



A Dash of Halloween

Author: *Andy Gallo*

Category: LGBT+

Description: When software engineer Dash Reeves accepts a too-good-to-refuse job offer in Oriskany Falls, he expects small-town quirks. What he doesn't expect is a town obsessed with Halloween, or the mysterious and charming Slate Blackwood, whose family's haunted house attraction draws visitors from miles around.

Slate has spent years hiding his family's dangerous secret behind staged scares and special effects at Blackwood Manor. But when Dash appears at his gate one autumn evening, Slate recognizes something special in the handsome newcomer – if only he can convince the relationship-shy engineer to take a chance on love.

As Dash and Slate grow closer, the veil between worlds begins to tear. Spirits long trapped in darkness seek escape, threatening to overwhelm the living. Dash discovers he shares Slate's gift for communicating with the dead, but will their combined powers be enough to prevent catastrophe? With Halloween's Blue Moon approaching and malevolent forces gathering strength, they must find a way to seal the breach between worlds – or one of them might have to make the ultimate sacrifice.

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Chapter One

The "Welcome to Oriskany Falls" sign loomed before Dash Reeves, its cheerful pumpkin decorations grinning at him with unsettling enthusiasm. He white-knuckled the steering wheel, a mix of apprehension and resignation settling in his stomach as he crossed the town's threshold. The quaint main street that unfolded before him was a riot of orange and black, an assault on the senses that made him blink in disbelief.

Storefronts were festooned with gossamer cobwebs that shimmered in the autumn sunlight. Jack-o'-lanterns leered from every corner, their carved grins seeming to mock Dash's discomfort. He had no doubt, if he'd had the windows down he'd be assaulted by the ghastly smell of cinnamon and pumpkin spice. God, he hated pumpkin spice.

"You've got to be kidding me," Dash muttered, carefully navigating around a group of enthusiastic locals hanging a "31 Days of Halloween" banner across the street. A gust of wind sent dry leaves skittering across his windshield, momentarily obscuring his view. "It's only October 1st, for crying out loud."

This was precisely why he'd been hesitant about moving to a small town. Everything seemed to be everyone's business, and apparently, Halloween was Oriskany Falls' *raison d'être*. Dash sighed. He'd been thrilled to get the job offer. The pay was three times what he made before, and his contract said he could work remotely. Then he read the fine print.

He needed to live within a ten minute drive of the main office in case of emergency, and this was the only town fitting that requirement. Who built their headquarters in

the middle of nowhere. It was like the company specifically created the job so the new hire had to live in Oriskany Falls.

The raise and the significantly lower cost of living compared to the city made taking the job a smart choice. Faced with the town's overwhelming Halloween spirit, he began to second-guess that decision.

Another wrong turn and he was forced to drive down narrow, leaf-strewn streets that all seemed to blur together in a maze of autumnal colors and Halloween decorations. Dash finally found his new apartment building. The Victorian-style house, its faded elegance a testament to a prior time, had been converted into units. It was also mercifully free of decorations.

Hauling the last of his boxes up the creaky stairs, their protests echoing in the empty stairwell, Dash paused to catch his breath. His "cozy" one-bedroom apartment was a far cry from his sleek city loft, but it had way more character.

He unpacked his workstation onto the old wooden desk the company provided. The company told him they'd supply him a desk and Dash expected a brand new, flimsy, pressed board desk, not this sturdy antique piece. The company certainly did things in their own style, and if he hadn't seen their quarterly reports, he wouldn't believe they'd be profitable.

Quirky was fine for what they paid him. He'd even live with the side of Halloween madness.

Organizing his place took most of the day. He'd wanted to go for a run to see the town better, but his growling stomach forced Dash to shelve the run and head out in search of food. Pulling up restaurants near him on his phone, he trotted down the still creaky stairs and braved the explosion of decorations.

Walking down the main street, he dodged enthusiastic shopkeepers who seemed determined to drag every passerby into their Halloween-themed stores. The sidewalks were crowded with locals, their animated chatter about costume plans and candy selections grating on Dash's nerves.

"You look lost, dear," cackled a not-so-old woman who dressed as a witch, complete with a warty prosthetic nose that looked disturbingly real. "Care for a potion to help you find your way?" She thrust a vial of murky green liquid towards him, its contents swirling ominously.

"No, thank you," Dash replied, quickening his pace. This town was like a perpetual costume party, and he hadn't RSVP'd. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was trapped in some bizarre holiday-themed "Twilight Zone" episode.

As he turned a corner, seeking escape from the festive madness, Dash found himself face to face with an imposing wrought-iron gate. Beyond it loomed a magnificent Victorian mansion, its windows dark and uninviting, like vacant eyes staring into his soul. Tendrils of mist seemed to curl around the foundation, despite the clear autumn day. A weathered sign swung gently in the breeze: "Blackwood Manor - Oriskany Falls' Premier Haunted House Experience."

Dash snorted, a mix of derision and unease coloring the sound. Of course, the town would have a haunted house attraction. He was about to turn away when a flicker of movement caught his eye. A figure emerged from the shadows of the porch, and Dash lingered to get a better look.

The man who approached the gate was handsome and hot. Wavy black hair framed a face that belonged on magazine covers. He had incredible green eyes that were fixed on Dash with a curiosity that sought entrance to his soul.

Dash blinked at the crazy thoughts the town induced. The guy was hot, not a mutant

mind reader.

In the time it took Dash to clear his mind of weirdness, hot guy had nearly reached the gate. He moved with a fluid grace that seemed at odds with his vintage Victorian-inspired clothing. Gothic wasn't a look Dash favored, but it looked great on the guy.

"Hey," the man called out. The voice was friendly, but it sent a shiver down Dash's spine. "I don't think I've seen you around before. Are you here for a sneak peek of the haunted house?"

It took Dash a second to realize the guy hadn't come to check him out, but thought he was a potential customer. "No. I just moved here and I was exploring. Looking for food actually."

The man's face lit up with a dazzling smile that seemed to brighten the gloomy atmosphere around the manor. "A newcomer! Well, welcome to Oriskany Falls. I'm Slate Blackwood, and this—" he gestured grandly to the mansion, "—is my humble abode and place of business."

"Dash Reeves," he said, extending his hand through the gate. As Slate shook it, Dash felt a jolt that had nothing to do with static electricity. Slate's hand was surprisingly warm, a stark contrast to the chill that seemed to emanate from the house behind him.

"Dash?" Slate raised an eyebrow. "That's an unusual name."

Not the first time Dash got that response, but it was better than asking if he was super-fast. "It's a nickname. My real name is Morten, which proves parental cruelty is alive and well."

"At least you have a decent nickname." Slate frowned for a moment. "Try growing up as Slate Blackwood. My parents thought it would be 'unique' to have a color in my

first and last names. Kids at school called me 'Chalkboard.' That's not a name I planned to keep."

They both laughed, and the weird vibe Dash had been feeling dissipated a little. Which had nothing to do with the hot guy holding his hand, he told himself.

"So, Dash," Slate said, finally releasing his hand. "What brings you to our little Halloween haven?"

"Work. I was hired by EcoCode Solutions to write software that optimizes pretty much any machine to reduce their carbon footprints."

"Wow," Slate said. "Guess I should call you Dr. Dash cause you're so smart."

Before Dash could answer, a crash from inside the house made Slate turn, a flicker of what looked like genuine alarm crossing his features. "Shoot, I've got to run. But hey, why don't you stop by tomorrow? I'll give you the grand tour, maybe even let you peek behind the curtain of our famous haunted house."

"Um... sure. What time?"

Slate was backing up toward the house. "Come by around eleven. And try the chicken potpie at the diner. You won't be sorry."

With a wink that made Dash's heart skip a beat, Slate spun around and disappeared back into the shadows of Blackwood Manor. The gate creaked ominously in the sudden gust of wind, and for a moment, Dash could have sworn he heard a faint, otherworldly whisper carried on the breeze.

He stood there for a moment, staring at the spot where Slate had vanished, wondering if he'd imagined the entire encounter. The logical part of his brain insisted this was

just an elaborate marketing ploy for the haunted house, but a smaller, more intuitive part of him wasn't so sure.

Dash finally turned away from Blackwood Manor, shaking his head. The town's obsession with Halloween was a bit out there, but Slate was hot. He also told Dash to come back the next day. It wasn't a date, but it never hurt when a hot guy asked you to come visit.

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Chapter Two

Dash squinted at his computer screen, the lines of code swimming before his eyes. He wasn't a morning person, but he'd gotten up early so he could justify taking an early lunch. It hadn't been the most productive first day. His thoughts kept drifting back to Slate Blackwood and the invitation to visit him and his haunted house.

With a frustrated sigh, he pushed back from his desk and glanced at the clock. 10:45 AM. The fact he'd have to work later to make up for the time almost wiped the smile off his face. Almost. Dash chided himself for feeling excited about what was essentially a tourist trap, but he couldn't deny the interest in the mysterious house's charismatic owner.

As he approached the wrought-iron gates, a chill ran down Dash's spine that had nothing to do with the temperature. The manor looked different in the late morning sun than it had the afternoon before. Now the light hit the front of the house making it less ominous, and more impressive. Its weathered facade seemed to hold countless secrets, and for a moment, Dash could almost believe in the supernatural stories that Slate had hinted at.

Slate was already waiting for him, leaning against the gate with a casual grace that Dash found sexy. Today, he wore a deep burgundy waistcoat over a crisp white shirt, the vintage style somehow looking perfectly natural on him.

"Welcome back, Dash," Slate said, with a grin. "Ready for the grand tour?"

The smile was probably a practiced routine Slate used on visitors, but Dash smiled

back despite the butterflies in his stomach. "Lead the way, Ghostbuster. Just don't expect me to believe in any of your hocus pocus."

Slate chuckled and shook his head. "Another non-believer. Blackwood Manor has a way of challenging even the most steadfast skeptics."

As they walked through the manor, Dash was assaulted by a barrage of sensory input. The floorboards creaked ominously underfoot, and the air was thick with the scent of dust, old wood, and something else Dash couldn't quite place but it made the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

Slate regaled him with tales of the manor's history, his voice filled with a passion that was almost contagious. "Blackwood Manor has been in my family for generations," he explained, gesturing to a faded portrait of a stern-looking woman. "That's my great-great-grandmother, Esmerelda Blackwood. She started the haunted house tradition back in the 1920s."

Dash raised an eyebrow, his skepticism warring with his growing curiosity. "So, it's always been a tourist attraction?"

"Not exactly," Slate said, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Legend has it that Esmerelda could communicate with spirits. The haunted house began as a way to appease the ghosts and keep them entertained."

Before Dash could scoff at the idea, a loud crash echoed through the hallway. They both spun around to see a suit of armor lying in pieces on the floor, its helmet rolling to a stop at Dash's feet.

"That's... not supposed to happen," Slate muttered, looking genuinely perplexed. Dash watched as he knelt to examine the fallen armor, noting the way Slate's brow furrowed in concentration. It was oddly endearing.

As they continued the tour, Dash had the unshakable feeling they were being watched. Every creak and groan of the old house seemed to follow them, and more than once, Dash could have sworn he saw movement out of the corner of his eye.

Slate showed him the various rooms, each designed to elicit a different fear response from visitors. It was impressive, but Dash's analytical mind was more intrigued by the complex systems running behind the scenes.

"This is where the magic happens," Slate said, leading Dash into a control room filled with monitors and equipment. "Or at least, where it's supposed to happen. We've been having some technical difficulties lately."

As if on cue, the lights flickered, and one of the monitors emitted a high-pitched whine before going dark. The room was plunged into an eerie half-light, casting long shadows across Slate's worried face.

Slate ran a hand through his hair, looking frustrated. "See what I mean? I've had technicians look at it, but no one can figure out what's wrong. It's like the house has a mind of its own sometimes."

Dash found himself moving closer to the equipment, his fingers itching to diagnose the problem. Despite his skepticism about the haunted house concept, he couldn't deny the allure of a good technical challenge. "Have you considered that it might be a software issue rather than hardware?"

"That's actually why I invited you here today." Slate averted his eyes, but tried to keep up his smile. "I was hoping... you might be interested in helping me upgrade the systems?"

Dash knew Slate hadn't asked him over as a date, but it still felt like a gut punch finding out he'd been right. With his hopes squashed, he viewed it as any other job

offer. He had no interest in getting sucked into the town's Halloween obsession, but the tech geek in him was interested in finding a solution. The deadlock was broken when Slate looked up, almost pleading for help.

Even knowing Slate was playing him by pretending to flirt, Dash let his little head cast the deciding vote. "I suppose I could take a look," he said, trying to sound reluctant but it didn't quite work.

"Fantastic." Slate's face broke into a dazzling smile, confirming Dash had been played. "I promise, it'll be worth your while. And who knows? Maybe you'll even start to believe in the magic of Oriskany Falls."

Just then, there was a loud knock on the door. Before either of them could react, the door burst open and a petite woman with intricate braids and vintage-inspired clothing rushed toward them. "Slate, you won't believe what I found in the archives!"

She stopped short when she saw Dash, her expression shifting from surprise to keen interest. "Oh, hello! You must be the newcomer everyone's talking about."

Dash flinched at the comment. "How could people be talking about me? I met Slate and the waitress at the diner, and all she did was take my order."

He looked at Slate, but if he'd been gossiping, he didn't show any embarrassment. "It's a small town," Slate said. "People must've seen you move in, or eat at the diner. Don't worry about it. Everyone's friendly."

The answer didn't fully calm Dash's irritation. This was exactly what he feared would happen. He didn't want the whole town knowing his every move. "They talk to each other a lot, it seems."

"Something like that." Slate shrugged and pointed to the woman. "This ball of energy

is Olivia Chen. Oriskany Falls' town historian and my best friend since second grade. Liv, this is Dash Reeves. He might be our technical savior."

Liv shook Dash's hand enthusiastically, her grip surprisingly strong for someone so small. "It's so nice to meet you! How are you finding Oriskany Falls? Has our Halloween spirit won you over yet?"

Given the town's fervent embrace of the holiday and their proclivity for gossip, he didn't want anyone to find out he didn't share their love for October thirty-first. "It's different," Dash said guardedly.

Liv laughed, a tinkling sound that lightened the room's atmosphere. "Oh, you have no idea. Oriskany Falls' Halloween traditions go back centuries. Did Slate tell you about the ghost of Esmerelda Blackwood? They say she still wanders these halls, making sure the haunted house lives up to her standards."

Dash opened his mouth to express his skepticism, but a cold breeze swept through the room causing him to shiver. The monitors flickered to life, displaying a series of strange symbols before going dark again. The temperature seemed to drop several degrees in an instant.

Slate and Liv exchanged a look that Dash couldn't quite decipher. The mixture of excitement and apprehension made him sure he'd missed something crucial. He was caught between the rational world he understood and the strangeness of the house he couldn't explain.

He was about to back out of his agreement, but Slate's hopeful expression ended that idea. It was too late. He'd told Slate he'd help and he couldn't disappoint him. No, make that he didn't want to be the reason Slate lost his smile.

"I can come by after work tonight." A shiver ran down his spine, as he realized he'd

committed to being inside the house after dark.

As if in response, the lights in the control room surged brightly for a moment before plunging them all into darkness, leaving only the faint, ghostly glow of the computer screens. In that moment, surrounded by the enigmatic Slate, the enthusiastic Liv, and the palpable sense of otherworldly presence, Dash realized that his life in Oriskany Falls was going to be far from the quiet, logical existence he had planned.

Oddly, while that should have upset him, he decided it might not be a bad thing.

Chapter Three

Dash stood at the gates of Blackwood Manor. The moon was nearly full, but it wasn't high enough to illuminate the grounds. Not that he really wanted to see what things looked like in the moonlight.

He'd sent Slate a text, glad they'd remembered at the last minute to exchange numbers. The gates were closed, and Dash had zero intentions of climbing the fence. He wasn't even sure he wanted to walk through the gate at night.

Worried he'd come up short on his first day, he'd put his head down and focused on work the entire afternoon. It also helped him forget he had to visit Blackwood at night.

Waiting for Slate to respond was borderline nerve-wracking. Dash wasn't superstitious, but he freely admitted being a bit uneasy. Unless he suddenly started to hear voices, there was something weird about Blackwood Manor. He was equally sure Slate and Liv knew something they weren't telling Dash.

A smart Dash would've headed home, but Slate messed with his head. They hadn't discussed sexuality, but Dash was certain Slate liked guys. Maybe not exclusively, but enough that he'd sent signals even someone as dense as Dash recognized. Most were probably to get Dash to help, but their first meeting, Slate held hands a bit too long for him to be straight. He also didn't know Dash was a software engineer.

None of which explained why Dash hadn't left already. Doing something to impress the hot guy was only a few steps below prostitution. Besides, Dash didn't do

relationships. His parent's divorce was ugly, and they were bitter, lonely people ever since. He'd rather stay single than be hurt, angry, and miserable.

A light came on over the front door, and Slate popped out, his silhouette backlit by the soft glow inside. The new vintage-inspired outfit he wore blurred the lines between past and present. How many of those different sets of Victorian clothing did he own? Dash got that it added to the manor's timeless atmosphere, but the house wasn't open for business yet.

