



Bear Naked Truth (Celestial Pines Romances #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Autumn Sinclair arrived in Celestial Pines to cleanse haunted houses — not fall for brooding innkeeper Dorian Hawthorne and his unsettlingly cozy, mildly possessed Briar Hollow Inn.

Dorian wasn't supposed to be charming, funny, or protective. He was supposed to be gloomy, mysterious, and maybe a little tragic. But from their first meeting, with his golden eyes and flannel-wrapped muscles, he was dangerously warm—and undeniably intriguing.

As Autumn dove into the inn's haunted past, she uncovered secrets older than the town itself, ones tied to a curse rooted in lost love and betrayal. Spirits lingered, not out of malice, but fear—a warning that history might repeat itself.

Together, Autumn and Dorian faced truths hidden in the whispers of restless ghosts.

But with the curse tightening its hold, Autumn had to decide: could she risk her guarded heart for a man who made her believe she finally belonged?

Or was history bound to repeat, dragging them both into its haunted embrace?

Total Pages (Source): 41

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:17 am

AUTUMN

The fog curled thick and low through the trees, like it had something to hide.

Autumn Sinclair tightened her grip on the steering wheel of her ancient Subaru and leaned forward, squinting at the winding mountain road ahead.

Somewhere between the faded GPS signal and the whispering pines, the town sign came into view—weathered wood carved with ivy-scrolled letters: Welcome to Celestial Pines – Population: Who’s Asking?

She huffed under her breath. “Charming.”

The engine sputtered like it, too, had opinions, but the car held together long enough to coast into the heart of town.

Celestial Pines looked like a postcard from a witchy lifestyle blog.

Everything about it was a little too quaint, a little too still, like even time knew not to mess with this place.

Mist clung to crooked rooftops, chimneys puffed lazy smoke, and a row of glowing shop windows blinked to life just as her tires pulled into a parking space beside an overly enthusiastic lamppost.

She stepped out, the mountain air crisp and alive with something not quite definable. It smelled like rain-soaked cedar, a hint of burnt sugar, and—beneath it all—that

familiar electric charge of old magic.

Autumn hoisted her duffel over one shoulder and shut the car door with her hip.

Her boots crunched on gravel as she scanned the buildings.

The Spellbound Sip stood directly across from her, its windows fogged with warmth, a chalkboard sign proclaiming: Today's Mood: Cautiously Hopeful.

A faint laugh escaped her lips. At least the coffee had a sense of humor.

But she wasn't here for mood lattes or mystical ambiance.

Her eyes drifted upward to the looming silhouette just past the town square. Briar Hollow Inn. Even from a distance, it looked like it knew too many secrets and wasn't inclined to share.

Her new... employer lived there. Or worked there. Or haunted it himself, depending on who she'd talked to in her very short email exchange.

She adjusted the strap of her bag, muttering to herself, "In, cleanse the house, collect the check, and get out."

"Planning a quick escape, are we?"

Autumn startled. The voice had come from behind her, deep and smooth and entirely too amused. She turned.

There, standing like he'd been plucked straight out of a lumberjack-themed daydream, was a man with dark brown hair tousled by the breeze and eyes the color of golden hazel, all warmth and mischief.

He was tall—too tall to be casual about it—and broad across the shoulders in a way that made her spine go straight.

His sleeves were rolled up, flannel open over a thermal shirt that didn't hide a damn thing. And he was smiling. Of course he was.

She blinked. "Let me guess. Dorian Hawthorne."

He gave a mock bow. "At your service."

"You're... cheerier than I expected."

"You were expecting brooding and ominous?" he teased.

"You're the guy who owns the haunted mansion," she deadpanned. "I figured 'melancholy' came with the deed."

That made him laugh. It was a rich, full sound, the kind that settled somewhere under your skin.

"Fair," he said. "But I'm trying to lean into whimsical instead of tragic. Tragic's overdone."

Autumn studied him for a second. He didn't look like a man tangled up in ghost stories and family curses. He looked like someone who gave out too many hugs and made the local diner staff blush. And his eyes—those flickering, almost-glowing hazel eyes—kept lingering on her a little too long.

She cleared her throat. "You know, you left out some details in your email."

"Did I?" he asked, flashing that too-easy grin that looked like it belonged on a

cinnamon roll more than a real person.

“You made it sound like a routine cleansing job. And this place...” Her eyes drifted past him to the looming silhouette of the inn just beyond the town square. “It doesn’t feel routine.”

He didn’t deny it. Just shrugged, casual-like, and nodded toward the winding trail that cut behind the shops. “Come see it for yourself.”

The walk to the inn was short, but not silent. Wind stirred through the pines, carrying scents of damp earth and distant woodsmoke. A crow cawed once, low and rough, then flapped off like it didn’t want to be involved.

With every step, the atmosphere thickened. Not oppressive, but aware. Watching.

Briar Hollow Inn sat nestled at the edge of the woods, its peaked roof and curling ivy looking like something out of a forgotten fairytale.

It was beautiful, if your idea of beauty included ominous charm and a strong possibility of mild possession.

The porch sagged in places, creaking under its own memories.

“Did it just... sigh at us?” Autumn muttered as the boards groaned beneath her boots.

“It does that,” Dorian said, clearly amused. “Especially when the weather shifts. Or people with strong energy show up.”

Inside, the scent changed. Old cedar, honeysuckle, and something else—thicker. A sorrow that clung to the wallpaper, threaded through the floorboards.

Autumn stepped into the foyer, dropping her bag near an umbrella stand shaped like a dragon skull. Her fingers brushed instinctively against the small charm in her coat pocket—a smooth river stone etched with a grounding sigil. She never went into a haunted place without it.

“You feel that?” she asked softly, scanning the ceiling with narrowed eyes.

Dorian hesitated behind her, then said, “Like stepping into someone else’s memory?”

She turned her head, just enough to catch the edge of seriousness in his voice. For a man who smiled like warm cider and wore dad flannel unironically, he suddenly felt... familiar. Like he understood.

“It’s heavy,” she said.

“It gets heavier upstairs,” he replied. “Want the tour?”

“Lead the way.”

He moved with a confidence that was somehow both easy and careful, like he knew the walls might shift on a whim.

She followed, notebook in hand, eyes cataloging the details—a cracked mirror in the hallway that reflected candlelight though none were lit, a painting that seemed to frown when she passed.

“The sitting room,” he said, gesturing to a parlor with wingback chairs and a fireplace. “Sometimes the fire lights itself. No one’s ever figured out why.”

She nodded, noting it silently.

He continued, pointing out a dining room with a grandfather clock that ticked backward on Tuesdays, and a library where the books reportedly rearranged themselves alphabetically by emotion.

Autumn let the information wash over her, half listening, half absorbing the house itself. There was grief here. But also yearning. The kind of energy that clung to joy once, and didn't know how to let go of its shadow.

As they climbed the staircase, Dorian asked, "So, why ghost whispering? Seems like a tough gig."

She hesitated. Most people didn't ask that. They either recoiled or romanticized it.

"It wasn't a choice," she said finally. "Spirits find me. I help them pass on. Better that than being haunted by stories I can't finish."

He didn't speak right away. When he did, it was softer than she expected.

"That's... kinda beautiful."

"It's a job."

He gave her a sidelong smile. "Still beautiful."

They reached the top floor. Dorian stopped at the last door on the right, pushing it open gently.

"Welcome to your haunted home-away-from-home," he said with a wink.

Autumn stepped inside.

The room was surprisingly warm. Sunlight filtered through gauzy curtains, pooling on the floor like spilled honey. The bed was made, simple but inviting. A faint scent of lavender clung to the air.

She crossed to the window, running her fingers along the sill. They paused on a faint, scorched etching—an old protection rune, partially rubbed away. Her brows furrowed. Whoever lived here before had tried to keep something out. Or in.

Behind her, Dorian leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed, eyes unreadable for once.

“You good?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yeah. Just... a lot to take in.”

“I’ll give you some space,” he said, but didn’t move. His gaze lingered, not in a way that made her feel exposed, but like he was trying to memorize something soft and fleeting.

“Dorian?”

“Hmm?”

“I don’t spook easy,” she said quietly, still facing the window. “But this place... it wants something.”

“Yeah,” he murmured. “It wants to be heard.”

She turned back to him, studying the man who should’ve felt like a walking contradiction—too open, too earnest for a place like this. And yet, somehow, he fit.

He finally pushed off the frame, flashing her a smile. “I’ll let you unpack. Holler if the bed tries to eat you or the curtains whisper secrets.”

“Noted,” she said, voice wry.

As the door clicked shut behind him, the room fell quiet.

She crossed to her bag, unzipped it, and pulled out her cleansing kit. Vials of black salt. Charcoal. Candles etched with runes. She lined them on the dresser in practiced motion, but her hands weren’t as steady as she wanted them to be.

The room wasn’t oppressive. But it wasn’t at peace either. And somewhere beneath the floorboards, or maybe deeper than that, something was watching. Waiting.

Autumn closed her eyes, taking a long breath.

She’d come to banish ghosts. But it was the living man with the golden eyes and smile like sunlight that was already haunting her.

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DORIAN

Dorian Hawthorne had never been particularly superstitious, but he had to admit—when the wind whistled just right through Briar Hollow's broken eaves, it sounded like the house was holding its breath.

He stood at the base of the wide staircase, arms crossed, shoulder leaned against the bannister post worn smooth by time and memory. The inn creaked softly above him, a shiver in the bones of old wood. Not a bad shiver. Not malevolent. But aware.

The house was always listening.

He rubbed the back of his neck, letting his golden-hazel gaze wander the front parlor.

Light filtered through the tall windows in slanted shafts, catching the dust like slow-falling stars.

The fireplace was quiet for now. He hadn't lit it since last week, after the logs hissed with whispering voices instead of smoke.

"Not today, thanks," he muttered to the room like it might respond. Which, given the week he'd had, wasn't entirely out of the question.

The soft patter of steps on the stairs pulled his attention up. Autumn.

She moved like someone trained to be invisible, even when she was the only one around—quiet, cautious, wrapped in that oversized sweater that looked like it had

seen better decades. She stopped halfway down, scanning the space like she was expecting something to jump out from under the rug.

Her eyes found him. Violet-blue. Startling in this light.

“You always lurk in corners, or is that a new innkeeper hobby?”

Dorian let a grin tug at the corner of his mouth. “Only when I’m trying to look mysterious.”

“Mission accomplished,” she said, descending the last few steps. “This place has a definite vibe.”

He chuckled, straightening. “That’s the polite way of sayin’ it feels haunted.”

“I try to be polite.” She gave him a once-over. “Sometimes.”

He liked her voice—calm but clipped, like she didn’t waste syllables.

It had a rhythm that was hard to ignore.

And that scent... gods, it was driving him insane.

Clean soap, cinnamon, and something wild he couldn’t place.

His bear stirred low in his chest, that instinctual buzz thrumming beneath his skin since he first caught her scent as she passed him entering the inn.

“So.” She folded her arms, leaned against the stair rail opposite him. “How’d you end up with this place? Don’t take this the wrong way, but you don’t exactly scream ‘gothic innkeeper.’”

“None taken,” Dorian said. “I scream ‘ex-forest ranger with too many flannels,’ I know.”

She gave a barely-there smirk. He liked earning those. They felt rare.

He motioned toward the open sitting room and walked in, speaking over his shoulder. “You want tea or coffee? Kitchen’s mostly functional. Unless the stove’s feelin’ dramatic.”

“I’ll take whatever doesn’t hiss at me.”

He chuckled again. “Coffee it is.”

While he filled the percolator, one of the few modern luxuries he’d managed to wrangle into the place, he started in on the story. The truth. Mostly.

“My uncle Alaric owned Briar Hollow. Only met him once, when I was a kid. Didn’t even know he remembered me. But two years ago, he passed. Left me the deed and a letter that basically said, ‘Good luck, you poor bastard.’”

Autumn perched herself on the kitchen table, legs crossed, watching him over the rim of her mug. “Sounds like a generous guy.”

“He was... eccentric,” Dorian said, choosing diplomacy. “The house had been abandoned for years. Locals wouldn’t touch it. Said it belonged to the dead.”

“They weren’t wrong.”

He poured the coffee, slid a mug toward her, and leaned against the counter. “When I first stepped inside, I felt it. Like... grief had soaked into the walls. Heavy. But not evil.”

Autumn nodded once, no sarcasm this time.

“I saw the inn,” he continued, voice lower now, more earnest, “and I didn’t just see rot and bad plumbing. I saw a place that could come back to life. Like me, maybe.”

That surprised her. She blinked, slightly thrown by his honesty.

“I needed a second chance,” he added. “After the wildfire took my job, my cabin, and most of the forest I called home... well, this place felt like a dare. Or a gift. I’m still not sure which.”

She took a sip of coffee. “Why now? Why call me in after two years?”

Dorian rubbed a hand over his jaw. “Because the spirits have started to act out more. They’re not just pacing anymore. They’re pushing. I think they know I’m getting close to opening. Something about that makes them nervous.”

Her brows rose slightly. “You’re reopening this place?”

He nodded. “Boutique inn. Charmy, spooky, tucked into the hills. Already got bookings lined up from people who want the ‘paranormal experience.’ Though I don’t know if you could tell, but the veil keeps us all protected here, the thing is though that even the supernatural enjoy a good ghost haunting.

Tourists are freaks for the paranormal these days. ”

She didn’t answer. Just sipped her coffee and looked at him for a long moment.

“You’re serious,” she finally said.

“As a hexed bookshelf.”

“Then you need more than a cleansing,” she murmured. “You need an exorcism and a ward built into the bones of this place.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

She stood, taking her cup with her, brushing past him to return to the sitting room. He didn’t miss the way her shoulder brushed his chest. Didn’t miss the goosebumps that raised on her skin. His bear stretched, slow and possessive, humming behind his ribs.

He followed her out.

“So,” she said, her tone lighter now, teasing, “what’s the catch?”

Dorian leaned on the back of the faded couch and gave her a crooked smile. “Catch?”

“You brought in a ghost whisperer, you’re talking bookings even with it acting out, and I swear this house grumbled when I walked in. There’s always a catch.”

He hesitated. He hadn’t meant to bring it up today—not this soon. But the moment felt cracked open just enough.

“Well,” he said slowly, “there’s been... some interest in the inn.”

She gave him a dry look. “Supernatural interest?”

He nodded. “Vampires. Real estate witches. One shifter couple who wanted to turn it into a ‘scent therapy retreat.’ They’re circling.”

“And you don’t want to sell?”

“I didn’t survive a forest fire, a bureaucratic nightmare, and six months with a

possessed plumbing system just to hand this place over to people who think moonstone tile is ‘rustic.’ No offense to moonstone.”

Her mouth twitched. “None taken.”

He shifted, bracing his hands on the couch’s backrest. “But the problem is, I’m single. Unmated. And around here, that’s... a vulnerability. Makes people think I don’t have roots. That I’m movable.”

“And?”

“And I might have told a few folks that I was taken.”

She raised an eyebrow, not quite following.

He let out a breath. “And I might’ve told them that the woman staying here—the incredibly gifted, sharp-tongued ghost whisperer—was my mate.”

She blinked. Then blinked again.

“You did not.”

“I did.”

She stared at him. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Probably,” he said cheerfully. “But hear me out. It’s temporary. A little public hand-holding, some strategic sightings. You don’t even have to fake smile unless you want to. I just need the town to back off for a while.”

She shook her head, muttering, “You bear shifters are ridiculous.”

His grin widened. “That sounds like a maybe.”

“That sounds like a this better come with hazard pay.”

“It’ll come with free coffee, a private room, and my undying gratitude. And I stipend as well, I promise.”

Autumn sighed. “Why do I get the feeling that this house isn’t the only one with unfinished business?”

He didn’t answer.

But when she walked past him again, mug now empty, hair swaying slightly, he couldn’t help but watch her go. There was something about her. Something more than her magic, more than her eyes and it made his bear pace. Something that made him think this wasn’t going to be fake for long.

Not for him.

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AUTUMN

A utumn paced the length of her room like the floorboards had personally offended her. She had slept decently the first night there, but still, her mind had been busy and given her complicated dreams.

The scent of lavender clung to the air like a polite ghost—persistent, a little invasive, and probably enchanted by some old woman with a fondness for charm bags and passive-aggressive energy.

Her boots thudded softly on the wood, rhythm matching the mental war she'd been waging since Dorian's ridiculous, yet annoyingly well-timed, proposal.

Mate. He'd said mate. Like that wasn't a word loaded with every kind of implication a supernatural woman might want to avoid. She could barely commit to a favorite coffee order. And now she was supposed to fake-date a bear shifter with eyes like honey and shoulders built for sin?

Her reflection in the old mirror frowned back at her, violet-blue eyes tired, mouth set in a stubborn line. She looked like someone who didn't do small talk or spontaneous decisions.

"Three weeks," she muttered. "Just three weeks, cleanse the house, play pretend, take the money, leave."

It was the paycheck that was pushing her toward yes. The inn needed real work, and Dorian—sunshine incarnate in flannel—had a way of making his chaos sound like a

plan.

But there was something else. Something harder to name.

Curiosity.

There was a story buried in this house. In Dorian, too. She could feel it, coiled tight beneath the easy smiles and warm mugs of coffee. And Autumn, for all her introverted edge, had always been a sucker for untold stories.

She grabbed her notebook, clipped a charm to her belt loop—one carved from red jasper to absorb spiritual agitation—and headed downstairs.

The house didn't creak when she moved through it. Not like it had when she first arrived. That was either a good sign... or a very, very bad one.

She found Dorian in the kitchen, sleeves rolled up again, arms dusted with flour, and a slightly scorched baking sheet on the counter.

"Is that... bread?" she asked, eyeing the dough ball with a suspicious lean.

"Supposed to be," he said, glancing up with that disarming grin that made her stomach dip. "Might end up as a weapon if it doesn't cooperate."

Autumn smirked despite herself. "If this inn thing falls through, you've got a future in shifter-proofing."

He chuckled and wiped his hands on a towel. "You sleep okay?"

She shrugged, noncommittal. "The bed didn't eat me, so we'll call it a win."

“I’ll take it.” He leaned against the counter, drying his hands slowly. “Thought about my offer?”

She hesitated. “I did.”

“And?”

Another breath, then she crossed her arms. “Here’s the deal. I don’t do drama. I don’t do clingy. And I sure as hell don’t do real feelings.”

His eyes crinkled at the edges. “Got it. Strictly fake feelings only.”

“I’m serious, Dorian. This is just for show. The second this house is cleared, I’m gone. We don’t blur lines.”

He gave a solemn nod, though there was a flicker of something unreadable in his eyes. “No lines blurred. Scout’s honor.”

“You weren’t a scout.”

“Nope,” he said, “but I was a ranger. That’s gotta count for something.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. I’ll do it. But you owe me hazard pay and at least three favors.”

“What kind of favors?”

“I’ll let you know when I think of them.”

He grinned like he’d just won a bet. “Deal.”

Autumn grabbed a banana from the bowl on the counter, peeled it, and leaned against the fridge. “We’ll start slow. Casual touch here and there. No pet names.”

His mouth twitched. “I was gonna call you sugar blossom.”

She pointed her banana at him. “You try it, I walk.”

He lifted his hands in mock surrender. “Noted. Strictly professional fake-dating with casual fond glances and occasional hand-holding.”

“And no telling the town yet,” she added. “Let me scope things out first. Spirit-wise.”

“Of course.” He tapped his temple. “I trust your ghost radar.”

“That’s not a thing.”

“Sure it is. You got that look when the air shifts. It’s all intense and haunted. Very chic.”

Autumn shook her head, trying not to smile. “You’re exhausting.”

“You like me anyway.”

She said nothing, not sure why she wasn’t able to deny it.

They spent the rest of the morning walking through the house again, this time with Autumn making more descriptive notes, checking pressure points, and letting her senses expand just enough to feel what wasn’t visible.

The first time it hit her, they were in the old study.

A whisper.

Soft. Not words, exactly. Just... longing. A breath of emotion that didn't belong to either of them. She paused, one hand on the edge of a dust-covered writing desk.

"You okay?" Dorian asked, watching her carefully.

"There's something here," she said quietly. "It's not angry yet. Just... watching."

He nodded. "That's pretty much how the house has felt since I moved in. Like it's waiting."

"Most ghosts are," she murmured. "For someone to listen. For a truth to be told."

They moved on to the library next. She let her fingers trail along the book spines, eyes narrowing as one vibrated slightly beneath her touch. "This shelf shifts itself?"

"Only when someone's going through heartbreak," Dorian said. "Or when I play country music too loud."

"Same thing."

He laughed, deep and genuine, and the sound made something warm uncurl inside her chest.

They didn't touch much, just the occasional graze of fingers when he handed her something, or when she steadied herself on a creaking floorboard—but every time they did, she felt her body heat up and tense all at once. His skin was warm. Always warm. Like a low-burning fire under the surface.

By the time they reached the third-floor landing, she was bone-weary and buzzed

from the constant low hum of spirit energy.

“I need a break,” she said, leaning against the wall.

Dorian nodded and opened the window nearby. A breeze drifted in, cool and pine-scented, carrying the distant sound of laughter from the square below.

“You ever think about leaving?” she asked suddenly, surprising herself.

He leaned beside her, close enough that their shoulders brushed. “I did. After the fire. Thought about running as far from these mountains as I could.”

“But?”

“But something kept pulling me back. Maybe it’s the land. Maybe it’s stubbornness. Or maybe this old house whispered sweet nothings when no one was lookin’.”

Autumn looked at him trying to understand.

He wasn’t what she expected when she took the job. Too kind. Too open. And yet... there was steel under the sweetness. A quiet kind of strength that didn’t need to prove itself.

Dangerous, she thought. The kind of man who could make her forget all her rules.

“You’re a strange one, Dorian Hawthorne.”

He smiled. “Takes one to know one.”

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DORIAN

Dorian had never believed in love at first sight, but he was starting to think maybe it came in stages.

First was scent. That hit him like a freight train the moment Autumn stepped out of her car—warm cinnamon, old paper, and something wilder, something that stirred his bear in ways no one else ever had. Then came her voice—cool and clipped, like she didn't give herself away easily. But now?

Now, he was watching her laugh.

And he was toast.

They stood just inside Pines & Needles , the warm, charming antique bookstore that doubled as the unofficial romantic epicenter of Celestial Pines.

The lighting was soft and golden, dust motes dancing in sunbeams like lazy fireflies.

Bookshelves curved and wound like tree roots through the space, whispering to each other when no one watched too closely.

Autumn was leaning against a table stacked with vintage poetry volumes, her eyes crinkling at the edges, mouth parted in a rare, real grin. Her laugh—low and a little scratchy—had just tumbled out at something Markus said, and Dorian didn't even remember the joke.

Didn't matter. He'd have carved that sound into the floorboards of Briar Hollow if he could.

"Alright, don't let the bear fool you," Markus was saying, his tone dry as the bone dust they kept in the shop's back room. "Dorian looks like he bench-presses pianos, but the man once cried at a Hallmark commercial."

"I didn't cry," Dorian muttered.

"You made a sound," Rowan added, perched behind the counter with a mug that read Don't make me hex you. "Like a bear caught in an emotional trap."

Autumn snorted into her coffee, and Dorian gave her a betrayed look.

"You're enjoying this," he said.

"A little," she admitted, her voice lighter than he'd heard it before. "You were right, though. This place has a vibe. Not the haunted one like yours, way more relaxed and enjoyable."

Pines & Needles did have a vibe. Books arranged themselves based on who needed them, the back room occasionally ate people for a few hours of personal introspection, and the air always smelled like a blend of old stories and fresh bread.

Markus and Rowan—the bookstore's guardians—were as much a fixture in the town as Hazel Fairweather's riddle-laced flower crowns.

Markus, all salt-and-pepper scruff and sharp eyes, had a way of seeing through people without making them feel skinned. Rowan was the softer one, all oversized sweaters and quiet knowing. Together, they curated love and literature like it was a religion.

Dorian sipped his coffee, trying not to stare at Autumn too much.

It wasn't easy. She had her brownish-blond hair tucked into a haphazard braid, dark circles under her eyes that somehow made her look more enchanting than tired, and her combat boots were crossed at the ankles like she belonged anywhere she damn well pleased.

He wanted to touch her.

Not just for the fake-dating gig or to appease his bear. He wanted to reach over, tuck that one flyaway strand behind her ear, maybe press his palm to her lower back just to feel her lean in.

She hadn't given him permission. So he didn't.

But damn, it was getting harder to remember where the lines were and they had just started this charade.

"So," Markus said, tilting his head toward Autumn. "Ghosts, huh?"

She nodded. "Whispers, mostly. Sometimes memories. I don't see them in the classic sheet-and-chains way. More like... impressions. Emotional residue."

"Must be exhausting," Rowan murmured. "Carrying all that."

"Sometimes," Autumn said, eyes flicking briefly to Dorian before settling on the shelves again. "But better me than someone who doesn't understand it."

There it was again—that quiet strength. She wasn't flashy, didn't strut her power around, but when she spoke about the dead, her voice carried a weight that silenced the room.

Dorian felt it like gravity.

Markus let out a low whistle. “Well, if anyone can talk a haunted inn into behaving, it’s you. Though you might wanna throw a few drops of vervain under the floorboards, just in case.”

“I’ve got black salt, enchanted sage, and an iron nail that belonged to a shipwrecked banshee,” Autumn said dryly. “We’re covered.”

Rowan blinked. “You have a banshee nail?”

Autumn’s mouth twitched. “It was a trade. Long story.”

Dorian watched her settle into the space, talking shop with the bookstore wolves like she wasn’t completely new to town.

She still kept her arms crossed over her chest, one boot toe tapping the floor absently, but her shoulders had lowered.

Her laugh had loosened. That wall she kept around herself had a few cracks now, and he couldn’t help but hope some of those were for him.

“Well,” Markus said, slapping his hands on his thighs, “if you two ever want to attend Couples Night, we’ve got one coming up this Friday. Love spells, tea leaves, and mildly possessed fortune cookies.”

Autumn shot him a look. “We’re not?—”

“We’ll think about it,” Dorian said quickly, cutting her off with a charming smile. “Thanks, Mark. Appreciate the invite.”

