheerleaders’ uniform fundraiser record for all four years of high school. I can sell like no one’s business. My mouth plasters to his as he carries me to the door of our pretend love nest.

By the time he fumbles with the keys and gets the door open, I don’t feel like pretending anymore.

## Chapter Seven

She’s kissing me. Like...reallykissing me. I don’t know what to do. My body says to return fire with fire, and she’s a whole damn inferno.

That would complicate the situation. You need to sweep the perimeter. This house is surely warded by now. I have to get her inside. Get her luggage inside.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:20 am*

My mind throws up a dozen excuses as the front door clicks shut and her hands continue digging into my back.

At last, just as I think I'm going to take her on a guided tour to find the bedroom, Therese breaks off the kiss with a gasp. "I'm sorry!"

"I'm sorry. Why are we sorry? Just so I'm sure we're on the same page," I pant, winded more from wanting her than from the effort of kissing. That, and the confusion. I've never... I know what sexual lust is, and there have been times in the past when I've felt twinges of it. But with me, it's always faded as fast as it came, leaving me feeling hollow.

This is filling me. Building in me. I tell myself to stop and focus on protecting Teri, and I realize I can't separate the two feelings. Taking her in my arms to slide into her kisses feels like it's as important as sweeping her into my arms to shield her from a blast of gunfire.

"I'm craving some comfort, I guess. I didn't mean to pull you into something that's 'above and beyond the call of duty.'" Therese blushes and smooths her hair away from her face, eyes wide and apologetic.

Honesty. It's vital; the only time I break the code of laws and morals fused into me is for the greater good, the greatest good—to protect innocents. I'm never going to see her again, not after the Feds give her a new identity. When will I tell her the truth if not now?

Don't I owe Artie's kin that much?

With a gravelly cough, I admit, “I don’t want you to think I’m the same kind of fast-mover as your ex, but I don’t usually behave like that. I’ve... I’ve never kissed any woman like that. Not as part of an assignment, a masquerade past enemies, or even just in my own free time. I’m no prude or saint, but... Well.” I shrug and keep my voice low and close to her ear, aware that I need to get back outside and search the perimeter more thoroughly. “Look, let me tell you something about me. Reginald Gray is supposed to be Mr. Steady and Reliable. I can be that—but I’ve never been that in terms of—a relationship. I’ve never been steady as anything more than a stable defense. Maybe as a friend.”

The instant sadness in her eyes stabs me, even though it shouldn’t. She shouldn’t have any power over me, nothing beyond a client that needs protecting.

“It’s not because I don’t want to. It’s because I don’t know how to.”

“But you’re so—”

“I have no soul. No spark of life that belongs to me. Golems aren’t made with one. A safeguard so we don’t become too powerful, too terrible. A spark that can create something real, something like love—that has to be given to us by someone first. Sort of like that fairy tale? Where the girl has to love the beast back? This time, she has to love the beast first. That’s too much to ask and too much to do—especially for someone I’ll only see for a few days and then never again,” I reassure with a gentle pat to her hand, speaking softly.

“I understand,” Teri whispers, squeezing my hand, her forehead close to mine. “You don’t have to say anything more. I understand why you wouldn’t want to get involved. I do, honest.”

Honest. Why did she have to use that word? I try to pull back. “I have to go outside. Get the bags. But you should know—it’s not that I don’t want to. I do want to. When I

saw you today? When you first ran to my arms like you were so happy to see me, like I was really the person you were about to start your new life with? Whatever I have instead of a soul, some instincts, some essence and semblance of life screamed at me. It screamed that you were warmth and life and would wake up the dormant pieces I carry, the pieces I've let slowly fade away. It was instant, and I didn't—don't understand it. To be truthful, I'm not sure I like it."

"Oh." Therese backs away.

I snatch her back, pressing my mouth back to hers and kissing her more thoroughly than I did before. When I jerk my head back, I keep hold of her waist. "I don't like what I don't understand. Orders are simple. Emotions are not. But you? You, I like. Very much."

REGGIE BRINGS IN OUR bags and puts his finger to his lips. He does something with his cell phone, walking from room to room. Next, he does something with his hands, murmuring in ancient Hebrew, words I can only understand bits of. I see blue and gold mist flood from his palms.

I know about magic. Never seen it like this. Knowing my husband had dark connections to it makes my knees weak in the bad way.

Ex-husband, I remind myself and try not to think about how he got his powers. I follow Reggie like a lost puppy, feeling more vulnerable than before.

He likes me in a way that's alien to him, a way that has literally never existed for him before.

I like him in a way that I don't understand—that I shouldn't want to understand. If I give him some "spark" that makes him have a soul, I don't worry that he'll become all-powerful and dangerous. I worry that my leaving him will somehow unmake



him—and break my own heart in the process. In two weeks, I won't even be able to text him a smiley face and tell him I miss him. All we have is this week and maybe the next.

So...Should I act on the sudden onslaught of feelings and seize the moment with someone I trust just because it could be the last time I can do that?

Or do I keep a lid on the emotions I'm developing because it will hurt me more in the long run, and it won't be fair to him to have a taste of happiness and then rip it away?

"You can talk," Reggie announces. The place is clean. And look. Jakob Minegold... he remembers every little thing." He pulls something from the bag he unzipped.

I smile at the familiar object, a small oblong piece of gold, a little case. Inside, there is a scroll with verses from the Torah. "Amezuzah," I whisper reverently.

Reggie places it on the wall by the front door. His thumb smears a dab of gray, clay-like substance and then affixes the golden case to it. "Golems. Better than sticky tack."

"You're so handy," I laugh, tension leaving me in small, warm waves. "The house is okay?"

"No listening or recording devices, no dark magical hexes or curses that I could pick up. And while it needs a lot of work to the exterior, it does seem to be a pretty nice place." He looks around the room we've ended in, the room at the back of the house.

This place should be a three-bedroom home, but I noticed that only one bedroom in the rancher's small hallway is furnished. There is a living room with two recliners and two loveseats around an entertainment center next to a dining room with a table for six. The kitchen and bathrooms look functional. Basic. Still, if this were my

starter home as a newlywed, I wouldn't have complained.

If I had a man like Reginald Gray, a handy, hardworking man, a good man, a simple, honest man—and he'd come home to me every night, and we made this place ours...

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:20 am*

I stop my dreaming with a shake of my head.

“What is it?” my ever-observant protector asks.

“I never had a home with Matteo,” I murmur. “He had an apartment in Miami, but he sublet it when we went to Europe for the year.”

Reggie nods as he pulls the blinds shut and tinkers with the AC window unit. I turn on the floor lamps in the living room and the overhead lights in the dining room. “That’s pretty common in drug or terrorist organizations. One or two people are on a lease, but whoever is in town can use it.”

I run my hand over the soft, faded velour fabric of the loveseat. Dust rises. “Rust and mustard.”

“Right from the seventies.”

“Should we hang a disco ball?”

He chuckles. “It’s terrible, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s fine. Honest.” I flash him a smile.

“That isn’t fooling anyone, let alone your hubby,” Reggie winks.

“Well, if we’re going to work on our backstories, this is a good place to start.” With a groan, I sit on one side of the loveseat, and dust flies up around me. Reggie hesitates,

then sits in the recliner nearest me, but he keeps his chair (and body) locked and alert.

“Growing up, I watched my parents struggle along, raising four kids in a small, blue-collar/agricultural town in the south. Pretty or athletic girls did better than brainy girls, according to my mother. She wanted us in sports or beauty pageants, on the cheerleading squad, or dating the captain of the team. Life had really clear expectations. Stay pretty, go to college only if you haven’t already got a job lined up and you’re not pregnant. Look for a steady, cute boyfriend and have your wedding the summer after you finish high school, or if you’re ‘brainy,’ after college.”

Reggie nods along as I talk, but his face doesn’t show disgust. It almost looks wistful.

“It wasn’t all that great if you couldn’t tell. That life is like living in a cookie-cutter factory. Each girl comes out looking and acting the same.”

“It sounds stifling. It also sounds like you had a community. People who knew you and watched you grow up. Pine Ridge offers that—but with a great deal of variety. With as many supernatural beings that live here, not to mention the college campus...” He shrugs. “You didn’t fit into your community?”

“Not so much.”

“I often feel I don’t fit into mine, either—but still. I have friends, particularly Jakob. There are so many kind people here in Pine Ridge, so many who accept others without question. I was happy to come here and settle after the war, to watch the town mature and change, and to even play a role in it.” His square jaw seems even more massive as he grins at me. “Can you imagine working in one town for over seventy years? I have. I’ve been the community servant, the ever-ready plumber. In a little town like this, being someone who can really assist others makes you feel needed. Wanted. Even... Even loved, in a way. That’s kept me happy most of the time.”

“I’m glad you found support here and that you have a friend like Mr. Minegold. It’s wonderful that you are able to have a business where people need you and make you feel like you belong. I didn’t find support in my hometown or with my mother and sisters. I didn’t get pregnant, I didn’t get married. I was ‘so cute, such a waste.’ People openly wondered why I felt I was too good for a decent, hard-working local boy?” I shake my head at the folly of it. “I guess I thought I was.”

“More likely you wanted to see if a man would appreciate you for you, not just another cookie-cutter bride.”

Reggie's words give me hope that my colossal mistake was at least a little bit justified.

“I didn’t even get one of the acceptable degrees—nursing or teaching.”

“I’m sorry, this is a story about you, right? Not some ancestor?”

He makes me laugh, even in the middle of my pity party. “When a guy from the forties tells you that... Yeah. You can see how backwards my neck of the woods was. Anyway, when one of my college friends got engaged, she held her bachelorette weekend in Miami. I’d never even been on a plane before, and I was twenty-five! I got to live my fantasy out for a weekend. Drank, partied, had fun, and met a tall, dark, and handsome bad boy-type.” I put my chin in my hands. “Confession—I read a lot of romance books in college. My favorites were the kind where the men wore dark suits, dropped diamonds at your feet, and lived the high life. Matteo did all of those things.” And more. I don’t want to think about the boundary-pushing, orgasm-inducing sex, the first real pleasure I’d ever had with someone.

With an effort, I stop myself from wondering what Reggie would do with me. Would I be his first? Would his hulking, musclebound form, magical abilities, and smooth, cool skin make me prickle with passion?

“It’s okay, Teri. A lot of people get hooked on a fantasy and confuse it with reality,” Reggie soothes.

“I sure did. Guess what? Those books end when the billionaire marries Ms. Joanne Average. My romance with Matteo didn’t. It went on, and it got hollow. He wanted a sexy girl to sleep with and show off. Yes, he spoiled me with attention in the form of fancy dinners and weekends on the beach, but... Now I realize how secretive he was, how little I knew about his life or his family. I never even knew the name of his company. Did I ask? Sure. Did I press? No. He told me things like, ‘I consult for a lot of companies.’ ‘I have a lot of different clients.’ Damn it! I really was the poster child for ‘Marry in haste, repent in leisure.’” I feel the hot, angry-at-myself-angrier-at-him tears start flowing. “I thought we’d get to know each other as we went! Why did I think that?”

An arm slides around my shoulders as they hunch, and a warm, solid weight sinks into the cushion next to me. “I think it’s because you’re a person who only keeps good secrets and good surprises for others. My instincts see you as honest. If you hide something, it’s for the greater good. You clicked with Delgado, so... you thought he was the same kind of person. That’s nothing to be ashamed of. I wish I thought of people like that. That they’d turn out to be fun to get to know. That you can trust life to put good people in your path.”

I snuffle into his shoulder. “You’re in my path. And I’m in your path. Isn’t that something?”

His lips briefly press the top of my head. “I hope so.”

THERESE IS MY KRYPTONITE. My truth serum. Simply taking her in my arms makes my chest loosen and flood with warm, relaxed feelings. I start telling her about the way Pine Ridge was in the 1950s, how I watched hundreds of families come and go, how I set up lots of washers, garbage disposals, and other “modern wonders”

for happy little housewives. How I got bitter. How I closed myself off as the fifties turned into the sixties, seventies, eighties, and the decades kept rolling. Technology got better and better, but pipes and toilets stayed stubbornly necessary. How love in this town hasn't changed. There are hundreds of happy couples, human ones, monster ones, even half-monster, half-human families—and I'm still alone. Waiting. Waiting to end or to begin, I've lost track. I just talk. I talk more to her than I have to anyone else in years.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:20 am*

Part of it is to make her feel better about her mistakes. Part of it is because I've never told anyone all of it. Some people know some things. I give out little pieces of ammunition, never enough for anyone to have more than one or two rounds to hurt me.

As she curls against me, still in her pretty white dress while I'm in my good slacks and untucked, unbuttoned white shirt, I stroke her hair, and we plan out our fake romance.

"Where did you go after Rome?" I ask.

"London."

"I was 'born' in London. I've been back many times. I'd love to go again one day, to see it all glittering and rebuilt. I haven't been back since the early seventies. I'm sure it's changed."

We exchange a smile, and Teri picks up our tale. "Okay. I was in London. You were born there—sometimes, I can even hear the faintest trace of an accent. You went back for a visit, and there you were—sitting in the same coffee shop where I was meeting with my divorce lawyer." She pauses, frowning. "It went through so fast, faster than they told me it would... Matteo must have done something shady to have it go through the courts so quickly."

I nod. He probably didn't want Therese to ask for his assets or alimony. If she just wanted out, he probably gave it to her in hopes of making his problems disappear, maybe in hopes of keeping her silent if approached by the police or feds.



“Right. You were in the coffee shop, and I happened to overhear the sad tale. I was over there to see my old stomping grounds—to pay respects to friends long lost,” I think of the men who never made it out of the Blitz. Who never made it back home. I swallow hard. For some reason, the pain reaches deeper this time, like it’s spread and grown roots.

When something hurts your heart—and your soul.

“I got to thinking about my own life.” I swallow. The best agents put a piece of themselves in the role to keep them grounded and help them carry off the part. I’ve been leaving enough pieces to put together an entire jigsaw. “It made me realize that I’m not getting any younger. I’m settled and established, but something’s missing. I want to settle down with someone. I mean, I wanted to settle down. In the story. That’s what we’ll say.”

“We talked and realized that we were both Americans. I realized that you were older, more settled, more mature.”

My hand tangles deeper in her hair as she talks, leaning against me. Even in all the humidity and traveling she’s done today, Teri’s hair is still like silk and smells sweet, like honeysuckle and violets.

“You were the kind of man I wanted. You were a solid, attentive, committed man who was still willing to travel and build a better life. You appreciated my quick thinking, my plans for the future, and the fact that I was still young and sexy.” She says the last line with a bright pink blush.

I can’t help it. I kiss her temple, stealing a deep breath to pull her scent into my memory. “That’s where people are going to doubt. You are young and sexy. Beautiful and sweet. I’m literally old and gray. Bald.”

“If I were sixteen or even eighteen, I’d worry. I’m not worrying. There are plenty of couples with a big age gap. Ours isn’t that big—at least to the rest of the world. There are probably different rules for paranormal couples, aren’t there?”

“Age isn’t the key factor. It’s compatibility of thoughts and spirits,” I explain, head starting to spin. She talks about this like it’s real. Fuck, I want this to be real. I hold her tighter, feeling her soft breasts press into my side. Both of our stomachs rumble in unison. “It’s almost nine!” I realize with a guilty start. Part of keeping Teri alive means feeding her!

“Pizza?”

“I’ll order in. There are only a couple of pizza places in town, and I know the owners of both. They won’t question why I’m here. They’ll assume I’m just doing some home improvements, maybe planning to fix this place up and flip it. But tomorrow, we have to stop behaving like wild honeymooners and go out to get some groceries.”

“Sounds good to me. Particularly that one part.”

I freeze, my hand on the small of her back. Does she mean the pizza? Or the wild honeymoon behavior?

Gentlemanly me decides it has to be the pizza. “Pepperoni?”

## Chapter Eight

There’s only one bed.

It’s a favorite plot device in romance books, but I never thought it would happen to me.

“I’ll take the couch.”

“What couch?” I stand in the doorway of the bedroom while Reggie exits the bathroom in a snugly fitting white t-shirt and black sweatpants that ride low around his waist. The cotton of the shirt is so thin that I can make out the lines of his carved biceps and chest. Matteo’s body was longer. Leaner. Reggie is slabs of solid muscle. Thick muscle. A living shield.

My breath vanishes, probably because my entire nervous system is on strike. My brain can’t do basic functions. It’s too busy wondering what it would feel like if Reggie and I did more than just kiss. Reggie slips from my protector to my protector and sudden fantasy. I no longer care about billionaires and bad boys. Give me a hero with history on his side, strong arms to wrap around me, and a square chin that warns he can’t be trifled with. I’ll take Reggie over those fake mafia pretty boys to keep my fantasies warm.

My pussy throbs without warning, and the tempo picks up as he moves past me, almost brushing my braless breasts with his arm.

“That one.” He points to the loveseat that would fit half of his height.

“Your knees will have to hang over the arm!” I point out indignantly. “Not happening. If anyone takes the loveseat, it’s me. I can curl up in a little ball.” I demonstrate, lying on my side with my knees curled to my chest.

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“You look like you’re trying to turn into a pretzel. I’ll sleep on the floor. I’ve had much worse. I’m technically just earth and magic. Human needs are optional for me.”

Reggie goes into the bedroom to get a pillow off the bed. When he turns around, I’m back in the doorway. “Don’t talk like that about one of my grandfather’s most respected friends—and if you think I’d let the guy saving my life sleep on the floor when there’s a gorgeous, comfy bed ten feet away, you’re wrong.” I put my hands on my hips and channel my grandmother’s no-nonsense stare.

With a sigh, Reggie puts the pillow back on the bed and stares at it with a critical eye. “It’s a queen. It will easily sleep two people.”

The aching throb spreads out from between my thighs and up my middle, making my breasts tingle. “Yep. Easily.”

“I can get the throw pillows off the loveseats and make us our own Berlin Wall. I’ll stay on my side.”

I don’t want him to stay on his side, but I don’t want to make things worse by showing my obvious (and completely inappropriate) horniness, either. Leaving someone like Reggie will be hard enough without adding physical complications. “I can stick to my own side without a border. I promise. I don’t roll around in my sleep or anything.”

He nods after a moment, eyes finding mine. “You go ahead and get settled. I’m going to take a quick stroll around the yard. Just a good habit, Teri. Nothing is wrong,” he soothes before I can ask.

Watching him walk down the hall and out into the dark leaves me suddenly somber. Grim.

I've never been on my own before this year. I went from living at home during high school, to a campus dorm in college, to back home again. Then—married.

Being alone never scared me before I was suddenly on the run from my own husband. Being alone and not being able to reach out and talk to anyone after next week? That terrifies me, especially since tonight feels so oddly perfect. Homey.

Like I know Reggie would listen to anything I have to say and really care about it. In a week or so, that link will be severed.

My family would be ashamed—but even shame pales to the sudden knot of fear in my stomach. Am I going to spend the rest of my nights sitting alone in empty apartments, afraid to make connections? Or mourning the ones I've lost?

With a groan, I sink back and roll onto my side, facing the wall.

Better get used to it.

THE GOONS HAVE GONE. There are no signs of disturbance in the flowers or grass. In the distance, I can hear people out on their patios and the humming whine of those mowing after dark. (It's more common than you'd think, especially in Pine Ridge.) Of course, our nearest neighbors are silent.

I look out over the sea of gray and white stones that separate this little road from the streets of town. Not just quiet. Dead quiet. Well, just dead.

I shudder. I picture a failed mission and Teri lying cold and empty. A lifeless slab buried out here.

I'm the one they call a lifeless slab, but since I met her, something has changed. There's warmth and wakefulness in place of the silence and emptiness I used to live with.

Another walk around the property line, senses stretching out—and coming back somewhat scrambled. Dammit. Maybe we made a mistake hiding her in Pine Ridge. Yes, we can use our magic more effectively, but if there are dark things lurking, waiting to mess with our wards and charms, they could be camouflaged by the constant hum of mystical energy our little town produces.

I guess it's good that I'm here. The last line of defense. I stopped a bomb once. I could stop a bullet. But I'd have to be near her almost constantly.

Which makes sense, you fool. You're standing about on a hot, sultry night. A hot, sultry wedding night. You should be inside, next to Teri, at least for the sake of appearances.

What does Teri expect me to do? Consummate our sham of a marriage in the name of comfort and convenience? It might be the best I get.

She leaves soon. It might be the only chance you get.

As I return inside and lock the door behind me, a thought punches me in my ever-sensitive gut, pummeling into me so hard that I stand frozen with my back to the door.

A little voice in my head whispers, You could go with her. You wanted to be finished. Done with this life. Well... Why not have a new life? They have pipes pretty much anywhere in the world! You've always hidden what you were. Now you could hide together! It could be real. It could be like this. Mr. and Mrs. Normal. She can work in I.T. somewhere. You can be a plumber. Hell, you could be a mall cop or

pump gas. You wouldn't care what you did if you had her to come home to each night.