"Right on time," Slate called out. "That's a good sign." He flashed a knee-weakening smile, and Dash couldn't remember why he hadn't wanted to visit.

"Precision is important when writing code," Dash said as he waited for Slate to unlock the gate.

"Good attitude." He pulled Dash into a brief hug before motioning toward the manor. "Ready to work some tech magic?"

Dash hadn't managed expectations well enough if Slate thought he could magically solve Blackwood's tech problems. It could be a combination of things, code being one of them. "Let's see what we're dealing with first before we start calling anything magic."

Behind them, the gate creaked its way shut, closing with a clink of metal on metal. The sound gave Dash an 'oh shit' moment. This was what happened when he let his dick think for him.

"I'm really glad you agreed to help," Slate said. "It gets lonely in the house. Most nights it's just me."

Another ambiguous comment Dash couldn't figure out. "How long have you lived

here?"

"Since I was twenty-two." Slate opened the front door and let Dash go in first. "My grandmother left me the house when my parents didn't want to take over the business."

"If this is too nosey, tell me, but how old are you?"

"Not too nosey," Slate said. "Twenty-seven last month. Have you had dinner?"

There hadn't been any mention of eating together, but Dash hadn't wanted to spoil his appetite if it turned into a dinner date. "Does a protein bar on the walk over count?"

"Definitely not." Slate frowned. "Why would you eat those? They taste awful."

Most nights, after a run, Dash didn't have the motivation to cook or even order take out. "I run a lot. They help deliver energy over an extended period."

"I had a hunch you wouldn't eat, so I ordered take out." Slate led them into a formal dining room. Under an amazing crystal chandelier, the table was set for twelve. "Liv's parents own the Chinese restaurant in town. It's pretty good, especially if you know the owners."

They passed through the dining room, down a long hallway, and came to a large, well-lit kitchen. Two place settings were at one end of a table capable of seating at least eight. Slate had the food already on the table. There was way more than the two of them could eat.

"I didn't know what you liked, so I ordered a variety."

Dash's first thought was how rich was Slate. The haunted house couldn't support the

upkeep, much less Slate. He pushed that wildly inappropriate notion aside. "Thank you. That's very kind of you. I eat most things, so I'm sorry you bought so much."

"No worries, we can eat it later in the week." Slate pointed to a chair and continued to the large restaurant size refrigerator. "I have water, lemonade, wine, and some soda. I'd avoid the sodas. They're all diet because Liv doesn't want all the empty calories."

Dash had been staring at Slate's butt and almost forgot to answer. At least he could play it off like he was deciding. "Water or lemonade are fine. Whichever you're having."

"Both." Slate brought two containers to the table. "I like lemonade but it's too sweet, so I cut it with water."

For something that wasn't a date, Dash couldn't shake the date like vibe Slate was throwing off. "Then both it is for me too."

"Excellent choice." Slate filled each glass half with water and the rest with lemonade.

They filled their plates, and Slate smiled when Dash picked up a pair of chop sticks. "What?" Dash asked

"Practically no one in town can use chop sticks." He pointed his sticks at Dash. "You're the perfect dinner companion for tonight's meal. If you'd used the fork I'd probably have cringed the whole time."

Dash found it funny that something he and all his friends did in the city made Slate so happy. He wasn't complaining. Anything he did that made Slate happy was a good thing.

They spent the next ten minutes eating without talking. Slate encouraged Dash to

have more, but he declined. "If I eat too much, I'll fall asleep before we finish."

"That's okay," Slate said before putting a piece of chicken in his mouth. "I have plenty of guest rooms."

Dash laughed it off, but he wasn't sure he could spend a night in Blackwood Manor. "A guest room won't get the work done."

"Tell me more about what you do." Slate leaned forward with genuine interest.

Dash shrugged. "It's mostly problem-solving. Finding ways to make systems more efficient and reduce energy consumption. Not nearly as exciting as running a haunted house."

"It's interesting," Slate said. "It's also lonely. Small towns don't have the best dating pools, especially when you're gay."

Dash nearly choked on his food. After coughing for a few seconds, he noticed Slate lost his ever present smile. Pointing and hoping Slate got the message to hold on, Dash took a drink to get himself under control. "Sorry, I didn't expect that. Let me counter that with, cities have more gay men, but most just like to play games."

Their eyes met, and Dash watched Slate's smile return. "I wasn't sure if you were too, so I figured outing myself was the fastest way to resolve things."

Dash grinned at how brazen Slate was. "You don't like to tap dance do you."

"Truth, I learned as a kid, but I sucked so I gave it up," he said wiggling his eyebrows. "I tried feeling you out, but I didn't get a clear signal, so I tried being direct. It worked."

Dash laughed. "Yes it did."

They finished eating and Dash help clean up. It was a tiny slice of domestic life Dash wanted but avoided because he was afraid of turning into his parents. "Thanks again. This was nice."

"My pleasure, and I totally mean it," Slate said. "Other than Liv, I haven't had anyone over for dinner in years. It was nice."

They made their way to the control room, and Dash noticed how different the house felt at night. Shadows seemed to move on their own accord, and more than once, he could have sworn he heard whispers just at the edge of his hearing.

"Is it always this... atmospheric at night?" Dash asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

Slate chuckled, the sound warm and reassuring in the gloom. "The manor does have a certain charm after dark. Don't worry, you'll get used to it."

In the control room, Dash immersed himself in the technology, his fingers flying over keyboards as he diagnosed issues and proposed solutions. The setup was more complex than he'd initially thought, a mix of modern equipment and older systems that seemed almost custom-built.

"Your main issue is integration," Dash explained, pointing to a diagram he'd sketched. "You've got newer programs trying to communicate with legacy systems. It's creating bottlenecks and causing the glitches you've been experiencing."

Slate leaned in close to peer at the diagram, his arm brushing against Dash's. The contact sent a jolt through Dash, but it wasn't welcome. Slate wanted someone to share his life with, and Dash didn't do commitments.

"So, you can fix it?" Slate asked, his lips near Dash's ear.

Dash swallowed, trying to focus on the task at hand and not on how close Slate was standing. "I think so," he replied, his voice slightly hoarse. "Your system's outdated, and can't handle some of the more complex programs. I can try to create some custom interfaces to help bridge the gaps. In theory it should work."

Suddenly, the lights flickered, and a cold breeze swept through the room. One of the monitors sparked, causing both of them to jump back. The acrid smell of electrical burn filled the air.

"That's new," Slate muttered, looking concerned. "It's never done that before."

As they worked to get the systems back online, the strange occurrences continued. Cold spots appeared and disappeared, tools seemed to move when they weren't looking, and at one point, they heard what sounded like a woman's laughter echoing through the halls.

Dash tried to rationalize each event. "Old houses settle all the time," he said after a particularly loud creak. "And the temperature fluctuations are probably just drafts." But even as he spoke, he found himself less and less convinced by his own explanations.

He caught Slate watching him with a mix of amusement and something else he couldn't quite identify. Was it concern? Or maybe hope?

"Still think it's all smoke and mirrors?" Slate asked, his voice low and challenging.

Before Dash could respond, the door burst open. Liv rushed in carrying an arm full of old books and papers. Her sudden entrance broke the tension that had been building between them.

"Sorry I'm late," she said breathlessly, her cheeks flushed with excitement. "But I really need to show you something."

She spread the documents out on a nearby table, the yellowed papers and leather-bound books filled the air with the musty scent of history. "Look here," she said, indicating an old sepia-toned photograph. "This is Esmerelda Blackwood on the night she first opened the haunted house. And see that shadow behind her? It's not cast by anything visible in the photo."

Dash leaned in, his skepticism warring with his curiosity. The shadow did seem oddly placed, and its form was disturbingly humanoid. "It could be a double exposure," he suggested, but his voice lacked conviction.

As they pored over the documents, the temperature in the room dropped dramatically. Dash could see his breath misting in the air. The lights began to flicker more intensely, and a low, mournful moan emanated from the walls.

Dash had just finished rationalizing everything, when all the equipment in the room sprang to life at once. Monitors displayed static and strange symbols, speakers emitted high-pitched whines that made them all wince, and in the center of the room, a swirling vortex of mist began to form.

Dash stumbled back. This was beyond any explanation he could muster. The mist seemed to have depth and substance, swirling in patterns that defied physics. He looked to Slate and Liv, expecting to see the same shock on their faces, but instead saw a mix of excitement and apprehension.

As quickly as it had appeared, the vortex dissipated, leaving the room in eerie silence. The only sound was their heavy breathing and the faint hum of the equipment cooling down. The air was thick with the smell of ozone and something he couldn't identify.

"What... what was that?" Dash finally asked, his voice barely above a whisper. His hands shook, so he clenched them into fists to steady himself.

Slate and Liv exchanged a look before Slate turned to Dash. "That was just the beginning. Still think you can explain everything with logic and science?"

Dash opened his mouth to argue, but he had no words. As he looked around the room, at the now-calm equipment, at Liv's excited face, and at Slate's challenging gaze, he realized that his neat, orderly world had just been turned upside down.

And despite the fear and confusion, a small part of him was thrilled by the prospect of unraveling this mystery alongside Slate and Liv. He took a deep breath, steadying himself. "Okay," he said, meeting Slate's gaze. "I'm listening. Tell me what's really going on in this house."

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Chapter Four

The control room of Blackwood Manor hummed with an eerie silence in the wake of the supernatural display. The acrid scent of ozone still lingered in the air, mingling with the musty odor of old books and the faint hint of pumpkin spice that seemed to permeate every corner of Oriskany Falls. Dash tried to process what he'd just witnessed, but there was no logical explanation for what he'd seen.

He looked from Slate to Liv, searching for any sign that this was all an elaborate hoax. Neither would meet his gaze. "I know you two know what happened," Dash said, his voice shakier than he'd like. He ran a hand through his hair, a nervous habit he thought he'd outgrown. "What the heck did I just see?"

Slate exchanged a glance with Liv and she shrug-nodded. Slate's usual charismatic smile was replaced by a somber expression. "Blackwood Manor isn't just a haunted attraction, Dash. It's genuinely haunted."

Liv smiled like she'd been waiting for Slate's confession. She clutched her leather-bound notebook to her chest like a shield. "The paranormal activity here has been documented for generations. What you just saw? That's a low-level event. Worse are coming."

Dash shook his head, clinging to his skepticism like a lifeline. The logical part of his brain scrambled for explanations. "There has to be a rational explanation. Maybe it's some kind of advanced holographic technology? Or a sophisticated AR system?"

Deep down, Dash knew none of those were true. Slate wouldn't have pulled a prank

like that on him. At least he didn't think he would.

"I wish all this was just a hoax," Slate said. He moved closer, but Dash backed away. "The truth is my family's been dealing with these spirits for almost a century."

As if on cue, a bone-chilling wail echoed through the manor, causing all three of them to jump. The sound seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once, reverberating through Dash's very bones. He felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up, a primal response to the otherworldly noise.

"That wasn't special effects, was it?" he asked, already knowing the answer but desperately hoping to be proven wrong.

"No, it wasn't," Slate said, his eyes filled with sympathy. "Look, I know this is a lot to take in, but?—"

The room plunged into darkness, and the temperature dropped dramatically. A faint, bluish glow emanated from the center of the room. Dash saw his breath misting in the air. The light coalesced into a translucent, humanoid shape. The figure of a woman in Victorian-era clothing slowly materialized, her features eerily similar to the photograph Liv had shown them earlier.

Dash stumbled backward until he hit the wall. His heart pounded so hard he felt it bang against his sternum. The rush of blood in his ears almost drowned out the ghostly whispers that filled the room. "What the hell is that?"

"That appears to be the ghost of Esmerelda Blackwood," Liv whispered, her fear mixed with more than a hint of fascination.

The spectral figure turned its gaze on Dash, its hollow eyes seeming to peer into his very soul. He felt a wave of dizziness wash over him, and for a moment, the world

seemed to blur and shift. Strange images flashed through his mind: a moonlit garden, a hidden room filled with arcane symbols, a swirling vortex of otherworldly energy, and two words. “Help Slate.”

As quickly as they came, the visions vanished, leaving Dash disoriented and shaken.

Slate moved protectively in front of Dash, his voice firm as he addressed the apparition. “Great-great-grandmother, Dash means you no harm. I’m working to fix things. Please, return to your rest.”

The ghost’s mouth moved, but instead of words, a cacophony of whispers filled the room. The equipment around them sparked and sputtered, monitors flashing with strange symbols and fragmented images. The air crackled with an unseen energy, making Dash’s skin tingle uncomfortably.

As suddenly as it had appeared, the spectral figure vanished. In her wake, she left a lingering chill. The room was plunged back into normal lighting, the abrupt change almost as jarring as the ghostly encounter itself.

Dash slid down the wall, his legs no longer able to support him. Thoughts whizzed through his head as he tried to reconcile what he’d just experienced with reality. “That... that was real, wasn’t it?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Slate knelt beside him, placing a comforting hand on Dash’s left shoulder. The warmth of his touch was a stark contrast to the lingering chill in the air. “I’m sorry, Dash. I should have been more upfront about the true nature of Blackwood Manor. Are you okay?”

Dash nodded numbly, his gaze unfocused. “I think so. It’s just... everything I thought I knew about the world has just been turned upside down.”

When he looked up, he saw the weariness in Slate's eyes. Dash recalled what Slate had said to his ancestor. "How do you deal with this on a daily basis?"

Liv joined them and crouched on Dash's right. She opened her notebook to a fresh page and scribbled something Dash couldn't see. "The Blackwood family has been dealing with these spirits for generations. Slate's the only one of his generation with the gift."

"I don't deal with it every day," Slate said. "Things aren't usually this active. Something's changed."

Slate helped Dash to his feet, his touch lingering a moment longer than necessary. Their eyes met, and Dash felt a spark of connection that had nothing to do with the supernatural.

He tried to push it away. Who in their right mind would get involved in this craziness?

"That's why we need your help, Dash," Slate said. "We think the increased paranormal activity might be linked to the malfunctioning equipment. Your expertise could be crucial in figuring out what's going on."

Dash shook his head. "You know it's not the equipment, and my coding expertise can't solve this problem. Why am I really here?"

Liv gave Slate a "told you so" look, and walked away.

"Coward," Slate hissed at her back. He took a deep breath and fixed his gaze on Dash. "I really don't know. When you showed up at the gate yesterday, I felt you. Or at least I felt someone at the gate."

“He’s been waiting for you,” Liv said without looking up from her book.

“Waiting for me?”

Slate shot daggers into his friend’s back, “Not you specifically, but someone who could help me.”

Esmerelda told him to help Slate. It seemed ridiculously coincidental Dash was the person who could help and miraculously arrived at the right time. “There’s more to this. If you want my help, you need to tell me the truth.”

“EcoCode Solutions is owned by my family’s trust,” Slate said. “They’ve been searching for the right person for a few years.”

“You want me to believe your family knew the right person would be a coder.” He waved a hand at Slate. “I’m out of here. Thanks for dinner and the entertainment.”

The temperature dropped again, and the door slammed shut. At the edge of his consciousness, Dash heard Esmerelda’s voice, “Help Slate.”

Dash spun around and pointed a finger at Slate and Liv. “Stop doing that.”

“We didn’t do anything,” Slate said. “What happened?”

Turning back to the door, his words died on his lips. The door he’d watched slam shut, was still open. He tried to explain, but he couldn’t keep one thought long enough to speak. Finally, he leaned against a worktable. “This isn’t real. It’s not real. You drugged the food, didn’t you?”

“Of course I didn’t,” Slate said. “You don’t have to believe what’s happening, but don’t insult me.”

“Slate,” Liv put a hand on his arm. “This was a lot to drop on him. Give him some time.”

“No,” Dash said. “He has a right to be upset. I’m sorry, Slate. You’ve been nothing but nice to me, but I’m confused. None of this makes sense.”

The room was quiet as Dash replayed everything. Finally, he looked at Slate. “Esmerelda told me to help you. Twice. How?”

“I’m not sure.” Slate said. “This is new ground for me. I was too young to remember the last time this happened.”

“This?”

“Everything.” Slate waved his hand around the room. “It’s not the first time this has happened.”

“So, how long has this been going on?” Dash asked. “The haunting, I mean.”

Liv pulled out a leather-bound journal from her bag, its pages yellowed with age. “According to family records, it started with Esmerelda Blackwood in the 1920s. She was known as a medium, someone who could communicate with spirits.”

Slate nodded, his eyes distant as if recalling a long-ago memory. “The story goes that she opened the veil between our world and the spirit realm, intending to help lost souls find peace. But something went wrong.”

“Wrong? How?” Dash asked, not sure he wanted to know the answer.

“The barrier became too thin,” Liv said. She sounded like a professor teaching a class. “Spirits crossed over easily, and not all of them were benevolent. Esmerelda

spent the rest of her life trying to control the situation, and each generation of Blackwoods since has taken up the mantle.”

Dash paused, looking at Slate with newfound respect and concern. “So, running the haunted house is what? A way to make money?”

“Slate doesn’t need money,” Liv said. She flinched when he glared at her, and walked to the far end of the room.

“By running the haunted house, it provides cover for any weird activities that happen,” Slate said. “It’s not fool proof, but it helps. Lately, however, things have been getting out of hand.”

