



Beltane Curse (Witchtown Crossing #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Spring in Haighton Crossing means bonfires, magic... and murder investigations.

I thought I'd finally settled into my new life—running my mother's inn, trying to keep the bills paid, and ignoring the fact that the town's doctor gets under my skin. But nothing in Haighton Crossing is ever that simple.

Beltane is coming, and the town is filling up with visitors. The FBI is here, too, investigating a murder—and they have their sights set on one of the town's own. Meanwhile, the land itself is faltering, my dreams are haunted by warnings I don't understand, and the magic of Beltane is rising, wild and unpredictable.

If I don't untangle what's happening before the bonfire is lit, Haighton Crossing may never be the same again.

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CHAPTER ONE

“RELAX. REMEMBER TO brEATHE,” TREVALYAN murmured.

I kept my gaze upon the scattered leaves on the earth between us, containing my frustration. I took a breath. Let it out. Then I spoke the words of the spell. Just in my mind. At the same time, I circled my fingertips over the leaves.

Today’s exercise was to arrange the leaves in neat, sorted stacks, while not speaking the spell aloud.

“It’s just a matter of concentration,” Trevalyan had assured me when we settled on the dirt forty minutes ago. “You speak the words in your mind, close the circle, and let the power emerge.” As he spoke, he moved his hand in a slow circle over the ten leaves he’d plucked from the trees around us and let drop to the ground.

The pale green maple leaves had lifted as though a breeze was stirring them, then flipped and dropped into three piles; small, medium and large. Even the stems were all facing the same way. Each stem showed a white dot of sap, and the slightly sweet, fresh scent rising from them was a strong reminder that winter was over.

“I couldn’t do that even if I was speaking it aloud,” I’d protested, as Trevalyan picked up the stacks of leaves and let the green flakes drop to the ground once more, rocking through the air like miniature swings with invisible ropes.

“Couldn’t or won’t?” Trevalyan shot back. His eyes always looked sad, but he pinned me with an intense gaze that refuted the impression. He was a short, painfully thin

man, with long dirty blond hair and a drooping mustache. Everything about Trevalyan sagged. Especially his face, which was wrinkled and filled with hollows and crests. He wore thin-framed glasses.

From only a few paces away, he appeared to be in his late sixties. He was, in fact, much older than that. Haigton was an unusual town, and Trevalyan had lived here a long time. I didn't know how old he was, but I knew he'd left seventy behind a long time ago.

It was only when you got close to him, and after you'd grown accustomed to the musky smell of cannabis that wreathed him like cologne, that you realized his eyes were those of a much younger man. That is, if he let you get that close. Trevalyan was, like nearly everyone in Haigton, a private person. Also, like everyone in Haigton, he had good reasons for staying aloof with people.

He was staring at me now, which didn't make it any easier to concentrate. I didn't think it was possible to stumble in pronouncing a word in your head, until I had tried today's "simple" exercise.

That had been forty minutes ago, and I was still trying to do this straightforward thing and failing. It was driving me crazy.

So were my knees, hips and ass. The ground was not even close to cushion-like. The new blades of grass in the little clearing were thin, and the earth compacted from the winter's snow.

The light here was filtered and cool. Too cool. I shivered and realized I'd stopped speaking the spell once more. I sighed and dropped my hand.

"One more time," Trevalyan said, his voice that of an old man's – wavering and deep.

“I’d rather speak it aloud first. I’m not even sure I can do the spell, let alone cast it silently.”

Trevalyan looked at me steadily for three heartbeats. “Very well,” he said. “Cast it aloud.”

Relieved, I arched my back. Hard. It was aching from sitting without back support for too long. I wasn’t twenty-something anymore. And the last time I’d sat cross-legged on the ground was in high school.

Then I resettled myself.

“Now, clear your mind. Relax. Breathe. And say the words,” Trevalyan coached me.

I took a deep breath and spoke the words I’d carefully memorized.

“No, bring the intensity down,” Trevalyan cautioned me. “They’re just leaves.”

I started again, while glaring at the leaves. It was a short spell, which was why it was annoying that I couldn’t say the whole thing in my mind without my thoughts wandering, or mentally stuttering.

I turned my fingers in a circle over the leaves. Power, silvered and cold, tore through me and out through my fingers.

The leaves didn’t just lift gently and sway back and forth as they sorted themselves out. They whipped about as though they were in a mini cyclone, snapping and cracking.

Trevalyan threw up his arm to shield his face. “Too much !” he cried. “Turn down the volume, Anna!”

“I don’t know how to do that!” I had to raise my voice because the little tornado was whistling.

Trevalyan lifted the hand that wasn’t shielding his face, but before he could start the circle, the tornado evaporated. The leaves, now desiccated and brown, as if the energy and power of spring had been sucked out of them, all burst into flames. They drifted back down to the ground, trailing ash and smoke.

I waved the smoke away. “ Damn it!”

My phone vibrated against my hip. Thank you , I told whoever was listening for the timely jolt and got slowly and painfully to my feet.

“You must try again,” Trevalyan insisted. “You must keep at it until it works.”

“Later,” I told him, brushing off my jeans and the hem of my short coat. “Unless you don’t want to eat lunch today.”

He leaned back on one hand. Unlike me, he seemed to be quite comfortable sitting on dirt. “You can’t keep ducking this, Anna. You must get control of your power.”

Something in me cringed. “Yep,” I said heavily. “But right now I have over a dozen people to feed.”

“You cannot continue to half-ass this,” Trevalyan snapped.

“I’m not!” I shot back, stung. I threw out my hand. “I have massive debit, the bills keep showing up, while supplies don’t , because normal people keep forgetting about us. My daughter is eight months pregnant, and I still don’t know what happens when she goes into labor! I have a hotel to run, and people who keep showing up three times a day expecting me to put food on the table. Frankly, I’ve got far—” I realized

what I was about to say and clamped my teeth together, cutting it off.

“Far better things to do than play with magic?” Trevalyan asked softly.

I rubbed my temple. “No, that’s not what I mean.” Tiredness was making my face ache, and it wasn’t even noon yet. But it was getting far too close to noon for me to linger here. I swung away. Then back to face Trevalyan, who hadn’t moved. “I’ll...see if I can practice, this afternoon.” I couldn’t bring myself to promise it, and that made me feel guilty, too.

“You’re vulnerable until you master your abilities.” Trevalyan’s eyes were back to sad. I think, this time, they were sad. “And you won’t master them until you take this seriously.”

“I do take it seriously.”

Trevalyan got to his feet. Unlike me, he rose gracefully, without effort. He stood with his hands at his sides, not fidgeting or brushing off dirt. He was that comfortable with nature. “You think you take it seriously, but in the back of your mind, where you won’t allow yourself to wander, magic still feels like fairy-tale nonsense to you. Even though you’ve summoned the Will of the Town and helped your daughter through a high-risk pregnancy, you still do not believe .” His voice dropped down to the lower registers, and he pronounced each word distinctly.

Was that true?

“You feel foolish, when you speak of magic, or when I do,” Trevalyan added.

I rubbed my face, feeling a hot mix of indignation, temper and embarrassment that swirled through my middle and made me want to squirm. “I have to go,” I said. It was both the truth and an evasion.

I could see from Trevalyan's face that he knew that, too. Which didn't help me feel any better.

I stalked through the oaks and maples and the odd spruce, heading for the crossroads. We hadn't been deep inside the woods. Not even close to the town's invisible and guarded borders. Just far enough to take us out of sight of anyone who might be looking for me.

Someone was always looking for me, these days.

I emerged from the trees only a few paces away from the crossroads and moved up to the corner. Sidewalks didn't exist on this side of the crossroads.

Kitty corner to where I was standing was the Haight Crossing Hotel. My hotel, willed to me by my mother.

I took in the lovely old building with its white walls and black timbers, steeply pitched roofs and three floors of mullioned windows. It could have been picked up from somewhere in England and dropped here. And it was mine. In the four months I had been in Haight, I had come to love the place...and loathe it.

I didn't bother looking for traffic before stepping into the intersection and crossing over to the hotel's corner. It was rare for cars to drive through.

It was a warm April day. Warm for the northern end of New York, that is. I was still acclimatized to California's weather and wore a sturdy jacket, while the true locals seemed to be comfortable in shirt sleeves.

I strode down the sidewalk in front of the hotel, then headed inside, while figuring out what I would serve for lunch. I always built a weekly menu—it was the only way to contain costs—but we had a few unexpected paying customers staying in the

rooms on the second floor and that was playing havoc with my supplies and my careful planning.

Until a week ago, no one had stayed overnight in the hotel since I had arrived in Haigton. Now we had three guests.

As I stepped into the welcome warmth of the foyer, my daughter, Ghaliya, ducked around the curtain that covered the doorway into the bar, moving carefully. Her hand was on her distended belly beneath the stretchy blue tunic.

“Are you okay?” I asked, moving over to her.

“I’m fine. I’m fine .”

I stepped back. “Okay...”

She shook her head. “I just have to pee. Again . That’s like the fifth time in the last twenty minutes. And everyone keeps asking me if I’m okay. Hirom won’t let me sit on the stools at the bar. He makes me sit at a table and brings things to me. And everyone at the locals’ table wants to pat my stomach...and listen to me bitch.” She rolled her eyes and blew out a breath that made her hair lift over her brows.

The hair was an odd combination of blue and golden brown. When she had fallen pregnant, she’d had blue hair, two inches long. Now the natural brown was growing out, but it wasn’t long enough yet to just cut off the blue, which I knew was another irritant for Ghaliya.

“You’d better go and pee,” I told her. “You won’t be able to hold it. And I have to start lunch.”

Ghaliya gritted her teeth and drew in a breath that made her nostrils flare. “I had that

figured out,” she muttered and headed down the corridor that ran alongside the wide stairs. I followed, for the kitchen entrance was under the stairs, closer to the back door.

I ducked under the stairs while Ghaliya went into the washroom on the other side of the corridor.

The kitchen was clean and sterile, for I had left it that way. I was the only one who worked in here. So far. If guests became common, I would have to rethink that, but for the last three and a half months I’d only had to feed Haigton residents. That was a whole ten people, including those who lived in the hotel, which was me, Ghaliya, Hirom and Frida. But Broch was a vampire and didn’t eat. I was only cooking for nine.

After surviving as a short order cook in a super busy diner for two years, feeding nine people was a piece of cake.

The kitchen was large and had a long steel table running down the middle of it. I always kept the table clear between meal prep. The big white envelope sitting on the end of the table stood out.

I picked up the stiff envelope. My name was on the front. The logo on the top left of the envelope made my heart jump.

The Judicial Branch of California. The Family Court was included in that branch, and I’d had my share of experiences with the Family Court.

I knew better than to put the envelope aside and get on with lunch prep. The unopened letter would burn a hole in my skull, and I’d make mistakes and ruin the meal. Six of the nine locals who ate in my dining room paid me to deliver edible meals. So did the three guests.

The nice thing about reaching fifty is that I was finally starting to understand my own nature a little better and sometimes, occasionally, I took notice of that awareness.

I opened the utility drawer and took out the paper scissors and sliced the end off the envelope and pulled out the thick wad of pages and opened them up. My heart raced as I read the headline on the first page.

ORDER TO SHOW CAUSE AND AFFIDAVIT FOR CONTEMPT

I drew in a shaky breath and read on. My brow ached and I realized I was frowning hard enough to make the muscles protest.

It took a few tries to make sense of it. I put the packages of pages down on the end of the steel table. My hand was shaking.

Jasper, my odious ex, was suing me for failing to pay the taxes on his house. The obligation had been a part of the divorce settlement, and at the time, a way for me to avoid having to pay maintenance, which I couldn't afford. But he'd sold our family home and bought a two-million-dollar-plus mansion on the Brentwood edge of the Hollywood Hills. I'd covered the November payment. Just.

Now I owed the City of Los Angeles seven thousand dollars.

Plus interest.

The payment had been due on the first of February, and officially became delinquent on April tenth. Today was the sixteenth.

Jasper hadn't waited a week to sic his expensive legal barracuda onto me.

CHAPTER TWO

I GOT LUNCH SERVED BY five minutes past noon. I barely noticed what it was. I hurried out into the dining room, where Ghaliya was putting the trays of utensils and napkins on the sideboard. The plates were already stacked on the end.

I pushed the tray filled with mushroom casserole into the steamer and dropped the lid and hurried back to the kitchen for the big bowl of salad, while everyone in the dining room got to their feet and headed for the sideboard.

The locals' table was three of the square tables pushed together for everyone to sit around. In the last few months it had been moved around the dining room a few times, until it had come to sit in front of the long mullioned windows at the front. The hotel faced south. The sun had been pleasant, during the colder months, and the long table didn't trip up anyone else.

The remaining tables in the dining room were round, with six chairs at each. Our three guests were at two tables. Two of them were dryads. Their flesh gave them away. It was a coffee-colored brown, with flecks in it, and it looked rough to me, although I had never touched a dryad's skin before. Not even Wim's, Haigton's resident dryad.

The two guests and Wim were the reason I was serving an enormous salad. They preferred raw food. They would eat cooked food if they had to. But never meat.

The solo guest at the other table looked human—a woman in her late thirties. Aurora Caro, she'd written in the guest log. Polite and pleasant but she had put out privacy

signals every time I'd spoken to her. I had a feeling that despite her appearance, she wasn't quite human.

Until Christmas last year, I'd believed dryads, vampires and magic were the realm of fiction. I was still learning about the Otherworld—the world that lived between, around, and beneath the human world, hidden away most of the time. I was waiting to find a good time to ask the locals what species our third guest was. I couldn't begin to guess.

I brought the big salad out from the kitchen and had to weave between diners to reach the sideboard and place it beside the warming trays.

Then I settled at the long table to wait for the line to diminish, and took a few breaths, trying to make myself relax. I wasn't remotely hungry, but if I didn't eat, everyone would be alarmed and want to know what was wrong.

I rose to my feet and served a single spoonful of the casserole on my plate, grabbed a bread roll and headed back to the table.

I don't know how it had happened, but my customary seat at the table was now at the end, with the window on my right, which let me look out over the crossroads. The chair at the other end of the table often went empty. Everyone sat at my end of the table, and not everyone came to every meal.

The chair was empty again today, which relieved me. I wouldn't accidentally meet anyone's eyes.

I tore the roll into breadcrumbs and picked at the casserole, waiting for the meal to be over. My gut was tight and hard, and it felt as though it was tightening even harder, every time I thought about the letter sitting in the kitchen.

The other two tables were closer to the kitchen. Everyone at my table spoke freely, but quietly. The chatter covered the usual subjects. I tuned them out until Broch—who always sat at the table, with a napkin elegantly draped across his lap—said, “Ghaliya, I had a great deal of trouble getting online this morning. Does the router need rebooting?”

Ghaliya burped softly and put her fingers over her wide lips. “Ooops. ‘scuse me. I can have a look at it after lunch for you. I wasn’t having any issues and I’ve been online all morning. Did you reboot your laptop?”

Broch frowned. “Juda used to say that all the time. I don’t understand how rebooting makes such a difference, but it was always the first thing he said.”

I put the last piece of bread back on my plate. With the reminder of Juda, I couldn’t even pretend to eat, now.

Everyone else at the table also paused for a moment.

“Juda...” Ben Marcus said softly. Heavily.

Juda had been a resident of Haigton. He’d built and maintained the internet connection for the whole town—something that stopped everyone from going insane with lockdown fever and also gave us a window upon the rest of the world. We ordered in groceries, household goods and everything else we needed.

And Juda had day-traded online and made everyone in the town wealthy.

Then he had killed himself, right out there in the middle of the crossroads I could see through the window. No one here had understood that the will of Haigton spoke through Juda, and had used him, too. It had harangued him into killing my mother, to bring me to Haigton. When Juda remembered what he had done, his guilt had been so

heavy, he had slashed his throat open.

I glanced at Ghaliya. She had been drawn to Juda, but had watched him kill himself. We all had.

She sighed, then bent and ate another spoonful of casserole.

Ghaliya was teaching herself computer coding and server maintenance, and was the only one who could coax along the network that served the whole town.

Broch shifted uncomfortably on his chair. It was one of the few times I've ever seen him look awkward or embarrassed. He'd reminded everyone about Juda.

Olivia, Wim's wife and the unofficial mayor of the town, stirred and said, "It's nice to see the hotel with a guest or two, Anna. Don't you think?"

She was changing subjects.

I could almost feel everyone's relief.

"It's almost a shock to have paying guests," I admitted. "There haven't been any since I arrived."

"Always a lull after the solstice," Hirom observed, and tore off nearly half his bread roll and chewed. He was a dwarf. I was still trying to figure out if he was the human kind of dwarf or the kind I'd once read about only in fiction. Despite his size, he could eat more than anyone else at the table. Perhaps he needed the calories because he spent every day serving drinks in the bar, rolling barrels down into the cellar, or carrying them up to the bar.

"But now we're coming up on Beltane," Trevalyan said.

Everyone nodded, except Ghaliya.

“What has Beltane to do with it?” I asked.

“Oh, Beltane is a lovely time of year,” Olivia said softly, with a small smile. “Haigton actually feels busy, around Beltane.”

“I know Beltane was one of the Celtic feasts,” I said. “It’s celebrated here, too?”

“It’s celebrated in many places,” Ben Marcus said. “Including here.”

I realized I was looking at him and quickly looked away.

“Folks travel up the Greenway,” Broch said. “Like the pair, yonder.” He didn’t quite nod his head toward the table with the dryads. “You’ll have plenty of guests, come Beltane eve.”

I stared at him, dismayed. I was already slammed to the max running this place with only Frida and Hirom to help me. Our three guests were pushing my limits.

How the hell would I manage if all fourteen rooms were full? Each room had two beds, and two of them had four beds. “We could end up with anywhere from fourteen guests to...” I calculated quickly what the maximum occupancy would be. “Thirty-two guests?”

“Oh, definitely thirty-two guests,” Olivia said brightly. “Folks will share rooms. Even strangers will bunk together so they can stay at the Haigton Hotel.” Her voice held pride.

Broch didn’t smile as he said, “Folks will camp in the trees around the town, too. Those who don’t like to be inside. And those who can’t get rooms here. But they’ll

drink in the bar, and they'll eat in the dining room."

My horror grew. "Oh my god..." I breathed. "That's why you've been bringing in all the barrels, Hirom?"

I had noticed that the cellar was close to bursting with towers of barrels, when before he'd only kept a few reserve barrels at the back of it. And Hirom had been out in the forest working his still for weeks, now. Those bottles were lined up on the shelves in the cellar, too.

Hirom raised his brow and grinned.

"And this is all for Beltane? I thought one of the solstices would be more...I don't know. Important?"

"They're all important," Trevalyan said. "But spring is renewal and rebirth. It calls to all of us."

Not to me . I held the retort back. Spring in L.A. had meant dust, allergies and headaches. But then I realized that I hadn't sneezed once in the last few weeks. And no headaches either.

More of Haigton's mysterious magic?

"Everyone comes for the bonfire," Trevalyan said. "We start the bonfire at sunset on Beltane eve, and keep it burning until midnight, when Beltane begins."

"I thought...isn't three a.m. the spirit hours?" I asked.

"It is," Trevalyan confirmed. "But the wild power begins to gather at sunset of the eve of the feast day. It peaks at three a.m. and recedes until dawn."

“It’s a lovely time, watching the fire burn, having a drink and talking to the folk who stop by just for the feast day,” Olivia added.

I looked around the table, my heart thudding. I need help , I told myself. But Ghaliya couldn’t help any more than she was already. Hirom and Frida already worked their butts off. Frida sat beside Ben as usual, for he had healed her wounds from a bear attack, some years ago. The wounds had left her mute, with a deeply scarred face and with a raging case of agoraphobia. She lived in the hotel and cleaned for me. Now we had guests, she worked harder than ever. She looked as though she was nodding off to sleep right there at the table.

I wasn’t going to ask Ben Marcus for help. Nuh-uh.

Trevalyan helped Ben by making medicinals, guarded the town’s borders, and had an official role with Parks and Recreation as the supervisor of the Finger—the giant lodestone located a mile north of the town. Wim and Olivia grew food in the empty houses beyond the main street and as the whole town benefited from their efforts, I couldn’t take them away from their indoor gardens. Broch just scared people off. Most folk sensed what he was and walked around him carefully.

That left Harper.

I looked at the woman who had seated herself in the last chair along the table to give her a view through the windows. She’d removed her hat to eat, and her long black wavy hair was pushed over her shoulders, which left her clear, sharp jaw and pointed chin visible, along with her fine black eyes.

I didn’t know Harper well at all. She made the private people in this town look like raging extroverts. I had no idea what she did to keep herself occupied during the days. At night, she often sat at the local’s table in the bar, drinking Hirom’s private label whisky, and rarely speaking.

Harper was good at brooding.

“Harper, I could use your help in the hotel for the next couple of weeks, if you can spare the time.”

Harper didn't look up from her plate. “I can't.”

I stared at her, astonished. “Not even for a few days? Perhaps just the evenings?” For she was here most evenings anyway.

“No.”

“I'll be run off my feet. I can pay you—” Although I wasn't sure how I would manage that. I'd figure it out later. “I'd ask Ghaliya, but...”

Harper looked up. Her black eyes were filled with some emotion I couldn't quite name, but I suspected it was anger. That was her go-to mood. “I said no.” Her tone was flat.

I stared at her, genuinely speechless.

Movement from the corner of my eye caught my attention. I looked through the windows toward the crossroads.

“Cars...” I said breathlessly.

For two cars were rolling slowly through the intersection. Black, plain sedans. I couldn't tell what model they were. They were too nondescript.

As everyone turned to look through the windows, the cars came to a halt beside the sidewalk in front of the hotel.

Four people got out of the rear vehicle, and two emerged from the front one. All of them, including the two women, wore conservative suits, blue or white shirts and plain ties.

“Suits ,” Ghaliya breathed.

The tallest among the people standing on the sidewalk examining the hotel had salt and pepper hair. I put him at mid-forties. Fit, tanned and crewcut. He was frowning at the facade. Then he said something to the others and headed for the front door.

“Suits coming here,” I added, getting to my feet.

I heard the front door open as I moved out of the dining room. I hurried to meet the man as he stepped in. He looked around, sizing up the place. His gaze tracked the stairs and the door to the bar, then he turned to watch me approach.

When I got closer to him, I saw that he was taller than I had guessed. He wasn’t quite frowning as he examined me, but he wasn’t smiling, either.

“And you are...?” he asked.

“Usually, the guest introduces themselves first,” I said.

He paused, and the corner of his jaw flexed. He reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a wallet, that he flipped open to display the ID inside. “Agent Axel King. FBI. I’m looking for Harper Gibbs. Can you tell me where I can find her?”

I couldn’t help it. I swiveled on my heel and turned to look through the big archway into the dining room. Everyone stood there, including Harper.

Everyone turned to look at Harper, too.

She crossed her arms, one foot thrust out for balance. “I’m Harper. What do you want?” Her usual anger rolled off her.

Agent King put his ID away. He turned to glance through the open door, and gave a short, sharp whistle. Then he looked back at Harper. “I need to ask you a few questions, Ms. Gibbs.”

“What about?” Harper replied.

Just cooperate ! I railed at her silently. We’d got used to her recalcitrant ways, but this agent would misinterpret.

Agent King spread his feet. The other agents stepped inside and ranged behind him, a solid phalanx of official suitdom. “About the murder of Raymond Calloway,” King said. His eyes narrowed. He was watching Harper, measuring her reaction.

Harper’s arms loosened and dropped to her sides. “Who the hell is Raymond Calloway?”

CHAPTER THREE

“I’M THE LEAD INVESTIGATOR WITH the FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit – Serial Crime Division,” Agent King told Harper. “I would like you to come along with us. We’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“Go along with you to where?” Ben Marcus asked, his tone merely curious.

“Gouverneur,” King replied, barely glancing at Ben. His attention was on Harper.

Harper hadn’t crossed her arms again, which was her usual pose when she wasn’t sitting at the dining table. But her eyes narrowed. “It takes six of you to ask me some questions?”

King lifted his hand in a tiny wave of dismissal. “This is my team. We had other business on our way here. If you would come along...” He turned, as if he expected her to fall in with him.

The other agents grew still, watching her.

“Why do you want to speak to Harper?” I asked.

“That’s not something you need to know,” King replied. “Ms. Gibbs?”

Harper hesitated. She turned toward the dining room. “Broch...do I need a lawyer?” she asked the vampire. He had remained by the archway, while everyone else moved closer to the agents and me.

My lips parted in surprise. I had never seen her voluntarily address Broch before. And she had never asked him a question. When she did speak to him, she usually snarled. Insults were common.

Broch didn't move. "I think you might be a person of interest," he said, his deep voice smooth.

"Are you Ms. Gibbs' lawyer, sir?" King asked Broch.

"I am a lawyer," Broch said, surprising me for the second time inside sixty seconds.

"He's my lawyer," Harper said firmly.

King considered her, then Broch. "You are a member of the New York Bar Association?" he asked Broch.

"Not currently," Broch admitted.

"Then you must remain here," King said. He turned back to Harper. "I'm afraid I must insist that you come with us."

"Yes, you're a person of interest," Broch said.

The other agents were once more tense statues, watching Harper closely.

Harper considered King for a moment. Then she smiled. It was an astonishing expression, making her whole face light up. She had nice teeth, and for the first time I noticed that her eyes were rather beautiful. "Sure," she said. "I'll go with you to Gouverneur."

My mind stuttered for a moment. "But..."

Someone squeezed my elbow from behind. I shut up and glanced over my shoulder. Ben had silenced me. I withdrew my arm from his grip.

The agents surrounded King and Harper. The group moved through the front door, heading for the cars.

King led Harper to the car he had been driving and put her in the back seat. An agent settled on the other side of the seat, while a second took the front passenger seat. King got behind the wheel.

The other three agents piled into the second car. No one discussed where to sit. They'd clearly done this before.

Because that didn't worry me at all.

Hirom shut the front door of the hotel, now the foyer had cleared out. He didn't lock it. The front door was only locked after the bar shut down each night, but guests could still open it from this side. It was a simple deadbolt.

I opened my mouth to protest. I preferred the door stay open so people wouldn't hesitate to step inside because we were run off our feet with customers and thirsty travelers here in Haighton.

Before I could actually protest, everyone gathered around in a circle that seemed to include me, as I found myself standing in it. I turned so I was facing the middle of the circle.

"Quickly, quickly, before they come back." Olivia kept her voice low, for my three guests were still in the dining room and all three had turned to watch the FBI arrest Harper in all but name. "Does anyone know that name? Raymond Calloway?"

“Before they come back?” I repeated.

“I can look him up, see what’s out there,” Ghaliya volunteered. “But the laptop is in our apartment and I’m not running anywhere...” She put a hand on her belly.

Broch took off. I could almost feel the air swirling against me, for he had been standing beside me. He flashed up the stairs at a speed that looked...no, it was faster than a human could move.

“You should sit down,” I told Ghaliya, as she rubbed her belly. “Maybe you should go upstairs.”

Ghaliya rolled her eyes at me.

“Then the table,” I insisted.

She nodded and headed back under the big arch. Everyone turned and followed. Wim pulled out Ghaliya’s chair for her, while Hirom headed back to the sideboard to see if there was anything else he could eat. I rarely had leftovers, thanks to his ability to tuck away food.

Olivia offered to make Ghaliya some tea, then moved over to the sideboard as well, to dig through the drawers for herbal tea.

The three guests were rising to their feet. Perhaps our noisy return to the dining room had encouraged them to leave. It would give us the room which was fine by me. I was still figuring out how to be a hotelier. Customer service was a bit further down the list.

I settled back in my chair. From there, I could see the tail lights of the last sedan disappearing around the bend.

Harper was in the leading car.

I got it. “The town won’t let her leave...”

Everyone glanced at me. Olivia gave me a little nod. An affirmative, or congrats because I’d figured it out.

Broch returned. He didn’t breathe hard or look stressed as he put Ghaliya’s laptop in front of her. He settled on the chair at the end of the table where Harper had been sitting.

Ghaliya opened the laptop and got busy with a search on Raymond Calloway. She paused, read, frowned, typed; rinse and repeat.

“While Ghaliya searches, can anyone recall the name at all?”

“I know the name,” Broch said. “But I can’t summon the context yet.”

“Thought vampires didn’t forget anything?” Trevalyan said as he squeezed out a herbal teabag.

“We don’t. Which means recalling stray facts becomes even more difficult,” Broch said. “You are asking me to find information in here—” and he touched his temple. “It is the same as asking me to dig up a random but specific fact from among all the books in the New York Library, without consulting the catalogue.”

Not for the first time, I wondered just how old Broch was.

“It will come, if I leave it alone to rise to the surface,” Broch said.

“Ha! Then I beat you to it,” Ghaliya said, straightening. “Detective Raymond “Ray”

Calloway,” she recited, studying the screen. “He’s a former homicide detective.”

“Where was he active?” Broch asked.

“New York City.”

“Harper never worked in the city,” Broch said thoughtfully.

“How old is he?” Olivia asked. Then, “Was he,” she corrected herself.

“Huh,” Ghaliya said, and tapped. “Wow...”

“Aloud, Ghaliya,” I murmured.

“Right, sorry.” She gave everyone a quick smile. “His wife and two kids—all his family—were killed by an animal attack near Albany, when they were travelling back from the Adirondacks. That was...twelve years ago. And his retirement announcement is dated for the next year.”

“They’re related,” Olivia said. “For certain.”

“What kind of animal attacked them?” Broch asked Ghaliya. His tone was touched with sharpness.

It wasn’t just me who noticed. Everyone looked at him.

Ghaliya shook her head, her blue and brown bangs swinging. “There are about six different newspaper reports and blogs about it, but the two I’ve scanned say no one knows what type of animal. Just something wild with claws.”

“God, what the poor man must have gone through...” Olivia breathed. Wim rested

his hand on her shoulder.

Ben, who was sitting across the table from Broch, which just happened to be the farthest away from me without separating from everyone else at the table, looked at Broch and raised his brow. “That means something to you?”

Broch glanced around the table. “It’s not an official code, but just...a trait among authorities who do not understand what they’re dealing with. The average police officer would look at the corpse of a human who had been attacked by gargoyles and could only think that an animal did it.”

The silence around the table held for a few heartbeats.

All I could think of, stupidly, was, now gargoyles are real, too .

“You think this Calloway lost his family to gargoyles?” Ben asked. “I thought gargoyles had been wiped out.”

“They were,” Broch said calmly. “Only two years before Calloway’s family were attacked...and in the same general area in which the last gargoyle clan resided. It was the third time the Stonebrood clan had risen, and it was the last time. The hunters who tracked them down made sure of it.”

“And Harper is a hunter...” Trevalyan intoned, then sipped his tea.

“There might be some connection there,” Olivia said.

“Only, gargoyles couldn’t have killed them,” I pointed out. “There were none when this Calloway’s family died.”

“I said that wild animals were what human authorities reach for as an explanation

when they have no other,” Broch said. “It isn’t just gargoyle attacks that leave them puzzled.”

“Vampire attacks,” Ben breathed.

Slowly, Broch nodded. I might have been imagining the reluctance weighing him down.

“I thought...” I cleared my throat. “I haven’t read the manual, Broch. But I thought that after they feed, vampires...um...clean up after themselves. And do something so humans don’t remember what happened.”

“We do everything we can to make sure the human we feed from is left as we found them, none the worse for the feeding other than waking to find themselves starving and thirsty.”

This time I had no trouble spotting his discomfort. He brushed at the tablecloth. He picked up his empty coffee mug. Put it down again. Brushed at the table again, then straightened the fold of his trouser leg over his knee.

“Guess there’s asshole vampires, like there’s asshole humans,” Trevalyan said, then sipped his tea.

“Seeing as vampires were all human once, that makes sense,” Olivia said crisply. “That makes it even more likely that somehow, this poor Calloway man is connected to Harper. She hunted vampires exclusively, did she not, Broch?”

“Yes,” Broch said shortly. “Which is how she found her way here.”

“Where you are,” Ben finished.

Broch grimaced.

Something glinted, catching my attention. I sat up straighter and peered through the windows. “They’re back,” I announced, as the two sedans rolled sedately around the bend and headed for the crossroads.

“This should be interesting....” Trevalyan breathed.

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CHAPTER FOUR

AGENT KING ESCORTED HARPER BACK into the hotel. He had a hand on her arm, and he looked pissed.

Harper, contrariwise, looked happy. That was a startling expression for her. I suppose she was deriving a sense of satisfaction out of the situation. It wasn't often that the Will of the Town's determination to keep us all here in Haighton had a beneficial effect.

"Back so soon, Agent King?" I asked, with as pleasant a voice as I could muster.

He nodded, looking around the hotel, up the stairs, and then at me. "I've changed my mind," he declared. Even his cheeks were flushed. "We'll conduct the investigation from here."

The other agents were filing into the foyer. They didn't look pissed. They were wearing neutral expressions. It was probably part of the training. Stoic Facial Styles 101. Maybe I was just imagining that they were hiding their bafflement.

"I'll need your dining room, thank you." King strode to the archway and into the dining room without waiting for an answer. Perhaps it was a good thing I didn't get to respond. I don't think he would have liked my answer.

I hurried to get ahead of him. "Lunch has just finished. Let me clear the table—"

"We'll all need meals, thank you," King said, heading for the round table that was

farthest from the archway. It was in the corner between the front windows and the high mullioned window by the kitchen door.

I know my mouth dropped open. I halted, as King pulled out a chair and put Harper in it, then pulled out a chair of his own. His agents were stripping the other tables of their cloths and pulling them closer to King's.

I glanced back at the archway. I think I was looking for support, or a clue about how to handle this.

Ben was the only one standing there. He nodded and tilted his head toward the kitchen.

I got the message, but I didn't like it. "That'll be seventy dollars a head," I told King's back. "In advance."

He looked over his shoulder. "Give me an invoice. It'll be settled later."

"I need the money now to buy the food. Everyone in Haigton pays for the month ahead."

"I don't have a cash fund."

"I accept all credit cards, PayPal and e-transfers."

He turned in the chair to look at me.

I crossed my arms.

King glanced at the agents setting up the tables. "Give her the credit card, Mooney," he said shortly. "And book six rooms for tonight."

Six !

I spoke without thinking it through carefully. “Rooms are doubles, and they’re three hundred a night.”

King stared at me for a long time. Behind his swiveled shoulder, I saw that Harper was smiling. It was a grim, highly pleased expression.

King smiled, too. His expression held no humor. “Make it four rooms,” he told Moody.

Moody was one of the women, a brunette with a severely short hairstyle. She dug a wallet out of her inner jacket pocket and came toward me. She wore no expression. “You do vegan, I hope?”

For seventy dollars a head I would serve meals to her in a bikini if she wanted it that way...except that would ensure she and everyone else in the room instantly lost their appetites. “I do vegan,” I told her, with a flat tone that matched her lack of expression. “I’ll get the machine.”

.

Olivia, Trevalyan, Ben and Frida were hovering around the kitchen door when I entered. They coalesced around me, a tight circle of concern.

“You have to let them use the dining room,” Ben said.

“We can keep tabs on them if they’re in there,” Olivia added.

“They want rooms,” I said flatly. “You’re not getting rid of them. Frida, they want four rooms for tonight. Can you manage?”

She nodded, her natural ringlets bouncing, and scurried to the back door that emerged under the stairs.

I turned and grabbed the credit card terminal off the shelf. I didn't ask why they wanted to keep tabs on the feds. I wanted to know what was going on, and I didn't even like Harper all that much.

"If you're going to stay in here," I told Ben, Trevalyan and Olivia, "then start up the deep frier over there. Four hundred and fifty degrees. These guys want a meal, pronto."

"What are you going to serve?" Olivia asked, looking around.

"The quickest and least healthy meal I can think of," I told them. "Bacon cheese burgers and fries. Turn the griddle on, too. Hottest setting."

All three of them looked as though I'd asked them to conduct open heart surgery.

"I'm not asking you to be line cooks. Just turn equipment on. Go!" I moved back out into the dining room. Mooney stood where I had left her. I added the line items to the terminal...and felt a little faint when I saw the bottom line. I mentally added a salad to their meals, and I would dig out one of the frozen apple pies and make a custard to go with it.

But Mooney just swiped the card without comment. She also didn't tip. Huge surprise.

"You might want to put one of those tablecloths back on the tables," I told Mooney. "Cutlery is on the sideboard."

I moved over to the long table and swept up as much of the dishes and cutlery as I

could carry and headed back into the kitchen.

Only Olivia was left. Also, not a huge surprise. Neither Ben nor Trevalyan liked to cook, although Ben would bake occasionally and Trevalyan was a master chef when it came to spell ingredients.

“What can I do to help, Anna, dear?” Olivia asked. She stood by the griddle. Olivia was our default mayor, and she often looked as though she had stepped out of a 1930s movie. She wore glamor the way I wore jeans. Her collar-length brown hair was bobbed and waved with a smooth gleam that promised it felt like silk. Her lips were a ruby-red, perfect bow. Her skirt stopped just below her knees, and she always wore loafers with heels, which made the most of her slender ankles. Perhaps she had bought the shoes in the 1930s, and they had simply not worn out. They were classically styled.

I was tempted to tell Olivia to just stay out of my way. I would be moving fast. But I’d just been bitching to myself about a lack of help. I said, instead, “Stand over by the end of the prep table, huh? I’ll call as I need things.”

Olivia stepped over to the end of the steel table while I adjusted the dials on the griddle. It came up to temperature fast. Then I started calling out ingredients.

Olivia scurried, I prepped, then cooked. Frozen, partially cooked French fries, prepared burger patties, a salad that always looked good as long as the ingredients covered the color spectrum. Bacon and patties on the griddle. Fries in the deep fryer. Apple pie in the microwave, then into the oven to finish warming it up. I had Olivia stir the custard, which could thicken beyond use if it wasn’t watched.

While everything was cooking, I sliced pickles, tomatoes, onions and shredded lettuce. I piled them in one of the divided steel trays and sent Olivia out to the dining room with the tray of condiments – mustard, relish, ketchup, mayonnaise.

I even had black bean burgers that I usually made for Wim. I fried one of those up for Mooney. I dug out the vegan mayonnaise and sent Olivia out with instructions to place it directly in front of Mooney.

“What are they doing out there?” I asked when Olivia returned.

“Listening. Agent King is asking Harper about Gouverneur.”

“Was that where Calloway was killed?” I asked.

“I don’t know, my dear. I couldn’t linger. It would have looked suspicious.”

I glanced at her, the chef’s knife lifted so the tomato juice dripped onto the chopping board and not down my sleeve. Something I’d learned the hard way. “If you all want me to keep the feds here so you can spy on them, you need to, you know, spy on them.”

“Oh, we are ,” Olivia said placidly. She returned to the pot of custard and picked up the spoon.

Barely ten minutes later, I took four plates out to the dining room. Olivia carried two.

King stopped talking as we entered and looked around as though he wanted to get pissed all over again at the interruption, but we were carrying the meal he had demanded.

We placed the plates on the round table. I put Mooney’s in front of her. Each plate had a heaped serving of salad, still steaming fries and a burger bun with a burger inside.

The rest of the burger ingredients, including chopped avocados, sizzling bacon,

slices of Havarti cheese, shredded carrot and slices of mini peppers, along with the usual tomato and onion slices and lettuce, were in the divided steel trays, which we placed in the center of the table.

“Dessert is on the sideboard. Don’t let it get cold,” I warned them. The agents’ eyes all got larger as they looked from the round table to the sideboard and back.

King got to his feet. He looked at Harper. “Don’t leave the hotel.”

Harper got to her feet. “I’m getting a drink,” she declared.

“Sure. Get drunk, if you want,” King told her. He didn’t quite smile.

Harper did, though. “So I can stupidly talk myself into confessing to something I didn’t do? Dream on, King.” She stalked out of the dining room. But Harper always stalked. I didn’t think anything of it.