I just want to be where she is.

But why? I trust my instincts, as long and painful trial and error taught me the folly of ignoring them. Still, without immediate danger, I try to be logical and rational. There's no reason (well, not enough of one) for me to have an instant attraction to Therese that goes far beyond the physical. It's not the looks, the smile, the body, or her openness. It's not her brains or her bravery.

Okay, maybe it is. It's all of those things, but there has to be more.

The family connection?

No.

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I slowly slide down the door until I find myself sitting on the scratchy green and beige welcome mat.

The spark.

The little flame that flares into a blaze whenever I think of her.

She woke up your heart. Is it stupid to think that maybe she breathed a soul into you with that kiss, too?

With a sudden bound, I'm back on my feet and walking with swift, silent steps to the bedroom we've decided to share.

"Teri?" I breathe.

Her soft, gentle breathing is my only answer. She's asleep.

Maybe it's for the best. I've known her for a day. Living in Pine Ridge has taught me that love at first sight does exist. Soul mates do exist—just not for hunks of clay like me.

I crawl into bed beside her and turn my back so that it's inches from hers, even though I ache to wrap my arms around her.

Still, the part of me that had resilience and hope shaped into it can't help but smile a little. We'll see what happens tomorrow.



## Chapter Nine

Saturday morning in the suburbs. The sun is shining. The humidity is crippling—and I'm in bed with one of the most gorgeous men I've ever seen. Bonus—he gives off a calming cool as I move closer to him.

Reggie looks different when he's asleep. All stretched out and sleepy, less the quiet, stern protector, and more... vulnerable. Like me. I can see every inch of thick, bulging muscle. His shirt's rolled up to just under his abs, and there are all kinds of muscles, scars, and sigils on his gray body, sacred words in Hebrew that I cannot read, faded gray on gray.

Do not think about dragging your tongue along the almost invisible lines, the sacred, holy lines on this divine warrior. Do not, do not, do not. He is forbidden in every sense of the word...or he should be.

My gaze travels lower. The low-riding black sweats have shifted in his sleep—and they're straining with what people crudely call "morning wood."

My face heats, and I turn studiously away, trying to be good.

But bad girl thoughts pursue me. Morning wood? More like morning redwood. So big. Matteo was tall enough, and the relevant parts of him were proportional. He was plenty big for me, especially since I was new to pretty much everything he wanted to teach me.

I can't help but wonder what Reggie could do with that equipment. Does it have special powers, like the rest of him? Would he ever want to...try anything? With me? I know that I tried a ton of new things with Matteo—and I blush from some of the kinkier ones—but that was built up over a year.

I would do anything Reggie wanted, instantly.

Probably because, see above—vulnerable. And desperate for physical comfort and distraction.

Suddenly, I want to convince Reggie to take a risk with me, even though parts of my brain scream it's a dumb idea. Other parts of me scream that I want to make his eyes pop with the realization that the "good girl" persona comes with a side of "good in bed."

Wrapping my lips around that long, thick bulge and showing him that I have no problem trying to take him all the way would be just the start.

Except that my masterpiece just rolled over and sat up. "Morning. Guess we'd better head out and hit the grocery store. Nothing in the fridge but ice cubes. You need to eat."

In spite of my disappointment, I smile. Married life.

"Right. Let me grab something to wear."

"Take your time. I'm going to check the house and the outside. Won't be a tick." He smiles, and I catch the adorable faint trace of his accent again.

I feel a prickle of anticipation as I start unpacking my suitcase, putting things in the walk-in closet and chest of drawers. Should I be feeling a thrill of excitement about wandering through the grocery store on Saturday morning instead of climbing on Reggie's cock and riding him until we both come? Probably not, but I can't help it.

This is the "real" I want.

And there's always tonight.

THERESE WEARS CHIC black shorts and a teal tank top that makes her look like a beach goddess. Every head in the grocery store turns. More than one guy checks out her hand. I put my arm over her shoulders possessively, glad we're both sporting rings. Luckily, no one I know is out and about in the produce aisle of the Pine Ridge Fresh Mart this morning. I'm spared a stumbling excuse for a bit.

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Teri slides her arm around my hips, head turning to look behind us. “Those high school girls are burning holes through your clothes!” she hisses angrily.

“What? Nonsense.” I shake my head and cast a casual glance over my shoulder. I’ve lived here for years, part of the background. Unnoticed unless your pipes burst.

But sure enough, a quartet of girls is staring. Some blush and giggle when they meet my incredulous gaze.

They notice me.

Something has changed. Maybe it’s something in me—some spark? Something that gives me more form, more presence in the human world?

I shake my head and wash that thought away. It’s Teri. She’s stunning. They’re wondering how some big clod like me ended up with a honey-toned goddess like her.

“Staring? Not at me, at you. Same for half the men in this store. They’re all wondering how I got so lucky.”

“Homicidal exes for the win,” Teri mutters with a wry smile.

She makes me laugh, even in the dark moments. “Delgado was an idiot,” I mutter back, my head close to her ear.

Therese looks up, a flash of surprise and pain in her eyes shooting daggers into me.

I've seen a lot of people in pain. I'm not an ass about it, but I don't usually stop and get all cuddly about it, either. Therese erases a lifetime of calmly carrying on. I pull her closer to me, pushing our cart with one hand. "That's not on you, Teri. He fooled the world. A trusting, kind heart is easy to deceive—and I wouldn't have it any other way. Hope and a willingness to seek the good are beautiful qualities that too many people lose."

"Are you sure you're not confusing hopeful and kind with idiotic and naive?" she sighs, grabbing a box of cereal.

"No, I'm not. I've been in a lot of tight spots over the years. I've seen men far worse than Delgado. The person who can make life brighter, even for a second, is the kind you hold onto. He... he should have changed his career if it meant keeping you. He should have changed allegiances, should have changed his life if it meant keeping you." That's all I can say in public. Therese's hand hesitantly slides into my back pocket as we walk along. It's her silent way of saying thanks—and making it hard to walk.

"Too much?" she asks, one eyebrow climbing high, drawing attention to the apple of her cheek and the crooked grin she risks giving me.

"I'd expect nothing less from you, Mrs. Gray."

"I have a feeling you might have severely underestimated me, Mr. Gray." She emphasizes the word mister with a squeeze on my cheek, hand staying firmly in my pocket.

"How do you mean?"

"If you're good, I'll show you later."

“Excuse me.” An older woman with her hair in a sharp, uneven bob passes us, glaring. I hear her growling under her breath, “Get a room.”

“We’re doing things right,” I sigh. “We’re pissing off cranky Karens.”

Therese grins at me. I grin back. That little buzzing in my chest can’t be silenced, and it’s like a symphony. The whole world has new sounds, and the empty spaces in my mind are filling in.

The assignment I didn’t want to take is turning out to be fun—and so much more.

CHIPS AND GRANOLA BARSgo in the cart. Some steaks. Canned soup. Pasta, milk, cheese, eggs, bread, butter, and the basics for a few days. “Do newlyweds eat out more?”

“Not if they’re honeymooning at home,” Therese shrugs and looks at the coffee. “Do we have a coffee pot?”

“Yes, and you’re an angel. I’m semi-coffee-dependent. Sometimes it’s the only thing pulling me out of hibernation.” I grab for a bag of my favorite roast and find my hand covering hers. “This is my favorite.”

“Mine, too. I wonder what else we have in common,” she whispers, walking ahead of me.

I swallow the drool that forms when I watch her hips sway, carrying her a few steps ahead of the cart.

Is she leading me on? Thinking of me as just a final fling? There have been others who’ve clung, looking for comfort. I always rebuffed them, kindly but firmly, genuinely wishing I felt something but finding nothing there.

It's not like that with Teri. If she wants to give me a chance... by God, I'm going to take it. It's not the most altruistic thought I've ever had, but it's there all the same.

The thing inside of me.... I know what it is, even if I'm afraid to name it.

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A soul.

Souls have mates. Could she be mine? She has to be, for she put this spark in me.

Teri thinks I'm saving her, but she could be my salvation. Something my kind rarely finds.

"Are you okay? Is something wrong?"

"Oh, no. Everything is good. Very good," I reassure quickly, snapping back to reality.

"You got quiet."

"Just thinking." Thinking about how I could make Teri see that she's meant to be mine. That I'm serious about her. That I'm even willing to leave town with her if that's what it takes.

SATURDAY IS FUN. I'Mnot supposed to be having fun. I'm supposed to be fearing for my life and waiting to hear from agents about the degree of life-fearing I should indulge in.

The nearest grocery store to the little house is one of those big chain stores, a Fresh Mart—and according to him, it is the only one in this semi-secluded mountain town.

Reggie and I giggle and flirt our way around the store. I ask if he needs to go down the aisle with light bulbs and tools to keep up the "fixing up the love nest" charade, but he shakes his head. We turn down the aisle where they sell antacids and



painkillers. “My allergy medicine.” I grab a box. “As soon as September starts, my eyes turn pink and my nose runs. I look like a miserable rabbit.”

“A cute rabbit, my honey bunny.” Reggie kisses my ear, a light, innocent little kiss that turns my insides into a puddle of lava.

My eyes land on the next aisle as we turn the corner. Pads, tampons, and condoms. We both stop walking. “I... Are we trying for a family?” I ask in a whisper. “In our story?”

“Maybe after we find a place that’s uh—in a school district we like.” Reggie’s hand hesitates next to the condoms, then he lets it fall to the side.

“Do monsters and humans ever have children?” I whisper.

“Often.”

“What about golems?” I ask, staring him in the eye without flinching.

“I believe they could.”

I take the pack of condoms and dangle them over the cart, that lake of lava rising to my cheeks.

Reggie licks his lip. “Is that wise?”

I put down the pack and watch resigned sadness fly across his features before he can hide it.

“You’re right. The three-pack wasn’t wise.” I calmly put them back and take the twelve-pack. “You have two weeks off, baby. I don’t want you to have to keep

running back to the store. It's bad enough you have to work on the wiring."

"I'll still find time to make you breakfast in bed, sweetheart."

As we head to the registers in the front of the store, Reggie nudges me down an aisle full of birthday cards, seasonal novelties, some stuffed toys, and a few card and board games. "I don't want to pack any board games. When we move to that new school district next year," I tack on the clumsy cover sentence quickly, even though Reggie hasn't alerted me that anyone's paying attention to us. I guess I have to get used to living like this, being careful all the time and watching every word.

"We can always leave them as gifts for the next couple who rents that house," Reggie shrugs. He throws a deck of cards in the cart as well as a few other kinds of card games, and then holds up a few board games. "Cozy nights at home, babe, when we're too exhausted to go out?"

This man could talk me into anything. What's more... in an entire year, Matteo and I never played a game or read a book together. If we didn't go out and one of us wasn't in the mood, he watched sports. There was never any discussion, either. He was the one providing a lavish lifestyle. How could I begrudge him a few mindless hours of FIFA when he was taking me around the world?

Still, the realization hits hard—we had nothing in common when we were alone together. A marriage shouldn't only exist in a public setting.

"My parents used to have our neighbors over and play rummy until all hours. Going out to the movies was a special date for them. They dated on a budget, raising four kids and not earning a lot. But I remember them laughing in the kitchen after us kids were in bed." I cough suddenly. "It's a hot one. I'm parched. Should we get a couple of beers, Reggie?"

“Get a six-pack of whatever you want, Teri.”

I get some spiked lemonade and watch Reggie nod in approval. “You like this?”

“I like anything as long as it isn’t flavored like watermelon. Can’t stand it.”

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“I don’t like artificial flavors of anything. No fruity gummy bears or chewy stuff, especially not after living in Europe for most of the last year. I’m a chocolate snob now,” I laugh and take a turn pushing the cart.

When we’re at the checkout, Reggie slips three of those solid Swiss chocolate bars (the only concession to European chocolate in the store) into the cart.

Observant. Thoughtful. Doesn’t even mention it.

Once we’re in the car with the AC cranked, I give Reggie a long look. It’s none of my business to say what I’m about to say. Matteo’s mantra was “That’s my business, baby” (always said in a very affectionate way) when I tried to ask questions or make suggestions about his work or his habits. I have no real right to say anything to Reggie anyway because I’m not his wife, I’m his assignment.

I guess he makes me feel comfortable because the words tumble free. I scoot higher up in my seat, bare shoulders on the warm leather. “Sometimes it’s more polite to be silent. It’s none of my business,” I muse aloud, hoping he’ll take the bait.

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Oh, just something I noticed about you. Something I think you’re wrong about. But it’s not my place to say.”

“Oh, don’t do that. This week is going to drag if either of us does that thing where we stop talking because it would be more ‘polite’ not to.”

Challenge accepted. “Fine. You said you couldn’t be in a relationship. Wouldn’t be good as anything more than a friend. I disagree. In a single day—I disagree. You would be a wonderful boyfriend. This thing about being a beast who needs to be loved first? I don’t know about that, but you have so many things that women want—it would be hard to resist falling for someone like you.”

“Well, that’s very kind, but—”

“No, you said I could talk, so I’m talking. I avoided dating for a long time because I knew what qualities I wanted in a man. Then, I was married for a year, and I got to test out my theories about love and relationships. If I’d have been smart...” I sigh. “If I hadn’t been so scared I wouldn’t get another chance at a guy like Matteo or that he’d change his mind and decide he didn’t want a small town, tiny bank account type girl like me, I would have tested those theories out before marrying him. We would have dated for a year. Or at least six months.”

Reggie's eyes never leave the road. The broad shoulders that make my mouth water are stiff. “You learned your lesson, huh? Not plunging in again.”

That’s a loaded question, and he doesn’t even ask it. He says it like a statement.

“Ordinarily, I would say yes. Maybe if I were smarter, I’d say yes. But I learned a whole lot in a short time.” A bitter chuckle escapes me, and I focus on the streets and buildings zipping past. Soon, I won’t get to be a passenger anymore. That’s another thing I’ll miss, just going for a drive with someone. Soon, I’ll be driving solo—if I even leave my house.

“Teri?”

“Sorry, I drifted into my own head. I would plunge in again with the right kind of man. He’d have to be one I was totally confident in. Otherwise, I’d be afraid of

making the same mistakes.” I’m not afraid of diving in deep with Reggie. But I can’t tell him that.

“I said this wouldn’t work if we didn’t talk, so now it’s my turn to say something. To ask something that’s none of my business.”

“Shoot,” I chuckle, lightly brushing my hand against his arm.

“How am I stacking up? To you? In spite of my abysmal track record of zero relationships—which is unlikely to change any time soon... I guess I’m just curious, and you’re probably the first and last person who can tell me if I’m ‘plunge-worthy.’”

I can’t tell him—unless he asks me point blank. I pull my hair off my neck and twist it into a ponytail to buy a few seconds. “One, you don’t have an abysmal track record. Not being able to have a relationship isn’t the same thing as failing at them or being bad at them. Did you ever try?”

Reggie’s stiff shoulders flex. “In a way. I never pushed it because... the hunger I felt was hollow. Without substance. Without the ability to fully return what I hoped would be given.”

“So you waited because you didn’t want to hurt anyone. That was smart. I lied to myself and rushed even when I had a lot of questions about how life with Matteo would work out after a year of glitz and glamor. I didn’t want to be a hick-town stage mother, but I didn’t plan to be a traveling honeymooner forever, either.” I twist my fingers in my lap, realizing I still have to answer his question. “Two, you stack up incredibly well so far. I learned that it wasn’t the big things like money and travel. They’re nice, but they don’t complete the picture. Like any good picture, you need lots of tiny details... and you’re very good with the details.”

I close my eyes after my speech. Probably said too much—and I don’t care. Look at

my life. I'm living one kind of lie and about to live a longer one. My conversations with Reggie are probably the last ones I'll have where I can be truly honest.

I am out of fucks to give.

"You stack up really, really well. Especially to me." I reach over and put my hand next to him, palm up.

He takes it.

## Chapter Ten

Teri is smart. So smart. I don't just mean booksmart or college smart. I mean that she summed up everything that's been circling in my heart in the space of one conversation.

One—I don't have a bad track record in relationships. I have no record. I thought of that as a failure, but Therese thinks of it as discerning. Like having a clean slate.

She thinks I'm boyfriend material—which is a bit backwards since I'm pretending to be husband material, but that's fake. Her words were real. Her hand in mine? That's real too. The little house we're now arriving at, with its overgrown neighboring lawns and the sun hitting the headstones in a lazy way... It could all be real.

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If she stays in one place. If I could convince her to let me protect her permanently.

To be with me—permanently. It wouldn't matter where; the mission would remain the same. Keep her safe.

Love her.

Instead of longing for sleep, I feel like I'm waking up.

I let go of Teri's hand to turn into our short driveway and pull into the square garage that attaches to one end of the house. My eyes check every shadow. I didn't see anyone tailing us at the store. Nothing around the perimeter has been disturbed.

That makes me twitchy. Are our precautions working that well, or are they simply too good for me to detect? Could they have genuinely bought our fake, clumsy wedding? I suppose a rebound quickie marriage for a gorgeous, disillusioned ex is believable.

"Come on. Let's get in the house," I grunt and grab the groceries.

"Is something wrong?" Teri jumps out of the car, her voice instantly high and breathless with fear.

"No. I don't see anything wrong."

"That's good, right?"

"Yes, but... Well, sometimes if you don't see anything wrong, you still have to look



for trouble. Come on, your chocolate will be a puddle if we don't pop it in the fridge.”

MY COMMENTS MADE THERESE twitchy, which I regret, especially after the peaceful moments we shared on the drive home, holding hands in contented silence.

The rest of the day passes with us moving about each other, but notwith each other, until it's time to make dinner. Teri is in the kitchen, muttering her way through the contents of the cabinets, pulling out pots and looking for utensils.

“I should take you out to a nice restaurant. That's what people do on their honeymoons. They don't cook.”

“Yeah, well, they're too busy doing other things. I have time,” she snaps, jerking a meat fork out of the drawer. “Steak? I can cook, in case you were worried.”

“Hey, I'm sure you can cook. I just... Well. I would still like to take you out to a nice dinner.”

Teri stills in front of the cast iron pan she sets on the stove. “I think Matteo thought romance was all about the public stuff. ‘Look at the jewels my wife has. Look at the dress I brought her. Look at the concerts we attended and the fancy restaurants we dined at.’ I loved it, too.”

I know she's not done. Teri sniffs in loudly and hurries to cover the steak with salt and pepper, muttering something about this place needing a spice rack.

My hands are gentle on her shoulders. I shouldn't touch. If I touch, I won't want to stop.

Therese relaxes under my palms at once. I rub in small circles, moving closer. When her back hits my chest, my arms wrap lower, holding tightly around her waist, my

lips just above her hair. “What is it? What else?” I murmur, eyes closed so I can focus on the scent of her skin, the warmth and softness of her.

“It was all public because it was a cover. And it was all sex because that was convenient. Why not fuck the stupid farm girl you dolled up and paraded around?”

Anger at Delgado for what he’s done to Therese far outstrips my anger at what he did to some other lowlife who probably deserved to be stabbed. “You’re not a dumb farm girl.”

“My dad sells tractors! That’s close enough,” Therese half-sobs. Her shoulders are shaking against me, tears and hysterical laughter overtaking her. “I’m so sorry. Sorry I was too dumb to slow down, to question him, to wonder why he wanted me instead of anyone else. Matteo could have had his pick.”

I’m surprised that a witness under this kind of stress has held it together for so long. I push Therese’s hands into the sink and scrub off the meat juices before turning her to me and folding her into my arms. “He didn’t want anyone else because you were... Youaresomethingspecial, Therese LaFontaine.”

“Therese Gray,” she corrects, wiping her eyes.

“I could tell you all the reasons a man would want you to be his wife, but deep down, you know them. You’re angry, rightfully angry, that Delgado exploited your gifts and set you up as his cover, parading you around as a honeymoon couple on an extended trip so no one would look too hard at his comings and goings.” I stop there before I can say (or worse,demonstrate) that I’d like to prove I want something beyond flashy appearances. That I want to romance Therese in private, intimate ways that mean something. That I’ll restore her faith in sex and intimacy as an expression of love between two people.

But I probably wouldn't. I don't know how. Oh, I know the mechanics of the act, but I'd be a clumsy failure in practice.

Wouldn't I?

"You're so good to me, Reggie. So far beyond duty." Teri looks up at me with trust and appreciation in her eyes. "You say all the right things."

I knead her shoulders, and she closes her eyes, breathing up against me, daring me to kiss her lips once more.

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“You do all the right things,” she whispers, lips framing each word.

Suddenly, I feel like I have an abundance of beginner’s luck. Teri brings me luck.

You can’t do this, my internal watchdog warns. She’s vulnerable right now. She’s crying about how a man used her for sex—amongst other things. You can’t offer her sex. That’s curing the problem with the problem. Right?

Therese doesn’t seem to think so. She rests her head on my chest with a weary sigh. “This isn’t in your job description.”

“My job description binds me to your family forever. I have longed to be a friend and ally. I could only dream of being something more,” I rasp.