As if to emphasize his point, a nearby cabinet door slammed open, books and papers flying out as if caught in a windstorm. Dash ducked, narrowly avoiding being hit by a heavy tome. A strange, metallic scent floated in the air.

“Fine,” he said looking up to address whoever was watching. “I believe, but what can I do? I’m a software engineer, not a ghostbuster.”

“I honestly don’t know why you were chosen,” Slate said. “I know you’re frustrated, but I am too.”

“At least Dash is a hottie,” Liv said.

Slate turned bright red, and growled in Liv’s direction. Dash wondered how they didn’t kill each other yet. “I think you’re hot too, if that helps.”

“I’m not sure if it helps with the problem, but I’m glad you think so.” Slate’s smile was back. “Liv’s timing isn’t how I wanted it to go, but I’m not mad she told you how I feel.”

Liv certainly sped up the awkward dance they were doing, but Dash still had his reservations. “As flattered and interested as I am, we probably should focus on what’s happening instead of each other. For now at least. You’re very... distracting. In a good way. And I think I’m going to shut up before I embarrass myself more.”

The amused look on Slate’s face made Dash want to crawl in a hole. Why didn’t he just profess his undying love for the man.

“I think you’re distracting in a good way too,” Slate said.

The frenetic pace of events since he’d arrived in Oriskany Falls left Dash lurching from one event to the other. It was like having too many lines of code open and unfinished. Nothing good came of such a jumble.

“Can we take a break?” he asked. “I need some air.”

Chapter Five

The Oriskany Falls town square was bustling with people and shops. Dash didn't know how many people lived in town, but it seemed they'd all turned out for the festival. Was it really a festival if it happened every night for a whole month?

The town had been transformed into a whimsical autumnal landscape. It reminded him of the Christmas bazaars when he was a kid, only with a different theme. Jack-o'-lanterns of all sizes lined the streets, their flickering grins casting dancing shadows on the worn cobblestones, twinkling fairy lights crisscrossed overhead, and the god-awful scent of pumpkin spice.

Dash tugged on Slate's arm at the caramel apple stand. He held up three fingers, and Slate and Liv nodded. Paying the merchant, he grabbed three sticks and handed them out. Stuffing the change in his pocket, he found another difference between Oriskany Falls and the city—cash. No one at the festival accepted payment by phone, and most didn't accept credit cards. Thankfully, Liv had warned him, and he hit the ATM before meeting them.

"I still can't believe you've never been to a proper Halloween festival," Slate said, taking a bite of his apple.

He looked as amazing as always in a vintage-inspired outfit that perfectly straddled the line between costume and everyday wear. Dash stuck out in his jeans, hoodie, and Cuban fedora hat. Hopefully no one got offended, because he wasn't buying a new wardrobe of Victorian-inspired clothes.

“Growing up in the city, Halloween was more about overpriced candy and questionable costume parties. This has a very different vibe.”

“Well, prepare to have your mind blown,” Slate grinned, grabbing Dash’s hand and pulling him towards a nearby booth. “First stop: Madame Zelda’s Cauldron of Curiosities!”

Slate had changed since the incident at Blackwood Manor two nights earlier. He touched Dash more, walked closer, and called just to say hello. Dash saw this behavior as a precursor to a relationship. A week ago, Dash would have run away scared, but he liked being close with Slate.

He was still processing his feelings when he found himself face-to-face with an elderly woman wearing an outrageous purple wig and enough jangling jewelry to stock a small boutique. She peered at him over half-moon spectacles, her eyes unnervingly sharp and knowing.

“Ah, the newcomer,” she crooned, her voice raspy yet somehow melodious. “Care to have your fortune told, dear?”

Dash didn’t like everyone calling him the newcomer, and he was totally skeptical of fortune telling. Even his supernatural experiences at Blackwood Manor didn’t change his opinion that this was something he’d find at a seedy carnival midway exhibit. “I’m good, thanks.”

“Oh, go on,” Slate handed the woman ten dollars and nudged Dash forward. “It’s all part of the Oriskany Falls experience.”

He held out his palm because he knew it would make Slate happy. The significance of that needed to be unpacked at a later date.

Madame Zelda's fingers were surprisingly warm as she traced the lines on his hand, her touch sending an unexpected shiver down his spine.

"Interesting," she murmured, her brow furrowing. "I see a great change coming... a veil lifting... and a choice that will alter your path forever." Her eyes snapped up to meet his, startlingly clear and intense. "Beware the night of the Blue Moon, dear. That's when the veil is thinnest, and secrets long buried may come to light."

A chill ran through Dash, and he quickly withdrew his hand. "Uh, thank you," he mumbled, backing away from the booth, unsettled by how her words seemed to echo the strange events at Blackwood Manor.

Slate followed, his expression a mix of curiosity and concern. "You okay? You look like you've seen a ghost again."

Dash blinked, trying to shake off the eerie feeling. "What was all that stuff about the Blue Moon and the veil is thinnest?"

"You know how fortune tellers are." Slate tried to brush it off, but his voice was uneasy. "It's just some words."

"No," Dash stopped walking. "Some of what she said felt like what happened at your house."

"Not really. All that stuff is part of the local legend," Slate said with more conviction. "This time of year, everyone's telling ghost stories."

Dash wanted to believe him, but he was sure there was more going on than he knew. He didn't think Slate was lying as much as keeping back information. What Zelda said was generic enough that it could be just as Slate said.

“Liv ditched us while you were getting your fortune read,” Slate said. “Let’s see if we can find her.”

Dash ignored the obvious redirection, and followed Slate deeper into the festival. As they walked around the town square, Dash gradually relaxed. The townspeople, while undeniably quirky, were welcoming in a way he hadn’t experienced before. He watched a surprisingly intense pumpkin carving contest where the gourds appeared to change expression on their own, and even allowed Slate to paint a small jack-o’-lantern on his cheek, the cool paint tingling slightly on his skin.

The painting had been more intimate than Dash expected. It required them to be inches apart for several minutes. That close, with nothing to do except remain still, Dash studied Slate's face. Slate smiled the entire time, like he'd wanted to do this his whole life. Every time their eyes met, Slate's smile widened. Dash didn't exactly swoon, because who swooned, but it made him feel appreciated, and strangely at home in this eccentric town.

“Dash! Slate!” Liv’s voice cut through the festival chatter. She appeared in a new outfit from when they last saw her. She must’ve gone home to change into a witchy costume, complete with a pointed hat adorned with tiny, softly glowing pumpkins. “I’ve been looking for you two. Oh, nice pumpkin, Dash.”

Dash blushed, and wondered if she knew he let Slate do it. The way Slate smiled proudly, she could probably guess. “Slate painted it. Said I needed more Halloween spirit.”

“Did he.” She dragged out the second word. “He’s always been good at art. I take it you’re having fun?”

He caught himself before playing it down. Slate wanted to come to the festival with Dash and while they didn’t talk about it, this was a date. “It’s more fun than I

expected,” Dash said, sneaking a peek at Slate. “Though I’m still trying to wrap my head around some of these customs. What’s with the competitive gourd rolling?”

Liv’s eyes lit up, and she launched into an enthusiastic explanation. “Oh, that’s one of our oldest traditions! It dates back to the town’s founding in 1692. Legend has it that a group of witches used enchanted pumpkins to escape persecution. Now we reenact it every year as a way to honor our history and have a bit of fun.”

Since he was going to have to live in Oriskany Falls, Dash had researched the town before accepting the job. He hadn’t read anything about their obsession with Halloween. He found the town’s history fascinating, especially how the lore and legend infused itself into every aspect of life here.

He snuck glances at Slate as Liv detailed other unique Oriskany Falls customs like the midnight moth release, the whisper tree rituals, and the peculiar habit of leaving offerings of cinnamon cookies at crossroads. Slate caught him every time Dash looked. For someone so confident, Slate seemed hesitant when it came to Dash.

Inching closer, he brushed his hand against Slate’s. He wasn’t sure what it would accomplish, but he hoped it would send the message that Dash was glad to be at the festival together. A second later, Slate hooked his pinky around Dash’s.

They both stood still, staring ahead as if looking at each other would break the moment.

“Oh, for the love of pumpkins,” Liv said, rolling her eyes. “Would you two hold hands already?”

He looked at Slate who was as red faced as Dash felt. Neither pulled away, so Dash twisted his wrist until he laced his fingers with Slate’s. The smile he got in return was priceless.

“Much better,” Liv said. “Let’s move around. I need a pumpkin spice chai.”

Dash didn’t groan at the mention of the horrid drink, he was too pleased to be holding Slate’s hand.

Liv led the way, threading them through the crowd. Walking with Slate’s hand wrapped around his, the festival took on a more magical atmosphere for Dash. He laughed more, noticed new things, and had way more fun than he expected when he agreed to come.

They’d made their way around the perimeter of the square, and stood in front of the large open space in the center. Couples had gathered and appeared to be waiting for something.

“What’s this?” Dash asked.

“The Midnight Waltz.” Slate’s ever-present smile grew wider. “It’s another old Oriskany Falls tradition. Legend has it that if you dance with someone at midnight between the full moons, your souls become entwined for a year and a day.”

Dash raised an eyebrow, a mix of skepticism and intrigue washing over him. “That sounds potentially complicated.”

“Scared?” Slate teased. The moonlight caught his green eyes, making them seem to glow. “Come on, it’s just a dance. Unless you believe in all that soul-binding stuff.”

A gust of wind swept through the square, carrying with it the scent of wood smoke and something wilder, more ancient. Several nearby lanterns flickered and went out. In the shadows, Dash thought he saw ghostly figures twirling at the edge of his vision, their forms translucent and shimmering. An instant later they were gone.

“Did you see that?” he asked Slate in a shaky whisper.

“The veil’s getting thinner,” Slate said, his expression serious. “We should probably go.”

The music swelled before Dash could agree. A haunting melody engulfed them, and the crowd surged forward, sweeping Dash and Slate with them onto the makeshift dance floor. Surrounded by dozens of couples, Dash was pressed close to Slate, and they moved to the ethereal tune.

Dash forgot about the strangeness of the town, and the eerie event that brought them into the dance. Those thoughts were pushed aside by the feel of Slate’s hand on his waist, the warmth of his breath, the way their bodies seemed to fit together so well. They twirled under the moon light, and Dash felt a strange sensation. He was probably just imagining things, but it was as if invisible threads wove around them, binding them together in ways he couldn’t fully comprehend.

The music reached a crescendo, and their faces mere inches apart. Dash’s heart pounded as Slate leaned closer. He felt the warmth of Slate’s breath on his face.

“Well, well, well,” a shrill voice cut through the moment like a knife. “Looks like our Slate has found himself a beau!”

They broke apart to find an older woman staring at them with undisguised glee. Around them, other townspeople were watching with varying degrees of interest and amusement, some whispering behind their hands, others grinning openly.

Dash’s face flushed as he straightened up, very aware of the many eyes upon them. It was like being back in high school, and everyone wanted to know who was dating who. Slate, however, was unfazed by the attention.

“Mrs. Finch,” he said smoothly, a charming smile on his face. “I see you’re as observant as ever. Always first with the news, aren’t you?”

The older woman started asking a barrage of question, but Slate moved them off the floor. “Welcome to small-town life.”

Despite his embarrassment, Dash didn’t mind as much as he thought he would. There was something almost comforting about being part of the town’s gossip. The people cared enough to notice. It was a stark contrast to the anonymity of city life.

They made their way through the crowd, ignoring questions and dodging knowing looks. Dash smiled at how different this place was from what he imagined when he first arrived. He decided Halloween wasn’t so bad, except for pumpkin spice.

They passed by Madame Zelda’s booth and he caught her eye. She smiled at him, but then put a finger to her temple. Her earlier warning, “Beware the night of the Blue Moon,” echoed in his mind.

Dash shivered and he was reminded that beneath the festive exterior, a deeper and possibly darker mystery still waited to be unraveled.

Slate must have sensed his unease, because he squeezed Dash’s hand reassuringly. “Doing okay?”

Dash nodded, forcing a smile. “Yeah. Taking it all in.”

They left the town square and the sounds of the festival faded behind them. Dash found himself at a crossroads, both literally and figuratively. To his left was his rented apartment, and the life he’d known before coming to Oriskany Falls. Blackwood Manor and it’s uncharted territory and potential danger was to his right.

Slate hadn't invited him to come home with him, but when they each headed toward their respective homes, Slate hadn't let go. For all his outward confidence and happy exterior, Dash realized Slate was as insecure about some things as Dash.

He met Slate's gaze and felt a gentle tug on his hand. It was almost too soft to notice, but it was a seismic event to Dash. He hesitated for a moment, and then leaned to his right. Slate's smile almost lit up the night.

They turned right, still holding hands and headed toward Blackwood Manor.

Chapter Six

D ash stirred, momentarily disoriented by the unfamiliar surroundings. As consciousness fully returned, memories of the previous night flooded back. He hadn't known what to expect when they got back to Blackwood Manor, but it had been nice.

They held hands and talked about trivial things that had nothing to do with supernatural events or what was happening between them. Once back at the manor, they sat in the kitchen drinking hot chocolate and pretending nothing weird had happened or would in the coming days. Slate brought up the computer system, telling Dash the haunted house actually did rely on tricks because no one could predict the spirits. Dash agreed to look at it in the morning.

Slate showed Dash to a guest room, gave him towels and some soap to wash off the face paint, and ended with a sweet, but mostly chaste goodnight kiss. Dash couldn't decide if he was upset nothing else happened or glad. The old him would be disappointed, because sex was all that Dash would've wanted. The idea they'd wait made no sense. Wait for what? Dash didn't do strings or relationships.

The current version wasn't so clear on his motivation. He didn't mind waiting because there was a promise of more to come. The fact he hadn't been disappointed was proof enough Dash had changed, at least a little.

Whatever they were, spending the night at Blackwood Manor was a significant step. Toward what, he couldn't say.

Dash stretched, his fingers brushing against the intricately carved headboard. Despite

the lingering unease about the supernatural events that seemed to be escalating around him, he smiled. He could tell himself he didn't do relationships, but he wouldn't deny he liked Slate. A lot.

"Great," Dash muttered to himself, "I've officially crossed into Twilight Zone territory. Next thing you know, I'll be picking out curtains for the haunted house."

The smell of coffee and bacon lured Dash out of bed. He put on the clothes from last night, because they hadn't progressed to the stage where he felt comfortable going to breakfast in just his boxers.

Slate was in the kitchen, looking unfairly attractive in rumpled pajamas and bedhead. He grinned when Dash entered the kitchen.

"Morning, sleepyhead," Slate slid a mug of coffee across the counter. "Sleep well?"

Dash nodded, wrapping his hands around the warm mug. "Better than expected, given the, uh, unique ambiance of this place. No midnight ghost parties or demonic possessions, so I'd call it a win."

Slate's smile faltered slightly. "About that. I know things have been intense lately. With the haunted house, the supernatural stuff, us..." He gestured vaguely between them. "I just want to make sure you're okay with all of this."

Dash took a sip of coffee, considering his words carefully. "It's a lot to process. I'm not sure how I feel about the strange things, but I'm glad to be here with you. Though I'm pretty sure this isn't what they meant by 'small town charm' in the job description."

"Not that I had anything to do with the job posting, but you're probably correct." Slate's joyful expression wasn't totally back, but it had improved. "Promise me if

stuff gets too crazy for you, that you'll tell me? I don't want it to stop what's happening between us."

The two seemed inextricably entwined, but he understood Slate's concern. He didn't want one to derail the other either. "Deal," Dash said. "But can we at least hold off updating our relationship status on social media for a little bit?"

Slate laughed, the tension in his shoulders easing slightly. "You really don't understand small towns, do you? Mrs. Finch and her gossip network are way more powerful than social media."

Judging by the way everyone reacted to the two of them last night, he had no doubts about the accuracy of Slate's assessment.

Slate put a plate of bacon, eggs, and toast in front of Dash. "I probably should've checked to see if this was okay, but I didn't want to wake you," Slate said. "If you don't eat eggs or meat, I have oatmeal and cereal."

Dash found it sweet that Slate was so concerned. He picked up a piece of crispy bacon and took a bite. "This is so perfect, it's like you know me. Even the bacon is done the way I like it."

Slate's smile faltered as he set his breakfast down and sat next to Dash. "I know you don't totally believe in things, but the dance last night... most people around here swear it's real."

He stopped chewing to sort out his emotions. Before the dance, Slate had warned Dash and then joked that Dash didn't believe in myths. If the legend were true, Slate hadn't really deceived Dash, but he had encouraged them to dance.

If Dash's soul had to be entwined with someone, he was glad it was Slate.

He put his hand over Slate's. "If you're worried I regret dancing with you, I don't. You're one of the nicest, most considerate guys I know. And you're super-hot."

Pink colored Slate's cheeks and Dash thought it adorable how bashful Slate acted. The moment, like so many between them, was interrupted by a shadow passing across a window, followed by the floorboards creaking, and finally, the temperature dropped. Slate's body stiffened, a subtle reminder of the weight he carried as the guardian of Blackwood Manor.

"For a guy who runs a haunted house, you're too tense." Dash smiled. "Shouldn't I be the one to jump when things go bump in the night?"

Slate's smile was a mix of amusement and something deeper, almost sad. "They're only restless spirits, ancient curses, and the occasional demonic entity. You know, small town stuff."