Autumn looked at him as they stepped back out onto the cobbled sidewalk, the door jingling behind them.

“You’re enjoying this too much,” she muttered.

“What, walking through town with a beautiful woman on my arm?” he asked, offering his elbow like an old-school gentleman.

She let out a disgruntled huff but took it anyway, sliding her arm through his. “This is still pretend, remember.”

He didn’t say it, but gods help him, it wasn’t pretend for him. Not anymore. Not with the way his bear seemed to recognize her.

Celestial Pines buzzed with midday activity as they passed The Spellbound Sip, where Nico Voss was arguing with a talking mug.

Across the street, Missy Hawthorne was stringing wards in her shop window with more flair than necessity.

Every corner seemed to pulse with magic and gossip and the kind of supernatural charm you couldn’t find anywhere else.

“You really like this town,” Autumn said softly.

Dorian looked around. “I do. It’s weird, and noisy, and nosy—but it feels like home.”

She was quiet for a beat, then said, “I’ve never had a place that felt like that.”

Dorian’s fingers tightened slightly where their arms touched. “Maybe you just haven’t stayed long enough yet.”

She didn't answer but didn't pull away either, just kept her thoughts to herself.

When she glanced up at him a few minutes later, cheeks slightly pink from the cool mountain breeze—or maybe something else—Dorian knew one thing for sure.

He was already in deep.

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AUTUMN

A utumn didn't do small talk, and she sure as hell didn't do small towns. At least, not in any permanent sense. But Celestial Pines had a way of settling into your bones like it belonged there.

Still, it was strange—unsettling, even—to walk down Main Street and feel... noticed.

Not stared at. Not in that suspicious “who's the outsider?” way most tight-knit supernatural communities wielded like a passive-aggressive welcome mat. This was different. The townsfolk smiled, nodded, greeted her like she was someone. Like she might stay. Like she mattered.

She wasn't used to being seen—not really. Not beyond her work, not beyond the label of ghost whisperer. Back in the city, most people kept her at arm's length. They liked the idea of her. They didn't like the reality. Too weird and quiet.

Too much.

Dorian hadn't flinched. Hadn't pulled away when she mentioned the dead, or the heaviness that came with them. He watched her, not like a man trying to figure out her secrets, but like one memorizing the way she stirred her coffee or smiled without meaning to.

It was unnerving. And if she thought about it too long, she'd bolt.

Which was why, after their meander through the town square and a brief detour past

Everglen Market “You don’t know fear until you’ve faced Celeste’s clipboard,” Dorian had whispered, genuinely spooked.

Autumn excused herself and returned to the inn with the excuse of “ward placement.”

Dorian had offered to help—of course he had—but she needed the quiet.

The kind of quiet only the dead could provide.

She moved through the inn with practiced steps, fingers brushing along wallpaper and wooden railings.

Every room had its own feel. The sitting room was dense with regret.

The hallway by the back kitchen buzzed with frantic, unfinished energy.

But it was the upstairs bedroom, the one with the warped mirror and a dresser that always stuck, that whispered loudest.

She stepped inside and closed the door behind her. The air chilled immediately.

Autumn exhaled slow, grounding herself. She removed the small red jasper charm from her pocket, kissed the stone, and laid it on the dresser beside the cracked mirror. Then she lit a single beeswax candle, inscribed with a runic sigil meant to draw truth from shadows.

“Alright,” she said softly. “Let’s talk.”

At first, nothing.

Just the usual flicker of cool air brushing against her skin, the creak of old boards, the

faint hum of something unseen pressing against the edges of her senses. But then the room changed.

Not dramatically or like in movies. Just... a shift.

The wallpaper near the window darkened, the florals bleeding into shadow. The mirror fogged. The flame of the candle leaned sharply to the left. And then, a voice.

Barely a breath, right next to her ear.

“ You shouldn’t be here .”

Autumn’s spine went rigid. She didn’t flinch. Didn’t run.

“I was invited,” she said, keeping her voice steady. “I’m here to help.”

Another pause. A colder draft, this time curling around her calves like a warning.

“ He brings death with him .”

Her fingers tightened on the lip of the dresser.

“Dorian?” she asked. “You’re talking about Dorian?”

The mirror pulsed once—just once—and then cleared. Her reflection stared back at her, eyes wide, chest rising and falling with too-sharp breaths.

The candle flickered violently. And on the wall beside her, a message appeared, scrawled as if by invisible chalk.

GO.

Autumn backed up slowly, grabbing the charm with one hand and the candle with the other. Her heart thudded wildly, too loud in her ears.

She'd spoken with hundreds of spirits. Angry ones. Lost ones. Even violent ones.

But this? This one wasn't just angry. It was scared.

She retreated downstairs, her boots thudding against the steps with each pace. Dorian was in the front parlor, shirt sleeves rolled up again, sanding a window frame that had clearly offended his sense of symmetry.

He looked up the moment she stepped in, eyes narrowing with concern.

"You okay?"

Autumn stopped in the archway, breath still shallow. "No."

He dropped the sanding block immediately. "What happened?"

"I talked to it," she said. "Or it talked to me."

Dorian stepped forward, slower than usual. He didn't crowd her, but the room suddenly felt smaller with him in it.

"What did it say?"

She met his eyes. "That I shouldn't be here. That you bring death."

His jaw tightened.

"Does that mean anything to you?" she asked.

Silence stretched between them, brittle and heavy.

He nodded. Just once.

“I haven’t told you everything,” he said.

Autumn crossed her arms, grounding herself with motion. “No kidding.”

He sighed, ran a hand through his hair. “There’s a story. A rumor, mostly. When my great-uncle Alaric lived here, they said he was part of something. A... coven, maybe. Or a circle. I don’t know. It was never clear.”

“What kind of something?”

“Blood magic.” His eyes met hers. “Ritual stuff. Forbidden. Dangerous. The kind that ties souls to places.”

She blinked, heart dropping. “That would explain the residue I’m feeling. The grief. The fear.”

“Alaric was the last one. After he died, the energy spiked. The spirits didn’t just wake up—they started reacting.”

Autumn sat down on the edge of the dusty velvet settee. “Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“I didn’t think it mattered,” he admitted, crouching down beside her. “Until now. Until you.”

Her eyes searched his face. “Why me?”

Dorian's voice dropped low. "Because the house reacts to you. Not just the spirit. The house itself. It listens. It shifts. When you're near, it gets quieter."

"That's not comforting."

"It should be," he said. "It means you're what it needs."

Autumn stared at him. "And what if I'm not what it wants?"

Dorian didn't hesitate. "Then we find out what is. Together."

That word. Together. It hung in the air between them, potent and heavier than it had any right to be.

His hand brushed against hers on the cushion. Not intentional. Not overt.

But neither of them moved away.

"You're a lot," she whispered.

He smiled gently. "So are you."

She looked down, watched their fingers nearly touch, then curled hers into her palm.

"Don't fall for me," she said, trying to make it a joke but it came out too honest.

Dorian leaned back just enough to look her in the eye. She could tell he wanted to say something, but instead, he held it in took a breath and returned to sanding the window. Leaving Autumn alone with her nervousness of being seen and what the house really wanted from her... or from them.

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DORIAN

Dorian didn't do dates. Not real ones, not fake ones, and definitely not ones involving emotionally volatile beverages served by gossip-hungry potion witches.

There he was, standing outside The Spellbound Sip in his cleanest jeans and a button-down shirt that didn't smell like sawdust or regret, waiting for Autumn like a damn schoolboy with a crush.

Not that he had a crush.

He had... interest. Respect. Deep, gnawing, can't-sleep-want-to-watch-her-breathe-through-a-haunting-level admiration. That wasn't the same thing. But he had to do this. She had been here a couple of days and he knew people were questioning his lie, so, it was time for a public appearance.

The bell over the café door jingled as he pushed it open, stepping into the warmth and magic of the shop. It smelled like roasted espresso and cinnamon, and something sweeter hidden underneath—hope, maybe. Or trouble.

Probably both.

“Dorian Hawthorne,” Nico Voss greeted from behind the counter, their voice laced with all the smug delight of someone who knew things they shouldn't. “We were starting to think you got cold feet.”

“Just warm boots,” he said easily, tugging at his collar. “She here?”

“Oh, she’s here,” Nico purred, eyes gleaming as they tilted their head toward the back corner.

And there she was.

Autumn Sinclair, perched in a candlelit booth like she wasn’t fully convinced she should be there. Her brownish-blond hair was loosely curled, soft around her face, and her violet-blue eyes were wary as always—but they softened when they met his. Or so he thought.

His bear perked up immediately. It had been restless since she arrived—twitchy and over-aware, pacing just under his skin. But when her gaze touched him, everything stilled.

Dorian crossed the room slowly, every step careful. Measured. The fake-dating plan was hers as much as his now, but this moment? This was something else. Something unscripted.

“You clean up nice,” she said, voice wry, but her eyes flicked down his chest like she approved.

“You look like you just broke a poet’s heart,” he said. “Which, honestly, is kinda what I expected.”

“Flattery’ll get you a seat. Maybe.”

He slid into the booth across from her, the table small enough their knees brushed beneath it. Her boot was warm against his shin.

“I appreciate you agreeing to this,” he said after a beat. “Even if it’s mostly for show.”

She looked down at her menu—handwritten, enchanted to change ink depending on the drinker’s mood. Hers currently read guarded with a chance of emotional thunderstorms.

“You’re lucky I’m bored,” she said, flipping it closed. “And hungry.”

“Then let’s order before Nico decides to lace our pastries with truth serum.”

Too late.

Their drinks arrived before they finished deciding—two steaming mugs that shimmered faintly at the rim. One glowed a soft violet. The other pulsed gold.

“Special blend tonight,” Nico said, placing the mugs with a theatrical flourish.

“Crafted to reveal just enough to keep things interesting. Drink wisely.”

“Define wisely,” Autumn muttered.

“Not at all,” Nico whispered back, then disappeared into the back with a giggle.

Dorian eyed his cup suspiciously. “What’s in this?”

Autumn sniffed hers. “Guilt and maybe rosemary.”

They drank anyway.

It hit almost instantly—a warmth blooming low in his chest, not alcohol-warm, but familiar. Like the scent of her had taken root in his lungs and was now curling upward through his bloodstream. Her magic brushed his aura like a kiss—soft, careful, but undeniable.

He watched her fingers curl around her mug, saw the moment her shoulders dropped. Her mouth parted slightly in surprise.

“You feel it too,” he said quietly.

She nodded. “It’s... you.”

“No,” he said. “It’s us. ”

Her eyes flicked to his, wide with something unspoken. “Don’t say that.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s a lie.”

He glanced down at the tea like she had forgotten already. “It’s not.”

She stared at him. And for the first time since he met her, she didn’t deflect. Didn’t joke or scoff.

“I’m not made for this,” she said. “I don’t do relationships. I do hauntings and salt lines and leaving before things get messy.”

“And I build things that last,” he said. “Doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate what’s temporary. But this? This doesn’t feel temporary.”

The magic pulsed between them—thicker now. Her scent wrapped around him like the woods after rain, and his bear rumbled in his chest, pushing forward with something feral and possessive.

Mine , it whispered.

Dorian gritted his teeth. This wasn't the time.

"I don't want to hurt you," she said, voice barely a breath. "That's why I push."

"I don't bruise easy."

"I do. " Her fingers tightened on the mug. "And when people see me, really see me, they leave. Or worse. They try to fix me."

He reached across the table, his hand warm over hers.

"I'm not here to fix you, Autumn. I just want to sit in your shadows and know the shape of them."

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Her hand then slowly turned beneath his, fingers threading through his deliberately.

"I hate how good that line was," she whispered.

He grinned. "It just came to me."

"Liar."

"Still not possible."

They stayed like that with their hands linked, drinks barely touched as the café hummed around them. Other tables filled. Laughter bubbled. But in that booth, beneath the twinkle lights and slow jazz, something sacred settled between them.

It wasn't a declaration. It wasn't a promise.

But it was enough to make Dorian think maybe he wasn't going to have to play pretend for long.

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AUTUMN

The walk back to Briar Hollow was quiet, save for the crunch of gravel beneath their feet and the gentle rustle of wind through the trees. Autumn kept her hands shoved deep into her coat pockets, fingers wrapped tightly around the edge of her charm like it was a lifeline.

Dorian strolled beside her, quiet but steady, radiating heat like a walking hearth. She could feel it even from inches away—comforting, constant. It tugged at something deep in her bones. Something she didn't want to name. All she knew was that she was in trouble.

Not the ghost kind or the hexed-mirror, cursed-bathroom, spirit-tries-to-yeet-you-across-the-room kind of trouble. This was worse. Something she had no idea how to handle.

This was emotional.

That damn dinner at The Spellbound Sip had cracked something open. She could still feel the brush of his fingers over hers, the way her magic had reached out on its own and wrapped around him like ivy finding its favorite tree. And she'd let it.

Hell, she'd wanted it.

That was the problem.

Dorian didn't talk much on the way back, which should've soothed her. But it didn't.

Not when his silence felt less like absence and more like... patience.

He wasn't pretending. Not anymore. But had he even really tried?

Autumn didn't know what to do with that.

By the time they stepped onto the creaking porch of the inn, her nerves were stretched tight as ghost wire. She paused, one hand on the railing, staring at the warped front door like it might swallow her whole.

"You okay?" Dorian asked, voice soft.

She nodded. A lie.

He opened the door, held it for her. She slipped inside, the warmth of the house curling around her like breath. The air carried traces of honeysuckle and something older, more aching. The spirits were stirring again. Watching. Always watching.

Autumn dropped her bag by the entryway and turned to head upstairs, needing space and air.

His hand brushed her arm. She flinched.

Not violently. Not enough to call attention. But it was a reflex, fast and instinctive. And it stopped him cold.

Dorian's hand fell away instantly.

"Sorry," he said, already taking a step back. "Didn't mean to?—"

"It's fine," she snapped, sharper than she meant. "You didn't... it's not you."

But the look in his eyes that had turned from warm fading to guarded told her she'd already hit a nerve.

“Autumn—”

“I’m tired,” she cut in. “It’s been a long day.”

He nodded slowly. “Right. Of course.”

She turned, climbed the stairs two at a time, shut the door behind her before the guilt could sink in fully.

Then she leaned against it, heart pounding like she’d just outrun something.

Because she had.

Him.

No, that wasn’t fair. She hadn’t run from Dorian. She’d run from herself.

Her past curled up like smoke around the edges of her thoughts. A thousand moments that had taught her that getting close meant getting hurt. That love was a leash, not a home. That the more someone saw her, the more it would eventually cost her.

Her mother’s voice whispered from memory, You scare people, Autumn. They don’t understand. And when people don’t understand, they leave.

And so she had learned to stay small. Stay distant. To let people get just close enough to think they knew her, but never enough to see where she really bled.

And then came Dorian with his bad jokes and steady hands and eyes that looked at

her like she was safe.

She couldn't trust that. She wasn't sure how to trust that.

Autumn sank onto the bed, hands trembling slightly. She lit a small lavender candle, the flame steady even if she wasn't. The light flickered over her fingers as she rubbed the red jasper stone between her palms, grounding herself.

"I don't do this," she whispered to the room. "I don't feel like this."

But her magic betrayed her. It still hummed in her skin, responding to his presence even when he wasn't in the room.

It had reached for him, claimed him, in the way only her gift could.

And that terrified her more than any spirit ever had.

Because what if she let him in, and he left? What if he stayed, and she broke?

There was a knock at the door.

Autumn stiffened.

"Yeah?" she called.

Dorian's voice, low and cautious. "Left a cup of tea outside your door. Just chamomile. No tricks."

She didn't answer.

"Sleep well, Autumn," he added after a moment, then his footsteps receded down the

hall.

She waited a full minute before opening the door.

The mug sat there, steam still curling from the rim. No note. No message. Just warmth.

She picked it up with careful hands, brought it to her lips.

It tasted like honey and peace and something that almost made her cry. She sipped it anyway, watching the moonlight spill across the floorboards.

In that moment of weakness, she let herself wonder what it might feel like to stay.

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DORIAN

Three days had passed since Autumn flinched from his touch, and Dorian still hadn't shaken the weight of it.

He didn't bring it up again. Didn't push.

That wasn't his way, and she was skittish enough without him crowding her with his feelings.

But something shifted after that night. The easy rhythm they'd started building over the first few days had grown jagged.

Stilted. She still worked her magic, still drank the coffee he made every morning, still offered quiet insights when the spirits stirred—but the warmth she'd briefly shown him had cooled again.

He tried not to take it personally.

Tried.

But every time she left a room a second too fast or answered a question with that soft-but-sharp edge of hers, it chipped away at him.

And then came the dreams.

They started the night after she pushed away.

At first, it felt like memory—his memory. A faint echo of firelight on stone, footsteps on old floorboards, a woman's voice humming from another room. But then it twisted.

He saw flashes of hands, his hands, but not, coated in blood, fingers trembling. A ritual circle. Latin carved into the floorboards with something bone-white and brittle. The scent of iron and grief so thick he woke choking on it.

It wasn't his past.

It couldn't be.

But the house was showing him something. Sharing something.

And somehow, he knew it had to do with Autumn.

So he got to work.

It started with clearing out the sunroom.

The room that faced east, tucked just behind the kitchen, lined with windows and soft light that soaked into the worn floor like warmth into skin.

It had been a catch-all space of boxes of things that weren't his, furniture he hadn't found a place for, an antique coat rack that liked to shift an inch to the left when no one was looking.

He cleared it anyway. Swept. Scrubbed. Took down the old floral curtains and replaced them with gauzy ones in cream. Found a battered wooden desk at the thrift shop outside town and hauled it back himself. Refinished it with oil and elbow grease until it gleamed.

He didn't tell Autumn. She'd only ask why.

He didn't have a good answer. Not one he could say out loud.

The first time she noticed, she was coming in from the back garden—her hair wind-tousled, cheeks flushed, a bundle of dried rosemary in her hands.

She paused in the kitchen doorway, blinking at the open French doors to the sunroom.

“You moved the junk?”

He shrugged, sanding the edge of a low bench he'd built that morning. “Felt like it was time. Room wasn't being used. Why? Does that mess up what you are doing?”

“No.” Her gaze scanned the space. “Looks like you're making it into something.”

He didn't look up. “Just a quiet space. Thought maybe you could use one.”

Silence stretched between them. And when he finally glanced up, her eyes were soft in that way that made him feel like he'd won something.

She didn't thank him, but quickly went back to what she was doing. But later, she left a mug of chamomile tea on the bench beside his tool belt.

He called it even.

That night, the dreams came again.

Clearer.

The woman now had a name— Evelyn —and she was weeping. Not from fear. But

from betrayal. He heard her scream echo through the inn, not aloud, but in the marrow of his bones.

And then he saw Autumn.

Not as she was now, but familiar . Like she'd been here before. In another life. In another form.

The spirit was watching her, hovering behind her shoulder as she walked the halls. Not malevolent—but protective. Possessive, almost.

He sat bolt upright in bed, sweating, fists clenched.

It wasn't a haunting anymore. It was a tether.

Whatever bound this spirit to the house, it wasn't just pain.

It was her.

He found her the next morning in the sunroom, sitting cross-legged on the bench he'd built, surrounded by candles and half-drawn sigils.

Her hair was pulled into a messy bun, wisps falling around her face as she scribbled notes into her journal with an intensity that made his bear paw with unmet needs.

“You didn't sleep,” he said quietly.

She looked up, eyes shadowed but alert. “Neither did you.”

He stepped inside, rubbing his chin with thought on how to word this. “Had another dream.”

Her pen paused. “The same one?”

“Getting clearer.”

He sat beside her, careful not to disturb the circle of chalk she’d drawn around her workspace.

“They’re not yours,” she said softly. “The dreams.”

“I figured.”

“They’re memories. From the spirit. Or... someone close to it.”

“Someone like Evelyn.”

Her eyes snapped to his.

“You heard her name too?”

He nodded.

“I think she’s the key,” Autumn said, voice trembling just slightly. “But I don’t know if she’s warning me or...”

“Claiming you?”

Autumn didn’t answer.

Dorian leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

“You don’t have to do this alone,” he said. “You know that, right?”

She didn't look at him.

"I'm used to alone," she said after a long moment. "Alone doesn't break you and it's how I've always done it."

He reached out, slow, deliberate, and brushed her hand with his. Just his fingers over hers, light and warm.

"You're not breakable, Autumn. You're sharp. That's different."

Her lips parted, but she didn't speak.

But she didn't pull away either.

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AUTUMN

After Dorian had left her in the sunroom about the dream, she decided it was time to see if Evelyn was ready to talk.

As her mind wandered as to why the spirits were reaching out to him as well, the scent of honeysuckle had turned metallic.

Autumn paused in the hallway outside the east wing, her fingers gripping a small crystal charm in her pocket so tightly her knuckles ached. The floor beneath her boots felt colder than it had an hour ago. Still. Not just quiet, but wrong. Like something was holding its breath in the walls.

She knew that feeling.

Knew it too well.

The charm vibrated once. Faint, like a warning bell muffled in cotton.

Her breath caught in her throat. She'd been tracking fluctuations in energy all morning, her notes scribbled across half a dozen pages on the desk Dorian had built for her.

This wing—this room —had pulsed on and off like a faulty heartbeat. But now it screamed silence.

She stepped forward, slow, deliberate.

The door to the end bedroom stood ajar, and the air leaking through it was ice against her skin.

“Dorian?” she called gently, knowing he was likely still downstairs but needing to say something or anything—to keep the goosebumps from spreading.

No reply.

She exhaled, whispered the shielding spell under her breath, and pushed open the door.

The moment she crossed the threshold, everything shifted.

The air pressed in, dense and wet, like walking underwater. The candle in her hand flickered once—then snuffed out entirely. The sunlight outside the windows dimmed, as if the house had turned its back to the day. That’s when she saw him.

The Hollow Man.

He didn’t emerge. He coalesced—from the shadows in the corners, from the cracks in the walls, from the very grief woven into the floorboards.

He was tall, impossibly so, draped in shadows that moved like smoke.

His face was... incomplete. A hollow where a mouth should be.

Eyes like empty wells. Not glowing. Not burning.

Just gone .

Autumn froze, every instinct flaring to life.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” she said, voice low, steady.

He didn’t move. Didn’t breathe. Just watched .

“Evelyn,” she said carefully. “I know her name. I know there was pain. That something was taken from you.”

Still nothing.

Her fingers twitched. The charm in her pocket heated sharply, then cracked.

That was when she felt it.

The shift in energy. It was sharp, like a spear cutting through fog.

“No,” she breathed. “No, don’t?—”

The psychic force slammed into her like a freight train, invisible but suffocating.

Her vision blurred, knees buckling under the pressure.

Not physical, but deep, emotional, mental.

Memories not hers tried to shove into her consciousness.

Images of fire, of a circle of robed figures, of Dorian’s face twisting in anguish that wasn’t his.

He was downstairs and he was about to get hurt.

She had to protect him.

She bit her tongue hard enough to taste copper and grounded herself.

Her body screamed under the weight of the spirit's fury, but she pushed back.

Pushed out . Her magic surged, flooding the room with warmth and memory.

Real ones. Her own. The scent of rosemary in her mother's garden.

The scratch of old wool sweaters. The feel of Dorian's hand over hers on a bench bathed in morning light.

The Hollow Man reeled just a step. But it was enough.

"Not him," she gasped. "You don't get to have him."

The energy cracked like lightning. The room snapped back into place. The pressure eased.

And the Hollow Man was gone.

No warning. No parting threat. Just the echo of cold and grief in his wake.

Autumn collapsed to her knees, shaking.

Footsteps thundered down the hall, and then Dorian burst through the door, eyes wide, shirt clinging to his chest like he'd run straight through the rising summer heat.

"Autumn—"

"I'm okay," she said, though her voice shook.

He dropped beside her, one hand bracing her shoulder, the other cradling her face like she might disappear if he blinked.

“What happened?”

“I saw him.” Her eyes filled with tears she wouldn’t let fall. “The true one haunting this place. The Hollow Man. All of him.”

His breath hitched.

“Did he hurt you?”

“Not like that.” She leaned into him, needing his steadiness. “He came after you . Through me.”

Dorian’s jaw tensed. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” She swallowed hard. “But he’s tied to this house in ways we haven’t seen yet. And I think... I think he sees you as a threat.”

“To what?”

She finally looked up at him, pupils wide with the last traces of fear.

“To whatever kept him here.”

Dorian exhaled through his nose, the sound low and steady. His arms wrapped around her without question, pulling her against him like it was the most natural thing in the world.

She didn’t resist. Autumn finally just let herself be held.

DORIAN

Dorian stood outside Autumn's bedroom door, the mug in his hands gently steaming, scent of chamomile curling into the air like a quiet promise.

The inn was hushed around him, a different kind of quiet than usual. Not the haunted stillness, not the expectant hush that crept along the baseboards and windowsills, but something gentler. Like the house itself was holding its breath, watching, maybe listening.

He shifted on his feet. His boots made no sound on the floorboards he'd reinforced last week. The new coat of polish hadn't dulled the creak; it had just deepened it, made it richer. Every part of Briar Hollow had personality. Most of it was haunted. Some of it was just damn stubborn.

He knocked once, knuckles soft on wood. "Hey. It's me."

A beat. Then her voice—soft, raw. "It's open."

He nudged the door open with his foot and stepped into the low light of her room.

The single lamp on the dresser gave off a faint amber glow, casting flickering shadows along the walls.

She sat curled up against the headboard in one of her knit seaters, sleeves too long, collar loose.

Her eyes were tired but alert, her fingers wrapped around her knees like she might fly apart if she didn't hold herself together.

"Brought you this." He handed her the tea, fingers brushing hers deliberately as she took it.

"Thanks," she murmured. "Still trying to get the cold out of my bones."

He didn't need to ask which cold. He could still feel the ghost of it too—the Hollow Man's presence lingering like smoke in the corners of his mind.

He sat on the end of the bed, not touching her, not pressing. Just there .

"You've banished spirits before," he said after a long silence. "Lots of them."

She nodded.

"But this one..." His voice dropped. "He's different."

Autumn's gaze met his. Steady. Haunted.