“Then... then what I want probably isn’t fair. Maybe you feel like you have to say yes, because of some ancient, sacred pact,” Teri whispers, leaning her cheek to my chest.

“For you—I feel as though I would break any pact, but because of who you are, I don’t have to. Forever faithful to you... Forever protecting you...” I rock her side to side, as I have rocked many a crying child, but this time my heart isn’t heavy with grief. My mind skips ahead to an improbable future where Reggie and Therese Gray have their own little place in some little town, it doesn’t have to be this one, and we hold each other just like this. Kids’ toys, laundry, and dishes clutter up the background of my imagination. Some men would flinch. I feel whatever passes for blood start racing in my cold veins. “It’ll be okay,” I mutter, half to her, half to myself.

“Hm? What?”

“Wh-whatever you want me to do would be okay. It wouldn’t break a pact. Even if it did, I wouldn’t care. Have you heard the verse, ‘whatever isn’t of faith is sin’?”

“Maybe?”

“With you, nothing could ever be wrong. Not for me. Of course,” I pull myself out of the warm haze of hugging her, of feeling her press more deeply into my chest and snuggle in my arms, “of course, you haven’t said what you want.” I cough. “I might be making assumptions. I’m not good at this.”

“Not good at it, or haven’t tried?” Therese looks up at me with one eyebrow cocked, challenging me in a friendly way.

“Both?” I don’t know for sure what she’s hinting at. I can hope, but...

“You don’t know that you can’t do it unless you try to do it first. You should know that, with all the crazy things you’ve said you’ve done.”

I like the spitfire that comes back into her voice and her eyes when she argues with me, even in her gentle, teasing way. I counter, “Maybe what I want to do isn’t something I can try.”

“Such as?”

You. Being with you. Making love with you.

“Is it private? I’m sorry. I shouldn’t pry.” She begins to wriggle away, and it feels like my soul is tearing.

My arm locks around her waist. “Being in a real relationship, not something fake. Something that lasts longer than a two-day charade. Something special. Something physical. But not like Delgado’s version of physical. Something real,” I whisper. If she can be scared, so can I.

“Ah. Real.” Therese’s eyes slide away. “This is a sham. A sham with an expiration date—and two weeks is the extreme end.” She turns back to the stove, putting butter in the pan. “Should have gotten olive oil.”

That’s not what I meant. I drop my hands back to my sides, tempted to walk away.

We do not run. We are a wall, a protection for our people. An ancient command holds me in place, and I feel energy soar through me, peace in its wake. This isn’t a mistake—and I don’t back away from fights.

REGGIE STANDS BEHIND me, not touching me any longer. I want this touch. At the same time, it’s not fair to tell him I could be what he wants—that real, permanent, physical lover—and then leave him in the dust.

“This could be real. If you want it to be,” Reggie’s voice is soft as he hovers. “Maybe they call you tomorrow, maybe they call you next week, or next year. No one said I have to leave.”

“But it’s— I mean, I can’t pay for a bodyguard for that long.” How am I ever going to pay him back for what he’s already done?

“Not a bodyguard. A boyfriend. Husband, according to some.”

My mind is blown. Why would he do that? Am I a project for him? Something to cross off his list? The thing that makes him more “human” than clay?

Do you care?

“I—”

I stop as a faint buzzing attracts my attention. My cell phone? Could it be Matteo? I'm not supposed to talk to Matteo. I've blocked his number. I don't want to talk to any of my friends or family and put them in danger. All they know is that I left Matteo and filed for a divorce a few months ago.

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“I’ll answer it if you want.” Reggie moves toward my purse while I stand frozen in the kitchen doorway. “It’s a 212 number. That’s the D.C. area code.”

Reggie holds up a small black phone, not my personal cell phone in its teal case. “That’s the other phone. The cell they gave me at the church,” I breathe out, and my knees shake a little. “It has to be my handler, Agent Powell? Or someone in WITSEC?”

Reggie passes me the phone, and I answer in a low voice, nameless fear floating around me. I don’t know what they’ll say, but even routine things feel like great big terrifying problems.

“Mrs. Gray?”

“Speaking.”

“This is Mr. Powell. Is now a good time to talk? Do you have any company?”

“Just Reggie. My husband, Reggie,” I answer, plopping bonelessly into a recliner in the living room.

“A hot day, isn’t it? I bet you could use a drink.”

That’s my safety question. If I answer with “Yes, I could use a lemonade” or use the word lemonade in some other way, that would be the code for needing help.

“It’s humid as heck. I’m fine. Everything is good. I really am alone with Reggie, and



I was about to cook dinner.”

“Excellent. I was calling to check on you.”

The sarcasm in my voice is sharp enough to peel the potatoes in the next room. “I’m peachy.”

“Understandable. That’s not the only reason I called. Mr. Delgado’s lawyer has filed a motion for discovery. The judge won’t hear about it until Monday, but our evidence will be presented to him. A source close to Delgado expects him to turn and inform on his higher-ups in the organization. Do you think that’s likely?”

“What? Me? How the hell should I know? I was sleeping with a fucking terrorist for a year and didn’t even know it!” I know I sound like a crazy bitch, but I can’t help it. That’s the most ludicrous thing I’ve ever heard—asking the Queen Dupee to assess the King Duper. “I’m sorry. Sorry for cursing at you.”

“You have a unique perspective. You know if Mr. Delgado is more likely to protect his own interests or those of others. That’s all. Nothing hinges on your comments. I simply think your insight might be valuable.”

I think back. I can hear Reggie running water and moving pans in the kitchen. I wish he were holding my hand instead, but I guess it is getting late. We need to eat.

Would Matteo take an opportunity to get out of jail? How do I know? No one likes prison! But... I close my eyes and envision the face I’ve tried to block.

Smooth. Suave. Perfectly gelled hair. Perfectly pressed suits. Dripping money and charm.

“If he informs, would there be a chance he could go into WITSEC? Or would he just

get a lighter sentence?”

Powell hesitates. “Well... That depends on the information he provides, of course.”

The conviction (and the distaste) grows within me. I used to think Matteo wanted to look good for me, but I realize now that he just plain wanted to look good. It was all about his image—down to the pretty blonde wife he picked to dress up and bejewel.

“If he can stay out of prison, I’m sure he’ll talk. Armani doesn’t make prison uniforms. \$300.00 bottles of cologne and \$200.00 shots of tequila aren’t going to come along with his weekly phone call, right?” I ask, the bitterness in my tone burning my throat.

“No. Not even the most lenient prisons offer that kind of luxury.”

Without warning, I see the next chapter of Matteo’s life. He’ll talk. He’ll go into hiding. Instead of cowering in fear, he’ll become a hot sugar baby to a wealthy older woman who can keep him safe and spoil him. He won’t mind, because any imperfections on her face or body will have been remediated with silicone and laser sculpting. I know love won’t matter. I’m proof of that.

I want Matteo behind bars, where he can’t hurt me or anyone else—but more importantly, I want the organization that terrorizes hundreds of people every year to collapse as quickly as possible. I want the demons they summon to be sent back to Hell, not that I can tell Agent Powell that.

Mainly, I want to be alive to see those things happen.

My voice is faint as the truth drags out of me, “I think he’ll talk if he can keep his kind of lifestyle.”

“The program won’t pay him a salary, Mrs. Gray. We may give the citizens under our protection some seed money, so to speak, but—”

“Matteo will use his looks and his charm to get what he wants. He’ll find someone to let him live lavishly, even if he has to work at it for a little while.” Or he’ll summon another demon, and make another sacrifice to get a brand-new life. Again, can’t tell them that. “There. That’s my ‘insight.’”

“Very useful. We’ll update you on Monday evening or Tuesday morning. Once we see you on Tuesday, we’ll begin discussing your time at the orientation center in D.C.”

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“Orientation center? This isn’t like you’re sending me off to college!”

“No, but there are a lot of things to be done. Routine exams by medical, dental, and psychiatric professionals, choosing a location for your new life, choosing a new last name, and getting your paperwork and identification documents. You’ll remain in the building at all times. Other families will also be there, but no one will see you or speak to you except your designated team.”

If I’m being helpful, how come I’m going to something that sounds eerily like prison? “How many days does that take?”

“Oh, not long. Six weeks, tops. Sometimes as few as four.”

“Six weeks!?” I screech.

Reggie is back at my side in a flash. “What’s wrong, honey?”

If I wasn’t so pissed, I’d love the affectionate, protective tone in his voice as he kneels next to me. “Wait, if Delgado is put in this program, would he be there at the same time?”

A split-second pause. “Of course not.”

Reggie taps my shoulder. “He’s lying,” he mouths.

My stomach drops. I recall what Reggie said about how he knows when to trust people. His gut has seen him through some pretty tense situations, so if he trusts it, I

decide I will too. “Did you lie to me?” I grip the phone hard, muscles rigid as I try to keep my shit together.

“No.”

Reggie shakes his head and holds up two fingers. Powell lied. Twice.

“Isn’t it conceivable,” I push, “that if I have to be there for six weeks, the end of my time might coincide with the beginning of his?”

The pause is longer. “Like I said, you’ll see no one but your team, so the other tenants are of no consequence.”

“Truth.” Reggie nods, eyes dark and dangerous.

Suddenly, this charade is too much. Six weeks in isolation (well, something like it) seems like too much. What will life without my family and friends be like? And if Matteo is walking around free—what’s to stop him from turning on me and then giving up more people to get away with my murder?

“Mrs. Gray?”

“I’m... I’m having some second thoughts about this.”

“I understand. It’s very frightening and overwhelming,” Powell’s voice is soft and soothing.

My head turns to Reggie. His face is neutral. I guess there’s no lie to be detected there. “If you let a murderer go, what’s to stop him from murdering me? Because he’ll know I’m the witness after this ‘discovery.’ And if he gives you lots of information, there’s no guarantee that he won’t have some in reserve and some

connections who are loyal to him. Loyal connections who might want to hurt me.” My fingers feel cold, and my head feels light. I stand up. I have to walk or I’ll faint. That doesn’t make sense. Doesn’t have to make sense.

“Well, we’ll keep you safe. We’ll check in on you frequently, and then after you’re settled, you can check in when you want, as long as you contact us at least once a year. We’ll be keeping tabs on Delgado, too. He won’t be near you.”

“But his old buddies might be.”

“Activities with ‘old buddies’ would get him removed from the program.”

But there are buddies you can’t see! Monsters right under your noses that you don’t even notice! I want to scream.

Reggie takes my cold hand in his, head shaking, free hand weaving back and forth.

A partial truth. Which part? I can’t really ask right now. “What about my family? They think I’m still hopping around Europe and New York City as the gay divorceé.”

“You can write to them, and they can write to you. You can call them on special lines that we’ve established. You won’t be allowed to keep each other’s letters. The U.S. Marshal Service will take them and dispose of them.”

Reggie nods firmly.

“What you might want to consider, Mrs. Gray—Therese, is what could happen if you decide to go this alone. There’s no guarantee of safety or monitoring unless you’re in the WITSEC program. Your fears about Delgado might prevent you from testifying—but the evidence on your flash drive is enough to ensure that Delgado is connected to the terrorist organization. What he does next may allow him to make a

deal, regardless of whether you're in the program or not. Now, doesn't it seem safer to be protected?"

I don't feel very safe with my government handlers right now. "I guess. Uh. Dinner is burning."

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“You sleep on it. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Good night.” I hang up and head back to the stove, bypassing Reggie.

“If you follow the rules, you’re going to be safe,” Reggie calls, trotting after me. He peels potatoes while I put more butter in the pan. It sizzles to nothing almost instantly, so I lower the heat, working on muscle memory after living in hotels for over a year. I get the steaks and the onions that Reggie sliced into the pan as Reggie reduces the potatoes to perfect slices in seconds.

“I can see you’re good with a knife, too. Sounds like that’s going to be a good thing,” I mumble, eyes stinging, and not just from the smoking butter.

“I don’t know a lot about the program, but I know they have a good record as long as you follow the rules and don’t get sloppy. The rules are restrictive.”

“And lonely,” I whisper.

“But... you can have family go with you. Family... or partners.”

“Uh-huh. But my parents have their own lives, and their community—for as small and tacky as it may appear to outsiders—is safe and supportive. At least to people who fit the mode. And I can’t ask my parents and siblings to put their lives on hold to go into hiding with me—probably forever.” I push the onions around as the smell of sizzling steak tries to lift my mood. Steaks remind me of Daddy’s payday around Christmas when the bonus money always bought us a steak dinner at Belvedere’s Steakhouse, the only “nice” restaurant in town. My tears hit the skillet, making the



grease pop and spit on my bare arms.

Reggie reaches past me and adjusts the heat for a moment. “I didn’t mean them. I meant... me.”

Let the steaks burn. I whip around to face him, nearly singeing off my arm hair on one side. “Excuse me?”

Reggie's thin but beautifully shaped lips are tight, his square chin jutting forward. “I’m offering. To go with you when you move into the program. That means I’ll go with you for orientation, too.”

There’s undercover, and then there’s insane. Reggie is insane.

I must be insane, too. I want to yell, “Yes!”

But I don’t. “You can’t do that.”

“I can. Or...” He licks those lips, and I remember his hot, heavy kisses, the way his tongue moved expertly against mine. “If you don’t want me in the program with you, but you just want me to meet you there, just to be where you are, I can do that. Don’t ask how I’d find you, but I would.” His hand brushes across my collarbone, then rests on his chest. “We are bound together. Apart or together.”

“I can’t let you do that. You have a life. We don’t know each other that well.”

Sure as fuck didn’t know Matteo, did I? And I lived with him for a lot longer, but I trust Reggie a lot more.

“I can go where I want. I know where I am supposed to be. I know where I want to be, Therese. With you.”

## Chapter Eleven

Therese stalls. I think she wants to say yes, but she's afraid to hurt me.

It's so refreshing. Sometimes, I haven't been treated as a person. I've never dated, but I have escorted women to events before, and it was clear that I was the accessory, something functional. Therese sees me as her equal, a person worth protecting.

To a golem, that's practically an aphrodisiac.

"That's so sweet. I... I would like that, Reggie, really. But I-I know that's not right. It's something you'd regret. It could put you in danger."

I snort. "That's normal for me."

"But you'd have to leave this place! I would hate for you to do that! Even if you're being serious—"

"I'm not much for jokes," I admit, suddenly struck by how much Therese and I tease and banter with each other, how much she makes me laugh. No one has ever done that—and it's not because I've known her longer and given her more of a chance—because I haven't.

"Well. Even if you're serious and I want to take you up on it, I can't. I won't trust myself not to make the same mistake twice. I'm not going to rush." She sets her chin—I never noticed how cute her chin is before—and nods once, crossing her arms.

I want to point out that this doesn't feel rushed to me. It feels like I've been waiting for her forever, and she's been coming to her own conclusions about what would really make her happy for the past year! We're finally ready to meet someone new. Someone special. Someone to go the distance with nothing hidden.

But it's like trying to convince a nervous skydiver that the jump window is now and only now. I'm airborne, and Therese's still back in the plane.

WE EAT DINNER WITHOUT talking about anything big. The tension diminishes the flavor of the steak, frozen green beans, and mashed potatoes, but it's still the best I've had.

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This girl can cook. With nothing but supermarket pre-packaged steak, butter, and a couple of spices, she made the meal memorable.

It's the company, you moron. You just like her. She likes you, too.

I don't know if I can change her mind before I lose my chance, but by God, I'm going to try.

Try. Without being overt about it, without pushing.

Well. This is hopeless, the voice inside my head moans.

In situations like this, where I can see what my charges cannot, I either use brute force to carry them out of danger or position myself as an immovable wall to shield them.

I never just let them do as they wish if I feel it is wrong. I don't like doing it now.

But maybe this is just selfishness—something I've never experienced in this form—or with whatever this strange new sensation is in my chest...

"I'll clear the dishes. You go... uh. You go rest. You look tired." I whisk the empty plates away and wait until I hear Therese walk out of the dining room before letting my head hang low with a long, heavy sigh.

It's hard to give someone space when you're obligated to be in the same house. It's also hard when she's the first woman you've ever called 'wife,' the first woman you

think might fit that job description—and she doesn't want to hurt you by accepting your offer, so she hurts you by rejecting it.

Damn. Is that what love is like? You feel wonderful and terrible all at once?

All the wounds I've had in the line of duty, on rescue missions, during war... I think the one that might kill me was given by a tiny little dude with a diaper and wings. All the bullets I've dodged, and Cupid's arrow is stuck inside, too deep to get out.

I scrub the cast iron so hard that the water slops out of the sink and all over my front. I'm covered in greasy water that smells like onions.

"Teri?" I call out as I rush through the rest of the dishes.

"What is it?" Her voice is alarmed.

"I'm going to use the shower, okay?"

MY HOT, MUSCULAR, DEVOTEDfake hubby is naked across the hall from me. There's a small half-bath in the master bedroom. It's not like I need to be in there. That bathroom shouldn't concern me at all. Nope. Nu-uh.

But all I can think about is stepping in there with him, running my hands down his wet body, soaping and lathering his sigil-covered skin. It's a fantasy of mine and has been ever since I saw an iconic hot tub scene in a teen romance movie. Funny, it was one thing Matteo wasn't interested in trying out. He was excited about anything and everything sexual, but not in the bathtub or shower.

I lay on the bed, my pussy giving needy tingles. How long since I had any kind of pleasure, whether delivered by myself or someone else? At least three months, probably closer to three and a half now. But Reggie sleeps in here, too. I can't touch

myself.

I want him to touch me.

Which is stupid in the extreme, I tell myself sternly. You just told the man you don't want to repeat any of your mistakes, and what do you think about doing? Rejecting his long-term offer but wanting him to bang you into the middle of next week? That's Matteo-thinking.

"God," I groan, hands over my eyes. I just realized why he didn't want to fool around in the shower. That was Hair Care Central. Matteo was more vain about his thick, lustrous black hair than any woman I've ever met. He had a fear of going bald. I should have told Powell to threaten to shave his head.

Speaking of shaving... I haven't. My hand briefly ghosts over my mound as I hear water running in the silent house. My nipples tighten as I play a dangerous game... a game that's completely safe in comparison. Knowing Reggie could walk in and see me touching myself makes me wetter than it should.

Matteo wanted everything smooth, shaved, and waxed. I didn't mind. He was perfectly "manscaped" in return. Now, I've regrown a thatch of whiskey-blonde curls. Would Reggie care?

I don't think so. I think Reggie would accept it as how I roll and move on. He might even like it.

Fuck, I want him to like how I look, how I taste, how I feel.

Would it be so bad to let him come with me? He could always leave later if he wanted... My finger slips under my pajama bottoms and parts my slick lower lips. My clit stands up, waiting for attention as images of Reggie stroking his cock in the

shower fill my mind. Maybe that's what he's doing.

Maybe he's imagining you on his big, hard cock, just like you're imagining him filling you up.

With a silent gasp, one finger intrudes, then two. The heel of my palm stays hard against my clit, rubbing in circles as I start to finger myself hard and fast, knowing I'm seconds away from exposure.

I have to finish, fast.

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SHE HAS ME SO WORKEDup and twisted around. My hand mimics the corkscrew of my imagination, soapy grip on my hard cock moving faster and faster, lip bitten hard to keep my dirty secret hidden. I shouldn't be jerking off, thinking about making love to Teri.

Matteo being good in bed was in her litany of reasons why she let herself follow blindly in his glamorous wake. But just from her descriptions, from little things she's mentioned and a few spare moments on my phone, I can tell what a selfish lover he must have been. Oh sure, he gave her pleasure and satisfaction because it stroked his ego, too. But I bet he always wanted his share. I bet he never gave unless he could take.

Right now, I imagine showing her that I can spoil her, that I don't need anything from her except the sound of her cries to explode in pleasure. I've never been pleased by another. I can't imagine the privilege of having a woman like Teri touching me, taking me inside of her. No, I'll be the one serving her, loving her, delighting her, feeling her hands stroke my smooth scalp as I give her exactly what she wants, what she should have.

My fist jerks faster and my breathing loses rhythm as I imagine my head buried between her thighs, letting her be on top as she rides my face into a happy vortex of pussy juice and breathless curses.

My cum spatters the shower wall with a single shout.

I hear an answering shout from across the hall. "Therese?" I choke, coming back to reality with a thud. I spray the showerhead at the wall to remove any evidence of my



lust and give myself the fastest scrub down on record, clay skin now extra supple and muscles more defined, plumped with the water I absorbed. With a muffled curse, I hurdle out of the tub and into a towel, shouldering open the door of the bedroom before I even assess the situation.

This woman makes me crazy.

And there she is on the bed, hand yanking up to her chest, flushed face and mussed hair telling me a story without her uttering a single word.

It wasn't a cry of pain.

It was a cry of pleasure.

"I... I was just—" Therese stammers guiltily, her eyes sweeping down my body and freezing at hip height.