If that was supposed to calm Dash, it failed. "I'll keep that in mind. So is the equipment really an issue or was that a ploy to have Saturday breakfast together?"

"That's real," Slate said, finally starting to eat. "We can work on it after I clean up and get dressed."

The weekend flew by in a whirlwind of trial and error. Dash resolved most of the issues with a simple program to force Slate's older machines to accept the latest updates. A few issues, however, had no tech-related solution that Dash could find.

Slate invited Dash to spend Saturday and Sunday night at the manor. "So we can work as late as we want," he'd said. Dash's cynical nature wanted to call bullshit, but he didn't because Slate had given Dash his own room. Once he squashed his jaded side he realized Slate was lonely. Even if they weren't sleeping together, they kept each other company.

Checking his work log, Dash was surprised how productive he'd been considering it was a Monday. After three days and nights, the creaking boards, strange sounds, and odd temperature changes had mostly become background noises. The only distraction was Slate, and Dash welcomed those interruptions.

"Ready to hit the library?" Slate said.

Dash smiled as he admired Slate leaning casually against the door frame. The Victorian clothes fit well, showing off his muscular frame. Dash wondered what Slate looked like without his clothes. Maybe one day.

"Sure. I'm curious what's so great about the place that it's practically Liv's home."

"Trust me, it's not the ambiance." He pushed off the wall. "Liv loves her books more than people. You and I are her only friends."

The weather had turned colder and even the short walk from the manor to the library chilled Dash to his bones. He forgot to bring his heavy coat from his apartment foolishly thinking the nice October weather would continue.

Inside the library, Dash kept his coat on longer, trying to thaw out. A pair of hands grabbed his upper arms and rubbed up and down. "I should've loaned you an overcoat," Slate said. "We can stop by your apartment if you'd like to spend the night at the manor tonight."

Dash had expected Slate would ask again, and this time he wanted a better reason than they could work late. "Listen, I appreciate the offer, but why do you really want me to stay in your house?"

He stopped rubbing, but Slate kept his hands on Dash's arms. If he gave Dash the same answer, Dash was going to sleep at his apartment. It wasn't just so they had

more time to work. You didn't kiss your assistant good night, or make him breakfast every morning.

Slate pulled him around so they were face-to-face. "I like you, Dash. Even if we're not a couple, I enjoy waking up to make you breakfast and then eat together. You banish the loneliness, and make the manor more of a home than a place."

He struggled to maintain eye contact, but Dash gave him major points for continuously trying. "Do I make you nervous?"

"Not even a little," he said with conviction. "I might be an extrovert, but when it comes to relationships I don't have the same confidence. You also mentioned you've avoided anything serious, so I don't want to push you. I'd rather have you around as a friend than not at all."

Slate's confession exposed everything he hid from the world, and it left Dash feeling guilty. He made Slate settle for some morsels because he'd said he didn't want a boyfriend or more.

Dash pulled him into a hug and buried his head in the crook of Slate's neck. "I like you too, Slate. I have my own issues to deal with, but I like waking up knowing your there. You're beautiful, inside and out. If you can be patient with me, I'd like to try to be more than friends."

His body shook as Dash knocked down a wall he'd used for years to protect himself. Maybe that dance had linked their souls, because he'd never told anyone he wanted to be their boyfriend.

Slate squeezed him until Dash stopped shaking. Pulling away, his smile was back. "I can be as patient as you need."

Staring into Slate's eyes, Dash wanted to kiss him, but wasn't sure he should. Was that too fast after he said he needed to go slow.

"For the love of pumpkins, would you kiss already?"

They turned and Liv stood in the archway, shaking her head. Slate looked ready to snark back, but Dash used his fingers to cup Slate's face. He pulled Slate closer and kissed him. It wasn't a totally innocent kiss, but they wouldn't get arrested for lewd behavior in a library.

Dash glanced at Liv. "Happy?"

"More than you know," she said without the slightest hint of snark Dash expected. "Now, can we please get on with the research?"

The trio spent the next two hours poring over dusty tomes and microfiche records. Dash wasn't always sure what he was looking for, but most of what he read were mundane facts about life in a small farming community in central New York State.

Liv's enthusiasm was infectious as she connected seemingly unrelated events. They were about to take a break for dinner when she put several pages of notes on the table.

"Look at this pattern," she exclaimed, spreading out a timeline across the table. "Every Blue Moon in October coincides with a spike in paranormal activity. And not just minor occurrences. Most were full-scale supernatural events."

Remembering what Madame Zelda said, Dash wasn't thrilled with the news. "Any chance there won't be a Blue Moon this October?"

"Sorry, handsome," Liv said. "The next one will be at the end of the month."

Dash sat back in his chair and a printout of newspaper from 1924 fell to the ground. Picking it up, his eyes caught on a familiar name in the middle of the page. “Reeves? Who is Ezra Reeves?”

The other two crowded next to him, and Slate read the page out loud. “Ezra Reeves, son of the town’s founding Reeves family, disappeared after leaving his wife and infant son to deal with an undisclosed emergency. It goes on to say the town continued to search for one of its leading citizens. Reeves’ wife, Fiona, blamed Esmerelda Blackwood, claiming she was a witch and sacrificed her husband’s soul as part of a demonic ritual. Gentry Blackwood, Esmerelda’s husband dismissed the accusation, stating quote. ‘Poor Fiona has lost her mind from her grief. Her ridiculous allegations are the ravings of a mad woman.’ Then it gives more details about Fiona and her son Henry.”

“Henry,” Dash said in unison with Slate. “My great grandfather’s name was Henry Reeves.”

The revelation was too much of a coincidence. Slate said EcoCode had been searching for the right person. They must’ve targeted him because he was the descendant of Ezra Reeves. The monster pay raise, the quirky condition that resulted in him having to live in Oriskany Falls, and his family’s dislike of Halloween all made sense.

He glanced at Slate, who was watching him with concern.

“Don't worry, Slate. I’m good.” Dash flashed a silly grin. “And I promise not to call you a witch or start brewing potions in your basement. Do you have a basement? It’s an old house, so it should, right?”

Slate's laugh was soft, but genuine. “Yes we have a basement, but it’s not suitable for potion making.”

“Speaking of food,” Liv said. “Let’s go eat. I sent Dad our order.”

S now had started to fall when Dash left his apartment and headed back to the manor. After their talk at the library two days earlier, Slate had asked him to stay until they fixed the house’s tech system. Dash smiled at the idea of deliberately sabotaging the system so he could stay longer. Then again, given the persistent unexplained glitches, Slate might have thought of that already.

Dash wondered what they’d do if they couldn’t fix the systems in time. The haunted house was as much an Oriskany Falls tradition as any he’d experienced. Failure would gut Slate and Dash wouldn’t let that happen. Finding a solution, however, would need to wait until tomorrow. Tonight, Dash had other plans.

For the last five nights, he’d slept in the guest room. Alone. Slate had been respectful, but Dash wanted to take the next step. Even if all they did was sleep, Dash wanted to spend the night in the same bed. Not that he’d turn down sex, but his true motive was to fall asleep together.

He turned the corner, and unexpectedly saw Slate heading his way. Dash smiled when their eyes met.

“Darn,” Slate said when they met. “I thought I had time to meet you at your place. Figured you could show me around.”

Meeting Dash at his apartment was sweet, but he suspected Slate had a different plan in mind. “We can go back now if you’d like, or I can show you tomorrow. Maybe you could spend the night? I don’t have a guest room, or even a second bed, but we can figure it out.”

Slate laughed and put his arm around Dash’s shoulder as they headed for the manor. “I was trying to find a good way to ask if we could sleep in the same bed, and you

stumbled into the suggestion.”

His hunch confirmed, Dash twisted and kissed Slate’s cheek. “Two things. First, I assumed you were trying to invite yourself over and take advantage of the fact I only had one bed.”

“That obvious?” Slate sounded deflated.

“Not really,” Dash shifted his backpack, and put his arm around Slate’s waist. “I was hoping to ask you the same thing. Well, not the same thing. I wanted to see if you would sleep in my bed with me tonight.”

“I’d like that, only, let’s use my bed.” He pulled Dash closer. “I’d feel weird sleeping in the guest room.”

“You’re the lord of the manor,” Dash said. He groaned inwardly at how much of a dork he was. “Sorry. That sounded so much better in my head.”

“It was cute.” Slate kissed Dash’s cheek. “Like you.”

They stomped the snow off their boots on the porch, and Dash’s heart thudded in anticipation. Hanging his coat next to Slate’s he felt a cold breeze come from inside the house. He looked at Slate who seemed just as confused.

Unlike prior times, the change in temperature didn’t end as abruptly as it started. It also didn’t just appear around them from nowhere. This breeze came from the system room.

He slipped his fingers into Slate’s and shrugged. “We should probably go investigate.”

“Yeah.”

Slate led the way, and they followed the trail to a section of the wall that shimmered in the dim light. They pressed against the panel and it swung open with a soft groan.

“Of course there's a hidden room,” Dash said. “This wouldn't be a creepy old manor without one.”

“I’ve never seen this before,” Slate said. He poked his head into the opening. “There’s an old storage room on the other side.”

Being told it wasn’t new, didn’t calm Dash’s frayed nerves. Slate might be used to these weird occurrences, but they were still new to Dash.

The room beyond was small and cluttered with antique-looking artifacts. Moonlight filtered through a dusty window, casting an ethereal glow over dust-covered journals and strange symbols etched into the walls. Dash's fingers trembled as they stepped into the room. The breeze stopped, but the temperature dropped even more.

A translucent figure suddenly appeared, hovering over a book on the floor. He recognized the elderly woman from the first night in the house. Esmerelda Blackwood stared at Dash with spectral eyes that pierced right through him.

"The veil grows thin," she whispered, her voice echoing as if from a great distance. "You must be ready, Morten Reeves. When the Blue Moon rises, the fate of Oriskany Falls will rest in your hands."

Before Dash could respond, the apparition faded, leaving him with a racing heart and a mind full of questions. Slate bent down and picked up the book on the floor. Unlike the rest of the room, this was dust free.

Slate opened the book, and looked up in surprised. “This is for you.”

He turned the book around and handed it to Dash. Written in flowing script were the words, “For the descendant of Ezra Reeves.”

‘I always thought my tech job was boring and I should try something new,” Dash said, trying to contain his fear. “I should’ve been more specific in what I had in mind.”

Dash closed the book and mustered a smile. “I think I’ll read this in the morning. We have plans for tonight.”

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Chapter Seven

Dash looked in the bathroom mirror and didn't recognize the nervous person looking back at him. He'd hooked up many times when he lived in the city. Most nights when he'd been in the mood, he'd had little trouble finding a willing partner. He hadn't been a man-whore, but he wasn't a choir boy either.

Sleeping with Slate felt different. Slate was different. This wasn't a hook-up or even a friends-with-benefits situation. They hadn't said as much, but the way Slate had treated him the last five days made that point clear even to a hook-ups only guy like Dash.

"I want more too," Dash whispered to his reflection.

Those four words terrified him. More led to a broken heart. At least that was Dash's experience.

He shut the light and retraced the steps he'd taken with Slate. He might've seen a hint of disappointment in Slate's eye when Dash told him he needed to go to the guest room. Once he explained all his things were there, Slate perked up. If this became a permanent arrangement, he'd move his stuff, but first they needed to get this one under their belt.

The door was open, but he didn't see Slate. Knocking, he waited outside for an answer. Slate stepped out from a door, his toothbrush still in his mouth. Waving for Dash to come in, he pointed to his mouth.

“Got it,” Dash said. “Go finish.”

The room was almost as big as Dash’s entire apartment. It might be the same size given Dash lived in a converted Victorian house. Long drapes covered the windows, and the large four-posted king bed looked small against one wall. Slate had two chairs positioned near the window opposite the door.

Dash wasn’t sure what to do, so he walked around looking at the furnishings. The pictures on the wall were mostly photos of Slate and what he presumed was Slate and his family. He had two siblings, both looked to be older sisters. There were shots of Slate in high school, with Liv in many of them, and some that appeared to be of him in college.

He hadn’t known Slate went to college, a reminder they didn’t know each other very well yet. Dash wasn’t upset, because he had things he’d never told Slate. Some of those he planned to have tonight before things went any further. Slate deserved to know what he was getting into before things went any further.

“That was my graduation from Cornell,” Slate said.

Slate wore a tee shirt and pajama bottoms just like he had every morning since Dash arrived. It felt different seeing Slate in his bedroom, ready for bed. The shirt clung tighter to his chest, and the bottoms showed off his ass in a way Dash hadn’t appreciated before.

“What did you study?”

“Architecture,” he said with a rueful laugh. “I didn’t think I’d be the one to get the gift or curse as I think of it. My plan was to design and build houses like they did once, not these prefab cookie cutter ones we see pop up all the time.”

Put that way, the ability was a curse if it stole Slate's dream. "Maybe once this moon is over you can follow your dream."

"Hopefully." The way Slate answered told Dash it wasn't likely to happen.

Without thinking, Dash reached for Slate and pulled him into a hug. He ached a bit that someone as kind and decent as Slate had to give up his dream because of a distant ancestor's mistake.

After a few seconds, Dash realized he'd gotten a hard-on. The hug hadn't been meant to be sexual, but Slate was in a similar state. They remained still for a few more seconds before Slate planted a soft kiss to Dash's neck.

The ice broken, Dash lifted his head off of Slate's shoulder and kissed Slate on the lips. The soft peck turned into Slate pressing his tongue against the crease of Dash's lips. Dash granted the entry requested and cupped the back of Slate's head to pull him closer.

Focused on the way Slate kissed, Dash barely realized they were moving until the back of his legs hit the side of the bed. They separated long enough for them to climb on. Once settled, Slate rolled on top of Dash, pinning him to the mattress with his weight.

"Like being in control, do you?" Dash asked in a husky whisper.

"Sometimes," Slate said, with a lascivious look on his face. "What about you?"

"I like everything, in charge, submissive, whatever works."

"I'm actually the same, but right now, I like this position."

Before Dash could agree, Slate crushed his mouth against Dash's. This time there was no asking. Slate pushed his tongue inside and took what he wanted. Dash wrapped his arms around Slate's back, pulling him deeper into the kiss.

The intensity of the connection grew as their breaths mingled. A swell of emotion built inside Dash as the warmth of Slate's body enveloped him. Slate grinded against him, creating friction against Dash's cock trapped between them.

Slate slid a hand inside Dash's shirt and ran his hand across Dash's chest. Ready to give Slate whatever he wanted, Dash paused as the secrets he'd withheld pushed their way forward. It surprised him, because he'd never worried about such things when he'd hooked up before. Slate, however, was different. He deserved the truth, because Dash wouldn't hurt Slate.

Pulling away took a monumental effort, but he finally broke the kiss and rolled Slate onto his back. Slate smiled up at him expectedly, but Dash slid onto his side.

Slate looked at him with a mix of desire and confusion. "What's wrong, Dash?"

Dash hated that he'd let things get anywhere before having this talk, but he wasn't going any farther until he gave Slate the truth. "I like you, Slate, but before we do anything, you should know two things about me. They will probably change how you look at me, and if you want me to go home, I won't be mad at you."

"I can't believe there's anything that will change how I feel about you."

Slate reached for him but Dash shook his head. This was one of the reasons Dash avoided relationships. They were hard, and they exposed his most vulnerable sides. "Hear me out first, please?"

"Fine, but don't expect me to change my mind."

Dash would have snorted, but he worried it would insult Slate. “The two things are related, but they might evoke different reactions. I know we didn’t talk about safety and past partners, but I want to tell you my past. First, I’ve always been safe, and I was tested before I moved. I wasn’t sure there was a place to do it here, and I wanted to begin fresh.”

“The medical practice in town doesn’t judge,” Slate said. “I get tested every six months.”

Good information for the future assuming he stayed. If things went to shit with Slate, Dash would look for a new job and be gone before the end of the year. “I mentioned that first because I’ve had a lot of partners in my life. I’ve never counted, but I’d guess at least seventy-five. Maybe more. I never thought of myself as slutty, but when I was thinking about how to tell you about my past, I realized you’d probably see me that way.”

Dash paused and watched for a reaction. At first Slate just lay silent as if waiting for more. When it was clear Dash had finished, Slate laughed softly. “You’re worried about that? Did you think I was pure and chaste?”

Slate’s response lightened Dash’s guilt a little. “No, but there is a big difference between the city and Oriskany Falls.”

“Yes, but I went to a major university and Grindr and other apps work out here,” Slate tentatively put his hand forward and Dash didn’t pull away. “The number of guys I’ve slept with is less than seventy-five, but it’s high enough I can’t count or remember all of them. If that’s what you’re worried about, forget it. And for the record, I wasn’t always safe when I was in college, but for the last five years I have been and I was lucky enough not to have caught anything that penicillin wouldn’t cure.”

Dash cringed at the memory of the shot in the ass when someone he hooked up with messaged him to say he had syphilis. “There’s a second thing, and it’s worse than the first. Much worse.”

Slate rubbed his thumb over the back of Dash’s hand, but didn’t prod Dash to continue. Gathering his courage, Dash fixed his gaze on Slate.