"He's not just angry," she said. "He's... aware. Calculated. Most ghosts are loops—grief on repeat, trauma echoing until it fades. But this thing? He knows what he's doing. He's picking his moments. Testing me."

"No," Dorian said quietly. "He's testing us. "

That surprised her. She blinked.

He leaned back against the headboard, stretching out beside her with the kind of ease that only came from a man comfortable in his skin. He wasn't trying to crowd

her—just share the space.

Her voice was low. “You think it’s because of... whatever this thing is between us?”

“I think he sees it,” Dorian said. “And I think he hates it.”

Autumn stared down at her tea. “Maybe he’s not the only one.”

He glanced sideways. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “Just... maybe I’m not built for this. For being close. Every time it starts to feel good, I remember why I stopped letting people in.”

He didn’t answer right away. He let the silence settle again, let the house breathe.

Then he said, “When I was thirteen, I got caught in a thunderstorm on the edge of Bear’s Hollow.”

She looked up, brow furrowed. “Random segue.”

“Hang on.” He smiled faintly. “It was pitch black. My flashlight died. I tripped over a root and landed face-first in a creek bed. Thought I was gonna die right there. But then I saw this flicker of light—tiny, maybe ten yards off. I thought it was fireflies at first.”

“What was it?”

“Turns out? It was a lantern left by a local hunter. Left it for a friend who got lost years before. Said he never found him, but he always left a light. Just in case.”

Autumn was silent.

Dorian turned toward her slightly. “Point is, sometimes the thing that finds you in the dark isn’t a monster. Sometimes it’s a light someone left behind. Something saying, ‘Hey, I got you.’”

She looked at him like she wanted to argue. Then she just... didn’t.

Instead, she reached up, tugged gently at the sleeve of his shirt. “Stay?”

The single word hit him like a punch to the gut.

He moved slow, like not to spook her, kicking off his boots and sliding onto the bed beside her, keeping a respectful distance. The kind of closeness that said I’m here if you want me, not I need something from you.

She lay on her side facing him, tea abandoned on the nightstand, fingers curled under her chin. He couldn’t stop watching her—how the flicker of the lamp caught in her eyes, how the vulnerability softened the edges of her usual guardedness.

“Do you believe in past lives?” she asked suddenly.

He blinked. “You mean, like déjà vu or fate or...”

“Like maybe I’ve been here before. Maybe I was part of this place once. Part of him .”

Dorian’s jaw tensed. He hated that idea. Hated it with the kind of silent fury that made his bear rise under his skin.

“You’re not his,” he said. “Whatever tether he thinks he has, it ends here.”

She searched his face. “How can you be so sure?”

He reached out then, fingers brushing the edge of her sleeve. Just enough to feel the heat of her skin. “Because I’ve felt you,” he said. “Your magic. Your fear. Your fight. And it’s not his. It’s yours. You belong to you , Autumn.”

She was quiet for a long time after that.

And then, without a word, she shifted closer. He didn’t move. Just wrapped his arms around her, his warmth surrounding her like a barrier against whatever ghosts might creep in.

They didn’t kiss. Didn’t touch beyond that. But it felt more intimate than anything else he’d known.

They continued talking throughout the night about her past work, his old job, stories that had made them who they are... well, bits and pieces they chose to share anyway.

Eventually, her breathing slowed as he told her a story of his ranger days and an abandoned baby kit. And when the first light of dawn crept across the windowsill, Autumn was still there, breathing slow and steady in his arms as her eyelids rested.

Dorian knew as he watched her finally letting herself be surrounded in peace that he’d wait forever if he had to.

AUTUMN

A utumn had faced down wailing spirits, restless children still clinging to cribs long turned to dust, and one particularly chatty poltergeist who wouldn't shut up about his ex-wife's meatloaf. But this ?

This was far worse.

Couples Night at Pines & Needles wasn't loud or pushy or even particularly intimate—not in the conventional sense.

But the way Rowan and Markus had arranged the store with low candlelight, enchanted music that shifted depending on the emotional temperature, and antique chairs arranged in soft, unspoken circles made her skin itch in a way she couldn't explain.

There was too much feeling in the air. It hung like steam on the windows, clung to her clothes and skin.

“Relax,” Dorian murmured beside her, voice deep and low. “You’re not gonna get hexed for being grumpy.”

“I’m not grumpy,” Autumn muttered, adjusting the sleeves of the charcoal cardigan that, just like the majority of her sweaters, was too big for her. “I’m... aware. That’s all.”

He grinned, brushing his arm gently against hers as they moved toward the back of

the bookstore. “You’re adorable when you’re lying to yourself.”

She stopped walking. Glared. “Say that again, bear boy.”

“You’re adorable,” he repeated, slow and steady, teeth gleaming in the soft lighting. “Also beautiful. And mildly terrifying. I like the mix.”

She wanted to be annoyed, to snap at him but her mouth twitched. She hated how easily he got to her.

Rowan—Markus’s softer half—was waiting for them with a tray of herbal cocktails and a book that shimmered faintly under the lamplight. He wore his usual cozy-cottagecore-meets-witchy-sophisticate ensemble, his long scarf draped like it had been arranged by moonlight itself.

“You two ready?” Rowan asked gently, voice lilting like a song only trees would understand.

“Define ‘ready,’” Autumn said.

Rowan offered her a look that said you asked for this, even though she absolutely had not.

The magical book between them—its cover aged, its spine humming faintly with old energy—was part of an old spell Markus had rescued from the haunted archives below their shop.

It read not your name or your story, but your heart’s quietest truths.

The things you weren’t ready to say out loud.

The things that lived between moments and glances.

Couples who participated got one reading each.

Autumn sat stiffly beside Dorian on the love-worn velvet settee as Rowan placed the book between them.

Dorian's hand brushed hers. "If I catch on fire, will you still pretend to date me?"

"No," Autumn said flatly. "I'll dump your ashes in Everglades Creek and make it look like an accident."

He smiled, wide and unbothered. But it bothered her because the more time she participated in this facade, that she spent at Briar Hollow, the more she felt like this wasn't pretend anymore. Like she wasn't going to be able to fight off what was changing inside of her much longer.

Rowan placed a single fingertip on the corner of the book. "Breathe in. Think of what you want most but haven't said. And this, this will ignite a much needed conversation for this session for every couple."

The room seemed to still. The candle beside them sputtered, then glowed a deep amber, rich like sap. The book fluttered open.

Autumn held her breath.

"You want to stay, but you're afraid you'll be asked to become someone you're not."

The words inked themselves onto the page in elegant script, glimmering faintly like they'd been dipped in starlight.

Autumn froze.

“You want to protect him, but you aren’t even sure how to protect yourself.”

The words stabbed like needles. Not cruel—just true . And that hurt worse.

She couldn’t look at Dorian.

The page turned now addressing him.

“You want her to see what you see when you look at her.”

“You want her to believe it’s real.”

“You’d wait forever if she needed you to.”

Her throat tightened. She wanted to speak, to laugh, to deflect like always.

But she couldn’t.

She could only sit there, in the middle of this bookshop filled with candlelight and soft jazz and strangers’ knowing eyes, and feel it.

The weight of it. The realness.

“Dorian,” she said, voice low.

He turned toward her, expression open, unguarded.

She licked her lips. “This isn’t fake anymore, is it.”

“No,” he said. “It’s not.”

DORIAN

The candlelight still shimmered off the book's truth-scrawled pages, its words bleeding warmth and unspoken ache. Dorian wanted to reach for her hands, but resisted. But between almost and maybe his bear prowled.

The bookstore felt different now. Not just magical, but personal . Like the whole place had leaned in with bated breath, waiting to see what happened next. The whispers of rearranging bookshelves, the scent of old parchment and lavender ink, it all faded behind the rush of her pulse.

She hadn't looked at him since the book closed and had been passed to another couple.

She just remained, still staring down, lashes low, body still as a windless evening.

He knew better than to push. So he waited.

Markus passed nearby, giving them a knowing side-eye but said nothing.

Rowan, too, flitted past in a swirl of enchanted scarf and soft-smiling mischief.

Nico was behind the counter humming something old and off-key, like they knew the song of every broken heart and half-finished love spell ever cast.

Autumn finally spoke. "That book's dangerous."

“It just writes what’s already there.”

“That’s the part that makes it dangerous,” she muttered.

Dorian smirked, adjusting slightly so his knee bumped hers under the table. “So... which part scared you the most?”

She looked up at him then, violet-blue eyes cool but storm-stirred.

“That you’d wait forever,” she said quietly. “Like it was easy.”

He leaned in, slow and solid, alpha calm rolling off him like heat. “Waiting for you isn’t easy, Autumn. It’s right. That’s different.”

Her mouth twitched, not quite a frown, not quite anything. “You’re not making this easier.”

“Not trying to.” He ran a hand down the table’s edge. “You don’t make easy feel worth it anymore.”

She exhaled sharply, something like a laugh hiding under her breath. “Gods, you’re exhausting.”

He grinned. “You keep saying that. But you haven’t left.”

She hesitated. “I might.”

“Not tonight,” he said, voice low and sure.

It wasn’t a command. But it was true.

Her gaze flicked down to where the book had been as if she wasn't sure how to continue.

Dorian didn't want the moment to end, or for this opportunity to pass. He took a breath and said, "Before you got here, I was having these dreams."

She looked up at him then. "The ones about Evelyn?"

"No. About... something else."

She almost looked like she gulped, as if she knew another confession was coming, but she held his gaze.

"Been having them since I took over the inn. Before I met you. Just... shadows and scent. Laughter in the woods. A woman I couldn't see, but I knew."

Her throat moved in a swallow. "What did she feel like?"

"Like standing near a fire you didn't light but want to burn in anyway."

Autumn blinked once, slowly. "You always talk like that?"

He chuckled. "Only when I'm trying real hard not to kiss someone."

That broke her stillness. Not fully. But enough.

Her hand jerked just slightly near his. Not pulling away, just reminding him that she was there, not ready, not running, but not surrendering either.

"Don't," she said softly. "Not yet."

“I won’t,” he promised. “Not until you ask.”

Silence fell again, thick and almost tender.

He could smell her magic now, unfurling like smoke from a slow-burning ember. Not flashy. Not showy. But wrapping around him like it knew him.

His bear responded with a slow, aching growl deep in his chest.

He pressed his other hand flat against the bench trying to quiet it. He wanted—needed—to shift. To brush his muzzle against her neck and scent-mark her. To leave a scratch that said mine .

But he wouldn’t. Not tonight. Not when she still flinched from the idea of being seen, let alone wanted .

So instead, he leaned back just enough to let air settle between them again.

“You hungry?” he asked, his voice warm but easy now. “Markus makes moon-pie shortbread when he’s feeling smug.”

Autumn blinked like he’d just switched languages. “What?”

“Food,” he said, tilting his head toward the counter. “Neutral territory. No soul-shattering revelations required.”

She stared at him. Then, slowly, cautiously, she nodded.

“Shortbread sounds... less intense.”

He stood, offering his hand. She hesitated only half a second before slipping hers into

his.

And they walked toward the counter like any other maybe-couple in a too-magical bookstore, surrounded by quiet truths and starlit bookshelves.

The only difference was Dorian had already decided.

He wasn't letting her go.

AUTUMN

A utumn was beginning to understand the danger of softness.

It wasn't spells or hauntings or whatever that book back at Pines & Needles had decided to air out like dirty laundry. It was Dorian, quiet, steady Dorian with those golden eyes that saw too much and touched like he knew what pieces you'd glued back together yourself.

Back at Briar Hollow, the silence felt different than usual. Less oppressive. Less haunted. More like the house itself had settled, too, as if even the spirits knew something had shifted between them in the candlelit hush of the bookshop.

Dorian headed to his room first and Autumn took a second to have a moment to think about what happened at the bookstore. But Autumn wasn't ready to name it. Not the moment, not the feeling blooming somewhere behind her ribs like an out-of-season blossom.

She tugged off her coat and boots in the front hallway while Dorian moved toward the kitchen to put on tea, because of course he did. He always had tea. It was like his love language was warm drinks and gently looming nearby.

"I'll grab the mugs," she called, heading toward the cabinet just beyond the dining room.

"No worries," he called from the pantry. "I've got 'em."

She turned the corner and stopped short.

Dorian stood at the sink with his back to her, barefoot on the hardwood floor, wearing only a pair of sweatpants that slung low on his hips and a hand towel tossed over one shoulder. The rest of him? Bare.

She froze. Not because he was shirtless. Well. Okay. Partially because he was shirtless. But mostly because she hadn't expected the sight to feel like an incantation.

His back was strong, broad, freckled across the shoulder blades like constellations she didn't know the names of.

His arms were thick with muscle, tensed slightly as he reached for the kettle.

And his chest—when he turned slightly, smiling without looking—was just...

a lot. Smooth and golden-toned and dusted with just enough dark hair to make her pulse stutter.

"Need something?" he asked, casually, like he didn't just exist in a way that scrambled her nervous system.

"Just—" she waved a hand vaguely, stepping around him to reach for a spoon in the drawer. "Getting out of your way."

But the space between them was narrow, and her balance was off, and when she brushed past, her hand, traitor that it was, landed right against the bare skin of his chest.

Just a second.

Not even that.

But it was enough.

The vision slammed into her like cold water to the lungs.

Blood.

Everywhere.

Not splashed, not spilled— drawn . Carefully, precisely, in a wide circle etched into dark stone. Candlelight flickered over wet surfaces. A woman stood at the center of the circle, tall, cloaked, trembling. And a man beside her. Not Dorian. But like him. Same eyes. Same presence.

The woman held out her hand.

“ I won’t let him go ,” she whispered, voice breaking. “ Not again .”

The man stepped forward, no hesitation. Only grief. And then a scream.

It echoed across the memory, splitting through Autumn’s mind like lightning in dry air.

She ripped her hand back from Dorian’s chest and stumbled, gasping, grabbing the counter to stay upright.

“Autumn!” Dorian dropped the kettle, reaching for her. “Hey—what just happened?”

She shook her head, heart slamming. Her legs were shaking. The room spun.

He touched her elbow, steadying her with one warm hand. “Autumn, talk to me.”

She looked up, meeting his eyes. Still golden. Still warm. Still his . But that wasn’t what haunted her.

It was the man in the vision. Because he looked too much like Dorian not to be connected .

“I saw them,” she whispered. “The ritual. The woman... she didn’t want to let go. She wanted to keep someone.”

“Was she hurting him?”

“No.” Her voice was faint. “She was trying to save him. But the magic—it twisted. It cost too much.”

Dorian’s brows furrowed. “Do you think it’s Evelyn?”

Autumn nodded slowly. “And the man... he looked like you. Not just similar . You felt like him.”

His face went still. The only movement was the muscle twitching in his jaw.

“Maybe this spirit’s not just haunting the house,” she said. “Maybe it’s tied to your family.”

He looked down, like he could see the ghost of the vision still etched across his chest.

“You said Alaric was involved in blood rituals,” she added, stepping back just slightly to give herself space.

“I didn’t think they worked,” he said. “Or that he went through with any of them.”

She wrapped her arms around herself. “Something went very wrong. And I think... I think she’s been waiting ever since.”

“For who?”

“For you , Dorian.”

He didn’t answer right away.

Instead, he walked slowly to the sink, gripping the edge with both hands. His back muscles rippled with the tension, and even now—after everything—Autumn’s eyes followed the lines of him like gravity.

“You okay?” she asked.

“No.” His voice was rough. “But I will be. If you keep telling me the truth.”

“I always tell the truth,” she said.

He turned, finally, and the weight in his gaze was heavier than anything that had come before.

“I know. That’s why I keep falling for you.”

Autumn flinched, just a little.

Not from fear. But from knowing.

And Dorian, he didn’t push. He didn’t press. He just bent, picked up the kettle, and

said, “Still want that tea?”

She stared at him.

At the man who wasn't trying to fix her. Just hold the pieces steady while she figured out how to fit them together.

“Yeah,” she said quietly. “Tea sounds good.”

And as he turned back to the stove, humming low under his breath, she knew two things for certain:

The Hollow Man wasn't done with them.

And as her rational side wanted to be, every other part of her that she had pushed down for years wasn't either.

DORIAN

Dorian had always thought of the attic as the house's last line of defense. The walls could whisper. The halls could rearrange themselves with a ghost's breath. But the attic... the attic held her secrets close, like a woman who kept all her pain in a locked box under the bed, daring anyone to pry.

The door groaned when he opened it, hinges rusted like they'd forgotten how to move without complaint.

Dust kicked up in lazy spirals around him, caught in the lone shaft of light slanting through the fractured windowpane.

It smelled like old paper and forgotten lives—sweet with age and the faintest tang of iron.

Warm, too. Oppressively so. Not just because of the insulation.

It was the kind of heat that came from memories too loud to die quietly.

He stepped inside slowly, like the air might snap shut behind him.

He didn't know what he was looking for.

Only that something inside him had cracked since Autumn described that ghost's face—the man she'd seen in her vision. The grief in her voice. The recognition she hadn't wanted to admit.

And gods, that look she'd given him. Like he wasn't a stranger. Like she already knew what lived in the shadows of this house and was just waiting for him to face it.

So here he was. Chasing ghosts of his own.

He moved past a stack of covered furniture and toward the back corner where his uncle's things were piled in an unceremonious heap.

A row of leather-bound trunks, brass corners dulled with age.

Some crates splintered at the seams. The scent of candle wax and dried lavender drifted from a rotted satchel.

One crate held only a bundle of dried herbs and a petrified animal skull.

And there—a shelf of journals. Haphazardly stacked, mismatched sizes. Some thin and crumbling, others thick and bound with care. Dorian's heart kicked harder against his ribs.

Alaric hadn't kept pictures. Not many, anyway. But he'd left behind something even more dangerous.

Words.

He pulled a journal from the top of the stack. The leather was soft with age, dyed a deep wine red, its spine stitched together with red thread like a wound someone had tried to sew closed. The weight of it felt wrong in his hand. Heavy in a way that had nothing to do with paper.

He opened it.

The handwriting was elegant. Looped. Precise in a way that felt obsessive. But it wasn't ink—not exactly. The words shimmered faintly, like oil-slick rainbows on wet pavement. Enchanted.

His bear stirred immediately, uneasy. Dorian squinted at the writing, trying to catch a rhythm. There were notes about ritual geometry, circle casting, emotional tethering. Someone had been documenting magical theory... and memory.

Then a name leapt off the page: Hollis.

Dorian froze.

He'd only heard that name once. Whispers at the Everglen Market. Hazel had said it absently, flicking petals off her sleeve like prophecy was casual. "Some griefs echo. Even Hollis didn't linger this long."

And now here it was. In his uncle's journal.

He turned the page.

Pain exploded in his palm.

Like fire, but worse. Like cold lightning and betrayal at the same time. He gasped, the sound torn from his throat, and dropped the journal. It hit the attic floor with a thud that echoed like a gunshot, pages fanning out.

The entire room pulsed—floorboards flexing, air thickening, shadows flaring just at the edge of vision.

"Dammit," he hissed as he dropped the journal, clutching his hand to his chest. His vision blurred, breath coming fast.

The house shifted. Heard him. Reacted. He heard footsteps racing up to him. Thudding up the stairs like thunder, like fury wrapped in wool and knit sweaters.

“Dorian!”

Autumn’s voice. Sharp, cracked with panic. No hesitation. Just his name, flung through the air like a rope to catch him.

She burst through the door, boots skidding slightly on the old boards, her eyes wide and already locked on him.

She bolted toward him, skidding on the wooden planks. “What happened?”

He tried to speak, but the pain crawled up his wrist now, tendrils of heat curling beneath the skin like branded roots.

“Let me see,” she said, kneeling beside him.

He opened his palm slowly.

The flesh across his hand was red and angry, already swelling. A burn. Not deep, but fierce—magical. Angry. Personal .

Autumn didn’t hesitate. She reached into the satchel slung over her shoulder—she always had it, always ready—and pulled out a small vial and a polished stone.

“This’ll sting,” she murmured.

“Already stings,” he rasped, voice hoarse.

She poured a few drops of oil onto her fingers and pressed them gently into his skin.

Her touch was cool, sure. The pain dulled immediately—not gone, but quieted like a reprimanded child.

Her hands lingered a little too long.

Dorian breathed easier. “Thanks.”

“You touched something you shouldn’t have,” she said, still focused on his hand.

He watched her. “Story of my life lately.”

She didn’t smile. Instead, she reached for the journal, her fingertips barely brushing the edge.

“Don’t,” he warned.

She nodded. “Not without preparation.”

Her lips parted, breath catching. “That’s not just magic. That’s bound memory. Someone didn’t want this read.”

“Someone like Alaric?”

“Someone like Hollis,” she whispered. Her voice was suddenly distant, haunted.

He swallowed hard. “You knew.”

“I heard you yell,” she said, but her eyes told another story. “The house... it pulled me.”

Dorian studied her.

Her hair was still mussed from earlier, her cheeks flushed from running up the stairs, but her focus never wavered. She was already halfway inside the mystery, even while she stood grounded in the present.

They sat in silence for a long beat, the attic swallowing sound like a secret.

Then Dorian said, “He was hiding something. My uncle.”

“I think they all were,” she whispered. “Evelyn, Alaric... maybe even the Hollow Man.”

He turned his hand slowly, testing the movement. The skin was tight, but healing already. His shifter body always recovered fast—but this? This had scar written all over it.

“He knew about the ritual,” Dorian said. “Knew how dangerous it was.”

“And he did it anyway.”

“For love?” Dorian’s voice twisted. “Or power?”

Autumn finally looked up at him.

Her eyes weren’t frightened. Not anymore. Just sharp. Knowing.

“I don’t think they’re separate, for some people,” she said. “And that’s what makes it dangerous.”

He swallowed.

The journal sat open between them, unreadable but humming with leftover magic.

“I’m tied to this, Autumn,” he said quietly. “My blood, my name. I can feel it in my chest.”

She nodded. “I know.”

When she glanced up and caught him staring, she frowned. “You’re not gonna pass out, are you?”

“No. Just...” He let the rest hang in the air.

Just falling a little more every minute.

AUTUMN

A utumn needed out of the house.

Not because of the ghosts, though their presence pressed at the back of her skull like an ache she couldn't reach. And not because of the journals or the burn mark Dorian was still downplaying like it hadn't practically branded him. No, she needed space because of him.

That man—big and stupidly warm and heartbreakingly gentle—was getting under her skin like he belonged there.

She'd spent the better part of the morning patching his hand, pretending the brush of his fingers didn't burn in ways that had nothing to do with magic. And the way he'd looked at her... like she was something important. Like he saw her.

It was unbearable.

So she left. Told him she was going to “gather supplies” in the town. Didn't mention that she needed air that didn't smell like cedar and yearning.

Celestial Pines wasn't large, but it didn't need to be.

The town pulsed with quiet magic beneath the cobblestones, in the crooked windows of every storefront, in the way the wind carried laughter like it was guarding something precious.

Autumn pulled her sweater tighter around her as she crossed the square, eyes scanning the familiar lineup of shops until she spotted the painted lavender sign that read Moonshadow Apothecary.

She decided to go in.

The scent hit her first—lavender and patchouli, layered over something darker and smokier.

The kind of smell that made your shoulders drop without realizing it.

The shop was cluttered in that intentional, witchy way—shelves of herbs in jars with hand-scribbled labels, hanging bundles of dried mint and marigold, and drawers that rattled when no one was touching them.

Behind the counter stood the owner, Missy Sage.

Autumn had met her briefly in passing and during one of the market days.

Dorian had warned Autumn not to even bother lying to her about their ruse because she saw the truth no matter what and would make it known to the whole town if you tried to play her.

She was eccentric and unbothered, wearing a caftan that might've once belonged to Stevie Nicks and a collection of silver bangles that jangled like wind chimes.

“Well, if it isn’t the ghost girl,” Missy said, not even looking up from the jar she was pouring into.

“Please don’t call me that.”

Missy's eyes flicked to her, sharp as ever. "Then don't wear it so loud."

Autumn sighed and moved deeper into the shop. "I'm just here for restock. Wards, salt, something to help with spirit dissonance. And maybe something that shuts off my emotions."

Missy snorted. "You want a potion for denial, honey, you're in the wrong business."

Autumn trailed her fingers along a shelf of protection candles, avoiding the way Missy always knew too much without asking.

"You ever get the feeling something's watching you?" she asked, voice soft.

Missy arched a brow. "You mean besides the dead, fate, the townsfolk, and Dorian Hawthorne's hopeful eyes?"

Autumn froze. "It's not like that."

"No?" Missy came around the counter, walking with the unhurried grace of someone who knew exactly how the world worked and didn't need to rush to catch up with it. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks exactly like that."

"I'm not interested in him," Autumn insisted. "I'm just... playing a part."

Missy gave her a look that could have curdled milk. "You don't lie very well for someone who talks to the dead."

Autumn's shoulders sagged. She hated how easily the other woman saw through her. "It's complicated."

"It's always complicated, baby." Missy plucked a jar from a high shelf and handed it

to her. “Here. Mugwort and vervain blend. Good for boundary work. Physical and emotional.”

Autumn accepted it with a quiet “thanks,” her eyes fixed on the dried herbs inside. “It’s easier when I don’t feel things. When I keep the work and the rest of my life separate.”

Missy hummed, tapping a ringed finger against her own temple. “Sure. And how’s that working out for you?”

She didn’t answer.

Missy reached out and touched Autumn’s shoulder, gentle, grounding. Her bangles clicked once, like punctuation.

“You’re not running from the ghost,” she said softly. “You’re running from the living.”

The words landed like a stone in Autumn’s chest.

She opened her mouth, closed it, tried again. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Sure you do.” Missy’s smile wasn’t cruel. Just knowing. “You think you’re afraid of these spirits. As if they are different from any of the others you’ve met. But it’s not the dead who scare you. It’s the ones who might stay.”

Autumn swallowed, throat tight. Her gaze dropped to the countertop.

“Dorian’s got a good heart,” Missy continued. “He sees people. Wants to protect them. That’s dangerous, you know. When someone like that looks at someone like you.”

“Why?”

“Because you start to believe it.” Missy squeezed her shoulder once more, then pulled away. “That maybe you deserve it.”