I consider closing my towel more firmly. Instead, I leave it where it is, showing the crease where my thigh and towel meet. An inch to the side, and I'll show her that I'm already semi-hard for her again.

"I was—it's been a—" Teri tries to explain as she sits up, but her words won't come. I walk over to the switch on the wall, moving slowly, giving her plenty of time to stop me.

She doesn't.

"Can I try to change your mind about my earlier suggestion?" I ask, voice soft and tight. If I let myself speak louder, my voice will crack and the spell will be broken.

Therese's head nods jerkily—and I turn off the lights.

## Chapter Twelve

In the dark, with only the light from the bathroom across the hall to give us a shadowy hint of what to expect, Reggie drops his towel and climbs on the bed beside me.

“I was thinking about you,” he says in a husky voice that has my still-spasming pussy tightening again.

“I was thinking about you,” I confess. “This is confusing for me. I’m sorry. You don’t deserve—”

“Shhh. I’ll tell you what I want. I want to make you scream my name—for real. No faking it. No doing things you think I’ll like unless they turn you on and get you wet. I want to make love with you. But for tonight, I want to make sure you come until you fall asleep and have sweet, satiated dreams.”

As he talks, he prowls up my body until he holds himself over me, supported by one arm, the other hand cupping my chin firmly.

Reginald Gray is one commanding presence—and he’s kissing me while I nod.

“Take this off?” He tugs on my top, but there’s a question in his voice. I know I could tell him no.

I don’t want to. I hurry to obey, top flying to the floor as Reggie grips my stretchy cotton pajama bottoms in his fist and pulls them firmly to my knees. I kick them the rest of the way off, careful not to knee him.

My legs slip between his as the kissing deepens. “I’ve never done this. You tell me if it isn’t good?” His voice is a husk that strokes down my belly and kisses my clit,

making my toes curl just from his words.

“It’ll be amazing,” I whisper, and it’s a promise. A belief. Reggie makes me believe everything is going to be better than okay, everything is going to be better than I imagined.

Every inch of him is defined by muscle, the hard, thick kind, ridges and layers. A brick fortress of a body that makes me feel so safe and so hot at once...These muscles were built to last. And the hardness between his thighs—I don’t know who built that part or if he can change his clay-like form at will, but I wouldn’t change a thing. I trace it with my knee, trying to gauge if he’s longer or thicker than what I’m used to with my ex. The weight of him makes my insides feel hot and slippery. He’s thick, solid, and longer than my hand from the base of my palm to the tip of my middle finger.

“That’s not for tonight.”

“Why the hell not?” I burst out, making him laugh.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:20 am*

“I want to prove I’m not out for what I can get.” Reggie rolls onto his back.

“Am I going for a ride?” I ask, puzzled. How can I ride him if I can’t have that thick prime rib of a cock? I feel a confused pout forming and try to hide it.

“Yes. Not down there.” When I try to sink down to his cock, Reggie’s strong fists grip my forearms and pull me up.

He wants me on his face? I freeze. I’m fluffy and furry, and I just came. My pussy’s all slick and gooey. I don’t know how that’s going to go. Reggie doesn’t seem like the kind of guy who would dive into a sloppy pussy, even if he’d burst into a machine gun nest to take out the bad guys. “I already came,” I whisper, holding my ground, knees on the mattress next to his shoulder.

“Good. Come some more. Think I can’t make you?”

“I’m sure you can, but... I haven’t shaved there, either.”

“Why should you have to shave?”

“I... don’t know. Bikinis?”

“I’m not a beach, Teri.”

“I know, but... I thought you’d prefer it. A lot of guys do.”

“I prefer you. Get up here before I have to demonstrate some combat skills on you,”

he teases with a gentle stroke on my thigh.

“Can’t argue with that,” I whisper and hesitantly kneel, letting him arrange me over his face.

“I’m not a giraffe. Would you kindly bring my dessert closer?” he teases and presses down on my hips.

When I laugh at the giraffe comment, my guard drops, and Reggie drops me squarely onto his ravenous mouth. His tongue whips around my juicy folds, making me moan. The best part? Not just how good it instantly feels, but how much he likes it. He’s moaning, too, as if he’s starving and I’m the meal he’s been waiting for.

Reggie's tongue burrows into me, fighting against my clinging walls, which are squeezing around him as his upper lip and nose take turns worrying my clit. He alternates by pulling as much of me as he can into his mouth—clit, swollen lips, juicy insides—whatever he can wrap his mouth around. And then he sucks, his hands massaging my inner thighs and my ass cheeks. I jump in surprise and pleasure when his thumb massages my leaking juices into my tight asshole, teasing the opening with his thumb. He’s not going in, just making my nerve endings dance.

How does he know how to do this? How does he know that I’ll like it? “How are you so good at this?” I whimper, hands grabbing at my breasts, cupping them as I tug on my nipples.

His voice is muffled. “I just listen to your noises. If you like it, I do more to that spot. Nothing fancy.”

“I disagree.” I lock my hands together and push onto the wall at the head of the bed, bracing myself as an orgasm begins. I know it’s partially because I already gave myself one that I come so quickly the second time, but Reggie's excellent

attention has helped speed it up, too. Normally, it takes me much longer to come just from oral stimulation. I need penetration and pressure on my clit at the same time, something Matteo was good at providing—as long as it was from his own fingers or mine. I once suggested a toy, and he sulked for hours until I said I was only kidding.

Reggie brings me back to the present with hard fast circles just above my clit, three fingers rubbing in hard.

“Reggie. Oh, fuck, Reggie. Reg-gie!” The last cry is a broken gasp as I reach back and grab his cock, working my fist around it.

“Oh, fuck!” Reggie tosses his head back in pleasure. “Oh, fuck, Teri.” His broken pants and his feverish lapping at my pussy keep me riding the wave of small orgasms, building up to a bigger one. I feel powerful. Glamorous and powerful without a stitch of fancy lingerie or a four-star hotel and champagne.

“Do you really not want to give me this?” I whisper, still fisting his cock, feeling a coating of precum under my fingers.

“It’s not necessary.” His teeth are gritted, and his jaw is tight. “Love and intimacy aren’t something selfish.”

“I didn’t ask if you wanted it. I asked if you would give me this. Unselfishly.” I pout at him, and he wheezes out a little chuckle.

“Teri...”

“What if I want it?”

“Then you need to give me a second.”

“One.” I roll to my back, and Reggie scoots out from under me and zooms to the bathroom. He put the condoms in there, I guess. I hear rustling and tearing, but before I can even lie down all the way, he’s back, kissing his way from my ankle to the top of my thigh. “Oh no, you don’t,” I push his shoulder away when he tries to resume his worship of me. “It’s your turn.”

“I don’t need a turn.” Reggie shakes his head. “And I didn’t even know if I would need the protection, but I wanted you to be relaxed and at ease. I—

“Shhh. I’m very at ease with you. Good partners take turns. They tell the truth. I want a turn to have my pussy filled by your cock, and that’s the truth.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:20 am*

I am prepared to give him more attention (and God knows I want to), but Reggie is already spooning with me, only we're chest-to-chest. With a grunt that's probably not very sexy, I yank him on top.

"I want to be safe in your arms."

"I promise I'll keep you that way. Not just for this week, but for always, if you'll let me," Reggie whispers.

I don't know the right answer, so I simply kiss him, running my fingers over his slick, smooth head as my pussy throbs at the erotic taste of my own juices on his lips.

It took me a long time to feel comfortable saying "dirty" things to Matteo in bed, but Reggie and I've bypassed that. We're in the fast lane, maybe because we only have a little time together—unless I take him up on his offer of "always." Maybe that's why I'm so comfortable with him. It could be forever. "I'm going to suck my juices off your cock the next time," I moan, eyes closed, cheeks hot with a second-thought blush. What if that's not how he expects me to act?

"Oh? Not gift wrapping it?"

"M-maybe," I whisper, feeling his tip toy with my clit before lining up at my entrance.

The first shove stretches my opening, but it isn't a painful one, thanks to all the foreplay. The next fills me up so completely that I feel tears prick my eyes, and my pussy clamps down, unsure what to do when something so thick presses it past its



norm.

“You’re so tight, Teri. So warm and wet. Perfect.”

“You’re perfect.” I mean it. He’s the perfect size, girthy in the right spots, but not so long that I feel like I’m going to be turned inside out from his cock. I imagine taking him in my mouth, feeling him slide past the opening of my throat.

Yes, Matteo taught me so many things—but I never felt such agency in using them as I do now. “I’m going to take your cock, you know. All the way. Balls deep.”

“Therese, you’re going to kill me,” Reggie laughs and rocks in. I feel his sack slap my cheeks, and I moan.

“Not there.Here.” I trace my lips seductively with my tongue.

“That’s even more likely to make me combust,” he complains, but again, he laughs. He laughs and kisses me, tongues tangling. When he pulls back, he gives me a look I can’t decipher, something playful but sweet. “You feel safe with me. Or else you wouldn’t let me see this side of you. Hear how daring you are.”

I am feeling brave, but his definition of it makes me squirmy. I do trust him. I do feel safe with him. But it’s too fast. It’s too messy.

“You went back into your shell. Well, I think I can make you come out again.” Reggie bends his neck to capture my nipple, tugging and sucking as his hips begin steady, shallow thrusts, his thick cock already wedged inside. I don’t need him to do anything fancy like hammering all the way in and out. I want him to just move a little, hard and fast, rocking into me in that deep, hidden space that feels so good.

“Is that a good spot?” Reggie asks.

“Right there,” I squeeze down and gasp as I feel a sudden thick, curved hump cradle the spot inside of me that makes me want to explode. “How?”

“My body has limitations, but not too many. I can mold it to please you.” He thrusts again, and the new notch on his appendage feels as though it's petting my g-spot. When he moves faster, it feels as though he's licking it with soft, firm strokes. “My God... Reggie, doesn't that hurt you?”

“Not at all. It feels wonderful.” His square jaw presses into my neck, and I rub the wide expanse of his shoulders as his cock curls and twists against me. “I could do more, but I'm worried the condom would break.”

“More soon,” I moan, thighs starting their familiar overstimulated tremble that means my orgasm is going to erupt soon. “As long as it feels good for you.”

“You feel beyond good. Paradise. Wet, hot heaven,” he groans, picking up his pace.

I can't believe how wet we sound together. The slap and splosh sound would make me blush if my brain weren't busy spiraling into another dimension, muscles wrapped around his cock as if daring him to leave.

“You're going to suck the wrapper right off.” Reggie leans on my chest for a moment, his serious face creased into a smile.

“Maybe next time.” I wink. I can picture him pulling out and painting my breasts with his cum, and I can picture his tongue and mine racing to lick it off, meeting in the middle. A gush of wetness meets Reggie's next thrust, and I cross my legs over his back to keep him in, working my muscles against him.

I UNDERSTAND EVERY romance movie, every skin flick, every bawdy tale told by an Incubus, and every passionate declaration of love from vampires and Orcs.

I get it. I'm finally in this secret club of spiritual love and carnal pleasure that I always knew existed but never dreamed I could be a part of.

Teri's got the most delicious little slit in the universe, not just the taste, but the way it soaks me, the way it grips me. She's starving for me the way I am for her. It's like finding a cure for a disease you didn't even know you had. Teri is what I need. She makes me shed inhibitions like a snake losing old skin.

I almost say "I love you" as her pussy spasms on me and her face twists. Her hands dig into my neck as she gasps my name, a little chant of "Oh, Reggie, oh, Reggie, ohhh, Reggie!"

Her orgasm pops mine. I go a little caveman, grabbing a fistful of her hair so I can crush our mouths together. The taste of her juice is still on both our lips, and my obscene brain loves how I can taste pussy while her tongue is in my mouth, like her sweet, soaking pussy is kissing me back for all my hard work.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:20 am*

We collapse together, me on top, knowing I have to move, but hating it.

“Reggie? Wanna know a fantasy?”

“Men with gray skin and bald heads?” I laugh, easing out, careful to keep my weight off of her.

“Shower sex. Without worrying about his hair.”

“What?” I touch my scalp. “I don’t have any hair. I can’t grow it, either.”

“No, no. Not your hair. Matteo was more vain about his hair than I was about mine. Just... I know you just had a shower, but I’m a mess, so I was going to take one. W-want to come with me?”

I lean on my elbow and look down on her. “I believe I tried to explain that very thing to you earlier.”

Therese smiles and bites her lip like a nervous little girl. It’s killing me not to point out how contradictory it is to want to share these intimate things with me—and then have us part ways. My gut burns, and it has nothing to do with after-dinner reflux.

“I want to do everything with you for as long as you want me to.” I kiss her forehead and rise, heading to the bathroom. She follows me, but she doesn’t tell me that’s what she wants, too.

Don’t rush her.

But I want to rush. I've been waiting for almost a hundred years to have these feelings—and she is the one giving them to me. She's mine. My soul's creator, my soul's mate. How can I let her go?

Therese is fixing my heart and breaking it at the same time.

## Chapter Thirteen

It's dark, warm, and not the erotic explosion I thought it would be. It's better.

The warm water drips down my spine and shoulders as Reggie lifts me in his arms, keeping my back off the chilly wall. Holding me up like I'm feather light.

My lips fuse to his as I sink down and find him hard again. "Already?"

"I never have to go soft. I do, but it's easy enough to just rearrange mass to be exactly what pleases you."

"I want this to be natural. To please us both," I whisper.

"Oh, believe me. It is. There's nothing that pleases me more than being with you. My heart. My soul," he breathes out against my wet skin.

Matteo used to call me *memi amore*. *Mi vida*. Love. Life.

"Heart and soul" hits different. Our love was a lie. Matteo's life was a charade.

Reggie's supposed to be a being of myth, but he's the truest, realest person I've ever known—and I'm in love with that.

I sheath him inside of me, feeling his bare skin against mine.

Love is slow, steamy, and silent, with long, desperate kisses. When he erupts, it's on a down thrust, and his cum goes down the drain, not inside of me. I should be relieved, but I'm oddly disappointed.

"You need to sleep," Reggie whispers as he carries me through the final aftershocks of my orgasm, my body rubbery and splayed across his as he holds me up.

"You come with me?" I clutch him, a little child afraid of going into the dark, scary world alone.

It occurs to me that he's been that rock for so many children, so many escaping refugees who wouldn't be here if not for him.

How could I have lost my heart to expensive drinks and suits when I could lose my heart to a real hero instead?

"Of course I will. I'll be right by your side."

THERESE'S LIVING LIKE she might die soon—whether it's a slow death entombed in some hidden building in D.C. or a drive-by on her way to the courthouse, she's acting like she's got nothing left to lose—physically.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:20 am*

I can barely pry myself out of our bed to check the perimeter and the phones on Sunday afternoon. When I come back, she's waiting for me, gloriously naked and on all fours, a big grin on her face. "Bring me that." She crooks her finger at me, and my cock follows orders.

She wraps her mouth around me with a moan that makes my knees buckle, quickly getting me to full hardness before sliding her mouth down. I feel the narrowing of her warm suction turning into the tightness of her throat, and she's taking all of me.

The voice in the back of my head, the one usually buried in grumpy silence, pops out long enough to shout "Make her your wife for real, fool!" and then disappears in a haze of enthusiastic slurping. I let Teri drive, just happy to be her passenger.

When she's done wicked, wicked things to me and caused me to explode across her chin and her beautiful full breasts (with sweet peachy-pink nipples and soft globes that fall naturally to the sides), we shower again. That just leads to more naughty things, with me bending her over in the shower and licking her from behind while she clutches onto the sides of the tub, three of my fingers sliding into her tunnel hard and fast as she babbles in bliss.

Yes. It's a honeymoon. There are naps, sex, naps, and more sex.

It's Sunday night before either of us realizes that Powell hasn't called.

"WHAT IF HE'S DEAD?"

"I don't think he's dead. He probably just figures there's no reason to call." Reggie

paces behind me as I make a loop around the outside of our safe house. Even though it's hot and sticky tonight, I have to be outside—as long as my protector is by my side. I feel too cooped up in the house.

“Judges don't work on the weekends, do they?”

“Some do. But I'm sure that has nothing to do with why he didn't call. No news is good news. He probably just didn't want to stave off questions.”

I hold his hand in one of mine and swat mosquitoes away with the other. “How did you know he was lying? You couldn't see his face.”

Reggie's brow furrows as he ducks under a wall of honeysuckle behind the garage. “Pauses and intonation in his voice. Some of it was just logic. Some of it is instinct, being built as a divine protector, a supernatural defense. You're not the first person I've helped. You begin to sense when something is off.” His voice is pressed right against my ear.

“What?” Panic hitches my breathing, and I dig my nails into the back of his hand. He's my lifeline.

That's scary.

It's even scarier to think I'll be cutting it off as soon as I get a phone call.

“Let's go in the house.” He shepherds me in, a frown deepening the lines on his face.

“You're freaking me out.”

“There's no reason to freak out,” Reggie's voice is even as he locks the doors. “We're here so you can carry on the charade of starting a new life and remain protected until



you can testify or get placed in the WITSEC program. You have the right to refuse protection from them.”

I nod my head. “I know. Everything from the early days is a blur, but I remember feeling safer with Kim and her ‘contacts’ than with the different officials I met. There were so many different ones, I couldn’t keep them all straight. Why are you bringing it up?”

“Did you refuse protection from them at some earlier juncture, in favor of Kim ?”

As I retrieve a glass from the cabinet and fill it with ice water, I think. At various points, I’m pretty sure people offered to post a female officer in my room or told me there would be officers checking in. “I don’t remember outright refusing. I remember being relieved when I was finally given travel arrangements. They told me I could leave Rome and fly to London, then leave London and go to New York, and finally, come h-here.” I almost said home. That’s ridiculous. I haven’t felt like I was home in over a year. How can I feel at home in this place that has almost nothing in it of mine?

It has Reggie. He’s yours. You just have to let him know it. Not yours for the week. Yours for a lifetime of running and hiding away.

Hiding in plain sight? He’s used to that already.

“Someone put a tail on us. We know that. That means Delgado or someone higher up assigned them.”

“So? He had to at least suspect I was the informant.”

“They’ve stopped coming around because they saw you get married, just like you said you were. That backed up your story—or because the protections around us are

stronger than the dark forces they have access to. Remember that good will always be stronger than evil, especially when there are enough good people standing together.”

“Okay. Comforting.”

“Yes, on the supernatural front. But on the ‘mere human’ front, I’m afraid Delgado’s men will be back soon. After the motion for discovery passes, we’ll see them again.” Reggie grabs the last hard lemonade from the six-pack. “Split it? Or you can have the whole thing if you want.”

“You have it.” I melt. The little things he does...

“Therese, you told Powell you were having second thoughts.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:20 am*

“Well, it’s a scary idea, going into hiding, bad guys chasing you, maybe hurting your family.” I rub my temples. My mother and my father. My siblings.

Reggie drinks the lemonade in two gulps, throat working. I watch the muscles twitch, leading down to a thin white shirt that makes my mouth water. The humidity makes it cling to him like wet paper. I now know that body intimately—and I want to know it much better.

“You don’t have a tail right now. Of course, the feds probably have local authorities and their own detail keeping an eye on this house on routine patrols. Powell will check in tomorrow, and people will be over for ‘dinner,’ to start the whole WITSEC procedures in earnest.”

“I know, I know. I’m trying not to think about it.” Now I’m thinking about it, and I want to vomit.

“If you want to get away and get out before anyone can trace you... I’ll help you run. And hide. Powell said they have evidence from your flash drive. They have your recorded statements. You can run. We can run. We can go, now, tonight. I’ll be your witness protection program, Teri.”

For a split-second, it’s tempting. Run off to a new life, one that sounds adventurous and teeming with passion?

Been there, done that.

And even though I like Reggie a lot—I skip over the jumbled, messy part of my brain

that tried to substitute another L-word—I don't know how we could survive on our own forever. I know he's a golem, and I know he's got incredible powers, but his experience is in ferrying people to safety, helping them escape. The threats didn't follow them.

“You're wondering how I can be this cocky, huh? How I can think I'm enough to keep you safe?”

I know it's a waste of time to lie to him. “It's different than rescuing orphans and smuggling them out of Poland to New York, or out of London to the countryside, that's all.”

“I say this as a loving and patriotic American—the bigger the government agency, the bigger the shitshow. But Therese and Reggie Gray—we could be in Anchorage by tomorrow. We could have new names if you want.”

“Alaska? No! I don't want to live in Alaska.”

“That's perfect. The Feds will ask you where you want to live—”

“I already told them, I gave them a list of ten places—”

“And those are the places you will never see.” Reggie slams the bottle down and crashes into the chair across from mine. “They figure if you've told them you have a place in mind, a place you want, then you'll have mentioned it to at least one other person. They send you to places you have no desire to go to. Alaska could be perfect. It's harder to travel there, harder to survive there, and in some of the smaller suburbs, a stranger stands out. When newcomers arrived, we'd know it. For that matter—we could stay here and tell them to bugger off. We don't need them. This place is safer than any other town in the country—most of the time.”