King apparently didn’t, either. He sat at the round table with his agents. None of them looked up. No one said thank you.

I left. I had spying to catch up on, apparently.

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CHAPTER FIVE

IT WAS AN INGRAINED HABIT to return to the kitchen. I had dishes to wash and a kitchen to tidy.

Olivia was already stacking dishes in the dishwasher and the prep table gleamed, with not a thing on it.

“Why don’t you go and get a drink, dear?” she told me.

“It’s barely one in the afternoon,” I pointed out.

“Everyone’s in the bar,” Olivia said. “Except Broch, of course.”

Of course ?

“Go on,” Olivia added.

I shrugged. It would be nice to not have to clean up for once. I moved down the kitchen – it was nearly twice as long as it was wide – and thumped the swing door open with the heel of my hand as usual, went through and moved out from under the stairs running overhead.

The door to the bar was just at the other end of the short, wide passage, up by the front door. Where the stairs started, the corridor widened into the foyer.

A few months ago, Hirom had found an old, scratched and dented wooden rocking

chair in the cellar. He'd spent a lot of spare time stripping generations of paint and restoring it. Ghaliya had donated one of the many cushions in her storybook bedroom to add to the seat of the chair. I'd placed the chair in the space along the wall beside the bar door.

Broch was sitting in the chair. He had a laptop open on his knee and was typing furiously.

It was amazing to me that he could move his big fingers so fast across the keyboard, but he wasn't deleting or hesitating. He looked up as I came up to the door. "Shh..." he breathed.

Mysteriouser and mysteriouser.

I pulled the curtain over the bar door aside and went in. When I tugged the curtain back into place, I saw the screen of his laptop.

He was typing out dialogue. Something about the Rangers.

Hockey.

Neither hockey nor fiction seemed to be quite Broch's style.

I moved around the big teak bar. Hirom hopped off his chair at the local's table, ready to run over and pour me a drink, but I waved him back. I poured myself a glass of lemonade and moved over to the table where everyone was sitting.

With a quick glance, I confirmed that it was everyone who lived in Haigton, except for Olivia, who was in the kitchen; Broch, who was writing a novel; Harper, who was being questioned; and Frida, who was upstairs preparing the four guest rooms for my new guests.

That left Trevelyan, Ben, Hirom, Wim, Harper and Ghaliya. The table was round, wide and sturdy. It easily accommodated all of them. The chairs were barrel chairs, which didn't tuck under the table, and took up more space than the spindle-backed wood chairs that populated the rest of the bar. I knew from experience the barrel chairs were deep and comfortable.

I suspected that guests would automatically pick this table, except that at least one or two of the locals were invariably already sitting around it. That also scared any guests away from the cozy window seat and the long table in front of the window, for the local's table sat only a few feet away. Anyone sitting at the local's table could enjoy both the view through the mullioned windows onto Haigton's high street, or the warmth of a fire, if one was set in the massive fireplace the table sat beside. No fire burned today, and I felt in need of it.

I sank into the chair that Trevelyan pulled out for me, with a deep sigh. "I can't stay long," I told everyone. "Olivia virtually shoved me in here."

"We'll have something soon," Ben said softly.

"Have what?" I asked.

"What they have," Hirom said, lifted his tankard toward the bar door.

I realized he was referred to the feds in the dining room. My heart gave a little patter. What did the FBI want Harper for? Yeah, I didn't like her, but it still offended me the way they strong-armed everyone, including Harper. It felt as though they thought we were all criminals, just not proven yet. The disdain, and the expectation that we would jump when they snapped their fingers, was irritating. I'd stopped answering to anyone with that sort of attitude about a decade ago. It was doubly annoying that I had to buckle under now.

I looked directly at Harper. “What did they want to know?”

Harper shrugged. “Where I was and what I was doing, two days ago. Where I was and what I’ve been doing around the state for the last twenty years.”

“Why?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “I know exactly why, because the feebies are really into oversharing.”

“That’s it?” I asked, ignoring her typical-Harper retort. “Just where you were two days ago and your history?”

“Harper’s history would be difficult to explain, I imagine,” Wim said quietly.

Harper grimaced. “I’ve had practice. But that King asshole...he knows there’s more that he can’t see.” She considered. “He’s got good instincts.”

“It sounds as though that’s all he’s working on,” Ben said. “Instinct.”

“Well, I didn’t give him anything, because I have nothing to give.”

“They didn’t tell you more about Calloway?” I asked.

“Oversharing. Hello,” Harper replied.

“Right.” I nodded. “And you don’t know who he is?”

“I have no fucking idea.” For the first time, Harper showed an emotion other than her usual anger. It was bafflement. I suspected that Harper didn’t like showing ignorance about anything. She would consider it a weakness.

But clearly, King had given her no information at all, while grilling her about her movements two days ago. That had to be when they figured the man had died.

Lunch had interrupted their interrogation.

“Why did you tell me to feed them?” I demanded of Ben.

“You were going to refuse seventy dollars a head?” Trevelyan asked, his mustache wriggling as he smiled. “Expensive burgers.”

“They’re good burgers,” I replied, trying to smother my irritation as it flared higher. If I was going to get irritated about it, why not vent it upon someone who had done nothing wrong? The day was heading for the garbage chute anyway.

“Then why are you angry about it, mom?” Ghaliya asked. She rubbed her extended belly absently, down by the side. She had been experiencing Braxton Hicks contractions for about a week. And that had freaked me out. I still didn’t know what we were going to do when she went into labor. I didn’t know if the town would let both of us leave. And a home delivery was out of the question. Ghaliya’s pregnancy was too high-risk for us ignorant locals to manage.

I rubbed my temple. The headache that seemed to lurk behind my eyes, lately, was starting up again. “I’m not angry,” I told Ghaliya, then let out a deep breath, venting...well, yes, it was anger.

“You would have turned down their money?” Hirom asked, surprised.

“Yes,” I said shortly.

Everyone looked at me. “Why?” Wim asked.

I had to think about it. I'd have preferred to head up to my apartment and sit on the gilded and tucked green velvet sofa and think carefully, without the pressure to come up with an answer. But no one at the table would let me do that. They wanted to know now.

At my age, one was supposed to know themselves a little better than a flighty teenager. I had learned, though, that the more I dug into my brain, the more I learned how much I didn't know about myself.

I rubbed my temple harder. "I just..." It occurred to me that I could just get up and leave. Cite too much work as a reason for not lingering to answer their questions.

And then I had it. "Six of them," I said. "Demanding, snotty, and imperious. I already have enough to do, with just three guests. How am I supposed to deal with them as well? Frida and Hirom are run off their feet, and you tell me it's going to get a lot worse before it gets better. That Beltane is Haigton's Super Bowl. And that, frankly, scares the crap out of me. I just figured out how to operate the cash drawer!"

Everyone around the table considered me. No one laughed, which I was thankful for, because even I thought I had sounded whiney.

"Do you think," Trevalyan said slowly, peering into his tankard, "That's why Olivia is in the kitchen right now?" He looked up at me, peering through his glasses.

I felt small and ungrateful. But at the same time, I hadn't lied, even if I had complained with a high school girl's tone. "And I appreciate that she is," I said firmly. "I might have to tap all of you on the shoulder and ask for help in the next while, if Beltane is as busy as you say, and you're not just trying to haze the new girl."

No one smiled.

Well, that killed my last hope that the next few weeks weren't going to be as insane as they'd reported.

I got to my feet and put my lemonade on the table. "You drink it, Ghaliya." I knew it was natural, homemade, and organic because I'd squeezed the lemons for Hirom.

I looked around the table. "I have to go and work."

"Me, too," Hirom said, pushing himself off the chair and landing on both feet.

Ben raised his hand. "We're waiting for Broch," he said, with a tone that implied I should wait with them.

"Why?" I asked.

"He's listening," Trevalyan said. "To the Feds."

Ooooooh . The details shifted my understanding. Broch wasn't typing out a novel. He was taking dictation. It was the Feds who had been speaking about hockey. "He can hear everything said in the dining room from way over here by the bar door?"

"Easily," Trevelyan said. "Vampires hunt by sound and scent. Sight comes last, especially at night, but he can see farther than any of us."

I shivered. It was an atavistic reaction to the idea of being prey.

Moody, the FBI agent, appeared in the doorway to the bar. She looked around, found us at the table, and glared at us. "Ms. Gibbs? Please come with me."

"Drinking time is over," Harper announced and put her nearly empty glass of whisky on the table with a thump. She stood and strode over to where Moody was waiting.

“Well?”

Moody blinked. “This way.” She turned and led Harper out of the bar and across the foyer, I presume, as if Moody was the local.

As the curtain fell back into place, I glimpsed Broch’s elegant leather loafer. He was still in the rocking chair. Moody hadn’t considered him suspicious at all.

“Harper could be there for hours yet. Which means Broch will be, too.” I didn’t spare any thought about Broch getting fatigued or hungry, because he couldn’t do either. “If this Ray Calloway has been murdered, and if they think Harper has something to do with it, they will keep going over and over it, hoping she’ll make a mistake or crack.”

“You know FBI procedures?” Hirom asked, sounding impressed.

“I watch movies,” I said. “And I helped produce some, years ago. I hired the consultants and stood around listening to them talking to the directors.” I shrugged.

Everyone looked impressed.

“It wasn’t like that,” I assured them.

“Like what?” Hirom asked.

“You’re all looking at me as though I’m Hollywood. I really wasn’t. I was paid to keep people happy because my boss had a way of pissing people off.”

“You were paid to be nice?” Trevalyan laughed.

Ben smiled. Wim pressed his lips together and kept his gaze on his beer. Even

Ghaliya was grinning.

I scowled at everyone. “I can be nice when I have to.” I walked away, because I had to get back to work. My first stop was going to be the kitchen, because the food I had thought adequate to feed twelve people for the week wasn’t going to last much more than a few days, now. But I also didn’t want to miss what Broch had to say. “Let me know when the feds are done with Harper!” I called over my shoulder and went to work.

CHAPTER SIX

IT WAS PAST FIVE BEFORE King finished questioning Harper. I think the only reason he wrapped it up was because I moved into the dining room from the kitchen, rattling crockery and cutlery. The opening of the door also wafted the scent of jambalaya and cornbread fresh out of the oven into the dining room. At least three of the agents sitting around the tables with their laptops in front of them looked up and sniffed. Then swallowed.

“Man...!” Moody breathed. She looked at me hopefully.

“Vegan version, too,” I promised her.

She sighed happily and went back to work, while the others glanced at where King sat with Harper. He had her boxed into the corner and I had to wonder what she thought about that. Her chair was right up close to the walls, while King had placed his chair directly in front of her and barely three feet away. His knees were spread, as if he was fencing off the corner.

Harper, though, sat with her arms crossed. She didn't look pissed, as she usually did. But neither did she look happy.

I went back to the kitchen and brought out the salted tomato salad, the green salad and the garlic green beans, which could sit under the warmer.

King looked around this time, frowning. He watched me place the salads on the sideboard, his pale blue eyes narrowed. I saw his larynx bob.

All his agents were watching him, now.

His expression said he resented the interruption. But then it smoothed out to bland status. He sighed and turned back to Harper.

I couldn't linger and listen. But I didn't need to, not with Broch writing everything down, out there in the foyer. Besides, I could hear tables being moved. Chairs scraping across the original hardwood floor, which made me wince. King had clearly shut up shop for the day.

Filtering through the normal door at the other end of the kitchen, I could hear Harper's voice. She sounded as though she was in the foyer.

Feet thudding on the stairs told me everyone was heading for the dining room. I could hear more voices in the foyer.

I ladled the last of the large pot of jambalaya into the serving tray, carried it out and added it to the warming frame. Went back and got the vegan version, the hush puppies, and the cornbread.

By the time I returned to the dining room, King's people had pulled the round tables back into position and re-laid the tablecloths. Everyone was gathered around the sideboard, although conversation was not as free, easy and loud as it usually was. The three guests and the agents kept everyone's chatter to a low murmur.

Broch was there, too. He put a dab of everything on his plate and picked up a knife and fork. He even came back for a glass of lemonade, but only half-filled it.

It was the first time I had seen him "eat" in front of people who didn't know what he was. I guess that covering up his real nature would have become habitual, after a while. I still had no idea how old he was. He could be only a few years older than he

looked, or thousands of years old...I had no idea if a vampire's existence had a natural term limit. I was still getting used to the idea that they existed.

Broch was nothing like the vampires I'd met in the pages of novels. He didn't twinkle in the sunlight...although he didn't turn into a pillar of smoke in sunlight, either. I'd seen his reflection in a mirror, and his tankard was a silver alloy. Most of the myths were wrong. What else about vampire lore was wrong?

The chatter around our table of locals was just as subdued and innocent as it had been around the sideboard. Everyone seemed to be hungry. They concentrated on their meals. Although more than just Hirom went back for seconds, which pleased me.

I spotted Moody going back for seconds, too, and that also pleased me.

Olivia was the first to push back her chair and put her napkin on the table. Wim, who had eaten little, also seemed eager to get to his feet.

"Busy day tomorrow!" Olivia announced over her shoulder as they left.

"Thank you for dinner, Anna," Wim added, turning enough to look at me with his gentle eyes.

I smiled back at him.

Everyone else got up and left, one by one, not long after that. Even Ghaliya said she wanted a glass of Hirom's warmed cider, and eased to her feet, then moved slowly over to the archway.

The Feds were still at their single table. The three other guests were also still eating.

I went into the kitchen and grabbed the big, flat plastic tub and headed back out to

collect dirty dishes, and told myself I didn't mind having to clean up by myself. Six people were paying seventy dollars a meal, and the other three guests I had also marked up—but not by as much as King's people.

When I stepped out into the dining room to collect the fourth tub of dishes, the other two tables were also empty.

Pleased, I swept all the tables clear, bundled up the tablecloths and stuffed them in the laundry bag under the stairs. Then I tackled the dishes and for the first time appreciated having a commercial dishwasher under the counter, not a little domestic one. Up until now, I'd considered it a waste of water and power and had frequently washed dishes by hand, instead.

Not tonight, though. I was impatient to hear what Broch had to say about his eavesdropping.

I stacked the dishwasher and got it going, cleared out the kitchen, wiped and washed the last of the dishes by hand, and left everything to dry. Then I hurried through the side door into the corridor. I would slip into the bar and sit at the local's table and see—

“Mom.”

I whirled, surprised. Ghaliya was sitting sideways on the bottom steps of the staircase, her back against the wall, and one foot stretched out.

“Ghaliya! I thought you wanted cider?”

“I changed my mind,” she said. She nodded toward the bar, which was behind me.
“King and his people are in there.”

“Oh.” My heart sank. I couldn’t cross-examine Broch while they were there.

“I want to go for a walk,” Ghaliya pronounced, and got slowly and awkwardly to her feet. “I’ve been sitting on my butt all freaking day. I’m going stir crazy.”

“You’re not walking out there at night,” I said swiftly. It was too easy to imagine her tripping over a curb, or a mystery crack in the sidewalk. Falling. Falling on her stomach... I shuddered.

“That’s why I waited for you,” Ghaliya said. “You can hold my elbow all the way if you want. I mean it, Mom. I’m growing moldy.”

I rolled my eyes at her, then considered it properly. I wanted to find Broch, but I still wasn’t sure which of the houses along the main street was his. And I remembered how awkward and lumbering I had felt in my eighth month. I had gone a little stir-crazy myself. I relented. “Well, okay. Just up to the corner. And slowly . I’ll get my jacket—”

She picked up my jacket, neatly folded, from the step up from the one she had been sitting on. Her jean jacket was underneath.

“Ah,” I said and held out my hand.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ONCE WE WERE OUT ON the sidewalk, the cool of the evening registered against my cheek. I took Ghaliya's arm and glanced at her to see if she was going to protest.

Instead, she steered me away from the crossroads, which was the direction I had intended to go in and headed west.

Well, we couldn't walk far in that direction, either. The road went on for not quite half a mile, then came to a dead end. We would reach the wards shielding the town just before the road ended. I suspected the town would not let both of us cross over.

I let Ghaliya steer me across the road to the sidewalk on the other side, which ran farther into the trees than the sidewalk on this side. It was a good chance to check which houses were showing lights. I could figure out from there who lived in which house, because I already knew Ben's house. His was next door to Olivia and Wim's house, which was on the corner, right beside the crossroads.

And Trevelyan's house was two up from Ben's.

The house between them was dark. That might not mean it was empty, though.

"You need to slow down," I told Ghaliya. "You'll get a stitch and have to sit right where you are until it passes."

"I'm fine," Ghaliya said with a touch of impatience.

I let it drop. But I kept my hand on her elbow. A light touch.

We passed Trevalyan's house, which showed the flicker of candles. He was a touch traditional in his practice. He liked the power of candlelight.

I mentally sighed. I had not gone back to attempt the spellcasting once more, as I had promised I would this morning. We had all been a little distracted, but I guessed that Trevalyan would be disappointed in me, anyway. He didn't get angry. Well, not often, even though I was a terrible student. He just looked at me with his mournful large brown eyes behind the magnifying glass of his lenses. My insides squirmed.

On the other side of Trevelyan's house was a side street. Narrow, dark, and without sidewalks. Gravel, pebbles and leaf litter had accumulated on the street, because vehicles rarely used it.

Ghaliya turned firmly into the street.

"The footing doesn't look good," I pointed out.

"It's fine."

"It's too dark to know if it's fine." The strong light that poured out of the hotel windows to illuminate the main street, which also lacked lights, didn't reach this far.

Ghaliya had her chin set in a way I recognized. That was my "don't mess with me" look. At least, that was what Jasper had told me more than once as we both watched her grow up.

I sheered away from that thought. I didn't want to think about Jasper, or the white envelope sitting on my desk, waiting for me to do something with it.

I stayed silent and scanned the littered roadway ahead of us with my gaze, looking for anything that Ghaliya could trip over. Our boots crunched in the pebbles, but the old leaves were damp and silent.

The road seemed surprisingly smooth. By the time we reached the next corner, I was feeling a bit more comfortable, but not enough to let go of Ghaliya's arm.

The intersection was as littered as the road we were on. The cross street ran left and right. Ghaliya turned left and trudged down the middle of the road for about twenty yards, then veered over to the curb.

I kept my mouth shut and stepped up onto the pale new weeds with her. The house we were in front of showed a glimmer of light through the front windows that wasn't the cheerful flicker of candlelight. It was too red, and it was showing in every window, not just one.

A fireplace, I guessed. Someone who felt the cold the way Ghaliya and I did. Not Broch's house, then.

Something stirred. A recent memory. I could hear Trevalyan's voice in my head, wavering, but rich. The house directly behind mine...the gray one? Wim uses it as a greenhouse. Works remarkably well, especially in winter. A classic greenhouse would be a king's ransom to ship in here and build.

This house was Wim's greenhouse. That explained the red glow in the windows. I knew the house had two old-fashioned open-faced fireplaces, which was partly the reason that Wim and Olivia had chosen it as a greenhouse.

It also didn't have a front porch. Just a simple concrete stoop in front of the centrally placed front door. The door had once been white, but paint flakes that still clung to the door gave it weird little shadows all over from the moon rising behind us, as if the

door was clothed in camouflage.

I let Ghaliya knock on the door, which opened almost straight away. Olivia smiled at us and beckoned us inside.

We stepped in and I sighed as the warmth of the room registered. The two fireplaces were on either side of the large front room, and each held a banked fire. Red hot coals glowed. Tiny flames played over them, as if they were trying gamely to linger. On the far side of the room were more windows, and an old-fashioned, deep metal kitchen sink standing on metal legs.

Someone had pulled out the interior walls. The entire main floor of the house was all open space. To the left, against the wall, narrow stairs ran up to the upper floor.

Between us and the windows on the far side of the room were hundreds of plants. None sat on the floor, which I had half-expected. All the pots and trays sat upon a range of objects that provided a horizontal surface at approximately waist height. I spotted old tables and desks, and lots of cardboard boxes, some of them stacked to gain the correct height. Old wooden fruit crates were stacked vertically and planks rested across them to create the horizontal surface.

On the walls, rough shelving made of raw timber and steel brackets held up even more plants. Some of them climbed up netting that had been stapled to the wall behind them.

The bigger tables had been pushed under the windows, beside us, and were covered with big terracotta pots.

I'm not a gardener. Any of the plants that did not have fruit or vegetables hanging from them I couldn't identify. But I do know vegetables. By the front windows were tomatoes and strawberries, pepper plants and leeks. Elsewhere I spotted green onions,

potatoes, salad greens, basil, beans, cauliflower, onions and enormous cabbages. Broccoli, parsley, even a lemon tree, its leaves reaching toward the ceiling.

Climbing up the wall near the fireplace was a vine from which cucumbers hung. Another vine was festooned with long green beans.

“Wow...!” Ghaliya breathed.

I didn’t have time to catalogue everything in the room. “Most of this ends up in my kitchen...” I murmured, for Wim and Olivia had been bringing me boxes of vegetables all summer. I paid them fairly, and they paid me for turning the produce into meals.

Ghaliya glanced at Olivia. “Everyone’s upstairs?”

She nodded.

We moved up the stairs, going single file. They were steep and I stayed right behind Ghaliya and watched her every step. She was breathing hard by the time we reached the next floor.

Whoever had torn out the interior walls downstairs hadn’t stopped there. The top floor was as open as the main floor, and just as crowded with green, growing things. The air was slightly cooler up here, but not by a lot. I spotted grills in the floor. They weren’t modern central heating vents, but simple channels that allowed warm air to rise up to this level. The walls jutted where the chimneys passed up to the roof, and those walls would be warm, too.

A small area had been cleared out in the middle of the plants. I could see that the rows that had been there had been pushed up against others, out of the way.

More old orange crates had been turned on their ends. Broch sat on one of them, his laptop on another crate in front of him. Ben, Trevalyan and Harper each had stools of their own, and there were three extra crates, forming an oval inside the little space.

A pair of candles flickered on the floor between us, giving the room just enough light to see details. They were the plain white ones that Trevalyan favored. I looked at him as we settled on the spare crates. “you left candles burning in your house?”

“I wanted to make it look like I was there.”

I had spent years trying to teach Ghaliya and Oscar safety around candles. They’d both gone through a phase of wanting to keep lighted candles in their rooms. Ghaliya had also burned incense. I had thought she was hiding the smell of cigarettes, but I had been proved wrong. Ghaliya had never picked up the habit. Oscar had smoked for a few months, until he’d sat down to figure out the annual cost of even a few cigarettes a day. That had offended him more than the long term health consequences and he’d stopped smoking that same day.

Now Trevalyan was letting candles burn in his house, untended. “You could have turned on a light switch,” I pointed out. It vexed me that a touch of my “I’m your mother,” voice emerged.

Trevalyan grinned. “I can make candles out of fat for pennies. Are you going to pay my power bill for me? Because that seems to increase every time I get one.”

I couldn’t dispute that. The monthly power bill for the hotel made me feel faint.

Nor could anyone sitting around us.

“It’s the taxes,” Ben said.

“And the fees. They add up to more than the power we use,” Broch added.

I looked at him, surprised. “Aren’t you all...well...financially independent?”

“Thanks to Juda, we were,” Broch said. “But...well...” He shrugged.

“You’re using your capital now?” I asked.

“Not yet,” Olivia said. “But with Juda gone, we must be careful to avoid that. And shares are not doing well right now. I don’t know why.”

“The value goes down and interest is cut,” Ben added.

“I thought...” I began. Then I shook my head. “It’s none of my business.”

“This is Haigton,” Trevalyan said. “We all know each other’s business. It’s how we get by.”

“What did you do before Juda came along, with his day trading?” I asked.

“He was here when I got here,” Olivia said.

“Me, too,” Trevalyan said. And Trevalyan, I thought, had been here the longest out of everyone, except maybe for Ben. I didn’t know Ben’s full story. I hadn’t coaxed him to speak about it. Just the idea of a cozy chat like that made me feel uncomfortable. Even now, I avoided meeting his eyes.

“Then everyone in town is squeezing their budgets...” I murmured, shunting aside the idea of chatting with Ben.

“Hard times come and go,” Olivia said brightly. “We’ll get by.”

Olivia would likely remember the Great Depression. She had actually seen hard times come and go.

“Why is Wim not here?” I asked her. Apart from Hirom, who was running the bar where King and his people were drinking, and Frida, who was agoraphobic and couldn’t step outside the hotel, every other local was in this room except for Wim.

Olivia said, “Wim isn’t feeling well.”

“Anything I can help with?” Ben asked. His tone was light.

Olivia shook her head. “I don’t think it’s anything to worry about, yet. He’s just...he’s not responding to spring as he normally does. At least I think that is all it is. He’ll come around.”

Everyone nodded except Ghaliya and me. “What happens to Wim in spring?” I asked.

Trevalyan smiled. It was an extraordinary expression on his normally sad face. And Olivia blushed. In that dim light, I could see her face turn red. All over. Even her throat turned a bright red.

She patted her hair, cleared her throat and looked down at the floor, unable to meet anyone’s gaze.

“In spring,” Trevalyan said, “Wim...gets younger, shall we say?”

His observation, and Olivia’s blushing let me grasp their meaning. Perhaps Wim actually grew younger, but more likely they were saying in a roundabout way that he grew frisky, responding to the renewal of the season the same way animals did. He was a dryad, and more closely connected to nature than modern man.

“The renewal of the year?” I suggested delicately.

Trevalyan’s smile broadened. “You might say.”

Ben touched Olivia’s shoulder. “Let me know if he doesn’t pick up soon. It’s nearly Beltane....”

Olivia nodded and said nothing.

“Let’s get on with this before King starts wondering where everyone is,” Harper said.

Broch nodded. “You were in the room itself for most of it, Harper. You tell us what you learned. Then I’ll tell you what they spoke about after they let you go.”

Harper looked bored. “I told you. They wanted to know where I was two days ago. When this Calloway person got himself killed. They gave away nothing.”

“They gave away a lot,” Broch told her. “You didn’t listen.” His tone wasn’t chiding. He was just stating facts.

“I don’t give a damn,” Harper said, with a touch of anger. “I don’t get why any of you do.” And she looked around the circle with a glare.

“We want to help,” Olivia said.

“I don’t need anyone’s help.”

“Then look at it this way,” Broch said. “If we don’t help you get off the hook with the FBI, and stop them from looking into your past, they’ll start looking into everything and everyone around you. If that happens, the town itself will be in jeopardy.”

“So? It’s not like I like this place.” Harper’s tone was sullen.

Trevalyan crossed his arms. “You don’t care if the town begins to think of King and his agents as enemies?”

“It already thinks they’re enemies. It’s not letting them leave,” Harper pointed out, with a withering tone.

“No, it’s stopping you from leaving with them,” Broch corrected her. “It keeps assets close. It lets the harmless and the useless go. I’m fairly certain that if King tried to leave by himself, the town would wave him farewell, if it had the means to wave.”

“You really don’t want to see what the town would do to them...to us, if it came to believe we were enemies,” Trevelyan said softly.

“This damn town!” Harper railed. “We all kowtow to it like it’s some sort of crime lord. It’s just a two-year-old with a temper!”

“You should stop thinking of it in human terms,” Ben said. “It isn’t human. Nor is it good or bad. It just is. And it wants to survive, just as all of us do. It doesn’t have morals, or human sensibilities. That is why what it does to survive appalls us.”

“I don’t care !” Harper ground out.

She was lying. I could tell by everyone’s faces that I wasn’t the only one to recognize her lie for what it was.

Broch opened his laptop. “Former New York detective Raymond Calloway was last seen in Gouverneur on the day he died, and that’s where the body was found. King’s people learned that he was asking for directions to Haigton, because Haigton wasn’t on the map he had and he couldn’t find it on Google Maps, either.”

He looked up from the screen, and around at us. “He was stabbed with an iron knife identical to yours, Harper.”

Harper smiled. It was a cat-that-ate-the-cream smile. She leaned down and delved in the top of her boot, then withdrew a knife with a pitch black blade. The edge was sharpened and glinted silver in the candlelight. “Not my knife, though.”

“Where do you keep your backup?” Broch asked. “Have you checked it lately?”

“Of course,” she said, her tone cool. She returned the knife to her boot.

“When?”

“Just before I came here. It’s where I stashed it.”

As soon as King had let her go, she had checked her backup weapon. That meant that she had learned that much about Calloway’s death. And she had been worried enough to check as soon as she could.

Harper was not as cool and indifferent to this as she wanted us to believe.

Broch considered her for a long moment. She stared back.

He returned his gaze to the laptop. “Calloway was seen talking to someone in a diner in Gouverneur. He was heard to bellow ‘Harper did this!’ by a dozen witnesses who were in the diner at the time.”

I could understand why King and his agents had hotfooted it to Haigton, where a woman called Harper had some sort of connection to Calloway that I still didn’t understand.

Apparently Harper didn't, either, because she said, "He has to be talking about some other Harper. I tell you, I don't know the man. I told King that, too. For four straight hours."

Broch held up his hand. "I'll get to that. Calloway's shout about 'Harper did this' was at a woman he was sitting with. The woman had her back to the security cameras, and her hair was down. The side view wasn't clear. She never looked up. The Feds figure she knew where the security cameras were, because her face wasn't clear, the whole time she was there."

"Why aren't they chasing her then?" I asked.

"Thank you," Harper muttered.

Broch pointed to the screen. "Because Harper's past as a hunter means she has a violent history. 'Harper' is not a common name. Any 'Harper' in the North Country would have been checked. Your record, Harper, made them sit up and pay attention. Nothing quite official, but King figures that's because you were smart enough to avoid charges. Lack of evidence, or people providing solid alibis for you. But you have been peripheral to a lot of strange things and that has King convinced there's much more there that they haven't uncovered."

"And he's right," Harper said, with a smirk. "Except that I have zero connection to Calloway."

"Are you sure about that?" Broch asked, his tone smooth.

"Yep."

"His family died by something supernatural, right here in New York. Possibly vampires...but definitely Otherworld."

Harper's smile faded. Her eyes narrowed. Then her lips parted. "That guy? Was that his name? Calloway?"

"You tell us," Broch suggested. "You've remembered something."

"It's...damn, it was fifteen years ago," Harper said. She gripped her head with long, elegant fingers, pressing in on the temples. "It can't be the same guy...."

"I think you had best tell us what you do remember, dear," Olivia said. "We can pick through it. Ghaliya is rather good at finding facts online."

Hunter snorted, showing her disdain for all things online. Or perhaps her disdain was for Ghaliya. She dropped her hand. "I don't know if it is the same guy. It's the family torn up by vampires...that's the bit I remember."

"Of course you do," Broch said, his tone dry.

She glared at him. Then she crossed her arms.

Defense mode, I catalogued. I've seen lots of clients my old boss offended take that stance. That was my signal to soothe and ease and make them laugh.

But I didn't feel like putting Harper at her ease. I kept my mouth shut.

"Fifteen years ago, more or less. I can't remember the exact year," Harper said. "Those times...it's a bit blurry now. I was half out of my mind with..." She paused and glanced around the room, as if she was totting up who was listening and realizing she didn't want to expose herself. "I was angry a lot," she said, with an air of confession.

Olivia rubbed her lips, as if she was considering a deep thought. No one else reacted,

except Broch, whose mouth quirked up into a grin.

“Go on,” I said softly.

Harper cleared her throat. “He was a hunter, this Calloway – if it’s the same guy.”

“That makes sense,” Broch said. “You lost your family and turned to hunting. So did he.”

Harper ignored him. “I had found a nest, just north of Albany. I found a vantage point where I could watch the entrance, while I waited for sunrise.”

“Why sunrise?” Ghaliya asked.

“Vampires used to be nocturnal, once,” Broch said. “Our energy is still at its lowest when the night is done.” Unlike Harper, he didn’t seem to resent speaking about a topic that some might call personal.

“Oh...” Ghaliya breathed.

“Vampire’s nest?” I asked. If personal questions didn’t bother him, I’d take advantage of it.

“Some call it that,” Broch said. “Some don’t. The variety of domestic arrangements are as wide as human ones. People live alone or share housing. A nest is an old term.”

“It’s still valid,” Harper shot back. “There were six of them, and they were sucking the life out of the little hamlet they’d found. Every night. Turning some and leaving them to fend for themselves. As if they needed more numbers and more food.” She sent Broch a withering look.

“And there are humans who are barely worthy of the label, too,” Trevalyan said, his tone a little sharp. “Move on. You waited for sunrise...?”

“Then this dick amateur hunter showed up. With a tire iron ! He elbowed in on my kill, so I explained it to him.” She shrugged.

Broch’s gaze was on the laptop. “Four witnesses, including one with a cellphone with video capabilities—”

“Cellphones had video way back then?” Ghaliya asked, sounding amazed.

I rolled my eyes at her.

“There were a few high end models that did,” Broch replied. “Although the video they captured would not impress you.”

“I bet,” Ghaliya murmured.

“Four witnesses,” Broch repeated, “watched you beat the hell out of Ray Calloway. You left him on his hands and knees, bleeding from all orifices—”

“All?” Harper repeated.

“All,” Broch said.

“Damn.” She grinned. “I’m impressed.”

“The video is what got this onto Calloway’s file and let King connect you together,” Broch said. “The video made Calloway a laughing stock at his precinct. He became a pariah in law enforcement. He was forced into early retirement, which meant his pension was a fraction of what it might have been, and his reputation was tanked. He

couldn't find work on the civilian side of the street."

I held up my hand. "All that because he got beat up?"

"He was beaten up by a girl," Broch said. "Some men...some professions that are still deeply patriarchal, like police forces...wouldn't like it."

"But still, to force him into early retirement...it's extreme."

"And perhaps Calloway brought some of it on himself," Ben said. "Maybe he was the type of man who would find it demeaning, even soul-destroying, to lose a fight to a woman. Maybe he couldn't get over it and it affected his work."

"I think his work was already affected," Broch said. "He lost his whole family, then turned to hunting. That implies obsession." His gaze, I noticed, did not swing toward Harper. Not even a flicker. "This fight with Harper might have been the last straw for his senior officers."

I nodded. That made sense.

Broch closed the lid of the laptop. "King has the connection between Harper and Calloway from fifteen years ago. Calloway was heard to speak her name in the diner, only hours before he died, plus he was looking for directions to Haigton. That makes a compelling case for considering Harper a suspect."

"Except I didn't do it," Harper said.

"And where were you two days ago?" Broch asked.

"Here." Harper rolled her eyes.

“Where, specifically? King didn’t come and ask any of us to swear we saw you. I don’t remember seeing you on Tuesday, either. Did anyone else?” He looked around the group.

“Harper was at dinner,” I said. “Roast pork chops and apple sauce,” I added.

“Oh, yes!” Olivia said, with a small sigh.

“Yes, I saw you at dinner, Harper,” Ben said. “But you weren’t at the table in the bar any time during the day.”

Broch raised his brow, looking at Harper.

She recrossed her arms. “I was hunting.”

“Hunting what, precisely?” Trevelyan asked, with a tone of professional interest.

“Anything that moved.” Harper gave an exasperated sound. “Not sentient. Jeez.”

“And that’s what you told King?” Broch asked, his tone sharp.

“It’s the truth.”

“It’s...not helpful,” Ben said, his tone diffident. “You were alone in the forest. As far as King figures it, you could have trekked to Gouverneur and killed the man, trekked back, and we here would never know you’d been gone.”

“As if I could step over the damn wards!” Harper snapped.

“King doesn’t know that,” Broch said. “From here, moving cross-country, Gouverneur is a little under ten miles. With your stride, you could get there in well

under three hours, slip into town, do the deed, and trek back...possibly without a soul in Gouverneur even knowing you'd been there."

The silence lasted a long moment.

Then Trevalyan blew out his breath. "No wonder the laddie kept at it for four hours. It's a solid case, as far as he's concerned. He just needs the evidence."

"Or a confession," Ben added.

"Oh, dear," Olivia breathed.

I agreed. It did look bad for Harper. "What do we do next?"

Broch switched his gaze to me. "You have to talk to Axel King."

I sucked in a breath. "Me? Why me? And what do I talk to him about?"

"It has to be you," Trevelyan said.

"He likes you," Ben added.

I was speechless for a few heartbeats, then found my tongue again. "Don't be ridiculous!"

"Yeah, Mom. He likes you," Ghaliya said. "He watches you when you're in the room."

"Even while he was eating," Ben added.

"How would you know? You had your back to the room," I shot back.

Trevalyan touched my arm. “You said you can be nice to people, if you have to be. That overqualifies you. We’re all out of practice. We don’t get to talk to anyone but ourselves most of the time.”

I opened my mouth to say no, as firmly as possible, and suggest that Broch deal with the man. He was the lawyer.

But then I saw Harper.

She wasn’t saying anything. She was sitting squarely on her crate, looking ahead. Looking at nothing.

Her hands were between her knees, held there as if her knees were a vice. And beneath, the heel of her boot was knocking a tiny tattoo against the floorboards, so minute that no sound was made. Just the little up and down movement, which might have been compensating for the tremble that she wouldn’t let her hands show.

The sight of her tumbled me back over twenty years. To the bio booth at the back of the private cinema that my asshole of a boss, Danny Ortiza, had built at the back of the office suite, to run clients’ movies and other productions, plus test films, daily rushes and more. We’d all learned how to load footage and get it going. Ortiza had no reason to step into the compact booth and close the door.

His hand on my ass told me exactly why he was there.

I’d heard the whispers, before. But I’d ignored them, because...well, he signed my monthly cheques. I owed him a modicum of loyalty. He’d never once shown even a hint of anything toward me. I had decided that I would go with the evidence, not the rumors.

Then his hand had cupped my ass, and his thumb stroked.

I didn't even think about it. I straightened up, making his hand fall away, moved over to the old reel cabinet and closed the door, then turned to face him and ask if I should get the film I'd queued rolling.

There had been sweat on his temples, but I'd said...I can't remember what I said. I pretended nothing had happened, while sickness rose in my throat and made it hard to breathe, and the sound of my heart screaming in my head made it hard to hear. I had used every social skill I had learned while soothing his clients to get Ortiza to laugh and walk out that door and leave me alone.

But that wasn't the worst of that day. The worst came when I was sitting on the sofa that night with Jasper, trying my best not to weep and be all feminine and weak, while I told him what had happened, the rumors about Ortiza, and how I didn't think I was safe at work, anymore. I wanted to quit. Tomorrow. I'd make an excuse. And I'd knock myself out to find another job.

And Jasper had taken my hand and brushed my hair back the way he did with Ghaliya, to make her sleep, and told me I must have misinterpreted it. "Why now, after working for him for two years?" he'd added.

"I don't care why now. He did it, Jasper. I don't want to wait around for him to try again. It will be more than a hand on my ass, next time."

Jasper had studied my hand for a long moment, before lifting his chin and saying, "You can't quit. Not right now. We need the money, Anna. I didn't want to tell you this, but the business...it's not doing well..."

And I had sat on the sofa, numb and shaking, while he laid out for me all the reasons I had to go back to work tomorrow. And the next day. And the one after that. Because no one else would pay me what Danny Ortiza paid me, just to make clients feel good about themselves. I had no other skills.

The trembling in my middle had spread out along my arms and legs as I realized I was trapped. Stuck. I had to do this. I had no way out....

...just as Harper was sitting there, probably thinking she had no way out, either. She couldn't leave Haigton. The town wouldn't let her. King was convinced she was the killer, no proof existed that humans would accept as evidence of her innocence.

I lifted my chin. "Okay, I'll talk to King," I told everyone.

And even though she appeared to not react at all, from the corner of my eye, I saw Harper's boot come to a frozen halt. Her breath stopped.

But the oddest reaction in that room was Broch's. His expression...I didn't know what to make of it. It defied analysis.

I took a deep breath. "Why am I talking to King?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

OLIVIA AND BEN SAID THEY would get Ghaliya back to her room safely. While Ghaliya rolled her eyes and protested that she could get back to the hotel on her own, she was twenty-nine years old, damn it, I hurried down the stairs and around the end of the block, back to the main street.