Autumn clutched the jar in her hand like it could anchor her. The air felt too thick again.

She paid for her items in silence, save for the quiet clinking of coins and a muttered thank you. Missy didn’t press, didn’t pry. Just handed over the little paper bag and went back to her herbs like she hadn’t cracked Autumn open with a single sentence.

Outside, the breeze was cooler.

She sat on the bench just beyond the shop, the one carved with moons and vines, and let her eyes close for a moment.

She didn’t want to feel this. Not the longing. Not the guilt. Not the fragile thread of hope that tugged at her every time Dorian seemed to see her like she wasn’t a burden but a blessing.

He was wrong about her.

People didn’t stay.

Not when they knew the real Autumn, the one who still carried echoes in her bones, who couldn’t sleep without salt under her pillow and a charm over her heart.

But gods help her, he made her want to believe.

She pulled her phone from her bag and stared at the screen.

One message.

Dorian: Made lunch. Come back before it gets cold. And yes, I still have both eyebrows.

Autumn smiled before she could stop herself.

Maybe she was a little doomed.

DORIAN

Rain came easy to Celestial Pines.

It didn't roar the way it did in cities, didn't batter windows like angry fists. It arrived like a soft confession, whispering through the trees, pattering on rooftops, soaking into the soil like it had secrets to share.

Dorian stood just under the overhang of the wraparound porch, hands braced on the railing. The storm had rolled in quick, all gray skies and distant thunder, but he welcomed the quiet it brought with it. Rain made everything pause. Even the house had gone still. The spirits, too.

Behind him, the front door creaked open. Soft steps followed. He didn't need to look.

Autumn.

She smelled like mugwort and coffee, like fresh parchment and that earthy spark of magic that always seemed to crackle in the air around her. He didn't turn until she came to stand beside him, one hand lightly grazing the railing as she leaned into the space between them.

"Made it back," he said, voice low.

She glanced sideways. "I brought herbs."

He nodded. "And?" he asked, a little hopeful, a little careful.

She was quiet for a beat. “Missy says I’m emotionally stunted and afraid of vulnerability.”

He snorted. “Sounds about right.”

Autumn gave him a sidelong look, half amused, half exasperated. “And you’re not?”

“Oh, I’m definitely afraid,” he said. “Difference is, I’ve been staring down bears and broken plumbing long enough to do things scared.”

There was a pause before she said gently: “You make a mean sandwich for someone who seems to know their way more around the carpentry side than the kitchen.”

“I aim to please.”

They stood like that for a while, shoulder to shoulder, watching the rain smear silver streaks across the mountain view. Thunder grumbled low in the distance.

“So, you never really have thought about leaving?” she asked, quietly.

“Sometimes,” he said. “Like I said, after the fire, I didn’t think I had anything left. But this place... it called me back.”

“You believe in that?” she asked. “Places calling to people?”

“I believe in a lot of things now,” he said, looking at her.

Autumn didn’t flinch under the weight of his gaze. That was something he’d always liked about her. She met him head-on. Even when she was scared. Even when she wanted to run.

Her sweater was damp at the sleeves, hair pulled into a loose braid over one shoulder. A few strands clung to her cheek, and he reached up without thinking, brushing them back.

She stiffened but didn't move.

His fingers lingered at her jaw, warm against the cool drizzle still hanging in the air.

"You're hard to read," he murmured.

"You're easy to fall for," she said before she seemed to be able to stop herself.

The words hung between them like thunder.

She blinked, as if surprised by her own mouth, and moved to step back but Dorian's hand was already at her waist, gentle but firm.

"Don't," he said. Not a command. A plea.

Rain tapped on the porch roof. Somewhere down the lane, a dog barked once, and then the whole world went quiet again.

Autumn looked up at him, violet-blue eyes wide and unguarded for once. "Dorian..."

"I know this started out fake," he said, voice rough. "But there ain't a thing about what I feel for you that doesn't feel real. My bear isn't allowing that."

She didn't speak. Just reached up and touched his chest, right where his heart beat steady under flannel and warmth.

And then, without ceremony, without panic, she rose on her toes and kissed him.

It wasn't rushed. It wasn't wild or desperate. It was soft. Intentional. A pause. A letting go.

His hands curled around her waist as he kissed her back, slow and reverent. Her fingers gripped the fabric of his shirt. They fit, somehow. In the rain, under the sloped eaves of a house full of ghosts and history, they fit.

When they finally pulled apart, she didn't move far.

Her breath was warm against his jaw. "This changes things."

Dorian's heart beat a little faster, but he kept his voice low. "I'm countin' on it," he said, resting his forehead lightly against hers.

Thunder rolled closer, low and steady.

She didn't lean in again. But she didn't step away, either.

When she spoke next, it was a whisper tinged with something raw. "You're gonna ruin me, aren't you?"

He wanted to say no. Wanted to promise her safety, and ease, and love without risk. But she wouldn't believe that. Not yet. So instead, he said what he meant.

"Not if I can help it. I'm aiming for keepin' you."

Autumn pulled back, just enough to meet his eyes. Her expression flickered—hope battling habit, fear whispering to trust. "You're sure about this? About me?"

"I'm as sure as I am about this rain falling," he said quietly. "And the ghosts still watching us from that attic."

She snorted softly, though her smile was tight. “You really know how to romance a girl.”

“I’ve got layers.”

That earned a huff, maybe half a laugh, and for a second it felt like she might relax into him. But her hands lingered at his sides instead of wrapping around his back, and her eyes kept drifting to the porch floor, like she was trying to memorize a way out.

Still, she didn’t move. Not entirely.

So Dorian did what he always did. He gave her space without making her feel it. Let his arms slip just a little looser around her waist, let his presence be solid but not suffocating.

They stood like that until the rain eased to a whisper, her shoulder barely brushing his chest, his cheek tilted toward the top of her head.

He closed his eyes, breathing her in.

Maybe the ghosts weren’t gone yet.

The house still held secrets and sorrow.

But this moment—frail and fleeting—was real.

And even if she wasn’t ready to let herself believe in it, he was.

He’d hold the space for both of them. For as long as it took.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:17 am

AUTUMN

A utumn couldn't sleep.

The rain had long since stopped, leaving the air heavy and wet, clinging to the eaves. Her room smelled like damp cedar and lavender—comforting, if she didn't already feel like she was suffocating under the weight of her own thoughts.

The kiss had changed things.

Dorian had changed things.

And that scared the ever-loving hell out of her.

She stared at the ceiling, covers twisted around her legs, one arm tucked beneath her head, the other resting over her chest where her heart refused to beat calmly.

It had been slow, the way he'd gotten under her skin.

No big moments, no grand declarations. Just warmth.

Steadiness. His big, bear-sized presence folding gently around her world until it felt natural.

Which was the problem.

Nothing about this should feel natural.

She sat up with a frustrated groan and shoved the blankets aside. Her sweater clung to her skin, damp from the humidity and her restless tossing. She pulled it off and grabbed a fresh one, something too soft for how sharp she felt inside.

The ghost hadn't made itself known tonight, which made her more nervous than comforted. Spirits didn't get quiet unless they were plotting—or watching.

Autumn padded barefoot across the room to the window. The glass was cold beneath her fingers. Outside, the fog hugged the garden like it had secrets to keep. She could almost see the outline of Dorian's greenhouse in the distance, soft light bleeding from within. He probably left it on again.

He was always doing things like that, forgetting to turn off the lights, leaving half-folded laundry on the stairs, baking at unreasonable hours because his hands needed something to do when his thoughts got too loud.

She liked those things about him.

And that terrified her even more.

Autumn pulled her notebook from the dresser, flipped through her sigil sketches until she found the one for psychic shielding. Her charcoal stick felt brittle in her hand as she drew the lines, focusing on the precision of each stroke. Magic needed intent. Purpose. Something she could control.

Unlike her heart.

Halfway through redrawing the symbol, the air in the room took on a change.

It was subtle, barely a whisper against the nape of her neck, but every hair on her body stood up. She turned slowly, notebook forgotten on the floor.

“Not tonight,” she whispered. “I’m not in the mood.”

The spirit didn’t answer, but the temperature dropped. A flicker of movement in the mirror. A shadow just beyond the doorway that shouldn’t have been there.

Autumn stepped into the hall, every nerve in her body singing.

The house was quiet. Too quiet for an old house.

She moved toward the stairwell, her bare feet soundless on the wooden floor. The flickering hallway light buzzed above her. One bulb dimmed completely, casting a jagged slant of darkness across the floor.

Then the whisper came.

Not words. Not really. But emotion. Raw. Enraged.

“You need to stop,” Autumn said firmly, grounding her heels, centering her breath. “I’m not here to threaten you. But I will protect this house. And the people in it.”

Another shift. Like wind through the walls. She reached for the charm at her neck but before she could clasp it, something slammed into her from the side—cold and weightless and furious.

Autumn hit the wall with a grunt, her shoulder slamming into the edge of a bookshelf. Pain bloomed down her right side. She tried to stand, but the air grew thick, pressing down on her like hands she couldn’t see.

A hiss in her ear. A scratch along her ribs.

She gasped, twisting, scrambling backward into the corner.

“Stop it!” she shouted, her voice cracking. “You don’t get to scare me into silence. Not anymore!”

The pressure eased. Just a little.

Enough for her to crawl to the nearest room, one of the empty guest bedrooms, and slam the door behind her. She pressed her back against it, shaking.

Silence.

Slowly, the pain in her side sharpened to something clearer. She lifted the hem of her sweater. Four angry red welts scored across her ribs, still weeping faint blood. Not deep. But deep enough to send a message.

A warning.

She swallowed hard.

The room swam a little as adrenaline started to crash out of her system. Her vision blurred at the edges.

She should go to Dorian. Let him see. Let him help. But instead, she curled tighter into herself, fingers clutching the hem of her sweater like armor.

She couldn’t. Not yet.

If she let him in now, there wouldn’t be a line to step back over. And she wasn’t ready to stop running. And her needing him was that step. So, she stayed put.

Not from ghosts. But from the man who might just be able to love her.

DORIAN

The attic had been restless again—floorboards groaning without reason, the temperature shifting like someone was pacing back and forth behind the walls.

He'd gotten used to that kind of unease, but tonight, something had changed.

There was a different kind of weight in the air, like the house was holding its breath.

Then he smelled blood.

Not much. Just enough for his instincts to rear their head.

He found Autumn curled up in one of the guest rooms on the second floor, her back against the door like it was the only thing keeping her upright. Her arms were wrapped around herself, head tilted down, and her entire body was stiff with the kind of stillness that came from trying not to break.

The moment she looked up, his chest tightened with the need to comfort her.

Her eyes weren't crying, but they were hollow. Tired. Distant.

And then he saw the blood.

His bear surged forward so fast it made his hands tremble.

"You're hurt," he said, already crouching beside her. "Why didn't you come get me?"

“I didn’t—” She shook her head, the motion quick and frustrated. “It wasn’t that bad. I just needed... space.”

He didn’t argue. Not yet. Not when she looked like she was one touch away from unraveling completely.

“Let me see,” he said softly.

She hesitated, then slowly lifted the hem of her sweater. Four deep scratches marred the skin along her ribs, angry and red, already beginning to welt. He inhaled sharply, jaw tightening.

“Damn it, Autumn.”

“I’m fine.”

“You are not. These look infected already,” he said, voice low, even.

Before she could protest, he stood and reached down. “Come on. Bathroom. Let me patch you up.”

She looked like she wanted to argue. But she took his hand anyway.

They moved slowly down the hall, her steps light but uneven. He didn’t miss the way she winced every time she shifted her weight or the tight way she held herself. Protective. Wary.

He led her into the master bathroom—newly remodeled, mostly functional—and started the tap in the clawfoot tub. Steam began to rise, curling through the air like lazy ghosts.

“I can handle this,” she said quietly, watching him pull a clean towel from the cabinet.

“I know,” he said. “But I want to help.”

That seemed to settle her.

While the tub filled, he grabbed the small tin of salve Missy had made him last fall after he’d stepped on a cursed nail. Smelled like peppermint and power. He set it on the edge of the tub along with a clean washcloth and a glass of water.

Autumn stood still, her arms wrapped tightly around herself again.

“You don’t have to do this,” she said, not meeting his eyes.

“I know,” he repeated. “But I’m going to.”

She watched him for a moment, as if she were trying to read something in his face. Then she nodded and peeled her sweater off, slow and deliberate, revealing a simple sports bra and the angry red marks down her side.

Dorian didn’t stare.

Didn’t gawk.

He just stepped forward, dipped the cloth in warm water, and knelt beside her as she sat on the tub.

“This might sting,” he murmured.

“Go easy on me, Ranger Bear,” she tried to joke, but it came out wrong as she winced

and her breathing hiccuped.

He pressed the cloth gently against her ribs, watching her jaw tighten as the warmth seeped in. Her skin was soft and marked by more than just these wounds—old scars, faint freckles, the evidence of a life lived quietly, and a body that carried more than its fair share of weight.

“You get used to pain?” he asked after a while, voice low.

She didn’t answer immediately.

“Not really,” she said eventually. “You just learn to expect it.”

He nodded. “That’s a damn sad way to live.”

“I don’t remember the last time it was any other way.”

He wanted to say something. Offer comfort. But she didn’t need soft words—she needed someone to stay.

He rinsed the cloth, squeezed out the water, and reached for the salve.

“This’ll help with the swelling,” he said, opening the tin. “Mind if I...?”

She shook her head.

So he dipped two fingers into the cool balm and gently spread it along the edges of the scratches, careful not to press too hard. Her breathing hitched once. He paused.

“You okay?”

“Just cold,” she said too quickly. Lie.

He didn’t call her on it.

After a few quiet minutes, he sat back on his heels. “The tub’s ready.”

She looked at it, then at him. “Are you leaving?”

He hesitated. “I can. I just want to make sure you don’t pass out is all.”

She pulled her hair over one shoulder and slipped out of her leggings as he looked away, then eased into the bath, hissing softly as the heat touched the scratches.

“Holler if you feel faint or need anything.” He turned to leave, but her voice stopped him.

“You can stay. If you want.”

He paused.

Slowly, he turned back and sat down beside the tub, back against the tiled wall. “You always this stubborn?”

“It’s the only way I know how to be.”

They didn’t speak for a long time after that.

The water lapped gently around her, steam curling around the edges of the room. She leaned her head back against the rim of the tub, eyes closed, tension easing just enough for him to see the woman underneath all the armor.

“I don’t think I can do this,” she murmured eventually.

“Do what?”

“Let someone take care of me.”

“You’re doin’ fine,” he said, voice softer now. “You don’t have to get it perfect.”

She cracked one eye open. “You always say the right thing?”

“Not always. But I mean it when I say I’m not goin’ anywhere.”

Autumn didn’t reply. But after a moment, she leaned just slightly toward him, her fingers brushing his.

AUTUMN

The bath had helped.

At least, that's what she told herself as she toweled off, fingers trembling slightly as she wrapped the fabric tighter around her chest. The heat had soothed her wounds, loosened the stiffness in her shoulders, dulled the ache in her ribs.

But the part of her that ached the most—quiet, invisible, and always running—remained untouched.

Dorian hadn't said much. Just sat with her, patient as a stone, letting the silence stretch until it was something less sharp.

It should've been easy to walk away after that. To thank him, crack a joke, slip back into her room and pretend like nothing had shifted in the air between them.

But she couldn't make herself move.

She stood in the doorway to the hall, hair damp and curling slightly at her collarbone, her oversized sweater swallowing her form again like a barrier.

The shadows in the house were soft tonight, muted by the lingering warmth of candlelight and the magic Dorian carried in his presence.

But her own shadows, the ones clinging just behind her ribcage, refused to loosen their grip.

She heard the rustle of fabric, the creak of the couch in the sitting room. Dorian, settling in.

Of course he wasn't going to push. That wasn't his style.

She moved before her brain caught up to her feet.

He looked up the moment she stepped in, concern flickering in his hazel eyes but he didn't speak. Just waited. Gave her that quiet space she was learning he excelled at holding.

"I can't—" Her voice cracked, and she flinched at how small it sounded. "I can't go back to my room. Not tonight."

He nodded once. "You don't have to."

She crossed the space slowly, bare feet whispering across the worn rug. Her body was sore in ways she wasn't used to—tired and unraveling, her emotional walls spiderwebbed with the weight of everything she didn't want to say. She wasn't sure how to even ask.

Dorian stood and opened his arms and she walked straight into them.

The tears came without permission. No sobs, no dramatic breakdown—just quiet, hot streams sliding down her cheeks as he wrapped her in his arms and tucked her against his chest like she belonged there.

He didn't shush her. Didn't tell her it was okay. He just held her.

Autumn buried her face in his shirt, breathing in the scent of soap and something warm she couldn't name. Her fingers clutched the fabric like it might disappear if she

let go.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” she whispered into the cotton.

He rested his cheek on top of her head. “You don’t need to apologize. You’re okay. You’re allowed to let yourself feel.”

She wanted to argue. Say that wasn’t it. But it was. Right now, in this moment, it was more than enough.

They moved together to the couch, slow and careful. He sat first, then guided her gently down beside him, his arm curled around her shoulders, her legs tucked underneath her like she was trying to take up less space than she occupied.

The storm outside had long passed, but the windows still glistened with lingering rain. The quiet crackle from the fireplace offered a steady rhythm, grounding her in the hush between her breaths.

Her voice came out in pieces.

“I left home when I was nineteen. Couldn’t stand the way they looked at me... like I was broken. My mom—she tried to understand. But she was scared of what I could see. What I couldn’t unsee.”

Dorian didn’t move. Just kept that steady weight beside her, anchoring.

“I used to talk to ghosts in my sleep,” she continued. “Said things I didn’t remember. My brother used to cry about it. Said I was haunted. That I’d bring something into the house that’d take us all.”

His fingers brushed gently over her arm.

“So I ran. Figured being alone would make it quieter. But it never got quiet.”

A long breath escaped her, like she was letting go of something ancient.

“I thought if I kept everything locked down, if I never let anyone close, it would be safer. Simpler. Less messy.” She laughed, bitter and soft. “Then you showed up with your dumb jokes and your warm hands and your stupid cinnamon rolls and made me think maybe—maybe—there was something better.”

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. Slow. No pressure.

“You don’t have to do anything, Autumn,” he murmured. “You don’t owe me a damn thing.”

“I know,” she said, voice cracking again. “But I want to.”

That admission felt like falling off a cliff. But he didn’t let her fall. He just pulled her in closer.

They stayed there, curled against each other like puzzle pieces half-figured out. No kisses. No whispered promises. Just breathing. Just being.

Autumn finally felt something near peace after what had seemed like forever.

She wasn’t fixed. Wasn’t ready. But she wasn’t alone and maybe that was the beginning of something real.

DORIAN

The morning sun slanted through the tall windows, casting soft amber light across the floorboards of the sitting room. Dorian hadn't moved much since Autumn had fallen asleep beside him, curled up as if still protecting herself.

She was still there now, tucked under the throw blanket he'd pulled over her during the quiet hours of dawn, one hand fisted in the fabric of his shirt. Her breathing was slow, steady. Finally peaceful after a night that had nearly torn him in half to witness.

He brushed a stray strand of hair from her cheek once more, careful not to wake her.

She needed the rest. Needed the space.

And he would give her that.

Even if everything in him—the bear, the man, the mate—wanted to hold her and never let go.

So he let go first.

Gently, slowly, he slid from beneath her, replacing his warmth with a second blanket and the pillow from the arm of the couch. She murmured something soft in her sleep but didn't stir.

He stood there for a moment longer, watching her. Memorizing the lines of her face in the morning light. She looked younger like this. Softer. The weight she carried of

ghosts, grief, and old fears seemed to lift when she was unconscious. But he knew better.

He'd felt it in her tears. Seen it in the way she flinched when he touched her too kindly.

She was still running. Just not on foot anymore.

Dorian left the sitting room, his boots silent on the floor. The house felt different today—quieter, not empty, but respectful. Like even the ghosts were giving Autumn some breathing room.

He grabbed a cup of coffee from the kitchen—black, hot, bitter as the ache blooming behind his ribs—and stepped through the back door into the soft hush of morning.

The porch groaned beneath his boots, same as it always did, like it remembered every storm that had ever rolled over these mountains.

He barely heard it. His attention was fixed on the far corner of the porch, where the row of rocking chairs sat like quiet sentinels, each one holding stories carved into their bones.

His uncle Alaric had started the tradition decades ago, back when the inn still bustled with overnight guests and fire-lit tales. “Memory belongs to places,” Alaric used to say, tapping the arm of his own chair with a gnarled knuckle. “And people deserve to leave a mark where they’ve been known.”

Every name on those chairs belonged to someone who'd mattered. A guest who'd stayed longer than planned, a friend who'd weathered a rough season, a lover who'd come and gone with autumn winds. It wasn't just a list. It was a testament to presence. To being seen. Being valued.

Dorian hadn't added any new names since inheriting the place. He hadn't felt like any of them were meant to stay.

Until now.

His boots scuffed the deck as he approached the final chair—the newest, raw wood still pale and unfinished, its back slat smooth and blank like an unsung promise. He'd meant to stain it months ago. Just never got around to it.

He set his coffee on the porch rail, pulled the worn pocket knife from his back pocket, and flipped it open with the same ease he used to gut fish and whittle branch ends as a boy. His fingers were steady. Steadier than he felt.

There was no plan. No flourish. He just began.

Autumn.

He carved her name into the wood slowly, careful not to rush the lines. He'd watched his uncle do this dozens of times—slow, deliberate strokes, each one like a memory etched into the grain. But this time, it wasn't about marking a moment for someone else.

It was a vow.

The kind you didn't need to speak aloud to keep.

Each letter felt sacred. A little weightier than it should have, maybe, but Dorian had always believed in letting his hands say what words couldn't. She might not be ready to hear it, not yet—but he could say it in his own way.

You belong here.

You matter.

You're safe with me.

When he was done, he sat down beside the chair and wrapped his palms around the warm mug. The wind had picked up, teasing through the trees at near the end of the property, sending the last of the golden leaves scattering like stubborn truths let loose.

He looked out at the fog curling low across the pines, and all he could think of was how she'd felt in his arms—small, yes, but not fragile. Like someone who'd been holding up the whole damn sky for too long and had finally let herself lean.

He'd felt her heartbreak. Not just in her tears, but in the way she held back even while clinging to him. In the way her voice cracked when she spoke of love like it was a storm she'd barely survived.

And he got it.

He'd seen that kind of loneliness before—hell, he'd lived it. After the fire took his old life, after the people he'd trusted scattered like ash, he'd rebuilt himself with silence and solitude. With routine and walls made of charm-laced timber.

But Autumn...

She made the quiet seem loud.

She made him want things again. Not just the comfort of a steady hand or a warm body, but something deeper. Something like home.

He sighed and leaned back, letting his head rest against the wall behind him. A small smile tugged at the edge of his mouth as he reached down, smoothing the rough edges

of the carving with a bit of sandpaper he kept tucked under the bench.

She didn't need to know he'd done it.

Not yet.

But when she was ready, when she finally let herself rest, really rest, he wanted her to have something real. Something lasting. Something she could see and feel and know—not as an obligation, not as a symbol—but as proof.

That he'd been waiting.

That she had a place to land.

“You take all the time you need, darlin’,” he whispered to the wind, his thumb tracing over the finished carving, slow and reverent. “I’ll be right here.”

He finished his coffee, picked up his tools, and sanded the edges of her name until it was smooth enough for her to lean back against without even noticing.

A quiet promise.

And the most honest thing he'd ever carved.

AUTUMN

The Spellbound Sip was unusually quiet for a Thursday morning.

Most days, it hummed with quiet magic and soft clinking mugs. Laughter. Flirtation. Whispers that curled into the rafters and stuck to the enchanted teacups like dust on old parchment.

But today, the quiet felt intentional .

Autumn stepped through the door and immediately smelled cardamom, sage, and something a little like citrus and memory. She tugged her knit sweater closer around herself, brushing damp curls off her forehead as she moved toward the bar, boots echoing faintly on the stone floor.

Nerissa, the siren-barista, was behind the counter as usual—long blue-black braid draped over her shoulder, and that serene, sea-glass expression she always wore like it had been stitched into her skin by moonlight itself. She didn't say anything, just looked up with a knowing smile.

"I need something honest," Autumn muttered.

Nerissa raised a perfectly shaped brow. "Oof. Dangerous request in this place."

"I can handle it."

The siren tilted her head slightly, then reached for one of the ceramic mugs hanging

from a copper rack overhead. This one was pale green with faint swirling glyphs etched into the glaze.

“Truth-teller’s brew,” she said as she poured. “Cinnamon for warmth. Mint for clarity. Marigold to reveal what’s buried.”

Autumn stared at the mug for a second too long, then nodded and took it.

She didn’t sip yet. Not yet. She turned and walked toward the back, to Nico’s usual booth—half-hidden by a curtain of enchanted vines that occasionally bloomed if the gossip got juicy enough.

They were already there, of course.

Nico Voss always knew things. Not in a nosy way, more like the universe whispered the good stuff in their ear just for fun.

Today, they wore a velvet blazer over a T-shirt that read Hexually Active, a cluster of charms dangling from one wrist, and a mischievous glint in their eyes that said they were already brimming with unspoken questions.

“Well, well,” Nico purred, folding their hands under their chin. “If it isn’t the ghost-wrangling goddess herself. And is that a truth-teller mug I see?”

Autumn sat across from them, wrapping both hands around the warmth. “Don’t start.”

“Oh, honey. I haven’t even opened the bottle yet.”

She sighed, staring down at the tea as it steeped. “Can I just... talk? Without being roasted?”

They blinked dramatically. “That’s a bold ask, but fine. I’ll only lightly sear.”

She rolled her eyes and took a long sip of the tea.

It hit warm, then cool. Sweet, then tart. The taste shifted mid-swallow, curling into something oddly nostalgic. The scent of a forest after rain. The sting of hope just before it hurt.

Nico waited.

“It was supposed to be fake,” she said finally, voice rough. “This whole... setup with Dorian. Pretending to be his girlfriend so the realtors and supernatural creeps would leave the inn alone.”