“You’d put the people of your town in danger?”

Reggie laughs. “Delgado’s men would stand no chance against the magical community in this town. We seem quiet and simple because that’s what we choose. We have the element of surprise here—especially if we can stop the WITSEC handlers from swarming us. Teri, let’s leave for a month or two. We can go anywhere, love. But we should go now if you don’t want to spend the rest of your life in the WITSEC program. We’ll lose all of the people trailing you, bad or good. Then we’ll come back, come home. ”

“Reggie. That’s a nice offer. But it’s a big leap of faith. We don’t... we don’t know how we’d do long-term.”

“Then we’ll start short-term.” His eyes plead with me. “I don’t ask for big favors unless I can repay them, Therese.”

What favor? Me, living with him, under his care and protection, with his studly goodness and his sweet little ways? He’s doing me the favor. The fact that he thinks me saying yes is a gift gives me that powerful goddess feeling again, but I know better than to trust it outside of the bedroom.

The desire to say yes is so strong that I slam it down with the only weapon I’ve got. “No. Reggie, thank you, but no. I can’t run tonight. I need to talk to Powell again before I can make any decisions.” I try to smile with firm sweetness, like a patient parent, but Reggie is no little boy; he’s a grown-ass man.

That’s something else I realize. Matteo was a little boy playing with dangerous, expensive toys and carelessly using anything he wanted—including me.

Reggie gives me a dejected nod. “Just say the word. I’m going to call Jakob.”

“I’ll take a shower. The humidity is killing me.” I disappear, mainly to give him privacy. If he learns anything about my case or Estrada, I know he’ll tell me. I trust him.

You are so stupid, Therese LaFontaine Delgado Gray. I call myself my full name and then some. You’re letting mistakes with a bad man ruin something with a good man, and you both know it!

“HOW ARE YOU HOLDINGup, Reginald?”

“Incredible.” I am flying with joy one second, and miserable the next. Incredible is the word. I wouldn’t have believed my life could change so much in a few days.

“You two hit it off?”

“More than that. Jakob... I have a soul. I felt it burst to life, struggle slowly, bloom, then explode into being.”

“I’m so happy for you, Reggie. Mazel Tov! But... Please be careful. I spoke to Ardy today. The FBI detail has asked for local police cooperation, and he’s passed on what they’ve told him, even though he’s not supposed to.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:20 am*

“Good man,” I say, referring to Ardy Walsh, the Pooka police officer in Pine Ridge, the one paranormal member of the tiny force. He usually helps cover up supernatural disasters and crimes, but now he can be our mole. “What’s the news?”

“Estrada’s closest associates are worried that Delgado will talk to save his own skin. The problem is that Delgado’s under twenty-four-hour surveillance now that he’s in custody, and it seems Estrada doesn’t have an in at the facility... yet. If he gets one, it won’t surprise me if Matteo becomes very suicidal overnight.”

“Hell.”

“Precisely.”

I don’t say anything for a moment. This means they’ll be looking for another way to get to Delgado or to keep him from turning state’s evidence. My stomach squirms. I’m sure there’s some leverage somewhere. Delgado’s mother. A sister.

A wife.

An ex-wife, I correct myself silently.

“You there?”

“Thinking. Therese might not want to go through with this now that they’ve got Delgado’s files. But... Say we wanted to relocate.”

“We?”

“She. But I’d help her. You still have friends in Anchorage?”

“One—and he still owes me a few favors.”

Just like Minegold. Too much of a gentleman to call in his marker, but he’d help me.

Suddenly, even though I’d fly to the ends of the earth with Teri, my heart balks at leaving Pine Ridge, the closest thing I have to home and family. The place where I learned to love, where I met my love, where I received my soul, and my soulmate.

“Well, uh... Good to know. I’ll keep you posted.”

I wish I could just take Therese and run, grab her, and bundle her into a waiting plane with or without her permission. But then, I’d be the villain. I don’t want to be the bad guy. She’s had enough of that. I want to be the man she truly falls in love with, the man who catches her when she lets herself go, lets herself love and trust again. I want that more than anything, even if it takes a long time. Is that love?

Or just selfishness?

The agent who played the minister at our “wedding” said something about love being patient, love being kind, and love bearing all things. He sounded pretty on point.

I’m still not used to it. I rest my head on my hands, wishing I could fast forward a few weeks and see how all of this turns out.

My insides are unsettled. I have the urge to hide away again, to escape the world that I don’t belong in, to disappear into myself, retreat where nothing can hurt me, back into the impenetrable fortress I was made to be. But for the first time, I have the urge to bring someone with me.

Chapter Fourteen



A Sunday night storm breaks the humidity apart, and I open the curtains on Monday to a cool blue sky and a white-yellow sun shining down on Pine Ridge. There's still no word from Powell, so Reggie suggests he keep his half of the cover story and work on the house. He shows me his tool kit, which is basically a cross between James Bond's luggage and my dad's old workbench stuffed into an army duffle bag that must be seventy years old.

I jump a little when I see guns and knives, even though I know he is my bodyguard. That must equal some sort of weaponry, right?

Reggie takes my hand firmly. It's the first time we've touched since last night. "The sight upsets you, of course, after what you saw with Matteo. You never have to fear these as long as I'm holding them. They have only ever been used to defend the defenseless." I notice that most of them look like older models, although they all appear well cared for. He picks up one shiny pistol, which probably used to be black and is now a mottled silvery gray. "An old Enfield. This was the British Army's standard service pistol... You know, I believe this was Artie's at one point. He passed it on to one of the older boys we rescued, a boy almost old enough to fight in the war himself, but... But I am happy to think we got him to New York with his little sisters."

"He gave up his service pistol?"

"It made that young man feel like he would have a way to save his little sisters if we were discovered. And your grandfather never needed a gun as long as he had me around to watch over him."

That shouldn't be sexy, but it is. The selflessness of this man—He's not a man. He's clay and magic.

Felt like a man last night. Talks and acts with more honor and self-sacrifice than most

men I've ever known.

Reggie mistakes my silent staring for unease. "It's not a bad thing to have some kind of protection in these situations. If you don't know how to defend yourself, it's a good time to start learning."

I can picture Reggie standing behind me, body pressed close to mine, helping me aim, his thick chest muscles hugging my back and his thick cock brushing my—

You will get nothing done, Teri. Nothing but bending over and grabbing your ankles like it's shower time sex round two. You let yourself fall back in bed with this man one more time, and you'll fall in love—and there is no way you'll ever climb out.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:20 am*

“M-maybe this afternoon.”

THAT AFTERNOON, REGGIE comes in and puts down a wrench and some rags as I walk in endless loops in the living room, the television on low, too distracted to read or think. What I really want to do is watch him upgrade the plumbing—not that I’m fascinated by pipes, I just want to watch him. I’ve heard him banging away throughout the house, and I’m sure the neighbors have, too—and that’s saying something, considering they’re six feet under. He takes one look at me and his gray face falls, wide planes of his cheeks seeming to flatten in dismay. “No call from your handler?”

“Not a peep. I’m going to call him.” I pick up the phone, sigh, and put it down. “Later. No news is good news, right?”

Reggie doesn’t answer. Instead, he holds out a hand again, and I take it, lacing my fingers through his and feeling instantly lighter and warmer. “Let’s go out to lunch today. You’re pacing a hole in the carpet.”

“Sounds good. There was a restaurant by the grocery store, that Italian place?”

“Tiramisu, yes, I saw that. It’s a new place; it opens in a few weeks. There are other places in town to go—The River House serves good food from all around the world, mainly Americana. Jade Forest has Chinese.” Reggie kneads my hand in his, and I ease deeper into his arms, looking up at the smooth head, the wide square jaw, and those eyes... Those eyes are different than they were when I looked into them when we exchanged vows at our sham wedding.

“I want to go somewhere alone with you, where everyone won’t come up and ask questions. Keeping a low profile is better, right?” I whisper.

“There’s several of the nicer chain restaurants out of town. Italian-American cuisine with endless refills on appetizers?” he hints.

“My favorite.”

“Mine, too! Actually, that’s not entirely true. I love everything. My taste buds have been asleep for years, but now that I’m with you... I don’t know. Everything seems to have woken up.”

I manage a giggle as I feel his cock waking up as I sway against him. I pull back and beam at him. “Ditto. I mean, not about food. I’ve always been the adventurous eater in the family. Oh, gosh, eating in Europe! I tried so many new things! I— Well, Belvedere’s Steakhouse is the height of fine dining back in myhometown. Let’s go.” I retrieve the remote and switch off the news.

“Anything about you-know-who?” Reggie asks tactfully.

“Honestly, I couldn’t tell you. I’ve been trying to listen to the news and not understanding a word of it. My brain has been in a fog, but I didn’t hear the names Estrada or Delgado, so I guess that’s good.” My stomach growls. “Or maybe I was too hungry to notice.”

“Then let’s eat out right now.”

Ohhh, bad, bad brain. I can picture him eating out, buried between my legs, strong hands gripping my thighs as I practically crawl the walls.

“Yes, let me get my purse,” I squeak, trying to outrun my impure thoughts.

“You mentioned your dining adventures in Europe—how many countries were you in?”

“Oh, I don’t know... At least ten,” I muse, trying to think. “Italy, France, Belgium, Spain, Germany, England—”

Reggie cuts me off, and as polite as he is, that really gets my attention. “Then you know—there are so many big cities to get lost in, Teri. People who work as freelancers or work remotely don’t have to stay in one place. Plumbers are in demand everywhere. They don’t always have to use their real names, either. Professional names or nicknames could be used, and money could go straight into a business account under the name of the company. I could be a handyman in London or a welder in Brussels. Tiny towns, sprawling cities...” His voice fades away.

I know what he’s thinking. Now I’m thinking it, too. Reggie and I, traveling the country, maybe even the world, setting up a business account for my computer freelance jobs, living off handyman money paid in cash for odd jobs whenever money gets tight.

From first-class and caviar to tacos and tents.

From a murderer who wanted you as eye candy to a man who would sacrifice everything to be with you and keep you safe.

I lean on Reggie's shoulder and trace the sacred markings on his skin through his taut white shirt. “It’s a nice offer. You should make it to someone else,” I murmur. “Someone who could enjoy all that with you, someone who won’t always be looking over her shoulder.”

Before I can breathe, Reggie turns, pushing me against the wall, hands cupping my chin as he pulls it up. “Therese, I don’t want anyone else. I’ve never felt this way, and

my instincts are never wrong!” he hisses, pain tightening his features.

I want to tell him I’ve felt it before—this rush of attraction, this desire to listen to impulses—but that isn’t strictly true. I’ve never felt it coupled with such security. My mouth moves, but then it’s covered by Reggie’s larger one, his tongue plundering my words, kissing me to silence before he speaks again.

“I have never wanted another woman, I want you. I will look over your shoulder. No, better, I will stand between you and danger, as I have always done for your family. Your living shield, mein neshama, only now, I am truly alive because of you.”

It’s been hours since we made love, but it feels like days. My hands scratch frantically at his long t-shirt, trying to get it out of the way of his zipper. Reggie easily solves that problem by yanking my shorts off, and miraculously, his clothes follow.

Even with all of Matteo’s sex god skills, this position never happened, but suddenly it does. My back is against the wall, and my hips are spread around his waist. His hard, bare cock slips straight into my hungry slit and makes me curse as I slide down. Impaled on him, I expect to be carried to the couch or the bed. Even the floor. That doesn’t happen.

Reggie has a manic glint in his eyes, something too bright and raw to look away from. We don’t even talk, just pound into each other. The only sound is our heavy breathing and the wet slapping of skin on skin as he hammers me like some beautiful machine.

I want to tell him that he can’t fuck me into saying yes. That good sex and impressive positions won’t change my mind.

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They won't. But that hungry, desperate look in his eye might. The half sob as he tries to pull out and I yank him in deeper, using his shoulders for leverage, that might do it.

"I didn't mean to love you," he rasps into my sweaty neck as we pull apart. My toes hit the carpet, and it feels like I'm returning to Earth after spending ten minutes on some other private, primitive planet ruled by passion.

My chest burns. My thighs burn. I'm a sticky mess as I stumble away, shaking my head in confusion. Love me? He can't. You can't fall in love in three days.

Although I did it over a drunken weekend in Miami...

My feet freeze on the carpet, even though our mingled juices are dripping down my thighs and hurrying toward my calves.

Don't. Don't walk away. Everybody walks away from him, or he forces himself to hide from them.

He loves me because I'm different. And damn it...

I find Reggie sinking down to the carpet, looking winded and empty-eyed. "I didn't mean to love you back."

THE ITALIAN LUNCH IS good, and the conversation flows. It's because we're playing roles in public, Reggie and Therese.

"Tell me about Alaska, honey," Therese says, twirling pasta artfully through a cream

sauce and spearing a shrimp.

“I have a friend who has a friend out near Fort Richardson—although now it’s a joint base, Elmendorf-Richardson. I hear a lot of soldiers go there for cold-weather training, but I have been in Poland when there was snow three feet thick, in Oslo during blizzards.”

Therese’s fingertip traces over my knuckles as her eyes stare into mine. Just the touch of bare skin on skin reminds me of our wild sexual sprint. What if I got her pregnant?

It only takes once, isn’t that what they say in sex ed? Not that I was ever in that class, but I know they say that.

I’m messing up everything.

Therese doesn’t seem to think so. Playing the part of a woman who likes her second husband much better than the first, she flutters her lashes at me. “My ex used to seem so adventurous to me. Your travels are much more impressive.”

“A lot more painful, perhaps.” I don’t want to think about the things I have done and seen, the people I have saved, the people I have gladly ended while reveling in the fact that I had no soul to corrupt, so that blood can be on my hands and there will be less of it on the hands of desperate women and children, less on good men like Artie. My eyes stay on my plate.

I have a soul now.

Was the absence of one a help or hindrance during a war?

Her fingers etch along the lines in my skin, invisible to the naked eye, and yet she seems to know just how to touch each and every one, waking up the magic in me just



like she snatched a soul from the ether and gave it to me... Or maybe she gave me half of her own?

I lift her hand to my lips and kiss the pale knuckles.

I would still gladly kill to protect this woman. Stain my hands with gore if she could remain untouched and safe.

“Whatcha thinkin’?” Therese sips coke through a straw in a way that makes my cock twitch.

“You spellbind me,” I whisper, enchanted just by looking at her, by feeling her touch on my sigils as her hand runs farther up my arm.

She coughs softly, eyes widening.

Right. We’re not in Pine Ridge, we’re miles out of town up by the mall. No magic here, and her touch has mine going haywire. I have to pull my Mr. Normal Guy Act back together. “Uh, I’m thinking... That I’m so glad I’m settled down, baby. Even if our careers move us around a lot, we’ll always be together. To me, that’s all that really matters. Home is where the heart is.” I finally have one that works.

“Oh, Reggie. Stop.” She runs a knuckle under each eye, catching the tears that form. “That’s so sweet.”

“Aren’t I supposed to be sweet to you? Love, honor, respect, and cherish. I heard him say it during the ceremony,” I wink, catching her hand in mine before she can wake up any other powers I was unaware of. Right now, I feel drunk—and tingly all over.

“Funny how I believe you when you say it. My ex was—oop. What’s that?” Therese looks to the side of the booth and grabs her purse. “The phone is ringing.” She holds

up the small black one from Agent Powell as it buzzes softly.

“Well, tell whoever it is that we’re enjoying our wonderful honeymoon lunch and we’ll call them back.” I look around, then whisper, “If it’s urgent, take it in the ladies’ room.”

Therese nods and rises. I follow her, slipping into the alcove where the restrooms are located, standing guard.

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“HELLO, MRS. GRAY. HOW are you?”

“Fine. Out to lunch with Reggie.”

“Wonderful, wonderful. Where are you at? Any special beverage you're drinking?”

“A tall, icy cola. I’m in the ladies’ room and it’s empty.” I lock the door behind me, hoping no one will have an emergency in the next five minutes.

Powell sighs. “Well, it’s been a busy morning. Delgado’s lawyer talked to him immediately after viewing the financial documents from his hard drive. We didn’t say where we obtained them, but he’ll eventually ask.”

“Why didn’t he ask already?”

“When it’s that bad, you don’t take the time to ask, you just call your client. Which he did. He suggested Delgado take a deal, according to our prosecutor. Delgado refused.”

I guess I’m not surprised. I wouldn’t want to piss off someone like Estrada.

“But give us time to talk to him. We’re going to speak to him tomorrow morning and see what information Mr. Delgado might offer in exchange for a lighter sentence—or even a chance to start over. He’s a bright young man, isn’t he?”

I blink. I used to brag about my Ivy League hubby with his Stanford degree, but the pleasant tone Powell uses is just too much for me. It’s almost admiring. I wish Reggie

could hear this call to tell me if there's something rotten in Powell's inflection.

"He killed a man. He helps people terrorize and kill people!" I whisper-yelp. He's in league with literal demons—not that you'd understand that.

"Comparatively speaking, Mr. Delgado's involvement is minimal to say... his godfather's. As it stands, expect us tomorrow evening unless Delgado changes his mind and either plea bargains or counters it with his own offer."

"What if he does?"

"Then we'll pick you up on Friday. That's the first opening we have at the WITSEC facility. And we'll deposit fifteen thousand into your account after a few papers are signed. That's the Anti-Terrorism Task Force's reward for information leading to the arrest of certain members of the RACAF organization."

"Goody."

"We'll call tomorrow morning."

"You said that you'd call yesterday."

"Did I? I'm so sorry, Mrs. Gray, but sometimes personal contact isn't necessary, especially if nothing has changed for you. It can be busy, even during the weekend. You can always phone us back if you have questions. Now, don't worry. Either way, you're going to be completely taken care of. Have a nice cold dessert with Mr. Gray."

Powell hangs up, and I unlock the door. I couldn't eat another bite right now if he paid me fifteenmilliondollars! Something about Powell's smarmy voice leaves me cold, something he said tickles my subconscious, and his news leaves me unsettled.

“What is it?” Reggie puts his arm around me as soon as I exit.

“The lawyer advised Matteo to take a plea. He didn’t.”

“They won’t stop there. They need to sweeten it. Give them a few days.”

I look up at Reggie's face, seeing the lines deepen as he frowns.

“He said they might offer Matteo a chance to start over. Said he’s a ‘bright young man.’ It was strange. Almost like he admired him. He even said that Matteo’s crimes were small—comparatively speaking.”

Reggie shakes his head. “Wish I could have heard him. That’s an odd thing to say, but then again, Powell could be playing up the good cop role. You know, the one where he tries to convince Delgado that it’s not so bad, that he can start over and get away from all of the stuff in his past.

“But why say that to me? Even if he was playing the good cop, that’s my ex-husband. I saw him murder someone. There is no universe where he gets to ‘start over’ like it never happened.”

“I have no idea.”

“Oh, and I called him out on not phoning when he said, and he brushed me off! He was like, ‘I’m busy, even on the weekends. Everyone can’t have personal attention.’”

Reggie's scowl threatens to crack his face in half. “That’s an odd way to put it. I wish I could have heard him.”

“I wished the same thing.”

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“Hmm. Well, we’ll know more tomorrow. How’s your stomach?”

I rub my knotted midriff. “How did you know? Queasy.”

“Let’s pay and go walk around someplace air-conditioned. The humidity is coming back.”

“We could go home.” I lean into his strong, long torso and feel safe, really safe. Reggie won’t let anything happen to me if he can help it. Right now, I’m not so sure about Powell. If Delgado takes a plea... will they even need me? No. So what reason would they have to keep me safe? I don’t have to go to trial.

“I feel like something is off,” I say in an undertone as we gather our things.

Reggie runs a hand through his hair. “A lot of these guys seem off. They don’t share more than they have to, and they get a hard-on from holding all the cards. You know what we need? A hard lemonade.”

“Mm. We’re out, though.”

“There’s a Giant-Mart across from the mall. We’ll pick up another six-pack.” Reggie drops a few twenties on the table to pay for our meal and steers me out the door into the blindingly hot afternoon.

My skin immediately springs leaks, sweat popping from my pores. I must look horrible.

“We can get some spices, too. What do you want for dinner? Want to go out or stay in?”

Reggie's words give me such a sweet feeling of comfort. The way he smiles down at me reassuringly as we talk about the little things makes me feel grounded—but not trapped in stereotypes and expectations like I was growing up. I don't feel like I'm trapped in some fake poor girl-turned-princess fantasy, either. I hug him tighter to my side, sweat be damned.

“Let's stay in. You never finished telling me about all the places you went.”

“I was in Helsinki. It was beautiful, treacherous, fun, friendly, and terrifying. And that was just at the airport.” He winks, and I laugh. “Stop that.” He kisses my head. “You shouldn't be so beautiful in public. We'll get arrested for public indecency.”

“Naughty.”

“You have no idea.”

“But I'd like to.”