The hotel door stood open as usual, and the curtain over the bar doorway hung closed, also as usual. But there were merry sounds coming from inside. Hirom was a spectacular barman. He knew how to listen, how to change moods, how to keep a room from breaking out in fights. He was oil over choppy water, and I wasn't sure there wasn't a touch of magic in what he did.

I was glad he was running my bar. And yes, I also liked his homemade whisky.

I moved around the bar itself, which jutted out into the big room, while a small sea of tables and the spindle-backed chairs spread across the rest of the room.

No one sat at the locals' table by the fire, which looked like a screaming advertisement that something was afoot, to me. But King didn't know that Broch and the others virtually lived at that table, watching the world go by.

The two dryads, my other guests, were talking quietly at the table by the window, where they could still see green growing things through the panes. They both had tall glasses in hand and from the color of the liquid inside, I guessed they had also discovered Hirom's lemonade.

My mystery guest, the woman I still wasn't ready to call human, Ms. Caro, sat all the way on the other side of the room, with her back to the wall, and a hardcover book open on the table in front of her. She was drinking beer, which just seemed...wrong. I would have guessed she was a Radler drinker, if she drank beer at all. Sherry seemed more her style.

Not that Ms. Caro had a lot of choice over what to drink, in Hirom's bar. But most people found his limited range of drinks perfectly adequate. Especially once they'd had a mouthful of either his beer or his whisky, even more so if he poured from the reserve bottles that he kept under the bar.

Ms. Caro's hair looked too perfectly coiffed. It was the type of hairstyle that went with pearls and a twinset, while she wore a cheap zippered hoodie, and a simple cotton shirt beneath it.

Jarring notes. Trevalyan was always encouraging me to not ignore the jarring notes. But so far, she was one of the few people in my life who wasn't causing issues. I turned away from the little mystery she presented.

Axel King and his people were in the middle of the room, spread around two of the tables that they had put together. They weren't crowded up around it, either. They had pushed their chairs out and were sprawled in relaxed positions. None of them wore their jackets. Those were all hung on the backs of their chairs. They'd loosened their ties or taken them off, too.

At least one empty glass sat in front of all of them. Bowls of chips and pretzels and nuts were between them, most of them near-empty.

"Give me a tray," I told Hirom as I reached the front of the bar.

He didn't ask why. He just moved down his narrow platform to the shelf where he

kept the trays and put one on the bar. I moved along the bar and picked it up. “What round number is this?” I asked him.

Hirom didn’t ask who I was referring to. “They’re on their fourth. I was about to catch the man’s eye, see if they wanted a fifth.”

“Pour a fifth round for me, on the house. I have some buttering up to do.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I glared at him.

“Sure, Anna,” he said, with a broad drawl, and a wink.

I went over to the twinned tables and rested the tray on one corner. Immediately, the six of them sat up straighter. The conversation halted.

“Sorry, just clearing out the empties,” I told them. “Another round is coming, too.”

“I didn’t order one,” King said. He sounded perfectly sober.

“On the house,” I told him.

“Nice,” one of the others murmured, and King speared him with a scowl.

I cleared off the table and picked up the tray. “Coming right up,” I told them. I paused by King’s end of the table, the heavy tray on my hip. “Might I have a word, Agent King?”

He looked up at me. This close, I noticed that he had...well, nice eyes. Then I realized that they weren’t being narrowed, and he wasn’t scowling. That was

probably why I hadn't noticed before. "Sure," he said, after a minute hesitation.

I took the tray over to the bar and left it there for Hirom to deal with. Agent King followed me over.

"Do you like whisky?" I asked him, because the empty glass that had been sitting in front of him had beer froth on the side.

"Not while I'm working," King replied.

"Oh." Well, that killed that ice breaker. "Are you still working?"

"Right up until I step back through my front door."

Hirom came over and put a full beer glass in front of King.

Okaaay . "How long until you get back?"

"Three months, so far."

Three months on the road. Wow.

Hirom put a glass in front of me. I had no idea what was in it, but I picked it up anyway and glanced around the bar. My three guests were occupying the wings, and King's people had the middle ground. "This way," I told King, and headed for the door. I ducked under the curtain, and across the foyer, into the dining room. It was dim in there, because I had turned the overhead lights off when I had finished in the kitchen.

I veered away from the locals' table and picked one of the round tables close to the kitchen door.

King had followed me. I expected him to sit directly across the table from me, but instead, he gripped the back of the chair next up from the one beside me, pulled it all the way out, and turned it so he was facing me. He put the beer on the table and sat in the chair. He leaned back and rested his ankle across his knee.

“Ms. Crackstone,” he acknowledged, and waited.

“Do you plan on using my dining room tomorrow, too?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Perhaps.” He looked up at the ceiling. “I don’t think this place runs to conferences rooms.”

“No,” I admitted. “How long do you think you’ll be here?”

“Until we’re satisfied we have all the information we’re looking for.”

It was a nice government-speak null-content answer.

“It’s just that...we’re expecting a lot of guests over the next little while.”

“We’re guests, too,” he said. “Paying guests. Highly paying guests.”

I didn’t bother looking guilty. “Are you going to talk to the people in the diner in Gouverneur?”

King didn’t give away anything, even though I had dropped a bomb on him. He didn’t react at all. But he did reach for his beer and sipped it thoughtfully, and I knew he was playing for time.

“How do you know about that?” he asked softly.

“It’s on the internet.”

“It is not.” He said it with complete assurance.

“Your people are monitoring every Discord channel, every sub-reddit, every private bulletin board out there?” I asked. I did my best to remove all dryness or sarcasm from my voice. I didn’t want to alienate him. Not yet, anyway.

He didn’t answer.

“Who was the woman in the diner?” I asked. “The one who wouldn’t look at the cameras?”

His eyes narrowed again. Yeah, that was the expression I’d seen all day. “That’s on the chat boards, too?”

“Yes.” I gave him a small smile. “We only look as if we’re tucked away from the rest of the world, here. We keep up. Do you know her name, yet?”

He ran his finger up and down his glass, swiping at the condensation. “That, Ms. Crackstone, is none of your business.”

“Call me Anna.” I paused. “You know, Harper does hunt. She’s good at it.”

“You want to talk to me about her hunting on a Federal land reserve, without a license?”

“She stays within the town limits. Always.”

“How do you know that. Do you go with her?”

I know because the Will of the Town won't let her step across the wards that protect it. I said, instead, "She was here for breakfast. Nine of us saw her at the breakfast table. And she was here for dinner. Nine of us ate roasted pork chops and applesauce with her. Breakfast is at seven-thirty, and finishes after eight a.m. Dinner was like tonight, just after five. You think Harper could have cut across the reserve, and around two lakes, sneaked into Gouverneur with not a single CCTV picking her up, killed Calloway, and got back in time to clean up, shower and walk into my dining room as cool and distant as usual?"

"She is that, isn't she?" Axel King said. Then he made a hissing sound and pushed the glass of beer away and sat up. "Even if it took her four hours to get to Gouverneur, that still gives her an hours' window. That's plenty of time, trust me."

"And what time did the M.E. say Calloway died?" I asked and watched King's face carefully. This was the question I had been sent in here to ask. The critical question, for which we needed the answer.

King looked away.

Bingo. Calloway had died either early in the morning, or late in the afternoon, outside Harper's "window of opportunity." King had been busy trying to crack Harper open and get her to confess. He hadn't put it together until now.

If he had considered it, if he'd put it together himself earlier in the day, he would have stared me in the eye right now. I wouldn't have surprised him.

I was mildly relieved he hadn't stared me in the eye. Because that would have meant he already knew that Harper couldn't have done it, but for reasons that didn't bear close inspection, he had persisted in hammering her, trying to make her...what? Confess to something she hadn't done?

King reached for his beer once more, and I had to hide my smile. Had he figured the damage was done, so what the hell?

He took a deep swallow and hissed as he put the glass back on the table. “Damn, that’s good,” he said, with a touch of bafflement in his voice.

“Hirom makes it himself. The smallest of microbreweries. He supplies just one bar.”

King nodded absently. “You know, we had a hell of a time finding this place.”

I nodded. “Lots of folk do.” I resisted adding that I had got lost myself, my first time visiting Haigton. It felt like oversharing. I couldn’t forget that this man was a federal agent.

“It’s the damndest thing,” King said. “When we asked for directions at Edwards, even they seemed unsure about where Haigton Crossing was.” Then he frowned. “No, it wasn’t quite like that...” he said, almost to himself. “It was as if they had forgotten about this place, until we mentioned the name. They were almost surprised to hear it.”

I nodded, because that was exactly the reaction I’d got when I’d asked for directions to the turn off, when I had arrived last December.

At least King hadn’t had to tackle knee-high snowbanks to get here.

I sipped my glass of whatever. It was some sort of tart-but-sweet fruit cocktail, with a featherweight kick. The spirit was one of Hirom’s experiments with the still that he kept in the cellar, until he could figure out what to do with it.

King was nodding to himself. “This isn’t the first place to drop off a map.”

“Really?” I said, genuinely surprised.

He nodded again. “I collect maps. Old ones.”

“That’s...I’ve never heard of anyone collecting maps, before.”

“We’re called cartophiles. There’re groups.”

“Recovery groups?”

His attention snapped back to me, and his eyes narrowed.

“Joke,” I said weakly, damning my big mouth. I scrambled to recover. “What is it you like about maps?”

“The history they hint at,” he said. His tone had gone back to far away again. Back to maps he had known, I guessed. “If you study maps, you can tell a lot about the history of a place without cracking open a book. Gouverneur, for example. That’s a French name. Perhaps Gouverneur was settled by the French before the War of 1812. Plus we’re less than twenty miles from the St. Lawrence and the Canadian border here. A lot of people in Gouverneur are probably related to a lot of people in Quebec.”

I nodded, although I knew he was wrong on one point. Gouverneur had been named after a statesman who lived there. I couldn’t remember who, or why. I didn’t know if he was right about Gouverneur residents being related to Quebecois people. I’d have to look it up, later.

“Then there’s Haigton Crossing. Haigton .” His gaze came back to me. “Names on maps mean something.”

“Someone named Haigton built the inn here?” I suggested, with an innocent, but interested tone. In fact, I already knew what the name meant.

“A town of witches, with a crossroads thrown in.” King’s smile was minimal, but it was there. “Maybe a few old women who knew their herbs founded the town. Although this isn’t exactly a crossroads.”

I kept my mouth shut. He was wandering all around the truth without quite stepping on it.

King took another mouthful of his drink. “If you look at maps across time, for the same region, you can see towns grow. And you can see towns vanish.”

“Towns don’t vanish, do they?” I gave a soft laugh.

King studied the bubbles in his glass. “Clarksville, down in Alabama. It used to be the county seat, but that got moved in the middle of the nineteenth century. The town wasn’t on the maps by the time Queen Victoria died. There’s nothing there now.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know what else to say. “Does that happen often?”

King gave the same tiny smile. “If you look at just about any map of what used to be the Gulf of Mexico, up until the end of the nineteenth century, you’ll see an island called Bermeja in the Gulf.”

“A whole island disappeared?”

“It was never there. Surveyors couldn’t find it. No one knows why the island was on maps for over three centuries.” He drank, put the glass down. Only an inch of beer remained. I could wait.

“It goes the other way, too,” King said.

“Maps add places?” I guessed. “I mean, you could put anything on a map that you wanted, can’t you?”

“Sure. And they used to do just that. If you pick up a map of Lancashire made in the 1930s, you might spot a town called Argleton on it.”

“Argleton didn’t exist?”

King shook his head. “Mapmakers put the town on there as a copyright control thing. They would know who was copying their maps, if the town was replicated. But then a general store right in that area adopted the name, and Argleton became a real place for a few decades.”

“It’s not there anymore?”

“Nope. The store closed and Argleton disappeared again. But it lived for a few years because someone put it on a map first.” He drained his beer.

I straightened. “Well...I have to get back to work.”

“This is the first time I’ve found a place in the US that isn’t on a map,” King said. His gaze stayed on me. He was watching for my reaction.

“I got lost getting here the first time, too,” I told him. “Will you be talking to the woman in the diner?” I kept my tone casual.

“No one knows who she is, and we have twenty other witnesses.” His tone was offhand. He kept his gaze on my face. “There’s something odd about Haigton.”

My innards jumped a little. “There’s something odd about any small places, haven’t you noticed?”

“Not like here.” His gaze released me. He got to his feet and picked up his glass. “Thanks for the beer, Ms. Crackstone.”

“Anna,” I said. “Enjoy your evening.”

He didn’t look back as he crossed the foyer and moved back into the bar.

I waited until he had disappeared, then I hurried to the stairs. I had an appointment of my own to keep.

CHAPTER NINE

I SHARED THE NARROW APARTMENT at the back of the third floor of the hotel with Ghaliya. It was merely a sitting room that ran along the back wall of that floor and two bedrooms in the attic space under the apex of the top roof. You reached both rooms by climbing up six steps.

Ghaliya was in love with the fairytale quaintness of the apartment. As we only slept in the apartment and ate in the dining room downstairs, I didn't give it much thought, other than the apartment had far more floorspace than my old one in L.A.

And occasionally, I worried about what we'd do when Ghaliya's child began to walk. But like many concerns I had about Ghaliya's pregnancy, I shoved that worry out of my mind whenever I recalled it. It felt as though I would be tempting fate to try to plan for raising a healthy child here, when her entire pregnancy was a miracle of the longest odds. If Ghaliya delivered this baby, it would be in defiance of the medical diagnoses of two G.P.s and two specialists who had all assured her she was unlikely to ever conceive and certainly would never carry a child to term.

I didn't want to sit. I walked the length of the sitting room while I waited, passing the many pictures and other framed memorabilia hanging on the wall. Nearly every frame hid a compartment built into the wall. I was still exploring what was in those compartments. I had discovered my mothers' multi-volume grimoire, which was how I had learned she had been a witch and had spent her years here in Haighton developing her skills.

It was how I had learned that I was a witch—and those two nouns in the same

sentence still felt awkward and unreal to me. That was probably why Trevalyan studied me with sad eyes. I was not a good student.

Broch slid into the room while I was at the far end where the kitchenette and old iron stove were located. He moved with complete silence, and when I turned, he was standing beside the wing chair.

I jumped a little, although I was getting used to the way he seemed to abruptly appear. I moved closer. “King hadn’t figured it out. The timing. He changed subjects when I laid it out.”

“Good. That means he’s not completely without morals,” Broch said. “We can use that.”

“They’re not going to follow up on the woman in the diner. I slipped it in while he was focused on something else. They have twenty witnesses who heard Calloway say it was Harper’s fault. That’s all they care about.”

“They’re not dropping their interest in Harper,” Broch said.

“No.” I frowned. “You heard them say that, while I was talking to King? What else did you hear?”

Broch’s smile was predatory. “They can’t decide if they like the man or hate him. He’s meticulous in his work, but his hotel room is full of fast-food wrappers and half-drunk coffee. And he’s a natural Sherlock; he picks up on details they miss, all the time. It drives them crazy. They bet on how many details he’ll spot that they fail to. And...he plays chess.”

“That doesn’t surprise me, given the rest,” I said.

“He plays himself. One move a week and he’ll spend the rest of the week thinking about the next move or researching it. He won’t let anyone see the board, either.”

“And that’s fascinating, and everything,” I lied, “but what about the investigation?”

“It’s always good to know your enemy.” Broch said, without rancor. “They talked as much about the case as they did about King while he was gone. The FBI took over from local law enforcement because King’s team have been trying to catch up with Calloway for years. They believe he was a serial killer who likes to make his victim’s remains disappear.”

“Wow...” I breathed.

Broch nodded. “The lack of bodies has made it difficult for them to catch up with Calloway. Plus, he was transient, and all over the country. He would return to New York frequently, but he would head out somewhere else just as frequently. They were tracking him primarily by reported disappearances, where nobody could be found.”

“On the surface, that does sound strange,” I admitted.

“It doesn’t sound strange at all, if you know he was a hunter,” Broch said. “That one fact makes all the difference. The FBI thought Calloway was elusive and clever.”

“You don’t think that?”

“I think that if a major law enforcement squad was tracking him, then he was a mediocre hunter at best. Harper would never have left such an obvious trail behind her.”

“The bodies that failed to turn up, the disappearances...they were all supernaturals?” I asked.

“I’m sure the FBI attributed to Calloway any unresolved disappearances where he happened to be in the area at the time. But some of those would have been nothing more than people quitting their lives abruptly and running off to start fresh somewhere else,” Broch said. “The others were certainly Calloway’s work.”

I rubbed my temple. “Will King give up on Harper now we’ve proved the timeline won’t fit?”

“Would you?” Broch said.

I weighed that up. “No,” I said at last. “There are too many unknowns that could shift everything and make it fit. King will wonder if I was lying about seeing Harper at breakfast and then at dinner. If he asks anyone else about it, and they say the same as me, he’ll start wondering if the whole town is conspiring to give her an alibi. Or maybe the time of death has been incorrectly reported. Or the body was put on ice for a while...or...no, there are too many factors that could completely change the picture, once they’re known. And Harper still looks like a perfect suspect.”

Broch nodded. “That’s how I see it, too. We have to talk to the witnesses. Find the woman who was talking to Calloway.”

“If the Feds can’t find her, what makes you think we can?”

“She’s a hunter, I just about guarantee it,” Broch said. “Calloway wouldn’t scream at a client. If she’s a hunter, we can find her.”

“He might scream at a client if he’s a mediocre hunter, the way you say.”

Broch nodded. “We have to find that woman. She’ll know what he was doing in Gouverneur, besides trying to find his way to Haighton.”

Broch spread his hands a little. “I can’t go. Harper can’t either.”

“The town will let me leave,” I said. “I don’t know why. I’ve been to Edwards a couple of times for supplies since the snow melted.” I’d had to use Olivia’s enormous 1980s Continental and had felt conspicuous the entire time. “Olivia can leave, too, but she won’t while Wim is sick. It has to be me.”

Broch let out a breath. “Yes,” he agreed, his voice low and heavy.

Harper will love that , I thought. “Let’s give Harper the news.”

CHAPTER TEN

WHEN WE WERE STILL GATHERED in Olivia and Wim's greenhouse, I had pointed out that meeting Broch upstairs after talking to King was a waste of time. I could walk into the bar, sit at the local's table and we could discuss it there. I had been vetoed by both Ben and Broch.

"Your face is too expressive," Ben said.

"And King will have returned to the bar, too," Broch added. "He'll know you're sharing everything."

"He's going to figure that out anyway," I said.

"It'll take him longer to come to that conclusion if we don't rub his face in it, dear," Olivia said.

I had agreed to meet in my apartment where we could discuss everything without being observed. The plan was that Broch could head back to the table, after a "bathroom break" while I would work behind or beside the bar, as the owner of the hotel.

When Broch and I reached the ground floor, Ben was standing by the open front door, watching us descend. "Could I speak to you, Anna?" he said when we stepped onto the big rug at the foot of the stairs.

I could feel the weight of that simple question settling on my shoulders like carrion

crows. I opened my mouth to say no.

“That works even better,” Broch said, before I could speak. “I’ll head inside. You tell Ben, Anna.” He touched my shoulder and moved over to the curtained doorway and stepped through.

Ben glanced around the foyer. “Perhaps somewhere more private?” He looked toward the dining room.

“Not there,” I said. “The kitchen is as private as it gets around here.”

“Beside your apartment,” Ben added.

I ignored that opening, turned and moved up the passage to the kitchen door under the stairs. I didn’t look around to check if Ben was following me. If Ben was about to say what I thought he was going to say, then I did not want this conversation.

The problem was, I didn’t know why I didn’t want to have the conversation.

For the few short seconds while I walked into the kitchen, turned and rested one hip against the cool steel surface of the center work table, and looked expectantly at Ben, I let myself hope fervently that he wanted to talk to me about anything but, well, us .

When I was meal prepping, the stark overhead neons flooded the room with white, crisp light. At all other times, the kitchen had a single low-wattage bulb mounted on the wall over the range and griddle, which was left on so people moving through the room didn’t stub their toes or worse.

The pilot light was on now, and it put Ben’s face in shadow. His dark eyes gleamed. He rested his hand on the bare work table for a moment. He paused. Then, “What did Broch want you to tell me?”

He was reluctant to speak, too. Recognizing it made both my gut clench harder and my shoulders to relax.

I told him what Broch and I had discussed, and the outcome.

“That seems like the only way forward,” Ben said. Then he paused again.

I couldn’t bring myself to help him get started, which I would have done with one of Danny Ortiza’s clients, once. I didn’t want to talk about this, either. But neither could I refuse to talk about it.

“I know you’re busy,” Ben said at last.

“Understatement,” I replied. “And everyone, including you, keeps telling me it’s only going to get worse before May. Throw a murder investigation in on the top of that, that we have to figure out for ourselves before the Feds come to the wrong conclusion and...” I shrugged.

“I know you don’t have time to think.” His voice was low. “But...”

I sighed. But . That was the entire conversation, right there in a single word.

But I had not left Haigton. Olivia had driven me and Ghaliya out of town. We had actually passed the town wards and could have gone anywhere we wanted, but instead, I’d made Olivia turn the car around and bring us back.

But I had returned, after letting Ben know that if we’d had more time, perhaps something, someday, might grow between us.

But when I had returned, Ben had stood on the front sidewalk in front of the hotel, his breath pluming in the frigid air, and watched us take our meagre belongings back into

the hotel. Ghaliya had been almost dancing with joy.

But since then, I had...yes, admit it Anna...I had actively avoided talking to Ben at all.

But since I had returned, he had not tried to force anything, until tonight.

I drew in a deep, deep breath. “No one comes right out and says it, but it’s obvious that anyone who lives here gets to enjoy a longer life than normal humans. Even my mother, who moved here when she was in her forties. I saw her body. She was in her eighties, but she looked to be barely sixty years old.”

Ben nodded. “There are many strange things about Haigton. Maybe it’s the will of the town, to keep us around and handy. Maybe it’s compensation for living here.”

“For having to live here,” I amended.

“Yes.”

“All of us have time. Lots of time,” I finished.

Ben shifted on his feet. It was difficult to clearly read his expression, but I knew that he didn’t like that.

“I know we should talk,” I said, feeling like the cheesiest cliché in the world. “but right now, I don’t think I could give that sort of conversation one hundred percent of my attention...and...” I drew in another breath. This was even harder than I thought it would be, when most of the difficult conversations I’d had in the past had ended up being far easier than the dire cataclysms I’d imagined they were going to be. “...and I don’t want to talk to you about that without my full attention. I won’t do that to you.”

Ben held still.

I let out my breath. I'd said it.

He swiped at the pristine steel workbench. "Then you agree that we should talk?" His voice was stiff. Controlled.

"Yes."

He smoothed the steel with his thumb, leaving a mist of a thumbprint on the steel. "I suppose that's something."

"Things change," I said. "You must know that by now. Things always change."

"If you're waiting for just the right time—"

"No. It's not that," I said quickly. "I know better than that. I learned it the hard way. It's not that. But right now, Ben, I feel like...like I don't have the capacity to add in one more thing. It's not just Beltane, and this thing with Harper. I'm also terrified about Ghaliya's pregnancy going wrong." I didn't have to explain that to him in detail because he was the town's version of a G.P. and knew better than I did how miraculous it was that Ghaliya had reached her seventh month.

"On top of that, I'm still trying to transfer everything from California to here by remote control, and it's – well, it should be a lot easier than it ends up being. There's only so much you can pull off via Zoom, especially when you're working with a minimal budget. On top of that there's—" And I shut up, realizing that I was about to bitch about my odious ex.

"There's?" Ben asked.

“Other stuff,” I said awkwardly. “That would probably be politically incorrect or socially inappropriate or something if I talked about it.”

Ben stopped swiping. He looked at me. I still couldn’t read his expression. But even in a room full of sunshine, I often couldn’t figure out what he was thinking. That went for everyone in this town. They were all deeply private people, despite everyone knowing everyone else’s business.

He straightened. “Very well, then.”

“Very well?” I repeated. Was I imagining that he sounded...I don’t know...pleased?

From out in the foyer, a male voice called out, “Hello? Is there anyone here?”

I sighed. “I’d better go and see what he wants. Sorry.”

“Before you go,” Ben said, “tell me if there’s anything I can do to help with...any of it. All of it.”

I hesitated.

“I mean it,” Ben said. “Whatever it is. I’ve seen everything. I can’t be shocked.”

Ask him to argue with the clerk at the DMV that yes, my California driver’s license was valid and no, I don’t have proof of residency and won’t until my mother’s death certificate was processed, her will probated, and the power bills started to arrive in my name?

I wavered for a second, wondering if a male voice on the end of the phone would shift the clerk over to a more cooperative mood.

Then I pulled myself together. “No. Thank you, but it’s a quagmire. I couldn’t ask anyone else to wade into it.”

“Quagmire. That’s an interesting word.”

“Hello?” drifted in from the foyer.

Ben stepped aside and I hurried out to the foyer. I could hear Ben following me. Then I forgot about Ben, as I took in my latest guest.

I knew he was here for a room, because he had a quaint old cardboard suitcase on the floor beside his old but shiny leather shoes.

He looked to be human, but I’d learned not to make that assumption too quickly, these days. Maybe five feet eight—close to my own height. He had pale white skin that was almost pasty, except for high spots of pink in both thin cheeks. The man was “average” from top to bottom. From his brown Oxfords on up. Brown corduroy trousers, a cream business shirt and a pale brown sweater vest were all his clothes. His shirt sleeve cuffs were properly buttoned, not rolled as one might expect this late at night.

He had pale brown hair—not quite pale enough to be called blonde. But it was baby-fine and wispy, cut short but not too short, and quite forgettable.

As I moved toward him, the man pulled a small bottle of sterilizing gel out of his pocket, squeezed some into his other palm, and rapidly spread the gel over his hands, both palms and backs. The entire sequence, from taking out the bottle, returning it and spreading the gel was practiced and swift. He’d done it so often he did it without thinking now.

I didn’t hold out my hand. Not because of the gel, which should surely still be sticky,

but because many non-humans did not like physical contact with other species. Hirom had warned me about it shortly after we had arrived in Haigton. His warning had primed me to take notice. I had registered the lack of handshakes, hugs and other human gestures of fellowship or closeness.

It was the complete opposite to Hollywood, and I have to say it was a refreshing change. If someone hugged you, here, they meant it.

The man gave me a nervous smile. “I know it is late, but I’m wondering if I could take a room? I got lost, you see. I was watching the hermit thrushes...it is lovely to see them this early, you know. But I was distracted and I put my foot into a puddle, and then I had to find a dry cleaner, and the laundromat at Edwards could have my clothes cleaned in the hour, but they couldn’t guarantee removal of spores and, well, it is that time of year when the pollen is particularly high and I don’t think I brought along enough antihistamines, so I thought I was turning onto the road to Gouverneur, but I wasn’t.”

I scrambled to follow his quick, trembling speech, and fought hard not to laugh when I pictured him stepping into a puddle in his immaculate Oxfords.

“You’re a bird watcher?” Ben asked, his tone polite.

The man pushed his glasses up his nose. “Oh, I wouldn’t really go that far. I do find watching birds and animals restful, so perhaps one can go that far.”

Ben blinked. “Ah...” he said, his tone neutral.

“I am...my name...most people call me Percy. Finch. Percy Finch.”

“Hello Percy Finch.” I had to control my hello smile so it didn’t turn into a grin, or worse, a guffaw. “I have a room you can use. You’re travelling alone?”

“I suppose I am, really. That is acceptable, isn’t it?”

“Oh yes, that’s fine,” I said. “I just needed to know how many rooms you want.” I moved over to the waist-high sideboard pushed up against the wall beside the stairs. “At this time of night, I will need the full amount paid now.”

“Of course, yes, that seems most sensible. Oh, where did I leave my wallet...?”

I opened the guest register to the current page, and turned to watch him pat his pockets, each one twice. Then he bent and opened his suitcase. It had old-fashioned spring locks, the kind that sprang open with a snap when you pushed sideways on the buttons beside them.

I felt as if I should look away as he opened the lid of the suitcase, but the interior of the case snagged my attention. It was a traveler’s dream of organization and neatness, despite the case being tipped up to vertical once it was closed.

Ben swayed sideways for a better view. He wasn’t smiling, but I could tell he wanted to.

Percy patted each neatly folded pile of garments, and each pouch and bag. “Ah!” He pulled out a perfectly normal wallet, neither stuffed full nor thin and chic. He carefully closed and stood the suitcase back up and came over to the sideboard.

I filled in the register fields with his name and pushed it toward him to fill in the rest.

He didn’t take the pen I held toward him. Horror touched his face. “You don’t use a computer?”

“Not for this. We like the old ways in Haigton.”

He stared at the pen. “Do you have...perhaps, some clean pens?”

Pre-COVID, I might have just rolled my eyes. But I also didn't clean the pens daily the way we had in the diner when it had reopened after the lockdowns. I hesitated, then pulled open the top drawer and fished out the box of pens there. I opened the top of the box. “Hold out your hand,” I told Percy.

He held out his hand and I carefully tipped one of the new pens onto his palm. “Never been touched by anyone,” I assured him.

“Oh, thank you,” he murmured and removed the cap. His hand hovered over the register, and I knew he was thinking about the open page and how many people might have rested their fingers on it. But the line where he was registering was second from the top on the page.

He drew in a breath and wrote quickly.

“It's two hundred for the night,” I said, as he wrote. “Cash, credit, or kind.”

“Kind?” he repeated.

I could have given him the whole spiel about how food or other goods also worked for us here in Haigton, but I still didn't know if he was a human who had bumbled his way into town, or something else. He wasn't giving off any vibes other than a desire to avoid germs, which many humans wanted to avoid, these days.

“Some folk don't like to touch money. You know,” I said, instead.

“And they're so wise not to,” Percy said. “It's unbelievable where money is kept. Toilet cisterns. Freezers. Down socks and stuffed in pants pockets.” He shuddered. “And that's after thousands of people have touched just one bank note. Do you know

they can track where money goes—the actual notes themselves? They can travel the world, these days—there’s just as much American currency in other countries as there is in the United States. The dollar I hand you could have been in Calcutta two days ago, and you would never know. You’d just get sick and think your husband bought it home from work, and it was the money all along.”

“I...um...that’s interesting.” It was a pathetic attempt at being polite. I pulled my keys out of my pocket and unlocked the other drawer and selected the room key from the tray. I held it out to him. “We sterilize our keys every day,” I lied, just to make him take it. I didn’t have any sanitizing gel. He could use his own.

Percy took the key without hesitation. “I appreciate that.”

His gratitude made my guilt bloom. I ignored it. “Room 12. It’s on the right when you reach the top of the stairs.”

Percy picked up his suitcase. “Thank you. Um...breakfast is in there?” He pointed toward the dining room.

“Seven-thirty to nine,” I said. “What can you eat?” I had been about to ask him if he had any food allergies, but I suspected that asking him what he could eat would give me a quicker answer.

“Oh...oats and fruit are safest, of course.”

“Of course,” I murmured.

“Fruit that needs peeling,” he added. “And bananas are not fruit, but they have fewer allergens, anyway. Tomatoes are fruit...but everyone touches them, squeezes each one with their fingers, so when you buy them, you don’t know who has touched them and they don’t put sanitizers at the front of the supermarket anymore, have you

noticed?”

“I hadn’t, actually,” I said. “Good night, Percy.” I put a touch of finality in my voice.

“I...ah...yes. Goodnight.” He trudged up the stairs. At the landing, he paused to look in all directions, as if there were many choices of direction beside climbing up the other half of the stairs. Then he climbed out of view.

Ben pressed his lips together firmly as he came over to the sideboard. He looked up the stairs, clearly waiting to hear the door of Room 12 open and closed.

I read the register entry. Detroit, MI . “He’s a long way from home, for bird watching.”

Ben glanced at where my finger rested. “He could have come across the lake.”

I hadn’t thought of that. I was still getting used to the idea that the great lakes were just a different sort of highway to most people who lived around them.

“I must keep Broch company, so he doesn’t look conspicuous sitting on his own and listening hard,” Ben said.

“Because the two of you not talking won’t look strange at all.”

“Trevalyan and I can talk.” Ben rested the tips of his fingers on my arm. “Thank you.”

I knew he was thanking me for talking to him in the kitchen, not for something I’d said out here. “Why?” I asked, surprised, because I had not been helpful. I’d said, basically, not now, but maybe later . Which had to be one of the most discouraging things to tell a man. It was only slightly better than It’s not you, it’s me .

Ben's smile was small, but warm, making his eyes dance. "You were about to tell me about your ex. Your odious ex."

I sighed. "I clearly say that way too often."

"You stopped yourself, because you don't think it's appropriate to tell me about your ex. Not the mucky details." His smile grew. "If I was just a friend, you wouldn't have stopped. I'm something more to you...and that gives me hope."

He crossed the foyer, heading for the bar, while I stood with my lips parted, astonishment rippling through me.

Then I got on with the still lengthy list of things I needed to take care of before I could even think about sitting down and relaxing.

One of those things was peeling and cutting up fruit for our new guest, for the morning. Now I had eleven guests in total. Maybe I could get through the rest of the evening without any more interruptions.

That was when my phone rang. Caller ID said it was my lawyer, and I knew my hope was wasted.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“YOU’RE WORKING LATE,” I TOLD Lucinda, as I walked up the stairs. The kitchen was private only to a degree. Anyone could walk there at any time. I wanted to be in my apartment for this call.

“It’s just past five,” Lucinda said, sounding surprised.

“Oh right, west coast time.” I rolled my eyes.

“I got a copy of the contempt order,” Lucinda said. “I didn’t want to wait for you to contact me about it, because you need to act fast.”

My pulse thudded heavily. I could feel it in my wrists and my temples. I hadn’t even thought of calling Lucinda about this. She wasn’t a five-hundred-dollar-an-hour lawyer, but she still charged by the hour and I didn’t have oodles of spare cash.

I wasn’t sure what I had planned to do. I’d put aside the worry, today. Events had distracted me from coming to a decision about what to do. I did know that calling Lucinda hadn’t been one of the possibilities.

“Act fast how?” I asked. “I owe the money. I’m not disputing that.”

“You don’t want this on your record,” Lucinda said. “You have to talk to Jasper. Get him to withdraw the complaint.”

My middle squeezed. “He can do that?”

“Of course he can! The court would rather see the two of you settle this by yourselves. And trust me, so do you, for all sorts of reasons.”

“I can’t talk to Jasper,” I said heavily. I stepped into my apartment and shut the door. “I mean, he won’t talk to me. It’s not as though he reached out and asked me to pay up, when I missed the pay date. He waited barely twenty-four hours after the deadline passed to file the complaint. He’s not going to talk to me.”

“It could be his lawyer who did that,” Lucinda pointed out. “I can get him to the table to talk, if you will talk. Will you?”

I hesitated. I didn’t want to talk to Jasper. I had learned too much about him since the divorce to even look at him calmly. There were good reasons I called him my odious ex. Too many reasons.

But I also didn’t want to get dragged through court.

“I’ll talk to him,” I told Lucinda. “Although I don’t know what good it will do.”

“It will make you look like the reasonable one,” Lucinda said. “And that is not nothing. Very well, I’ll set it up tomorrow. I’ll email you the details.”

She asked me how I was going. It was small talk, and I couldn’t afford small talk even at Lucinda’s rate. I wrapped it up quickly and hung up, then sank onto the cushion of the wing chair closest to the door. My heart was doing strange, fluttery things.

Just thinking about talking to Jasper made me sweat. My skin prickled under my arms.

How could I speak to him civilly? How could I speak to him at all? How was I

supposed to ask him to compromise and give me time to come up with the taxes on his house?

I dealt with that horrifying prospect as I had dealt with the complaint letter itself. I pushed it out of my mind. I got to my feet and went to finish all the tasks I needed to do before the end of the day.

I didn't go into the bar. There were at least three locals watching Axel King and his agents. They didn't need me. And I didn't want company.

I fell into bed nearly three hours later, my feet throbbing and my fingers smelling of oranges.

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For more than a decade, my dreams had often featured a freak-show rendition of searching for something. Or someone. And for many years, I always found myself in the same bewildering place that even in my dream, I knew was somewhere in L.A., but it wasn't a place I had ever visited while awake.

Yet I had come to know that collection of Brutalist-inspired buildings well in my dreams. I would find myself there, looking for a way out, looking for someone (usually one of my kids), or looking for a particular apartment or shop that I urgently needed to reach. And every time I thought I'd remembered how to get to wherever it was, something would stop me from reaching it. I'd be waylaid, or I'd forget that I had to go a different route to reach it, or...well, there were dozens of ways my subconscious had found to torture me in my sleep.

The dreams persisted even though I was living in Haighton, but lately they had shifted locations, too. It was a forest that I wandered, now. A forest that felt a lot like every forbidden, dark, tree-infested forest I'd ever seen in the movies. I was getting to know

this forest, too. The paths that I thought should get me to where I wanted to go had become familiar. The mother trees that held up canopies of dense foliage that spread dark, cool shadows across the earth were mileposts, anchoring my orientation.

Even the Greenway featured in these dreams. It was exactly as it appeared in real life, right down to the green moss that covered the rarely used road, which gave the Greenway its name, and the baked-in corrugations that threatened ankles and axles alike. But the town itself was not nearby. Only the Greenway, and the trees.

I pushed through trees, looking for a path I knew, that might lead me to...I don't know where I was heading. Perhaps I was looking for a way out. And just ahead, there did seem to be an opening. The end of the forest? Or just another clearing? The clearings in this dream forest shifted. I could never find them where I remembered they had been before.

But this clearing stayed where it was, and it was with a deep sense of relief that I stepped out into weak sunlight slanting through the opening in the canopy.

I stopped, astonished, for I knew this clearing. It was the little patch of open ground behind the old, abandoned hall that sat on the corner of the crossroads directly across from the hotel. The hall was falling down and dangerous. It was the only structure on that side of the crossroads.

The open land behind the hall backed onto the forest. It was in that earth that we had buried Juda, in January.

Nothing of the crossroads or the old building was in the dream. The other side of the clearing was lined with more trees and maidenhair ferns, while deep shadows wound between them.

The clearing was the same, though, with the little hillocks and old, dried clumps of

dropseeds, and the wild thyme that had adopted the area and tangled with everything. I knew it was the same place because where Juda's grave and homemade headstone should have been was, instead, a waist-high structure made of roughly chopped tree branches, denuded of leaves, and laid in neat layers, each layer running across the one beneath.

And on top of the bed of branches was Juda. He wore the clothes I had last seen him in. The clothes he had died wearing. No blood showed on them and Juda's throat appeared to be normal. I could see no gaping cut running across it from where I hovered by the last tree, fear gripping my throat.

He didn't move. His eyes were closed. After all, he was dead.

I stepped out of the trees, making my way with slow, hesitant steps closer to the bed of boughs. As I drew closer I could see that not a spot of dirt clung to him. He was as neat and fresh as he had always appeared to be, before he had died. His chin jutted up in the air, the closely trimmed black beard making his rich olive skin seem fine in comparison.

The town had killed Juda, just as the town had made Juda kill my mother to bring me here. Even though Juda had died by his own hand, he had been driven to it by the town lodging in his brain, driving him toward insanity with its constant hounding.

He had welcomed death, but I still felt sick every time I remembered the night we had stood in a ring around the crossroads and watched him die.

I felt sick in the dream, too. But I didn't stop moving steadily toward the bed he laid upon.

I stopped beside it. Juda turned his head and opened his eyes, looking directly at me.

I trembled. “What? What?” I demanded. “Why am I here?”

His gaze shifted to my hand. I was holding a branch of my own. The top of it was wrapped in rags that burned, the flames crackling and leaping, making the light in the clearing brighter.

Juda’s gaze shifted to the branches he laid on.

Horror burst through me, for I knew what he wanted. “No!” I protested. I tossed the burning branch away. I didn’t look where it landed. “No!” I repeated again.