Their perfect brows climbed, eyes widening. “Fake? ”

“Yeah.” Autumn exhaled hard, shoulders curling forward. “It was just supposed to be a ruse. A means to an end. In. Cleanse. Out. Done.”

Nico blinked, stunned. “You mean to tell me... that the two of you—with your heart eyes and stormy porch kisses and unspeakable kitchen tension—that’s all been pretend ?”

Autumn’s cheeks burned.

They threw a hand over their heart like she’d wounded them. “You witches are dangerous. I was this close to making a couples prediction for the winter solstice board.”

“It’s not that simple,” she muttered, tracing the rim of her cup. “I didn’t plan for... him.”

Nico softened. “No one ever does, darling. That man has the emotional range of a bear in a flannel-covered romance novel.”

“He is a bear in a flannel-covered romance novel.”

“Exactly.”

They fell quiet for a moment. The vines above fluttered faintly.

Autumn didn’t look up. “I want him,” she admitted, so quiet it barely carried. “I want him in that messy, terrifying, soul-baring way. But...”

“But you don’t trust fate.”

She nodded.

“And why would you?” Nico said gently. “You’ve been alone a long time. Taught yourself that being safe means being untouched. That being seen means being left behind. Or so I’ve been told.”

Autumn’s throat tightened. The tea went down like truth lodged behind her ribs.

“I’ve never had anyone stay,” she said. “Not really. Not when it got hard. Not when I stopped being useful.”

Nico reached across the table, their rings clicking softly against the ceramic as they took her hand.

“Maybe,” they said, “the lesson isn’t that people don’t stay. Maybe it’s that you’ve never let them.”

Her eyes snapped to theirs, sharp. But she didn't argue.

"You think I'm cruel," they said, smiling gently. "But I'm not. I see people. And I see you. And I see him. And babe... whatever this thing started as? It's not pretend anymore. You know it. He knows it."

"I'm scared," she said.

Nico squeezed her hand. "Good. That means it matters."

She finished the tea in one long swallow. The mug glowed faintly as she set it down, then dimmed.

"I don't know what I'm doing."

"You don't have to," they said. "You just have to let it happen. Love's a spell that only works when both casters surrender control."

She snorted. "That was annoyingly poetic."

"I'm annoyingly everything."

Autumn laughed despite herself.

Outside, the clouds had parted just enough to let light spill through the stained glass over the bar, painting her sweater in fractured gold and blue. She stared down at the mug.

"I'm not ready to say it," she whispered. "But I'm not ready to let go either."

"Then don't," Nico said. "Let him be your slow burn."

Autumn stood, her chest a little looser than when she'd walked in. "Thanks, Voss."

"Anytime, Ghost Girl."

She paused at the doorway.

"And Nico?"

"Hmm?"

"Don't put us on the solstice prediction board."

"Too late," they said, grinning. "Already etched it in glitter pen."

DORIAN

The fire crackled in the main hearth of Briar Hollow Inn, casting golden light over the stone floor and timber beams that had, until recently, echoed with more memory than merriment.

Now, it buzzed gently with conversation, laughter, and the occasional clink of mismatched mugs borrowed from The Spellbound Sip's overstocked collection.

The inn, once known only for cold drafts and colder spirits (the non-drinking kind), was alive.

Dorian stood near the foyer, arms crossed over his chest, eyes scanning the space like a man watching his dream walk around in borrowed boots as he plays host for the community event.

The lanterns flickered with warm amber glow, the scent of cinnamon scones and woodsmoke wafted from the open kitchen, and people—actual people—milled about without a trace of fear or suspicion.

It was working.

He didn't dare say it out loud, not with the history of the house pressing quiet behind the walls, but tonight felt like the start of something.

Across the room, Autumn laughed.

Not just a chuckle or a smirk or one of those dry smiles she gave when she was humoring someone. This was different. Her head tilted back, eyes bright, mouth open. And it hit him square in the chest like a bolt of light.

If he hadn't been done for before, he was now.

She wore a dark green knit sweater and jeans tucked into her boots, her damp curls pushed back with a leather headband that looked like it had been enchanted by someone with too much taste and too much free time.

She was talking to Hazel Fairweather and Cassian Drake, her mug cradled in both hands like a talisman.

He watched her talk, half-shy, half-sarcastic, and wholly present.

It did something to him.

She caught his gaze across the room and gave him the smallest smile—just a flicker. But it landed like a vow. He started moving toward her without thinking, his boots thudding softly on the old floorboards, like they remembered the rhythm of his hope.

“Hey,” she said as he reached her, voice low and warm like spiced wine.

“You good?” he asked, tilting his head toward the open room. “Any ghostly growls or wailing mirrors yet?”

She sipped her tea. “None. Just one mug that tried to flirt with me, but I think that’s more of a Nico issue than a haunting.”

He huffed a laugh. “So the house is behaving?”

She nodded, then added more quietly, “They’re not interested in the crowd. Whatever’s been stirring—it’s been personal. Centered on me and you.”

He tensed instinctively, jaw tightening. “They hurt you again?—”

“No.” Her hand landed lightly on his arm, just above the elbow. “Not tonight. I think... they’re watching. But not ready to act.”

He studied her face, searching for cracks in her calm, but found none. There was a steadiness there he hadn’t seen before. Not peace, exactly, but purpose. She belonged here, whether she believed it or not.

“Thank you for coming out of your room to be here tonight,” he said, voice gentler now. “I know this kind of thing ain’t your usual scene.”

“I was bribed with free tea and the promise of no matchmaking spells.”

He smiled. “Those might still be in effect. Hazel hasn’t denied it.”

Autumn glanced around, eyes sweeping the room trying to take it all in. “This place... it feels different tonight.”

He nodded. “It’s breathin’ again.”

“Because of you,” she said.

“No,” he said firmly. “Because of us. You being here, working with me, not running when it got hard. That changed everything.”

She looked down at her mug, quiet for a moment. Then she whispered, “I feel like I belong here. For the first time in possibly ever.”

Dorian didn't say anything.

He just reached out and brushed his fingers down her arm, slow and grounding. She leaned into the touch, just slightly, and it was enough. More than enough.

They stood together near the hearth for a few moments, silence shared like a story too sacred to say aloud, both pretending it was due to the facade they had to play into.

Then, from the hallway, Markus emerged with a tray of enchanted honeycakes and a dramatic flourish. "Alright, you cozy lovebirds, who wants to try a dessert that tastes like first kisses and forest air?"

Autumn blinked. "I don't know whether to be intrigued or concerned."

Markus grinned. "Both. Always both."

As guests filtered through the room, sampling local treats and quietly gossiping about the new life breathed into Briar Hollow, Dorian caught glimpses of what the inn could become—of the future he'd dared to dream about. Not just walls and wooden beams, but home.

A place people returned to.

A place people chose.

By the end of the evening, after the last of the guests from the Harvest Spirits Sampler Night had drifted back toward town—full of spiced cider, enchanted honeycakes, and far too many speculative whispers about the inn's "mildly haunted" charm—Dorian leaned against the doorway to the foyer, watching Autumn stack mugs by the kitchen sink.

Her sleeves were pushed up, revealing the faint bruising from her last spirit encounter, and her hair was tied back with a ribbon that looked like it had been borrowed from one of Junie Bell's cheerful impulse buys.

She didn't see him at first. Her focus was on the rhythm—rinse, dry, stack. A methodical sort of calm. So different from the storm she carried when he first met her.

He approached slowly, not crowding her space.

"Need help?" he asked, voice low and casual.

She glanced over her shoulder. "I've got it."

But she didn't bristle. Didn't pull away when he stepped beside her instead of behind her. Progress, in her own language.

"The townsfolk didn't run screaming," he said, offering a towel.

"That's a win," she admitted, taking it.

"They seemed to like the ghost trivia game."

Autumn allowed a ghost of a smirk. "Who knew fake haunted history could be so popular?"

He leaned on the counter. "They don't know it was fake."

"Mostly fake," she corrected.

Dorian chuckled and handed her another mug.

They worked in companionable silence for a bit. The kind that had weight but not pressure. She didn't lean into him, didn't reach for his hand, but she also didn't step back. Didn't put that usual steel wall between them.

He'd take it.

When the last mug was dried and set aside, Autumn exhaled and pressed her hands flat against the end of the counter, staring down at the soapy sink water like it held some kind of answer.

"This has been pleasantly unexpected." she said softly.

"What?"

"People. Liking me. Letting me... be part of something."

"That's good," Dorian said. "You just have to let yourself enjoy it instead of fight it so much."

She looked over at him then, eyes clear and tired but open. There was no kiss. No dramatic swoon into his arms.

But she smiled.

And that, for now, was everything.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:17 am

AUTUMN

The attic door groaned like it remembered the first time it had been opened in fear.

Autumn exhaled through her nose and pressed her palm flat against the wood, feeling the subtle tingle of old magic along the grain.

The charm Missy had given her was tucked into her back pocket, a clump of lavender and bloodstone wrapped in silk, but it felt almost unnecessary now.

The air didn't hum with menace. It pulsed with waiting.

The Harvest Spirits Sampler Night had come and gone without incident. Dorian had smiled through every awkward townie question, Autumn had done her part, and the ghosts—well, they'd stayed silent.

Too silent.

Which meant something was coming.

She stepped up into the attic, the light from her lantern casting long shadows across the boxes and crates she'd half-explored weeks ago. Her ribs still ached sometimes where the Hollow Man had clawed her. A warning, she'd told Dorian.

But it hadn't been meant to scare her off.

It had been personal.

Now she understood why.

The journal lay where Dorian had left it after his hand had burned from touching the spellbound page. She'd waited until he was out with Rollo at the wildlife sanctuary that morning—checking on a fox with frostbitten paws, he'd said—before she came up here alone.

Autumn settled cross-legged on the creaky attic floor, setting the lantern beside her and pulling on her gloves before flipping the journal open to the shimmer-inked pages. The words still shimmered faintly, but they no longer repelled her.

The house knew her now.

And the ghost? He remembered.

She read slowly, her lips barely moving, tracing each curve of the script like the ink itself was reaching through time to etch the words into her bones.

October 13, 1817

He told me the stars were ours. That they'd always light our path. And yet, tonight, I bury a promise instead of a man. Hollis, forgive me. The blood was never supposed to fall.

Autumn sucked in a breath sharp enough to sting her lungs.

Hollis.

She flipped back through the earlier entries, hands trembling, every turn of the page kicking up a gust of cold air that didn't come from the drafty attic windows.

The atmosphere thickened with every line, the weight of memory pressing in around her like the house itself was trying to warn her away—and still, she read.

There. A name scrawled in the margin, repeated three times in increasingly unsteady handwriting.

Hollis Blackthorne.

And beside it, in another hand—more severe, precise like a ledger or a curse—was the line that cinched it all:

Property deed transferred under duress. Curse invoked. Circle unbroken.

Autumn sat frozen for a moment, the journal warm in her gloved hands despite the chill sinking into her bones. Her breath fogged the lantern light.

This wasn't just some angry soul clinging to the place he died. The Hollow Man wasn't a random, violent echo.

He was the spirit.

The sorrow that dripped through Briar Hollow's walls like mold. The reason no magic stuck long in the hallways, why the windows wept in the fall, why love stories here always turned tragic by the third act.

He'd been a man once. A man in love.

And he'd been betrayed.

She pressed her hand against the journal's leather cover, feeling the faint thrum of leftover magic pulse beneath her palm like a heartbeat. Pieces of the story tumbled

into place like bones snapping into alignment.

The original builder—Theodore Hawthorne—hadn't just raised this house for grandeur or status. He'd built it with Hollis. Laid the foundation stone by stone beside the man he loved, whispered promises in the mortar, planned a life beneath its roof.

And then... he'd caved.

To power. To pressure. To fear.

There were hints in the writing—mentions of “family expectations,” “a union not yet sanctioned,” “an offer I cannot afford to refuse.” Words that reeked of cowardice dressed in duty.

Autumn felt it in her gut: the ritual that ended Hollis's life hadn't been born of cruelty, but desperation. Theodore had tried to sever the tie between them. To cut the cord of fate before it pulled him under.

But magic like that doesn't disappear. It lingers. It rots.

And Hollis—heart split, soul unanchored—had stayed.

Not as a memory.

As a wound.

The ritual hadn't summoned immortality. That had just been the lie told to make it palatable. The real spell had been darker. Ancient. Forbidden.

It had been cast not to preserve love, but to destroy it.

Autumn's throat tightened. Her fingers curled into fists over the edges of the journal.

This wasn't just a haunting.

This was grief, immortalized. A fated bond betrayed so completely it had warped into something vengeful. Something protective. Something afraid to let anyone else try again.

And now, she and Dorian—another pair on the cusp of something real, something binding—were paying the price.

It wasn't just coincidence the spirit had targeted them.

He thought it was history trying to repeat itself.

Autumn's stomach turned. She felt it then, behind her—a shadow shifting, just barely.

She didn't move.

"Hollis," she whispered into the stillness, "I know your name now."

The attic didn't respond. But something listened .

"I know what they did. And I know you've been trying to keep it from happening again."

The lantern flickered once, then steadied.

"I'm not them," she said, louder this time. "And Dorian isn't Theodore."

Still nothing. But the pressure eased.

She traced the edge of the page with her glove. The ink no longer shimmered—it stayed still, flat, like it had finally settled into truth.

The Hollow Man wasn't trying to keep people out of the inn. He was trying to protect what had once been love. Fated. Sacred.

And somewhere in the bitterness of betrayal, he'd turned it into a weapon.

“Dorian,” she breathed, heart suddenly pounding.

It was why the spirit targeted them. Why it had scratched her. Why it had left everyone else alone.

He wasn't punishing her. He was warning her.

Autumn slammed the book shut, grabbed the lantern, and bolted down the attic stairs two at a time, her breath coming in harsh bursts.

She needed to find Dorian. She needed to tell him.

But more than that, more than the haunted history and twisted love story—they needed to face the truth together.

Because if fate was still listening...

They had one last chance to make it right.

DORIAN

The wind shifted sometime near sunset.

It curled down off the ridge in a way that tugged at Dorian's instincts, brushing against his skin like a whispered suggestion.

Change was coming. Not the kind that made folks pack up and move, but the kind that made you stop and look at what was right in front of you. Real, fragile, and worth fighting for.

He stood on the porch of the inn, hand resting on the railing just above where he'd carved his initials when the deed was turned over to him, thumb smoothing over the familiar groove out of habit.

The scent of pine and woodsmoke drifted on the breeze, grounding him.

But his thoughts were tangled in the woman inside.

Autumn had been quiet since her attic discovery. Not distant, just... focused. There was something in her eyes that said she knew more now than she ever wanted to. Something that had cracked her open.

He'd seen it. Felt it.

And he knew, bone-deep, that she needed a moment—just one—where none of it had to matter.

So he made a decision.

She was in the kitchen, stacking the last of the clean tea mugs when he walked in.

Her hair was pulled into a loose bun, little curls slipping free to frame her face, and she wore one of her usual oversized sweaters, sleeves rolled up to her elbows.

She didn't see him at first, too caught up in lining mugs with neurotic precision.

"Autumn," he said gently.

She turned, startled, then offered a faint smile. "Hey."

He stepped closer, tucking his hands into his back pockets. "Can I ask you something that doesn't involve ghosts, curses, or psychic trauma?"

Her brow arched, but amusement flickered at the corners of her mouth. "That's a tall order."

"I'll risk it."

She leaned her hip against the counter, mug still in hand. "Alright. Hit me."

"Go out with me."

She blinked.

He held her gaze. Steady. Unflinching. "Not fake. Not for show. I want to take you out. Just you. Just me."

She hesitated, something unreadable crossing her face.

“You don’t have to say yes,” he added. “No pressure. But I’d really like to have a night that’s ours. Away from the inn. Away from the past.”

Her grip tightened on the mug, then slowly loosened. “Just a night?”

“I’ll take what you give me.”

She exhaled softly, physically letting herself give in. “Okay. Yeah. Let’s do it.”

Dorian didn’t do fancy, but he did thoughtful.

He set a table out back beneath the string lights he’d strung between the porch columns last fall.

The old garden chairs were layered with soft flannel throws, and the table was topped with a basket of fried chicken, spiced sweet potatoes, and her favorite lemon-rosemary biscuits.

A small cooler sat beside it, filled with ginger beer and apple cider.

Autumn stepped out just after twilight, her shoes treading lightly on the gravel path. She wore a long wool coat, sweater dress underneath, and her hair down in soft waves catching the light.

He forgot how to breathe for a second.

“This is…” she looked around, lips parting. “Really lovely.”

He grinned. “Only the best for my ghost wrangler.”

She rolled her eyes, but the smile stayed. “If you try to serenade me with a banjo, I’m

leaving.”

“Was gonna bring out a kazoo, but alright.”

They ate on the porch under the stars, laughter echoing across the hills between bites.

They talked about everything except ghosts—childhood stories, favorite foods, books that made them cry.

He told her about the time he accidentally turned into his bear form at a sixth-grade field trip.

She told him how she once punched a boy in the nose for mocking a spirit in her old town.

He loved the sound of her laugh. Not the polite one she gave strangers, but the real one—the one that made her eyes crinkle and her hand smack the table like she couldn’t help it.

By the time they finished, the air had cooled, the sky ink-black and full of stars.

“Walk with me?” he asked.

She nodded, tucking her arm into his without hesitation this time.

They strolled through the back trail leading near the end of the inn’s property. The moon spilled silver light through the trees. Autumn stopped by an old bench nestled beside the creek that bordered the woods, her breath curling in the chill.

He wrapped his coat around her shoulders without a word, his fingers brushing her arms.

She turned to face him. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes searching his.

“I don’t know what to do with this,” she whispered.

“With what, my coat?”

“You,” she said. “Us. This feeling like the ground’s shifting under me every time I look at you.”

He stepped closer, one hand cupping her cheek. “All I can suggest is to stop fighting it.”

She leaned in before she could think twice, and when their lips met, it was quiet and certain with steady and slow heat, the kind that burns low and lasts through the longest nights.

His arms slid around her waist. Her fingers tangled in the front of his shirt. She pulled him closer like she was afraid to let go, and he didn’t let her.

They stayed like that until the cold nipped at their heels.

Back inside, he led her upstairs to his room—slow, careful, never pushing.

She stood by the bed, staring at him, eyes wide, chest rising and falling with something heavy.

“Are you sure?” he asked, voice hushed.

She nodded once.

They didn’t rush.

Every movement was deliberate, a silent promise passed from breath to breath.

Dorian's shirt hit the floor first, the fabric whispering against skin that ran hot—his natural warmth like a steady hearthfire.

Autumn's fingers hovered at the hem of her own sweater, uncertain, until he stepped in, gently curling his fingers around hers.

“Let me,” he murmured.

She lifted her arms, and he peeled the sweater up and over her head with reverence, letting it fall to the floor with a softness that belied the thrum of tension between them.

The tank top beneath followed, baring skin pale in the moonlight filtering through the window.

Scars laced his ribs, old and faded, reminders of a past he never spoke about—but she traced them now with a featherlight touch, memorizing.

Dorian's breath caught when she laid her palm against his chest. “You feel like sunlight,” she whispered.

His hand found the small of her back, then slid lower, cupping her curves with a groan so low it rumbled from deep within his chest—his bear close, just under the surface, content and stirring for her alone.

“You feel like gravity,” he answered hoarsely, kissing her again, deeper this time. “Like something I was always supposed to find.”

Autumn's fingers trembled at the waistband of his jeans.

She unbuttoned them slowly, savoring the weight of what they were choosing together.

His cock sprang free when she eased his boxers down—thick, flushed, already aching for her.

She stared for a breathless moment, and the hunger in her eyes nearly undid him.

“You can touch me,” he said, voice gone rough with restraint. “Please.”

Her hand wrapped around him, tentative at first, then bolder when she felt the way he shuddered beneath her touch. “God, Dorian... you’re so hot,” she breathed. “You’re burning up.”

He chuckled lowly, burying his face in the crook of her neck. “Always run hot, sweetheart. Especially for you.”

She tugged her own leggings down, stepping out of them with a graceless kick, her combat boots long since discarded. Left in just her panties, violet-blue eyes meeting molten brown, she reached for him again, but he caught her wrists, brought them to his lips.

“My turn,” he said.

Dorian guided her gently to the bed, laying her back against the sheets like she was something precious. He kissed his way down her throat, slow and unhurried, pausing at the hollow between her breasts to murmur, “Beautiful,” as his thumb traced the outline of her bra and unclasped it with ease.

Her nipples peaked as the cool air touched them, but it was his mouth that made her arch—hot, wet, open-mouthed kisses over one breast, then the other, his stubble

leaving ghost trails across her skin.

“Dorian,” she whispered, half-moan, half-prayer.

“I’ve got you,” he whispered back, settling between her thighs, his broad shoulders nudging them open. Her panties were soaked through, clinging to her like a second skin. He inhaled, groaned like it physically pained him. “You smell like moonlight and need. Fuck.”

With one slow pull, he peeled them down, baring her completely. He didn’t hesitate. He kissed the inside of one thigh, then the other, and finally leaned in, tongue sliding between her folds with a reverent groan.

Autumn gasped, hips jerking. “Oh—God.”

He worked her gently at first, letting her get used to the sensation, but soon he was devouring her like she was his last meal—tongue firm and flat one moment, then teasing circles around her clit the next. She fisted the sheets, thighs trembling.

“You taste like heaven,” he said between licks, voice gravel and hunger.

She whimpered, one hand tangled in his hair. “Dorian—please. I need you.”

He pulled back, his lips wet with her, eyes now a shade darker—earthy brown muddled with gold. His bear was bleeding through, pacing behind his eyes, but still Dorian stayed in control.

He crawled up over her, kissed her slow and deep, letting her taste herself on his tongue. His cock brushed against her thigh, hard and aching.

“You’re sure?” he asked again, breath fanning her lips.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life,” she whispered.

He lined himself up, the head of his cock nudging her entrance, and pushed in slow—inch by inch—stretching her until she cried out, hips rising to meet him. He was thick, the stretch exquisite.

“Shit,” he gritted out, forehead pressed to hers. “You feel like you were made for me.”

Autumn’s arms wrapped around him, nails dragging down his back. “You were made for me.”

He began to move—slow, deliberate thrusts that rocked the bed in gentle waves, the room filled with nothing but their mingled moans, the rhythmic creak of old wood, and the soft slap of skin against skin. Each movement was worship, each thrust a question and a promise all at once.

“Dorian,” she gasped, legs tightening around him. “I feel... it’s like I’m unraveling.”

He kissed her cheek, her jaw, the space beneath her ear. “Let go. I’ve got you.”

She came first, with a cry muffled against his shoulder, her body clenching around him like she never wanted to let go. That was his undoing.

He thrust once, twice more, then groaned low and deep as he spilled inside her, warmth flooding between them. His entire body trembled with the force of it.

They stayed tangled, breathless and raw, sweat cooling between them.

He rolled them gently, letting her rest atop his chest, his hands stroking her back in slow, grounding circles.

“You okay?” he whispered.

She lifted her head, eyes shining. “More than okay.”

Her fingers traced idle patterns along his chest. “You know what I said earlier, about not knowing what to do with this?”

“Yeah,” he said softly.

She smiled, then leaned in close, pressing a kiss to his heart. “I think I just figured it out.”

And in the quiet that followed, her breath warm on his skin, Dorian finally understood what it meant to be claimed in the most human, sacred way.

She was his.

And he was home.

AUTUMN

The morning sunlight crept through the old curtains in soft, sleepy lines.

It painted golden stripes across the wooden floor of Dorian's room, gently coaxing the shadows away.

Autumn lay awake, still tucked against his side, his heartbeat a slow, steady rhythm beneath her cheek. She hadn't moved. Didn't want to.

He smelled like cedar and warmth. Her fingers were curled lightly into the blanket, one bare leg tangled with his beneath it, and his arm still rested around her waist like he would never let go.

She hadn't meant for it to go that far.

She hadn't meant to fall asleep in his bed, to wake up with her heart aching in that tender, terrifying way. Like a door had opened inside her chest she couldn't close again.

It wasn't the intimacy that undid her.

It was the safety.

He had held her like she was something precious. Kissed her like he was afraid he might wake up and find her gone. Not with desperation, but with devotion. Quiet, sturdy, unshakable.

And that was the problem.

Autumn slid carefully out of the bed, pulling one of his long-sleeved shirts over her shoulders and padding toward the window, barefoot and quiet. Her breath fogged the glass as she stared down at the yard below. The path from the porch still held her footprints from the night before.

Everything felt too still. Too perfect. That's when it hit her.

She loved him.

It wasn't a flutter. It wasn't a giddy realization tied up with ribbon and sweet words. It was a gut punch. A truth so whole, it pressed against her ribs like it had always been there, just waiting for her to look down and see it.

She loved Dorian Hawthorne.

Loved the way his laugh softened when it was just for her. Loved that he remembered how she took her tea and didn't flinch when she talked about death like it was an old friend. Loved the way he always stepped back just enough to let her choose. Never forced. Never rushed.

And she couldn't tell him. Because loving someone like her—someone who talked to the dead and dreamed in memories that weren't her own—was dangerous. Unfair. And telling him felt like giving him a weapon she wasn't sure he'd know how to carry.

Even if she trusted him more than anyone she ever had.

The door creaked softly behind her, and she turned just in time to see him stirring, his messy hair sticking out in odd directions, face half-lit by sunlight, half-shadowed

with sleep.

“Hey,” he rasped, voice thick.

“Hey,” she whispered back.

“You okay?”

She nodded too quickly. “Yeah. Just... needed air.”

He didn’t press. Just gave her a smile that made her knees soft.

“I’ll start coffee,” he said, already sliding out of bed, bare feet meeting the floor with a comforting thump.

Autumn watched him go, heart doing somersaults behind her ribs.

But before she could let herself get caught up in her feelings, she heard it. A whisper.

Soft, low, and cold.

She froze.

It came from behind her, close as breath.

" Don't trust the living. "

She spun, but no one was there. Just the echo of the voice clinging to the windowpane and the fine hairs rising on the back of her neck.

The room seemed darker suddenly. Not in shadow, but in presence. A weight that

hadn't been there a second ago.

"Not now," she murmured to the empty air. "You've had your warnings."