We end our mercifully short walk across the parking lot and step into the shadow of the huge superstore. We both grab for a cart at the same time, ending our banter as our rings click. He's wearing my grandfather's, and I'm wearing my old wedding ring. It still fits, although it's a little bit looser these days. Stress doesn't do good things for my appetite. I think our steak dinner was the first decent meal I've had in weeks. “Looks good on you,” I murmur, and I mean it.

Reggie stares at my hand as we push through the squeaking second set of automatic doors into a blast of frigid air. “I wouldn't have gotten you anything that fancy. Maybe I'm too simple.” His eyes settle on the diamond-studded band.

“When we’re clear of all this, I’m hocking it. Selling it online. Tossing it in the ocean, I don’t care. This and my engagement ring. I’d rather have one from you.”

The cart jerks to a halt. I stumble and hit my ribs on the handle, giving Reggie a dirty look. “Need your brakes checked, pal?”

“You said we. When we’re clear.”

Shit. I did, didn’t I? I put on a falsely light voice. “Of course, silly. You’re my hubby. Not getting out of it so easily!”

“Of course not.” Reggie gives me a tight smile, and I feel like I’ve kicked an entire box of kittens. The pain in my stomach stabs me again. “Excuse me a minute?” I gesture to the restrooms near the front of the store. “I’ll be a couple of minutes. Anxiety messes me up,” I add in an embarrassed mumble.

“I’ll be right nearby.”

“Okay. Ooh! But grab the lemonade. It looks like they’re almost out.” I point to the end cap a few rows away where summery drinks and mixers are running low.

“Be right back.”

I WAS RIGHT BACK. I never took my eyes off the door. Fortunately, these superstores carry everything, and they have it everywhere. There was a rack of earrings, necklaces, and rings in shiny blue velveteen boxes just waiting to lure me in directly across from the restrooms.

One ring caught my eye. It was forty dollars and studded with blue topaz chips. It was silver, not gold, but it was bright and shining, like a summer sky.



It reminded me of Therese.

Humidity would always remind me of Therese.

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Steaks and shrimp would remind me of Therese.

Sex against walls and crammed in showers would remind me of Therese.

Drinking lemonade would always remind me of Therese. It was odd that her handler had chosen that to be her distress word. I guess he knew a little something about her habits.

I felt like I was learning something about her habits, too.

Even her bathroom habits.

I looked at my phone. Ten minutes had passed, but she hadn't come out.

No one had gone in or out.

Should I worry? I waited for my usual warning senses to kick in and tell me if something was wrong. I've always known when something was wrong, just a quiet sense, a stubborn sensation in my gut.

There's nothing, now.

Nothing at all.

Because... Because are you different now? Did you trade your abilities for her love?  
For your soul?

God, Reginald, what if that's why golems are made without these cumbersome, beautiful, forbidden things like souls to mate and hearts to love? What if, because of her love, you're broken now?

Panic sets in, hard and fast. Twelve minutes.

Maybe the shrimp was bad.

Maybe something else was bad.

Sluggishly, as if I were fighting something unseen cloaking me, muting me, my gut started singing the Fight or Flight song, and when it comes to Teri, I'll always choose fight. "Excuse me!" I hammered on the door of the ladies' room. No answer. I pounded again and pushed into the women's restroom without waiting to hear a reply.

The first sight that greeted me was a door at the end of the narrow corridor separating the tiled wall from the row of stalls. It was cracked open, letting a sliver of sunlight battle the flickering fluorescent bulbs.

"No." I choked on the word. An exit I hadn't covered. Hadn't known about. Maybe it was just a sunny room? Could she still be in the building? Gotten turned around and taken the wrong door?

Behind me, aggravated, high-pitched noises were squeaking and shouting, protesting the fact that a man had barged into an empty women's room.

I didn't care. I ran straight toward the door at the end of the hall. "Therese!"

Nothing. "Teri!"

"Listen, sir!" A voice behind me earned a shove backward, and then I burst through

the door—into blinding sunlight.

It led to the outside, to the side parking lot.

The bodyguard's worst nightmare—his charge missing, gone, because he failed to check the perimeter, he let her out of his sight.

“Holy fuck.”

Someone had taken Therese.

## Chapter Fifteen

The last thing I recalled was a voice saying, “Don't move and you won't get hurt.”

Something hard stabbed into my hip as I washed my hands in the store's steel and sterile bathroom that smelled like bleach.

Then the light changed, it got hotter, and I found myself leaning heavily on someone's arm. I tried to call for Reggie, but all I could do was whimper and grunt.

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*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:20 am*

But that's okay, I told myself, because he's magical. Mystical. Bound to my family.

He'll protect me. Find me. Measly little humans can't stop him.

IT WAS ALL A DREAM. All of it.

I know, because I can smell the stale cigarette smell that always lingers and feel the thin, scratchy blanket under my cheek.

I'm in a hotel room. Where else would I be? I've lived in hotels for months.

I blink away the bad dream, holding still as I wonder how much champagne Matteo and I poured into each other last night. My jaw hurts, and it feels like I've been munching on cotton.

Matteo. Even though I know now that it was all a dream, as I struggle to sit up, I'm not... happy. I realize that I need more. That strange hangover dream about agents and murders and a hero named Reggie has shown me how I want to live my life.

I struggle to make Matteo a part of it, even though I remind myself that he's not really the villain. It was a bad dream. A nightmare.

Wasn't it?

I try to call to Matteo, but my mouth won't open. My eyes are fuzzy, and my wrists hurt.

“She’s awake. Put Estrada on.”

“Shhh! Fuckwad! Don’t say his name.”

“Like she’s going to say anything.”

A warm piece of plastic is shoved next to my head, and the fabric that wedged my jaws open and rendered me unable to talk is ripped out of my mouth.

A voice crackles too loudly in my ear. The shout of a phone’s speaker makes me jump. “Therese? This is a friend of Matteo’s.”

The voice catches me off guard. It’s pleasant and lilting, the voice of an older man with a rich accent that rolls. Columbian? Mexican? I don’t know.

I know now that my nightmare was real, and this is the sequel. Part One: Therese’s Marriage is a Sham. This is Part Two: Therese is the Victim.

“Can you talk, my dear?”

I’m too stunned. Who the hell would call me “my dear” after tying me up? Well, he’s on the phone, so I assume that he didn’t tie me up himself, but he’s responsible for it!

Hey, that was pretty logical for someone who can’t tell if she’s in a dream or not. Good brain.

A rough hand smacks my cheek lightly, at just the right angle to sting.

“Answer him!”

“I’m here!” I croak. I’m so glad I made it to the bathroom before this all happened.

Even so, the urge to vomit or void is overtaking me. “I need to sit up. I’m serious. I don’t feel—”

“It’s fine, my dear. A little side effect, that’s all. You’ll be fine in a few hours. Now, this ugly mess of Matteo’s... It must be dealt with. You know that the police have pinned nasty things on him.”

What am I supposed to say to that? I don’t want to admit my role in all of this—but I’m guessing they already know. How much do they know, that’s the question. I pick a safe answer. “I heard.”

“Because of you.” The pleasant voice hardens.

“Not because of me. He did it. I just saw it.” I bite my lip. I should stop talking. Reggie would tell me to—

Oh my God. Reggie. Things make more sense as whatever they gave me starts to fade. If they got me, they got to me through Reggie. There is no way they could have grabbed me without incapacitating him.

A bomb couldn’t stop him. What did they do? How could they stop him? I picture the worst—clay slabs cut into pieces. Little bits of my lover, the only man I think I’ve ever truly loved, crumbled up like pebbles, desperately trying to piece himself together to rescue me.

I blink and realize that there is a piece of gauze or mesh tied over my eyes. I can see fuzzy shapes and outlines, but no more. My tears are choked by this stretchy nylon trap. “What did you do to him?” I demand. “Is he still alive?”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:21 am*

“Matteo? Yes, and I wish to keep him that way as long as he continues to prove his loyalty.”

Tears work their way down to my lips. He didn’t answer about Reggie. He didn’t know who I meant.

Estrada continues, “Now, I have a very good friend at the Marshals Service.”

“Powell,” I spit. I need to ask about Reggie, but I need to pay attention. If I make it out of this, I want every possible detail in my mind to give back to the right people—the safe people. Maybe Powell isn’t one of them.

“No, no, not him. Agent Powell is very trustworthy—just very stupid. Very talkative. He’s a senior agent making a big bust. It’s easy to get him to open his fat piggy mouth, and my very good friend did just that. Whatever Powell knows, I know—thanks to his ego and my friend’s excellent memory. You should listen now, my dear. Boys? Make sure she listens.”

Cold, sharp metal digs into the soft spot below my ear where my throat begins. “Don’t talk, or I’ll make another hole for your voice to go through.”

The sinister threat seals my lips. At this close range, I can see under the mesh, see a hand with a bloody pentagram on the back of it. Is it carved? Tattooed? I don’t know, but my heart sinks. This man is either trying to prove he’s tough stuff, or he really is in league with the devil, and if that’s the case...

I swallow, thinking about Reggie, but the goon holding me chuckles in a satisfied



way, digging the edge of the knife in a little more, clearly believing my swallow is one of fright, not tears.

It's both.

"She's listening, jefe."

"Good. Now, then, Therese. You already handed over a bunch of recorded evidence implicating my godson. So killing you won't help me. And killing Matteo is a waste. He hasn't talked...yet. He's loyal. A good boy. Besides, I paid for that fancy education of his, and I'd hate to waste it. And he knows I'd have him killed, which is also an excellent encouragement for silence. But... if someone manages to place him in hiding, he may feel that it's safe to open up, and at that point... Well. He's not blood kin. But it'll be much harder for me to accomplish my task, not to mention the delays it will bring to my business. He's very useful and his work is excellent." Estrada clucks his tongue like his coffee is cold, not like he's fretting about rearranging his business to murder a witness. "Are you paying attention, Therese?"

A pinch of metal at my throat, and I gasp in shock and pain. "Yes, I'm here!" I hiss.

"Good. Here's how we can fix this little matter. I want you to tell the police you made the whole story up. You discovered Matteo was cheating on you, and in a fit of jealousy, you decided to concoct an elaborate lie. You may be fined for wasting police time, or even jailed, but I'm sure that a few years behind bars is better than a permanent location in a box, isn't it, dear?"

The knife point leaves my skin. I guess they trust me to speak and not scream. "I guess so." I say as little as possible.

"So, you'll tell them it was all a lie?"

“Yes. But not until I talk to Reggie.”

“Reggie?”

“Reginald Gray. An old family friend, the man who was with me. My husband.” My husband. Yes. The word leaves my lips with the desperation and ring of truth, the kind of truth you feel in your soul. “My soulmate,” I add, for me, not for them.

“Oh. So that was real. You know, I thought it might be. Matteo is very handsome, but he can be very impulsive and immature. He tires of women quickly, and smart women tire of him. And you’re a smart girl, aren’t you, Therese?”

Think like Reggie. Be calm. Steady. Strong. Keep storing info in case you get out of this. Friend in the Marshals Service. Not at the ‘wedding,’ or they’d know it wasn’t real. Someone who knows about the murder, that I’m the witness, and where I was staying—or—they heard me say where I was when I talked to Powell inside the restaurant. Near Powell, but not equal to Powell. Great. I’ll tell Reggie if I ever see him again.

“What is she saying? I can’t hear anything.”

“She’s not saying anything, sir.”

I pipe up, “I want to speak to Reggie. I want to know he’s safe.”

“You’re not in a position to make bargains, young lady.”

“I know!” I snap, fear suddenly turning into anger. “And neither are you! If you kill me, Matteo will make a plea bargain. You think he’d rather go to prison than rat you out? You just said he was selfish! He’ll talk Powell’s head off as soon as he figures out he can get a clean start somewhere else where he can seduce rich cougars who

want a ‘hot Latin lover’!” I push myself up, using my protesting muscles. “I guess your good buddy didn’t know everything Powell has planned—did he?”

“What? What does she mean? Make her say what she means!” The pleasant voice is suddenly wandering into hysteria, edges of words shrill against my ear even after the phone is pulled away.

“I’m not saying anything unless you prove that Reggie’s safe.”

“Ah! Why couldn’t he have stabbed this one, too? Where is the man? Who is he? He’s not an agent?”

“I don’t know where he is! In the store somewhere where we picked her up. She said he’s the new husband, and it sure seems that way. At least, they were a couple. We followed them when they left, just like your buddy said to do, and then Mickey went in and black smoked the house.”

“You burned down our house?” I shriek.

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“Huh? No! Black smoked. That’s when... Never mind. We made it so that we could find you. Boss, I don’t know how much she knows about that side of things.”

The magical side. The demonic side. I don’t say anything. Playing stupid seems safer here.

“Well, no matter. The man is fine, he’s in the store. Now—”

I shout over him, continuing with my stupid motif, apparently. “They could be lying. You think I’m going to trust kidnappers and terrorists? I want to speak to him, and then I’ll call Powell.”

“Bossy bitch. Shut her up.”

“Yes, sir.”

I feel the punch coming before it connects. I drop sideways just as it glances off my temple, pretending to be a senseless heap.

That ought to buy me some time. Since they don’t seem to know that Reggie is actually my personalsecurity, they probably left him alone. That means he’ll come for me.

I know it in my heart. Reggie will come for me, and he’ll never let me out of his sight again. I’m fine with that. I don’t want to let him out of my sight, either.

As I lie in a huddle on the bed, I get to eavesdrop.

“Where is he now? This Reggie Gray?”

“I doubt if he’d still be at the store now. He’ll have realized his wife is missing. He has probably called the police.”

The second thug rustles something. “She has two phones.”

“One of them must have the husband’s number.”

“Stop talking in front of her.”

They haven’t turned off the speaker, which I guess makes sense, seeing as there are two of them that need to hear Estrada’s instructions.

“She’s out cold, boss. When I hit, they stay down.”

I try not to smirk or move, even though my arm is twisted under me and I’m desperate to take the pressure off of it.

Why am I being so brave? I shouldn’t be brave. I’m going into shock, that’s it.

Or... I’m waiting.

Because Reggie already told me that he could find me no matter how well WITSEC hid me. I’m sure these goons are no match for him. These knuckleheads probably didn’t even take me that far. They didn’t know they were dealing with Reginald Gray. They thought he was just Mr. Joe Normal, hapless second husband.

“Get her husband on the phone, then have her call Powell.”

“What about after that?”

“We’ll keep her under wraps for a few days to make sure Matteo is released.” There’s a pause. “I have a boat nearby. I’ll send it up the river today. You’ll put the bodies on it, and they’ll take it from there.”

So much for not panicking.

Don’t come for me, Reggie. You’ll get hurt.

The tears are back, and I can’t stop them. I could have been the one woman who never hurt him. I could have been the woman who admitted she loved him back as hard and fast as he loved her. We could have run together.

Now, he’s going to lose me or lose his life.

I WAS SMART ENOUGH to get Powell’s direct number, and I dial it as I sit in the car, heart beating out of my chest and adrenaline higher than it’s ever been in my life. Higher than the first time I smuggled children to safety, in more pain than my first bullet, first blast, first anything.

Because she is my first love. Only love.

## Page 51

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I hate to admit what happened. That I failed. Something is off, and I cannot sense it, even with all of my powers.

Maybe when golems get their souls, they finally are unmade. They die? No longer immortal? No longer all-powerful servants?

Maybe that's why Therese was taken. I lost my powers when I began to live for myself, not merely as a weapon, a shield. I did my job so well that it was taken from me, along with the one who made me real.

What a cruel joke.

Well, I don't care. I don't care if I end now, even when I most want to live, when I finally know what life is like, with all the beauty and riches that exist because of love and family... I will gladly go, as long as I get Therese back first.

"Agent Powell." His voice is suave and unconcerned, and that makes me want to punch through the hood of a car.

"Someone took Therese. You have location tracking set up on her phone, right?" I have both phones set up with tracking—as long as they're on. I'm praying that they haven't thrown out her purse or smashed her phone yet. Even as I have Powell on speaker, I'm pulling up the "Find Your Friend" feature.

That's right. I don't need Powell, but his answer is about to tell me a lot.

After some cursing and shouting, Powell goes quiet. I know that people are

mobilizing in his office, which is nice, but they'll take hours. I want seconds.

"I— It's malfunctioning. They must have disabled her phone."

I'm silent, watching a little red circle move on a map and stop—only about ten minutes from me, just off an I-81 Southbound on-ramp.

"Someone in your office shut it off. The phone is working. Not only that, but I haven't seen any agents on detail near us. Did Teri tell you where we were?" I throw the car in reverse, narrowly missing a minivan.

"No! Oh. She mentioned a restaurant near you, but that was only minutes ago!"

"That's right. And you told her that you couldn't call her personally—which means you think someone followed your instructions to call—and they didn't. Someone in your office is either listening in on your calls or getting you to talk freely. That same someone is changing patrol schedules and deactivating GPS trackers. I'm getting Therese back. You catch your mole."

"Getting her back is a matter for the U.S. Marshals Service. Agents are mobilizing."

"Then tell them to be discreet about it and meet me at the Good Nights Inn off I-81 Southbound. Exit 12." I tap the image on the phone and reveal one of those bedbug magnets, the kind where the clerk hands out battered keys to battered rooms from behind a bulletproof partition. "Who can turn tracking on and off?"

"Well... Anyone in the technology support division. Of course, we can access it, but—"

"I don't have time to learn the inner workings now. Get someone you trust to turn the location tracking back on for Therese's phone! Watch them do it, and see if you can



get a record of who last activated it or deactivated it. That's going to help you catch the rat."

I hang up, muttering about rodents, hearing my engine roar and the tires squeal as I break speed limits and pass recklessly.

Slow down. Don't get caught by a cop. No time. Therese is in danger. Idiot.

I blame Estrada, Delgado, and their agents, who must have some dark powers, or they wouldn't have been able to thwart me so effectively. I blame myself more than them, for letting us leave the house, for falling in love and letting it go to my head while I dreamed rosy dreams, but I blame Powell the most. He was complacent, sure that he knew all the different ways this could pan out. Instead of worrying about Therese, his agents have been scrambling, worrying about what to do with Delgado. He's the better catch, the bigger fish with more to spill. They had Therese's evidence, and so... They dropped the ball. She was no longer the big prize. That—and the mole. I pretty much just handed them the evidence they'll need for an Internal Affairs investigation, but that doesn't help Therese now.

"Stupid fuck!" I curse myself out as I keep one eye on the road and the other on the tiny red dot. It's no longer moving. That could be where they dumped her purse.

Or her body.

A choking, panicked sound comes from my throat, and I drag my wrist over my eyes. Her beautiful, perfect body, carrying that sweet, beautiful soul. I failed to keep her safe. I didn't protect her.

Shouldn't have accepted the job. I wanted out. Wanted to be done. I got sloppy.

I'm on the same level as Powell now, down in the dumb shits of the world, the ones

who got soft and sloppy, complacent because they thought they had it handled.

I was so enthralled with her, so in love with finding love, that I missed so many red flags. I was looking for ways to be sure she loved me, that this was real, when I should have been studying the terrain and the other players! Why didn't I see tails? Patrols? Because I was busy in the bedroom, the shower, the living room, looking at her.

Why didn't Powell phone in? Why didn't that trigger some kind of warning in my gut?

The mole was probably manipulating things ever since Teri got into the area.

When I get off the exit ramp, I see the sign above the run-down motel. My speed drops, and I let the car amble to its destination, looking for any police or signs of activity.

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Everything seems to be business as usual. There are plenty of cars on the street, people arguing in front of the taco-friedchicken joint on the corner, and trash blowing across sagging cars that aren't worth stealing.

The motel is one of the two-story sticks. Two dozen rooms on the top, two dozen rooms underneath, and a maltreated office in peeling tan stucco. The parking lot on the front side has a few cars, but I don't recognize any of them—I let out a frustrated growl before remembering the back. That's right, this concrete vermin trap has a strip for cars on the front and the back, all the room they have with the street and other equally dilapidated businesses encroaching.

I park in the front, cursing my ill-preparedness. I could run home and grab what I need. I could wait.

Yeah, right.

What if I don't have powers against these guys?

I sit for a minute and try to let my instincts connect. Resurface.

Nothing.

All these decades of being able to save people with my inhuman abilities, wishing to be human—and now that I'm more human-like, I can't sense a damn thing.

I think I'm still strong, but there's no time to test it. I exit the car slowly, and on a whim, I see if I can lift it.

I can. One-handed. But who knows how long that will last? I yank the small fire extinguisher from the trunk of the vehicle and pat my thigh. One knife. One blunt object. One massive desire to rescue Teri that far outweighs my desire to be alive at the end of it.

Striding to the back of the building and searching for a familiar car, I hear Artie's voice in my head, soft and soothing. "Don't give up, Reg. One day, it'll feel right. It'll feel right, here." He had tapped my chest all those years ago, a young father with two children at that point.

I put my hand over the spot he tapped, over words he anointed me with.

Calmness settles over me.

Therese is my right place. She is what makes things right in my world, in my life. She is what makes me right as a being. I am no longer just a shell with sigils. I am something—no, someone, with a soul.