Dash took a deep breath, feeling the weight of his memories settle around him. It was time to be honest, time to share the past he’d carried with him for so long. He turned slightly, ensuring they were both comfortable in their intimate space, then began to speak.

“My parents divorced when I was twelve. It was... ugly. When I was little, I thought they were perfect. Even when things changed, I didn’t notice at first.” Dash paused, fighting back the urge to curl up and forget it had happened. “Mom said after I was born, Dad treated her like someone he lived with and not his wife. Dad said he never stopped loving her, but his career took up more of his time, and me and my sister had things they needed to take us to practically every day. Typical family stuff, but Mom faded into the background of his life.”

Slate listened silently, concern written on his face as he squeezed Dash’s hand. Encouraged by the support, Dash pressed on. “Mom changed too. She spent less time with us, and the time she gave was rarely fun. Everything set her off. When I was older I realized Dad ignoring her made her feel ugly and unwanted. Throw in Dad was a tightwad, and her life wasn’t that great.”

“I thought you said your Dad’s career was going well,” Slate asked softly.

Dash wished his parent’s explanations were as simple and accurate as they believed. “My family has money. It’s all in a trust, but Dad didn’t need to work. He liked his job and wanted to move up the corporate ladder. Being cheap was Dad’s way to

control Mom.

“Eventually, Mom had enough, and she cheated. I don't know if it was about sex for her, but the guy made her feel better about herself. The guy she had the affair with treated her well and made her feel desirable again.” Dash shook his head. “He was a bigger jerk than Dad. He thought Mom's family was rich, and when he realized he slept with the wrong spouse he not only dumped her, but sent Dad a copy of their texts and emails. For deceiving him he said.”

“He sounds like an asshole,” Slate said.

“He was. I'd blame him for destroying my family, but Mom and Dad were the real reason it broke up.” Remembering things in such detail made Dash's chest hurt. “Dad was livid. My older sister and I heard them screaming at each other through the walls. He called her these awful names I don't want to repeat. Mom was mad too. She blamed him for everything, saying if he wasn't such a horrible husband and father this never would've happened. They both believed they were right and the other person was the villain.”

Dash glanced at Slate to gauge his reaction, but all he saw was concern. “Their divorce was acrimonious. They tried using us kids against each other as leverage. I was constantly caught in the crossfire, hearing them tell us, ‘Don't tell your father,’ or ‘I wouldn't get your mother anything for her birthday because she doesn't care about you anyway.’ It was exhausting.”

Dash gulped as the memories rehashed themselves; he still felt the residual weight of that turmoil. “They both moved on quickly after the divorce. My sister and I were subjected to a parade of boyfriends and girlfriends, none of whom lasted long. Now they're both miserable people, still clinging to how they were wronged by their spouse.”

Silence hung between them and Dash avoided looking at Slate. “Watching how they treated each other during and after the breakup, I saw up close the collateral damage of love gone wrong. It terrifies me I’ll do that to you. I don’t want to become the horrible person they are today.”

Slate’s grip tightened around Dash’s hand and he pulled Dash closer. Turning Dash around, Slate became the big spoon to Dash’s little. “You have a choice, Dash. You can be better than them. Believe in yourself.”

Wrapped in Slate’s embrace, Dash felt safer than he could remember “I told you this because I want to see where things can go between us. You deserve to know the baggage I come with. Like I said, if you want me to leave, I won’t be angry with you.”

“Is that what you want me to do?”

“No.” Dash pulled Slate’s arm tighter around him. “I want you to take a chance on me, but I couldn’t ask that of you unless I told you the truth.”

Slate squeezed him tighter and kissed the back of Dash’s neck. “Thank you for telling me. I want you to stay right where you are. Communication between two people is essential, and you’re already miles better than your parents.”

Relieved to have shared his past with Slate, Dash closed his eyes and appreciated being with someone. In the past, he used quiet time to plan his departure. Now, he used it to plan how to stay with Slate.

D ash woke up, warm and content. When he moved, the arm around him moved. His eyes widened when he realized where he was and who was hugging him.

“Good morning,” Slate said. “I hope you slept as well as I did.”

Sleep. Dash had fallen asleep on Slate. “Oh my God. I’m so sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?”

He tried to move, but Slate held him in place. “I fell asleep on you. We were.... You must think.... That wasn’t what I’d planned for last night.”

“I thought it was kinda perfect.” Slate pulled Dash closer, leaned over, and kissed his cheek. “We’ll have time to do more another night.”

Dash was stuck in his old mindset. The night before wasn’t a one and done. If he and Slate were going to seriously date, Dash needed to believe there would be more nights. He twisted until he faced Slate. “Sounds wonderful to me, but right now, I really need to pee.”

Slate laughed. “Some romantic you’re turning out to be.” He kissed Dash before letting him go. “We should get up anyway. I’ll make us something to eat.”

Dash put off reading the book until after breakfast. Then he decided to wait until after he showered. Now he had it in his backpack and wasn’t going to read it until he and Slate met up with Liv. She was meeting them in a few minutes and then Dash would be out of excuses.

He could be forgiven wanting to hold off reading Ezra Reeve’s book. Slate had made pancakes and they cleaned up the mess together. The entire morning reeked of domestic bliss and Dash wanted to extend the moment as long as possible.

Unfortunately, the good vibe was about to end.

The weight of Ezra’s book felt heavier the closer they got to the library. As they walked down Main Street, Dash noticed strange occurrences that he might have

dismissed before. A flock of crows took flight suddenly, their cries eerily synchronized, forming a dark, writhing cloud against the sky. The air seemed to shimmer in places, like heat waves on a summer day, but the temperature was barely above freezing. Even the carved faces of the Jack-o'-lanterns looked more ominous than the night before.

Townspople hurried about their business, and Dash overheard snippets of conversation as they passed.

“Did you see those weird lights last night? Like the northern lights, but... wrong somehow.”

“My grandma swears she saw a ghost in her kitchen this morning. Looked just like her long-dead husband.”

As they approached an intersection, all the clocks in the nearby shops suddenly chimed in unison, despite showing different times. A chill ran down Dash's spine as he realized the sound was forming a discordant melody, one that seemed to whisper words just beyond his understanding.

Dash looked at Slate, seeing his own concern mirrored in his friend's eyes. He'd clearly gotten involved in something way over his head. He was a coder – a software engineer – not a ghostbuster.

Slate squeezed Dash's hand. The warmth took the edge off of Dash's concerns. He needed to stay calm, because the future was going to come no matter how much he worried.

Liv met them at the steps of the library. Dash showed her the book and her eyes opened wider. No surprise. This was a newly discovered piece of Oriskany Falls' history, and the town's self-appointed historian couldn't wait to read it.

“Where did you find this?” she said, holding the book like it was a sacred relic.

“There’s a hidden door in the back of the equipment room,” Slate said. “Which is crazy because how many times did we look for one in that room?”

“I keep telling you, this is beyond us,” Liv said. “Esmerelda must not have wanted anyone to find the room unless a descendant of Ezra Reeves was present.”

Dash didn’t like how supernatural beings kept interfering in his life. “Yeah and apparently, I’m supposed to use it to save the town or something.”

“You read it already?” Liv asked sounding disappointed.

“No,” Dash said, pretending to frown as he looked at Slate. “I wanted to, but told he told me to wait until we met you.”

“Context, Dash. You need to give her context,” Slate pointed toward the doors to the library. “I said we should probably wait until we saw you because we might misinterpret something and get upset for no reason.”

Dash rolled his eyes dramatically. “My way sounded better.”

Liv swung her gaze from Slate to Dash and back a few times. “You two are like a married... Oh my! You slept together, didn’t you?”

Dash’s face burned as he looked around to see if anyone heard her. Slate’s face was also red, but he glared at Liv.

“It’s bad enough we have Mrs. Finch to tell everyone’s business to the town. You don’t need to shout it to the four winds.”

“Sorry.” To her credit, Liv looked and sounded contrite. “I’m just excited for you both.”

In theory he knew people in small towns knew everyone else’s business, but part of him had hoped some things could remain private. Clearly, that was too much to wish for. “Can we please go inside? At least there she’ll keep her voice down out of respect for the books.”

Liv clutched the book to her chest as they walked to a secluded spot in the library. Dash expected she’d give him back the book since it was addressed to him, but she didn’t. Slate and Dash sat quietly as Liv flipped pages and scribbled notes furiously.

After twenty minutes, she set her pen down. “This clears up a few mysteries.” She pointed to chairs on either side of her, and the guys book ended her as she turned back to the first page.

“Ezra and Esmerelda were good friends, and they were also both mediums. Now, mediums are rare, but having two in one place is incredibly rare. Esmerelda theorized that with the two of them, they could do more than just comfort the lingering souls who never passed on. She believed they could open the veil and help souls move on. Ezra didn’t like the idea, but he agreed to help.

“Together they managed to part the veil and souls left, just as Esmerelda hoped. Then, a malevolent soul tried to come from the other side to ours. It tried to possess Ezra, but with Esmerelda’s help, they banished and closed the opening. The incident left Ezra scarred and he told Esmerelda they shouldn’t do it again. Esmerelda tried to convince him the work was too important to abandon. She believed they could take necessary precautions, but he refused to help.”

“Ezra wrote down his thoughts on the veil and how any opening weakened the barrier. He also believed that if a spirit managed to pass from the other side to ours, it

could cause a permanent opening that might be impossible to close. If that happened spirits would flood our world. The final entry is from early October 1925. First he mentioned his belief the veil is weakest during a Blue Moon, and how one medium might be able to open a rift on such a night. He noted October 31, 1925, would be a blue moon. He was worried Esmerelda might try again because the next one wouldn't be until August 31, 1928. He ended by saying time was running out, but his newborn son had been colicky, and he hadn't had time to warn Esmerelda not to try again."

Liv turned the page and Dash tapped the book. "The handwriting is different."

"Good eye," Liv said. "Esmerelda wrote the last pages. She also confirmed the veil was weaker during a Blue Moon, and she tried on Halloween, 1925. Like the last time, an evil spirit tried to use the opening. She was struggling to keep it away when Ezra appeared. He called her a pig headed fool who couldn't leave well enough alone. Stepping in front of her, he dropped his book and walked into the breach. She heard a horrible scream, and then the rift closed."

Dash sat back and considered what she'd said. "My great-great grandfather sacrificed himself to close the breach."

"Yes," Liv said turning to a new page. "Esmerelda realized after reading his book that he did it to save his family."

She skipped ahead a few pages. "The rest of the entries are from Esmerelda. She spent years trying to bring Ezra back, but realized she couldn't. Her studies of the veil revealed that what she did had weakened the curtain between worlds and the malicious spirits were trying to break through. She believed that if someone from her line could work with another medium, together, they could undo the damage she'd done."

"Which explains the foundation and the search," Slate said.

“I’d need to do more research, but I think you’re right,” Liv said closing the book. “I’d even bet EcoCode and other Blackwood funded companies have been searching for a medium to pair with one in their family for the last century.

“And I’m the lucky winner,” Dash said. After he spoke, he realized how Slate might interpret his comment. “Then again, I guess I am lucky. It introduced me to Slate.”

Slate’s smile looked forced, and Dash could figure out what he was thinking.

“Good point,” Liv said, oblivious to Slate’s unease. “Now we need to figure out how you seal the breach.”

Dash was certain it was going to be harder than she made it sound.

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Chapter Eight

The floorboards of Slate's living room creaked beneath Dash's feet as he paced, each step a testament to the century-old manor's history. Two weeks had passed since the discovery of Ezra's journal, yet closing the veil seemed as elusive as ever. The impending Blue Moon loomed over them, its significance weighing heavily on Dash's mind.

Most of their days and evenings were spent in research and discreet late-night discussions with Oriskany Falls' elders Slate trusted. Despite all their work, they hadn't discovered how to repair the damage Esmerelda had caused.

They had, however, fixed the machines and the haunted house show could proceed as planned. Slate speculated his great-great-grandmother had created the issues to keep them in the room until they discovered Ezra's book. Since that night, everything worked perfectly again.

Another positive development was Dash's relationship with Slate. He'd spent every night at the manor and Dash's fears were slowly releasing their hold on him. Dash had always enjoyed sex, but Slate taught him sex with someone he cared about was infinitely better.

Each morning, they'd wake up entwined in a way that eased the weariness in Dash's soul. It was a bittersweet comfort in the storm of supernatural responsibility that had engulfed them.

Dash's leg bounced under the desk as he finished his project for the morning. Slate

had offered to speak to his parents, who ran the family trust, about giving Dash a paid leave of absence, but Dash declined. Work, coding work, grounded him so he didn't spend the whole day thinking about Ezra's leather-bound journal sitting on the coffee table.

A mug of hot chocolate appeared to the right of his laptop, followed by a pair of strong hands massaging his upper back. Dash leaned into Slate's touch, still not sure what he'd done to deserve someone so sweet and amazing. "I can't get any work done when you spoil me like this."

"We wouldn't want that," Slate said, not stopping his ministrations. "Are you almost done? I'm running out of things to keep myself busy."

Dash laughed. "What did you do before you met me?"

"Sat around wishing I could meet a hot, sexy man who made me happy."

It was an incredibly sweet thing to say, but it resurrected Dash's insecurities. What had he done to make Slate think he was so wonderful? Was whatever they had simply a case of proximity or common family history? Dash could point to a hundred good things about Slate, but he struggled to find even a handful about himself.

"I can be done in a few minutes." Dash had a shitty poker face, and was glad he had his back to Slate. "But it's my turn to make lunch. You've done it all week, as well as breakfast and dinner when we don't eat out."

"There are no turns." He pulled his hands away and leaned in to kiss Dash's cheek. "And lunch is being delivered and it comes with a side of Olivia."

Dash smiled at Slate's description. Despite all the time they spent with Liv, she never felt like a third wheel. She was respectful when they needed to be alone but otherwise

she was fun to be around. “Can I at least pay for lunch? This totally hot guy I’m dating rigged it so his family is paying me a boatload of money more than my job is worth.”

“If you can convince Mr. and Mrs. Chen to take your money, go for it,” Slate said. “I’ve stopped beating my head against the wall.”

Dash had met Liv’s parents, and he agreed with Slate’s assessment. “Give me five minutes, and I should be done.”

Slate kissed him again before leaving quietly. It amazed Dash how much his life had changed in three weeks. Mostly for the best.

Five minutes later, Dash entered the kitchen. Liv and Slate were talking quietly in a way Dash knew meant they didn’t want him to hear their conversation. “What did I do this time?”

“What makes you think we were talking about you?” Slate asked.

He had the worst ‘busted’ face Dash had ever seen. Frowning, Dash kept his gaze on Slate until he caved. “Fine, it is about you, but you didn’t do anything. Liv found some interesting information about your family.”

The words Slate used and the way the two were talking suggested Dash might not like the information. Also, why did she research his family?

Before he could ask any questions, Liv eagerly pulled out her notebook and flipped the pages. The way her hair was tied back in a messy bun with strands escaping to frame her face, Dash knew she’d been working on this for a while.

“As you know, your family and Slate’s founded this town in the late 1600s. Both

families made their fortune in wheat, lumber, and trading furs with the Indians. Dash, your family eventually sold most of its land and invested in canals, railroads, salt, and other industrial concerns. Slate's family kept the land longer. They expanded their acreage by clearing the land and selling the timber."

"That's very interesting," Dash said. "But it's not helpful."

"You said your family has a trust, but did you know Ezra Reeves's younger brother created a foundation to investigate paranormal activity?"

At the mention of his great-great grandfather's name, Dash felt a familiar tingling sensation at the base of his skull. The first time he felt it, he thought someone was behind him, trying to get his attention. There wasn't anyone there, and the episodes had become more frequent lately. This was the first time it happened in response to someone saying Ezra's name.

"I didn't know that."

"The foundation has had four directors. Thaddeus Reeves, Ezra's brother created the foundation. When he retired, Henry Reeves, Ezra's son took over. After Henry died, his youngest son, Morten Reeves assumed control. About five years ago, he retired and because he couldn't find anyone to take over, he ended the foundations work."

The odd feeling returned again. "My grandfather ran a foundation focused on paranormal activity?"

"You got it, hot stuff." Liv smiled like she'd solved the mystery of life. "Guess who he sold the building to?"

"My family," Slate said. "Dad mentioned something about buying an old building that might have things that could help with the paranormal activity, but we didn't find

anything useful. I can't believe they never mentioned Ezra Reeves or his family's involvement."

"I doubt they knew." Liv said. "The official incorporation of the foundation had no mention of the Reeve's family. It was a private entity, so it didn't have to publish its members or any information it didn't want the public to know."

"If everything was so secret, how did you find out?" Dash asked.

Liv smiled and tapped Ezra's book. "Esmerelda left a note in a margin about Thaddeus creating the E. R. P. foundation to investigate paranormal activity. I did some digging, found old records and pieced together the rest."

For the next few minutes, Slate and Liv discussed her investigation. Dash tried to follow their conversation, but his thoughts kept drifting. The weird sensation and the E.R.P. were connected. He didn't know how or why, but he knew it was true. A sound poked at his consciousness. He strained to hear it, and realized it was a whisper in his mind.

The thought someone was inside his brain freaked him out, but he wanted to hear what it was saying. No matter how hard he tried, it remained maddeningly out of range.

"Dash?" Slate's voice cut through the ethereal whispers. "Are you okay?"