But the whisper had pierced deeper than she wanted to admit.

She grabbed the journal from her satchel in the corner and ran her fingers over the cover. Hollis's story, the betrayal, the blood spilled to sever fate... it was still swirling in her head. Still settling.

The ghosts didn't lie.

Not often.

But they didn't always speak the truth, either.

The living could betray. That much was true.

And fate? Fate had teeth.

But so did love.

Autumn closed the journal, her fingers trembling, and pressed it to her chest like it could shield her from whatever storm was brewing next.

She wasn't going to run. But she wasn't ready to leap either.

She just hoped Dorian would still be there when she was.

DORIAN

Dorian didn't know the first thing about planting roses.

But he knew Autumn liked them.

Not the kind you bought from the grocery store in a crinkly plastic sleeve.

No, she liked the messy ones—wild and overgrown and so vibrant they looked like they'd bled through the seasons just to keep blooming.

She liked them with thorns and scars and tangled roots.

The kind of flowers that didn't apologize for taking up space.

So he built her a garden.

It started with the idea in the middle of the night—after she'd fallen asleep in his arms, after the air had turned too quiet, and the whisper she'd mentioned had left a frostbite of doubt behind her eyes.

He couldn't fight her ghosts, not directly.

But he could remind her every single day that she was wanted in the land of the living.

That she belonged here.

With him.

So while she spent the next two mornings pouring over Hollis Blackthorne's journal, unraveling the house's history page by haunted page, Dorian slipped out back and got to work.

He cleared the space behind the greenhouse—an overgrown tangle of briar and rock that most folks would've ignored. It was shaded by a massive red oak that still dropped acorns like confetti, and bordered on the edge of Echo Woods where the air always felt a little too alive.

But Dorian loved a challenge.

He brought in soil from Missy's apothecary, charmed to keep spirits from leeching into the roots.

Nico provided enchanted clippers that whispered compliments when he pruned ("Oh yes, trim it just there, you botanical beast.").

And Markus and Rowan gifted him a crate of bookish garden markers with labels like "emotional healing" and "regret-absorbing rosemary."

It took him two full days, and he hadn't told a soul, not even Autumn.

By the third morning, his hands were raw, his back ached, and he'd somehow managed to charm a trail of moonstone gravel into glowing ever so slightly at night.

And still, it didn't feel enough.

Not until she saw it.

She came out of the house right around noon, mug in hand, curls caught up in a haphazard clip like she'd wrestled with sleep and lost. She wore one of his flannel shirts again—one he hadn't even realized was missing—and the sight of it on her hit him harder than it should've.

"Hey," she called out, lifting her mug in greeting.

Dorian dropped his tools and jogged to meet her at the porch steps, brushing dirt off his jeans.

"Got a minute?"

Her brow creased slightly. "Yeah?"

"Come with me."

He didn't say more. Just reached for her free hand and walked her along the winding gravel path he'd been shaping all week.

The trees overhead rustled like they were holding their breath.

When they rounded the final curve and stepped into the clearing, he heard AUtumn's breath halt as sudden as her feet had.

The garden spread out before her like a spell made real—rows of herbs and blooming flowers twisting around each other, wild but purposeful.

Colors spilled from every corner: foxglove and feverfew, twilight-colored lavender, blush roses clinging to newly built trellises.

The path wound gently to a hand-carved bench made from cedar and copper piping,

nestled under the shade of the oak.

A small sign staked into the dirt read: Autumn's Peace.

She didn't speak.

Didn't move.

Dorian's heart thundered behind his ribs.

"I know it's a little rough still," he said, voice quiet. "But it's yours. Thought maybe you could use a place that didn't need you to fix it. That just... grew for you."

Autumn stared at the sign, then the roses, then the gentle shimmer of the moonstone path. And then she sank to her knees.

Not like she was overwhelmed. Like she was undone.

Dorian moved to kneel beside her, panic kicking in. "Hey—hey, darlin', you alright?"

She didn't answer for a beat. Just let the mug slip from her fingers onto the soft grass and pressed both hands to her mouth.

When she finally looked at him, her eyes were wet.

"I've never had anything like this," she whispered. "No one's ever... made a place for me before."

He swallowed hard. "Well. I figure it's about time someone did."

She reached for him suddenly—fingers fisting in his shirt, pulling him close until

their foreheads touched.

He didn't kiss her. Not yet.

He let her breathe.

Let her feel.

"I don't know what to say," she whispered, voice rough with emotion. "No one's ever... done anything like this for me."

Dorian pulled her in, anchoring her to the moment. "You don't have to say anything. This was never about earning it."

She closed her eyes, exhaling against his chest. "You make it hard not to believe in things."

He smiled softly, lips brushing the top of her head. "That's the idea."

They stayed in the dirt, sun warm on their backs, the scent of rosemary and rose drifting through the air around them. Her hand found his, fingers twining slowly, uncertainly—but she didn't let go.

And Dorian knew—without a doubt—that he'd keep making room for her, one root, one bloom, one breath at a time.

AUTUMN

E cho Woods wasn't a place people wandered into lightly.

Even locals—the shifters, witches, half-beings, and all the in-betweens of Celestial Pines—knew better than to stroll under its canopy without reason.

The trees weren't just old here. They were aware .

The kind of ancient that bent time if you blinked too long and whispered things into your bones if you let them.

Autumn Sinclair had been avoiding the woods since she arrived.

She knew how they worked. Felt the pull in her chest every time she got too close to the tree line, like the forest could smell her uncertainty and was just waiting for her to step wrong.

But now she had a reason.

The Hollow Man wasn't going to reveal anything else from the attic. She'd felt it in the tightening in the air, the unease in the bones of Briar Hollow. He'd said all he was willing to say there .

She needed to go to him .

To where he died.

To where the blood hit the earth and stayed.

So she walked.

Dorian didn't ask questions when she left that morning, only offered her a packed thermos of Nerissa's focus tea and a kiss on her cheek that lingered. She hadn't told him where she was going. Not yet.

The path into the woods curved like a question mark—uncertain, shifting. Roots tangled beneath her boots, and branches overhead creaked like old warnings. The deeper she went, the colder the air grew, even with the sun hanging stubbornly overhead.

She paused at the old break in the trees where the path split.

Left to the old Warden watch post. Right to the place Rowan once called “the memory hollow.”

She went right.

It took her an hour to find it. And when she did, she knew without a doubt it was the place.

A clearing, half-eaten by moss and time. The remains of an altar, stones now crumbling, twisted with vines. A circle faintly burned into the earth, the outline blackened but still breathing with a kind of quiet ache.

She stepped into the center of the clearing, heart thrumming against her ribs like a warning she didn't want to heed.

The circle on the ground was faint but still pulsing, an echo of a ritual unfinished. She

could feel it in the dirt beneath her boots. Hollowed out. Waiting.

“I know what you lost,” she said softly, voice barely more than a breath.

Nothing answered.

She closed her eyes, grounded her breath.

“I read the journal,” she continued, stronger now. “I know what he did. What he took from you.”

The wind stirred.

Then came a whisper.

“He promised forever.”

It was a voice full of soil and sorrow, carrying centuries on its breath. Not cruel.

Just tired.

Autumn’s chest ached. She bowed her head slightly. “Yes,” she said. “And he betrayed it.”

The air thickened around her. Not like a threat, but like grief crowding in too close.

“He said I would be safe here. That no one would know. That love could survive a lie.”

Images tumbled into her mind unbidden—two men building a life in secret.

Stone by stone, this very house. One full of charm and charmers, laughter tucked into the corners, hope laid into the foundation.

Hollis Blackthorne and Theodore Hawthorne.

Soul-bound. Hidden. Lovers before the world was ready.

Until it wasn't enough.

Until Evelyn .

Autumn had read it between the lines—Theodore's decision to marry the governor's daughter, Evelyn Vane, the one with the dowry and the family name. A union meant to protect the Hawthorne bloodline. To cement his position. But also, maybe, to bury a truth he couldn't live with out loud.

He tried to keep both.

And lost everything.

Hollis hadn't just died. He'd been sacrificed. Not in body, but in bond.

The spell that burned in the soil around her had been meant to untether fate. To sever what had been divinely stitched. Theodore had stood in this clearing with another man's heart in his hands and whispered a lie into the roots of the inn.

He'd sworn he could love two people.

But only one had been condemned to silence.

Autumn trembled.

“What do you want?” she asked, her voice cracking open like the pages of a too-old book.

“Truth.”

Just one word. But it echoed through her like judgment.

She lowered herself to the earth, knees brushing the cold moss at the circle’s center.

The ground felt oddly warm beneath her palms. Her fingers curled around the flask of tea Dorian had packed her that morning—still full, untouched.

The steam had long since faded, but the weight of it reminded her of comfort. Of something waiting.

“What kind of truth?” she whispered.

The wind curled close, brushing her jaw.

“The kind that cannot hide. The kind that must be spoken aloud.”

She stiffened.

“You mean...” Her throat closed. “You want me to say it.”

“You love him. But you have not told him. You are trying to rewrite my story.”

Her stomach turned. Tears pricked at the edges of her vision.

“I’m not you,” she said, fiercer than before. “And Dorian is not Theodore.”

The trees around her swayed, branches shivering with something colder than wind.

“Then prove it.”

Autumn stared at the earth, at the forgotten bones of someone else’s heartbreak trying to bury itself in her future.

“Severing the tie,” she whispered, the words heavy, “means surrendering mine.”

It meant risking it.

Everything.

It meant not hiding.

It meant choosing Dorian—not quietly, not tentatively—but with her whole heart.

The Hollow Man didn’t answer. He didn’t have to because in her chest, Autumn already knew the magic wasn’t about ghosts. It was about grief.

Theirs.

And hers.

She sat there for what felt like hours. Long enough for the light to shift gold. Long enough for the birds to fall silent again.

Then she pulled the journal from her satchel and opened to the last page. There was still space left.

A line waiting.

She pulled the piece of anchoring chalk from her coat pocket. Salt-charged. Scry-bound. Her hand shook.

She bent low and wrote:

This love will not be hidden. This love will not be silenced. I choose to speak it, so it will not be stolen.

The chalk flared faintly against the paper. Not bright, but warm. Like coals that hadn't gone out after all.

A low hum vibrated through the circle beneath her knees. The vines at the edge lifted, then lay still. From somewhere unseen, a breath moved through the woods. A sigh.

Let go.

She didn't speak. She just listened. And when it was done, she closed the book, stood slowly, and looked toward the path that would lead her back to the inn.

Not freed. Not finished.

But no longer afraid to begin.

DORIAN

Dorian's first clue was how quiet the inn was.

No hum from the kitchen, no distant rustle of paper from the library, no soft shuffling footsteps that had, without him noticing, become the rhythm of his days.

Autumn's rhythm. Her presence had bled into every inch of Briar Hollow like sunlight catching in old glass, subtle but impossible to miss once you knew what it looked like.

Now?

It was just silence.

He found her in the sitting room, standing by the window with her arms wrapped tightly around herself. She hadn't heard him come in. Her shoulders were too stiff. Guarded. Like she was holding herself upright by sheer will and a threadbare sense of resolve.

His gut twisted.

"How'd the expedition go yesterday?"

"Fine," was all she offered.

"You okay?" he asked softly, voice breaking the stillness but not the tension.

She didn't turn. Just nodded once. "Yeah."

He stepped closer, pausing a few feet behind her. "You don't look it."

A pause. Her breath fogged the glass in front of her.

"I finished the last of the house yesterday," she said. "Cleansing's done. Spirits are settled."

Dorian frowned. "You sure?"

"Sure enough."

He waited. Gave her space. Let the silence do what it needed to.

"I'm leaving tomorrow."

The words knocked the wind out of his chest.

She turned then, slow and deliberate. Her eyes met his, and it nearly broke him because he could see it.

She didn't want to leave. But she felt like she had to.

"I told you this was temporary," she said, voice quiet. "That once the job was done?—"

"That was before," he cut in, not harsh, just honest. "Before everything."

"I know."

“Then why?”

She pressed her lips together, eyes flicking down to her hands. “Because this place has roots. It’s alive. It holds stories and spirits and... pain. And I’m too tied to all of that. I don’t just hear ghosts, Dorian. I carry them.”

He moved a step closer. “You don’t have to carry them alone.”

“You say that now,” she whispered, “but you haven’t seen what happens when I stay too long. The ghosts don’t go away. They linger. They attach. And one day, they’ll look at you and see a threat, and I won’t be able to protect you from that.”

His hands clenched at his sides.

“You’re scared,” he said, voice low. “Not just of the ghosts. Of being loved.”

Her jaw tightened.

“Because you think if someone really sees you—sees the weight you carry—they’ll walk away.”

“Dorian—”

“I’m not walkin’,” he said, stepping closer. “But I’m not gonna chain you here either. If you need to go, go. But don’t lie and say it’s just the spirits driving you out.”

She blinked, a tear slipping down her cheek.

“It’s not in me to stay,” she confessed, brokenly. “Everywhere I’ve been, it’s been about the next haunting. The next call. The next door creaking open. I don’t know what it looks like to belong somewhere.”

He reached out slowly, brushing his thumb under her eye to catch the tear. “Then let me show you.”

She didn’t lean into the touch.

“I need to clear my head,” she said after a long pause. “Just... a little space.”

He nodded. Didn’t argue. Didn’t beg. Didn’t ask her to stay when he knew she wasn’t ready to believe she could.

Instead, he stepped back.

“Alright,” he said softly. “But know this, Autumn Sinclair—there ain’t a day coming where I stop waiting for you to find your way back.”

Her breath caught, and her lips parted like she wanted to say something— anything .

But instead, she turned and walked upstairs.

And Dorian stood there in the silence, in the hollow space she left behind, and told himself it wasn’t the end.

Just the part where the roots had to hold fast while the wind tested the branches.

AUTUMN

The bell over the door at The Spellbound Sip gave a soft chime as Autumn stepped inside, hugging her coat tighter around her frame.

It was warmer than she expected with its steamy windows, low golden light, the scent of sage and citrus steeping in the air like memory. The walls hummed with enchantment, just beneath the music of ceramic mugs clinking and chairs scooting on the tiled floor.

And laughter.

So much laughter .

It wrapped around her like a hug she didn't know she needed, and all at once, she wanted to leave. To run. To disappear into the fog outside before she could feel too much again.

Instead, she walked toward the corner booth by the window—her booth. The one Nico had once enchanted to make your tea taste like whatever emotion you were pretending not to feel.

She sank into the cushions and glanced around, chewing on the inside of her cheek.

Everywhere, couples filled the little shop.

Nerissa stood behind the bar with Walin, and Walin, who still hadn't figured out he

was magical, was clearly trying not to blush every time their hands brushed over the pastry trays.

Across the room, Markus and Rowan shared a book between them, leaning in close enough to whisper but never quite touching.

At the fireplace, Rollo and Delilah of all people were playing chess, and somehow still making it look like foreplay.

Autumn curled her hands around the mug that had already appeared in front of her—no order placed, no words needed.

The drink was dark red. Smelled like plum and pepper and something just a little too sweet.

“Truth tea,” Nico’s voice said behind her, soft as velvet and twice as smooth.

She didn’t look up.

“Thought that booth had been looking a little lonely.”

“I’m fine,” she said quickly.

They snorted and slid into the seat across from her anyway, brushing non-existent lint from their maroon blazer. “Oh, honey. That was the most aggressively false ‘fine’ I’ve heard all week—and I once watched Cassian try to pretend he didn’t cry during a Hallmark movie.”

Autumn stared into her tea. “I told him I was leaving.”

Nico’s brows lifted. “Ah.”

“He didn’t stop me.”

“He wouldn’t,” they said gently. “That’s not who he is.”

“I thought that meant he didn’t care.”

“And now?”

She didn’t answer.

She looked up and saw them again—Nerissa and Walin laughing over steamed milk. Rowan sliding a note into Markus’s book. Rollo catching Deliliah’s smirk like it was a gift.

All these people. All these little moments. And all at once, it hit her.

She hadn’t run from Dorian.

She’d run from happiness.

From the idea that she could want something and actually have it. That she could choose a life that didn’t revolve around pain. Around ghosts. Around always waiting for the other shoe—or the ceiling—to drop.

Tears sprang to her eyes, unbidden, and Nico’s expression softened.

“You know,” they said, “love doesn’t make you weaker, Autumn. It roots you.”

“I’ve never been rooted,” she whispered.

“Then plant yourself somewhere good. Somewhere true. ”

The rose garden Dorian planted for her came to her mind as she took a long sip of her tea. The flavor curled on her tongue, bittersweet and bright, like new beginnings steeped in regret.

“I’m not sure how to fix it.”

“You don’t,” Nico said. “You just go back. Tell the truth. Let it be messy and honest and real.”

Autumn looked out the window.

The fog had lifted. Sunlight was breaking through, scattering gold across the street like breadcrumbs.

She stood, setting a few bills on the table beside her mug.

Nico didn’t say anything—just winked as she passed.

She let the cold kiss her cheeks, let her breath fog the air in small, uneven clouds.

The town around her moved slow, like it knew not to rush her—just shop signs swaying gently, the distant clink of glass from the Everglen Market stalls, and the occasional crow overhead that sounded more like commentary than warning.

Autumn stood at the end of the street, hands deep in her pockets, staring at nothing.

She didn’t head back to the inn.

She didn’t head anywhere in particular.

Her feet carried her forward, not with purpose, but with instinct. One block. Then

another. She didn't need answers yet. She needed space. A moment. A breath that didn't belong to Dorian's world or hers or anyone's ghosts.

She didn't know where she was going.

But she knew it wasn't time to go home yet.

Not until her heart had caught up with everything else.

DORIAN

Dorian had never minded quiet.

As a forest ranger, he'd once spent entire weeks without hearing anything louder than a deer's hooves against fallen pine needles. Silence was sacred then—clean, useful. But the quiet in Briar Hollow this morning was the kind that got into your bones and made you ache .

The kind that reminded you something was missing.

He moved through the inn like he always did, coffee in one hand, to-do list in his back pocket, but the rhythm felt off. Like trying to dance to a song that used to mean something.

The library lights hadn't turned themselves on this morning. The fireplace had stayed cold despite the damp creeping in through the floorboards. Even the ghosts, usually fond of creaking floorboards and curtain-fluttering dramatics, had gone still.

Maybe they felt it too.

He started with the kitchen, stacking dishes and wiping down countertops like that could scrub out the hollow space in his chest. Every time he turned a corner, his eyes reached for her without permission. Every time a floorboard creaked, his body braced.

But she didn't come down the stairs.

Didn't poke her head in with a dry joke.

Didn't refill her tea mug with that sleepy scowl she always wore for the first hour of the day.

She was gone.

And he hadn't stopped her.

He couldn't decide if that made him noble, or just gutless.

He told himself it was the right thing to do. Let her have space. Let her run if she needed to. But the truth was, he'd stood still while everything he wanted walked out the door with nothing but a duffel bag and eyes that didn't say goodbye.

Dorian wasn't even sure where she was staying now.

Nico's maybe. Or the back room at Pines & Needles.

Or even that strange spare loft above Moonshadow Apothecary Missy kept locked unless the moon was in a certain phase.

He knew she hadn't left town as of yesterday—Nerissa had casually mentioned seeing her duck into Everglen Market, hood up, head down.

But she hadn't come back here.

And he hadn't found the strength to go into town just to watch her choose somewhere else.

After lunch, though calling it "lunch" was generous, given the untouched sandwich

on the counter, he climbed the stairs with heavy feet and a heavier heart. He wasn't sure why. Habit, maybe. Or maybe he just needed to feel her in the place she'd once dared to soften.

The door to her room was ajar.

He paused in the threshold, one hand resting on the frame, the other fisted loosely at his side. The room smelled like her. Not just perfume or tea, but her . A quiet mix of lavender, old paper, and something earthy and warm—like home that hadn't been claimed yet.

It wasn't much inside. Just the tidy chaos she always left behind. A neatly made bed. A folded flannel of his. An empty mug resting on the vanity like it had been forgotten mid-thought.

And then he saw it.

Her scarf.

It was draped over the back of the chair like she meant to grab it on her way out and just... didn't.

Dorian stepped forward slowly. Reached for it before he could think better. The knit was soft, a little frayed at the ends, worn from years of use. Still held the shape of her shoulders.

He sat down hard in the chair, elbows resting on his knees, scarf clutched between his hands.

His jaw clenched. He didn't cry. Not the way people expected, anyway.

There were no sobs. No broken sounds clawing their way up his throat.

But his chest ached.

Sharp and deep, like something had been ripped out without warning. His fingers curled tighter around the fabric, pressing it to his sternum, breathing her in like she was his lifeline.

He loved her and his bear was gnawing at him to go find her.

He didn't need the words to know it. It was in the way he'd built her a garden, remembered her tea just right, given her room to run and prayed she'd find her way back.

But love didn't always matter when fear was louder.

And she was afraid. Not just of him, of them , but of believing that something good could actually stay. Even after the evening they shared. He had hoped it had been enough, but something happened when she searched for the Hollow Man, something enough to think she didn't deserve this happiness.

He could only wait.

"Come back," he said quietly, the words spoken more to the empty room than anything else. "Whenever you're ready. Just... come back."

He didn't expect an answer.

But somewhere down the hall, a door creaked open.

Not loudly. Not like a ghost with something to prove.

Just a gentle, steady creak like the house was listening.

Like it agreed.

AUTUMN

It started with the mug.

Not just any mug—the one from The Spellbound Sip, deep green with a faint gold ring around the rim and a handle that always warmed to her touch. The one that, for weeks, had tasted faintly like cinnamon and safety. Like comfort that crept in slowly and made a home between sips.

But that morning, after she'd spent her first full night away from Briar Hollow, it tasted like lavender and smoke.

A warning.

The first real one.

Autumn stared at the swirling steam until it faded, until the tea went cool and sour in the cup. Her hands didn't shake, but her chest ached with something she hadn't named yet. Something that whispered under her skin like the ghosts she tried so hard to ignore.

She didn't drink it.

Didn't have to.

Because the next message came quietly, the way all the real ones did—with rain tapping against the attic window above Nico's spare room, and a whisper curled

beneath it, softer than her own breath.

“Go home.”

She sat frozen for several minutes, her knees tucked to her chest, the covers still drawn up like armor.

Home.

She didn't know where that was anymore.

Briar Hollow had felt like it. Dorian had felt like it.

But so had running. So had silence. She'd made homes out of half-emptied tea canisters and train station benches before.

And yet... nothing had ever wrapped around her quite like that porch light flickering to life just before dusk.

Like Dorian's hand reaching for hers under the table without looking.

She'd stayed away for two nights.

Just two.

But every hour of it had dragged, thick with discomfort. The room Nico gave her above his shop was charming in its way—walls of potion jars, a tiny brass-framed bed, a window that faced the Moonshadow Apothecary roofline—but it never warmed.

The charm bags didn't settle.

The air didn't hum the right way.

And the ghosts?

They didn't stop.

They whispered in her dreams. They tugged at her fingertips when she tried to write. Every time she passed a mirror, she expected to see someone else's reflection staring back.

And she knew—somewhere deep and certain—that the house hadn't rejected her.

She'd rejected herself.

And in doing so, she'd turned the Hollow Man's sorrow inward.

Because if there was one truth Hollis had been trying to tell her, it was this: you cannot exorcise a ghost you're still carrying in your chest.

By dusk, she was pacing Nico's kitchen in mismatched socks and a sweater that didn't smell like Dorian.

She'd picked up her sketchpad three times.

Put it down three times. And when she'd walked past the window that faced the edge of Echo Woods, the wind stirred the branches in a rhythm she hadn't heard since the day she learned the Hollow Man's name.

It was like the woods were waiting for her to listen.

So she did.

She pulled on her boots, packed her sketchpad and a charm of black salt and rose quartz, left a scribbled note for Nico that just said “I’m okay. Probably.”

She didn’t take the scarf she’d left behind.

Because the truth was—she didn’t need armor anymore.

Not if she was going home.

The path to Briar Hollow felt longer than it had ever felt before. Not because of the distance, but because every footstep carried a memory.

Dorian brushing her hair back with a hand gentler than any she’d known, holding her steady when her knees wanted to fold under the weight of her own fears, him carving her name into the back of a rocking chair without asking for anything in return.

Every step stirred guilt.

And love.

And the bone-deep understanding that peace didn’t come from the absence of ghosts.

It came from learning how to live with the ones that stayed.

The porch light was off when she arrived. But she didn’t hesitate.

The inn loomed like it always had—tall and still and watching—but the air was different tonight. Still, yes, but not in warning. In welcome.

She stepped up onto the porch and stopped cold.

There he was.

Dorian.

Curled into the rocking chair on the far side, head tilted back, flannel jacket tucked around his chest like the weight of the world had finally made him sit down.

His boots were off and lined up neatly beside him, one slightly askew.

A half-finished mug of tea—hers, she'd bet—sat abandoned on the railing, forgotten.

And carved into the slat of the rocking chair beside him, catching the last glint of moonlight, was her name.

Autumn.

She stared at it, eyes burning, chest tightening.

He hadn't moved.

Hadn't given her up.

She stepped closer, her boots soft against the weathered boards. Every inch of her trembled—not with fear, but with something she'd spent her whole life denying: belonging.

As her shadow passed over him, he stirred.

His eyes blinked open, groggy at first. Then they landed on her.

And held.

“Hey,” she said, voice rough and windburned from the walk, throat thick with regret and something dangerously close to hope.

He didn’t speak.

Just blinked once.

She stepped closer, heart fluttering.

“I, um... I think your porch invited me back.”

His lips twitched, not quite a smile. “Stubborn thing. Porch never did listen to me.”

They stood like that—words not enough, silence not too much.

Then she lowered herself into the chair beside him—her chair—and pulled her knees up, wrapping her arms around them like a shield she no longer had the strength to hold.

“I didn’t mean to stay gone so long,” she whispered.

Dorian tilted his head, watching her. “Wasn’t timing I was worried about.”

She looked down, voice catching. “The woods whispered. Told me to go home. Figured that was either emotional manipulation or a cosmic nudge.”

He nodded. “Could be both.”

She laughed, small and broken.

And then silence. Not cold. Not awkward. Just quiet.

She turned toward him slowly. “I saw what you did. With the chair.”