I just have to get to her.

## Chapter Sixteen

I see the car that I observed earlier in the week, the one that was at the airport, at the very end of the row. It's hidden behind an overflowing dumpster amid overgrown thistles and weeds that have surpassed my height.

And they say there's no greenery in the city.

To get Therese inside without being seen... I shake my head and look around the hellhole's exterior. I doubt if anyone would have paid attention to anything outside of a bottle or a needle. They obviously think she won't be pursued for a little

while—because of the mole. They also think I’m the real deal, a husband who will be frantically relying on the police and panicking in place, not a bodyguard who has crossed oceans and battlefields. If they knew exactly what I was, they probably would have traveled farther.

I’d love to have more time to analyze, but I’m too busy worrying about why they took Therese and what they’re doing to her. Delgado’s expecting to get offered a sweet deal—he’s not worrying about revenge since he’s about to get off with a slap on the wrist and a new name.

That means Estrada. My stomach ices over. Estrada’s henchmen would have known they’d be lugging either deadweight or a struggling woman and would have parked as close to the room as possible. I start to move toward the last room at the end of the first floor, eyeing the rusty green doors of the rooms that I pass.

Therese’s attackers probably walked her in, holding her upright and supporting her weight between them. They either had a weapon pressed against her to keep her quiet, or she was incapacitated. Otherwise, she would have been screaming and fighting.

She would have screamed for help at the store.

She shouldn’t have needed to scream; I told her I would be between her and danger—God, I’ve failed her, broken a promise to her... Even if I save her, she won’t love me anymore. How could she?

But I can’t have a pity party now.

Fuck it, this could go badly. Who knows how many addicts are flopping in this place? How many of them have guns and drunken trigger fingers?

I’m going to have to go for a mix of brutality and cleverness—and prayer.

“Let me get Therese back, and I’ll still be Your servant, even with this soul. I will protect her for the rest of her life, and any who need our help. My help. I won’t desert the place You’ve placed me, the place You’ve enabled me to protect, make a safe haven.” I picture Pine Ridge—and Therese. That little home, with the grass mowed, and quiet, peaceful headstones with tulips and buttercups dotted in between the gray... Like her. Sunshine and color, mixed into my shadow.

“Amen,” I mutter as I bang on the door.

SOMEONE IS YELLING something in Spanish. Matteo spoke fluent Spanish, but mine is rusty and fragmented. I hear “fuego” several times.

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Fire?

The voice sounds like Reggie's. Or is it wishful thinking? Does he even speak Spanish?

He's been around three times as long as I have and traveled the world far more. I'm sure he speaks dozens of languages. Knows thousands of secret hiding places, a thousand tricks for smuggling and safety.

Damn it. I should have run when he offered me the chance. Why did I doubt that he could keep me safe?

Well, he didn't, did he?

I shush my inner monologue. I know there is a reason, and I know that it didn't stop him. He's here now—at least, I hope he is.

Please don't be drug-induced delusions...

Rough hands suddenly grab me and roll me to the floor. I cry out as I land, my bound hands tingling with pain and my shoulders forced so far back I'm afraid they'll pop out of their sockets. A thin hotel comforter is thrown over my head and pulled down to cover my body as I'm wedged between the wall and bed.

"Move, you die. Talk, you die." Something hard presses into the top of my skull.

I don't move. I don't talk.

I can barely hear over my own heart beating, but I hear the door open and shut.

Then nothing.

After a minute, the pressure leaves my skull. “You move, you die. I’m not leaving the room, just going to the door. Don’t try to be cute.”

The door opens again. There’s a sharp grunt and a heavy thud before the door shuts and bolts.

Someone just got knocked out. Or worse. Please don’t let it be Reggie.

“Teri?”

I gasp under the comforter. “Mmf!”

“There!”

The blanket flies off, and Reggie is kneeling over me with tears in his eyes. “Oh, sweetie. Oh, my love, mein neshama, I’m sorry. It’s okay now. It’s all okay.” Reggie removes whatever is over my eyes and takes the fabric out of my mouth.

“I thought they hurt you,” I blurt out, blinking, eyes struggling to adjust.

“No. I hurt them.”

As he flicks a knife through my bindings, I crane my neck. One thug is on the ground, blood coming from his nose and head. “Did you shoot him?” I gasp, even though I didn’t hear a gunshot.

“Not yet.”



I notice blood on the knife.

“Where’s the other guy?” I whisper.

“Behind the dumpster.”

“Dead?”

“Not sure. Probably not.” Reggie picks me up as I whimper. My shoulders and arms are useless, and my hands are purple. “You’re going to be okay. You haven’t even been here for two hours. We moved fast.”

“Okay. Good. Reggie—someone at WITSEC is a—”

“Spy for Estrada? I know. I found out too late, but thank God, nottootoo late.” He kisses me on the forehead as he carries me toward the door. “You’re alive. Teri... Teri, I’m so sorry. I failed you and —”

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“Shh! Listen, Reggie. Estrada wants me to change my story so Matteo walks, to keep him from talking in exchange for a deal,” I hiss, eyes torn between drinking in Reggie's wonderful tear-stained face or staring at the heap of human scum bleeding on the carpet.

“That means whoever the mole is doesn't know about your flash drive evidence.”

“And they didn't know that the wedding was fake.”

“It's not a field agent, then. It's someone with limited clearances but who's in Powell's inner circle. Someone who only hears bits and pieces but knows enough to turn off the GPS tracking on your phone. Fortunately,” Reggie snags my purse off the top of the cracked TV, “we had backup. My phone.”

“Tell me more in the car. We have to get out of here.”

“Yes. We do. We have to get far,farout of here.” Reggie hesitates at the door, looking at the kidnapper. “This is a bad man. A killer. A kidnapper. A terrorist, a trafficker, and God-knows-what-else. I am a protector of the innocent. I cannot let a man like this exist.”

I swallow. I know what he wants to do. Part of me agrees. A larger part just wants to get away safely. “I need to pee.”

“Understandable. Make it fast, okay?”

“I will.”

I barely make it to the toilet. The trip is two-fold. I figure we might be in the car for a while, and I don't want to know what's happening outside in the hotel room. I hear the door open and close, and then a soft, reassuring voice says, "Don't worry, honey. Just putting out the trash."

"How very domestic of you."

"Some gorgeous, smart woman told me I'm good husband material. Do you need help? Your hands probably aren't working too well."

Okay. I'm marrying this man. For real.

This man saved my life—and now he offers to help me use the toilet because my hands are still half-numb stumps with purple fingers that won't bend.

"I've finished the necessary part, but I can't button up." I'd managed to push the button through with my thumb (which was still numb but solid enough to do the job). Pulling the button back through while holding the buttonhole steady is another matter.

Before I can blink, Reggie is next to me in the tiny, dusty bathroom. He washes both of our hands with lukewarm water and sticky orange soap from a broken bottle on the wall. Once we're clean, he stands behind me and buttons my shorts like a pro.

"How?"

"Injured friends. Scared children. Sick people. I protected so many... But I didn't protect you. My love, please—"

"I forgive you. This wasn't your fault, and even if it was, I would forgive you a million times. I love you, you big gray tank," I manage a feeble laugh. Reggie smiles

at me as he turns me to face him. “I was so scared,” I breathe out as I collapse on his chest, safe in the muscular shield of his arms.

“I know, babe, I know. It’s all my fault, I—”

“How is it your fault? You didn’t do any of this. I know someone did something to you to allow this to happen, to create the opportunity. I even thought to myself—” I look up at him, eyes overflowing, “I thought to myself, ‘They killed Reggie. That’s the only way they could get to me.’ But even though they took your powers somehow, you still saved me from the—where are they?”

“Behind the dumpster.” Reggie picks me up again, even though I was limping along.

This time, I don’t ask if the men are alive or not.

## Chapter Seventeen

In the car, we watch the police descend, but we’re not there to talk to them. Not in person.

“If those guys die, I could be charged. I don’t care, but it’s going to make our wedded bliss a little iffy,” Reggie eases the car into traffic.

“But you were saving me! I’ll tell them!”

“I know, but they might argue that I used unnecessary force. I can’t really explain that I’m a golem. My regular force could crush a car if I wanted.”

“And yet you’re still so gentle,” I sigh, snuggled up against him, seatbelt straining across my chest.

“There have been way too many cases of victims and heroes getting sued or arrested because they saved someone’s life by putting a hurt on the real threat. And while you sit still, waiting to be on the witness stand for Delgado, or Estrada, or those shitheads, or God forbid me, you’ll be a sitting duck. But you can tell me to drive you straight to police headquarters or down to D.C., and I’ll do it.”

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I bite my lip. My hands are still a reddish blue, and I clutch Reggie's arm convulsively, even though I can barely feel him. All of me is sore and bruised, and my brain is fuzzy.

“They shot me up with something.”

“I know. Probably a short-acting dose of Midazolam. It’s a drug that decreases consciousness and does a number on your nervous system if handled improperly. Thank God they didn’t pick a hideout a few hours away. If they’d needed to keep you quiet for longer, they would have used a larger dose.” Reggie rubs my knee and makes a dark growling sound as he looks at the bruises on my legs.

“I don’t think they hurt me,” I say quickly. “Not like you’re thinking.”

“I’m thinking that’s from shoving you in the car and dragging you around. You’re going to feel like shit for a few days. We’ll get you to a doctor.”

“No. No doctors.” I swallow, unsure about my next words. My heart and head are in unison on what I want to say. It feels right, but I don’t know if it will work.

I’m alive. Reggie came and got me. I don’t know what other sign I could want, but something still holds me back from telling him that I want to start a new life with him, wherever we can be safe. “I have to call Powell, right? They’re looking for me. Also, I can tell them that Estrada is planning to send a boat up the river near this area within the next few days. Maybe that’ll help them catch some of his operatives.”

“Good idea.” Reggie's lips go tight.

“Reggie?”

“Teri?”

“I don’t have to go somewhere and make an official statement, do I?”

“I think he’ll let you give your statement wherever he meets you.”

“I don’t want to be in the WITSEC program,” I whisper.

“Then we’ll find another way to keep you safe,” Reggie reassures me with a kiss on the back of my bruised knuckles. “I’ll figure out what they did to me.”

“Oh! The guys used the term ‘black smoked.’”

Reggie makes a choked sound. “In Pine Ridge? That’s... That’s horrible.”

“What does it mean?”

“They released demons. Actual demons, the bad kind, from the Pit. They released them to track you and destroy any protections around you. They would have needed something of yours, with your hair or blood, or skin cells—old shoes or clothing would do. They probably got something from one of the places you and Matteo lived.” He groans, “But at least it makes sense. Demons are powerful enough to undo almost any protection or power protecting a person—including my powers of protection for you. The only good thing is that I’m confident they were destroyed completely in doing so. To take out the protections imbued in me... No, they could not have survived.” Reggie shakes his head. “And I felt all silly and floaty with you, my love. I thought you were stealing my powers with your glorious touch—and it was them.” His voice darkens. “They probably destroyed themezuzah, as well. We’ll have it replaced before we go home.”

“H-home?”

“One day, we’ll be back in Pine Ridge. And that will be our house, and that lawn will be filled with buttercups, tulips, daffodils, and lilies—and children. Our children.”

“How? After all this?” I whisper.

“I have an idea or two. Do you trust me?”

“With all my heart.”

REGGIE PARKS ON THE street by our home, not in the garage. It’s funny how this little ranch house in the ‘burbs feels more like home than any of the places I stayed in during the past year.

“I’m parking here in case we want to make a fast getaway. I don’t want to be blocked in.” Reggie hesitates, hand on the ignition. “If you want to run right now, we can. I don’t need things. I need you. I just want to make sure the house is not contaminated by their demonic filth—no offense to reformed demons.”

“You’re going to have to explain that. But later.” I hesitate, hand on the car door.

Reggie’s voice is gentle. “You’re not a fugitive. They have enough evidence to do whatever they choose, go to trial, or offer a plea bargain. You can talk to Powell on the phone and tell him what you want.”

Just to disappear...

It’s tempting. “I’ll—”

My words are cut off by the arrival of a long, sleek black SUV careening past us. It



pulls into our driveway, and two men spring out. One is Powell, and the other is the guy he called Heatherington.

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Reggie sighs. “If they try to make you move, and you don’t want to—call me Reginald. I’ll have you out of there fast. While they talk to you, I’ll be in the background—packing. Packing everything.”

I LISTEN TO TERI GIVE her statement in a clear voice that barely shakes. They ask about the abduction, and she’s pointed in remarking that someone in Powell’s agency must have led the kidnappers to her, whether through her phone or someone talking too much.

“We’re handling the internal breaches. Now, the men who abducted you were found outside the hotel. Both had severe head trauma, and one had a stab wound.”

“They got into a fight over something. Money, I think.”

I keep my back turned, pretending to fiddle with the thermostat, worried my face might show my proud surprise at Teri’s quick wits, but Heatherington and Powell are focused on Therese.

“They beat each other up and carried each other outside?” Powell’s voice is skeptical, and my blood boils. Later, when it’s safe, I’ll be angry. I’ll rage. But then I think about Therese’s face and how it’s in one piece.

Something calm inside of me swallows up the anger and enjoys the scoffing in Therese’s voice.

“No! Reggie dragged them outside so he could rescue me. It’s funny that he got there before the police. I thought you said something about a police detail keeping tabs on

us and checking in periodically?”

Powell mumbles something about miscommunication and a failure to update rosters.

“You mean you didn’t check to see if your details followed through? You put in the requests—presumably through whatever emails or web forms U.S. Marshals use—and you never double-checked to see if anyone erased them or called them off?”

“We would have checked periodically. Remember, you only arrived here several days, not weeks, ago, and you insisted on hiring private security instead of staying under our direct protection.”

I turn around in time to watch my beautiful blonde goddess standing on weak legs, holding onto the loveseat for support. “I think you started focusing on the new evidence I gave you and the big fish you were about to catch. You were so consumed with that, you neglected the little details—like keeping the witness alive.”

Get him, Teri!

She smiles suddenly, her voice changing to something meek and sweet. “I understand. Truly. These men are so dangerous and evil. Of course you would focus on bargaining with Delgado to get information on Estrada. If you’ve improved security, I’m guessing Estrada won’t hear that his plan fell through—at least not for a few hours. So, he’s still planning to send a boat up the river—the Susquehanna, I guess—to collect my lifeless body. I heard them talking to him. He offered me my life in exchange for changing my story about Matteo—” Therese pauses and drops the mild-mannered routine, giving the sweaty, open-mouthed Powell a steely stare. “But they planned to kill me anyway..”

“Mrs. Gray... I’m so sorry. But, you’re safe, and that’s an excellent lead.”

“Good. I’m not changing my story—but I am changing my plans. I’m no longer interested in being in the WITSEC program, but I’ll be leaving town and avoiding any publicity or notoriety. You won’t need my testimony, will you? Once I refuse to recant, Matteo will probably talk.”

Powell begins to protest as I slide my arm around Therese’s shoulders and push her gently back into her seat. “If you do need her, I’m sure you’ll find a way to contact us.” But you won’t find her unless she wants to be found. The people of Pine Ridge will make damn sure of that.

“I think you ought to reconsider, Therese. You’ve had a horrible experience. It can cause people to act rashly. And the matter of the abduction and those men—”

I know it’s rude not to let Therese speak for herself, but I don’t like Powell’s stance, the tone of his voice, or the sudden hardness around his eyes. He’s feeling like an ass, and he wants to get the situation back under his control so he can end up looking like a hero instead of someone who dropped a ball the size of a Boeing.

“You must have footage from the shopping center. There are cameras everywhere. You’ll find their DNA and Therese’s all over the hotel room and their vehicle. Not only that, but I’ll bet they’re hatchet men for Estrada. Why don’t you cook up a nice juicy deal to get them to rat each other out and get the Coast Guard searching any craft just entering the Susquehannah?”

“Yes, Agent Powell, that seems much more important. After all, I’m being very cooperative. It’s not like you’ll never see me again.” Therese smiles and extends her hand, ending the interview.

Only we both know it’s not over. It’s just delayed by pressing matters that involve more dangerous fish to fry. A squawk of static from Powell’s flesh-colored earpiece confirms that. He turns on his heel, holding up one finger.

Just a minute.

Therese has given every agency in the country precious minutes, and the agencies have proven untrustworthy.

I kick myself because I failed her, too.

“Can you get me some water? And maybe something like plain crackers—if we bought any?”

“I’ll go check,” I whisper, helping her back into a chair. Of course, I don’t have the few items I had in the cart. I don’t have her hard lemonade when she could really use a drink or even a vague idea of what to cook after this hellacious day.

As the sun sets, I stalk into the kitchen and lean heavily against the counter. A hard bulge presses into my hip—and it isn’t the fun sort of bulge. It’s in the wrong spot, anyway.

Fuck. I’m a shoplifter, too. I still have the ring I wanted to buy Therese in my pocket. Once the dust settles and she has a moment to think, she’ll blame me for failing to keep her safe, no matter what she said in the heat of the moment when she was newly rescued and finally safe. My daring rescue is all well and good, but it wouldn’t have been necessary if I’d guarded her better in the first place.

I take a long time getting her that ice water.

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HEATHERINGTON TALKSwith Powell before Powell storms out the door, letting it slam behind him.

“Bad mood?” I don’t care if Powell is miserable at the moment. I gently tease my hair out with tentative fingers. My hands still don’t want to cooperate, and my scalp is tender. It even hurts to swallow. I shiver as I recall the hard press of metal against my skin.

“Between you and me, the oversights that occurred are serious, and Powell was your handler. In this business, you have to trust your team, but... Well. Trust but verify, that’s my motto.” Heatherington sits on the edge of the recliner, his apologetic face turning embarrassed. “This is probably a bad time, but maybe it’ll give you a laugh. God knows we could use one.”

I grimace. “It would take a team of stand-up comedians to get me to laugh tonight, but go ahead.”

“Do you remember Agent Holloway?”

My face shows my confusion.

Heatherington prods, “The agent who stepped up and did your service?”

“Oh, him! He was very good. I almost believed it was real.”

Heatherington doesn’t laugh. “That’s because heisthe real deal. He’s a lay minister and licensed officiant. He took the online courses to get legally certified to perform

marriages in the tri-state area so he could be the officiant at his nephew's wedding this summer."

The world tips.

Is this the sign I've been waiting for? The one I wouldn't admit I want? "You mean Reggie and I... We're legally married?"

"What?" Reggie's startled bark coincides with a clatter and splash.

I turn to see Reggie with a wet splash on his shirt, a plastic cup sitting in the middle of ice cubes, and a spreading wet stain on the carpet. "The man who married us is actually an officiant. Licensed to marry," I inform him, my voice carefully calm.

"Right, but you didn't have a marriage license. Just thought it was funny. If you'd filed for a license, or even a self-uniting license—"

"What's that?" Reggie and I blurt in unison.

"Oh, it's a Quaker thing, but a while ago the ACLU won a lawsuit so non-Quakers can practice it, too. Basically, if you have a self-uniting license, all you need to do is make your vows and exchange your rings in front of two witnesses." Heatherington suddenly blushes. "Guess who helped Holloway study for his exams? I know more marriage trivia from New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey than you can shake a stick at." He ends with a placating grin. "I don't know if it's legal in New York, but you were also married by a federal agent, so, maybe... I'd have to look it up."

I force a smile in return. "I see. Well. That is funny. Isn't that funny, Reggie?"

"Sure is. Look, Heatherington, Therese's probably exhausted and feels dirty."

I glare for a second, but he's right. I feel like I'm caked in filth after being near those bastards and also from that cesspit of a motel room.

Reggie gives me a hint of a smile. "That's how I usually feel after a mission goes sideways," he mumbles with the cutest little shrug, wide shoulders suddenly hunched.

"If we could just have the clothing you're wearing for fibers, I'll be out of your hair. Oh, and speaking of hair," Heatherington holds up a little baggy from his breast pocket, "let me have some."

"THEY REALLY SHOULD have done all of that at the scene," Reggie says, turning on the shower.

"We weren't at the scene."

"True."

Conversation that flowed in relief is now stiff and stilted. Confusion about the next steps hangs over us after Powell and Heatherington muddy up plans made based on instinct.

Reggie would tell you to trust your instinct, I scold myself, stepping into the bathroom after him, wearing one of his shirts as a makeshift nightgown-slash-robe since one of my few outfits is now in an evidence bag on its way to who knows where.

"Teri? You want some privacy? Or some help scrubbing up?" Reggie offers, one hand lightly brushing the back of my arm.

"I'm too sore to—"



“Honey, you never have to sleep with someone if you’re not up for it. Just telling you how I feel about it, in case Delgado or some other jerk told you a different story. I—I know you might not feel the same, but I love you. Care about you. That won’t change on my end, even if it has to change on yours.”

My eyes well up without warning. “Why wouldn’t I feel the same?” I whisper.