He stared blankly at Slate for a second, trying to understand what was happening. "Maybe? I feel like something is trying to communicate with me, but I can't hear what it's trying to say."

"Voices?" Slate's eyes narrowed slightly. "Can you describe them?"

Dash hadn't expected Slate to believe him, so the request caught him off guard. "It's like someone is whispering, but I'm not close enough to hear them. The more I try to make out the words, the softer the voice becomes. I want to scream at the speaker to either tell me what they want to say or leave me alone."

He'd expected Slate would be dubious, but instead he seemed more concerned. "Is it like a mosquito that you hear in the dark but isn't close?"

"Yes!" Dash said. "And I keep listening hoping it will go away, but it lingers just at the edge of my hearing."

"Let's try something," Slate said. He took Dash's hands in his and squeezed gently. "Close your eyes and think of someone close to you that died. It doesn't matter who, just a person you can remember."

Dash cleared his mind and thought of his maternal grandmother. All his grandparents had been islands in the storm for Dash and his sister, and he had fond memories of all of them. Grandma Joyce had gotten sick when he was a sophomore in college and died a month later.

He pictured her smiling like he'd hung the moon every time he walked in her door. How she raised such a spiteful daughter he never understood.

"Now, without losing the image, think of saying hello to her spirit." Slate's voice was soft and reassuring. "Just a simple greeting, not a conversation. Remember to keep the person you're thinking of in the front of your thoughts."

Dash followed the instructions, and waited for what to do next. When Slate didn't say anything, Dash focused on the silence, eager to hear more.

It was so quiet in the room Dash heard his pulse throbbing in his ear. The buzz at the

edge of his hearing returned, but instead of hovering out of reach, it seemed to come closer. Clearer this time, he almost made out the words, but not quite.

Remembering Slate's last instructions, he kept Grandma Joyce's face in his mind. Four words emerged from the buzz. They were repeated over and over, but there was no context.

The voice spoke for another few seconds, before it faded away. When it was gone, so was the tingling at the back of his neck. Slowly, Dash opened his eyes, almost afraid of what he'd see. Slate watched him with a hopeful gaze that quickly turned into a smile.

"What just happened?" Dash asked. "Was that really Grandma Joyce I heard?"

"I don't know for sure, but I doubt it," Slate said. "When I first showed signs of being a medium, I used to complain about the same thing. My grandmother taught me that trick. No matter how much you want to hear what's being said, a part of you is afraid of the unknown. By picturing someone you'd like to speak to, the dead aren't so scary and usually it works. Like it did with you."

Across the room, Liv watched the exchange with a mixture of hope and trepidation. "Did you learn anything that will help?" She asked.

Dash squeezed Slate's fingers and took a deep breath. "Not specifically, but in general I think it did," he said with a shaky voice. "I think I know who we can ask for help."

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am

Chapter Nine

Dash stood in the living room and stared at his phone. Why was this so hard? It wasn't like he was calling his parents.

The silence of the room was broken only by the ticking of the antique grandfather clock. A sudden chill ran down Dash's spine, and he could've sworn he saw a wisp of spectral mist curl around the clock's face and then wink out. Clearly, the spirits were telling him to get on with it already.

"You don't have to do this if you're not ready," Slate said softly, placing a reassuring hand on Dash's shoulder.

Dash smiled at the gesture. The support he received from Slate made him wonder why he thought being single was so wonderful. He also knew why he was stalling. He'd always had a good relationship with his grandparents, and he didn't look forward to confronting him about something his grandfather clearly meant to keep secret.

"This can't wait. We're running out of time fast. If my grandfather ran the E.R.P. foundation, he might have the answers we need."

Finding his grandfather's number, he hit send and put the phone to his ear. The call rang three times before a surprised voice answered. "Hello?"

"Hi Grandpa. It's Dash."

“Dash! This is a pleasant surprise. How are you, son?”

The cheery greeting was exactly how he remembered his grandfather. “I’m good, gramps, how are you and Grandma doing?”

“Not bad for a pair of retired old folks,” he said, laughing at his joke. “What are you up to? How’s the new job? Do you like Oriskany Falls? It’s a big change from the city.”

Dash smiled at how things never changed. His grandfather couldn’t ask one question when four would be more confusing. “The job is good, sorta. It was a scam of sorts. The Blackwood family targeted me to get me to move here.”

“Hmm, I see things don’t change,” Morten said in a half-whisper.

“It’s not so bad now that I’m here” Dash said. “I… um, met someone. His name is Slate. Slate Blackwood.”

“I see,” his grandfather said slowly. “And by met someone, are you dating?”

“Yes, sir.” Dash suddenly needed to defend the situation. “Slate’s been amazing, Gramps. He treats me better than I deserve.”

“Pfft. You deserve to be treated well. Sounds like that Blackwood kid has more brains than most of his family.”

Dash took a deep breath and pushed ahead. “Speaking of his family, Esmerelda paid me a visit and gave me a book great-great grandpa Ezra wrote.”

This met with a prolonged silence. “Esmerelda Blackwood? She died when I was around your age.”

“It was her ghost, Gramps. She wants me to help Slate fix what she did ninety-nine years ago.” He looked at Slate, who nodded at him. “I know that Thaddeus Reeve started the E.R.P. Foundation and you were the director until you retired a few years ago.”

“I see,” Morten said. “You’ve clearly inherited the family gift. There’s a lot we need to discuss, but not over the phone. Why don’t you come visit? Bring your friend Slate, too. If you two are dating, I think the Reeves and Blackwoods can peacefully coexist again.”

The invitation caught Dash off guard, especially the suggestion he bring Slate. “That’d be great, Gramps. What should we bring?”

“Silly grandchild, just bring yourselves,” he said with a chuckle. “Your grandmother and I will be so glad to see you. Both of you.”

Dash couldn’t hold back his smile. “Is it okay if we come tomorrow?”

“You’d better come tomorrow morning,” his grandfather said sternly. “You’re already cutting it close. The Blue Moon is in a few days.”

They said goodbye and Dash felt he had whiplash from the way the conversation went. He turned to Slate and Liv. “Grandpa wants to see us tomorrow. Are you up for a road trip?”

Liv hadn’t been happy at not being invited, but Dash couldn’t justify bringing her. They promised to take good notes, and ask the litany of questions she wrote down.

They got up before dawn to get ready for the trip. The drive to the Albany suburbs would take almost three hours, and Dash’s grandfather said to come in the morning.

Dash stopped at a gas station and filled up the tank and get snacks for the trip.

“When did you get this,” Slate asked. “It still smells new.”

Dash snorted. “I bought it right after I got the job. I didn’t need a car in the city and trying to park one would be impossible.”

“Feel free to tell me to kiss off, but do you get money from your family trust?” Slate asked.

Dash hadn’t expected the question and had to think about how to answer. “Yes, but it’s complicated. My Dad tried to cut me off after I insulted his bimbo of the month when she tried to act all motherly. That caused a delay in me getting money when I turned twenty-five. Grandpa talked to the trustees, and I got my first check earlier this year. I didn’t need the money, so I had Grandpa invest it with the rest of the trust funds.”

“I like your grandfather, but can I say your dad sounds like a dick.” Slate said.

“Dad wasn’t always like this,” Dash said. “When we were little, he was nice and we had a lot of fun. At least, that’s how I remember him.”

“You’re not going to turn out like your father,” Slate said putting his hand on Dash’s leg. “You’re a good person.”

He’d heard all this before, but he was sure people told his father that at Dash’s age. “Trust me, I don’t want to be like him, especially not to you. I like you, Slate. More than I’ve liked anyone. You make me believe in myself. I’m just scared I might hurt you.”

“That’s why I know you won’t,” Slate said. “You put my happiness above yours.

From what you told me about your parents, they never did that. Believe in yourself, Dash. You should be proud of who you are.”

Slate was a good person who didn’t want to see the bad in anyone. Dash didn’t think he was awful, but he wasn’t the good person Slate saw. “Thank you. I hope you’re proud of yourself too. You’re one of the best people I know.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere, Morten Dashiell Reeves.”

Dash nearly veered off the road when Slate used his full name. “How did.... I never told you my middle name.”

“Haven’t you figure out Liv can uncover anything she wants to know?” Slate said.

“That’s not fair,” Dash said with a laugh. “You have the world’s greatest detective for a best friend.”

“You don’t need a detective, because I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.”

When Slate said things like that, it made Dash want to be better. “I’ll tell you whatever you want to know too. Although, thanks to Liv, you probably know more about me than I do.”

“Nope,” Slate waved a finger between them. “I didn’t ask her to investigate you. If I want to know something, I’ll ask.”

Dash called his grandparents when they were ten minutes away. His stomach felt like he had a squirrel running around inside. What if his grandfather couldn’t help them. They only had six days until Halloween.

They stopped at an ornate iron gate that opened before Dash could press the call

button.

“Your grandparents must be eager to see you,” Slate said as they followed the long, winding, driveway.

Memories of visiting his grandparents flooded Dash. This had been a happy place for his sister Meredith and him. “More like they want to meet you. I’ve never officially dated anyone before.”

“Great,” Slate said with a fake frown. “You didn’t warn me this was like meeting the parents.”

Dash knew Slate was nervous. He was too, and these were people who loved him. “What part of ‘my grandparents want to meet you’ wasn’t clear?”

They rounded a clump of trees and a stately Georgian-style mansion with perfectly manicured lawns and gardens came into. The house, built of red brick with white trim, exuded an air of old money and refined taste. But there was something else, too – a sense of power and mystery that seemed to pulse just beneath the surface.

“Do you feel that?” Dash asked, moving his right hand in front of him and side-to-side. “Whatever that is.”

“It’s a sign of considerable paranormal activity,” Slate said. “Your grandfather is obviously a medium and ghosts come to him for help moving on.”

Scanning the area, Dash saw faint trails of light all around. They all either started or ended at the house. “I can see it too.”

“Last night, when I helped you hear whoever was trying to speak with you, I fully awakened your gift,” Slate said. “Fortunately, it’s easier to tune it out than it is to

communicate with the dead.”

They arrived at the house, and the front door opened before they got out of the car. Grandpa Morten and Grandma Millicent exited. They wore thick wool sweaters and huge smiles.

The churning in his stomach was gone, replaced by a warm fuzziness as fond memories rushed to remind him of good times he'd had in his grandparent's home. He looked over to check on Slate, but he was staring at Dash. He had a huge grin on his face, and Dash realized he had one too.

“They, and my other grandparents, were lifelines during the worst times,” Dash said.

He walked around the car and brushed his hand against Slate's. The offer was readily accepted, and Slate's fingers curled around his. They climbed the steps in unison and stopped a few feet from his grandparents.

Dash wanted to swoop in for a hug, but he needed to introduce Slate first.

“Gramps, Grandma, this is Slate Blackwood. Slate, these are my grandparents, Morten and Millicent Reeves.”

He waited while they made their acquaintance, but when his grandmother turned to him, he practically launched himself into her arms. “It's so good to see you, Dash,” she said squeezing him tight.

The hug with his grandfather wasn't as long or as tight, but when he checked on Slate, he was watching everything, still wearing his big smile.

“Come in,” Morten said. He opened the door and let Millicent go first.

His grandmother put her arm around his waist as they walked down the hallway to the kitchen. “You look happier than I’ve seen you since before those awful days we don’t speak of in this house. I see the Blackwood boy has freed the Dash who’d been hiding all these years.”

Coffee, juices, and an assortment of pastries waited for them inside the kitchen that hadn’t changed since Dash could remember. It was the closest place to home he had anymore.

“I told Gramps, Slate treats me better than I deserve.”

“And I’ll tell you the same thing he did.” She crooked a finger at him. “That’s a bunch of goose poop. You’re a good man and he should treat you well.”

“He is and I promise I will,” Slate said from behind. “Dash makes me incredibly happy.”

They sat at the table and nibbled on the food while they talked about everything except why Dash and Slate had made the nearly three-hour drive. For a short time, Dash forgot about ghosts and closing veils, and focused on the people around him. The only two people missing were his older sister and other grandfather. He decided once Halloween past, he was going to visit both. Hopefully, Slate would go with him.

He and Slate cleared the table over his grandparent’s objects. “I still remember where everything goes,” he said. When they finished, everyone grabbed a drink and headed for a sitting room.

Dash and Slate sat next to each other on a love seat, while his grandparents sat in a pair of antique chairs across from them. The mood turned more serious, as Morten sat back and fixed his blue eyes on his grandson. “Tell me what’s happening in Oriskany Falls.”

Dash recounted his recent supernatural encounters and Slate filled in the specifics of the paranormal beings. Morten asked a few questions for clarification, but generally listened and exchanged glances with Millicent.

“I always wondered if you'd inherited the gift,” Morten mused when they had finished. “Your father never showed any signs, but you’re such a kind soul. I had a feeling it might skip a generation and land with you.”

“Did Dad know about all of this?” Dash asked, gesturing vaguely to encompass the supernatural world he'd discovered.

“No, and yes.” Morten looked at the books lining a side wall. “We kept it from him when he was young, but he figured it out when he was in high school. I think he kept waiting for his gift to appear, but it didn’t.”

Dash wondered if that’s what changed his father, the realization he’d never inherit the family gift. “Your grandfather and his brother suspected he didn’t have the right temperament,” Millicent said. “The dead won’t approach someone without a kind soul. Unfortunately, none of our children had the right temperament.”

“Are you a medium too?” Dash asked her.

“No, but I’ve shared my life with your grandfather for more than fifty years.” She cast a fond look at Morten. “We don’t keep secrets.”

Dash put a finger on Slate’s hand. They’d were already more like his grandparents than his parents.

Morten got up, stopped at the desk for something, and then approached a dark wood cabinet with a lock on the front. Dash held his breath while his grandfather used a key to open the door.

“This,” Morten said, and pulled out an old, leather-bound book, “is the culmination of the E.R.P. foundation's work.”

He handed the book to Dash, who felt a familiar tingling at the base of his skull as he took it. Slate must've felt it too because he nodded when Dash glanced at him.

“Everything E.R.P learned about the supernatural over ninety plus years is in there.” Morten pointed toward the book. “Given what happened to my grandfather, we spent most of our energy learning how to manage and hopefully close rifts between worlds.”

Dash ran his fingers over the book's embossed cover. This book connected him to his ancestor who tried to keep the barrier between worlds in place. “Why did you stop the foundation's work, Grandpa?”

“I got old, Dash.” Morten sighed, settling into his high-backed leather chair. “This work takes a toll. Your grandmother and I wanted to spend what time we had left enjoying ourselves, and I couldn't find anyone with the right abilities to take over.” He looked between Dash and Slate. “Hopefully, the right two people have come to me.”

Dash hadn't even settled in his new job. He wasn't ready to come to a new career. “We need to get past Halloween before we talk about that.”

“Of course,” his grandfather said. “In my excitement at meeting you both, I got ahead of myself.”

He'd gotten ahead of Dash and Slate too. It was too early to make plans for their future when they were still figuring out their present. “Can you help us close the weak point Esmerelda created?”

“I believe I can.” He steepled his fingers and sat up straighter. “Alone, I don’t think either of you could undo the damage she caused. It required two mediums to create a stable barrier, and I believe it will take two to permanently seal the opening Esmerelda created by herself. Unfortunately, there’s a lot for Dash to learn and not much time before the Blue Moon.”

Dash didn’t find comfort in his grandfather’s words. How was he going to learn everything in time. “Can’t you work with Slate?”

“No.” Morten shook his head. “Working together requires a level of trust only two people who are close can achieve. Ezra and Esmerelda were close childhood friends. You two have strong feelings for each other. No one else can take your place and help Slate heal this wound.

“I can walk you through our research and you two will have five days to practice. I’m confident that is more than enough time.”

True to his word, Morten spent the rest of the morning and into early afternoon teaching the two. After a late lunch, Dash and Slate prepared to go home. They had a lot of work to do before the thirty-first.

“Remember, Dash, the power isn’t in the book,” Morten said as he hugged his grandson. “It’s in you and in the bond you share with Slate. Trust in those two things and you’ll succeed.”

Chapter Ten

They'd just entered Oriskany Falls when Slate's phone buzzed with a new text message. When he turned, Dash heard a soft groan.

"Something wrong?"

"Text from Liv." Slate typed a quick response. "She asked where we are because my parents dropped in to speak to me. Knowing them, it's also so they can meet you."

Dash's first reaction was hell no, but fair was fair. He'd made Slate meet the closest thing to his parents. "Is that bad?"

"Not really. My parents are good people." Slate stuffed his phone back in his pocket. "They'll say they want to check on the status of the haunted house, but they really want to know if I'm ready for the Blue Moon."

Dash gripped the wheel a bit tighter. "Oh."

"Don't worry, they're not going to grill you." Slate put a hand on Dash's thigh, something he did a lot during the trip. "If the veil parts, even for a short time, they need to get ready to deal with the increased paranormal activity. They want to be prepared for the worst."

Did Dash's grandfather worry about the same thing? He hadn't given off a concerned vibe when they visited. "Do all mediums have to worry about what happens in Oriskany Falls?"

“Not immediately, but if the opening isn’t closed it will spread.”

How had Dash lived his whole life without this impacting him? “Can you break that down a little more?”