And again. And again.

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I was grateful to wake up, even though the beginning of my days were as crammed as the end of them.

I washed and dressed and rushed down to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. Since yesterday, the number of people I had to feed had jumped from eight locals plus three guests, to eight locals and eleven guests. The guests outnumbered us now. I would have to spend more time in the kitchen, as I hadn’t planned for this many diners and would have to tap into the long-term pantry items on the metal shelves. I’d worry about replacing them later.

I paid little attention to anyone already seated in the dining room when I took out the trays and dropped them into the warming frame. I was moving too fast to chit chat. Besides, I was hungry, too.

There were two types of oatmeal; one with a touch of cinnamon and brown sugar, the other plain, for I had a feeling that Percy would recoil in horror at the cinnamon. Or

the sugar.

In addition to the oatmeal, I added plenty of the usual breakfast foods; bacon, sausages, scrambled eggs, lots of toast, hashbrowns, grits, fruit, pancakes. I put the waffle maker on the sideboard and a pourable bowl of waffle mix.

By the time I headed out into the dining room with my last load, another plate of toast, nearly everyone had served themselves and all I could hear was the scrape of utensils across china, and the occasional murmur of conversation.

Nearly all the tables were occupied, too. I'd have to bring tables up from the basement, if more diners and guests showed up.

Another thing to worry about later.

I stacked the toast in the basket, then loaded my plate and headed for my chair at the local's table by the window. Nearly everyone was there, except for Trevalyan. They were all eating steadily.

"Where's Trev?" I asked.

Broch was busy slicing up a sausage and mixing it with the small portion of eggs on his plate. He lifted his chin toward the back of the room.

I looked. Trevalyan was sitting at Percy's table, one hand resting over the other, listening hard while Percy spoke.

Olivia leaned toward me as I sat down. "We couldn't quite place him," she confessed in a low voice. "Trevalyan thought talking to him would resolve that."

"Maybe Trevalyan should talk to Aurora Caro," I said, for Aurora was in the corner

at a table by herself, hardcover book spread before her plate, nibbling on bacon.

“Oh, she’s a witchlette,” Olivia said dismissively. “One of those who thinks they can grow their powers at Beltane. There are some silly myths about Beltane.” She sipped her coffee.

Witchlette ? That was a new one. I wondered if it was an official category or if Olivia was being sarcastic. I wanted to laugh, but I was too hungry. I ate a quick mouthful of eggs, took a bite of toast and chewed furiously. “Everything about Beltane is a myth to me,” I pointed out. “What actually is true?” I drank three big mouthfuls of coffee. I was going to need a lot of coffee today. I had woken feeling drained and I had a full day ahead.

“The veil between worlds grows thin at Beltane,” Olivia said.

“I did know that one,” I said, a touch relieved. “That’s it? You have a bonfire and the veil grows thin?”

“It’s what happens because the veil grows so thin that draws people to the places where the veil thins the most.”

“Haigton is one of those places,” I guessed. “That would explain the influx of guests.”

“Plus, it’s a nice night,” Olivia added, with a small smile. “A feast, a bonfire.”

“Dancing around the maypole?” I suggested.

“That’s an English custom that we didn’t import,” Broch said, lifting a fork loaded with eggs and toast toward his mouth. “But the reason for the dancing remains.” And he chuckled as he put the fork back down.

Was that what he did to fool people into believing he was eating? I suppose I had never actually watched people eat every bite on their plates. It was just something humans did. It was the conversation around the dinner table that I paid attention to. “And what’s the reason?” I prompted him.

“Ugh...mom, these eggs are revolting!” Ghaliya said, pushing her plate away from her. She put a hand to her belly. “Ugh...” she repeated.

“That is your second plateful, dear,” Olivia said, with an indulgent smile. “Perhaps your belly has decided that it has had enough.”

“What was the reason?” I asked Broch.

Broch put his knife and fork together on the plate. “Connection,” he said.

“That seems...ordinary,” I said.

Harper snorted. I wasn’t sure if that meant she agreed with me, or thought I was being obtuse.

Trevalyan sat in his usual chair and put a loaded plate on the table.

“Connection at Beltane is more than it appears. It is quite profound on a number of levels,” Broch said. “That’s the reason handfasting was popular on Beltane, when handfasting was still legal.”

“You’re mystifying it,” Trevelyan said. “It’s just simple people feeling the power and getting randy because of it.”

Olivia made a tsking sound.

Trevalyan smiled at her, took an enormous forkful of eggs and chewed. Then his mouth grew still and his jaw slack. He brought his fingertips to his sealed lips.

“There, see?” Ghaliya pronounced, looking at me and pointing at Trevalyan.

“Give him a napkin,” Olivia urged Harper, who sat beside him.

Harper gave Trevalyan the napkin off her own lap. Trevalyan put it to his mouth, then wiped carefully and rolled up the discarded eggs in the napkin. “... Lord...!” he breathed and reached for his coffee.

“They were fresh eggs,” I said. “Not even a week old. But I’ll check all of them after breakfast.” I looked around the table. “Sorry.”

“Not at all, dear,” Olivia said. “I had eggs, and they were just fine.”

“You must have got the good batch,” Trevalyan said, his voice croaky.

“It was all the same batch,” Olivia said. “The tray was full when I took mine.”

“And it was nearly empty when I just got mine,” Trevalyan said. He shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. The bacon is just fine ,” and he bit into a piece with relish.

“What did Percy Finch tell you?” Ben spoke quietly so his voice wouldn’t travel to the other tables.

Trevalyan took a bite of hashbrowns, chewed, and said, “He doesn’t know how he ended up here. Says he just drove around. He was looking for somewhere quiet to walk off his week. He was going to read under a tree or walk in the woods.”

“But he stepped in a puddle, then went hunting for a dry cleaner, then turned off the

road to Gouverneur and ended up here instead?" I asked. "That's a long string of coincidences."

Hirom and Broch both shook their heads.

"What?" I said.

Hirom was chewing. Broch said, "He's a dead leaf."

Hirom pointed at him and nodded.

"A dead leaf?" I repeated.

Hirom shoveled his last forkful of food into his mouth and slid off his chair. "Gotta go open up." He hurried out of the dining room.

"Dead leaf?" I said again.

"Some people get pulled into the town like leaves down a drain," Ben said. "After a while, they leave."

"You mean, they're drawn by the power?"

"We're not sure," Trevalyan said. "They don't have any power themselves. Finch is a cold, dead stone, in that regard."

"Not even a flicker?" Ben asked, his tone curious. "I thought everyone had a touch."

"Even witchlettes, which is what gives them eternal hope," Olivia said, her tone indulgent.

“Not Finch,” Trevalyan said firmly. “He’s got nothing. He’s like all the other dead leaves. He just found his way here. Later, he’ll drift off again.”

“Probably after Beltane,” Broch said. “Once the power has dialed down.”

“Um, boss?” Trevalyan said, surprising me. He was right by my elbow. His face looked strained. “There’s a new guest out in the foyer.”

“I didn’t hear the door open,” I said, for we left the door closed when no one was in the bar.

“I think he’s been there a while,” Hirom said. “Just waiting.”

That wasn’t good. “We need to put the bell somewhere more obvious, I guess,” I said, for the bell sat beside the register on the sideboard and no one used it.

“Or a sign that says they should ring it,” Olivia suggested as I got to my feet.

“I just don’t think we’ve got a room that will suit him,” Hirom said. He patted my arm. “Over to you, boss.”

“Why do I feel like he’s escaping?” Trevalyan murmured, watching Hirom leave.

I had that feeling, too. I headed for the foyer to greet my next guest.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I'D ONLY BEEN RUNNING THE hotel since January—just over three months—but even in that short period of time, I'd stopped dropping my jaw every time I saw someone whose appearance was a little different from the average human. Wim's flecked brown flesh looked quite normal to me, now.

Yet I found myself coming to a halt in the middle of the foyer, while I absorbed the appearance of our newest guest.

He was at least seven feet tall and built like a concrete dam. In Hollywood, tall people got lots of work in strange roles that needed someone their height, but most of them were no stouter than those of us less gifted in the height department. Peter Mayhew, who had played Chewbacca in the Star Wars movies, had been seven foot three, but painfully thin. I had been careful when I shook his hand.

My guest, though, was the opposite. His shoulders were massive . Even for his height, they were disproportionately large. I wondered if he had to turn sideways to walk through doorways. He was standing with his back to the closed front door as if he had stepped just inside the door then halted. I couldn't see the edges of the door from where I stood, dumbstruck. His shoulders hid them.

And that was not the only strange thing about him. His skin was blue—the shade of the sky just before the sunset hides it—and from where I stood, it looked as though it might be thick enough to turn a blade, like cured leather. His ears leaned back, forming long points. Between them, his hair was a coarse black, raked backward from an exaggerated widow's peak, over a flat, deep forehead. His eyes were orange, and I

wasn't certain, but I thought they might be glowing. His nose was a squashed triangle with creases on either side running down to the point. He had a wide mouth. Inhumanly wide, with lips so narrow they were barely there at all. They were pressed together in an unhappy bow, right now.

He was wearing heavy pants and a cotton button-up shirt. The pants were held up with an ordinary leather belt. His boots were enormous. The normal human clothing looked incongruous on him, and I wondered for a moment where he had found them. The size alone would increase his difficulty of finding clothes.

The shirt would make curtains for a small window—a lot of fabric laid over the big shoulders and a chest that matched the shoulders in size.

I was not even remotely petite, but I felt small and weak, looking at him. He was staring back at me. And yes, the orange eyes were glowing. I shivered.

Then he spoke. "I. Orrin Stonebrunch." His voice was low and graveled, like rocks tumbling together.

I found my voice. "Can I help you?"

He nodded. Once. It was a slow, deliberate acknowledgement. "A room," he intoned.

Hirom was right. We didn't have a bed this man would fit into. But then...neither would anyone else.

A flutter of worry curled in my upper chest. How could I tell this...person to go elsewhere? There was nowhere else. Not for miles. And he wasn't human. He couldn't rent a room at the nearest Super 8.

I didn't want to know what he might say if I refused.

“Give him a room,” Harper said, from just behind me.

I jumped a little. I hadn’t noticed her. She did move silently.

“Get him upstairs.” Her tone was urgent. “Before King’s people spot him.”

“Right.” I headed for the sideboard.

“Screw the register,” Harper said. “Give him a key and get him out of here.”

“But...he has to pay.” My nascent business sense was appalled. Give a room to someone when we were going to be overrun with paying guests?

“I pay,” Orrin Stonebrunch declared. He reached into his pants pocket.

I looked at Harper and raised my brow.

“Take it, and get him out of here,” Harper said firmly. “Give me the keys. I’ll get the room key. You take his money.”

That meant getting closer to him. I wasn’t sure I wanted to do that. But Harper was right. Orrin Stonebrunch did not look human. We couldn’t let Axel King and his agents see him. And turning him away, so he could walk past the windows where everyone could see him was a bad idea. Getting him upstairs and tucked away in a room with a closed door was safer.

I gave Harper the key to the key drawer and made myself move over to Stonebrunch as he withdrew...not his wallet. He held out a bunch of weeds that had been cut like flowers. Their stems were bunched together and tied with twine.

“Oh...” I said inadequately and took the weeds. They were parched and limp.

Harper thrust one of the room keys at Stonebrunch. "Here. Room seven." That was at the other end of the hall from the four rooms King had rented.

Stonebrunch took the key between thumb and massive forefinger and looked at the stairs. I wasn't sure if I imagined his sigh. I suppose someone with his boot size would find the normal depth of steps an inadequate perch.

"I'll keep the feds' attention away from the foyer so he can get up the stairs. Wait thirty seconds." Harper whirled and strode back into the dining room.

I looked at Stonebrunch. "There are humans in there." I wasn't sure he would understand.

But he nodded again. The same single movement of his head. "I wait."

After thirty seconds, I stepped aside. "Please. Up the stairs and to the right."

Stonebrunch strolled over to the stairs. If I wanted to keep up with his stroll, I would have to run to do it. He took the steps four at a time, the toe of each big boot pushing up against the back of the step.

The stairs groaned. It was well beyond the quiet creak they normally gave out.

He turned on the landing and I tracked his progress up the other half of the stairs by each mournful groan of stressed wood.

"What's happening, Anna?" Broch said, startling me for the second time in a few minutes. He moved as silently as Harper.

I drew in a calming breath. "We have a new guest."

“Harper gave me a sign to come and help,” Broch said.

“Me, too,” Trevalyan said as he moved up beside Broch. “What’s going on?”

“Describe the guest,” Broch told me.

“He paid with weeds.” I rolled my eyes and held out the wilted plants.

“They’re...not weeds.” Trevalyan plucked them from my hands and turned them around, examining them. “Damn...I think this is vervain. And, yes, that’s henbane. And, damn, that’s datur.” He looked at me. “Do you know how hard it is to find these?”

I shook my head. The names were vaguely familiar to me. I thought of Trevalyan’s kitchen shelves, which were stuffed full of tiny jars holding esoteric ingredients for spells and hexes. “I believe you. Why don’t you keep them?”

He looked pleased.

Behind the two of them, all the other diners streamed out of the dining room. The guests went up to their rooms. The locals brushed past us, heading for either the bar or the door. King and his people were missing.

“The guest?” Broch said in an undertone.

I described Orrin Stonebrunch to them.

Trevalyan and Broch exchanged glances.

“What is he?” I prompted them.

“There hasn’t been any for nearly a hundred years...” Trevalyan’s tone was full of doubt.

“You’re falling for the presumption of continuity,” Broch shot back. “Anna saw what she saw.”

“What did I see?” I whispered furiously. “He scared the hell out of me just standing there.”

“That was your instincts correctly telling you to be wary,” Broch said. “Stonebrunch is a Firbolg.”

“Firbolgs are dangerous?”

Trevalyan made a harsh sound in his throat. “Humans are dangerous. We kill off the competition with a ruthless disregard that appalls every other species.” He nudged Broch in the side with his sharp elbow. “Your kind were on the hunters’ list for centuries. You didn’t get there because you’re cute.”

Broch didn’t quite roll his eyes, but I could tell he wanted to.

Trevalyan’s eyes widened. “I wonder how long he was waiting by the door...?”

“Does it matter?” Broch asked.

“I’m thinking about the last of the eggs suddenly tasting sour.” Trevalyan’s mouth turned down more than usual.

“Firbolgs can do that?” Would I have to check every single item of food while he was a guest?

Broch said patiently, “Firbolgs are known to wipe whole villages out of existence. If you rouse them and make them angry or give them reason to think you’re their enemy, they won’t settle for killing just you. They will wipe out all traces of you and yours, and the people you live among.”

Even Trevalyan looked uneasy. I was glad I hadn’t told Stonebrunch he couldn’t have a room.

Broch frowned. “They don’t normally live inside.”

“This one does,” Trevalyan said.

“Yes, but why?”

“Because of Beltane, I assume,” I said.

“He could stay in the woods just as easily,” Broch said pedantically. “By now there will be others out there. He won’t be alone.” He looked at me. “You must tell him he has to leave.”

I shuddered. “Nope. I am not pissing Stonebrunch off. Nuh-uh.”

?

I stood in front of room seven’s door, my heart beating hard enough to make my chest and my head ache.

Broch had made it perfectly clear. “He can’t be seen by King and his agents. Period. It would be safer for all of us if he wasn’t here.”

“He paid for his room,” I hissed, keeping my voice down.

“Here,” Trevalyan said, thrusting the herbs at me. “Give them back, if it helps. You have to get him out of here.”

Now I stood with the herbs hanging from my hand, trying to wind myself up to eject a guest who could probably hammer me through the floor with one fist if he objected.

I didn’t disagree with Broch. It was critical that the ignorant humans in the hotel didn’t spot him. And I was already scrambling to put together meals for more than double the number of people I had bought groceries for. If having Stonebrunch in the hotel would make what food I did have inedible, then I was more than happy for him to be somewhere else, too.

That gave me the courage to lift my hand and knock on the door.

I could hear Stonebrunch walk to the door. The floorboards gave the same mortal groan that the stairs had done.

He opened the door and bent a little to peer at me. He didn’t speak.

I took in the angry orange eyes. The back of my neck prickled painfully. “Hi,” I made myself say. “Listen. This is...well, I have a tricky situation here in the hotel. You couldn’t have known about it. But the thing is, we have humans as guests here. Federal agents. They’re actively investigating...well, another matter. But if they saw you...”

I watched his face for signs of comprehension, but his expression didn’t shift. He didn’t blink. Could he blink?

It seemed I hadn’t made myself plain enough. “That bed—” I pointed to the bed behind him. The cover had been rumpled, probably from him sitting on it. “It’s not nearly long enough for you. And I don’t have anything longer. Bed manufacturers

don't cater for people like you. They don't know about you, to start with."

I made myself stop babbling. "I'm wondering if you wouldn't find it more comfortable out in the woods. You could stretch out there, and be yourself, with no need to sneak around. You could relax. And it's lovely and warm now, too. All the new growth is coming in."

He didn't move. Not an inch.

I leaned in. "You do not want the FBI to know about you, Orrin. Trust me. They will lock you up in a basement somewhere and you'll spend the rest of your life being tested and probed and measured and answering a million questions." And I held the herbs out to him.

Stonebrunch reacted. He nodded. "I fix."

He closed the door, leaving me with my hand out, the drooping herbs hanging over my fingers.

My jumpy, slightly hysterical brain screamed questions at me. What did fixing it mean? Was he going to magic the agents away? I had stupidly implied that King and his people were natural enemies. Would Stonebrunch make Haighton disappear to be rid of them?

I had made things much worse.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I GAVE THE HERBS BACK to Trevalyan and told the pair of them what Stonebrunch had said, then headed into the kitchen. I had way too much to do to stand around any longer.

While I was clearing out the remains of breakfast from the dining room, King and his agents had claimed the empty tables. Harper sat in the corner once more, looking normal. That is, she looked annoyed. Her arms were crossed.

I washed and cleaned the kitchen, resetting it. Then I pulled out the kitchen laptop and set it up on the counter. I went through the pantry, shelves and cold room and checked every fresh ingredient I had, looking for food that might have gone over. I couldn't check the eggs without cracking them. I had to assumed they were bad and added another three dozen to my order.

I also found that more than the eggs was unusable. The avocados that had been fresh yesterday were weeping brown ooze. The bananas were black, soft, and smelly. The sliced bread I'd put on the shelves while preparing breakfast was now a solid, hard lump of dough that could substitute as a blunt weapon.

I tossed spoiled food into the garbage, my temper building at the sheer waste that I could do nothing about. The cost that I must bear through no fault of my own.

Then I realized that most of the food I was forced to pitch had been sitting on the open shelves at the front of the kitchen, right up against the wall that separated the kitchen from the dining room and the foyer.

If Stonebrunch was doing this, that made sense.

I moved with even more grim determination and speed, transferring anything I thought might be vulnerable to Stonebrunch's influence into the cold room or onto the counter that ran along the back wall. That left the shelves bare of everything except canned goods. Those, I would thoroughly inspect when I opened them. I couldn't move the hundreds of gallon cans anywhere else.

I finished the order to the grocery store in Gouverneur. They would deliver by late afternoon, if I paid a rush fee. I sighed and paid it, then got on with prep for lunch.

I made a no-brainer meal, a quick recipe I didn't have to think about, that everyone could eat no matter what their dietary preferences were. Tacos, with a variety of fillings that everyone could pick and choose from. Avocadoes were not one of them.

I had lettuce and tomatoes in the cold room, onions on the counter, and frozen ground beef. I made a lentil "meat" filling for the vegetarians, and two types of beef—one spicy and one with zero heat for Finch and anyone else with a baby mouth.

I had canned guacamole, canned refried beans, sour cream in a bucket in the cold room that needed using up. I opened a can of whole corn from the shelves and sniffed and stirred cautiously, then even more tentatively, ate one of the kernels. Satisfied, I threw it into a frying pan and seared it, along with a dusting of chili powder, chopped cilantro, sliced green onions and lime juice from a bottle on the back of the shelf in the cold room. I made a pico de gallo out of the last of the tomatoes, corn, green bell peppers and onions, and separated it into two batches. One got jalapenos out of a jar. The other remained innocent.

Grated cheese, well over a pound of it, was in the cold room beside the non-dairy cheese. I dumped them in bowls.

I had the oven heating to cook the shells and was heating the refried beans and the meats when I heard a deathly groan of timber and nails and paused.

The sound had come from the stairs, on the other side of the passage door.

Alarmed, I dropped the wooden spoon back into the pot, hurried to the door and stepped out under the stairs. They sent out strained sounds that were unmistakable. I moved around them, intending to halt Stonebrunch before he stepped into the foyer, in full view of King and his people through the arch into the dining room.

I halted on the big round rug and watched Stonebrunch descend the stairs, speechless.

It was Stonebrunch. His height and those shoulders told me it couldn't be anyone else. He gripped the wide balustrade, his hand easily stretching over its width, and used it to navigate the stairs, which were too narrow for his boots. He carefully placed the heel of his boot on the step two below the one he was on, then transferred his weight.

He had reason to be cautious, I judged, because if his boot heel slipped off the step, he would roll all the way to the bottom.

It was Stonebrunch, but he had changed. His skin was no longer blue, but a brown shade that could easily pass as human. He'd also changed the shape of his ears. They looked human, now. They were peaked at the back, but no more than a human's might be.

Those two changes, combined with his human clothing, made a huge difference to his appearance. He appeared to be human. A tall and muscular human, but definitely human.

He stepped onto the rug I was standing on and looked at me. "I fix."

I nodded, and reached out for the newel post, as relief weakened my knees. “You did,” I agreed. And he hadn’t razed Haigton to the ground to do it.

“I eat,” Stonebrunch added. He pointed at the archway into the dining room.

“Ten minutes,” I told him. I pointed at the doorway into the bar. My finger shook. “Have a drink, then you can eat.”

He considered that. “I drink.”

I mentally wished Hirom luck as Stonebrunch walked with surprising grace over to the barroom door.

Then I noticed that the handsome, lush fern that sat on the pedestal between the front door and the barroom door had wilted and was sagging over the side of the enamel pot like a dying, gasping fish.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

EVERYONE SEEMED TO ENJOY LUNCH . Little food was left, afterward. I had correctly guessed that Stonebrunch would have an appetite to match his stature, and Hirom could always be counted upon to take seconds and, often, thirds. I cleaned up and reset the kitchen.

A natural lull occurred in my daily grind, just after lunch. I could, if I wanted, relax for an hour. It meant that some small tasks would be pushed into tomorrow, so I didn't often take the time, but today I felt as though I deserved it. Besides, my head was thudding. I would drink lots of water this afternoon to offset it.

And I wanted to check in with the locals, too. Harper had been grilled all morning by Axel King. She might have picked up a tidbit or two we didn't already know about the case.

I settled on the only stool in the bar, which lived by the bar itself, where the old fashioned landline phone with a rotary dial was located, and massaged my temples. "Just water, please," I told Hirom when he came over to see what he could get me.

The locals – nearly all of them, today, including Harper – were at their usual table. King and his people were grouped around a single table on the far side from the windows, which put them as far as they could get from the locals table and the fireplace. Judging by the way they had their heads close together, they were discussing business.

Orrin Stonebrunch sat at a table by himself, right in the middle of the bar. That

explained why King, et al , had settled well to one side. Being alone didn't seem to bother Stonebrunch. He was, I realized with a touch of amusement, drinking beer straight out of a pitcher, which looked like a pint glass in his big hand.

Hirom saw who I was watching as he settled the water in front of me. "That's his third pitcher." He leaned heavily against the edge of the bar. "He likes my beer."

I studied Hirom. "You're sweating. Is everything okay? You've handled this many drinkers before."

Hirom shook his head and straightened. "I'm fine," he said firmly. It sounded to me as though he was convincing himself of that. Worry touched me. What would I do if Hirom couldn't work? He'd always just been here. As reliable as the sun.

"Uh-oh," Hirom added under his breath and nodded at something behind me.

I swiveled on the stool to see Percy Finch paused just inside the bar room doorway. He slowly scanned the room, taking it all in.

"He's being brave," I murmured. "All the germs you can find in a bar..."

Hirom grinned, showing his big white teeth. "Maybe he wants straight alcohol to kill them all?"

"Finch!" The call came from the locals' table. Broch was standing and waving Percy over.

Percy didn't immediately react. He studied Broch and the others, and his shoulders hunched in a little. He pushed his glasses up his nose. His eyes were narrowed. Suspicion? Wariness?

Broch moved around the table out to the open space beside it and waved Percy over once more. “Come and have a drink. Let us get to know you a bit.” His voice was loud enough to carry.

Percy straightened his shoulders and walked over to Broch. Broch thrust out his hand to shake Percy’s.

“He’ll refuse...” I said softly.

Percy kept his hands by his sides.

“Now, you don’t want us to think you don’t like us, do you?” Broch was speaking so everyone could hear.

Percy reached for Broch’s hand, surprising me. Broch gripped his hand, and I hoped fervently that Broch wasn’t using his unnatural strength in an unspoken pissing match to prove who had the biggest gonads.

Broch looked puzzled. Then he broke the handshake and lifted his palm up to study it. “Hello. That’s not sap, is it?”

Percy lifted his own hand, his fingers splayed. From my position at the bar, I could see his palm was glistening with a glutinous clear gel.

Percy shrieked.

The sound he made came up from his toes. It reminded me of kettles whistling on the stove. Jet engines winding up. It was a strained outcry of horror, climbing in pitch as Percy’s dread grew.

He turned and stumbled toward the bar, gripping his wrist. “Water!” he screamed.

“Water! Now!”

Hirom glanced at me, and I nodded. He bent and picked up the big plastic tray that was half-filled with soapy water, where he dumped glasses as they were emptied. Only a single beer pitcher sat in the suds, upside down.

Hirom put the sloshing tray on the counter and stepped away.

Percy thrust his hand into the suds as though it was on fire and he needed to douse it.

Over by the fireplace, everyone at the locals table was laughing. Softly, at least.

Broch remained where he had been standing, watching Percy scrub at his palm. He wore a smile that held a touch of disgust.

Percy pulled his hand out of the water and examined the palm. The pale flesh was covered in red blisters. He shrieked again and pushed his hand back into the water.

I went over to Broch. “What the hell did you do to him? What was that gel? His palm is burned .”

Broch’s smile faded. “That’s not possible.” He held up his own palm, which glistened the way Percy’s had. “It’s just aloe vera gel.” He pointed his other hand over his shoulder toward the plant sitting on the mantelshelf over the fireplace. One of the big, spear-shaped leaves had been broken off.

“Then it was too concentrated. He has blisters, Broch.”

“Aloe vera is one of the most benign compounds in the world,” Trevalyan said. “If he has blisters, he talked himself into them.” He spoke with such conviction that I wondered if he was right. Percy seemed like the type of person who could terrify

himself into psychosomatic symptoms.

“I need sanitizer,” Percy said, behind me. “I need medical attention!”

I looked at Ben.

He nodded and got to his feet, heading for the bar.

Then I heard a tired sigh and a heavy thud, and whirled.

Hirom had disappeared. Percy leaned over the bar to look behind it. “He fainted!” he squeaked.

Ben ran.

?

Even Stonebrunch wanted to help carry Hirom to his cot in the basement, but as I suspected Stonebrunch was the reason why Hirom had passed out from a raging fever, I explained as diplomatically as I could that we’d take care of Hirom. In a moment of inspiration, I told Stonebrunch that he wouldn’t fit inside the stairs down to the basement.

“I big,” Stonebrunch observed, nodding. He went back to his beer, while Broch, Ben, Wim and Harper carried Hirom out of the bar.

When they returned, I told Broch he was deputized, so get behind the bar and pour drinks.

Broch accepted the assignment calmly, which told me he regretted the prank he’d played on Percy. Percy had headed upstairs with Ben following, to see to his palm.

I returned to the stool to finish my water. My head was thumping heavily, now.

King, I saw, was sitting with his back to the wall, sideways on his chair. He was watching the room with a thoughtful expression.

Broch moved behind the narrow platform that Hirom used to put himself at the same height as his customers, scanning the shelves, and familiarizing himself with where everything was.

The room settled down. Low conversations began.

A hand settled on my shoulder. I took my elbows off the bar and straightened.

Ben gave me a sour smile. “Finch will be fine,” he told me. “The blisters were fading when I left.”

“Then they were psychosomatic?” I asked.

“Aloe vera can’t harm anyone. Not even undiluted sap,” Ben said.

“That would be a yes, then,” I concluded. “The poor man. Everyone must leave him alone, Ben. Hazing is cruel. It doesn’t matter that you intended it to be harmless. It wasn’t.”

Ben rubbed the back of his neck and nodded. He dropped his hand. “I sent Frida to bed.”

My insides sank. “She’s sick, too?”

“Fever and chills. I came down to find a hot water bottle for her feet.”

“We have some in the closet on the first floor, I think.” Then I realized what Frida’s illness meant. “I’m going to have to clean rooms, too...” I got to my feet.

My head gave out a series of hard, heavy knocks that made my vision swim. “Oh...”

Hands gripped my arms, and I was returned to the stool. “Stay still,” Ben told me quietly. His hand rested against my forehead. “No fever.”

“Headache,” I whispered. “Bad one.”

“Anything I can do?” Broch asked, from close by.

“My medical kit. It’s at home, on the kitchen counter,” Ben said.

“I’ll get it,” Broch said, his voice already moving away.

I was afraid to open my eyes. I suspected it would hurt too much.

Ben gripped my arms once more. “Come on. I’m taking you up to your room. You need to lie down.”

“I can’t,” I protested. “I have dinner to make for seventeen people!”

“You can’t do anything but sleep,” Ben said.

“I must.”

“Okay, stand up on your own.”

I fought to open my eyes. I winced and waited for the thudding to stop. Then I got to my feet.

I sat down fast, hissing, and rubbed my temples.

Ben smiled and helped me up once more. “A step at a time,” he told me. “Rest every step, if you want. Or...I could carry you up.” His eyes glittered with amusement.

“I’ll walk,” I said quickly.

I was still on the first flight of the staircase when Broch returned with the big, battered bag that Ben used as his medical kit. He handed it to Ben, then picked me up off my feet and strode up the stairs. I didn’t seem to be a burden to him at all. I shut up, because it was good to not have to walk anymore.

Broch laid me on the purple sofa. “Gotta go pour beer,” he murmured and left.

Ben knelt on the rug beside the sofa and delved into his bag. “I have some basic Tylenol, and an ointment to put on your temples and the back of your neck. Then you can set your phone to wake you in forty minutes. By then, you’ll be able to stand once more.”

I took the Tylenol he handed to me and stayed still while he smoothed the cool gel into my temples, then carefully lifted my hair out of the way and rubbed it into the back of my neck. I watched his face as he worked. He was concentrating, in full healer mode, and probably oblivious to my scrutiny.

He had a face that was neither young nor old. Anyone meeting him for the first time, who was unaware of his true nature, would probably guess he was in his late thirties or early forties. I knew he was much older than that. He had high cheekbones, and a straight nose, full lips outlined by a well-trimmed mustache and beard. Olive skin that was a product of his heritage; he was a direct descendant of Roman royalty; a Patrician family that counted emperors among them.

A lock of his rich dark brown hair laid against his forehead, and I itched to push it back with the rest of the waves.

Ben sat back. "Lie down," he told me. "Let everything work as it should."

I wanted it to work, so I laid down as directed, and set my phone for forty minutes from now.

"You need to find a little time in your day to relax," Ben added, as he pulled the afghan off the back of the sofa and spread it over me. "You haven't been sleeping, have you?"

"Bad dreams," I murmured.

"Hmm. You're not the only one in Haigton to have them, right now. But in forty minutes you won't sink deep enough to dream. Relax."

That did help. I reached for his sleeve as he moved to stand up. "In the kitchen..."

Ben shook his head. "Remember what I said about trust?"

"No," I said frankly.

He smiled. "Trust in time. I was wrong to force it." His smile faded. "But I needed to know."

"You're two thousand years old, and you get impatient?"

He rolled his eyes. "I'm not that old. And just because one has lived a long while doesn't automatically infer wisdom. I still make mistakes. I still guess wrong." He paused. "I still feel ." Then he got to his feet. "See you in a while."

I didn't want to nod, because it would hurt to move. I tried to pull together the energy to agree with him or thank him or something. But already, sleep was sliding over me, making every muscle relax.

?

Ben lied. I did dream.

It wasn't the same dream that I had been suffering through for weeks. I was in a town, with streets of stores and a park in the middle, and bizarrely, a giant packet of Life Savers floating over the grass. I didn't know the town at all.

People were walking through the park, using concrete paths that crisscrossed it. They didn't look at me.

Harper stood beside me, her hands on her hips, looking around with a moue of disappointment. "Well, it's not New York, is it?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out.

"Come on, then," Harper said. "That's a diner. We can get a coffee there." But she stayed where she was. Instead, she looked down at her boots, scowling. "I can't move." She looked at me. "You did this."

I still couldn't speak, but I could move. I stepped forward, ahead of Harper. And like a shadow, she followed me. "Hurry!" she yelled.

I woke up with a shudder and blew out my breath as I realized I had been dreaming after all. My phone was buzzing like a demented bee. I turned it off and got to my feet.

My head felt thick, and mildly foggy. I felt that way whenever I slept during the day. But my head was not thudding, and I didn't feel sick.

Amazing.

?

Instead of heading directly to the kitchen to start dinner, I stopped at the bar first. I had a hazy notion about thanking Ben. I wanted to check in and make sure everything was okay.

Broch was still behind the bar, leaning with one arm against the top of one of the beer barrels sitting at the other end of the bar. He straightened when he saw me and came over. "You've got color back in your cheeks."

"I feel a lot better," I admitted. I nodded to the back end of the room, where King and his people were still sitting. They had drinks and bowls of nuts and pretzels in front of them now. "Why are they not in the dining room, grilling Harper?"

"King isn't saying," Broch said softly. "And I don't think the others know. They're not talking about anything important. The two women wondered if King was hanging around town to hook up with you, but he's apparently never done anything like that, so they're uncertain." He shrugged, the corner of his mouth turning up. "I think he was flummoxed by the town turning him back the first time. Now he's building the courage to try to leave again. Finding himself turning the car around for no reason that makes sense...it takes the pith out of a decisive man like him."

"That works for me," I said, glancing at Harper, who was sitting in the sunlight slanting through the front windows, drinking whisky. She was reading a magazine and sitting by herself. "Broch, if I wanted to get some Life Savers, where would I go?"

“Anywhere?” Broch said, puzzled. Then, “Although there’s a big monument to Life Savers in Gouverneur. A man called Noble who owned the company was born there. Though I wouldn’t recommend eating the monument.”

I stared at him. Gouverneur . “Now I know what I have to do.”

Broch considered me. “And that would be...?”

“I have to take Harper to the diner in Gouverneur, where Calloway was last seen. We have to find the woman he was having coffee with.”

Broch frowned. “You won’t be able to leave town.”

“I will.”

“Not with Harper.”

“Yes, with Harper.”

“What makes you sure?” He wasn’t challenging me. He was simply asking.

“I don’t know. A dream. A gut feeling. I just know.”

Broch considered me for a long moment. “Okay,” he said at last.

“Okay?”

He nodded. “That tone you just used. When you said ‘yes, with Harper’...that is the same tone Trevalyan uses and Juda used to use, when they were sure of themselves and their power.”

I shivered. “Well, I’m not that certain,” I said quickly.

“Yes, you are.” Broch’s tone was firm. “It’s coming from somewhere other than you. Trust it.” Then he smiled. “Who gets to tell Harper she’s going on a road trip?”

“It’s not Harper I’m worried about. I’m going to have to use Olivia’s beast of a car, and it’s got a manual transmission. I’m worried about what Olivia will do to me if I ding it.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“THIS IS NOT GOING TO work,” Harper repeated from the passenger seat of the boat-like Continental, as I steered carefully around a bend in the narrow road—officially a state highway—that wound through the trees just outside Haighton.

As I was losing confidence by the second, I ignored Harper. The car was big. It felt as though there was barely room on the road for it to pass through the trees. If another car happened to come along from the opposite direction I would lose my nerve altogether.

“The town line is coming up.” I could feel it, not far ahead, like a heat map in my mind, with a narrow, glowing white band running perpendicular to our heading.

“Yes,” Harper said quietly. “I can sense it.” She’d stopped her blustering observations that my mad idea to take her to Gouverneur wouldn’t work. That made me mildly happier.

I glanced at her, then back at the road. It wound about too much to look away for longer than a second or two.

As we drew closer to the unofficial town border, my heartrate picked up. The tension in my gut wound up even higher and I could feel the remains of my headache threatening to start up its heavy thudding.

I could do nothing about it but continue driving. I concentrated on steering carefully around the bends.

...and even closer.

Harper cleared her throat and sat up straighter on the big bench seat.

I could feel my foot trying to lift off the gas pedal as we approached the invisible border. No outside force was making me slow down. It was just my own trepidation.

I made my boot stay against the pedal at exactly the same angle, maintaining our speed.

Then we were across the unseen line.

I gasped as the border fell behind us.

Harper made a sound in her throat, wordless and strangled. It might have been a gasp, too.

We looked at each other.

I quickly pulled my attention back to the road. My heartbeat slowed.

Harper resettled herself on the seat, looking ahead. She didn't speak until I had carefully navigated the turn onto Gouverneur Road. I turned right. Heading to the left would take us into Edwards. To the right, the road ran into 58 just over a mile from here. The 58 curved around a big chunk of state forest and undeveloped land to reach Gouverneur.

I found it amusing and slightly irritating that Gouverneur was northwest of Haigton, but to get there, I had to point the car to the southeast, and do a 15 mile half-circle. Long ago, the road in front of the hotel that ran through Haigton had continued on to the northwest, coming out on 58 just south of Gouverneur. But that road no longer

existed. The forest had taken it over and not even a trace of it was left beyond the big concrete barriers just outside the town borders.

Harper said, “Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“Pretending you’re a Fed. Looking into Calloway’s murder.”

“It’s not just me. Everyone is working on this,” I pointed out. “Broch is listening to every word they say.”

She made an impatient sound. “You don’t like me.”

“I don’t know you well enough to dislike you.”

“Semantics.” Her tone was highly irritated.

“If you want to think I dislike you, knock yourself out. I’m too old to care.”

“Like age means anything in Haigton.”

“How old are you?” I think it was the first time I’d wondered about her true age.

“None of your business.”

Fair enough. “I don’t dislike you, and I want you free of the Feds for purely selfish reasons. My daughter lives in Haigton, and the town cannot afford to have the FBI investigate the place.”

Harper didn’t respond to that. I turned the car onto 58 and relaxed. The road was

wider, smoother and I could go faster.

A few minutes later, Harper said, “Do you know where the diner is that they say he was last seen in?” Her tone wasn’t diffident or meek. But it wasn’t belligerent, either.

I’d checked with Broch and his notes before we left. “I do,” I told her. “It’s on this side of the town. We’d have to pass it to go into the town itself.” Which was where the giant Life Savers were. I’d studied Google Maps to find the diner. A park was in the middle of the downtown area...and a Life Savers monument was located at the end of it.

That had made me even more certain that I was doing the right thing. “Did Axel King tell you they have dropped the diner as an avenue of enquiry?”

“He didn’t tell me zip.” Harper was back to sounding annoyed. Back to normal. “Why are you so gung ho about it?”

If someone from Los Angeles had asked me that, I would have hedged and made up a story about...I have no idea what. But Harper was from Haigton. Remembering that let me relax and speak the truth. “I had a dream. And my gut has been screaming at me since yesterday, when I heard about the woman speaking to Calloway in the diner.”

After a moment, Harper said, “Okay, then.”

My middle relaxed a bit more.