He shifted, the motion slow and stiff from sleep. “Didn’t do it for thanks.”

“I know.” She looked down again, fingers twisting in her scarf. “I ran because I didn’t think I deserved it. Any of it. You. The house. That garden. A life.”

He stayed quiet.

Autumn reached over and touched his hand, light as a whisper.

“But I want to,” she said. “I want to try.”

Dorian’s fingers closed around hers. Strong. Steady.

“I’m still here,” he said simply.

Her eyes burned.

And somewhere behind them, inside the house, the fireplace crackled to life on its own.

DORIAN

Even though part of Dorian wanted to fall at her feet and kiss the dirt she'd walked to get back here, the other part, stronger and steadier, was done being her landing pad only when the ghosts got too loud.

He cleared his throat, low and rough.

"You don't get to keep doing this though," he said, not harsh, but not soft either.

Her head jerked up. "What?"

"Coming here. Leaving. Coming back again like I'm just— here —waiting to be convenient."

Autumn stiffened, shoulders rising like a drawbridge. "I didn't mean for it to be like that."

"Well, it is like that." His voice cracked at the edges, sharp as a splinter.

"You come into my life like lightning, burn everything clean, and then vanish the second it starts to feel real." He turned to face her now, eyes storm-dark. "And I've let it happen. Over and over."

"I needed time," she said, voice small but hard. "You knew that."

"I gave you time, Autumn. I gave you space. I carved your damn name into wood."

Her eyes went glassy, and he hated the way that gutted him.

“You think this is easy for me?” she snapped, voice shaking now. “You think I wanted to run?”

“I think you did what you’ve always done. What you said you were done doing.”

“I was scared.”

“I am too! ” he shouted, standing now, pacing the porch like a caged thing. “You think it’s easy waiting here wondering if this is the time you leave and don’t come back?”

She flinched.

Good.

Let it sink in. Let her feel what it was to be the one left holding the weight.

“I’m not a damn lighthouse,” he said, chest heaving. “I can’t keep shining just to help you find your way in the fog.”

Autumn stood too, rising slow, tears streaming now but unhidden.

“I never asked you to be.”

“You didn’t have to,” he said, voice quieter now. “You just assumed I would. I told you I’d wait for you, but this feels like toying with me the more it happens.”

Silence snapped between them.

She stepped forward. Just one step. Then another. Until she was in front of him, eyes wild and wrecked.

“You’re right,” she said. “I did. I do . Because you’ve been the only place I’ve ever felt safe. And that scared the hell out of me.”

He didn’t move.

“Everywhere I go,” she whispered, “the dead follow. I don’t get peace. I don’t get to keep things. But you— you made me want to try.”

He looked at her fully then.

Hair wild from wind. Eyes red. Hands fisting at her sides like she couldn’t bear not to touch him. And he broke.

He reached for her, pulled her against him in one swift motion, and kissed her.

She kissed him back harder.

Desperate. Fierce. Real.

They stumbled through the front door, all breathless heat and desperation. Dorian’s hands were already beneath her sweater, tugging it up, his fingers brushing the bare skin of her back like he couldn’t wait to feel all of her.

Autumn’s mouth was hot and wild against his—tongue tasting him like she’d starved for it. And maybe she had.

Upstairs, the door slammed shut behind them. Clothes hit the floor without ceremony. His shirt. Her sweater. Her leggings. His jeans. All of it discarded in a trail of need

leading to the bed.

This wasn't soft like before.

This was the kind of need that clawed at bone. The kind that had waited too long and held too much.

“Goddamn it,” Dorian growled as he backed her toward the mattress, eyes burning with golden heat. “You have no idea what you do to me.”

Autumn's breath hitched, fingers curling around the waistband of his boxers. “Show me.”

He kissed her again, brutal and claiming. When their bodies hit the bed, he was already between her thighs, pulling her panties down her legs, slow enough to make her whimper, fast enough to tell her he couldn't wait another second.

She was soaked. Her pussy glistened in the low light, swollen with want. He groaned when he saw it, when the scent of her hit him—earth and lilac and something uniquely hers, already seared into his memory.

“Fuck, Autumn,” he murmured, dragging the flat of his tongue from her entrance to her clit in one long, reverent stroke. “I could spend days between your legs.”

Her head rolled back, a moan slipping free as her thighs instinctively closed around his head. “Dorian, please...”

He gripped her hips tighter, holding her open for him, and went back to work. Tongue flicking, swirling. His mouth devoured her, his stubble rasping against her tender skin. She trembled with every pass of his tongue, her hands tangled in his thick, dark hair as if she could anchor herself there.

“Fuck—you taste like heaven,” he growled, eyes hazy now, voice vibrating against her clit.

“Don’t stop,” she gasped. “Please, don’t stop?—”

He didn’t. He pushed two thick fingers into her, curling them just right, and the sound she made was wrecked. Her pussy clenched around his fingers like she didn’t want to let them go. Her hips began to roll against him, chasing her high.

He let her.

She came hard, back arching off the bed, thighs trembling around his shoulders. Her moan broke on his name— “Dorian!” —and he drank every second of it.

When she stilled, he climbed up her body, kissing her sweat-slicked skin along the way—her stomach, the underside of her breast, the sharp line of her collarbone.

“You’re mine,” he murmured, kissing the spot just below her ear. “Every time you run, I feel it like a wound. And I still want you.”

Autumn pulled his mouth to hers, tasting herself on his tongue. “Then take me.”

He didn’t need to be told twice. His cock was thick and heavy, the head flushed dark with need. He gripped the base, lined himself up, and with a breathless groan, sank into her.

She was tight. Wet. Hot as fire.

“Shit,” he bit out, head dropping against her shoulder as he pushed in deep, inch by inch. “You feel like... like coming home.”

Autumn wrapped her legs around his waist, lifting her hips to meet him. “Don’t hold back.”

He didn’t.

He started to move, each thrust hitting deep, driving a rhythm that matched the thunder of his pulse. His golden-hazel eyes locked on hers, and for a moment, she saw the shift—the hint of milky brown, the shimmer of his bear flickering just beneath the surface.

“You make me lose control,” he growled, voice hoarse. “You make me feel too much.”

Her nails dragged down his back. “Then feel me. All of me.”

He fucked her harder, deeper. The bed groaned beneath them. Her cries grew louder, less words, more sound. She met every thrust, sweat glistening on her skin, hair wild and tangled around her flushed face.

“Say it,” he grunted, driving into her. “Say you’re not leaving again.”

“I’m not,” she gasped. “I’m staying. I want to stay.”

That broke something in him.

He pinned her wrists above her head with one hand, the other gripping her hip as he slammed into her. Their bodies were a tangle of heat and emotion, skin to skin, no space between them.

Her pussy clenched around him, and he knew she was close again.

“That’s it,” he whispered against her lips. “Let go for me, baby. Come on my cock.”

And she did. Shuddering, crying out his name like it was a spell, her whole body going taut and then collapsing beneath him. The feel of her coming around him—tight, pulsing, his —pulled him over the edge.

He cursed low, biting her shoulder as he came, his cock jerking deep inside her as he spilled into her heat. His whole body trembled with the force of it.

They lay tangled in the aftermath, bodies slick and shaking, hearts thundering.

Dorian rolled them gently, letting her rest on top of him. His fingers wove into her messy hair, his chest still rising and falling like waves against the shore.

Her lips brushed his collarbone. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “For every time I ran.”

He kissed the crown of her head. “Just don’t run again.”

“I won’t.”

And this time, she stayed.

Her head on his chest.

Her fingers tangled in his.

Like she’d finally decided to stop being haunted, and start being his .

AUTUMN

A utumn stood barefoot in the middle of the garden, toes sunk into the cool dirt, the sky above stretching pale and wide as the morning bled into gold.

Dorian's necklace lay warm against her collarbone, the silver pendant he'd crafted for her earlier that morning from a smoothed piece of pine and an inlaid moonstone, threaded onto a leather cord.

It was simple. Solid. Her fingers kept drifting to it like it was a compass pulling her forward.

It had been two days since she'd come back.

Two days of working side-by-side with Dorian like they'd never fought, never shattered, never tried to undo what had been slowly sewing them together.

They moved through the inn like two halves of the same body—comfortably quiet, occasionally teasing, frequently brushing fingertips and passing each other looks full of words neither of them had to say anymore.

But under it all, the air still pulsed with something unfinished.

The Hollow Man was still here.

And if she was staying— really staying—then it was time to help him leave.

Dorian stepped out from the porch, barefoot too, carrying the carved bowl filled with salt and ash. His hair was tousled, eyes heavy but focused, and he looked like the man she'd finally let herself love: strong, steady, and so full of heart it threatened to spill over.

"You sure about this?" he asked, voice low as he joined her in the clearing.

She nodded, not trusting her voice yet.

They'd planned it together.

The ritual had to be done inside Briar Hollow. Within the bones of the house where it had all begun. Where Hollis had lived, loved, and lost. The sorrow was bound to these walls, soaked into floorboards and fireplace mortar. It wasn't the earth outside that needed release.

It was this place.

They'd chosen the east parlor for the preparation.

The room most affected by the spirit's presence, where mirrors had cracked on their own and cold spots hovered near the hearth even in August. Autumn had set the perimeter earlier that morning, tracing sigils in salt along the molding, anchoring the corners with bundles of sage and hawthorn tied with red string.

Missy had stopped by briefly, arms full of protective wards and unsolicited advice.

Markus and Rowan lent their energy too, reinforcing the charms with quiet murmurs and a few unsanctioned puns.

Nico, in true Nico fashion, handed Autumn a small glass vial of swirling golden

truth-oil and said, “If the ghost won’t talk, this’ll loosen his dusty tongue. ”

Now it was just her and Dorian, moving through the parlor in a rhythm that felt familiar, unhurried. She carried her chalk in one hand, sketching the preliminary circle in wide, steady curves, each line deliberate, each breath syncing with the gentle hum of her magic.

Dorian knelt at the cardinal points, placing their symbolic offerings with a reverence that made her chest tighten—rose petals for what was lost, silver coins for the debt owed, and a piece of briar root, dried and splintered, for the pain still lingering in the walls.

They didn’t speak much but there was no real need to.

When the last symbol was drawn in the center, Autumn stepped back, wiping her palms on her jeans. The room didn’t feel heavy anymore—not hostile. Just... waiting.

She looked at him then, Dorian crouched beside the hearth, hands resting loosely on his knees, his eyes trained on her like he was taking in something sacred.

“This isn’t just about sending him on,” she said quietly, echoing what had lived in her chest for days. “It’s about showing him he doesn’t have to stay.”

He nodded, rising. “It’s about giving him peace.”

She hesitated. “And maybe... giving me some too.”

He moved closer, fingers brushing hers, anchoring her in a way no ward ever could. “You’ve earned it. Whether you think so or not.”

She exhaled, gaze sweeping the room. “This house... it’s seen so much.”

“It’s survived it too.”

Autumn nodded slowly, her eyes drawn to the way the sun filtered through the parlor window, casting honeyed light across the rug. Dust swirled in the beams. It didn’t feel like a haunted house right now. It felt like a memory, waiting to be rewritten.

“I didn’t think I’d ever be able to call something home again,” she said.

He didn’t press. Just let the silence stretch between them until she filled it.

“But this place... this town. You.” Her hand lifted, fingers brushing the moonstone necklace resting against her chest. “It’s starting to feel like something I might be able to stay for.”

Dorian smiled. Soft. Certain.

She stepped into him, not because she needed to be held, but because she wanted to be close. The kind of close you only get when you stop running.

They stood there for a long moment, the room quiet around them, the air no longer holding its breath. It wasn’t finished. Not yet.

But finally, Autumn didn’t feel like she was borrowing peace.

She felt like she was building it.

DORIAN

Dorian had seen storms roll off the mountains in the dead of night, how they crept in on a hush, then broke all at once, lightning snapping across the sky like it was tearing the world in half.

That's how the night felt.

Tense. Breathless.

On the outside, the inn looked still. Quiet. Not a whisper of wind through the trees. But inside Briar Hollow's parlor, where sigils glowed faintly across the floor and salt lines glimmered like star paths, the air was thick with something ancient.

Something watching. The house knew what was coming.

He stood just outside the circle, watching Autumn as she lit the last of the ward candles.

Her hands were steady, but he could see the tension in her shoulders, the way her jaw flexed when she thought no one was looking.

She wore the moonstone necklace he'd made her, the pendant catching the candlelight and throwing it back in soft pulses.

She looked like a spell in motion—quiet, powerful, full of intention.

He didn't breathe until she met his eyes.

"You ready?" he asked, voice low.

"As I'll ever be."

They'd talked it through. Every step. Every symbol. Every breath that would need to be shared. But rituals had a way of ignoring instructions when the emotions behind them ran this deep.

Dorian couldn't stop the protective instinct that surged up. He didn't try to. He just stepped closer, hand brushing hers.

"I'll be right here," he said. "No matter what."

Autumn nodded, then stepped into the circle.

The temperature dropped immediately. Not a gust. Not a breeze. But a presence . Like the room was now breathing with them. Or without them.

She knelt at the center, palms flat against the sigil-marked rug, her voice soft as she began the invocation.

The words were old, sacred, older than either of them had ever dared to speak aloud and they unfurled from her lips like smoke, curling through the air and catching fire in the symbols around her.

Dorian didn't know how long he stood there, watching her command something so much bigger than either of them with such calm resolve. It scared him.

And it awed him.

The room shuddered.

The candles flickered violently. The wind began to push in through the shutters, though none had opened. The walls groaned. Then the cold hit him in the chest like a punch. Autumn gasped.

She clutched her ribs, eyes wide. The chalk lines began to glow brighter, humming low and sharp.

Dorian took a step forward, hand out. “Autumn?—”

“Don’t break the circle,” she hissed.

He stopped himself mid-step, growling low under his breath. His bear stirred beneath his skin, pushing upward like it could sense what was coming.

Then the shadows moved. They coalesced in the corner, where the light didn’t reach. Slowly taking shape. Tall. Slender. And heart-wrenchingly sad.

Hollis.

The Hollow Man.

But this wasn’t like the flickers they’d seen before, this was full form. Eyes dark and hollow, grief etched into every shadowed line of his face. His mouth opened, and the air dropped again.

“You cannot keep what is not yours,” he said. Not shouted. Not growled. Just... stated. Like it was law.

Autumn shuddered but didn’t break eye contact. “No one’s trying to take anything.

But you don't have to haunt this anymore."

Hollis stepped forward, and the circle flared bright in warning.

That's when Dorian's body shifted. No conscious thought. No permission.

The bear pushed forward hard, shoulders splitting wider, breath ragged as fur rippled down his arms and his spine curved into something feral and full of fire. He roared once, deep and furious, and moved near the lines etched for the circle, placing his massive body between Hollis and Autumn.

He didn't step inside. Didn't break the ritual. But he dared the spirit to try.

Hollis faltered just slightly.

His gaze fell to Dorian's bear eyes, and something ancient flickered in them...recognition, maybe.

"You would give yourself for her?" the spirit asked, tilting his head.

The bear didn't answer. But Dorian did.

"Yes."

Hollis looked at Autumn again. "Then speak it."

Autumn reached forward, her hand brushing just over the inside edge of the chalk line, toward Dorian's massive paw. She didn't touch—but she was close.

"I love him," she said. "I love him. And I'm not leaving. Not because I'm not afraid, but because I want this. I want him. And I'm not going to run from peace anymore."

Hollis stilled.

The air held, thick and tense.

He stepped back and smiled. But it wasn't peace.

Not entirely.

It was soft, yes. Sad. But there was something else underneath it. A curl at the edge of his mouth that didn't quite reach his hollowed eyes. Something off .

Then he vanished. Just like that.

The circle pulsed bright, blinding white and then collapsed inward. The sigils dulled to soot. The candles flickered out in perfect unison.

The room breathed again. And for a moment, so did Dorian.

He staggered slightly as his bear form melted back into his body, breath ragged, shoulders sore, skin tingling with the remnants of something otherworldly. Autumn moved toward him immediately, her hands sliding up to cup his face.

She kissed him.

It wasn't frantic. It was truth. Raw, unhidden.

Her lips pressed to his like she'd meant to do it for years, and now that she had, she never wanted to stop.

Her fingers curled in his hair. Her body, warm and trembling, leaned into his. He wrapped her up in his arms and pulled her closer, felt her pulse race beneath her skin.

She didn't let go.

Not at first.

But behind her, in the darkest corner of the parlor—where the candlelight hadn't touched—something shifted.

A shadow moved. A whisper coiled through the air, too low to be heard, but cold enough to raise the hair on Dorian's arms again. And the moonstone around Autumn's neck flickered.

Just once.

Faint.

Like breath on a mirror.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:17 am

AUTUMN

The kiss lingered, warm and grounding, Dorian's breath tangled with hers, his hands splayed against her back like he couldn't bear to let go.

And she didn't want him to. But the moment their lips parted, the room tilted .

At first, it was just the air. A tremor barely there, like the house had sucked in a breath and forgotten how to let it go. Then came the chill.

Subtle, at first. A prickle along her arms, a shift in the flicker of the candlelight. Autumn tensed.

She turned her head slowly toward the far corner of the parlor—the one the ward candles hadn't reached, where the shadows always pooled thicker than they should.

The cold pressed against her spine like a hand.

Then came the voice. Not in her ears.

Inside her.

“You opened the door, and I walked through.”

She gasped, hand flying to her chest. The moonstone pendant Dorian had given her burned against her skin, searing like it had been set aflame. Her breath stuttered, fingers clawing at the cord as if cutting it free might stop what was coming.

“Autumn?” Dorian’s voice snapped through the haze. “What’s wrong?”

She turned to him, half a step, no more, and her knees buckled.

Her vision blurred. Her hands spasmed. Then her body went utterly, unnaturally still.

Dorian stepped forward instinctively.

And then she smiled. But it wasn’t her smile.

It was tight. Cold. Detached. A mask.

“Hollis,” Dorian breathed, every muscle locking into place. “You son of a?—”

Autumn—no, Hollis —tilted her head, studying him like a specimen behind glass.

“You call me a ghost,” he said through her lips, voice layered with hers, mournful and sharp. “But I was alive when they buried me.”

Dorian’s eyes narrowed, stepping sideways, circling. “You tricked her.”

“She left the door cracked,” Hollis whispered. “And I was already inside.”

The room pulsed with cold. The mirror across the room splintered, a crack running from top to bottom. The candles flared blue, then sputtered back to life, unsteady.

Autumn’s body moved with eerie calm, her hands flexing at her sides like she didn’t quite know how to use them.

“You were supposed to be free,” Dorian said, voice low, controlled. “She gave you peace.”

“She gave me a grave,” Hollis hissed. “You think love is enough to undo betrayal? Do you know what it is to be silenced by the man who swore he’d protect you?”

Autumn twitched. Her fingers jerked upward to her throat.

“I was his,” Hollis went on. “And he promised me forever. Just like you promised her.”

Dorian’s jaw clenched. “I’m not him.”

“You’re close enough.”

A gust of wind slammed against the windows. The floorboards beneath them creaked like something ancient had stirred beneath the inn.

“She’s not yours,” Dorian growled.

“She is ours,” Hollis corrected. “She carries grief like I did. She speaks to the dead like I did. She loves like I did—quietly. Fearfully. And now?” Hollis’s smile widened. “She breaks like I did.”

Autumn’s body convulsed suddenly, knees hitting the floor. Her hands clawed at her sides, her face contorted in pain.

“Dorian!” her voice—her voice—ripped through the air, just once.

He dropped beside her instantly, hands on her shoulders.

“Autumn, I’ve got you. Come back.”

“She’s too far,” Hollis taunted, now quieter, from somewhere beneath her voice. “She

gave me space, and I filled it. She wanted to understand.”

Dorian pressed his forehead to hers, gritting his teeth.

“You’re not him. And she’s not yours.”

Her hands trembled, fingertips digging into his arms. Her eyes flickered—dark, then green, then dark again.

“Let. Me. Go. ” she rasped.

Hollis didn’t answer.

But the shadows did.

They surged behind her, swallowing the far wall, climbing up the sides of the hearth like smoke made sentient. The sigils on the floor—dimmed after the ritual—flared again, repulsed by the intrusion.

“I won’t be forgotten,” the voice snarled. “I won’t be buried again. ”

Autumn cried out, her body arching.

Dorian wrapped his arms around her, anchoring her against his chest. “Then be remembered. But not like this.”

The moonstone pendant glowed.

And suddenly Autumn was back.

Gasping. Sobbing.

“He’s still inside,” she whispered, clutching the pendant. “Watching. Waiting.”

Dorian cupped her face, eyes burning. “We’ll get him out. We’re not done.”

She nodded, broken and breathless, and fell into him.

And the shadows watched from the corners.

Waiting.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:17 am

DORIAN

Autumn shook in his arms like a live wire, her body both here and not, like the spirit clinging to her was trying to pull her beneath the floorboards. Dorian held on tighter, heart pounding, arms anchoring her against his chest.

“Breathe, Autumn,” he whispered. “You’re still here. You’re still you.”

But her breath came in gasps, eyes unfocused. Her hands clutched the moonstone at her throat like it could hold her soul inside her skin.

Behind them, the shadows pressed in from the corners of the parlor—slithering up walls, crawling toward the sigils that still pulsed faintly with dying protection. The house groaned. A mirror across the room shattered entirely, the sound sharp as bone snapping.

Dorian pulled her away just enough to cup her face.

“Look at me,” he said, voice deep, steady. “Autumn. Come back to me, darlin’.”

Her lips parted. A flicker of clarity passed through her eyes.

Then came him again.

The shift was so subtle it was horrifying. Her spine straightened too perfectly. Her hands dropped to her sides like puppet strings. Her gaze went cold. Vacant.

“Still you?” Dorian asked, though he already knew the answer.

She blinked once.

“No,” Hollis said through her voice, soft and final. “Not anymore.”

Something in Dorian snapped.

He shoved back the swell of fury. Let his bear rise only far enough to lend strength. His hands trembled with it, but he would not shift this time.

No.

This fight wasn’t about claws or teeth.

It was about the heart.

“You don’t get to use her like this,” he growled. “Not again.”

Hollis—inside her—tilted her head. “She welcomed me. She wanted to understand.”

“She offered you grace. And you’ve twisted it.”

“I was love once ,” Hollis hissed, stepping closer, shadows trailing behind her. “I bled for love. I died for it.”

“I know ,” Dorian said, his voice cracking. “And that should’ve been enough.”

He stepped into the circle again, ward lines flickering beneath his boots, threatening to break under his presence. But he didn’t care. If he had to burn for this, he would.

“You think you’re the only one who’s lost someone?” he whispered fiercely. “You think you’re the only one who’s scared of being forgotten?”

Her hands twitched. Her eyes flickered.

“You are forgotten,” he said, raw now. “Not because people stopped caring. But because you refused to let go. Because you turned your pain into something poisonous.”

The shadows reared behind her.

“Because you buried the love and kept the grief.”

A sob cracked through Autumn’s lips, but it wasn’t hers. Not fully.

Dorian reached forward, hands cupping her face again. “But love doesn’t rot, Hollis. You did. ”

A scream tore from her mouth, Hollis’s voice twisted and howling, and the circle ignited. Flame—not fire, but light—surged up from the sigils. The shadows shrieked. Windows burst outward in a spray of glass and wind.

Autumn dropped to her knees, arms wrapped around herself, teeth gritted in agony.

“ Get out of her! ” Dorian shouted, dropping to his knees beside her.

He gripped her hands. Tight. Anchored her with the weight of every moment they’d shared—every laugh, every touch, every whispered promise.

“You don’t belong in her, Hollis. She is not your vessel. She is not your ghost.”

He leaned forward, forehead pressed to hers. “I love you,” he whispered, voice breaking. “Autumn, I love you. You’re not alone. Not anymore.”

Crack.

Like lightning splitting through ice, a sound split the air.

The sigils flared. A scream rose from the walls—one voice, layered with centuries of sorrow—and was ripped away, pulled upward in a gust of wind that blew the doors open and slammed every window shut at once.

Autumn gasped, chest seizing, then collapsed into him, panting.

The moonstone at her neck glowed a soft, pulsing blue.

Still. And whole.

The shadows were gone.

Truly.

No lingering presence. No crawling cold.

Just the room, battered and quiet, and the scent of ash and old roses.

Autumn trembled in his arms, her voice barely audible.

“Is it... over?”

He nodded slowly, pressing a kiss to her hair.

“Yeah,” he whispered. “He’s gone.”

She looked up at him, eyes rimmed red but clear.

“I heard him,” she whispered. “Right before he left. He said... ‘thank you.’”

Dorian closed his eyes.

“I think he meant it.”

They stayed there, knelt in the ruins of the parlor, breath syncing, hands clasped.

Love had survived.

Grief had finally let go.

And Briar Hollow?

It was quiet for the first time in centuries.

AUTUMN

The house was still.

Not silent, exactly, but the kind of stillness that followed something sacred. Something survived.

The storm inside her had finally passed.

Autumn lay curled in Dorian's arms, still fully clothed, her cheek pressed to the solid warmth of his chest. His heartbeat was steady beneath her ear, a deep, grounding rhythm like it had never once faltered—even when hers had.

Outside, Celestial Pines exhaled. The storm was over.

The dead had been dealt with. And Hollis... was gone.

Not forgotten or erased. But banished.

And she wasn't broken. Not anymore.

Her limbs felt heavy in that post-magic way, like her soul was still catching up to her skin. But the ache was soft. Welcoming. The ache of being alive. Dorian's thumb traced lazy circles at the base of her spine, tethering her to the here and now.

She tilted her head, found him already watching her—not with fear, not with pity. But with that look. The one he saved only for her.

Like she was home.

“Are you okay?” he asked, voice still rough, like it had been scraped raw by everything they’d just lived through.

She nodded. “Tired. But okay.”

“Still with me?”

Her smile curved slowly. “Yeah. Still with you.”

The words weren’t just an answer. They were a promise.

He leaned in, kissed her forehead. Then her temple. His lips dragged down the side of her jaw, slow and aching. Each press of his mouth made her breath catch, but she didn’t pull away.

She didn’t need to.