“Sorry, I keep forgetting you haven’t been trained yet.” Slate shifted so he faced Dash. “If there’s an open portal, Esmerelda had theorized spirits who didn’t leave when they died but want to move on will make their way to Oriskany Falls and use the opening. That will take some time to happen. The bigger issue is what comes through from there. My family realized over the last century that the only things that want to come back to earth are those less pleasant spirits.”

Slate paused and Dash didn’t need an explanation of what ‘less pleasant spirits’ meant. “That’s what your family will need to deal with.”

“Yes, but it will impact all mediums eventually. Those that come through would eventually flee hoping to avoid my family’s attempt to send them back. That would make work for those outside of Oriskany Falls.”

Which meant if they failed it would have real and widespread consequences. “Great.” Dash said as they pulled up to Blackwood Manor’s iron gates. “No pressure at all.”

Dash pushed the button Slate had loaned him and the gate slowly parted. Slate hadn’t said anything, which meant he was thinking or Dash had insulted him, or both. Probably both, Dash decided.

Driving around the house, Dash parked in front of the carriage house. He was about to get out and open the door when Slate put a hand on his arm. “I’m sorry my family dragged you into this. It seems my family has been nothing but trouble for the Reeves family for the past century. I’m really sorry, Dash. You don’t deserve all this.”

Dash had been wrong, it wasn't either of the options he thought. It was guilt that silenced Slate. "First, neither you nor your family did anything to me. Esmerelda made a mistake, but her actions came from a good place. It wasn't her fault something wicked tried to use her portal. Second, I've spent the last two weeks wondering if I deserved someone like you. If having to help you fix what Esmerelda did is the price for dating you, sign me up twice. You showed me I have a choice. I don't have to end up like my parents and I won't because I have you. So don't apologize for anything, Slate Blackwood, because I'm not sorry. Not even a little."

Outside the car, Dash noticed a shift in the air. The lights around the house flickered with an eerie, almost sentient light. A chill ran down Dash's spine as they approached the manor, its windows dark and watchful.

"I feel it too," Slate said. "It's like the world is holding its breath, waiting for something to happen."

Liv met them at the door, a bundle of nervous anticipation and guarded concern. "Did you learn anything?"

"We think so, but let me call my parents first." Slate shifted his backpack and headed for the second floor.

Dash admired his 'take on the worst problem first' attitude. "My grandfather gave us a book that has some ideas on how to seal the rift for good."

"And?" she asked. "Will they work?"

"I have no idea," Dash said. "We talked about things with my grandparents, but we need to study the book before we can make the attempt. Slate understands it a lot more than I do."

“Can I see the book?”

Dash expected this request, and left it with Slate. He wanted to read it first before he let anyone besides Slate see it. He didn’t know if there were family secrets he was supposed to keep. “Slate has it. I’ll go ask him.”

Ignoring her response, Dash ran up the stairs two at a time. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust her, but this was all new to him and he didn’t want to do something he’d regret later.

“Yes, I know.” Slate’s voice floated down the hallway from his bedroom. “I’ll talk to him as soon as I get off the phone.”

Dash assumed he was the “him” Slate mentioned. He turned to head to the guest room, but the temperature dropped suddenly, and Esmerelda appeared in front of him. She pointed in the direction of Slate’s room.

Dash understood what she wanted, but it wasn’t what he wanted. “He’s having a private conversation, Mrs. Blackwood. I don’t want to be rude.”

She pointed more emphatically and moved closer.

Ghost or not, she didn’t get to tell him what to do. “No. I’m respecting his privacy.” He stood his ground, bracing for her to make contact.

Something touched his shoulder, and he screamed as he jumped from the contact.

“Dash,” Slate said, his phone still in his hand. “What’s wrong?”

“Esmerelda...” He turned back, but she was gone. “She appeared and told me to interrupt you. I thought she was going to push me when I told her no.”

Slate extended his hand into the cooler air around Dash. “That’s peculiar even for her.” He turned and offered Dash his phone. “My mother wants to say hello. If this is a bad time I can have her call back.”

The screen showed the call was on mute, and he could’ve kissed Slate for his forward thinking. “I can talk to her. Liv wants to read the book, but I wanted to talk to you first.”

“Understood.” He headed back to his room. “You can talk in our room.”

Slate referring to his bedroom as theirs was a big step, but it didn’t scare Dash as much as he expected. It even put him in a much better mood as he clicked off the mute button. “Hi, Mrs. Blackwood, this is Dash Reeves.”

The conversation with Slate’s parents was brief. They were nice, welcomed him to their family, and said they looked forward to meeting in person. Dash’s conversation with Slate took more time. Together, they skimmed the book, but didn’t see anything they couldn’t share, so they rejoin Liv in the sitting room. When Dash handed her the book, she scurried off to her desk full of notes.

While Liv read and re-read the book, Dash helped Slate bring food into the sitting room. They encouraged her to eat, but she didn’t want to interrupt her flow. For all her excitement, Liv didn’t learn anything Dash and Slate hadn’t gotten from Morten Reeves.

As they pored over the book, a picture began to emerge. The ritual to seal the veil would require both Dash and Slate, their combined abilities acting as a counterbalance to Esmerelda’s solo attempt a century ago.

“It says here that the ritual must be performed when the Blue Moon reaches its zenith,” Liv read aloud. “That gives us a very specific and limited window to work

with.”

Dash had been worried when he'd read the passage, but the weight of the narrow time frame felt heavier hearing the concern in Liv's voice. “What happens if we miss the window.”

“At a minimum we need to wait almost three years to try again,” Slate said. “That assumes the veil doesn't rip apart this year. I'm not sure what we do if that happens.”

“Like I said in the car,” Dash mumbled. “No pressure at all.”

The next few days for Dash passed in a blur of preparation and practice. He spent hours working with Slate on how to use his new abilities. Dash learned how to sense and direct the flow of spiritual energy through meditation. It was similar to the on the fly lesson Slate gave him the first time, only more focused. When they were training, the air around them shimmered with ethereal energy, Dash heard sounds that he thought were whispers at the edge of his senses.

Slate held Dash's hand and told him to focus on their connection to serve as an anchor as he reached out with his senses. Energy flowed between them during those times, and drew them closer. If he didn't believe the midnight waltz could bind souls before, he did now.

The connection Dash had with Slate was something he'd never experienced before. It terrified and excited him in equal parts. Using that link to Slate, Dash's confidence grew every time he successfully mastered a new skill. Time, however, loomed in the background like a growing storm. Halloween was just days away.

The closer to the Blue Moon it got, the more supernatural activity in Oriskany Falls intensified. Most people didn't notice the whispers or apparitions walking down Main Street, but they couldn't miss objects moving, lights flickering, or shadows passing

through rooms.

On the night before Halloween, Dash dreamed Esmerelda reached out to him in her spectral form. Her eyes filled with a mixture of disappointment and sorrow. He jerked away and sat up in bed, tossing aside the arm Slate had draped over his chest. Gasping for air in the dark, he felt the room closing in around him.

“Breathe, Dash,” Slate said as he wrapped his arms around his trembling boyfriend. “I’m here. Just breathe.”

Dash clung to him, still shaking from the vivid image. “Esmerelda was there and she looked disappointed. What if I’m not strong enough? I’ll put everyone in danger if I fail. Especially you. I’m not ready for that. It’s too soon.”

“You won’t fail, Dash.” Slate stroked his head gently. “Believe in yourself and in us. You don’t need to do it all by yourself. We’re a team. Together, we got this.”

Closing his eyes, Dash clung to his connection with Slate. It was strong and steady, just like Slate. Energy built up between them, like when they were training, and it soothed away Dash’s fears.

He tilted his head up and pressed his lips to Slate’s. The kiss was desperate yet passionate. Slate pulled Dash closer, and their energy circulated between them, drawing their souls closer still.

The power of their bond should have scared Dash, but it didn’t. The closeness allowed him to see Slate’s beautiful soul. He was like an angel sent to earth to save Dash from his loneliness.

Breathless, they finally parted, and Dash rested his forehead against Slate’s. “Thank you for saving me. The way you believe in me, I feel I can do anything.”

“That power was always inside you.” Slate pulled their hands to his lips and kissed Dash’s fingers. “You saved me too. I was so lonely until I met you.”

Holding Slate close, something hit Dash. “Promise me you won’t do anything rash tomorrow night. No jumping in the breach to seal it like Ezra Reeves did.”

Slate leaned back until he could look Dash in the eye. Slowly he shook his head. “I can’t promise you that. And before you ask me again, can you honestly promise me if the situation required one of us to do what Ezra did a hundred years ago, you won’t do it to save me?”

Dash wanted to lie, but Slate already knew the truth. “You know I can’t.”

“Then don’t ask me to make you a promise you can’t make to me.” Slate’s hard edge faded. “That’s not how love works.”

Dash knew he loved Slate since the first night they slept together. Hearing Slate felt the same left Dash with a warmth he hadn’t felt since he was still single digits old. He couldn’t tell Slate how he felt, because he knew without a doubt, when the time came, he’d do exactly what his ancestor did to save someone he loved. Slate would ask Dash to make a promise he had no intention of keeping.

Rather than continue the conversation, he pulled Slate on top of him. The chance this would be their last night together was high, and he wanted Slate to have something to remember for a lifetime.

Chapter Eleven

The town of Oriskany Falls was a kaleidoscope of color and sound as Halloween night unfolded. The streets buzzed with excitement, children darting between houses in elaborate costumes while adults mingled at the festival booths lining the town square. Lanterns carved into grinning faces flickered in the cool night air, casting dancing shadows that seemed almost alive. Overhead, the long-awaited Blue Moon hung heavy and luminous, its glow bathing the town in white light.

Blackwood Manor opened its gates earlier in the day and a steady stream of fright seekers passed through. Dash overheard many of them discussing previous years and wondering what new elements Slate had added this year.

Outsiders flocked to the town for its annual over-the-top Halloween celebration. Most of the visitors lived in the surrounding areas, but some travelled much greater distances based on Oriskany Falls' reputation. This year's Halloween Blue Moon drew a larger crowd than usual.

At the urging of Slate and Liv, Dash took an early tour of the town. The thing that stood out most was how much fun everyone had. The children racing between houses, accompanied by smiling parents, reminded him of happier family memories. Even people working booths or attraction seemed to have a good time.

The first time he visited the festival Dash felt out of place without a costume. Now he blended in with the others. Most of his outfit he borrowed from Slate, which was appropriate since they wanted to wear similar clothes. The tailored black frock coat adorned with intricate silver embroidery was a bit big owing to Slate's more muscular

build, but it fit well enough. Hidden beneath, Dash wore a period-style white shirt with a complimentary dark waistcoat that was cinched in the back to hug his torso. They'd managed to find some period pants, and Slate had a large collection of top hats any gentleman of that time would be happy to wear. Completing the outfit, Dash wore a pair of black leather boots he'd polished well enough the moon reflected off them.

Keeping in character, he tipped his hat to people who made eye contact. Most smiled, or complimented his costume, and even Mrs. Finch had positive things to say about his attire.

By the time he arrived back at the Manor, the number of people waiting to get in had gotten considerably larger. He bypassed the line, and met Slate on the porch. A warm hand slipped into his as they greeted their guests. Dash hadn't expected to be a host, but Slate said they were together, and it was what couples did in those days.

They walked around to the back to hear what people said when they left. Most of the comments were very positive. The locals made a point to tell Slate it was the best one they could remember. Some of the out of town guests had negative comments, but most centered on it wasn't as scary as they'd hoped. Dash wondered what they'd say if the veil broke open and swarms of freed spirits swirled around them.

"Ready?" Slate asked softly.

Just after 11:00 p.m., Liv approached with a box of candles, chalk, and salt. Dash had tucked the E.R.P. journal inside his coat. He wanted it with them in case they needed to refer to it at the last minute.

"We should set up," she said. "The peak is in less than an hour."

Dash checked his watch, but he didn't need to tell the others they only had forty-six

minutes.

The trio entered the manor, weaving through the revelers who remained blissfully unaware of the potential danger they might face. The manor was a labyrinth of shadows and flickering candlelight. Decorations hung from the high ceilings, a blend of festive and eerie. Dash heard the distant sounds of laughter, shrieks, and the orchestrated clamor of manufactured scares.

The air grew colder as they entered the house. Slate kept it cooler for added effect on the attraction, but Dash had passed through several colder patches. Dash saw signs of ghostly activity including ozone that tickled his nose and a thick fog of spiritual energy everywhere he looked.

“Is it my imagination, or is there more activity than usual in the house?” Dash asked.

“You’re not imagining things,” Slate said. “Spirits are drawn to places where the veil is thinnest. It’s possible a number of ghost will try to rush through if there’s an opening.”

Dash pictured a stream of ghost whizzing past them as they raced toward their goal. “Will they try to stop us from closing the breach?”

“No one knows what they’re going to do, but if we stay focused, they can’t stop us.”

They made their way to the heart of the manor, a grand hall seldom used save for the most significant occasions. Slate locked doors as they passed to ensure no human guests stumbled upon them while they were working.

The room was cavernous, with towering windows that framed the Blue Moon perfectly. Liv arranged the candles in a precise pattern Slate had set out. Dash and Slate drew intricate symbols on the floor in white chalk, referring to the E.R.P. book

for guidance.

As they worked, the back of Dash's neck tingled in the way he'd come to associate with a spirit close to him. Every time he looked up, shadows flickered oddly in the dark corners of the room, and whispers he couldn't quite understand teased his hearing. He also sensed restrained energy nearby. It was a new sensation, and given what he'd learned recently, he didn't think it was a good thing.

"Do you feel that?" he asked Slate. "It's like someone trying to push open a door being held shut."

"That's a good description," he replied. "They can feel the veil is weakening."

They quickly finished their preparations. Slate and Dash made their way into the center of the circle, careful not to step on any of the chalk lines. They joined hands and Slate's energies flowed into Dash. Merging his essence into Slate's, he pushed the combined energy back. The process repeated itself until it was impossible to tell where his life force began and Slate's ended.

They started the ritual, reciting the words they'd practiced for days. Candles flickered as the veil became visible. The thin whisp of white light in the center was the weakness Esmerelda's attempt had created. On either side of the vulnerable space was a dense fog that looked like fluffy white clouds on a sunny day. Dash reached out to the left side while Slate took hold of the right. Together, they began moving the two sides closer.

Slowly, the thinned space shrank. They'd reduced the opening about a quarter of the way when the momentum stopped. It felt like someone had stood between the two sides and held them apart.

A violent wind erupted from the other side of the veil. It whipped through the hall,

extinguishing three candles and scattering lighter objects around the room. The temperature plummeted so rapidly that frost formed on the windows. Dark shadows writhed just beyond the opening, hissing at the pair.

Dash ignored them at first, keeping his attention on the ritual. The book his grandfather had given them stressed that once the ritual began, stopping would open them to being possessed. Dash considered that worse than dying.

Slate tightened his grip on Dash's hand and strained to bring the sides of the rift closer. The wind howled, buffeting Dash's face and chilling him deep inside. The two strained to overcome the resistance and the opening closed a tiny bit more. But it wasn't enough.

The pressure on the other side increased, threatening to unravel all of Dash and Slate's work. A feeling of desperation seeped through the rift, and Dash understood what they faced. Twice the spirits had been thwarted in their attempts to break through. If the opening was sealed, they'd lose their only avenue to the living world.

The foul thoughts coming from the other side explained why Ezra Reeves abandoned his wife and newborn son and sacrificed himself to close the rift. These were truly dark souls who'd been forced out of the world. They were trapped in a place that ignored them. Only if they could return could they feel free again.

Dash's hold on his side was weakening, and he saw the darkness seeping through the veil to grasp the frame of the opening. In that moment, Dash knew what he had to do.

A century ago, Ezra made the decision his sacrifice was worth barring such pain and misery from his family and friends. His conviction was so strong, he left behind a son who would never know his father. Could Dash do any less?

He could end this with one act. A step into the opening and use his life force to seal

the breach. His sacrifice would build on Ezra's and would close the rift for good.

The thought of leaving Slate tore at his heart. He paused for a moment, but quickly decided protecting Slate and everyone else was all that mattered.

Dash tried to free his hand, but Slate's grip became almost painful. "Don't you dare," he said, his voice fierce with emotion. "Remember what we talked about. We're stronger together. I love you Dash. Believe in us."

The truth in Slate's voice reached something deep inside Dash. All his life, he'd been afraid to truly connect with someone, afraid of becoming like his parents. He'd also realized something else. If Dash tried to go into the breach, Slate was coming with him.

Taking Slate with him wasn't what Dash wanted. What good was sacrificing himself if Slate wasn't saved?

Digging deeper, Dash opened himself fully to their connection. He channeled his love for Slate and all the joyed he'd experienced into his efforts.

Power surged between them, stronger than before. Their combined energy pushed back against the darkness, weakening the malevolent spirits hold on the living world.

The air around them cooled, but it didn't chill Dash, it felt comforting and almost warm. A golden light appeared and grew steadily brighter. In the blink of an eye, Esmerelda Blackwood appeared before them.

Unlike the cold spectral figure with a willowy form that lurked in the shadows, this manifestation was solid and defined. She glowed from within, giving her an almost human appearance.

“Well done, my dears,” she said, her steady voice rang out clearly despite the supernatural chaos around them. “I knew you would find the way together.”