It didn’t take long to reach the outskirts of Gouverneur, and I looked around with interest. This was Haigton’s shopping town. We ordered our groceries from here. Any supplies that Amazon couldn’t deliver were carried to Haigton by the same unpleasant man who delivered our groceries. I had resisted visiting Gouverneur

myself, because I was too busy learning how to run a hotel. The other reason I'd kept to myself whenever Olivia had suggested I take her car and run to Gouverneur for whatever it was we needed; I was still learning how to drive on icy and snow-covered roads. I was California born-and-raised, and I had rarely driven even though L.A. was driver-central.

But now the roads were perfectly clear. I just had to get used to Olivia's car.

Harper spotted the diner before I did because she wasn't concentrating on navigating the light traffic. "Over there on the left," she murmured as we approached the river. I could see a high, rusty railway bridge ahead, and on either side, many blue and red buildings and homes with white trim on the corners and around the buildings.

And squatting among them was the diner; a long trailer-like building with quaint rounded corners and metal siding. The sign, mounted on a tall post announced this was the "Sock Hop Diner." Half a dozen cars were parked on the compacted gravel in front of it.

I pulled off the road and into the unmarked parking area. I couldn't think of a reason why I wouldn't just pull up beside the other cars, except that we weren't proper customers.

"So, Sherlock," Harper said, as I reluctantly eased the Continental up alongside a Ford Explorer and came to a halt with a tiny squeak of the brakes. "What's your plan?"

"I don't have one," I confessed.

Harper rolled her eyes.

"I was going to start with the wait staff. Ask them what they remember about

Calloway and the woman. See where that gets us.”

“I’m getting something to eat,” Harper declared.

“You’re hungry?” She never seemed to stint herself when it came to meals. And booze. And holding back her feelings.

“It’s not your cooking,” Harper said. “I’m taking the opportunity.”

I didn’t let it touch me. I was a short order cook and indifferent housewife who had learned how to cook for a crowd only in the last few years. I was not a foodie. I was not into cooking for the love of flavor.

Even I thought it would be nice to eat something I hadn’t cooked myself.

We pushed open the swing doors and stepped inside, then paused to absorb the ambience.

Everything was red. The stools, the benches, the front of the counter. The floor was black they were steel, or chrome. The walls had red horizontal stripes running across the pristine white paint, and between the big windows, red sidelights were mounted.

“My eyes...!” Harper breathed.

“It’s cute,” I decided.

“It’s making me think of ice cream sundaes and bobby socks.” She said it in a hushed tone, for at least a dozen people were sitting in the booths, eating and talking. A young couple sat at the counter, and I nearly laughed aloud when I realized they were sipping milkshakes through striped straws.

“The counter,” I decided. “More staff to talk to.”

“Your show, Sherlock.”

I took a seat four stools along from the couple with the milkshakes. Harper took the stool beside me that was farthest from the couple. That put the booths along the windows only a few feet away from us, but no one had stopped to watch us sit down, or glare at the out-of-towners. Conversations continued as if we were not there.

For now, that suited me.

A waitress wearing a uniform that was nearly identical to those the staff had worn at my last place of employment walked along the length of the counter and placed two laminated menus on the counter between us. She bent and retrieved squat coffee cups and saucers and placed them in front of us, along with a knife and fork rolled in a paper serviette each. “Coffee?”

“Damn, yes,” Harper said.

“Do you have tea?” I asked.

Debbie, according to her name badge, spoke with complete indifference. “I got tea bags in the back.” She was already pouring coffee into Harper’s cup. She returned the pot to the warmer beneath the counter and moved away.

“Tea?” Harper intoned, picking up her unadulterated cup.

“It’s too late in the day for coffee, for me.”

Harper snorted. “Your loss.” She drank.

The waitress came back and placed a small pot of hot water on the counter by my cup, and a bent and wrinkled packet of black tea. I thanked her.

Harper didn't glance around for observers, or look like she was taking an interest in anything but her coffee, yet as soon as the waitress moved away once more, she said, "Why did the town let me through?"

I pulled the teabag out of the packet, put it in my cup and poured the water. "What makes you think I know?"

"You knew it would let me through. You said you dreamed about it."

"That was all the dream showed me. You, here in Gouverneur. I don't know anything else. I don't know why."

"It doesn't let people leave."

"It lets Olivia leave. And me."

"You've both got ties that bring you back." Harper shrugged. "I don't."

I scanned the menu. It was breakfast-all-day stuff that I had spent four years making a ton of each day. I put the menu aside. "Perhaps the town has higher priorities right now? Maybe it wants you clear of this Calloway thing, and the Feds gone, just like we all do?"

The waitress, Debbie, appeared in front of us. "Ready to order?"

"Oh yeah." Harper held out the menu. "The Philly cheesesteak sandwich and cheesecake for dessert. Fries on the side, with gravy. And more coffee."

Debbie nodded and looked at me. “I’m good,” I told her, handing the menu back. “I heard you had some excitement here the other day.”

She looked confused.

“Didn’t the FBI stop by?” Harper said.

“And give you guys a hard time,” I added.

That meant something to her. It would mean something to any waitress in America. Hard times were legion; from customers who demanded the world and didn’t tip, to outright abuse, some of it physical.

“Oh, yeah ,” Debbie breathed. “I wasn’t on shift, but Ramona was lead. They didn’t let her leave until three hours after her shift had ended.”

I didn’t have to try hard to look sympathetic, although I had to fake the surprise. “Do you know what it was about?”

“Some guy, a customer.” She shrugged.

“Did they keep Ramona back because they thought she knew something?” I sipped my tea. It was adequate.

“Assholes kept hounding her...” Debbie frowned. “How come you want to know?”

I took a deep breath, weighing my options. I had pushed a bit too far, too fast. Now she was wary. I had to get her back to thinking I was one of her people. I had to make her trust me.

This would either backfire badly or win her over. I waved toward Harper. “The Feds

came and hounded Harper. They think she killed the guy.”

Debbie’s eyes widened and I felt Harper go still beside me. Debbie sized Harper up. The long, black, wavy hair. The fine chin and Harper’s beautiful, pale blue eyes, with their thick lashes. If you didn’t know she had a knife in her boot and a backup somewhere else on her body, and could use them, that she was a superior hunter with superb instincts, then you would dismiss her as incapable of killing someone.

I willed Harper to keep her mouth shut, or at least not sound off with one of her pithier observations. Not right now.

Debbie said to Harper, “You? They think you killed him?”

Harper didn’t quite roll her eyes. “They kept at me for a whole day.”

“They came out to Haighton,” I said. “They’re all staying in my hotel.” And I sighed.

Debbie looked from me to Harper and back. “You came here figuring we’d tell you something that would...” She stopped. “Hey, you wouldn’t be here at all if you’d really done it. The Feds have the wrong person....” Then she shook her head. “Typical,” she said in disgust. “They’re hounding you into a confession ‘cause they don’t want to find the real killer.”

“They’re absolutely hounding me.” Harper’s tone was meek and put-upon.

Debbie nodded and refilled her coffee cup. “I’ll get your order started. Ramona clocks on at the top of the hour. I’ll send her over when she does.”

I let out my breath as Debbie marched away.

“Damn, you’re good,” Harper told me. “You had her on your side and willing to fight

for you.”

“Us,” I corrected her. “She sees you as the victim of Big Brother and wants to help you as a member of the oppressed.”

“Yeah, I figured that out.”

“You’re pretty good, yourself. That was nearly a whine in your voice at the end.”

Harper smiled grimly. “Hunting involves a lot of coaxing for information. You have to figure out pretty quick how to get people on your side. Or you don’t hunt.”

When Harper’s meal arrived, she ate with relish, as if she had not recently eaten a huge lunch. For a moment I envied her youthful metabolism, which was endlessly forgiving.

The long hand on the clock at the back of the store had slid past the 12 by a few minutes when a Latina woman with crimson hair came over to our end of the counter. She refilled Harper’s coffee. “I’m Ramona,” she said. “Deb told me about you. I’m not sure about...is it against the law to talk to you?”

“Harper hasn’t been arrested,” I said. “And probably won’t be. They’ve ground to a halt, questioning her.”

Harper gave Ramona a friendly grin that made me blink. I don’t think I had seen that expression on Harper before. “The Feds slipped,” Harper said. “They told me that Calloway had been here with a woman. Someone who knew where the CCTVs are, so her face doesn’t show on any of them.”

Ramona nodded. “Yeah, yeah, yeah, I remember her. Who wouldn’t?”

“She was memorable?” I asked.

“I wanted to hate her fuckin’...I mean, ‘scuse me—”

“That’s okay,” I said, with a smile. “You wanted to hate her fucking guts?”

“Wanted to, ‘coz she was so fucking beautiful. Absolutely gorgeous, made me want to do her myself.” Ramona hooked her thumb over her shoulder. “Like that chick in that movie with the big dresses. About the south, ya know?”

It took me a second or two. “You mean Gone with the Wind ?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. That’s the one.”

Harper grew still. I ignored it, keeping my attention firmly upon Ramona. “Calloway yelled at her?”

Ramona wiped at the steel countertop. “Yeah. Something about Harper did it. I told the Feds that. I don’t know what it was about.”

“Did she get upset when he yelled at her?” I asked.

“Nope. Just kept on talking. She was doing most of it. I told the Feds that, too. They wanted to know what they were talking about, but they had their heads together. And she seemed to know when I was getting close to the booth, coz when I got there she was talking about her daughter. Chloe.” Ramona grimaced. “She’s a mother and still has a twenty inch waist. It’s just not fair....”

Harper burped softly and put her knife and fork together on the plate. I mentally sighed. Putting down her knife and fork would trigger Ramona into clearing up.

Ramona swept up the plate and the empty bowl that had held the chips and gravy. “Anything else?” she asked Harper.

“I asked for cheesecake.”

“Strawberry, blueberry or caramel?”

“Caramel,” Harper said quickly, looking happy.

She liked sugar and cheese. And I thought she was a steak person. Although she’d had a Philly cheesesteak....

Ramona went away. I knew she wouldn’t come back unless we asked for her, and that would make her even more cautious about opening up.

Harper barely waited for Ramona to move beyond hearing distance. “I know who Vivian Leigh is,” she said in an undertone.

“Really? Just because someone says someone else looks vaguely like a long dead movie star?”

Harper shook her head. “Calloway was a hunter. The woman he was talking to, if it’s who I’m pretty damn sure it is, is also a hunter. A brilliant one—fourth generation and responsible for ending the third return of the Stonebrood clan.”

“Who are they ?” I breathed, fascinated by the hints and implications of a layered and detailed hunting world Harper had once lived and worked in. A fourth generation hunter? Until now I’d thought they all took up the profession the way Hunter and Calloway both did; because a supernatural species had killed someone close them.

“The Stonebrood Clan was the last clan of gargoyles to ever exist. Azazel brought

them back twice and Riley Connors's mother got rid of them the first time. Riley took care of them the second time because they came after her and her two partners."

Too much detail! "Azazel?" I asked cautiously, because I was swiftly realizing that if I tugged on any thread at all to do with the hunting world, I would be just as swamped with bewildering answers as I was now.

"Demon." Harper curled her mouth down and wrinkled her nose. "It's probably still around, but I don't think even Azazel is stupid enough to try a third time. Riley will deal with him, if he does."

I shuddered without warning, as I added demons to my list of species that lived among humans, who weren't just ripped from the pages of paranormal novels.

"It does sound like the woman Calloway was talking to is this Riley Connors," I said in agreement.

Harper looked even more grim. Perhaps even a little depressed. She nodded.

"That's not good news?" I asked. "We're a step ahead of Axel King. You can reach out to Riley Connors and find out why Calloway was talking about you and trying to find you."

"You don't just reach out to someone like Riley Connors!" Harper said, with a tone that said I should know that. "Even if I asked nicely, she'd probably refuse to speak to me."

"Why?"

"Because..." Harper shook her head. "I have a history. Especially with Calloway."

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Riley Connors and her two partners run all of New York state and most of New England. They’re damn near royalty.” Harper shifted on her stool. “You don’t just stroll up and knock on the door.”

I weighed that up. “There’s something about this you’re not telling me.”

Harper blew out her breath. “We haven’t got a few weeks for me to hold your hand and walk you through Hunting 101. Just trust me. This isn’t happening.”

“But—”

“No.” She snapped the word, then sat up straighter as Ramona came closer, carrying a plate with a hefty slice of caramel cheesecake with whipped cream on the side and two spoons. Ramona winked at me as she put the plate in front of Harper, but close enough to me that we could share if we wanted to.

Boy, had she misread her customers!

Harper pulled the cheesecake closer and used one of the spoons to attack it and eat.

I could almost feel the waves of resentment coming off her like a radiant heater. It occurred to me, not for the first time, that Harper wasn’t used to needing help. She was suspicious of my help. And she wouldn’t reach out to Riley Connors for the same reason. Harper wanted to do this all by herself, because that was easier for her. It didn’t require dealing with other people.

From the few hints I’d picked up about her life before she arrived in Haighton, she had worked alone and been alone for a long time. And that was the way she liked it. Or maybe she just thought she preferred it that way.

It fit with the way she lived in Haigton. Among a small group of privacy freaks, Harper was the ultimate loner.

“It’s not good that Riley Connors is involved.” Harper’s tone was defensive.

“Mmmm....” I replied. I was busy dealing with a new idea, one that had occurred to me just now. I pushed my empty teacup away from me. “You should go.”

“Go?” Harper frowned.

“Get out of here. Leave and not look back. Now. This is likely your one chance. The town let you leave. So, really leave. I know you can take care of yourself.”

Harper put down her fork and swiveled the stool to look at me squarely. “Are you saying what I think...yeah, you are.” She examined me for another long moment. “I gotta say that’s twice you’ve surprised me, today. And I thought I had you figured.”

“Glad I’m not a cliché,” I murmured. Was I that transparent? But I’d surprised her.

Harper put her hands between her knees. “I can’t run.”

“There’s nothing stopping you. Not even me.”

Harper’s expressive mouth thinned. “There are at least two sets of posters with my name on them.”

I thought it through. “The FBI and...the hunting people?”

Harper nodded.

“Then what everyone told me at Christmas, the reason you came to Haigton in the

first place—that you were being hunted by the hunters...that’s still in play?”

“I told you I had a history. And honestly, Crackstone, it’s the hunters that worry me more. But if I run, I’ll be telling King I’m guilty and then the Feds will never stop looking for me.”

“Head to Venezuela, then.”

Harper looked at me as though I had disappointed her. “Hunters don’t have to worry about extradition.”

Oh. “This is why you don’t want to talk to Riley Connors?”

“It’s a big chunk of it,” Harper said. “But everything else is true, too. You don’t just message them. It’s...rude.”

“You’re just going to go back to Haigton?” I asked.

Harper’s knees bounced a little. “I don’t have a choice.” Her tone was bleak. “Maybe that’s why the town let me leave with you. It knew this just as well as I did.”

“I don’t think the town cares about anything beyond its borders, unless it’s something that threatens the town. It’s inhuman and doesn’t have morals or emotions. It doesn’t feel pity.”

“Listen to you. Three months in town and you’re an expert,” Harper said sourly.

I recognized that she was deflecting me in typical Harper style, by going on the offensive.

I eased off the stool, feeling the ache in my back from sitting without support for too

long. Getting older sucked. “It’s getting late,” I said, my tone firm. “We are going to stay the night in Gouverneur. We’ll find a cheap motel, and we’ll go out and have a nice dinner, and drink too much. Find a club with a band, maybe.”

I had made hasty arrangements with Olivia and Ben to take care of dinner in the hotel that night. Most of it was made, already. It just had to be heated up. I thought about relaxing in a real bar full of purely human people, crowd-watching and listening to a semi-pro rock band and watching men try to hit on Harper and what she did with them when they messed it up.

I was already looking forward to it.

Harper gave me another of those “you are stupid” looks. “That’s not going to happen,” she said with complete certainty. She pulled a billfold out of her pocket and slid two bills under the dessert plate. She was a good tipper.

“There’s no reason it can’t. You need to de-stress, Harper. Take the night. Enjoy yourself. Go back to Haigton tomorrow.”

Harper gave a soft, muffled laugh. “You have no idea...” She paused, then smiled at me. The full wattage she had given Debbie, earlier. “You know what? Sure. Let’s find a motel. There’s gotta be one along the road into town.”

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Twenty-three minutes later, I pulled my credit card out of my wallet. It took enormous effort, as if my arm was moving through concrete. I concentrated on the credit machine that was showing the total for a room and taxes, waiting for me to tap it.

I pulled my hand away from my body, clutching the card, aiming for the machine,

while the check-in clerk for the Lofty Inn watched me with bored indifference.

Just a foot more... I had brought my hand this far.

Then, just as I thought I had won, I found myself returning the card to my wallet, my hand moving swiftly. "You know what, I've changed my mind."

"No probs," the kid told me, putting the machine away. He sat behind his desk and went back to watching whatever he had been watching when I stepped into the reception area.

I trod heavily back to the car sitting under the portico inside. I got in behind the steering wheel. Harper's shoulders were shaking.

"Do not say anything," I warned her and started the car. I drove out of the parking lot and back onto 58...heading southeast.

Harper laughed openly, then. She held her sides and whooped, her boot thumping the floor.

When we reached the little graveled parking area beside the hotel in Haigton, Axel King was sitting on the steps leading up to the side door into the bar.

It was getting dark, so I wasn't sure, but I think it was relief I saw on his face.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I THINK IT WAS BECAUSE Harper had chuckled on and off all the way back to Haigton that I let down my guard.

By the time we got out of the Continental, and I conscientiously locked it, Axel King had disappeared back inside. It left Harper and me alone in the parking lot, with the last of the day's light dazzling us.

Harper was waiting for me a few paces away from the car. As I drew closer, she said, "Guess you've got my marker now, huh?" Her tone was sour.

It took me a few seconds to understand what she meant. Abruptly, my skin prickled and fury rose up inside me like a geyser. "What the fuck ?" I still had enough sense left to want to verify that she had meant what I thought.

She didn't blink. "I owe you for looking into this Calloway thing," she said flatly. "And I don't like owing favors."

I lost my cool. I can't remember the last time someone provoked me into a rage this great, but it surely had been Jasper, toward the end of our marriage.

I threw out my hands. "Not everyone counts favors, Harper! Not everyone goes around with their shields up, afraid someone will steal from them!"

Harper was unmoved. "You've got more wrinkles than me, but you're a complete babe in the woods, aren't you?"

“That’s a shitty way to live !” I screamed.

“It’s called survival.” She was so cool, I wanted to claw at her face. Vaguely, I was aware of people spilling out of the side door. My screaming had drawn them out.

Too bad. I would have my say. I’d had enough of trying to tolerate and empathize with Harper Gibbs. “At some point you have to trust someone. You have to let them help just because it’s the right thing to do!”

Harper snorted. “If you can’t get by without help, you might as well slit your own throat and do the world a favor.” She stalked toward the stairs where everyone who had been in the bar was witnessing my complete lack of chill.

I wanted to haul her back and slap her into fighting me...and that thought pierced the envelope of fury around me. I deflated and was left with a new headache. My heart beat heavily.

I was shaking.

I headed for the front of the hotel. I would use the front door. I had no desire to pass through the bar, where Harper was probably already on the window seat, a boot on the edge of the table in front of her, and a whisky in hand, while everyone around her laughed and relived the last few moments of entertainment.

At the corner of the parking lot, where the footpath that ran in front of the hotel ended, Ben stood with a hand against the rendered and whitewashed wall. He dropped his hand as I got closer.

I didn’t have the courage to speak. I didn’t know what I could say, anyway. Had he heard all of it?

When I was within hearing distance, Ben said, “I only heard the last part.”

“Small mercies,” I said.

His response shocked me. “You should heed your own advice, Anna.”

I came to a halt on the sidewalk, feeling like I’d been slapped.

Ben said over his shoulder, as he headed for the front door, “Dinner’s in ten minutes, according to Olivia.”

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It had been an intense few days. Once I had cleared up after a perfectly adequate but plain dinner and put some basic planning in for breakfast prep for the morning, I headed upstairs, my head still thumping.

My lawyer, Lucinda, had left me a text message, giving me the date, time and Zoom location for a meeting between me and Jasper to sort out the delinquent taxes on his house. It was too soon, as far as I was concerned. But anywhere in the next year would be too soon for me. I texted back an affirmative.

The next few days were remarkable for their lack of drama, but they were all marathon sprints that made me appreciate *Alice Through the Looking Glass* more than I ever had when reading it as a child. The constant running to get nowhere...yeah, I could understand that now.

Five more guests arrived over the next three days. That put us close to full capacity, for everyone but Axel’s group had rooms to themselves. That would have to change if we had more people arriving, asking for a room. Which Olivia repeatedly assured me would happen.

I didn't know the guests' names, nor had I the time to stop to observe them and guess their species. Ghaliya said they were human in appearance, and that was my only criteria for accepting guests at the moment.

Axel King and his people took up near permanent residence in my dining room. Between meals, they yanked the tables around so they were working in a rough circle and could talk to each other. Pads of paper, laptops and glasses with the remains of water and other beverages, plus plenty of coffee cups, littered the room.

My moving around the room with a garbage bag, sweeping the detritus into the green bag, they took as a clear signal that I wanted my dining room back for the next meal, and they would pack up without protest.

Broch had stopped listening in on their conversations. "They're not saying anything, anyway," Broch told us. "Except that all of them are wondering why Axel King can't stir himself and head back to Gouverneur to finish the investigation." Broch had smiled at that. So had we all.

Except me. "Why is the town keeping him here?"

"It's waiting for us to get Harper off the hook," Broch said. "Keeping King close until we can."

"Or keeping him out of Gouverneur where the investigation can progress and lock Harper in as the primary suspect?" Ben suggested.

"Either way, it's giving us time," Broch concluded.

Although I had no time at all to follow up on the Calloway thing. As Ben's temporary nursing assistant, I had tended to Frida and Hirom. I knew neither of them could move off their bed. With Frida and Hirom both out, I was close to being too slammed

to draw breath.

I harangued the grocery store for more food every single day and paid premiums to have it delivered before any other delivery they made. I needed every scrap they delivered, too, for food was going off within hours of delivery.

Even the canned goods on the shelves spoiled. I discovered a can in the far back of the shelf, up by the side door of the kitchen, had swollen, tearing the label and bulging at the seams. I handled it gingerly, the way one would handle an unexploded bomb—which was exactly what it was—and took it out to the big dumpster behind the hotel.

I started watching the cans and spotted that the wave of rotten whatever it was seemed to be working its way from that corner toward the front of the shelf and down the shelf toward the dining room door. It just didn't work as fast on the cans as it did the fresh food.

Broch tended bar, and because he did not need to sleep, he was the perfect substitute for Hirom—he worked as many hours as Hirom did, without need for rest or sustenance. He seemed to be enjoying himself, too. Perhaps the change of pace appealed to him.

At least one local was happy.

The guests seemed to mind their own business. They sometimes left during the day, always on foot, and would reappear for dinner. Sometimes they stayed in their rooms. Or, like Aurora Caro, they spent their days in the bar. Not always drinking. But reading or playing games or talking. I found more dusty board games in the cellar and brought them up. I tried bringing in the Tribune-Press from Gouverneur, but the locals got their news on the Internet and the guests didn't seem to care for newspapers.

“News passes differently, here,” Wim told me, when I offered him the newspaper as starting fodder for the fireplace.

“Then I wish I knew how to plug into the feed, because I always feel ignorant.”

Wim considered me with his leaf green eyes. “You knew to go to Gouverneur and take Harper with you.”

“But that was just...” I sucked in a breath. “Right. Got it.”

On the third day after our trip to Gouverneur, I came rattling down the stairs, already far behind in my lunch preparations, and found Orrin Stonebrunch staring through the mullioned window beside the front door. He was standing close enough to touch the glass, but he dominated the lofty foyer, anyway.

Like the other guests, Orrin lingered inside the hotel for most of the day. Usually, he sat in the bar and drank gallons of Hirom’s beer. He had maintained his human appearance, which I appreciated. It was one less thing to fret over. Because of the gratitude I felt over his appearance, I moved to stand beside him and looked up at him. “You’re still comfortable here, I hope? I know rooms are...a far cry from the forest.”

He didn’t answer at once. I half-hoped that he would agree and decide to move back into the forest. At least my food would stop spoiling.

Instead, Orrin kept his gaze on the window and said, “The walls are quiet. The stone beneath holds no grudge. That is enough.” I think it was the longest speech I’d heard him make since he had arrived.

It took me a moment to understand that he was saying his room was enough. I hadn’t thought of a building as a structure sitting upon earth and stone that might resent it.

That was something to think about later.

“Well, good,” I told Orrin truthfully. “Most guests just want fresh towels and working plumbing.”

Orrin didn’t look away from the window. “They are not guests. Not as you think of them. They have gathered—not for comfort, but for turning.”

“Turning?”

Orrin didn’t move his head to look at me. He shifted his whole body, and I found myself swaying out of the way, to make room for him. He looked at me with the same solemn expression he always wore, and said, “The wheel creaks. The year rolls forward. There is a night when silence leans close...when the breath of the land holds still to listen. They wait for that.”

I looked past his massive elbow, out through the window at the crossroads. “Beltane.”

He nodded. Slowly. “The veil thins on Beltane, aye. All that slumbers beneath stirs. Listens. Watches. Judges.”

Judges . Is that why he was here? To judge us? He had the power to destroy all of us. Was this the time of year when he used it?

Then a secondary thought occurred to me. “You know about the will of the town.”

“It names itself thus?”

I didn’t have a good answer. “It’s what we call it. You’re saying the will of the Town is waiting for something?”

“It will hear what the fire has to say. And what walks the green road that night. What it decides will bind or break.”

I couldn't decide if he was merely being poetic. After all, Broch had revealed that Beltane was basically a festival celebrating sexual bonding, which humans had formalized with hand-fastings.

But if he was being literal....

I had more dreams that night. Most of them were dark shadows of dread that I was happy to forget. I woke in the morning in a cold sweat. I could still feel the rough, dried bark from the torch I had been holding in my hand, while a silent Juda urged me to burn the bed of branches he laid upon.

It was hard to shrug off the fear, though. It followed me around like Pooh's little black rain cloud.

I never for a moment thought that anyone else had caught my mood and was trailing their own invisible black rain clouds, until I found Ghaliya weeping in her room.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I DON'T REMEMBER WHY I had to speak to her. Whatever the reason, it fled the moment I tapped and opened the door to her room and caught her wiping her eyes hastily.

Dry cheeks didn't eliminate the evidence. The rims of her eyes were pink, and the rest of her face white.

"Hey, hey, what's this?" I asked, closing the door behind me. "This is more than screwy hormones."

Ghaliya's eyes filled up yet again. "I'm fine." Her voice wobbled. She bent her head and dripped tears onto her belly.

I patted the bed. "Scooch over."

Ghaliya carefully maneuvered herself toward the head of the bed. The bed itself was enclosed inside an alcove that was lined with bookshelves. Dozens of cushions turned the bed into a sofa beneath the bookshelves. I knew that Ghaliya was working her way through all the old leatherbound books on the shelves, for every now and then she would entertain the dinner table with obscure questions about long gone authors and their writing. Or she would quote a strange fact she had gleaned from among the pages.

I settled in the approximate middle of the bed, which gave Ghaliya no room to escape. I took her hand. "What's wrong?"

“Nothing.” Her voice was low. Almost inaudible. And she didn’t lift her head. I could see she was still weeping.

“No, really, Ghaliya. What’s upset you?”

“Nothing.” Her voice was a little stronger.

“It’s not nothing. Not from where I’m sitting.”

“Yes, it is !” She lifted her head. “Don’t you get it? Nothing is wrong !”

I stared at her. I was lost.

Ghaliya’s fingers gripped mine, squeezing them. “I’m eight months pregnant as of tomorrow, Mom. I was never supposed to be able to carry a baby for this long. I wasn’t supposed to ever get pregnant at all! And now I’m here, it’s eight months...” She took in a trembling breath. “Do you know that if something goes wrong now and they have to do a C-section, that the baby will most likely live?”

I nodded, although I don’t think I had processed it quite that precisely. I was starting to see the shape of her worry.

Ghaliya shook my hand. “What if something goes wrong? What if, after all this time, I lose the baby? Mom, I don’t think I could stand it. It was okay while it was a peanut in there. I think I could have lived with it. But now ...?”

“You said it yourself,” I told her. “Even if something does go wrong, they can take the baby out and now it has a good chance of living when it does. The twenty-eight week mark is the borderline, and you’ve passed that. Weeks ago.”

“And what if I deliver it? I don’t know what to do with a baby !” Ghaliya cried. She

shook with great wracking sobs.

I pulled her against me and murmured all the wordless sounds of comfort I'd used when she and Oscar had been small children. They'd grown out of it quickly. Too quickly. Oscar was in Newfoundland now, a father in his own right. Did he soothe his kids the same way?

They might have grown out of it but Ghaliya, right now, needed the comfort. Gradually, she calmed.

I brushed her hair back from her sweaty forehead. "I promise you, Ghaliya, that I will not let anything happen to you and the baby."

Ghaliya lifted her chin. "You swear it?"

I could hear the hope in her voice, which made it easy to nod and say, "I swear it."

.

By the time I reached the bottom of the stairs and the front foyer of the hotel, I'd stopped crying myself. But I was drained of all energy and had dinner for twenty-six people to prepare.

Possibly, more than twenty-six people. Yesterday, two dryads had arrived from wherever they came from and requested to lunch with Wim. Olivia had looked thrilled. I didn't have the heart to say no. Later in the afternoon, one of them had presented me with a new aloe vera plant to replace the one on the fireplace mantle in the bar. The original one had shriveled and curled into a ball, the way many of the plants in the hotel were doing.

Because of those two unexpected diners, I thought it would be smart to assume I had

to cater for thirty people.

The dining room, like the rooms upstairs, was reaching capacity.

And I had zero capacity of my own to prepare yet another huge meal. I trudged around the stairs and under them, then through the side door into the kitchen.

Ben straightened up from his lean over the steel prep table and put his phone in his pocket. His eyes narrowed. “You’re upset.”

I shook my head. But damn it, just the concern in his voice was making my eyes water all over again.

I used the tip of my finger to wipe the moisture away, as if I had something in my eye. “It’s nothing....” I began and stopped. I heard Ben’s voice from a few nights ago, telling me I should take my own advice.

Ben didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to. He tilted his head a little to one side. Disbelief.

“Ghaliya’s terrified!” I said. Then it was there. All of it. Pushing to escape me, to be heard. “She’s afraid something will happen to the baby and afraid of what will happen if the baby is born! And I just swore I would fix it all! Me! I don’t even know what hospital to take her to. Or even if the town will let me ! And I can’t think at all because I don’t have time, and I’ve had a headache for five days, and the dreams are getting worse, and if I don’t start prepping lunch now, everyone will bitch at me, and I don’t even know if I can serve what I planned because who the hell knows what food has gone over since breakfast? I’ve got hot and cold running guests whose beds and bathrooms must be cleaned every single morning, and Frida can barely lift herself up on one elbow without passing out! Axel King and his people aren’t leaving and won’t until we figure out who killed Calloway, and I don’t have the time to sort that

out, not until after Beltane. They're going to be here for all the craziness on Beltane Eve. Hirom's out, but Broch's doing okay, but what do I do when the beer runs out because Orrin drinks a jug at a time, and he's here to pass judgement on us all and—"

Ben touched his fingertip to my mouth. It halted me as effectively as if he'd laid his entire hand across it. My lips tingled where he'd touched me.

He reached up and with his thumb drew a line from the center of my forehead to my temple. He did the same on the other side with his other thumb.

I could feel something sigh and relax inside me. The headache that hovered behind my eyes receded. It didn't disappear, but it was enough for me to realize that I had been holding my face in a scowl. I could feel the muscles loosen and my skin smooth out.

"Just a touch," Ben said, his voice soft. "I won't use too much power. Not even for you. Not now."

I realized with a start that he had used some of his healing power to fix my headache. Well, send it into the next room for a time-out, at least.

I focused on what he had said. "Why not now?" I asked. Ben was a Caladrius, one of a long line of male family members, going back to Rome itself. He was a shifter, and when he shifted and flew during the equinox or the solstice, his healing powers were restored.

The spring equinox had been in late March. The June solstice was two months away. "You're saving your powers?" I asked Ben.

He looked down at the steel counter beside his hip. Reached out and wiped away an invisible smear.

“You are ,” I breathed. “For Ghaliya...” Some more of the straining chords of tension inside me eased.

“Ghaliya is perfectly healthy,” Ben said, his voice low. “She’s in better health than when you arrived. I can deliver her. You don’t have to go anywhere.”

Her . I gasped. “You know the sex of the baby?”

He made a small sound of annoyance. “Sorry,” he added.

Ghaliya was carrying a girl.

I squeezed my hands together, delighted.

Ben came closer. “Ghaliya will be fine,” he said, his voice firm. “As for you...you need—”

“Help,” I finished and blew out my breath. “I really, really need help.” And my voice wobbled, adding to my pathetic stature.

“That’s why I’m here,” Ben said. He put his hand on the counter. “I figured you’d be back here sooner or later. What help do you most need?”

Everything was relaxing inside me. But at the same time, my cheeks burned. I tried to ignore all that. Treat it as a simple corporate delegation exercise.

“Help in the kitchen,” I said. “Help cleaning the rooms each day. But the kitchen is the big one. And someone has to talk to Hirom and see if he has more beer already barreled in his forest clearing, wherever he brews the stuff.”

“Broch will know where that is,” Ben said, swiping out notes on his phone.

“Broch has to stay tending the bar,” I said quickly. “Everyone who is staying here is spending their days in the bar. Broch could probably use help of his own.” I had been too busy to check in on him and find that out. I was a terrible boss.

“Stop that,” Ben said and touched my brow again. I could feel the tension crowding in there once more and tried to let it relax.

“That’s all for now,” I said. “It’s a lot, but...”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“You’re sure?” I asked. “About Ghaliya, I mean.”

Ben put his phone away. “You haven’t been here long enough,” he said. “If you had been here for a while, you might believe me when I say that Ghaliya is probably better off here than anywhere else.”

“Because you’re that good?” I asked, trying to remove any doubt from my tone.

“Because we all care about her,” Ben said. “Trevalyan has spells he’s been building ingredients and hex bags for, for a couple of months now. That’s why he was pleased about the herbs that Stonebrunch gave you. I have medicines that have been used throughout history to help a woman through delivery. They work, better than you would believe. Olivia has been knitting like crazy, just not where you or Ghaliya could see it because she thought it might be bad luck for you to see the blankets and booties and caps she’s finished. Wim has been building a bower—”

“Bower?” I repeated. It was an ancient word, right out of nursery rhymes.

“A basinet. A crib. A dryad version of one.”

I felt winded. “Is there anyone who hasn’t been running around behind my back, behaving like it was their kid on the way?”

Ben smiled. “A child, in this town...of course she will be everyone’s delight. Ghaliya will never lack babysitters. Broch, by the way, has been buying up Amazon. Anything we can’t make here is either already stashed in the house behind mine, or it is on the way.”

I drew in a shuddering deep breath. “Okay...” I said at last. “Alright. I trust you. And I’ll ask Trevalyan for a Tylenol equivalent, so you don’t have to do anything more this quarter.”

Ben squeezed my shoulder. “You’d better start dinner. I’ll go and haul Olivia away from her knitting needles and we’ll help you finish it.”

.

Everyone did turn out and roll up their sleeves. Every local who wasn’t bedridden, except Broch, who was tending the bar, ended up helping in the kitchen, while I acted as chef and directed them, while dealing with the temperamental recipes.

After dinner, which was a noisy affair at our table, and not a lot less noisy anywhere else in the room, everyone filed back into the kitchen and cleaned up.

Olivia asked if they could do anything to have breakfast prep go more smoothly in the morning. It took me nearly thirty seconds to nod my head and ask diffidently that fruit be peeled and chopped and muffins made.

Lots of laughter sounded as people squeezed juice into their eyes or licked dough bowls clean.

And the work was actually done a lot faster than I could have done it myself, even with all my practice.

We all trooped out and across to the bar after that, to have a well-deserved drink, which would be on my tab.

The bar was crowded and noisy. Even before we moved through the doorway, I guessed by the noise level that it was likely the big round table by the fireplace had been taken by others. That might make the locals who spent a lot of time at that table uncomfortable.

“Ha!” Trevalyan exclaimed as I ducked under the curtain myself.

I moved around everyone to see.

The big round table had an empty glass or mug or tankard in front of every chair, and in the middle was a folded piece of card with “Reserved” on it.

“I could kiss him,” Trevalyan declared.

I glanced toward the bar, at least twenty feet away, and caught Broch rolling his eyes as he poured a pitcher of beer from one of the two hand-made barrels sitting on their stands at the other end of the bar. He nodded at the dryad standing in front of the bar, talking to him. I couldn’t hear the dryad from here.

Everyone headed for the round table and settled themselves into one of the barrel chairs. Good natured shoving and laughter sounded.

Harper was sitting by herself on the window seat as usual. She had a glass of whisky in one hand and a magazine in the other, the cover curled under so she could hold it in one hand. Her head was bent, and she ignored us.

That was fine by me. I was still processing what had happened in the parking lot a few days ago. I wasn't ready to be charitable toward her once more.

Trevalyan, though, got to his feet to look over the heads of everyone at the table. "Harper. Come and sit with us."

Harper looked up at him. Her nose wrinkled and I thought she was about to give one of those disdainful sniffs of hers.

"I mean it," Trevalyan said. "Come on."

Harper's gaze roamed around the table. Then it settled on me for one long second.

Silently, she closed the magazine, lowered her foot from the coffee table, rose and moved over to the table.

We all shuffled and nudged chairs around once more, making room for her. Broch brought over two trays of drinks, a round for everyone, and sorting them out and handing them out took more conversation.

Harper sat in the chair that Wim had placed for her. She put her glass of whisky on the table. Then, after a second, she picked it up again.

The conversations started up again. They teased each other about how bad everyone was at cooking, and how food just didn't behave the way one thought it should. And how was one supposed to peel a pomegranate, anyway? There were more comments about how satisfying raw muffin dough was to eat.

Harper didn't join them. She remained silent, sipping her whisky. Until, some minutes later, Olivia leaned across Wim and touched Harper's arm, resting on the chair. Olivia asked Harper something that I didn't catch as I was on the far side of the

table, and Trevalyan wasn't modulating his tone at all.

Harper stirred and answered Olivia. Ghaliya added something and the people on that side of the table laughed...except for Harper, whose mouth merely twitched.

I didn't last long, after that. I was exhausted and could feel sleep pulling at me. By the time I had finished my small glass of whisky, I was drooping. If I merely closed my eyes for a few minutes, that would be it. I would sleep right where I was sitting, regardless of the high level of noise in the room.

By the time I hauled myself to my feet, Harper was speaking as easily as everyone else at the table.

And the next morning when I entered the kitchen to start breakfast prep, Harper was standing at the back of the group waiting for instructions. She didn't meet my eyes, but she didn't need to.

It turned out that Harper was a natural cook. Not surprisingly, she could handle a knife like nobody's business.

Two days later, I realized that Ben had created breathing room in my days. I was no longer bouncing from essential task to critical chore in a string that ended only when I fell into bed. When I cleaned the rooms after breakfast, Olivia and Trevalyan helped me. When the last three rooms were claimed by five new guests, Ben joined the morning cleanup crew, too.

And while we were cleaning, Wim and Harper were starting basic prep in the kitchen. By the time I arrived with my cleaning crew to prepare lunch, most of the grunt work was done.

The frantic pace of my days geared down, enough to let me start thinking about

something other than the demands of running the hotel. I consulted with Broch, then sent an email to Riley Connors, asking for an hour of her time, and explaining why.

I got an answer within the hour, inviting me to stop by her apartment in Soho, tomorrow.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I HAD TO PHONE MY lawyer, Lucinda, and tell her to postpone the Zoom meeting with Jasper and his great white shark of a lawyer. I said something had come up that had to be handled right now. Lucinda was pissed about it. I could tell, even though her tone didn't rise at all. She said she would see what she could do and hung up.