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“I let you get hurt.” Reggie thrusts his hand into his pocket with an angry grunt, swollen knuckles catching on the scratchy denim. “I was so busy looking for the one I thought you’d like best that I didn’t even realize how long you’d been in there.” His visibly cracked hand plants a small box on the edge of the bathroom sink with a slam.

“What’s that?” I know it’s jewelry, but I’m confused. Why was he buying me anything?

“It’s your wedding ring.” Reggie opens the box and holds it out to me. “I want you to wear my ring. Not his. I want to be your husband—even if it’s dangerous, even if I fail. Even if I’m a monster, not a human.” I can see his throat rise and fall with a hard swallow. “Now’s not the time to ask you, but in case you want to know... The offer stands. It’ll stand forever. And if you give me a chance to keep you safe my way, I’ll out-manuever any agency or bad guy ever. I can’t spoil you like a queen, Teri, but I’ll sure as hell treat you like one.”

Matteo charmed me with compliments and praise, but it was all superficial. It’s funny how you notice those things later. “Oh, Reggie.”

I lean forward to see the ring he holds out. I know it came from the superstore, not some fancy boutique jeweler, but when I see it, I gasp.

It’s so unique. So perfect! The silver and blue shine brightly. It’s clean and simple.

It’s not gaudy.

“A fresh start.” That’s what it is. It’s a new start for both of us. “I want to wear this.”

“It’s yours.” Reggie pops it from the velvet casing and holds it out.

I drop Matteo’s huge diamond into the box in its place. I’ll sell it one day. Maybe to buy Reggie a ring. As he slips the ring onto my newly bare finger, I look at the way my grandfather’s ring perches perfectly on his finger.

Reggie needs a fresh start—but he also needs to belong to someone. He needs family, and that ring shows I want him in mine. He’s always belonged to us... with us. We’ve been tied together by invisible strings all of our existences.

“Well. I’ll leave you to it.” Reggie squeezes my fingers before he tries to step past me and get to the door.

I won’t let him walk away from me. I’m not going to walk away from him, either.

“We’re done running unless we run together.” In the fogging mirror above the sink, I catch a glimpse of both of us. Neither of us looks our best, but the smile on Reggie’s face and the way his eyes glisten make him the most beautiful sight in the world.

“Thank you.” Reggie claims my mouth with a gentle kiss.

“Thank you.” I hesitate just for a second, then pull Reggie’s ring off and put my new ring back in his hand. The confusion and pain on his face is short-lived, but it breaks my heart all the same.

“When we get where we’re going, let’s do this for real. This is practice, even if it’s not legal without a piece of paper. I, Therese LaFontaine, take you, Reginald Gray, to be my lover, my life partner, and my safe place to hide. I take you as my rescuer. I promise,” I cough and rub my tender throat, “I promise never to run without pulling you with me. I promise to be your safe place, too, even though you might not need one, since you’re the safe haven for so many. I promise that instead of leaving, we’ll

fight whatever it is like the badasses we are—even if you’re really all the badass and I just pretend. Oh. And I promise to love you.”

THE WOMAN OF MY DREAMS is saying the most beautiful wedding vows in the world while wearing my white undershirt and nothing else. And just when I think I’m going to die of happiness, she puts her grandfather’s ring back on my finger and says, “I wish you’d keep this one. I think my grandfather always considered you family, and he would have been proud to have you legally, truly in the family that you’ve saved a hundred times. I know I am.”

How can I compete with that level of beauty? She didn’t even rehearse!

But words flow. “Therese LaFontaine, I, Reginald Gray, take you to be my wife. I take you in danger and safety, wealth and poverty, through problems and solutions. I promise to love you and never run unless you’re coming with me. I promise to honor how damn smart you are and never treat you like a showpiece—even if you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. You are my soulmate. Mein neshama—my life force. Without you, I could not love—and with you, I will never love another. You have made an empty, dark spot in me a glowing flame. I’ll always keep that love burning bright for you.”

Therese gives me a half-sobbing little hiccup that makes me want to smother her with kisses, but I can’t until she’s healed for a few days. I smile. The next time we make love might be on our actual honeymoon.

Careful of her sore hands, I slide the ring on her finger, lost in my own makeshift vows. They’re from the heart, but they’re nowhere as stunning as Therese’s. “Stay married to me?” I murmur, raising her hands to my lips.

“I will. Love me?”

“I do.”

## Chapter Eighteen

“Where’s Kullorsuaq? Near Anchorage?”

“Nope. Greenland. It’s a place that’s pretty much a pain in the butt to get to, but Klaus and Eirwen have a cabin there. Minegold has been playing our social secretary overnight. The coven will be here to fix up the wards, the pastor will be here with a rabbi buddy of his to give us a newmezuzah, and Klaus and Eirwen say that cabin is ours until December—if we want it.”

“Months and months of honeymoon? I’ve had that. I want to come back. Come home, to Pine Ridge. I want to start my new life with you,” I sigh. Reggie doestreat me like a queen. This morning, I had breakfast in bed. Now, I’m sitting at the kitchen table using his laptop while he carries our things to the car. We’re leaving today, no matter what Powell or his underlings say.

“You sure you don’t want to pack more?” Reggie asks.

I know what he means. I’ve packed all I have with me, because there isn’t much of it. But I’m not taking it all. I’m not running. “We’ll be back soon.”

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“The more we pack, the longer I have to keep you to myself,” he whispers, kissing my head as he comes to sit beside me.

I sigh, thighs clamping together. “Don’t get me all needy before the wedding,” I whisper. That’s the other thing that Mr. Minegold, the pastor, and the rabbi are bringing with them—a license and a quickie marriage ceremony. “Are you sure the license is going to be acceptable?”

“In New York, there’s a twenty-four-hour waiting period. I asked for it last night. It’s technically a day later.”

“How did Jakob Minegold get that?”

“He called a warlock lawyer who knows a judge who owes him a favor.”

“Everyone here really helps each other out, huh?” Looking back at the trophy wife I was last year, I can’t believe how much I want to trade margaritas and Manolos for a real community—a community where it seems like everyone helps each other and values each other—even if everyone is very different.

“They do. I’m doing free plumbing for at least five people for the next couple of years,” he laughs, but there’s pure joy in the sound. “I don’t mind.”

“You are so handsome when you smile,” I practically swoon.

“Don’t you get me started before the wedding, either.” He stands back up. “I won’t put the laptop in the car just yet, but is there anything else I’ve forgotten?”

I look around. “Nope. What does one do in Kullorsuaq?”

“Watch the night sky. Sit in the hot tub. Make love.”

“Start a family?” I hint, butterflies in my stomach fluttering through my middle, making my insides twitch with want.

Reggie’s eyes light up. “If you want to,” he whispers.

“I want to. I think. I mean... You didn’t pack enough condoms for a month-long trip to the middle of nowhere, did you?” I ask.

“No, I didn’t buy out the store,” he quips back. “Most couples wouldn’t start married life with a month in Greenland. Well, not unless they were already from Greenland, that is.”

“Maybe they should. I think we’ll see each other at our best and worst in the middle of nowhere, in the cold. Alone.” Thinking back, I don’t think I would have been comfortable with the idea of being alone, isolated from civilization with Matteo.

With Reggie, all I feel is excited. And horny. And wondering how many new things we can try while we’re all alone without interruptions, without having to look over our shoulders. I think if I had tried a trip to Greenland with Matteo, he would have abandoned me to the polar bears and narwhals and escaped with a first-class ticket outta there.

Reggie just grins at me like a lovesick loon. I can’t get over how a smile changes his face. “Being alone with the woman I love? For a month? In the middle of the icy wastes, where no one is going to call me at one in the morning to fix a clogged toilet, where we could see bad guys coming for miles around? And again, I repeat—being alone with you? That sounds like heaven to me—especially since this

heaven comes with a fireplace and a hot tub.”

A sudden, grave thought grips me. Reggie says he has a soul now. That he can feel it. Would he have done so many wonderful things and never have seen heaven—if it weren’t for me and my love? That doesn’t seem right. Or fair. But it does seem humbling. “It sounds like the perfect little bit of heaven to me, too.” I sashay up to him and wrap my arms around his neck. Instantly, he puts his hands on my hips. My insides don’t flutter, they squeeze. His hands feel so warm and strong, and they fit me, straddling my waist and molding to my hips (perhaps literally). So perfect. I forget the lingering aches and bruises. “Did I thank you properly for saving me?” I lick my lips as I look up at him.

“You’re wearing my ring. That’s a lifelong thank you,” Reggie steps back, putting distance between our hips.

“Awesome, responsible husband.” I pout.

“Hey, if you want to give Pastor Fortnum and company permanent emotional damage when they see me without trousers, bending my wife over this kitchen table, I— Oh, who is it?” Reggie’s phone buzzes from the pocket of his pants, and he scowls as he retrieves it. In seconds, he’s beaming.

“What is it?”

“I get breaking news notifications. You made headlines, beautiful.”

“I did?” I squeak, taking his phone.

“Not directly, but you made them possible.”

I read the words on the screen in an incredulous voice. “Estrada’s Money Man



Talks—Terrorist Leader Apprehended by Joint Task Force.”

Reggie slips his arm around me. “You did that, babe. You’re a hero.”

“They better not say my name in the article,” I sit back down, scanning the press release.

“They won’t. They won’t mention how they got Delgado to talk, either.”

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A knot of fear replaces the warm, gooey feelings I've been enjoying. "Do you think he's free?"

"No, I think he's probably going into some sort of WITSEC program. Whether it's the kind for prisoners or free citizens depends on what he gave and what they offered. The point is—wherever he is—he's the new target. If anyone in the organization wants someone to blame—this headline tells them who to focus on." Reggie gently uncurls my frantic fingers from the phone and kisses my sore knuckles. "If anyone ever comes looking for you—I'll end them this time. That's a promise. Can you live with that?"

"Yep." It's that simple. He'll protect me—all the way. Without his powers, he found me. With thugs or demons standing in the way, he'd find me. Even with what happened, I still feel incredibly safe with him.

"It's us!" a voice calls from outside.

Reggie smiles. "Ready?"

I give his hand a squeeze and check my reflection in the mirror. White sundress and denim jacket. Sandals. He's in jeans and a white shirt, and at a moment's notice, his yarmulke is reverently unfolded and placed on his head.

The last, painful chapter of my life is done. It's time to start something true. "Ready."

Epilogue

“This is actually better than a bridal suite—and most hotels stopped calling them bridal suites, anyway.” Reggie carries me through the door of the remote little cabin, the motorized black and yellow sled golden in the glow of the midnight sun that shines all summer at this tip of the world.

“I like this place better. I’m sick of swanky hotels, but this... Oooh, this has the view.” I look out the window as he puts me down. In the distance, there are rocky crags, snow, and a fighting sea, with the huge hot tub in its stone altar in the back. Inside, the bed is on the left, the kitchen and the fireplace beside it. There’s another room in the back, which probably has a bathroom and laundry facilities. At least I hope so. “Klaus said—”

“That this place has everything. Don’t be fooled by the rustic appearance. He even called the local grocer who brings out supplies every other week and told them to leave us plenty of goodies. Want to go explore? I see some outbuildings. I think Klaus said those were for the reindeer.”

I give him a sidelong look. I met Klaus and Eirwen yesterday —at my wedding. She’s about three and a half feet tall with silvery streaks in plum-colored hair, and he’s a tall, bearded silver fox with long flowing white locks. Pine Ridge is full of mystical people. Could Klaus and Eirwen be... Could Santa and one of his elves ever...

Nah.

“I don’t want to explore anything but the view from the hot tub,” I sigh and tiptoe my fingers up his arm, “or the best baby-making positions you can think of.”

Reggie’s eyes go from soft and peaceful to burning with lust—and then filled with worry. “I believe I can be a good husband. I hope I can be a good father. I’ll never leave, and I’ll always try.”

This man. He has a direct switch to my heart and my tear ducts. “That’s the best kind of dad! You’re going to be great—and that won’t be happening for a little while, right?”

“Nine months from this honeymoon, anyway,” he says, the lust returning.

This time, after two days of rest, restraint, and traveling, Reggie doesn’t hold me back when I run to his arms and climb him like a tree.

“MATTEO WAS SCARED SHITLESS of children. For someone who wanted to play with the devil, he was a whiny little boy. I can see that now. I like the man I’m with—the one who is prepared to go the distance.”

“Yep. Even to Greenland,” I joke as she worms her way up my torso, her legs wrapping around my waist.

“You’re who I’m supposed to be with, no matter where in the world we are,” she says seriously, kissing me softly.

I’m in awe of my new wife. She’s so smart. So wise. Maybe I’m wiser now, too? All the wisdom of the ages was carved into my skin, placed in my being—but it didn’t click before like it does now.

“I am who I’m supposed to be now,” I return, touching the spot above my heart, the place that once felt hollow, “and you are who I’m supposed to be with.” I bury my lips in the soft spot on her neck.

“I want to understand all of you. Know all of you. Touch all of you,” she purrs, her fingers working down to my belt.

She’s so perfect. So beautiful. She’s mine. She loves me. That beauty. This beast.

If I start sobbing... “Teri.” I take a steadying breath. “I love you. Too much for words right now.”

“That’s okay. I’ve been dying for the past few days waiting for you to show me.”

“OHHHH. OH, OH, MY GOD.”

Teri’s mouth wraps around my hard cock, and I shrink the hard length down so the whole thing fits handily in her mouth and I can feel the tight circle of her sucking lips.

“That’s such a neat trick,” she giggles, looking up at me between long, sinful sucks.

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“I’m going to make it bigger later. Much bigger,” I sigh, as she goes back to bobbing her head on me, looking up at me as if she can suck out the soul that she gave me along with my cum. “Sweetie, I’m going to pop if you do that.”

“I want you to.” She swirls her tongue over my crown.

“I want to put it in your pussy,” I moan, latching my fingers onto her blonde locks.

“You do? Do you want to fill me up?” she whispers, one hand leaving my thigh and slowly moving between her own.

I can’t speak for a second, too lust-struck watching her play with herself while she sucks me. Like she wants this. Wants me.

I’m still in awe.

An awed golem who’s about to explode in pleasure is possibly not the best communicator in the world. I pull myself from her mouth, puffing up with pride at the disappointed little noise she makes.

“Reggie, I—”

“Get in that tub,” I demand, my voice a growl.

“But the—”

“I’m not going to let you lose a single drop,” I warn, hoisting her up and taking her

with me to the steaming, bubbling pool of water.

TWO THINGS HAPPEN RIGHTbefore my eyes when my new husband sits me in the hot tub—aside from the fact that I moan like a pornographic actress getting paid to be loud. “This feels so good,” I cry out.

“Good,” Reggie joins me, standing while I sit on the ledge, pumping his hand over cock—and it gets longer and thicker with each swipe. My eyes get bigger as he grows from the perfect mouthful to the perfect pussy-full, and then several inches larger and longer.

“Whoa,” I whisper.

“Watch what else,” he says, stepping closer, until his cock is just level with my mouth. He swirls his thumb slowly around his length—and the pattern of the swirl emerges on his skin. “I believe I’ve heard the phrase ‘ribbed for her pleasure.’ I can do that.” He moves his fist again, a little grunt coming from behind his sealed lips this time, and the beautiful, glistening gray cock I’ve been fantasizing about riding on until it fills me and his cum overflows me is suddenly covered in little ridges. Another stroke, and there are soft swirls, like a 3D paisley print. “I’ll change as often as you want so it feels the best for you,” he offers.

“What about what feels the best for you?”

“Being inside of you, feeling you grip me and pull me in... That’s the best.” His voice is low and still dropping, and he wades closer, sinking until he kneels in front of me, hands leaving his cock to massage my thighs. Kneading them. Drawing them apart. “But it’s better after I taste you.”

I start arching up, trying to lift myself out of the water so he can get to my hungry holes, but instead, he pushes against me, keeping me on the ledge, legs spread. He

sinks down into the water with a smirk, disappearing until only his eyes and the bald dome of his head are visible. “But you need to—ooh. Breathe?” I moan out the question, but all I get in answer is the feel of his tongue teasing my slit open before flicking my clit, light touches that make me squirm, slowly building to demanding sucks that have me keening on every pulse, bottom fighting his hands as he tries to pin me down. I rise to grind my sex hungrily against his mouth.

“Inside, inside, inside,” I try to grab his chin, only to find Reggie playing submarine, dodging me to submerge himself completely. “Reginald!” I grunt, standing up—and finding my new husband using me as a snorkel, planting my pussy right over his face, this time with his fingers joining him, sliding solidly into my tunnel and stroking against my g-spot. “I want to come for the first time on our honeymoon with you inside of me,” I finally manage to make words over my impending orgasm, and Reggie reappears, dripping wet, his sigils shimmering in the firelight, like all of him is covered in fresh ink.

“Do you know how hot you look?” I demand, fingers itching to touch him—and thrilled that I can. I run my hands over the wide planes of his chest and down to his hips.

“If it’s anywhere as hot as you look, we’re going to burn this place down,” he pants, grabbing me by the wrists.

This is a new side of him. Possessive. Aggressive. Still protective. There’s something sweet and desperate under every touch, something that’s hungry to be alive.

To create a life. A new life, together.

“Sit with me,” he pants, turning me, his hands sculpting me like I’m clay, too, molding his palms across my breasts, kneading my mound as he circles behind me. I obey easily, legs parted and slit dripping with arousal and water when I feel him



nudge my entrance.

Nudge, then stretch.

Reggie lifts me up easily, then sinks me down onto him, slowly, bending me forward as he works to get his much larger length inside of me, straining my walls and making me see stars at the edges of my vision.

When I think I can't take anymore, he rocks us back together, and I'm impaled even farther, sitting on his huge, thick cock as he crashes back to the ledge of the hot tub. Water splashes up over our thighs, but he was right. Not a drop of his cum will escape my pussy—because he's filled it so full, yes, but he's done something else, too.

“What did you make?” I babble, slowly starting to bounce on him, feeling each little ridge and swoop he's created, a pattern for my pleasure. To return the thoughtfulness, I make sure I squeeze, working every muscle I have against him as if I can suck the cum right out of him.

“A knot. Orcs and shifters have them. They keep you full. Encourage the likelihood of little ones by making sure sperm stays in.”

I bounce on him more firmly, getting used to the strained feeling, surprised at how fast the pleasure is building. “But won't it just slide out if I'm just bouncing up and down on—ooh. Ohhhh,fuck.” My question turns into a semi-pained, semi-blissful moan. The wide, rounded lump I felt at the base of Reggie's cock shrunk.

Then migrated.

That's right, not content with stuffing me and stretching me, he's also added an extra little something to send me over the edge. "It's like two cocks, but one's round and tiny," I gasp.

"I could easily make two. Three. However many you wanted," he laughs. "And it won't feel little for long. Are you sure you want me to come in you? Fill you?" His voice is dark and cloudy now, and his hands dig into my breasts to keep me seated on him.

"Oh, God. Yes, I want that. I love how you're filling me," I whimper.

"Good."

The little bulge that's wedged in my entrance starts to grow. Pushing my walls out and his cock in deeper, until I feel him more than bottom out; he rubs against my cervix, but like magic, Reggie's crown softens to cradle it while the rest of him stays rock hard. "You literally have a magical cock," I say, letting myself go limp in ecstasy.

"And you must have a magical pussy, taking so much, taking my knot. Do you like that, my love?"

Do I like feeling like I'm about to blackout from pleasure and not worrying about a damn thing? Yes. "I love it. Love you."

I push one of Reggie's hands down to work between my legs while I cup my breasts, teasing and tugging the nipples while my pleasure finally peaks.

I don't know quite what happened. I guess when your pussy and heart are so full, your lungs have to keep up. All I know is that reindeer on the other side of Greenland probably heard me scream as Reggie hammered into me, tugging me wider and fucking me deeper on every jackhammer stroke—and then burst inside of me while I was a shaking, blurry-eyed mess.

"Oh. Oh, my God." I come back to earth with a dizzy spiral, Reggie's head slumped against my shoulder.

"I can't move. I moved after I was shot seventeen times in Warsaw," he gasps.

"Can't move, either. Never been shot. Never will be, thanks to you."

He chuckles.

I giggle.

And then we're laughing, and flailing, and falling in the water, still glued together, and I think... I think that this is the best possible outcome for my life. I never expected to be the golem's bride, or for this ancient monstrous protector to be my soulmate, but I could not be any happier or more in love.

"Happy?" I venture.

"I did not know the meaning of joy until you."

"Aww. Baby, you're going to melt me into a puddle."

"I like it when you're soft and puddle-y," he chuckles, then helps me lean back

against him, and we sigh.

The sun shines on snow that won't melt, and we can see it from where we sit, surrounded by simple luxury at the icy edge of the world.

“Happy?” It's his turn to ask. “You aren't missing Pine Ridge, or even a land where the nearest neighbor is within ten miles?”

“I'm not missing anything. I have everything I want right here,” I look back up at Reggie, who presses a sleepy, satiated kiss to my forehead. “I'll be happy anywhere, as long as I'm with you.”