The danger was gone. The voices were quiet. Her body? Hers again.

And it wanted .

Her thighs tightened around his hips as she shifted, slowly straddling him. She rolled her hips just once, experimentally—and the sound he made vibrated through her, low and full of restraint.

His hands slid under the hem of her shirt— his shirt—and skimmed up her back, reverent and warm. He didn’t rush. There was no fumbling, no frenzy. Just him, unwrapping her as if she were something sacred.

“Take it off,” she whispered.

He obeyed, lifting the shirt over her head, baring her skin to the low lamplight and the heat in his golden-hazel eyes. They darkened, turning that milky shade that meant the bear was close, watching. Wanting.

She unclasped her bra and let it fall. His hands slid up to cup her breasts, calloused thumbs brushing over her nipples until they peaked under his touch.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he said, voice hoarse.

Her hands found the hem of his shirt and tugged. He sat up so she could strip it off, and when their bare chests met, skin to skin, she let out a shaky breath.

“I don’t want to forget this,” she said.

“You won’t,” he promised, mouth brushing hers. “Neither will I.”

Their kiss deepened—tongues sliding, teeth nipping, mouths greedy. His cock was hard beneath her, trapped between their bodies, and she ground against it slowly, moaning when the friction sent pleasure sparking up her spine.

The world narrowed to the rhythm of their breath. The soft creak of the bed beneath them. The low, golden light catching in the sheen of sweat starting to bloom across his chest.

Dorian’s hands moved with purpose, reverence threading every motion. His palms skimmed her waist, rough with calluses but careful—like she was something breakable even though she never had been. Not until him.

“You sure?” he murmured against her throat, his voice pitched low, almost guttural.

His hazel eyes were nearly gone now, clouded and molten, a milky brown ring circling the center—his bear so close to the surface it felt like he wasn't just making love to her... they both were.

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life," Autumn whispered, nails curling gently into his back.

He exhaled, a hot breath that ghosted down her collarbone before his lips followed.

He kissed every inch of skin like it mattered—like it was the first and last time he'd get to taste her.

She arched as he traced the soft underside of her breast with his tongue, her nipple peaking again beneath the press of his mouth.

His hand cupped the other, thumb brushing over it slowly, building her pleasure in slow, deliberate strokes.

She was soaked already. Aching. Not just with want, but with need. That deep, soul-hungry kind that wrapped around your bones and didn't let go.

He sat up slightly, letting her shift beneath him as he undid the buttons of her flannel pajama pants.

She lifted her hips, helping him peel them down, and then her panties—cotton, soft, damp with arousal.

When she lay bare beneath him, her thighs parted in silent invitation, she saw the restraint in his eyes snap like a tether.

He didn't dive in. Didn't rush.

He knelt between her legs and just looked.

“Dorian...” she breathed, thighs trembling as the air kissed her slick folds.

“I want to remember everything about this,” he said, voice thick with emotion, not lust. His fingers skimmed up the inside of her thigh, not yet touching where she needed him most. “The way you look when you want me. The way your skin smells like lavender and firewood. The way you let me see you when nobody else gets to.”

His fingers found her slit and slid through, gathering her wetness. Autumn gasped, her head tipping back into the pillow.

“Gods, you’re soaked for me, sweetheart.”

Her hips lifted involuntarily as he teased her entrance with just the tip of his finger. She bit her lip, trying to keep her composure, but every part of her was trembling.

“Please,” she whispered. “I want to feel you.”

Dorian leaned down and kissed her again, slower this time—his tongue tangling with hers like it had all the time in the world.

When he pulled away, it was only to push his sweatpants down, revealing the thick, flushed length of his cock—hard, veined, and curving slightly toward his abdomen.

Her breath hitched at the sight of it, heart thudding like a war drum.

“Touch me,” she said softly, reaching out to wrap her fingers around him.

His head dropped back with a hiss through his teeth, hips flexing into her grip. “Shit... Autumn.”

She stroked him slowly, savoring the weight and heat of him in her palm. He was thick, the skin velvety over steel. When he started to rut gently into her hand, she let go with a final squeeze and pulled him down to her again.

“No more waiting,” she said. “I want to feel you inside me.”

He groaned low in his throat and nudged her thighs wider with his knees, his hips settling into the cradle of hers. The tip of his cock brushed her folds, and she gasped at the contact—at the way he just fit.

Then he pushed in—slowly, carefully, inch by thick inch.

Her mouth dropped open in a soundless moan, nails digging into his shoulders as he stretched her open. The pressure was delicious, a burn that bordered on pain, edged with the pleasure of being filled.

“Gods, you feel like heaven,” he rasped, forehead dropping to hers. “Tight... perfect...”

Tears pricked her eyes, not from pain, but from the overwhelming rightness of it. Of him. Of this moment.

He bottomed out with a trembling breath, and they stayed like that for a moment—bodies joined, hearts pounding in sync, the silence saying more than any words ever could.

Then he moved.

A slow, steady pull-out that made her whimper from the emptiness, followed by a deep, rolling thrust that had her seeing stars.

He kept the rhythm torturously slow, their foreheads pressed together, every movement designed to drag pleasure out until it frayed her nerves and made her voice shake when she said his name.

“Dorian... I love you,” she said, barely louder than a breath, her voice cracking.

His hips stilled.

His eyes met hers—wide, raw, as if she’d just torn open the center of him.

“Say it again,” he whispered.

“I love you,” she said louder this time, her hands cupping his face. “I love you. All of you.”

A sound broke from his chest—half growl, half groan—and then he kissed her like a drowning man, hips picking up pace.

The slow drag turned urgent, a rhythm built on desperation and reverence.

His cock stroked her deep, every thrust brushing her most sensitive spot, lighting her up from the inside out.

He shifted slightly, angling her hips higher, and the next stroke made her cry out, her pussy clenching tight around him.

“Fuck, you feel so good when you squeeze me like that,” he panted.

She locked her legs around his waist, nails trailing down his back, and arched into him. Sweat slicked their bodies, her nipples rubbing against his chest with every movement.

His eyes flashed fully milky brown, and he growled low in his throat as he gripped her hip.

“I need to mark you,” he said, voice breaking with emotion.

“Yes,” she gasped, hips rolling up to meet his. “Do it.”

His claws extended—not violently, but instinctively. She felt the drag first, then the sharp sting as they broke the skin on her hip in three deliberate strokes. Her body spasmed, a wild rush of sensation tearing through her.

Her orgasm hit like lightning—sudden, all-consuming. She screamed his name, pussy clenching tight around his cock, milking him as he let out a feral sound and spilled inside her with a shudder.

He buried his face in her neck, breath ragged, his body trembling with the force of his release.

The room went quiet again, save for their breathing.

He licked the mark on her hip, soft and soothing. “Mine,” he said, not possessive—but reverent. “My mate.”

Autumn blinked up at the ceiling, tears tracking into her hairline. “And you’re mine,” she whispered.

He pulled the blanket over them and tucked her against his chest, still deep inside her, their bodies tangled.

Neither one of them needed to say it again.

The mark said everything.

DORIAN

Three weeks passed like falling leaves.

Slow at first, drifting. Then suddenly, everything had changed.

The inn was different now. Lighter. Autumn still muttered to ghosts under her breath when she thought no one was listening, but the spirits no longer pressed heavy against the walls.

The floorboards no longer creaked like they were crying out.

The halls no longer wept. The mirrors held only reflections. The house breathed.

And so did he.

They'd spent the past few weeks elbow-deep in repairs—replacing the windows blown out by the final flare of the ritual, re-chalking damaged sigils, and clearing the lingering soot from the walls of the east parlor.

The townsfolk had come in waves to help, armed with ladders, charms, pastries, and opinions.

Even Cassian had shown up one afternoon with vintage stained glass panels and an uncharacteristically sincere smile.

Now, only a few details remained. A bit of polish here. A final coat of paint there.

The reopening was scheduled for next week.

They already had bookings—mostly supernatural couples intrigued by the “reformed haunted inn” charm, some in it for the mystery, others for the town’s undeniable magic.

Even the realtors who were skeptical of Dorian’s commitment to the place had vanished.

No one questioned that he was staying and that Autumn was his mate.

Not anymore. And as far as Dorian could tell, the house wasn’t complaining.

Dorian stood in the center of the greenhouse, wiping his hands on the rag tucked into his back pocket.

The late spring sun filtered through the glass panels above, casting soft shadows across the freshly swept floors.

The vines had climbed a little higher since last week.

The little wildflowers from Millie Grace’s herb bed bloomed defiantly in a reclaimed corner.

It looked alive .

It felt like them.

Behind him, a breeze fluttered the curtain tied at the doorway, and he turned just as Autumn stepped inside.

She wore denim overalls over a thin white shirt, hair up in a loose knot that she'd probably twisted without a mirror. Dirt was smudged along her wrist. She looked like home.

"Hey," he said, casually enough.

Her brows arched. "Why do you sound suspiciously calm?"

He grinned. "What, I can't just say hi to the woman I love?"

"You can," she said, squinting. "But you've got that look. Like you're about to suggest something reckless."

"I resent that," he said, stepping toward her. "I'm a model of responsibility."

She laughed one of those warm, real ones he'd come to crave. She stepped further inside, brushing her hand over the edge of a planter box filled with basil and sleepy violets.

"You're stalling," she said.

"I might be," he admitted.

She cocked her head. "Why?"

He exhaled. Pulled the small box from his back pocket.

Autumn blinked.

He didn't drop to one knee.

They weren't the kind of people who needed theatrics. What they'd built had already been full of storms and hauntings and messy, sacred second chances.

He just stepped in close, took her hand, and held her gaze like it was the only anchor he had left.

"I didn't know what home meant until you knocked the dust off this place," he said softly. "Until you looked at my porch like it might love you back. Until you told me ghosts weren't the scariest things you'd ever faced—but hope was."

Her eyes shimmered, just a little.

"So I'm not asking you for perfection," he said. "I'm asking you to stay. For mornings with bad coffee and long nights with weird ghosts. For every porch light and creaky stair and stolen blanket. For all of it. With me."

He opened the box.

The ring was simple—silver, etched with runes from Moonshadow Apothecary, a single moonstone set in the center.

She stared at it, lips parted, breath caught. Then something soft rained down between them.

She glanced up.

The vines above had bloomed. Tiny white flowers drifted down like confetti, dusting her shoulders, her hair, her cheeks.

She laughed again, breathless, blinking through petals.

“Yes,” she said, voice cracking on it. “Yes. Yes—of course yes.”

Dorian slipped the ring onto her finger, hands just barely shaking. She threw her arms around his neck and he lifted her off the ground like he’d been waiting his whole life to do it.

They kissed in the middle of the greenhouse while petals fell around them like blessings, while the moonstone on her ring caught the sun and gleamed like it had known all along.

And somewhere in the rafters, unseen but felt , the house, their house, smiled too.

AUTUMN

The sunlight sifted through the canopy like spilled honey, dappling the forest floor in soft gold and mossy green.

Echo Woods had always carried a sort of hush to it.

A quiet not born from fear, but from reverence.

The kind of place where time stepped back and waited at the tree line, letting you be exactly who you were for just a little while.

Autumn stood barefoot on the moss, her heart thudding steady under her ribcage. Not wild. Not frantic. Just full.

Her dress was simple, a soft ivory silk that hugged her just right, the bodice laced with barely-there embroidery that mirrored the sigils Missy had etched into her final charm bracelet.

A thin ribbon of pale green wrapped her waist, the ends fluttering with the breeze.

Her hair, curled loose and long, was adorned with sprigs of rosemary and a few stubborn violets from Millie's garden.

She wore no veil. She hadn't wanted one. Nothing to hide today.

Nico had cried the moment she walked into the clearing. Then handed her a mug of

calming tea with a flourish. “For nerves,” they’d said. “Or drama. Whichever hits first.”

Now, the town gathered in a crescent around her.

Cassian Drake leaned against a tree, still wearing his notorious velvet coat and a smirk.

Junie stood beside Nerissa, hands linked in excitement.

Missy perched on a fallen log, pretending not to wipe her eyes.

And Markus, tall, calm, and composed in a charcoal-grey robe that somehow didn’t clash with his rugged stubble, stood at the center, holding a leather-bound book of his own making.

Autumn took a breath and braced herself when she saw him.

Dorian emerged from the trees like the forest had carved a path just for him. His suit was dark moss green, tailored and quiet. No tie. The top button of his white shirt undone. Boots, not dress shoes. A sprig of lavender tucked in his lapel, next to a sliver of pine carved into a small sigil rune.

He looked like a storm waiting to be kissed.

Autumn’s feet moved without command, drawing her forward. She met him beneath the oldest tree, where the roots curved like arms and the branches bowed low in silent blessing.

He took her hands, warm and calloused and sure.

Markus cleared his throat.

“We gather here,” he began, voice calm, “not to promise perfection, but to promise presence. To stand beside what is imperfect and call it sacred.”

Autumn barely heard the rest.

All she saw was Dorian. His eyes. The faint twitch at the corner of his mouth as if he wanted to smile and couldn't, not with all this feeling in the way. Her thumb traced the scar on his knuckle. His fingers curled tighter around hers.

Then it was her turn.

The words came slow. But certain.

“I thought love had to be quiet,” she said.

“Like it was something you earned in pieces, and if you held too tight, it would vanish. But then you stood there—in that house full of grief and ghosts—and you stayed. You stayed. And you didn't ask me to be less, or softer, or quieter.

You asked me to be mine. And I've never wanted anything more than to be yours. ”

Dorian swallowed hard, eyes shining.

He cleared his throat. Spoke low.

“You were the loudest thing I'd ever felt in a house that hadn't made a sound in years,” he said.

“And I didn't know I was waitin' for you until you knocked the dust off my life and

asked it to bloom again.

You taught me that strength isn't in the holding on, but in the letting in.

And I'll spend every damn day proving that you never have to run again. ”

Markus's voice was soft when he spoke next. “By the wind that brings change, by the soil that holds memory, by the moon that knows secrets, we bind this truth.”

The ribbon—green and gold—wrapped their joined hands.

Dorian kissed her there with a kind of kiss that carried roots. The kind that whispered,
We made it.

Applause broke through the clearing, wild and bright. Someone whistled. Someone definitely wept.

They turned, hands still laced, faces flushed.

Autumn looked up at him. “You're my home,” she said.

Dorian grinned. “Took you long enough to say it out loud.”

She rolled her eyes. “Still not taking your last name.”

“We'll talk about it.”

They laughed.

And somewhere, just beyond the clearing, the wind stirred through the trees, not mournful, but light. Content.

Echo Woods didn't whisper warnings that day.

It sang.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:17 am

The kitchen of Briar Hollow Inn was alive with scent and warmth.

Sunshine poured through the tall windows, catching on steam rising from the waffle iron.

Butter sizzled in a cast iron pan. A charm from Missy clinked against the side of the spice jar, humming contentedly, a spell that ensured the cinnamon stayed potent and the maple syrup never ran out.

Behind him, the familiar creak of old floorboards signaled footsteps. Soft. Steady.

Autumn.

“Is this breakfast or a bribe?” she asked, voice still raspy with sleep, curls wild and glorious around her face.

He turned, grinning. “Depends. You planning to kiss me before or after you taste this?”

She padded over in fuzzy socks and one of his old T-shirts, looped her arms around his waist, and kissed his cheek.

“Before,” she murmured, “but only so I can have seconds.”

He laughed, the sound low and easy. He kissed her lightly. “Smart woman.”

They ate on the porch enjoying their own little section of the inn, early and separate

from the guests.

The summer air thick with the scent of garden roses and warm syrup.

The inn had reopened weeks ago, but mornings were still quiet—this time was theirs, before the bustle of guests and bookings and other people's stories.

The “Reformed Haunted Inn” reputation had stuck, in the best way. Most folks came for the thrill of ghost stories and the draw of magic. Fewer expected the soft charm of Dorian's gardens or the steady calm of Autumn's voice as she led twilight ghost tours through the halls.

She had a way of telling the stories—some true, some polished up for tourists—that made people listen like it was gospel. Her laugh echoed through the halls now, not silence. Not fear.

Peace had taken root here.

And so had love.

That afternoon, guests drifted in and out. Junie brought fresh-squeezed lemonade from the Sip, and Nico had stopped by with a delivery of spellbound tea leaves— “for romantic clarity,” he claimed, winking far too dramatically.

Dorian fixed a squeaky railing, restocked the kitchen, and then made his way to the garden where Autumn already waited. The space had bloomed into something wild and wonderful, lavender spilling into the rosemary beds, sunflowers tilting like they knew her name.

She stood barefoot beneath the trellis, reading from her notebook, a pencil tucked behind her ear. Her skin glowed in the dappled light, and when she looked up and

saw him, her whole face softened.

“Busy?” he asked.

“Always,” she said, slipping her hand into his.

“Wanna dance anyway?”

She tilted her head. “There music I don’t hear?”

“Nope,” he said, tugging her gently. “We’ll make our own.”

He pulled her close in the garden, his hand at her waist, hers curling behind his neck. They swayed, no rhythm, no audience, just the rustling trees and birds too polite to interrupt.

“Remember when you thought I was going to save you by simply being here?” she murmured.

He chuckled. “Isn’t it obvious you did?”

“From the realtors.”

“And so much more.”

They laughed, forehead to forehead, breath mingling. In that moment, nothing else mattered.

Not the ghosts. Not the rituals. Not the past. Just this.

Them.

The garden. The inn. The life they'd built from broken pieces and made whole.

"You happy?" she asked softly.

"Yeah," he said, kissing her. "I'm home."

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:17 am

The wood of Caleb's desk cracked under his grip. "He did what?"

"Victor's been showing up at the community center," Wade said, leaning against the office doorframe. "Manager's been letting him and his goons hang around, intimidating our people. Got the security footage right here." He waved his phone.

Caleb's nostrils flared, catching the lingering scent of his second's anger mixed with the leather of his jacket. The afternoon sun streaming through the window did nothing to warm the ice in his veins. "Show me."

Wade crossed the room. The video played out in grainy black and white: Victor's smug face as clear as day, while pack members hurried past with their kids, heads down.

"Son of a-" Caleb's chair scraped against the floor as he stood. "That community center is supposed to be a safe space." His wolf stirred beneath his skin, hungry for action. "And Thompson just let them walk right in?"

"Thompson's been taking payoffs. Found the transfers this morning."

"Fire him. Now."

"Already done. But Cale-"

"Double the security. I want cameras everywhere, better ones."

"What about Victor?"

Caleb's lips pulled back, showing teeth. "Let him try that shit again. I'll personally escort him out - through a window if necessary."

"You know that's what he wants, right? To provoke you into-"

"Into what? Defending our territory? Our people?" Caleb paced, his reflection fragmenting across the wall of windows. "This isn't just about territory anymore. He's going after families now. Kids."

"We could call a council meeting, get the other packs involved."

"Politics." Caleb spat the word like it was poison. "While we're filling out paperwork in triplicate, Victor's out there terrorizing our people. No. We handle this our way."

Wade sighed, but there was a hint of a smile on his face. "Your way usually involves property damage."

"Property can be replaced. Peace of mind can't." Caleb grabbed his jacket. "Come on. Let's go make sure our people know they're safe."

"Where are you going?"

"To the community center. To remind everyone exactly why Eclipsed Moon doesn't bow to bullies."

Caleb stalked down Main Street, the cobblestones still slick from the morning's rain. The salt-tinged breeze carried snippets of conversations from the Cauldron & Cup's outdoor seating area, where a group of witches quickly averted their gazes as he passed. News traveled fast in Saltwater Grove.

"Remember when Victor tried to challenge you at last year's Midsummer Joust?" Wade matched his stride, hands tucked into his jacket pockets. "Man couldn't even

stay on his horse."

"The horse had more sense than he did." Caleb's lips twitched at the memory.

"Bucked him right off into that big pile of manure."

"Good times." Wade chuckled. "Before he got... whatever this is."

Caleb's amusement faded. Five years of territorial disputes, three failed attempts to absorb smaller packs, and now this. Victor's obsession with power had grown from annoying to dangerous.

"He's always wanted more than he deserves. Remember when he tried to convince the Shadow Pack that their alpha was 'unfit to lead' because she preferred diplomatic solutions?"

"Yeah, that backfired spectacularly. Jill kicked his ass in front of everyone at the winter council."

"And now we're the last ones standing between him and his delusion of becoming some sort of supreme alpha." The wolf inside him bristled at the thought.

A group of kids ran past, toy swords clashing as they played shifters versus vampires. One small boy with plastic fangs waved shyly at Caleb.

"At least the kids still think you're scarier than Victor," Wade said.

"That's because they haven't seen him try to dance at the Autumn Enchantment Fair." Caleb waved back at the kid. "That was pretty terrifying."

"Speaking of terrifying, you never told me what happened at that peace talk last month."

"You mean when he suggested we 'merge our packs for the greater good'?" Caleb rolled his eyes. "I told him I'd rather french kiss a troll."

"Harsh."

"The troll would probably have better breath."

Caleb kicked a loose cobblestone, sending it skittering across the street. "If Victor wants to prove he's such a big bad alpha, he should come challenge me directly instead of harassing innocent pack members. Coward's way out."

The salty breeze carried the scent of fresh bread from the bakery, mixing with the ever-present tang of ocean air. A group of merfolk hurried past, their scales glinting in the afternoon sun as they gave Caleb a wide berth. His reputation for protecting his territory preceded him.

"You know that's not his style," Wade said. "He's trying to wear everyone down first. Make them doubt."

"Yeah, well, I'm done playing his game." Caleb's wolf prowled beneath his skin. The beast understood what needed to be done - show strength, protect the pack. "Time to remind everyone why Eclipsed Moon's still standing after all these years."

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking it's time for a pack gathering. Right in the town square." Caleb's lips curved into a predatory smile. "Let Victor watch from the shadows while we show exactly how united and strong we are."

"A show of force?" Wade raised an eyebrow. "That's... actually not a bad idea."

"Try not to sound so surprised." Caleb dodged a witch's familiar - a rather plump

orange cat that shot him a disapproving look. "We'll have food, music, maybe some friendly sparring matches. Show everyone that we're not hiding."

"And if Victor shows up?"

"Then he'll see exactly what he's up against." The wolf in Caleb's chest rumbled with satisfaction. "And maybe, if we're lucky, he'll finally grow a pair and face me properly instead of picking on cubs and elders."

"You really want that fight, don't you?"

"Want? No." Caleb paused at the intersection, watching another group of pack children chase each other through the magical fountain's spray.

Their laughter echoed off the old buildings, reminding him exactly what he was protecting.

"But I'll end it if he forces my hand. Nobody threatens our people and gets away with it. "

The red-brick community center loomed ahead, its weathered facade a testament to decades of pack gatherings, celebrations, and sanctuary. Caleb's jaw clenched at the sight of the "Open to All" sign. That welcome had been weaponized against them.

"Third one this month," Caleb muttered, running a hand through his dark hair. "First the bookkeeper, then that new security guard, now Thompson."

"Could be worse." Wade dodged a puddle. "Remember when Victor tried bribing the entire janitorial staff at the town hall?"

"Yeah, with counterfeit leprechaun gold." Caleb snorted. "Turned their hands green for weeks."

The community center's double doors swung open, releasing a group of young shifters from their after-school program. Their laughter faded as they spotted him, eyes wide with recognition. Caleb softened his expression, offering a reassuring nod.

"I'll handle the center myself for now," he said, watching the kids scamper off. "At least until we can find someone trustworthy."

"You?" Wade's eyebrows shot up. "Mr. I-Set-The-Microwave-On-Fire-Making-Popcorn wants to run a community center?"

"That was one time." Caleb shot him a look. "And in my defense, those instructions were clearly written by a vampire. Who measures time in heartbeats?"

They climbed the worn stone steps, the afternoon sun warming the railings beneath their hands. Inside, the scent of floor cleaner mingled with traces of anxiety from their pack members - and underneath it all, the lingering smugness of Victor's presence.

"You can't run this place alone," Wade said, following him through the lobby. "You've got enough on your plate with-"

"Watch me." Caleb's wolf stirred, responding to the challenge in Wade's tone. "My pack, my responsibility. Besides," he grinned, "how hard can it be? File some paperwork, organize a few events, keep Victor's goons from terrorizing everyone-"

"Schedule maintenance, manage the budget, coordinate with other community leaders, handle complaints-"

"Okay, fine." Caleb stopped at Thompson's - former Thompson's - office door. "So maybe I need help. But finding someone we can trust? That's like trying to find a honest pixie at a poker game."

"What about your sister?"

"Sarah?" Caleb barked out a laugh. "The same Sarah who organized last year's pack picnic and somehow ended up with three rival covens of witches fighting over the potato salad?"

"Good point." Wade leaned against the wall. "Still, better than you trying to do everything yourself. You're already running yourself ragged."

"I'm fine."

"Sure. That's why you showed up to Tuesday's pack meeting wearing two different boots."

"They were both black," Caleb muttered, but his lips twitched. "Besides, I started a new fashion trend. Half the younger pack members showed up mismatched the next day."

Caleb opened the door to the office and sat down at Thompson's old desk. His fingers drummed against the desk as memories surfaced. "You know, Victor wasn't always like this. Remember when our packs used to do those joint full moon runs?"

"Back when his ego could still fit through doorways?" Wade settled into a chair next to the desk. "Yeah, those were fun times."

"Until he decided being alpha of one pack wasn't enough." The wood beneath Caleb's fingers warmed with his touch. "Remember that camping trip? Six years ago?"

"The one where he tried to prove he was the better alpha by catching more fish?"

"And ended up wrestling that selkie who thought he was hitting on her." Caleb chuckled. "She dumped him in the bay. Twice."

His wolf stirred at the image of Victor, sputtering and soaked, his precious designer clothes ruined by saltwater. Back then, their rivalry had been almost friendly. Competitive, sure, but not this... whatever it had become.

"You'd think after Sarah broke his nose at the Winter Solstice ball, he'd have learned some humility." Caleb smirked at the memory.

"In his defense, he didn't know she was your sister when he grabbed her ass."

"No, but he definitely knew after she introduced his face to the punch bowl." Pride colored Caleb's voice. His little sister had always been a spitfire. "That's when everything changed. His pride couldn't take being embarrassed in front of both packs."