As it turned out, that was one of the least stressful moments of my day.

I refused to take anyone with me. Not even Olivia, whose car I would have to drive. "It's bad enough that I'm leaving for a whole day," I told Olivia, who had suggested that at the least, she could drive and I could navigate. "The hotel will need all of you on deck to keep it ticking over while I'm gone. Let Harper make the casserole—"

"Harper?" Olivia asked, startled.

"Yes, Harper," I said. "She can follow the recipe I wrote out – two batches, of course."

"Plant-based and omnivore," Olivia said, with a nod.

"And you can manage everything else," I added. "I'll use Google Maps. It will talk me through every mile."

What I didn't tell Olivia was that I had never been to New York. And now I was going to drive a car the size of a small submarine around the busy streets of one of the largest cities in the world, find parking, and not get a ding on it, all while millions of

other cars got in my way.

Yeah, telling Lucinda to move the Zoom meeting barely twitched the stress-o-meter in comparison.

Olivia had pulled the Continental out of her garage and left it in the driveway. That was on the greenway side of the house. I headed over to the house after breakfast and after checking with Ghaliya one last time and found the car where Olivia had said it would be, and one more thing.

Harper was leaning against the car, her arms crossed, her flat-brimmed black hat shading her eyes from the morning sun. She didn't move as I got closer, and she was leaning against the driver's door.

"You're doing this just because it's the right thing to do." Her flat tone made it sound like a statement, but I knew it wasn't.

"I'm doing it because the world is fucking with you, Harper, and that's not fair."

"That would be yes?"

I picked out the big old car key on Olivia's key ring and shook it out. "I've been where you are. I know what it feels like. No one should ever be there."

Harper considered that for a long moment. "Who helped you out?"

I smiled. "This whole damn town. Last Christmas."

I could see that the sentiment irritated Harper. But she straightened and got out of my way. "Go through Albany, not Syracuse," she said. "It's quicker, even though it doesn't look like it would be on the map."

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Whoever thought up the idea of Google Maps' navigation feature deserves a Nobel Prize. As nervous as I was, having my phone tell me in a calm voice where to turn, what lane I needed, and how soon a turn was coming up was a life-saver.

I took Harper's advice and picked the Albany route, which Google Maps told me was nearly thirty minutes quicker than going through Syracuse. Once I had settled into the route, some of the tension eased, only to flare up high once I crossed over to Manhattan and was dealing with five lanes of cars racing through four-laned streets.

Once I reached the apartment building in Soho, I had to circle around the block several times until I spotted a legal parking spot that was miraculously empty and had room on either side for me to steer the Continental into the space. The curbside tires ended up six inches away from the curb. I called it good enough.

A different sort of tension tugged at my innards as I rang the buzzer to be let into the building. It was a lovely old gray building, in a quiet street with actual cobblestones. It didn't look pretentious, but this was Soho. Kids were playing in the street while mothers stood on the stoops and gossiped.

It seemed perfectly normal and domestic. But I could hear, close by, the endless noise of cars and horns, the basso rumble of trucks, and even more horns. People yelling, somewhere I couldn't see from where I was standing on the small stoop. Music playing—all I could hear was the beat.

Noise. It was everywhere. Even the chitter of birds in the small trees planted along the sidewalk seemed less like nature's soundtrack and more like the complaints of neighbors.

I couldn't remember L.A. being this noisy. Had it been? I suspected it might have

been.

The door clicked open, and I headed up to the second floor and knocked on the double doors. They were the only doors at this level. Riley Connors owned the whole floor, it seemed.

Everything Harper had said about Riley Connors being royalty in the hunting world came back to me.

The door opened. The dark-haired woman smiled at me.

I was taken aback for a second, because Riley Connors had answered her own door. It had to be her, a woman who was known for her beauty, for she was stunningly gorgeous.

“Mom, it’s moving !” came a cry from behind her.

Riley lifted her hand. “Just a moment,” she told me. She twisted and called over her shoulder. “Put the lid on and turn the heat all the way down!”

“I’ve got it, Riley!” came another voice. Male.

Riley looked back at me.

“Warming milk?” I guessed.

“For hot chocolate.” Riley smiled. “Good guess.”

“You can also blow on the foam. That will take it right down to nothing, then the milk won’t spill over beneath the pot lid.”

Riley's eyes widened. "You'd better come in. You're Anna, right?"

I nodded and stepped in. The apartment was one of the open studio apartments that New York seemed to love, except that the kitchen was closed off—I could see a teenage girl, who I guessed was Chloe, and a tall man with olive skin working at a gas range, both studying a small pot.

I realized that the two partners that Harper had spoken about weren't just hunting partners. They were life partners.

At the far end where the kitchen wall ended, I could see the end of a dining table. On the right, the wall was punctured by huge old windows that let in southern light, where it spilled on gleaming floorboards in bright squares.

Three sofas defined the sitting area. At the far back of the apartment was a king sized bed half hidden by a bamboo screen. The corner was closed in. A bathroom. And in the corner to my right was a spiral iron staircase, heading down to the floor below.

A second man sat on one of the sofas. He had pale skin and dark hair, and pale blue eyes. He was watching me with a stillness that reminded me of Broch.

Was he a vampire? That sort of stillness wasn't natural. Did that make Riley a vampire? Harper hadn't mentioned this. As she hated vampires and had spent the majority of her adult life hunting them down, it would have been natural for her to state that they were. But she had said nothing.

Or did her unease at the idea of speaking to Riley Connors come from this old prejudice of hers? That seemed likely.

Riley waved toward the sofas. "Have a seat. Did you drive down this morning?"

“I came straight here,” I admitted. I picked the sofa opposite the man watching me closely and nodded at him. “I’m Anna Crackstone.”

“Sorry,” Riley said, dropping onto the corner of the sofa the man sat on. She picked up a cushion and put it over her knees, as she curled her legs up under her. “This is Nicholas. Damian and Chloe are in the kitchen. I’ll introduce you when they’re done burning the milk.”

“I heard that!” Damian called.

Riley smiled. “If you just arrived in the city, you’re probably hungry. Have you had lunch?”

“I stopped at a McDonalds not long ago,” I said.

“Then she hasn’t eaten real food at all!” Damian called. “I’ll make a sandwich.”

“Thanks, Damian!” Riley said, lifting her voice. “He likes to cook,” she told me, her voice lower.

“I like to have other people cook for me,” I said. “It doesn’t happen often.”

Riley laughed softly. “I looked up Haighton Crossing. It’s not on any maps except for one that Nicholas has that is from the eighteenth century.”

“That sounds about right,” I told her. “Haighton is...different.”

“There are hamlets like Haighton all over Britain,” Nicholas said. “They are rare, here.” He spoke with a rich English accent. “Hags’ town...the name explains everything.”

I shivered. “It does.”

“Even you, Anna Crackstone,” Nicholas added. His gaze would not let me go. I had to wrench my attention away from him. I looked at Riley instead.

“Yes,” Nicholas said. “She’s the real thing.”

Riley nodded.

I felt a touch of irritation. “You were testing me, somehow?”

“You broke Nick’s gaze,” Riley said. “Most humans don’t have the strength to look away, once he holds their gaze. It’s a vampire thing.”

I let out my breath. “Then I guessed right.”

Riley put her elbow on the arm of the sofa and her head on her hand, considering me. “You’ve met vampires before?”

“Just one. Broch. He gave me your email address.”

“Broch...Eadward,” Riley said, clearly recalling the name from her memory.

“Yes, that’s him.”

She looked at Nicholas and raised her brow.

Nicholas rubbed his chin. “I met him in eighteen ninety...three. Not long after I arrived here. Not a hunter, but not completely useless, either.”

I could feel my lips parting. Broch was at least a hundred and fifty years old...why

was that a surprise to me?

Damian emerged from the kitchen carrying a plate that he handed to me. “Lots of protein,” he told me. “You’ve been stressed lately and its running you down.”

I stared at him, speechless.

“Your pheromones give away everything,” Riley said. “There’s no privacy among vampires.” And she smiled fondly at Damian.

He grinned and headed back to the kitchen.

I looked down at the sub he’d made. I could see thin slices of roast beef, ham, cheese, and a sauce with a slightly pungent odor. My mouth watered even though I wasn’t hungry. I took an enormous bite. It was as good as the smell implied. “What’s in this sauce?” I asked, as soon as I could speak.

“I’ll have Damian write it down and I’ll email it to you,” Riley said. “Please, eat. We can wait.”

She and Nicholas chatted while I ate as quickly as possible. It was general talk. Plays they had seen, a book Nicholas had read, and a vigorous, apparently ongoing argument about the merits of British football versus ice hockey. Riley liked football. Nicholas was the Rangers fan. And Damian, from the kitchen, weighed in with his opinion about cricket.

The three of them were all contradictions.

I put my plate on the low table between the sofas and sat back. Now I wasn’t hungry.

Damien took the plate away, then sat on the empty sofa and crossed his ankle over his

knee.

Riley said, “We heard the news about Calloway only a few hours before your email arrived. And that was via an unofficial channel. No one in authority is talking about it.”

I nodded. “That’s because the investigation team—the FBI, not the police—is in Haighton. And for the moment, that is where they’ll stay. Their investigation is mired.”

All three of them stared at me. Chloe came over to the sofa Damian was on. She was a pretty girl of around sixteen years of age, I estimated, but looked nothing like her mother. She had Hispanic features that didn’t match Damian’s either. If Damian was a vampire too, that made sense. I wondered who Chloe’s real father was.

Chloe sat beside Damian, sipping her hot chocolate and watching me.

Riley said, “You’re detaining the FBI?” Her tone was polite.

“Oh, not me,” I said quickly. I told them everything that had happened since Axel King had arrived in Haighton. With these people, I didn’t need to monitor what I said or distort the truth. I could just tell the story.

When I was done, everyone remained silent for long minutes, thinking hard.

“I can see why you came to speak to me,” Riley said at last. “I must be one of the last people to speak to Calloway other than to take his order. He must have died later that day.”

“They aren’t saying when he died,” I said. “But unless it was midday, then Harper couldn’t have done it. And only we in Haighton, and now you, understand that even if

the time frame works, Harper still could not have left Haigton.”

“No,” Riley said, in agreement.

I let out my breath, feeling a surprising touch of relief. The three of them had accepted without argument that some people in Haigton couldn’t leave. Neither could Axel King leave, not until the town allowed it.

“Are you sure that the town allowed Harper to leave just to look into the murder?” Nicholas asked. “That shows a highly sophisticated understanding of both human nature and human affairs. And from what you say, the town has no interest in either beyond crude basics.”

“That is what I thought,” I admitted. “But now I’m second guessing.”

“I have to wonder if the town has not discerned that Harper has emotional ties that keep her returning, that everyone else is yet to notice,” Damian said, frowning down at his bare foot. He looked up. “That seems to be its standard way of dealing with the world.”

“Except for killing my mother, to bring me to the town,” I said.

They all stared at me once more.

I sighed and explained how I had come to Haigton last Christmas and when I was done, they stirred and cleared their throats.

“A Jinn, Damian?” Riley asked softly.

“Heard of them,” Damian said. “I’ve never met one. They’re rare.”

Riley's face filled with amusement. "And do they grant three wishes?"

"They can, but there's no upside to wish fulfillment," Damian said.

"You're getting distracted," Nicholas said. "Anna wants to know about Calloway. She drove six hours to find out."

Riley cleared her throat. "Yes, of course. I'm sorry, Anna. My role in this was a side issue. I can't see how it has anything to do with Calloway's murder. But...I went to Gouverneur because rumor reached me on the dark net that Calloway was there."

I frowned. "Why did you want to speak to him?"

"Because he was hunting Harper Gibbs."

It was my turn to stare in surprise.

Riley gripped her hands together. "The internet has connected more than just the human world. Twenty years ago, hunters could only pass along news when they came across each other while hunting. These days, there is a heavily trafficked bulletin board on the dark net, where news is posted. Hunters can cooperate with each other, seek out other hunters with complimentary skills, or those with specific knowledge of the species they're hunting. There's chat about weapons, eluding the police, multiple and serial identities...everything that hunters must deal with."

"That doesn't surprise me," I admitted.

Riley nodded. "You know of the history between Calloway and Harper, yes?"

"They're a pair, those two," Nicholas added.

“They were a pair, once,” Riley said. “Harper was obsessed with slaughtering vampires. Calloway was, too, until Harper beat him up. He lost his job and all formal ties to the human world. That was part of the reason Harper first came to our notice and why, eventually, we had to post a takedown notice for her.”

I shivered. These three people were the reason why Harper was hunted by her own kind, now.

“What you may not know,” Riley continued, “is that after a few years, Calloway gave up trying to find Harper. He settled down. Instead of indiscriminately killing vampires, he turned himself into a moderately good hunter. Not brilliant, but solid and methodical. That was about the time I first met him. He was older, wiser, and dogged about spending the last of his days finding supernaturals.”

“That sounds...sort of admirable,” I admitted.

“Doesn’t it?” Riley said in agreement. “That was why I grew alarmed when rumors broke out that Calloway was hunting for Harper once more. It was as if he’d relapsed.”

“That’s why you went to speak to him?”

She nodded. “I wanted to talk him out of his obsession with Harper. I went in to bring him back to the city before sending in Nick and Damian. I failed. He wouldn’t give up on his hunt for Harper, and he wouldn’t tell me why.”

“What were you two going to do to him?” I asked the two men.

“Not kill him, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Damian said easily. “We hadn’t quite decided when we heard he’d been murdered. I was thinking Nepal. Nick wanted to drop him in Georgia. But either place, without a passport or funds...he’d be there a

long time, trying to find a way home. Long enough to cool down and grow some perspective.”

“We haven’t left Manhattan in over a year,” Nick said. “We did not murder Calloway.”

I believed them. Certainty built in me that these three had nothing to do with Calloway’s death. Riley was tangled up in it only because she was one of the last people to see him alive.

“We’ve known that Harper was in St. Lawrence County for a few years now,” Riley said. “Not exactly where—no one could pin that down. But she was no longer leaving a trail of bodies behind her, so we left her alone. The takedown notice expired eight years ago.”

“You mean, Harper isn’t being hunted, anymore?”

“I wouldn’t take it that far,” Nick said. “There is no ticket out for her, but the vampire community has long memories. She killed friends, lovers, people considered to be family....”

“Ah,” I said. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“This Harper,” Chloe said, speaking for the first time, and surprising me. “She hunted vampires, whether they had tickets or not?”

“Yes,” Riley said.

“But there’s a vampire where she’s living now. Right, Ms. Crackstone?”

“Anna is fine,” I said. “Yes, there’s a vampire in Haighton. Broch.”

“Why didn’t she kill him, then?” Chloe asked.

“Rules of the highway,” Nicholas said, before I could.

I was impressed.

“Huh?” Chloe said.

“Don’t grunt, Chloe.” Damian prodded her shoulder.

“I mean, ‘what the hell does that mean?’”

“Don’t swear, either,” Nicholas said. “The rules of the highway are an older authority. It is so old, no one remembers where it came from. Highways and crossroads are neutral territory. No one can harm anyone else while they are under the protection of the highway, which grants free, unfettered passage for all who use it.”

“That’s dumb,” Chloe declared. “It’s just a rule. If Harper was so pissed about vampires killing her family, why does she let a silly old rule stop her?”

“It’s not silly, and it is a rule because everyone enforces it,” Damian said. “In Sparta, even humans understood that while they travelled the highways—the unofficial highways—they were safe. And safe travel was unusual, then.”

He was a Spartan. That made Damian...well, I wasn’t sure how old that made him, but it wasn’t just a few hundred years.

“But why was it safe?” Chloe demanded, with the typical teenager’s relentless and self-centered focus upon the point that she wanted explained.

“Because if anyone broke the rule, they were destroyed. Right there and then, by whoever had witnessed it,” Nick said. His voice was harsh. “No trial was needed. No mercy was given. They were slaughtered and their heads mounted on stakes, which were left by the road as a warning for others.”

Wow. And even Juda had followed that rule. He’d killed himself as soon as he discovered he had been the one who murdered my mother.

Chloe weighed that up. “The highways that follow the rule...that’s not the nearest Interstate, right?”

“You’d be surprised,” Damian said. “Many of the older highways follow even more ancient paths used by people for centuries before they were sealed and cars took over.”

“But they’re not the same thing, no,” Riley added. “Real highways...well, they have a power that is hard to explain.”

“There is one running through Haighton,” I said. “It’s called the Greenway by everyone because it’s old and moss has grown over it. But dryads still use it to move up and down the state. Other creatures, too.”

“Like what?” Chloe asked me, with deep interest.

“I have a witchlette, four dryads, a dwarf and a Firbolg in my hotel at the moment.”

“A what?” Riley asked, her voice rising.

Nick made a sound that pulled my attention to him. “You have a Firbolg in town?”

I nodded.

His expression was grave. “That’s...not good.”

“Nick?” Riley prompted.

“Firbolgs...they’re nature’s policemen,” Nick said. “I’ve never heard of one living inside a human structure, but there’s a first for everything, I suppose. Firbolgs patrol the wild places. If they come across a human enclave that they think is hurting or damaging the...the earth and the plants that it is sited upon, then they correct the issue.”

Even Damian looked alarmed. “Just wipe the town out?”

Nick nodded.

The band of tight worry that had been constricting my chest for days tightened up a few more turns. “All Orrin is doing right now is drinking beer. He says he’s waiting for Beltane, to see what nature and the will of the town think about things.”

“Judgement Day,” Chloe said, and grinned.

I couldn’t laugh, even though the others smiled. I wanted to be back there. To pat Ghaliya’s belly and count noses in the bar. To assure myself everything was fine.

Damian insisted on making me a thermos of coffee for the road. I pointed out that I couldn’t return the thermos, but he waved that off. “Give another traveler the thermos to take with them. One day, it might find its way back.”

I took the thermos with gratitude because I had learned today that roadside coffee was unfiltered sludge with a dash of motor oil to disguise the taste.

“What will you do now?” Riley asked me as she walked me to the door. The street

door, not merely her apartment door.

“I don’t know,” I said truthfully. “I need to think through everything you’ve told me. Calloway was looking for Harper, and that involves her. I have to figure this out. Axel King won’t go away with anything less than solid evidence that Harper is innocent.” I sighed. “Harper is always in defense mode. She comes across as...abrasive.”

“I’ve known people like that from time to time,” Riley said. “Once you crack open their shield, you frequently find that they’re far more vulnerable than anyone suspected.”

“And I think Harper might be exactly like that, too,” I admitted. “but her shielding is nuclear proof.”

“She’s been fighting the entire world for a long time,” Riley said. “Maybe, if she can lay aside the shielding, Haigton might be the one place where she can draw breath and heal.”

“You don’t plan on coming for her, now you know where she is?”

Riley weighed that up. “She destroyed lives, and not just the lives of those she killed. Yet her own life was destroyed by rogue vampires, and it sounds as though her current life is anything but happy. Some might say that the world and Harper are even.”

“Do you say that?”

Riley smiled. “I’ve got much better things to do than sort out old feuds.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“That doesn’t mean Harper is free to go where she will, though,” Riley said. “Harper has clung tenaciously to her need for vengeance. There are many others who feel the same way about her.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.” I thanked her for her hospitality, got back into the Continental and reset my phone to lead me by the nose back to Gouverneur.

It seemed to take longer to return, which was ridiculous. Yet time seemed to slip by fast. I had a lot to think about. By the time the Continental was rattling over the corrugations of the Greenway, I still had come no closer to figuring out what to do next.

But at least I had a little good news to give Harper.

And that decided the matter for me. I would call a town meeting.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

OUR NUMBERS WERE DEPLETED, COMPARED to the last time we had met on the second floor of Wim's greenhouse. I wouldn't let Ghaliya walk along the dirty, pot-holed side streets in the dark. Not now. Ghaliya had meekly abided by my wish and settled on the purple sofa in our apartment with some of the dusty books beside her. "But I want to know exactly what everyone said!" she called after me as I left.

Broch had remained behind to manage the bar. Hirom was still in bed, subsisting on his whisky and the chicken soup I made for him. Frida was also trying to eat some of the soup, but she couldn't leave the hotel, anyway.

That left me, Olivia and Wim, Trevalyan, Ben and Harper.

It took nearly an hour for me to go over everything that Riley, Damian and Nicholas had said, earlier that day. I left the news about Riley's takedown notice expiring for last and repeated my conversation with Riley on her stoop word for word.

Silence. Olivia reached out and squeezed Harper's arm.

Harper's reaction was wildly over the top...for her. The corner of her mouth turned up.

"I spent an entire day improving my driving for no reason," I summed up. "Riley Connor is exactly the dead end that Axel King had decided she was."

"We know for certain now, and that's not nothing," Ben said.

“But now there’s nowhere else to go,” I said. “I tried to figure it out all the way home. No wonder Axel King is sitting on his tush drinking cider. He can’t figure it out, either. We’re missing something. Why did Calloway relapse and start hunting Harper?”

“He didn’t relapse,” Hunter said. “What he had isn’t a disease.”

“Some might call obsession a disease of the psyche,” Ben said.

Harper shook her head. “Even a mental problem isn’t something that comes and goes.”

“Bipolar disorder,” Ben said instantly.

Harper scowled at him.

“What if Calloway wasn’t hunting Harper?” I said.

“Riley Connors said he was. It was all over the dark net,” Trevalyan pointed out.

“No, she said that everyone else said Calloway was looking for Harper, and they thought he’d relapsed again. But what if he was trying to find her for some other reason? They were both hunters. They both had vendettas against vampires. That’s a lot of common ground that could give him a reason to want to find her.”

Silence.

Ben’s tone was thoughtful as he said, “I wish I could see the body. That might tell us a lot that King isn’t.”

“We don’t need to see the body,” Harper said. “We need to see his hotel room.”

“Where he died?” I asked.

“Dying is peripheral, at the moment,” Harper said. “I need to see the room where he was staying.”

“Same thing,” Trevalyan said.

“Still irrelevant,” Harper said. She made an impatient hissing sound. “King isn’t telling you anything more because he and his groupies don’t have anything more. Crackstone said it, minutes ago. Everyone is missing something. That’s because Calloway was a hunter.”

“You had best explain yourself, dear,” Olivia said. “Pretend we’re not hunters.”

Harper gripped her own knees. “They didn’t find anything interesting on Calloway’s body or in the room.”

“We don’t know that,” Trevalyan said.

“We do,” I said. “Broch can hear them perfectly from the bar. And they’re going over everything endlessly, trying to find a way forward. If they had found something on the body or in the room that would give them a direction to go, they would be constantly talking about it, wondering why King doesn’t follow that up, instead of hammering Harper.”

Harper held out her hand as if to say, “See?” She added, “I need to see Calloway’s hotel room.”

“You just said nothing was there, dear,” Olivia said.

“Nothing that King’s people found, or the police before them,” Harper said.

“You think you can find something that a forensics team could not?” Trevalyan asked in his wavering voice.

“Hunters stash things,” Harper said. “Specifically, they stash things where other hunters would think to look but no one else would.” She held up her hand and pointed to the thumb with the other, then each finger as she said, “Inside a spent bullet casing, taped under the sole of his boot, inside a false bottom of luggage or a med kit, or anything with a flat bottom, inside the battery compartment of a flashlight. Stashed in a hidden pocket of his belt or jacket. In his gun cleaning kit.” She dropped her hand. “If Calloway was the half-way decent hunter Riley Connors says he turned into, then I’ll find it.”

I said lightly, “I guess we’re going to Gouverneur again.”

Trevalyan smiled. It held a degree of wickedness. “But first, you have to talk to Axel King.”

“I do not ,” I protested. The last time I’d spoken to him, I’d had nightmares that night. King was...slippery.

“Then how else are we to find out where he was staying?” Harper raised her brow at me.

I sighed. “I guess I’m going to talk to Axel King again.”

Trevalyan lifted his hand. “I can help with that.”

“What you’re going to cast a spell, make King cough up the room number?” Harper’s tone was as dry as it ever got.

“As it happens, yes,” Trevalyan said.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“I DON’T BELIEVE THERE IS a spell to make FBI agents give up the facts of a case,” I told Trevalyan as he moved around his small kitchen, opening cupboards and taking down small pots, little glass jars holding anonymous herbs, and other bits and pieces. He put them all on the little chopping block island that sat in the middle of the kitchen. His cauldron was already set up in the middle of the block because this spell, he explained, didn’t need fire.

“It’s more a hex than a spell, and you’ll be wearing it,” Trevalyan replied. He gave a grunt of satisfaction and placed an old coffee tin on the block and closed the cupboard. Then he started opening all the jars and tins and putting pinches of ingredients into the cauldron. It was a little cast iron wok, but it worked marvelously for brewing up spells. At least, that was what Trevalyan had told me, although I had yet to graduate to cooking spells of any kind. I was still at the speak-and-close-the-circle stage.

“Okay, it’s a hex. I still don’t believe there’s a spell that can make Axel King tell me state secrets.”

“It’s not a state secret,” Trevalyan said absently, frowning as he added more ingredients. “The gossips in Gouverneur know exactly where the body was found. By the end of the week, so will the rest of Gouverneur. By next week you can read about it in the Trib . But we can’t wait for the grapevine to work.”

“Still, a spell , Trevalyan?”

“You’d rather seduce him?” Trevalyan looked at me through his glasses, his youthful eyes holding my gaze.

“Hell no,” I said fervently.

“Then, a spell.” He went back to mixing. “You won’t find a spell in any grimoire announcing it is for the benefit of interrogating FBI agents. You have to think laterally.”

“Okay, what does this spell do?”

“It makes a man relax and let down his guard.”

“I could just get him drunk.”

“King?” Trevalyan shook his head. “He’s too disciplined. He wouldn’t let himself get drunk enough to lose his sense of discretion. Not unless he was alone and the door was locked. This spell gets around that. You give it time to work, then you bring the conversation around to where you want it and by then, all you have to do is ask the questions. He’ll spill his guts.”

“Even if he doesn’t want to?”

“He won’t care.”

“What about tomorrow?”

“Oh, he’ll care then. But that’s tomorrow.” Trevalyan used a silver spoon to drop spoonfuls of the spell ingredients into a tiny leather pouch on a long string. He tightened the strings of the pouch and held it out to me.

“There has to be another way,” I said. “I don’t want King coming after me tomorrow and grilling me the way he has Harper.”

Trevalyan put the pouch on the block in front of me. “What is your real objection? Does it have something to do with the fact that you haven’t practiced spellcasting in well over a week? And even then, you were reluctant.”

I picked up the pouch. “I don’t have time for this now.”

“Then when?”

I shook the pouch at him. “This feels like cheating. It’s an unfair advantage.”

Trevalyan crossed his arms. “It’s survival. You think King has any qualms about using all the authority and power he has as an agent to do whatever the hell he wants?”

“Agents have restraints.” My tone was sullen because Trevalyan had a point. “The Constitution, for a start.”

“Firbolgs don’t care about constraints. Demons don’t. If Stonebrunch decides that Haigton is a blight on the world, what are you going to do? Tell him you have a constitutional right to live in peace here, so go away?”

“Well, I do have that right.”

Trevalyan closed my fingers over the pouch. “You’ll understand, eventually. For now, go spy for us.”

.

I felt ridiculous and hyper-self-conscious as I walked into the bar. The hex bag under my shirt had sharp corners that dug into my breasts as it swung like a pendulum as I walked. Perhaps I should put on a red, low-cut dress and sashay my way over to King. I was wearing jeans but felt like I had a sign on my forehead announcing my intentions. A red dress would do the same thing, but with greater effect.

The bar was a noisy, busy place, tonight. And I was delighted to see Hirom working at the bar. He looked pale, with red in his cheeks, which was normal for him. He was moving with his usual efficiency.

Broch was also behind the bar and both of them were needed to keep up with the demand. They moved around each other easily because of the platform Hirom used to raise himself up to a height that let him deal with customers. Broch, who was at least a couple of inches over six feet, moved up and down the bar behind the platform. He could lean to put drinks on the bar without effort.

I glanced around the room not just to locate Axel King, but also to see who was in the bar. Our locals table had the Reserved sign on it once more, and no one had ignored the sign. I spotted all our guests, including the new ones I had yet to meet and catalogue.

Plus, there were strangers in the bar. They were all human in appearance, even if that human appearance was odd. I counted a number of dryads, who were easy to identify. The others...they could range anywhere from werewolves to witches, and everything in between. The more I learned about the supernatural world, the more I realized how much I didn't know. It felt as though I was learning about species who were more than fairytales every week.

King and his people were at their usual table. They had squashed themselves in around one table, instead of sprawling over two. I wondered if they'd voluntarily given up the second table, or if someone had asked them to hand it over.

I stopped by the bar briefly. “Don’t kill yourself, Hirom,” I told him as he stepped past where I was standing and reached for a whisky glass.

Hirom nodded. “Might stay in bed in the morning, boss. But all hands, tonight.”

“Do that,” I told him. I nodded at Broch, who nodded back.

Then I moved over to the back end of the bar, where Axel King was sitting. He was already watching me.

I was going to have to raise my voice to be heard. I leaned closer. “Could I speak with you?”

King considered, then picked up his glass. He was drinking beer, and the foam had thinned out to a ring around the glass. He’d been drinking that glass for a while.

No, he wasn’t going to let himself lose control.

He got to his feet and lifted the glass in a “after you” gesture.

I shrugged. The dining room would at least have the virtue of being quiet enough to hear each other speak. Right now, I would have preferred a smaller room with a closable door. Why did this place not have an office? Had my mother considered her tiny desk in the apartment to be good enough?

I settled at the table we had used before. King’s people returned the tables to their normal position for each meal, and I appreciated that. The sideboard against the kitchen wall was in shadows cast by the edge of the archway. The tall steel warming frame and trays of cutlery glinted.

I weighed up turning on the lights, but that would make it too impersonal. We had sat

in the gloom last time. It would do, now.

King did the same thing as before. He picked the chair two up from mine, pulled it all the way out from underneath the table and turned it sideways.

He sat, placed his beer glass on the table, and looked at me expectantly.

“You’ve been here nearly a week,” I said. Just talk, give the hex time to work .

King frowned. “You object to taking our money?”

“Thanks for the reminder,” I told him. “I’ll talk to Mooney about settling up the last couple of days.” I’d stopped insisting on cash in advance. I hesitated. “It’s not that I object to the money, but you might have noticed that we’re a bit busy right now. One more overnight guest, and we’ll be at capacity.”

“I’d noticed,” King said. “It’s a bit strange that a place like this, in the middle of nowhere, could do so much business.”

“It’s the time of year. There is an old feast day coming up that Haigton is known for as a great place to see in the day.”

“Beltane?” King asked.

I could feel my lips parting in surprise. “You know Celtic history?”

“I heard some of the people in the bar talking about it. Bonfires, dancing and drinking. Spirits and ghosts. As if there isn’t enough of that at Halloween...” He shrugged.

“You don’t believe in magic, Agent King?” I used a teasing tone.

King snorted. “Do you?” He glanced around the room, and I realized he was taking in the hotel and the whole town. “This place...it’s a throwback. For the gullible, it would be easy to believe.”

I laughed. “I stopped believing in fairies when I was six.”

“That’s specific. What happened?”

I realized that he was asking me the questions, and that wasn’t how this was supposed to go. “My father told me Santa Claus wasn’t real. I was upset for a week, because I figured out that if grownups were lying about Santa Claus then they were lying about the tooth fairy and everything else, too.” I shook my head to mentally reset. “Do you have any idea how long you think you’ll be staying?”

King seemed to weigh up his answer. “You know what annoys me the most about modern TV?”

“You’ll have to tell me. I don’t watch TV.” I didn’t have a TV. And neither Ghaliya nor I missed it. If we wanted to watch something, Ghaliya could play it on her laptop.

“You’re not missing anything,” King said.

“That’s what’s wrong with modern TV? Everything?”

“It’s the bullshit parading as truth.”

The mild curse seemed shocking coming from him. Was the hex already working, lowering his guard?

“Isn’t that what fiction is about?” I asked carefully. “It’s fiction , not fact.”

“Fiction should reflect fact, or what’s the point?” He shook his head. “It drives me crazy. Characters get DNA results in thirty minutes. Do you know how long it takes to get DNA results?”

“Days?” I guessed.

“Used to be. We can do it in two hours now, but that’s for internal use. And you have to know someone to get moved to the top of the list. While the rest of us have to wait like civilians do.”

“You’re hanging out in Haigton to avoid TV?” I asked.

He wagged a finger at me. “Investigators on TV. It’s hysterical. They never sit down. Have you noticed that?”

I shook my head.

“They bounce from one conveniently found clue to the next. And while they’re racing to the next witness, they’re figuring out the whole crime in their heads.”

“That’s not the way it happens? I’m shocked.”

King paused and sent me a searing glance. In that light, his blue eyes seemed almost colorless, and they gleamed. “Most cases, there’s a lot of thinking time. You learn something new, then you have to fit it into what you already know. And that requires reflection. Staring at walls, or out windows.” He picked up his beer and sipped. “I’ve been getting a lot of thinking time in, this week. And we’ve been short on it for too long. You can’t dive deep into motives when you’re trying to figure out where the nearest breakfast joint is.”

“You’re on the road a lot.”

“Almost too much.”

“You’re relaxing here, just like the rest of my guests.” I smiled at him. “Your wife must love that.” It was a direct, personal question. I was testing him. He’d given me a long, winding answer to a simple question about how long they were going to stay—and I still didn’t have a straight answer. Was that the hex working? Because I didn’t think that an FBI agent, even one who was off duty and enjoying time to think, would speak casually to a woman he didn’t know well.

King gave a soft chuffing laugh. I could hear the sarcasm in it. “ Wives ,” he corrected me.

“It happens. Divorce, I mean.” And I touched my own chest.

“Not in five years, it shouldn’t.” He said it almost to himself.

“You divorced after five years? I’ve seen marriages collapse inside a few days. You’re not unusual.”

He shook his head. “Two marriages, two kids, two divorces. Make that four divorces. My kids have forgotten how to make phone calls.”

I could hear the bitterness. It was barely showing beneath the matter-of-fact tone he was using. But it was there, and I recognized it. “Is that because you’re on the road so much?”

He was watching the bubbles in his beer rise. It was as if I wasn’t there and he was speaking to himself. “Marcy will tell you I’m a workaholic. Taylor said I would rather solve cases than deal with emotions. Her email said that. She was already gone by the time I got home.”

“I’m sorry.” I felt like that was the only thing to say. Anything else would be advice or commiseration and I didn’t know him well enough to commiserate, even if I did recognize the pain. This was the man investigating Harper and by extension, he was a threat to the whole town.

The hex bag under my shirt hung heavy and warm against my skin.

King shook his head, dismissing my “sorry.” He stirred and put his other ankle on his knee and gripped it. “You’re strong,” he said. “Not the fold-in-the-middle-type.”

“I’m actually not,” I assured him. “It’s just the circumstances that make it seem that way.” And this town.

“No,” King said, his tone flat. “Most people, looking at you, would think you’re just another middle-aged woman. But you’re not that at all. You’re smart and you’re good at dodging my questions. I can’t tell if you’re hiding something or if you’re just better at reading people than me.”

I held still for a moment, letting my spiking heartbeat calm. “You resent me for that?”

King considered. “Nope,” he said at last. “It’s interesting.”

I decided that the hex was working, and said, “Where was Calloway’s body found?” I spoke softly, casually, as if it was an idle question that naturally followed on from the last one.

“Now, that’s not interesting. The Serene Maple Hotel. Who comes up with names like that?”

“Fairies?” I suggested.

He didn't laugh. "I know what you've been doing."

My heartrate spiked again. I held still.

"You were asking questions at the diner."

I relaxed a little. "Harper didn't do it. You know that. I know that. If you're not going to look for other suspects, I have to."

"Why look for suspects when I have a perfectly good one already?"

"But you know she didn't do it," I pointed out.

"I don't know that for sure." He bounced his foot. "Nothing about this town makes sense. Harper's records are spotty. Everyone else seems to be off the grid. Records don't add up. They keep shifting. Giving a different reading every time you study them. Even your daughter has a chunk of history missing."

I swallowed.

"Yours are the only ones that are perfectly normal. Even boring. But I've watched you. And I know that there's more to you than that."

My heart was screaming now. The hex was working far too well. How could I shut him up? I didn't want to hear any more.

But King was on a roll. "There's a couple of wiccans in the bar, talking about their grimoires." He rolled his eyes. "Everything here says magic, but that's bullshit. It's just shit that people can't explain. Magic fills in the gap. Or they're wish-fulfilling to paper over their desperate little lives. Because a witch with powers who has to hide her true nature from the rest of the world and appear to be a mousy secretary by

day...that's something a weak mind can hold onto, isn't it?"

I drew in a breath to answer, but King drove on. "There's something about this town. I'll figure it out. Sooner or later." He sounded happy about that prospect.

King wasn't staying in town because the town wanted him to. He wasn't staying for the chance to spend some quality thinking time, either. He was staying because he wanted to solve the puzzle. Had the town built that compulsion in him? Suggested it, and King had grabbed the idea and run with it?

Unnerved, I got to my feet. "I'll arrange another three days' accommodation with Mooney. Have a good evening, Agent King."

"So far, so good," he told me with a weird, cheerful tone.

I got out of there before he started talking again. Whatever he said, it would be something he didn't want me to hear. And I didn't want King to hate me in the morning.

Whatever it took, we had to find Calloway's killer and shove King and his agents out of Haigton. Preferably before Beltane, because that night would hand him way too many clues about the true nature of Haigton and the people who lived here.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE SERENE MAPLE HOTEL WAS a two-story clapboard building with a balcony running its length and multiple stairs giving access to it. Like many buildings in Gouverneur, it was painted red with white trim. The shutters were white, too.

It looked clean and modern, but the clapboard was warped in places, and what should have been sharp, straight lines at corners and along the roof and windows showed telltale curves and wobbles that the sparkling paintwork couldn't hide.

"What was the room number?" Harper asked me, as she tested the edge of her knife, then slid it back into her boot.

"I didn't get that out of King," I said. "I was going to ask at the front desk."

Harper rolled her eyes. "You figure they're just going to tell you and hand over the key so you can do your own investigation?"

"I didn't think about it," I told her. "I was too busy getting us out of town before King figured out we were leaving. And I can't see why asking the receptionist won't work."

Harper sighed. "Okay, we'll do it your way. But let me do the talking." She took off her hat. Then she studied me. "Give me your scrunchie."

I touched my hair.

“Come on, give it.” She held out her hand.

I pulled the scrunchie out and gave it to her. Harper quickly pulled her hair up and tied it with the scrunchie. It swung in a long ponytail from the crown of her head.

She looked ridiculously young, even though she was still wearing her basic, monotone black. Without her dramatically black hair framing her face, you could clearly see the feminine lines and firm jawline.

“Maybe you should swap coats with me,” I suggested, for mine was a camel-colored wool coat I’d found in my mother’s wardrobe. I’d worn it since arriving at Haigton, and it no longer smelled like my mother.

“Nope,” Harper said firmly, reaching for the door handle. “Pockets are a hunter’s toolkit.”

We got out and headed for the reception room, which was at the far right of the building, with a big, fixed-pane window. Harper didn’t walk like herself, which was normally a long-legged, determined stride. Her steps shortened and she almost bounced along. Her ponytail swung in big arcs.

She pulled the front door open, setting off a short electronic beep, and causing the teenager behind the desk to look up with a bored expression.

“Hi!” Harper warbled. “This is the place, right? Where that guy died? My mom says I’m wrong, but I’m right, right?” She leaned over the counter toward the kid. “Please tell me I’m right. She said she would buy Fleshwater’s, my copy sucks, you know?”

I realized with a start that I was the mom in her story.

The kid said, “Don’t get the live track. They suck live.”