"You planned this?" Dash asked.

“More like nudged things along,” she said. A smile appeared, something Dash had never seen from a ghost. “I’ve been trying to guide you both since you arrived in Oriskany Falls. My mistake all those years ago was thinking I could create a controlled gateway alone. Ezra knew this and tried to warn me, but I foolishly ignored him. My unforgiveable actions cost my dear friend his life. I will keep the dark souls away so you can seal the rift forever.”

“You and I will keep them back, my friend,” a voice said from the other side. The image of a young man appeared surrounded by golden light. “It is time for you to come home Esmerelda. You’ve more than atoned for your mistake. Please come and be at peace. Gentry, Fiona and all the others are waiting for you.”

Before Esmerelda moved, a thin stream of white emerged from behind the veil and coiled its way around Dash’s feet. It slowly moved higher until it surrounded him. The mist seeped into Dash’s body. Ezra fixed his gaze on Dash.

“Do not seal the rift,” Ezra said. “Use the knowledge I just gave you to bring to fruition Esmerelda’s vision of a controlled gate. One that will keep the dark souls from your world and allow lost ones to find their way home.”

Esmerelda glanced back at them. “I wish you both a long life full of love and happiness.”

She turned and stepped into the space where the veil was thinnest. Ezra held out his hand and Esmerelda accepted. Her body transformed into a young woman, and she had a look of pure joy.

Dash watched as Esmerelda and Ezra reunited, their forms merging in a gentle embrace before both faded from view. In their wake, the oppressive pressure from the other side disappeared, leaving only a sense of peace.

The knowledge needed to carry out Ezra's final request flooded into Dash's mind. "I know what we need to do," Dash said.

Using his connection to Slate, he guided them in redirecting the energy. Free of the pressure from the other side, the translucent light in the middle turned solid. Unsure what it should look like, Dash molded the energy into a barn door, with a large handle on the right side.

He guided Slate so that the breach was now a gate that they controlled. Dash knew it would take both of them to open this portal. One of them needed to keep the spectral side clear, while the other shepherded lost soul to their final rest.

The wind died away and the temperature returned to normal. Dash scanned the room, but the shadows were gone. The whispers had gone silent as well. Their new gateway was still visible, but he sensed only peace from the other side.

Liv broke the silence first. "That... that was incredible."

Slate brought their still joined hands to his lips and kissed the back of Dash's hand. "You did it."

"We did it," Dash corrected. "I love you too, I was just too scared to tell you."

"I didn't need the words to know how you felt," Slate said, his face a mirror of Dash's joy. "Thank you for not giving up."

Dash pulled Slate into a hug. "I'll never give up as long as I have you," he whispered

into Slate's ear. "You saved me again tonight."

They clung to each other for a few more seconds, and then helped Liv snuff out the candles. When they finished, Dash opened his arms to give her a hug.

"We couldn't have done this without you," he said. "Thank you so much."

A moment later, Slate joined him and they stood quietly for a few more seconds.

Under the light of the full moon still making its journey across the sky, they swept away the chalk, stowed the candles, and put the room back in order. The atmosphere felt lighter and their moods reflected the newfound peace.

Exiting into the main house, they helped escort the last of the guests through the attraction and collectively breathed a sigh of relief when the manor was empty.

"You know," Dash said to Liv. "Now that this is over, it will be quiet enough for you to finish your PhD."

"That's right," Slate said. "You just need to finish your thesis and defend it."

Liv gave them both stink eye. "What are you two up to?"

"Just trying to encourage you to finish, is all," Dash said. Slate nodded his agreement.

"You know how crazy it gets in my house," Liv said. "I can't hear the video clips at home, and the library doesn't like when I play them there."

"If only you had a quiet place all to yourself." Slate tapped a finger to his chin.

"I know," Dash said. "Since I'm practically living here, I could move in permanently

and Liv could use my apartment. It's paid for through September of next year."

"Oh my God! Are you two serious?" Her voice was loud enough to wake the dead, which in Blackwood Manor, wasn't that hard to do. "Yes! That would be so amazing. You two can help me move in next weekend."

Dash laughed at how shocked Slate looked. "Did you expect her to need time to think it over?"

"No, but next weekend?" Slate's voice was almost a whine.

"We could do it this weekend, if you prefer," Liv said. She practically bounced over to them and pulled them into a hug. "You two are the best. I love you both."

She released them and practically ran out the door to get started on her packing.

"That was a nice thing to do," Slate said. "We both know the apartment is only paid for because you're going to pay the rent."

Dash shrugged. "The other option was to invite her to stay here. Blackwood's a big house, but for a small person, Liv makes a lot of noise."

"Sometimes we make a lot of noise," Slate said.

Dash didn't miss the innuendo and it fired up his libido. "Which is another reason we don't need her living here."

"I think it's time we go to bed and make a bit of noise."

Dash grabbed Slate's hand and let himself be led upstairs. He had to admit, relationships with the right person were way better than living alone.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am

Dash stepped back from the dining room table and surveyed his handiwork. The antique silver gleamed in the late afternoon sunlight streaming through the tall windows of Blackwood Manor. He'd spent the last two hours polishing every piece. They probably needed a housekeeper given the size of the house. The day before Thanksgiving, however, was not the time to try and hire one.

"The table looks amazing," Slate said from the doorway. He wore an apron over his usual Victorian-inspired attire, and a smudge of flour dusted his cheek. "Though I think you missed a spot on that spoon."

"Very funny." Dash grabbed a napkin from the stack he'd carefully folded and threw it at his boyfriend. "I don't see you obsessing over every detail of tomorrow's dinner."

Slate caught the napkin and tried to refold it. "That's because I know both our families already approve of us. Besides, I have you to be the detailed oriented person who will keep us on task."

Before Dash could respond, the temperature in the room dropped suddenly. A familiar tingling sensation crept up the back of his neck. They shared a look just before a translucent figure materialized near the china cabinet.

The spirit, an elderly woman in late twentieth century clothing, looked around in confusion. Her form flickered like a candle in the wind, but her voice came through clearly. "Is this... is this the way home?"

"Yes," Slate said gently. "This is the way."

Dash moved closer to Slate and reached for his hand. It had taken a few stops and starts, but they'd perfected a routine to help lost souls.

The barn door gateway shimmered into view. With every crossing, Dash found it easier to summon and protect the portal. A warm golden light enveloped the gateway, and the spirit's eyes widened.

"It's safe to go through," Dash said. "Your family is waiting for you."

The woman's form became more defined as she approached the door. She turned back once, smiling at them both. "Thank you, dears. Happy Thanksgiving."

After she passed through, Dash and Slate sealed the gateway. The room returned to its normal temperature, but the woman left behind a trail of joyful energy. It was something they hadn't expected when they started helping lost souls.

"That's the third one today," Dash said, squeezing Slate's hand one more time before letting go. He moved to one of the place settings, and adjusted the silverware. "Grandpa was right about more spirits finding their way here once word spread about a safe passage. What happens if we're not here or we're too busy when they arrive? Will it create issues?"

"I don't think so," Slate said. "The dead will wait until we're ready to acknowledge them."

"You hope," Dash said. "I've been sifting through the box Gramps sent us and I don't see anything about ghosts waiting patiently for the living to acknowledge them."

"Speaking of your grandfather," Slate said as he adjusted another place setting, "Did he respond to your email?"

His grandfather had been persistent in contacting Dash with ideas and proposals for

reviving and modernizing E.R.P. Dash wasn't opposed to the idea, but he'd had many questions. He reached for another napkin to refold. "Yes. He said the foundation has a large enough endowment to pay both of us and three or four staff members. There should be plenty of funds to create a secure database to track supernatural activity, document different types of spirits, and develop an app for other mediums to log encounters. If we want to do more, however, we'll need to get more money."

"We'll need to speak to my parents and your grandparents about that before they leave," Slate looked at the mess he'd made of a napkin he'd tried to fold, and sheepishly handed it to Dash. "I don't think money will be an issue."

"You might be a bit too optimistic, but we'll see," Dash said. He put the newly folded cloth back in place.

He surveyed the table and didn't see anything else he wanted to fix. At least not at that moment. Happy with his work, it hit him how much he was enjoying himself. He used his thumb to wipe away the flour on Slate's cheek and then kissed the spot.

"What's that for?" Slate asked.

"Everything," Dash said. "When we met two months ago, if someone told me I'd be living in a haunted house with my boyfriend, helping ghost find their eternal rest, and was seriously thinking about running a paranormal research foundation with said boyfriend, I'd have called them crazy."

"You forgot to mention said boyfriend is devastatingly handsome and makes amazing pumpkin pie." Slate wrapped his arms around Dash from behind, and rested his chin on Dash's shoulder.

"I was trying to forget the pumpkin part," Dash said, leaning back into the embrace. "You know how I feel about pumpkin spice."

“Yet you’re letting me make both pumpkin and apple pie for tomorrow.”

“Because I love you,” Dash said. The words came easily now, something else that would have terrified him two months ago. “Also, Liv threatened to spill a pumpkin spice latte on my laptop if I tried to ban pumpkin pie from Thanksgiving.”

They stood quietly for a moment, comfortable in their shared space. The manor creaked and settled around them, its sounds now familiar and almost comforting to Dash. A grandfather clock somewhere in the house chimed four times.

“Speaking of Liv,” Dash said, reluctantly pulling away from Slate to continue preparing for Thanksgiving. “Did she say if she’s coming tomorrow?”

Liv’s parents ran the only Chinese restaurant for miles, and according to Mr. and Mrs. Chen, Thanksgiving was a big day for take-out.

“Yes, though she said she needs to finish grading some papers first. Apparently, her thesis advisor thinks helping her teach freshman history will help Liv complete her PhD faster.”

“More like help the teacher get work done faster,” Dash said. “Which reminds me, have you noticed anything unusual about my old apartment since she moved in?”

“You mean besides Liv’s ability to create chaos in any space she occupies?” Slate ran his hands up Dash’s torso. “No. Why do you ask?”

The effect was immediate, and Dash pulled away to adjust his now hard cock. “Later. You’ve got pies in the oven, and I will not be accused of sabotaging the pumpkin pie because I think it’s one of the nastiest things ever created.

“Wow, Dash. Don’t hold back.” Slate put his hand under his apron and smiled at Dash. “I know, I did it to myself.”

“Did Liv tell you who built that house?” Dash asked. “Obviously not given your nonanswer to my question. Ezra’s great grandfather built it. That’s too much of a coincidence. Plus, when I lived there, I’d heard weird noises or felt like someone was watching me. I always blamed it on the house was old.”

“And now?”

“Now I know better.” Dash pulled out his phone and opened a notes app. “Add that to the list of things E.R.P. needs to investigate. I really need to create a data base.”

“Sounds to me like you’ve already accepted the position,” Slate said. “Though I hope you’re not planning to work through Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow.”

“Grandma already told me, no shop talk at dinner,” Dash agreed. “Though I’m not sure how we’ll keep Liv quiet about it. She’s already created three different filing systems for documenting supernatural encounters.”

A knock at the front door interrupted their conversation. Moments later, they heard the distinct sound of Liv letting herself in. “If you two are being disgustingly cute, please make yourselves decent. I don’t need my eyes burned out again.”

“We’re in the dining room,” Slate called back. “And we’re always decent.”

“That’s debatable,” Liv said, appearing in the doorway with a large shopping bag. Her cheeks were pink from the cold November air, and her eyes sparkled with excitement. “But I’ll forgive you because I found the perfect ledger for recording spirit crossings. It’s very Victorian. You’ll love it, Slate.”

“Given how well you have my boyfriend’s aesthetic preferences memorized, I know who to go to for Christmas gift advice,” Dash said.

“You’d better or I’ll find a way to torture you,” she said.

“Why would you be mad if he doesn’t talk to you?” Slate asked. “I’ll be the one with the less than perfect Christmas gift.”

“He’s such a romantic,” Liv said with a frown. “Because helping Dash buy you a gift is almost like buying you one with his money. It’s shopping without the guilt.”

Dash made a note not to bring too much cash when they went shopping. “Didn’t you say you brought him something?”

“Don’t worry, Dash, I’ll bring you gifts too.” She pulled out a leather-bound book and handed it proudly to Slate. “I also realized if we’re really modernizing E.R.P., we need both digital and analog records. Some of these old houses don’t play nice with electronics.”

Dash raised an eyebrow at the persistent use of the word ‘we.’ Before he could comment, the lights flickered and a cold breeze swept through the room. They followed the source of the cold into the parlor off the dining room.

“Make that four,” Slate said softly.

Liv quickly pulled a notebook from some pocket and followed them into the sitting room.

The spirit materialized and looked around. “Sorry. Am I in the right place?”

“Are you looking to cross over?” Slate asked.

The ghost’s attire looked fairly modern, the style looked about a decade old, but Dash couldn’t tell for sure. Her expression turned somber at Slate’s question.

“Yes. I was looking for my sister, she said she’d wait for me, but I couldn’t find her.”

Dash had quickly learned waiting for a loved one was the most common reason souls chose not to cross over immediately.

After helping the spirit, they returned to their preparations. Liv insisted on staying to help, though her version of helping mostly involved peppering them with questions about the crossing while organizing her notes.

Working next to Slate, Dash marveled at how right everything felt. His fear of commitment seemed like a distant memory. Not only had he found Slate, but he'd also found his purpose. Hosting their family for Thanksgiving dinner was a first for him. A lot of firsts. It was also a glimpse of what the future held.

In addition to two pumpkin pies, Slate made an apple and a pecan pie. The last was for Dash. It was also Dash's grandmother's favorite and that seemed to convince Slate to make it.

"I should probably head home and finish grading those papers," Liv said, as she pushed papers back in her bag. "What time should I come over tomorrow?"

"We'll be up early, so any time really," Slate said. He handed her a pumpkin pie. "Remember to share this with your parents."

Once Liv left, the manor felt peaceful. Dash wondered when the last time Blackwood Manor had been someone's home or hosted a holiday. Hopefully, he and Slate would have many more together.

They cleaned up from Slate's bake-a-thon, and put everything away. Dash made a last sweep of the dining room to be sure he'd done as much as he could in advance of tomorrow.

"I think that's as much as we can do today," Dash said, joining Slate in the kitchen. The scent of baking pies filled the air, and despite his aversion to pumpkin spice,

even Dash had to admit the kitchen smelled amazing.

“Having second thoughts about any of this?” Slate put the dish towel over a bar to dry. “The families meeting, taking over E.R.P., making Blackwood Manor our home.”

“Nope, not really, and not even a little.” Dash hopped onto a clear spot on the counter, his legs dangling. “I kept waiting for the panic to set in, but it didn’t. I guess that’s the universe telling me everything’s perfect.”

“Perfect?” Slate moved to stand between Dash’s legs. “Even running a supernatural transit station?”

“Even that part,” Dash said. “Although I do have one condition about tomorrow.”

Slate raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“When your parents and my grandparents start planning our wedding, we pretend not to hear them.”

“Deal,” Slate laughed, leaning in to kiss him. “Though I think it’s too late. Mom’s already asked about our preferences for flowers.”

They were interrupted by another temperature drop, though this presence felt different from spirits seeking crossing. A familiar figure materialized near the doorway. It was Thomas, a twenty-one year old spirit from the 1950s who’d taken to visiting them regularly since Halloween night.

“Don’t let me interrupt,” Thomas said with a knowing smile. “Just checking to make sure you’re both ready for tomorrow’s family invasion.”

“As ready as we can be at this stage,” Slate replied. “Are you going to stick around

for dinner?”

“No,” Thomas’s expression faded a bit. “Family gatherings.... I don’t have good memories of those. But I’ll be around to make sure wandering spirits come back after the holiday.”

He faded away as quietly as he’d appeared, but it left Dash a little melancholy. He’d grown fond of Thomas, but they didn’t know a lot about him. Given Thomas’s reaction to the dinner invitation, Dash suspected he’d had a tough, though short, life.

“Come on,” Slate said, offering Dash his hand. “As much as you want to, you can’t fix his past.”

Dash accepted Slate’s words as the truth, but it didn’t stop him from wishing he could’ve helped.

“I know.” Dash took the offered hand and slid off the counter. “I hope he can keep the spirits away, at least during dinner.”

“With our families, they’re likely to bring along souls so they can watch us help them cross over,” Slate said.

Dash snorted, because that’s exactly what his grandfather would do. “I’ll call Grandma in the morning to have her keep Gramps in line.”

“Hopefully you’ll have better luck than me,” Slate said. “My mother’s like Liv. She’ll want to watch.”

As they walked upstairs together, Dash reflected on how much his life had changed since arriving in Oriskany Falls. He’d come looking for a fresh start, expecting to hide away in a small town with a weird Halloween obsession. Instead, he’d found a home, a purpose, and most importantly, love.

At the top of the stairs, Dash paused and turned to Slate. “Thank you again. I know I say it a lot, but you’ve made me so happy. I love you, Slate Ezekial Blackwood.”

Slate struggled not to smile, but in the end failed. “I love you, Morten Dashiell Reeves.”

Around them, the manor settled in for the night, its ancient walls holding countless secrets and stories. Those were things to explore another day. Tomorrow would be for family, both living and spectral. Tonight, however, was just for them.

The End