“Oh, I know! ” Harper rested her hands on the counter, which, combined with her lean, put her cleavage on display between the open edges of her button-down shirt. “What room was he in? The body? It’s so gruesome , right?”

The kid seemed to agree that it was gruesome. Then his face fell. “I don’t know what room,” he said. “The cops were there for days. I wasn’t on when they found him. The maid took a week off. And the cops took our log books. Sorry.”

Harper’s face fell. “Yeah, that’s too bad. But, I was right.” She turned to me with a triumphant expression. “You owe me.”

“Yes, it seems I do. Are we done here?” I put on my best impatient mother expression.

Harper looked at the kid and rolled her eyes. “Thanks, ‘kay?”

“Peace out,” the kid said and returned to his phone.

?

Outside once more, I turned to Harper. “That was...practiced.”

She pulled the scrunchie out of her hair and handed it to me, then leaned forward and scrubbed at her scalp. “That’s what hunters do.” Her voice was muffled.

“Lie? Deceive?”

She straightened and flipped her black hair back over her shoulders. “We’re passing through life just like vampires do. It’s not like I could flash a badge at pimple-face and demand answers. Best to leave as little impression as possible.”

“Why?” I demanded. “I don’t understand why the Otherworld is so damned secret. It exists! Why not just tell people?”

Harper pushed at my shoulder. “Not here,” she said quietly. “Walk down the rooms.”

I turned and walked and studied the long row of rooms. Two floors of them. “There has to be fifty rooms,” I said. “We could be here all day trying to figure this out.”

“No, we won’t,” Harper said with complete confidence. Her gaze was on the side of the building as we traversed it.

“Explain it to me.” I lowered my voice. “Why the big secret?”

“You studied Salem in school, right?” Harper sounded indifferent.

Aaah! “It’s a survival thing?” I could hear the echo of Trevalyan’s voice in my head.

“Even more so, these days.” Harper glanced at me, then away. “It’s not just humans dealing with global warming, you know. Humans as a breed have demonstrated that they resent any competition and will do anything to get rid of it. And that’s when resources are plentiful. Figure they’re going to play nice and cooperate when resources start drying up and land to grow food shrinks because the sea is rising and the climate is completely fucked?”

“I hadn’t thought of it like that.”

“Clearly.” Her tone was back to indifferent.

The indifference stung. “You’re a hunter,” I said. “Your profession does nothing other than kill supernaturals. Doesn’t that make you worse than humans?”

We walked for many steps before Harper answered. “I was worse than the average human, for a long time. But hunters—most of them—protect supernaturals.”

I laughed.

Harper looked at me with a touch of impatience. “Hunters take out supernaturals who are exposing us to the human world. Who are preying on humans and other sentients. Who are breaking the barrier.”

“You’re policemen,” I concluded.

Harper snorted. “We’re a lot better than the average cop. They’ve got rules and by-laws and lawsuits and lawyers tripping them up. Detectives will solve the easy cases, the no-brainers, first, before they’ll tackle the tough murders and assaults, because they have to keep up their clearance rate. Hunters are effective at what we do. There’s a reason you thought vampires were just stories until you got to Haigton.”

I was being handed a lot to think about. But that was the theme of my life since moving to Haigton. It would be nice, though, to not have to process so much at once. Just for a while. A perfectly normal, boring and routine day sounded like a spa day.

“This one,” Harper said, stopping by one of the room doors. “Calloway was here.”

I stared at her, then at the door. “What, there’s a magic sign on the door?” An image of Gandalf drawing his rune on a round, green door flashed into my mind.

Harper actually smiled, as if she’d plucked my fanciful thought right out of my head. “There are strips on the door frame, one on each side. No dust or grime. That’s where the police tape was.”

She was right. A fine pale dust, probably from the parking lot, clung to the white

frame like a subtle coating of baby powder, except for a strip on each side, about two inches wide.

“Now what?” I asked. “You pick the lock?”

“D’uh,” Harper said, reaching into her coat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE ROOM WAS A STANDARD American hotel room, depressingly familiar, right down to the faint smell of cleaning agents. “This place will have been cleaned six times over since they moved the body,” I said. “There’ll be nothing left to find.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Harper quartered the room with her gaze. “Shut the door.”

I shut the door. “Can I move?”

Harper rolled her eyes at me. She moved around the room. Lifted the mattress and prodded at the base carefully. Felt underneath the frame. Squeezed and patted down every pillow. “Make the bed again,” she told me, moving on.

She pulled out the metal grid over each furnace vent in the floor and carefully probed inside. Then the air conditioning outlet, up by the ceiling, standing on the one chair in the room. She pulled out every drawer and opened every cupboard and felt around inside. She tapped the bottom of each drawer before handing it to me to add the bible and the other few items back into them and returning them to where they belonged.

She pulled back the short pile rug lying between the bed and the bureau the big screen TV sat on. “Meet Calloway,” she said. “What’s left of him.” The carpet beneath the rug was stained. The patch was dark brown. A cleaner had been over it more than once, for the pile of the carpet was brushed back and forth, showing clear tracks where the head of the cleaner had passed over it.

We were in the right room. Although I hadn’t doubted it. Harper dropped the rug

back in place.

In the next twenty minutes, she moved around the room in slow circles, testing and examining everything. She even lifted up the heavy floor-to-ceiling drapes and felt along the thick hems, then repeated the exercise on the top hems, while balancing on the chair, one boot planted on the top of the back of the chair.

“You’re not checking the back of the paintings,” I pointed out.

Harper looked amused. “Knock yourself out.” She waved toward them.

I went over to the indifferent pastel water color depiction of mountains and a lake and gripped the frame. It didn’t move an inch.

Harper laughed at my expression. “You don’t get out much, do you?”

“They screw them down?”

“How else can they stop guests from stealing them?”

“The pictures in my rooms aren’t screwed down.”

“Because all dryads yearn to hang a bad Mona Lisa knock-off on their mother tree.”

“It’s not a bad knock off,” I protested.

“It’s the ugliest rendition I’ve ever seen,” Harper replied. She put her back to the door and her hands on her hips. “That’s all the obvious places.”

“Where are the unobvious places?”

“They’re unobvious for a reason.” She was back to scanning the room. “He would have left it nearby. The reception area is too busy and too open. It might be out in the carpark, but that’s too far away and unlikely.”

“Why is it unlikely?”

“Too impersonal, too public. You can’t plant anything there without risking being noticed.”

“You’re assuming he left something at all. Maybe he didn’t.”

Harper shook her head. “He was looking for me. Why, I have no fucking idea, but that’s why I know he left something for me to find.”

“He knew you’d come here?”

“He was covering his ass. It’s not like he could leave me a letter. And you never know when something or someone might catch up with you. Pure common sense, leaving word for someone to find if the worst happens.”

“You, or another hunter?”

“Uh-huh.” She blew out her breath. “We know the Feds didn’t find it. It’s still here. But where the fuck he put it....”

“You were pretty sure you could find it.”

She glowered at me. “Gonna cast a spell, Crackstone? Prove me wrong?”

The suggestion surprised me. And it irked me. Why hadn’t I thought of that sooner? And the sense of unreality I had been experience for weeks now washed over me

once more. Anna Crackstone, witch . It still seemed surreal.

But a finding spell...that was one of the first Trevalyan had taught me, because it was simple. It didn't require ingredients. "Let me try it."

Harper snorted and crossed her arms. "Go on."

I held up my hands and recalled the words. They were, Trevalyan had told me, ancient Egyptian, because that was where magic had been discovered. I didn't know what the words meant. I remembered them because of their sounds and the rhythm of speaking them. I cleared my throat, while Harper watched me. I could feel I was blushing as I spoke the words. As I spoke, I moved my forefinger through the air, making a circle.

The spell left me in a little rush of power that felt cold, as if refrigerated air was racing through my veins. I tingled from head to foot.

I lowered my hands and opened myself up to listen. I stopped tingling and my body heat returned to normal, which actually felt warm, now.

Too warm. My skin was prickling with sweat. My neck grew damp. I wiped my cheeks dry. Was this going to happen every time?

"What's the matter? Hot flash?" Harper asked.

I gasped. "The thermostat!"

"I didn't touch the damn thing," Harper assured me. "They're too small, nothing can fit under them."

"No, that's where it is." I could feel it now. Beckoning. Tugging at me.

“Where is the thing, anyway?” Harper asked, turning a slow circle.

“Behind the curtain. You pulled the curtain back and it covered the thermostat.” I moved over to the narrow piece of wall between the door and the window and shoved the heavy gray drape aside. The thermostat was beneath, as I had known it would be. It wasn’t a little, narrow metal band mounted on the wall, the way modern ones appeared. It was bigger. Not by much, but it looked older, just as this hotel looked older, the more you studied it. Honeywell was printed across the top.

“I tested it,” Harper said, coming up behind me. “It hasn’t been touched in years. Look at the screws. They’re grimy.”

“It’s under this cover,” I said flatly. “Maybe the top comes off without disturbing the screws.”

Harper narrowed her eyes. Then she bent and pulled out her knife. “Let me at it.”

I moved out of the way and held the curtain aside. She tapped the lid with the hilt of her knife, then flipped it and probed along the edges. “Huh...” she said softly. She gripped the knife, placed the thin tip under the edge of the cap, and patted the hilt in soft hammering movements.

The cap loosened with a dull cracking sound. She grabbed the edges and pulled it out of the way. Underneath was a mess of wiring and a circuit board. And jammed between a red and a green wire was a small sliver of plastic.

“Damn...” Harper breathed. She reached in, gripped the plastic and drew it out. She laid it on her palm and showed it to me. “A thumb drive.”

It was one of the tiny drives, which were all USB connector, with a quarter inch of plastic mounted on top.

I could feel the heat that had surrounded me like an invisible sauna easing off. Cool air touched my cheeks. “That’s it.”

Harper bounced the thumb drive on her palm, then slid it into one of her inner pockets. “Best read it later. We’ve been here way too long. Put everything back the way it was, and let’s get out of here.” She turned to replace the thermostat cover.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

HARPER PRESUMED THAT SHE WOULD be the one to see what was on Calloway's drive, and I didn't argue with her. It didn't matter who read it, as long as Axel King didn't figure out what we were reading.

When we got back to the hotel, I fetched Ghaliya's laptop from her room, plus my tablet, and took them both to Ghaliya, who was sitting at the locals' table in the bar, with Olivia beside her, knitting something pink and delicate.

"Can you dump the contents of the thumb drive into my tablet, so it looks like Harper is reading a book?" I asked Ghaliya. "Then give it to Harper to read. I have to get lunch ready."

"I'll come and help you," Olivia said, putting away her knitting.

Trevalyan, Wim and Ben were already in the kitchen. They'd consulted the menu I had taped to the back of the dining room swing door and were prepping vegetables.

"The beets are off." Wim wrinkled his nose.

"They look fine." I was reluctant to throw out good vegetables. I'd had to toss too much food already and the waste was distressing.

"Trust me, dear," Olivia said. "If Wim says they're no good, they're no good."

I sighed. "Out they go then. Let's get this meal done. I want to find out what Harper

has learned.”

Lunch proceeded without a hitch, after that. I had been planning to serve borscht, cabbage rolls, potato perogies and ham, with a light gravy, fried onions and sour cream and other traditional fixings. The loss of the beets had me pivoting. I made a fast and easy potato and leek soup and added the chopped ham to half of it for the omnivores. I warmed up pre-made garlic bread. Lots of it.

While we were eating, Harper couldn't speak about what she had discovered so far, with King sitting only two tables away. I found myself gobbling my food, anxious to gather around the locals' table on the other side of the hotel to hear what she had learned. I wasn't the only one bolting their meal.

Little was left of either soup or the bread, afterward. We raced through the cleanup in near silence and headed into the bar.

Ghaliya was back in her seat, her closed laptop before her. Broch was beside her. I turned to smile at Hirom, who was back behind the bar. He lifted his hand in a little acknowledgement.

Harper had settled on the window seat to read while we did the clean-up. She had her back to the wall, and her bootheels dug into the cushions in front of her. The tablet was on her knees. The midday sun streamed through the frosted windows, bathing her and the window seat in bright spring sunshine.

“Anything?” I asked.

“Maybe. Let me finish,” Harper said curtly.

I sucked in my impatience. I went over to the bar and asked Hirom to pour a round of drinks for everyone at the table, then waited there until the tray was loaded and

carried it back to the table.

Olivia was knitting again.

I handed out the drinks, and returned the tray to Hirom, then settled in to try to enjoy my cider.

The conversation around the table was desultory. I think we were all willing Harper to hurry up.

I leaned toward Broch. “Did King’s group say anything interesting this morning?”

“They’re growing impatient. They want King to move on. They’re still not saying it to his face, though.” He shook his head. “He’s a remarkable leader. Eight days, and they still haven’t openly challenged King about why they’re sitting around a hotel. That shows a huge amount of respect and trust.”

“Did King have anything to say about talking to me last night?”

“Not a word. But he’s drinking straight water this morning.” Broch smiled. “And he’s not talking much, either.”

“He’s thinking again,” Ben said.

“We’re giving him too much to think about, is the problem,” Trevalyan added.

“If Harper finds anything interesting, it might be enough to get him off our backs,” I said. “Another line of enquiry.”

“Anything that gets them out of here is fine by me,” Trevalyan said. “May Day is too close.”

It took another hour before Harper was ready to talk to us. She swiped and tapped and frowned, sometimes turning the tablet to read in landscape.

While everyone else got to sit at the table, I took care of things. The daily grocery delivery arrived, and I went out to haul cartons of groceries out of the truck, and pay off the driver, an unpleasant man called Leo Davis, who would only continue to deliver to us here in Haighton if I sweetened the pot. A lot .

One day, we would have to find an alternative. After Beltane, I promised myself, as I carried the boxes one at a time into the kitchen and put away the groceries. I didn't dare leave them until I started dinner, not with food going off in an hour or two. I put the fresh stuff on the wooden shelves in the cold room and the two fridges beside it and filled in the empty spots on the shelves with replacement cans.

Ben found me there. "Harper's done. She's waiting for you."

I raised my brow. "She's waiting for me ?"

"Mmm." His slow smile said he understood my skepticism.

I headed for the bar.

Harper was at the table. They'd found a chair and moved everyone around to fit her in. The tablet was in front of her. Everyone watched me approach and take a seat. They had been waiting for me.

Then everyone's gaze switched to Harper.

She cleared her throat. "Seems Calloway didn't hate me, after all." She touched the tablet. "He was trying to warn me."

Olivia leaned forward, crushing her knitting, in order to look at Harper. “Given what you did to him, dear, that seems...extraordinary. Can you explain why he didn’t hate you?”

“Oh, he did hate me for a while.” She touched the tablet again. “His diary is in here. I did a search and found mentions of me. About six years after...after our run-in, another hunter clued him in about me. Calloway spent pages being all mournful about how my parents were killed by a rogue vampire.”

Broch’s gaze dropped to the tabletop. He sighed.

“Seems that convinced Calloway that I was just like him.” Harper rolled her eyes.

Only, it did make them the same. Could Harper not see that?

“How dare he,” Trevalyan drawled.

Harper shot Trevalyan a glare that would have withered weeds. He just smiled back at her.

“Continue, please,” Ben said, with false patience.

Harper said, “Figuring out we were virtual kin took all the anger out of him. But he didn’t have a career to go back to. All he had was hunting, so he decided to make something of that. And he started learning the trade. Paid his dues and earned the forgiveness of Riley Connors and her people.” Harper’s mouth twisted cynically. “Softies,” she added.

“What was he trying to warn you about?” I asked.

“That’s where it gets hazy,” Harper said. “There are a bunch of documents I can’t

make sense of. Business documents, contracts, incorporations, agendas, share certificates...there are screens' worth of them. But none of it makes any sense to me."

"Let me look at it," Broch said. "I'll figure it out."

"Knock yourself out. It gave me a headache." Harper shoved the tablet across the table toward Broch.

"If you can't make sense of it, then how did you know Calloway was trying to warn you?" Ben asked, which saved me from asking the same thing.

Harper sat back. "Silly fool wrote it in his diary." She raised her chin and looked up in the air, recalling. "' Harper might be the one person to believe me. She has to know about this before it's too late. Orpheus will end all of us ."

She glanced around the table. "That's it. It was his bloody diary. He didn't spell it out. He already knew who Orpheus was and why I had to know about him."

I looked at Broch. "Does the name mean anything to you?"

"I've never met anyone called Orpheus or heard of anyone else who has. It's a rare name."

"I can ask Riley if she has. She needs to know there's an Orpheus out there who can end all of us."

"You believe him?" Harper asked. "The man was paranoid."

"He went out of his way to put proof into the hands of other hunters," I said. "Maybe he was seeing threats where none existed, but as a fellow hunter, isn't it your professional responsibility to at least consider his evidence and act as if he was of

sound mind, instead of condemning him to Lalaland out of hand?"

Harper stared at me. Her face was rigid and expressionless. Then she cleared her throat. "Aaanywaaay.... That's the most I could get out of Calloway's ram—" She grimaced. "That's everything I found. None of it says why Calloway was murdered."

"That's because you want to believe he was delusional, Harper, dear," Olivia said. "It's clear to me that the obvious suspect is this Orpheus. He must have learned Calloway was looking for you. Perhaps when Calloway unwisely shouted your name in the diner. That would have forced Orpheus' hand. He acted immediately."

Harper blinked. "Oh," she said in a small voice.

"That puts your paranoia theory in a different light, doesn't it?" Trevalyan added.

"It's even worse than that," Broch said softly.

Harper nodded, her gaze unfocused. "If Orpheus killed Calloway to shut him up, he'll come looking for me, next."

"Perhaps he has been looking for you all along," I said. "But Haighton Crossing isn't on the maps, and the locals forget where the place is. The town has been protecting you all along."

Harper crossed her arms. "Let him come. I'm more than ready. That is, if he exists."

"It doesn't matter if Calloway was delusional, or if he had uncovered a grand plot," Broch said. He leaned forward and slid toward me the teeny thumb drive. "That is exactly what Agent King needs. A suspect who isn't Harper."

I picked up the thumb drive. "And how am I supposed to explain how we got this?"

There's a thing called chain of evidence. I'm sure you've heard of it, Broch."

"Tell him the truth," Broch said. "He knows you got the hotel name out of him. If he isn't expecting something like this, he's being paid too much."

I got up and walked over to King's table. It didn't surprise me to see him watching me as I crossed the floor. He didn't smile at me when I stopped beside his chair. Everyone else at the table stopped talking.

I put the thumb drive on the table beside King's glass of water. "We found that in the room Calloway died in. His diary is on there, along with a lot of documents that he considered to be evidence that someone called Orpheus was a threat." I was struck by a good idea. "Check the CCTV footage at the hotel. You'll see we were there this morning."

"I already know you were there," King replied. "We've studied the footage." He looked at the thumb drive. "We turned that room upside down. Where was it?"

Tell the truth .

"Calloway stashed it behind the thermostat cover," I said.

King made a sound that I interpreted as one of satisfaction. He picked up the thumb drive and closed his fist around it. "Thanks, Ms. Crackstone. We'll take it from here."

I walked back to the locals' table and gripped the back of my chair. I didn't sit down. Everyone looked at me.

"He was expecting us to check the room. He was waiting to see if we found something they didn't. We did exactly what he wanted us to do."

Harper glowered. “Fuck,” she said softly.

In this, I agreed with her one hundred percent. I didn’t like being played. Had King given up the hotel name voluntarily, knowing I would look there? Or had the hex worked, and only afterward he decided to use his indiscretion to further the case?

“It doesn’t matter if he outsmarted you,” Broch said. “He got what he needed out of it and so did we. Harper is in the clear.”

I glanced at my watch. “Damn,” I said. “I’m about to be late for a meeting.” I had three minutes to get upstairs, fight with Ghaliya’s laptop and see Jasper’s face on the screen for the first time since we’d signed the divorce papers.

Jasper was in California, but he was still screwing with my life and making me miserable. It seemed I was surrounded by manipulative men.

I took a glass of whisky with me. I was going to need it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE MEETING STARTED BADLY AND went downhill from there.

Lucinda and Jasper were both waiting when I opened the Zoom room. Three other men's profiles showed, all of them in suits, all of them strangers.

Jasper had put on weight and his face was red. It wasn't anger. Jasper was one of those people who turned pale when they were pissed, especially around the mouth. When his lips became bloodless, I knew it was time to compromise, back down, and fight another day.

His flushed face had to be related to his ballooning cheeks. I wondered if he was getting regular health checks.

"Can we get on with this, please?" one of the strangers said. He had a clipped, educated voice. New England, I suspected, and not just for his law degree, which had likely come from Harvard. "Mr. Brooks has gone out of his way to accommodate a flagrant breach of the divorce agreement. Wasting more of his time increases our reluctance to find yet another compromise. How are we to trust that any other agreement will be met?" He lifted his wrist to look at his watch, even though the time had to be displayed somewhere on his screen. He was making A Point. "Mr. Brooks has many demands on his time."

The man couldn't even refer to me in the third person. I didn't figure as a human at all.

I snorted. “Hot date with your playdough, Jasper?” I asked sweetly.

Jasper’s mouth parted and his eyes widened.

“Mr. Brooks is a respected artist and sculptor!” The lawyer was strident.

“And Ms. Crackstone apologizes for her remark,” Lucinda said quickly. “Anna!”

“I apologize,” I said stiffly.

“Jasper?” the lawyer said.

While I waited for Jasper’s response, my gaze fell upon the documents I had arranged on the sofa beside me so I could refer to them if needed. One of them was the divorce agreement. Jasper’s signature was on the top page. I’d watched him sign it.

And the thought occurred to me: That is a thing of Jasper’s. A token. I could use it to send a spell right now. Make him fall asleep, or make him happy and high, so he gives in and this all goes away....

And then, the cold voice of reason. That would be cheating .

I pushed the papers away from me.

Jasper’s gaze shifted to the left and I realized he was reading the chat window. His lawyers were telling him what to say. Coaching him.

“Okay, fine,” Jasper said, and I think he was reacting to the chat. He brushed back his thinning hair. “Whatever it takes to sort this out.”

“Thank you,” Lucinda said earnestly. “Now, about the outstanding tax bill—”

“Yes, we’ve been weighing the matter up,” the suit said, his tone grave. “Mr. Brooks is willing to accept a low aggravation fee. Fifteen percent.”

My blood ran cold. “Wait. What’s an aggravation fee?” I demanded.

My chat window popped up with a message from Lucinda, for my eyes only.

You pay the City’s interest plus 15% of the outstanding bill on top of the bill itself.

An image of Harper standing with her arms crossed, her mouth curled into a cynical sneer, flashed through my mind. Harper’s typical response came out of my mouth. “No fucking way,” I snapped.

Everyone gasped. Even me—in the back of my mind, at least. And part of me was actually grinning. I kept my face expressionless, though. While they were all flopping about, looking for something to say in response, I said, “I have no money to spare, Jasper. Do you get that? I would have paid the bill if I could, but I can barely afford groceries right now.”

“Then maybe you should have stayed in L.A. and looked after the kids, instead of running off to wherever the hell you are now,” Jasper shot back.

This time, my mouth dropped open. I felt a dizzying sense of disbelief that quickly curdled to disgust. “You don’t know where they are...” I said slowly. “Your own kids! You changed your address and didn’t tell Ghaliya about the new one. I thought it was just an oversight, but it wasn’t, was it?”

The red in Jasper’s face grew deeper. He ran his hand over his hair once more. “It’s not like they call...” His voice held a whining tone.

“Just shut up now,” the lawyer snapped loudly, overriding Jasper.

“You’re the father of the year, aren’t you?” I said.

Lucinda didn’t smile, but the corner of her mouth twitched. “Anna, let me take it from here.”

I nodded.

The three lawyers were all looking acutely uncomfortable, while Jasper just scowled. Lucinda smiled sweetly at the camera. “Anna has been caring for Ghaliya in New York. Oscar is in Canada with his wife and two children...soon to be three. Oscar and Ghaliya are both adults, but Ghaliya is progressing through a high risk pregnancy that—”

“She’s pregnant ?” Jasper cried. “Why wasn’t I told?”

“We don’t have your contact information,” I said sweetly. “Not the current information.”

“Jasper, please, let me handle this,” the lawyer said with strained patience.

Lucinda went on smoothly. “Ghaliya’s pregnancy is extremely high risk. I’m sure that Mr. Brooks will, with a bit of thought, be able to recall his daughter’s medical diagnosis when she was sixteen.”

I nearly smiled. “...with a bit of thought .” Lucinda wasn’t a great white shark, but she wasn’t stupid, either.

“Anna is taking care of Ghaliya and will be paying all the medical expenses, plus housing both Ghaliya and the child in the future, and helping raise the baby, too. Given the...lopsided responsibilities and the demonstrated care and concern Mr. Brooks has for his children and, presumably, his grandchildren, I believe fair

consideration and adjustment should be made to the current agreement.”

The great white shark’s jaw flexed. When he spoke, it sounded like he was chewing glass. “What did you have in mind?”

Lucinda said, “Anna, I don’t need to hold you up any longer. I know you’re busy. Let me sort this out. I’ll get back to you.”

The shark nodded in agreement. “That might be best. Jasper, you can drop out, too. We’ll take it from here.”

“Oh, for...” Jasper said. “You can’t just...just banish me to my room like this.” His churlish tone, though, sounded just like Oscar used to sound when I told him to go and do his homework.

I said brightly and loudly, “Thank you, Lucinda. I appreciate all your help. Call me when you can.”

The suits frowned. Jasper scowled. Lucinda beamed.

I clicked the button to leave the chat and sat back, my heart pounding. I could hear birds outside the window. Voices, from downstairs. The faint buzz of conversation from the bar.

My heart slowed.

Moving stiffly, I shuffled all the legal papers into a pile and returned them to the folder and shut down the laptop. Then, because I was busy, I headed downstairs to prepare dinner.

Dinner was once more the crowded noisy affair it had become lately. I sat at the table,

eating a little, and watching Ghaliya. I studied her blue-brown hair, her huge belly, her features that were, everyone told me, just like my own. Every time I looked at her, the bundle of feelings in my middle grew large and stronger, until I was near to bursting with them.

If anyone came near Ghaliya, if they tried to harm her or even hurt her feelings, hell, even if they stepped on her toes, I would kill them and stomp on their remains until they returned to the earth where they belonged.

The thought was fierce and clear. I nearly moaned at the power of it.

That sure, intense feeling stayed with me while I cleaned and prepped for tomorrow. I picked up the bucket of scraps, which was the last chore of the night. My kitchen helpers had all gone. I turned off the lights and headed out to the greenway to drop the scraps for the wild things to find.

This was a task that Frida, via mime and Hirom's interpretations, had explained to me was essential. I could understand feeding the birds and what beasts stayed active through winter. But it was near summer now, yet Frida insisted that I maintain the custom.

I was starting to understand why. Each day I dropped the scraps on the same bit of old asphalt that had once covered the greenway. Each time, while I banged the bottom of the bucket to loosen the last of the food, I could see from the corner of my eye that more and more birds were waiting in the trees to either side of the old highway. Shuffling in the grass under the trees told me other creatures were also waiting. The squirrels made me laugh. They would cling to their tree trunks and lean way out, holding on with one hand, sniffing, and quivering with eagerness.

The creatures had grown to depend upon my scraps. Frida was right. I couldn't let them down.

It was near to sunset when I crossed over the greenway just above the crossroad itself, and moved up the shoulder of the old road to the stained section of asphalt where I left the food.

A squirrel chattered at me, as if I was taking too long. "I'm hurrying," I told it. "I'm tired and the bucket is full. Patience. There's plenty for everyone."

It took a few minutes to get the last of the scraps to stop clinging to the bottom of the bucket. While I worked, I listened to the shuffling movements in the trees. Was there more of it than usual? Or were they getting used to me, and no longer bothered to be cautious in their movements?

I liked that idea.

I gave the bucket one last slap, grabbed the handle and stepped onto the greenway, intending to cross it and move into the area behind the back of the hotel, where gravel hardstand fought with weeds for dominance, and the hulking great Dumpster that was the town's garbage dump was located. The steps up to the back door of the hotel were there, and the kitchen side door was a few paces beyond that.

I looked both ways before I crossed, the habit unbreakable, even though I knew intellectually that nothing passed along this road but some strange folk who used the highway to reach other wild and powerful places.

A traveler was moving up the greenway, coming from the south.

I drew to a halt, my breath catching in delight.

The stag was level with Olivia and Wim's house, heading for the crossroads. His antlers were huge, complicated things, with many tips that gleamed white in the steadily fading light.

Could it be the same stag who had greeted me in December? This one's coat was sleek, the winter layer already gone. But the white ruff around his shoulders and throat looked the same.

As he drew closer, I decided that the black eyes studying me were the same.

I put the bucket down and moved into the center of the crossroads to meet him there.

He stopped in front of me, close enough that I could feel the warmth of his breath bathing my chest. Awed, I lifted my hand and stroked his nose. He gave a soft snuffling sound in response.

Then he backed off and for a moment, I was disappointed.

His shoulders dipped. His front hoof came out. The magnificent being lowered his head.

Was he...bowing? To me ?

I gripped my hands together tightly. I didn't know what to do. "Um. Thank you." It was woefully inadequate.

The stag straightened and moved forward, brushing past me. I inhaled the scent of wild things, of nature.

I turned to watch him go. But he stopped three steps beyond me and turned his head to look back at me.

It was a message. Loud and clear. But I lacked the ability to translate it.

The stag turned and came back to me. Circled me. Then he moved three paces up the

road once more, his solid hooves tapping on the corrugations. He stopped and looked back at me.

“Follow you!” I said, almost laughing in relief. “Got it. Got it.” I moved up behind him. “Okay, I’m following you.”

The deer moved off the road, skirting my abandoned bucket, heading for the open land between the trees and the old, falling down hall. Juda’s grave was there, but so were the trees where the deer had appeared last December. I was certain it was the same stag, now.

I followed him, fully expecting the stag to plunge into the trees and lead me somewhere mysterious.

But when he reached Juda’s grave, he stepped around it carefully.

How did a stag know that a body was there? What sort of advanced thought process was required to carefully avoid the ground where the body rested? That sort of respect for the dead was a purely human thing, wasn’t it?

Or was there a hidden side to animals I was just beginning to learn?

The stag moved around the grave to the earth behind the rough headstone that Hirom had hastily carved.

Juda Malik.

A four hundred pound, four-footed creature carrying a small car’s worth of antlers didn’t exactly spin on one toe. The stag turned in a large circle, while my heart geared up and thudded. It wasn’t doing what I thought it was doing...was it?

He stepped back toward the headstone. Nudged it with his nose. Then he looked at me, soundlessly telling me...something.

I trembled. “I don’t understand,” I whispered.

But I suspected. My swirling gut and a portfolio of bad dreams told me exactly what he was trying to tell me.

“I can’t,” I whispered. “It’s...it isn’t respectful to disturb him. Not after we’ve laid him to rest.”

The stag nudged the headstone once more, then lifted his head to study me. To make sure I’d understood. The last of the day’s sunlight burst up behind me—the last flare as the sun slipped below the horizon. The tips of the stag’s antlers blazed as if they were on fire.

“Fire...” I whispered. I sighed. “Very well,” I told the stag. “If you insist.”

The stag stood for a moment, the golden tips pulsing with light. Then he reared back, and leapt forward, heading for the trees. He ran into them and was gone, while dusk settled around me.

I shivered, and not just from the abrupt transition to nighttime. Orrin Stonebrunch stood in the exact center of the crossroads, his massive arms crossed.

He’d seen it all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I PICKED UP MY EMPTY bucket and moved directly to where Orrin stood waiting for me. I couldn't put this off. "You saw that?"

"The king gives you obeisance. Yes." His voice sounded like rocks tumbling in a cement mixer. The grumbling sound was clearer today. Did that mean he was angry? Or was it because he was outside?

Clearly, he attached no significance to the deer nudging Juda's headstone. But he had not been here in the days after Juda died.

"Will you excuse me? I have to find Trevalyan." I needed to talk to him. I needed Trevalyan to tell me I was wrong about the message the stag had given me.

"You have much to do," Orrin said, inclining his head. "The mage is by his own hearth."

Was Orrin bowing, too? I stared at him startled. "Well," I said inadequately. "Trevalyan is at home?"

Orrin nodded. It was just a nod, this time.

I turned toward the hotel and walked down the center of the normal road, angling toward the houses opposite the hotel. Trevalyan's was the little house two up from Ben's, which was the house beside Olivia's. If the houses had ever been numbered, those numbers were long gone. No one got traditional mail here, anymore, and all

parcel deliveries came to the hotel.

I was just about to step onto the curb on that side of the road when I heard my name being called.

I looked around.

The informal parking lot beside the hotel had precisely two cars in it, illuminated by the bulb over the door into the bar. Given the number of guests staying in the hotel and the even higher number of people that drank in the bar each evening, the wee number of cars in the parking lot should have goosed the curiosity of anyone not walking in their sleep.

It was little wonder that King thought something was screwy with Haigton.

The two cars in the lot were the black sedans that King and his agents had arrived in. Their trunks were open, and his people were sliding backpacks and small rolling luggage into them.

Axel King stood a few paces away from the cars, as if he had moved toward me. He waved at me.

The luggage gave me a spurt of hope. I put my bucket down on the sidewalk and crossed back over the road, and across the lot to where King waited.

He tilted his head as I got closer. “Feeding the chickens?” he asked.

I realized he was talking about the bucket. “The birds. Squirrels. A racoon or two. Some deer. A coyote and his mate.” I shrugged.

King rubbed his jaw. I could hear the rasp of his five o’clock shadow. “I read

Calloway's diary."

"That's why you're leaving?"

King smiled and in the gloaming, his teeth gleamed white. "The man was delusional."

"You're not the only one to believe that." I was thinking of Harper's reaction to Calloway's belief that she and he were alike.

"I know that's why you gave the thumb drive to me. I figured you'd read it first. All that rubbish about demons and vampires..." He shook his head. "I know Calloway lost his wife and children in a bear attack. It clearly warped him. He wanted to find who was responsible so he invented a whole world of hunters and blamed vampires that he could hunt down for himself. A lot of people disappeared wherever he roamed. The man was a deluded serial killer. And now he's dead. It doesn't matter what he believed or the constructs he built to justify it all."

"It doesn't?" I marveled at the human ability to reason away just about anything. Calloway wasn't the only one gifted in that department. But then, how else could King spin it and not be laughed out of the service? He had a vested interest in finding an explanation that made the weirdness go away.

"It doesn't matter what Calloway's version of reality was," King said, "because what was clear was that he didn't consider Harper to be an enemy. He was looking for her, not to kill her or confront her about their original confrontation. She was an ally, in his estimation."

"That's what we realized, too." And I waited.

"This Orpheus he spoke about. He was afraid of the man. He considered Orpheus to be a threat to everyone, not just himself. That included Harper. He was trying to find

her to warn her.”

I let out my breath. “Yes,” I agreed.

King looked like he had more to say, but he shifted and glanced around, as if he had just remembered where he was and that his people were just behind him. “Anyway,” he said. “My team tell me they want Dunkin’ Donuts. Tonight. And the store in Gouverneur closes at eight, so....”

“You’re leaving,” I concluded.

“You said you wanted the rooms.”

“I do. Does this mean Harper is no longer a suspect?”

King weighed up his answer. “It’s looking unlikely. The timeline doesn’t fit. The feud we thought was there has evaporated. Harper is unpleasant and tiring to speak to, but people can be like that because they insist upon living life on their own terms. And her terms are to be left alone. Do I think she killed Calloway? No. But I can’t take her off the books. Not just yet.”

“Oh.” Disappointment circled me.

“Relax, Anna. Calloway was a killer. We didn’t catch him, but he has been stopped. I call that a good day.”

And a part of me did relax.

“We’re going to look into this Orpheus,” King continued. “But the pressure is off.” He paused. “I might even get home to see the end of the hockey season.”

“Go Rangers?” I guessed.

“ Les Rangers sont nuls. Allez les Canadiens. ?Olé!, ” he said.

“Umm...” I knew a bit of Spanish, enough to get by. This wasn’t Spanish. French, perhaps. Except for the last word.

“Montreal Canadiens,” King added. “Go, Habs.”

Yes, he’d been speaking French. “Oh.” I shifted on my feet, crunching gravel, and feeling ignorant. And my foot slipped. It was a stupid, weird thing. My boot slid on the gravel. I didn’t have time to brace myself. My weight went out from under me, and I was going to land on my rear. Hard.

King’s reactions, for a human, were insanely fast. He lunged forward, got an arm around my back, grabbed my arm with the other hand and hauled me back up onto my feet.

We froze that way, while my heart raced. My nerves were jangling. The unexpectedness of it was most of my shock. It had come out of nowhere, as if someone had pushed me from behind. “Wow,” I breathed. “Thank you. That could have been nasty.”

“You need better soles on your boots.” King’s voice rumbled in his chest, which was pressed against my shoulder. It felt like he was pure muscle under the blue business shirt. “Got your balance?”

“Yes. Sorry. Yes. I’m fine.”

He let go and stepped back. Behind him, the trunks thudded closed and car doors were shut. “If they don’t get their caffeine...”

I nodded. “Good luck with your case, Agent King.”

Now he had moved from where he had been standing, the shadow that had hidden his eyes was gone. He considered me for a long moment. “This town...there’s something about it,” he said softly.

“It’s old,” I assured him, my heartrate spiking yet again. “Lots of history makes for intriguing backstory. We’re just a little hamlet going about our business.”

“Perhaps,” King said. Then he seemed to shake off the mood. His shoulders straightened. “Well...” He went over to the car and got in behind the wheel.

Most senior agents would sit back and let someone else worry about the driving while they dealt with business. King liked the control. And he liked solving puzzles.

The two cars rolled past me, turned onto the road. The bulk of the hotel hid them from me as they headed for the crossroad and the road to Edwards.

I glanced at the corner of the hotel, where the sidewalk ended. No one there. Neither was anyone standing or sitting on the wooden steps up to the side door.

Relieved, I headed back to the road, to collect my bucket and to talk to Trevalyan.

?

I knocked on the faded front door and waited.

“Anna?” Trevalyan’s wavering voice came through the door faintly.

I pushed open the door—no one locked their doors in Haigton—and leaned in. “Yes, it’s me. You didn’t want to sit with everyone in the bar?”

The front room, which most people would have used as a sitting room, Trevalyan used as a studio for his practice. The furniture in it changed as his interests did. In the last few weeks, a long narrow workbench made of pallets had appeared, pushed up against the wall that was common with the kitchen. Trevalyan was processing and drying herbs that Wim had grown over the winter in his greenhouse. Bunches of herbs hung overhead, and small glass jars and tins were lined up on the bench. The smell was divine.

Frequently, Trevalyan liked to sit in front of the fireplace, on the floor and cross-legged. He would meditate while staring at the flames or smoke his beloved cannabis in a pipe and contemplate...everything, I suppose. Like everyone in Haigton, Trevalyan had a long perspective on life.

Tonight, though, Trevalyan sat in the one narrow armchair in the house. He had wrapped a blanket around his shoulders and from the front door I could see that he was sweating, even though the small fire in the fireplace was the only light. It was overly warm in the room.

“A fire ?” I asked, stepping into the room.

Trevalyan coughed. “Don’t come too close,” he said sharply.

I halted on the bare floorboards. Close to my toes, I could see where a chalk line had been wiped away. A trace of it remained. Following it, I could make out the ghost of a pentacle. “You’re sick?” I asked.

“You could call it that.” His tone was grim.

“It looks as though you have a fever. Do you want me to get something for it?”

“There’s nothing natural about this illness,” Trevalyan said. “It came on too fast and

too severely.” He coughed again, then pushed his glasses back into place. “It has power running through it, Anna.”

I thought of Orrin Stonebrunch, standing at the crossroads. He’d known where Trevalyan was. Had he also known Trevalyan was ill?

I lowered myself to the floor right where I was, at the tip of the faded pentacle, and crossed my legs. “The stag came to me. Just now. Out on the crossroads.”

Trevalyan shivered and pulled the blanket in around him. “What did he want?”

“How did you know he wanted something?”

“A guess.”

I told him about my dreams, the ones where I stood over Juda’s grave with a burning torch. Then, the stag leading me to the grave and nudging the gravestone. The tips of his antlers, glowing in the last of the sunlight. “I’m supposed to burn Juda’s body,” I concluded. “The first time the stag was in my dream, I ignored it. Now it has come in person and told me the same thing. I just don’t know how to go about it. I’m not sure I even want to, but it seems I must.”

“The message has become more urgent, the closer we get to Beltane.” Trevalyan paused to wheeze and cough. “I believe you must do this on Beltane eve.”

“In front of everyone?”

“Why not? People attend funerals all the time. This one is a pyre instead of a grave. The Vikings and Hindus would approve.”

That steadied me. A little.

“But be wary, Anna,” Trevalyan said. “A pyre, the dead, and Beltane...it is a powerful cocktail. Shake it the wrong way....”

“And it explodes like Oscar’s chemistry set?”

“Something like that. You must shepherd the power, make sure it is channeled away from the elements that it should not mix with.”

You . I squeezed my hands together. “You won’t be there...”

Trevalyan shivered. “I think that if I tried to move out of the house, this sickness would only worsen. Whatever it is, it has removed me from the board.” He grimaced. “You must see this through on your own.”

Everyone would be there, but I knew what he was saying. I would be the only one there with the ability to deal with whatever the wild mix of people and power generated.

“I’m not ready,” I said, my throat tightening. “I haven’t learned nearly enough.”

“You know more than you think you do,” Trevalyan said.

I tried to take comfort from that, but it didn’t help. All I could think of was that Orrin Stonebrunch was waiting to judge me and Haigton on Beltane eve, and dozens of other people would try to tap into the power that would flux and flow at that time.

And now I was about to introduce a destabilizing element that could tear it all apart.

Everyone’s future depended upon me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

DAYS AGO, I HAD WHINED to Ben that I was too busy to think. In the two days leading up to Beltane eve, I learned what “busy” meant.

King and his team had left, but the rooms they had vacated, and the last unoccupied room swiftly filled with more guests.

It was as if they had been waiting for the ignorant humans to leave, because some of the guests were distinctly not human. The dryads stopped wearing human clothes and went back to their preferred garments made of softly matted leaves and vines.

Even more guests arrived, and I had to negotiate with the single occupancy guests to give the other bed in their rooms. I left Percy Finch alone, though. I suspected that he would fall apart if I suggested he share germs with another occupant.

I tried to match species as roommates, but some of the species I couldn’t identify. They were too close to human, or absolutely human in appearance. Some of them would be shifters. The others I would have to learn about later.

A pair of dwarves arrived, the first I’d seen beside Hirom, which answered the question I had wondered about since meeting Hirom. He wasn’t a human dwarf. Dwarves were a species of the hidden world.

Which led to another question: Did dwarves have paranormal talents? Hirom had shown a talent for woodcarving, that he had turned into a business making barrels and the contents for those barrels. He had also made me a statue of the Roman goddess

Diana, which he had given to me for Christmas last year. It sat on my desk.

But he had also told me that his family were traditionally metal workers. Perhaps my two guests were of the same inclination? Was it a species-wide bent? Or just Hirom's family?

I knew so little!

I had additional work to do that was related to Beltane preparations, and for some of it, I enlisted my guests. Everyone I could speak to, I asked that they comb through the forest around the town and bring back any deadwood and pile it in the middle of the crossroad. Each day the hotel emptied as everyone, except Percy Finch, headed out into the woods. Even Orrin Stonebrunch seemed willing to haul wood. He dragged back to the crossroad deadwood the size of full trees.

The pile of wood in the crossroad swiftly grew taller. Ben produced an extending ladder that was laid against one side of the pile and the feet were anchored. People climbed the ladder to lay their deadwood haul upon the top of the pile.

Once the bonfire was pronounced big enough, the wood was stacked on the corner opposite Olivia's house and the old hall. That would be used to feed the fire during the night.

I had another task that I wanted to put off, but time was pressing upon me. Late on the 29th, after the bar had closed, I grabbed Ben and Broch and Hirom, and asked Wim to meet us at Juda's grave. We carried camping lights and shovels, and I had stitched together a pair of old blankets to wrap the remains in. We'd wrapped Juda in a shroud made of sheets, but it had been in the earth for three months.

Halfway through our grisly work, Ben had laughed. "Look at us," he said, stretching his back. "In the eighteenth century, resurrectionists were publicly whipped for their

crimes.”

“Resurrectionists?” I said, wiping my sweaty face off with my sleeve.

“Grave robbers,” Broch said, shoveling with relentless, unbroken rhythm.

“Why would people steal bodies? It was only the ancient races who buried grave goods with their dead.”

“Anatomists would buy the bodies to dissect them,” Ben said. “Modern medicine was built upon what they learned from taking a human body apart.”

Wim shuddered. “They could have learned more from speaking to living bodies.”

“Humans don’t have your talent for talking to mute intelligences.” Ben bent to his work once more.

The other Beltane-related job, and one of the largest, was preparing the feast that everyone was expecting to enjoy. Olivia, who was looking forward to Beltane so much that I often caught her singing to herself as she scurried about the kitchen, filled me in on the usual arrangements for the feast.

“It is a smorgasbord,” Olivia explained. “We put up trestles on three sides of the crossroads, where everyone can help themselves throughout the night.”

“Hot food?” I asked, thinking about the massive organization required to keep hot food continuously on three tables, for an entire evening.

“Oh yes,” Olivia replied, carefully picking the eye out of a carrot. “And Hirom sets up a table in front of Ben’s house, for the beer and whisky barrels, and all the glasses.”

“I’ll have to run to Gouverneur,” I said, thinking aloud. “It will require a ton of food...”

“Probably not as much as you think,” Olivia said placidly.

That was on the same night that King and his people left, when I had spoken to Trevalyan. The next day, I learned what Olivia meant by her cryptic remark.

The guests and complete strangers arrived in the foyer with a mind-bending range of gifts for the kitchen. For the feast, they explained as they handed it over.

I was given rabbits, a raccoon, and a whole deer carcass, which made me worry about what the stag might do if he learned of it. And, delivered in sections, an entire moose, already skinned and dressed and expertly butchered. In addition, I was handed bags, baskets and bunches of a bewildering array of vegetables, fruit and nuts, and herbs. Some of them were clearly foraged from the wild – morel, chickweed, field garlic, wild blackberries and blueberries, walnuts and chestnuts. But many of the baskets contained human, domesticated food. Carrots, potatoes, lettuces of all types, tomatoes, bell peppers, and a small hill of onions and garlic. Apples and berries of all kinds, pears and apricots and figs. A bag of dates.

Working space in the kitchen grew cramped, as the only place we could store the overflowing food was on the counters and worktable. The cold room was stuffed with meat.

“Orrin will take care of most of a table of food all by himself,” Ben said, when I marveled over the largesse.

“Hirom will take the second,” Olivia said, with a trilling laugh.

Orrin Stonebrunch did not switch back to his natural appearance once Axel King had

left, which I found curious. And while everyone in the hotel spoke to everyone else, Orrin remained alone. At dinner, when everyone was forced to share tables—even Percy Finch found himself with three other diners—and everyone chatted with their fellow diners, Orrin stolidly ate and then left, while the other three at his table looked relieved.

We had over fifty people eating at each meal. My preparations in the kitchen expanded. I barely left the place, and I needed the help of everyone I could tap. Trevalyan was down and out, but Frida emerged from her room, wan and clearly weak, but willing to work. I reluctantly allowed her to take over the cleaning of the rooms once more, and asked Wim to help her.

Broch and Hirom managed the bar, while Ben, Olivia and Harper worked in the kitchen.

Everyone was running on the spot, Alice-style, and we were just barely keeping up.

At night, I would fall into bed, my body actually hurting and my brain numb, to fall instantly asleep. On the morning of the 30th, Beltane Eve, I woke up lying in the exact same position I had fallen asleep in, and it felt as though I had just laid down.

I dragged myself down to the kitchen well before dawn and started work preparing both breakfast and the feast for this evening. After breakfast, I took a thermos of soup over to Trevalyan, along with a tincture that Ben wanted Trevalyan to rub on his chest, to help with his breathing, which was loud and sounded painful.

“Beltane starts at sunset,” Trevalyan told me, sipping the soup. His voice was hoarse and made me wince in sympathetic pain. “The power will intensify until midnight. It will be at its most intense from then until dawn. Spells and rituals performed after midnight and before dawn will be strong and lasting.”

“I know,” I assured him.

“If anything is to happen, it will be after midnight.”

“Yes.”

“You have to watch, though. It could happen sooner. The veil grows thin throughout the evening. As soon as it is thin enough for anyone to pass through, or use it, they will.”

“I will watch.”

Trevalyan broke into a heavy, wracking cough, which left him trembling. “Damn it!” he cried, thumping his knee with his fist. “I can’t even stand. I tried. I came round to find myself on the floor.”

“It is what it is,” I told him, using his own words deliberately. “I’ll manage...or I won’t. I’ll do everything I can.”

He nodded, still coughing.

I went back to the kitchen. I had nothing left to do but cook and wait for sunset. All the arrangements were made.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

EVERYONE IN THE HOTEL EXCEPT Frida, who was psychologically incapable of stepping outside, gathered around the bonfire at sunset, while a few of us moved around the edges of the twenty-five foot high pile of wood, lighting it with branches wrapped in rags.

It was my dream come to life, and I shivered as I watched the flames leap and climb the pile, heading toward the top where Juda's body laid. We had sewn the body into the blankets. It rested, inert, upon the wood. The flames licked at the wool, then caught and danced upon it.

"It is what he wanted, Anna?" Broch asked, beside me.

"It is what the stag wants, too."

"I wonder what will come of it?"

"That Juda will be at peace, I hope."

"We didn't know him well enough to get it right the first time." Broch touched my shoulder briefly. "Thanks to you, we can correct that error."

Once the entire pile of wood was burning, and I could no longer see Juda's body, I went back inside to the kitchen. I was followed by a line of people who waited for me to hand them trays of food for the tables. I gave Ben, Broch, Hirom, Olivia and Wim the first trays, and found myself facing Aurora Caro. She smiled and held out her

hands. Behind her was a long line of guests and visitors and strangers.

“Oh,” I said stupidly. I gave Caro the next tray.

The kitchen rapidly emptied as I thrust trays and bowls, casseroles and pie plates and more at the next pair of hands. I warmed and cooked the hot dishes and when each was ready, someone was waiting to take it outside.

I nibbled as I worked, for I was starving and it would be a while before I could go out to the bonfire myself.

Ghaliya came into the kitchen sometime after ten, holding her side. “Mom, take a break. The tables are full, and everyone’s eaten at least one plateful, even me.” She was wearing a pretty dress a shade of blue that matched her hair. The fabric had sprigs of flowers printed on it. I couldn’t remember seeing it before. The front of the dress flowed over her belly, and the vee at the neck revealed her swollen breasts. She looked fresh, young, and lovely. Looking at her, I understood the expression about the glow of motherhood.

It would be good to spend a few minutes with her, this evening. “Okay,” I told her, and moved the soup pot to the cold side of the range and turned off the gas. “Just for a few minutes.” I finger-combed my hair. “Is there enough food?”

“More than enough,” Ghaliya said, linking her arm around mine. “Even though more people keep arriving. They come out through the trees or walk up the greenway.”

“It’s getting close to midnight,” I pointed out. “Perhaps they’re drawn here.”

Ghaliya rested her head against my shoulder for a moment. “It’s a weird world, here, isn’t it?”

“You wanted to stay here,” I reminded her. “Are you regretting it?”

She pressed her hand to her belly once more. “Not even for a second.” We stepped out of the hotel and came to halt on the footpath in front of it. Ghaliya lifted her hand up, waving toward the bonfire. “I wouldn’t want to miss this for anything.”

It was a sight. The bonfire still burned steadily. People tossed more wood upon it from time to time. I spotted the dwarves on the far side of the fire, competing with each other to toss the wood higher upon the pile. It appeared to be a drinking game where the loser had to drain their mug.

I couldn’t see the tables of food. There were too many people in front of them. I spotted many dryads, more dwarves, and shorter people with pale skin, large eyes and pointed ears. Elves? Pixies? Or were elves and pixies the stuff of fairytales only? The taller people included those who looked human, and many who did not. Green flesh, and blue. Black flesh. The mottled flesh of dryads. More pointed ears, eyes with no whites, large eyes, elongated eyes, eyes that glowed.

A flutter caught my attention, and I turned my head to see a pair of gossamer wings folding against the back of a woman with long hair and silver eyes.

Hirom’s table of barrels was also barely visible among the people waiting for drinks.

And right in front of the hotel, using the broad stretch of concrete between the door and the curb, was a group of musicians, none of them human. They were playing pipes, a handheld drum, and a fiddle.

On the road, in front of them, people were dancing, for the music was infectious, with a fast beat and a merry tune.

On either side of the dancers and on the footpath across the road, people were

watching, clapping, laughing, or grabbing partners and pulling them onto the road to dance, too.

In the shadows just beyond the reach of the firelight, all around us, I could see couples standing close together.

I heard Broch's voice in my head. Connection at Beltane is more than it appears. It is quite profound on a number of levels . And Trevalyan's pithy rejoinder; It's just simple people feeling the power and getting randy because of it .

I let my gaze scan from right to left, across the dancers to the tables, to the bonfire, and the dark trees behind the crossroad.

This was Beltane. This was what had made Olivia sigh in anticipation. I understood her pleasure, now. It was a bewildering sight for a mere human, but it was universal in its meaning. People coming together to enjoy the company of others. Community. Fellowship.

"Wow," I breathed, taking it all in.

"Right?" Ghaliya said. She grinned. "Oscar has got to come and see this. His kids will go wild over Haigton."

"That's a discussion for another day," I said firmly. How does one explain Haigton to a human unaware of the Otherworld? The locals had let me and Ghaliya trip, stumble over facts, and figure it out for ourselves. Maybe that was the best way. But I wasn't ready to find out, just yet. I was still figuring out this world for myself.

"Mid-summer," Ghaliya said, her eyes shining. "They must celebrate the solstice here."

“mmm...” I said it with a neutral tone.

“I know. We’ll discuss it later.” Ghaliya let go of my arm. “Go and eat. I’ll get you some of the mulled cider.”

My throat contracted dryly. I liked Hirom’s warmed and spiced cider. But my stomach was protesting loudly, too. “Deal,” I told her, and moved around the band, heading for the tables of food.

For a feast I had orchestrated and cooked, I was pretty impressed by how it had all come together. It was nothing like any other staff Christmas buffet I’d ever eaten. I’d been challenged to find ways to serve rabbit and racoon, and moose did not taste exactly like beef. I did not eat the venison. I couldn’t bring myself to it.

The recipes were all down to earth. Potato dishes, stews, and lots of salads. Lots of homemade bread, rolls, buns, crusty loaves. Pies, both sweet and savory, and fruit tarts.

I ate a lot . I had probably been short on calories for days, for I had eaten on the run, ruining my appetite for when I did sit down to a formal meal. Not that I could afford to sit for long at all.

Not everyone was eating standing up. Sawn logs and big branches had been pulled off the woodpile to make temporary seating, and other diners were using the curb as a low seat. I moved back to the hotel and put my back to the wall beneath the dining room windows, where I ate, drank my tankard of spiced cider, and people-watched. I wasn’t alone there. A small woman in a pretty dress sat a few feet away, her plate on her lap, nibbling at a roasted pear. Her hair was pure white. She smiled at me when our gazes met.

Smiling at everyone seemed to be the theme of the evening.

I put my head back against the wall when I was full. It had taken two bowls of stew and a plate of apple pie and tarts. The music was happy, the chatter was full of laughter. And the warmth from the bonfire was nice. I could easily fall asleep right here where I was sitting, on concrete with my back against stucco.

After a while, I sat up straight. I felt cold inside, and too hot on the outside. The urge to stand was pulling at me. I resisted for a moment, because I was tired. The sensation to move, to do something, built until I could no longer ignore it.

Something is about to happen . The mental voice was mine, but the tone was not one I'd ever heard before. Absolute, pure confidence.

I put my plate aside, and got to my feet, scanning the party. This time, I looked for people I knew, locating them.

Broch was by the fire. He seemed to be studying the flames, except that he wasn't standing square with the bonfire, looking to one side. Did he sense something, too?

Olivia was dancing with Wim. I couldn't locate Ben.

Aurora Caro was standing at one of the food tables, pointing out dishes to a human-like woman with pointed ears. She was talking quickly. Trying to make an impression?

Harper...where was Harper? I looked for the familiar black hat, but when I spotted her, she was not wearing it. I saw her hair first, rippling down her back. She was sitting on an upturned log, her long legs stretched out, her ankles crossed. She had a whisky glass in one hand. She was talking to a dryad I didn't know, a man with intelligent eyes and wide shoulders.

Harper, talking freely. I marveled.

Instinct made me switch my gaze back to Broch.

He wasn't staring at the fire. He was watching Harper. The emotion on his face defied analysis. I only knew that pain was part of what he was feeling. I heard his voice again, in my mind. Connection at Beltane is more than it appears. It is quite profound on a number of levels .

I would have let myself mull over what I had seen, what it meant for both of them, but the sensation of something looming, something about to happen, was building. I shifted on my feet, turning from side to side to take in the entire road, and everyone in it. Where was it coming from? Where was the threat?

I found Orrin Stonebrunch and studied him, my heart screaming in my chest. He stood at the end of Hirom's barrels, a pitcher of beer in his hand. He glowered at everyone. His eyes, which had remained human for days now glowed a deep orange.

Where was Ben? I hadn't seen him at all, since stepping out of the kitchen.

I let my gaze slide over the length of the party once more. A cheer went up as more wood was thrown upon the bonfire and sparks climbed up into the night sky.

I couldn't breathe. My throat was closing down. My chest squeezing. I pressed my hand to the center of my chest, massaging it.

What was coming? I badly wanted to run to Trevalyan's house, hammer on the door and have him tell me what was happening.

Percy Finch, wearing a sweater vest and a tie, was murmuring apologies as he stepped around people standing around the bonfire. He avoided touching any of them, his mouth held in a little pucker of distaste.

He stopped a few feet from the bonfire, which was closer than most people could withstand. He raised his arms, his fingers spread. “I, Lucien Harrow, declare!” he cried in a powerful voice unlike his own.

Who? I stared at him, puzzled.

The music came to an awkward, sour-noted stop. People stopped dancing.

Percy ignored them. “By blood once spilled, by debt long due; by hollow breath and midnight’s hue—”

Midnight ! I turned my wrist so I could see my watch by the firelight.

It had just gone midnight.

“By fire’s kiss and moonlight’s tide; Let fate unbind, let woe subside—”

“No! No! Stop! You must stop!” It was a woman’s scream, a voice I didn’t know. The party had come to a resounding stillness and silence since Percy began his chanting, and I could hear the woman clearly. I turned to locate her.

It was Frida . She was outside, running toward Percy with her hand raised, fear in her face. “Don’t do this! You must not!” she cried.

As Frida got close, Percy threw back one of his hands in an underarm swing.

Frida was picked up off the ground and flung up the road, to land between the dancers and rolling before coming to a stop, her limbs sprawled and her eyes closed.

Everyone gasped. There were cries of alarm. And abruptly everyone turned and tried to leave, tripping over each other, knocking into the tables, falling and crawling and

screaming.

Percy raised his arms again and continued, as if he had not been interrupted. “Life for life, the scales must turn; Let cinder cleanse, let ember burn.”

“Anna!” The shout came from my left. I spun to look.

Juda stood there. Juda . His deep olive skin was unchanged. The trimmed beard still neat. His black eyes were alive. Aware. I clutched my chest as my heart groaned painfully.

Juda pointed at Percy. “Block him! Now!! He’ll take Ghaliya’s child!”

I gasped. I think I staggered. This was all happening too quickly. I couldn’t think.

“What once was taken, now restore. Let shadow reign in me no more!” The triumph in Percy’s voice was terrifying.

Ghaliya screamed. I swung to find her. She was by the front door to the hotel, clutching her belly. Her knees buckled as I watched.

Terror swamped me. I had to stop this. I knew that. But how? I couldn’t think of a single thing I could do that might halt this.

People were still screaming. I heard a crash and saw Hiron’s barrels crash to the ground. Beer glugged, and people pushed through it, panicked and near hysterical.

“Stop him, Anna!” Juda cried.

Percy stood alone at the bonfire, which was dying as he studied it. He wore a triumphant smile that made him appear wildly different to the meek, germophobe

who had crept about the hotel for more than a week.

“ Mom !” Ghaliya screamed. “ It hurts!”

I couldn't think of a single spell. My mind was blank. But I had lived without spells my entire life. I knew other ways to stop someone. I leapt forward, running hard. It was only a dozen steps to reach Percy and by the time I was there, I was moving at top speed.

I bent and rammed my shoulder into his side.

And where I touched him, my flesh and muscles turned instantly cold.

Percy staggered sideways, lost his footing and sprawled.

I tripped and staggered backward, clutching my shoulder. Even from here, I could feel the wrongness coming off him, like the chill of a block of ice.

And I could see more than that. I blinked to clear my vision, but it didn't go away. There were faint lines in the air, shimmering like vapor, barely visible. They poured off the bonfire and ran along the ground, heading toward Percy like a thousand lines of ants, like water following a channel, undulating as they reached him and he took them into himself.

The lines weren't just coming from the bonfire. I could see more of them flowing from the Greenway, from people who were still standing too close to Percy, frozen with shock or fear.

And the lines were coming out of Ghaliya. She was on her knees, a hand on the ground to hold herself up, so her belly did not make contact. The other hand was to her belly. She was crying and moaning at the same time.

Percy hissed at me. He climbed laboriously to his feet once more, fury making his face writhe in inhuman ways.

He came at me, his hands out.

Before he could reach me, Harper lunged between us, her hand raised. I saw her knife in it, as she slammed her fist into Percy's chest, right over the heart.

The impact brought him to a halt, but he didn't drop or sag or die. He looked down at the knife, plucked it out of his chest and threw it aside.

Harper shouted over her shoulder at me. "Run!" Then she spoke words that I didn't understand and shoved Percy with both hands.

He flew through the air to land on the table of food. The table collapsed and he and the food jumbled together.

I backed up a dozen steps.

"The Greenway!" Juda cried. "It must not fail!"

I whirled again. The Greenway was...trembling. The surface shimmered and shook, like sand dancing upon a loudspeaker turned up too loud.

Another crash sounded, this one the unmistakable sound of glass breaking. Orrin Stonebrunch had tossed his jug of beer to the ground. "I fix!" he cried and strode forward, his heavy stomps swallowing up the ground. He reached Percy, raised his fist and hammered it on the top of Percy's head.

Percy dropped to the ground, then pushed himself up, groggy. He pushed himself to his feet, swaying, and turned to the fire once more, bringing his hands up into the air.

Orrin was already nearly all the way around the fire. He bent—an astonishing movement for someone of his size—and spread his hand out upon the shimmering surface of the Greenway.

Immediately, the Greenway calmed. The near-invisible lines stopped rising and running toward Percy.

But they were not the only lines.

Ghaliya screamed again. Her fear, her pain, broke my paralysis. I didn't think. I had no time to weigh up options. I'd already waited too long. I raised my hands, one on either side, and spoke the words of the beckoning spell. They were ancient and powerful words. I felt the power gather inside me, the fizzing, slightly cold, deliciously sensual run of feelings through my nerves and veins. The power left me, and raced outward in all directions, seeking more of itself. More power, from wherever it might be.

And something answered. The call came from the north, and from not too far away. The power rushed to me, pulled by the beckoning spell. It was an unearthly, inhuman power. Blind, but all-seeing, coldly scalding, ageless and ancient. Aware but not sentient. And overwhelming .

Fear shot through me at the strength of the power I'd called to my side. I had no time to cringe. It slammed into me, stealing my breath, dimming my vision. I pulled my hands together, fighting to drag them through the surge of power. Then I turned my palms out and thrust all of it at Percy.

He instantly turned to flame. It licked up from his well-polished shoes to his well-trimmed hair. Every inch of him was consumed.

He did not scream. He turned to me. I saw his mouth moving. Read the words it

formed.

Thank you .

Then he ran forward, still burning, and threw himself upon the bonfire.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I RAN TO GHALIYA AND made her sit down. “Let me see, let me see.” I had to see that the baby was alright.

“I’m...I think I’m okay,” Ghaliya whispered.

And I could see the shimmer of lines around her, flowing back into her.

My fear faded. I put my hand on her belly, knowing that this time, I could do more than comfort her. I felt the life within her, questing, confused. I wordlessly reassured it and felt it subside, contented.

I could also feel the minute tremble of the earth beneath me and looked around. Orrin Stonebrunch came toward us. He had reverted to his real appearance. His skin was blue once more, the ears elongated into long points, and his eyes glowed fiercely.

“The babe...” he said anxiously. He crouched and examined Ghaliya.

Ghaliya looked up at him and smiled. “She’s fine.”

“Yes,” Orrin said, with a slow nod. He rose to his feet and looked down at me, where I sat beside Ghaliya. “You will call upon me again. You will not wish to.”

While I tried to puzzle out his meaning, he turned and walked back to the crossroad. He moved around the now-dead bonfire, black ashes rising around his big boots, then across the open ground on the other side. He walked into the trees and disappeared.

Everyone was around us, all trying to reach Ghaliya at the same time to check on her. They were all babbling questions, talking over the top of each other.

Hands pulled me out of the way, and I shuffled backward on my hands and feet, crab-like, giving everyone room to reach Ghaliya.

But the hands lifted me, instead, and put me on my feet. Ben turned me around. His gaze ran over my face. He stepped back a half pace and examined me all the way down to my toes.

“I’m okay,” I said.

“You look...more than okay.” His voice was hoarse. He drew me to him and hugged me.

I let myself be hugged. It felt good. It felt heavenly.

“Hey,” someone croaked, behind me.

Ben let me go and I turned. Trevalyan, looking pale and trembling, stood with a hand against the door jamb, holding himself up. “What the hell did you do?” he asked me.

“She was amazing!” Ghaliya said, turning away from Olivia, who was trying to check her temperature.

“I was nearly too late,” I said, retrospective fear clogging my throat. “I froze, Trevalyan. I couldn’t think. If Harper hadn’t stepped in front of me—”

“Harper?” Trevalyan asked, his voice rising.

Everyone looked at Harper. She stood with us, just on the edges. She crossed her

arms. “Automatic reaction,” she said. “I’m as surprised as you are.”

“And Orrin saved the Greenway,” I said, pulling everyone’s attention away from Harper, sparing her.

“I saw him smash the jug of beer and take off running...well, striding,” Hirom said. “Then he hammered Percy into the ground and kept running and the bonfire got in the way after that. I don’t know how Percy got up after that.”

“He wasn’t human,” I said, thinking of Harper’s knife slamming into his heart. “He took Harper’s iron blade up to the hilt and it didn’t do more than irritate him.”

“No, I would have felt it, if he was Otherworld,” Trevalyan said.

“No, no, I want to hear what Orrin did,” Hirom said. “He was here the whole time just to help?”

“Apparently,” Ben said.

“But...all the bad food...those eggs?” Trevalyan said, sounding peeved.

“I think you’ll find that all the rotten food and dead plants were Percy’s doing. The same with Hirom and Frida... Frida!” I whirled to look at the road. “I saw her land.”

“I’m here,” came the quiet response.

Everyone gasped. Frida moved along the sidewalk, and over to where we were all grouped under the light over the front door. She had scrapes on her cheek and her elbows.

Ben moved over to her. “How are you outside? Talking?”

“I am not the Frida you know, not right now,” she said. “Later, I will be, but not until I am inside.”

“She is the will of the town,” Juda said. “The town found a way to speak to us once more.”

Broch pointed at Juda. “You’d better do a lot of speaking, yourself.” He was furious. “There is no such thing as ghosts!” he added, almost shouting.

Juda smiled at him. “But there is such thing as jinns, my friend.”

“You were flesh and blood!” Broch cried.

“How do you think we fit into all those bottles and lamps?”

Trevalyan shook his head. “Myths! Fairytale!”

“With an underlying truth,” Juda said calmly. “Take my hand.” He held out his hand.

“You’ll grip nothing but air,” Trevalyan warned Broch.

Broch snatched at Juda’s hand. I heard the smack of flesh upon flesh. Then Broch’s knuckles whitened, as he stared at Juda. “Not possible,” he whispered.

“Says the vampire.” Juda made a tsking sound. “Are you holding as tight as you can?”

“Yes, damn you.”

Juda lifted his hand out of Broch’s grip. I saw his hand pass through Broch’s.

Broch snatched at it again, and this time, his hand passed through Juda's.

"It takes a lot of energy to hold my human form," Juda said. "Now that I have been released from that flesh." He turned to me and bowed. "Thank you, Anna."

"You were talking to me," I whispered.

"The only way I could," Juda said gravely. "The one you know as Percy was blocking me."

"I'm sorry," Trevalyan said. "But I've got to sit down before I fall down. Can we dissect all this in the bar?"

"But I still want to know about Orrin!" Hirom protested. "Firbolgs kill towns. They don't save them."

I looked at Frida. "Do you know why Orrin helped?"

Frida shook her head. "The big one cares only for the earth, not those who stand upon it."

"She's as cryptic as Stonebrunch ever was," Trevalyan grumped.

"Who would have thought the milk of human kindness ran through his kind?" Olivia mused.

"They're not human at all," Harper said. "He only made himself look human. Firbolgs are wild, ancient things. And the milk of human kindness is bullshit. Selfless help is not a human thing. It doesn't exist. No one does anything for selfless reasons."

"I disagree," I said. "Look at us. We survived Beltane because we helped each other."

I shot Harper a steady look. “Even Harper,” I added.

Someone laughed. It was a low chuckle. Then, abruptly, we were all laughing. If some of us shed tears as we laughed, everyone else was diplomatic enough to not mention it.

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The next two days we spent mopping up the near disaster that had been Beltane. We farewelled guests, as the hotel emptied out around us. And we spent a lot of time figuring out answers to the hundreds of questions we had.

Our best source of answers was the least expected one: Juda.

We all sat around the locals’ table in the bar. Even Hirom came over and sat on the table beside ours to listen, while Juda revealed to us the tragedy that hid behind the facade called Percy Finch.

“I am older than this town,” Juda told us, the first morning we paused to listen to his story. He had warned us the tale was long and would take days to tell. “I remember when the English were fighting the French and New York was a colony of the British. This place was a camping glade, where people came for the fresh waters. I stopped and was caught by the will of what would be this town.”

“That’s not possible. I remember you arriving here,” Trevalyan said.

“You remember this form arriving,” Juda told him. “I have been many forms. I adapted as humans progressed.”

We watched his appearance change. He became a native American, dressed in deer skins, with feathers in his hair. He shifted to an upright British soldier in a red coat

with brass buttons. Then a settler, with a fur hat. A man in a Victorian suit. A Great War soldier, a debonair Roaring Twenties Valentino, a Second World War Marine, a man in a pin-stripe suit with wide shoulders.

It was like watching history flip past us.

“Who are you?” Ghaliya asked. “Which appearance is truly you?”

Juda reverted to the appearance we had thought of as his. “This is the closest to my roots, to my nature,” he said. “I am most comfortable, here. But it was not an appearance I could use, until recently.”

“You’re a genie, then,” Trevalyan said. “How much of the myths is true?”

“Very little of it,” Juda said, with a smile. “Jinn families enjoy great good luck and good fortune throughout their lives. We cannot explain why.”

“Day trading...” Ben murmured and shook his head.

“Yes, indeed,” Juda said. “Because of our good luck, we long ago learned the pleasure of helping others. That is where part of the myths arose. When I came to this place, long before the first buildings were built, the will made itself known to me, and I wanted to help.” A shadow crossed over his features. “And I was trapped, then, for the will did not want to let me go. I was too useful.”

“It drove you mad,” I said.

“It was desperate,” Juda said. “It made a mistake.”

“Killing my mother was a mistake?”

“Yes,” Juda said. “But it did need you here. It would not tell me why. I could not discern its thoughts. I never have. Just its intentions, what it wanted me to do. And sometimes, it spoke through me—especially when the veil was thin.”

“Like last night,” Trevalyan concluded. He looked at Frida, who looked small, sitting in the barrel chair. “Now it has its hooks in Frida?”

“It has learned how weak humans are. It will not make the mistakes it made with me,” Juda said. “It waited to withdraw until Frida was inside.”

“It can empathize?”

“Or reason,” I said. “Perhaps that is enough for now.”

Frida gave me a small smile.

“Tell us about Percy,” I said to Juda. “You knew what he was, even while you were...” I grimaced.

“The flesh and blood body I was born in died,” Juda said. “That released me from the will of this town. It let me evolve into my true nature.”

“You all have to die to become real genies?” Trevalyan said.

“Not all of us evolve,” Juda said. “Perhaps I would not have, except for the danger than I felt enter the town. I have spent too long protecting it and that pulled me back.”

“The danger being Percy Finch?” Harper said. “He was pathetic.”

“He wanted us to think that,” I said. “And it worked.”

“I knew Percy Finch,” Juda said. “I knew him when he was called Lucien Harrow. That was before the first of the great wars began. He lived here.”

“In Haigton?” Olivia breathed. “Oh, dear.”

“In those days, the fae lived in the Otherworld with all of us,” Juda said. “It was before they formed their world and locked themselves away. I was here when Lucien killed one of their newborns.”

I gasped. So did everyone else.

“He murdered a baby?” Ghaliya breathed, her voice strained.

“He protested that it was an accident, but the fury of the fae was cold and ruthless,” Juda said. “The grieving fae cursed Lucien so he would forever feel the weight of his crime. I heard the curse put upon him, and I heard the cost of lifting the curse. Lucien didn’t understand what was happening. He was dazed and sick with guilt. I don’t think he heard any of what was said around him.” Juda paused, then recited: “Only a life blessed by moonlight and kissed by fire, at the hour of wild magic, may unbind what was wrought.”

“What was wrought on the sick bastard, beyond a long life he didn’t deserve?” Broch asked.

“Lucien learned that for himself the same day the curse was cast,” Juda said. “He went home and kissed his wife and patted the cheeks of his children. All of them withered and died.”

I swallowed. Everyone else was silent.

“Then Lucien learned that everything he touched, if he touched it long enough, would

die. He drained the life of everything around him. He made people sick with a brush of his fingertips.”

“Food spoiled and plants died,” I added.

Juda nodded. “Lucien was beyond consolation. He tried to kill himself, but nothing he could do, or coax anyone else into doing to him worked. The fae intended that he live a long life to truly wallow in his misery.

“No one in the town wanted him in it. Even the will of the town wanted him gone. He was turned out to cope as well as he could in the world beyond these borders. Since then, Lucien has lived alone, always moving on because people grew suspicious when sickness followed him into town. He was cast out, stoned, and hung. Everyone turned away from him.”

“Gods...” Broch whispered.

“Why did he come back?” Trevalyan said.

Juda shook his head. “I can only guess this part. I think he learned how to lift the curse and unraveled its meaning. When he learned that, I don’t know. Perhaps years ago. But this year, he learned that a woman called Anna Crackstone had come to Haigton and that her daughter carried an unborn daughter of her own, all of them descendants of a long line of powerful witches and maybe...possibly...he could break the curse. And if he could not, then Anna would most certainly kill him for trying.”

Thank you . The words Percy Finch had mouthed at me before throwing himself on the bonfire.

I swallowed.

“Didn’t he...” Olivia began. She licked her lips. “I’m sorry, but he killed a child. Didn’t he perhaps deserve the curse?”

“It was an accident, he said,” Ben pointed out.

“It was accidental,” Juda said.

“How does someone accidentally kill a child?” Olivia demanded.

“A fae child, and all,” Hirom added.

I looked at Juda and lifted my brow.

“Lucien tried to cast a spell to make himself larger. Stronger. More handsome. He needed the pure life of a child to do it, but I don’t think he intended to take all of that life. And in the end, the spell did not work.”

I looked at Trevalyan. “He was cursed because he was using the spell for personal gain.”

Trevalyan shook his head. “What you do is different.”

“Using a power that no one else has, to make people change what they do...that’s what Jasper’s lawyers have been doing to me. It’s just wrong.”

Trevalyan didn’t flinch. “It’s the way things are. Your power comes at a cost. You’re starting to learn what that is. But only you could stop Percy. And you did, when you had to.”

“It wasn’t me,” I said.

Even Trevalyan looked surprised.

“I pulled the power from somewhere else.” I paused. “From the Finger.”

Trevalyan looked thoughtful. “A seeking spell?”

“I was lost. I needed help. I got it.”

Trevalyan blew out a long breath. “The finger is an ancient power, forgotten by the world. Right, Juda?”

“I did not meddle with it. The will of the town would not let me.”

“Too few understand the real power of the Finger, Anna,” Trevalyan said. “I have not dared tap into it. But you did, and you survived. If you think you were not strong enough to halt Percy, that fact alone proves you wrong.”

I opened my mouth to refute him. Then I closed it again.

“Damn,” Broch said. He pointed to the mantelshelf. “That’s why Percy shook my hand.”

“Because he liked aloe vera?” Harper said, amused.

“We are both undead,” Broch said. “I couldn’t register him. No one could. He couldn’t register me. He was trying to use touch to figure out what I am. The aloe vera did burn his palm. It’s a healing, positive thing.”

“Why didn’t it burn through your hand, bloodsucker?” Harper asked sweetly.

Broch considered. “Because I’m a changed man?”

Everyone laughed.

.

There were more stories to tell. More questions to be answered, but they weren't all answered that day.

I lost my kitchen team, for we were back to only nine people who needed calories. I went back to charging them for the meals, too. On the first morning I prepped breakfast alone, Harper strolled into the kitchen. She silently washed her hands and picked up a knife from the block, stood beside me and chopped the mushrooms, while I finished the onions and garlic.

I had moved on to the eggs and was scrambling them when I felt Harper's gaze on me. I looked up.

"Thanks," she said.

I thought of the way she had stepped between me and Percy. "I think I'm the one who should be saying that."

She considered. "Not from where I stand."

"Okay then. Pass the mushrooms, will you? And could you grind coffee?"

We got on with the meal.

?

I had my own sorting-out to do.

I found Trevalyan in his kitchen, pounding some poor herb into powder. “Tarragon?” I guessed.

“Do you care?”

“Yes.”

He considered me. “Hissop.” His voice wasn’t wavering like usual. It was just grumpy.

I leaned back against the side counter. “I get it now.”

He dropped the pestle into the stone bowl. “Get what?”

“Percy. Lucien Harrow. He’s a perfect case in point. You know that, right?”

Trevalyan pushed his glassed back into place. “Pretend I don’t know.”

“He tried to use power for personal gain. I mean, originally. When he killed the fae child. Everything that happened to him after that was a consequence of that first mistake. All through time, right up until the bonfire, the other night.”

“Guess he learned, huh?” Trevalyan picked up the pestle once more.

“It isn’t the same. That’s what you kept trying to tell me and I didn’t get it until Beltane. I got it mixed up. I kept thinking that using magic against people who don’t have power was cheating. But that’s not the way it works, is it?”

Trevalyan waved the pestle over the bowl, as if he was considering his answer. He looked up. “You tell me.”

I nodded. The perfect teacher response. “It’s the reason why you use the power that makes the difference. You said it was a matter of survival, but everything anyone does comes down to that in the end. You have to look at the higher order. I used a location spell to find the thumbdrive, but that was to help Harper and the town get rid of the feds. And at Beltane, I used...I massively overused the power of the Finger to stop Percy, because he was hurting my daughter and her child.”

Trevalyan drew in a breath. Let it out. The corner of his mouth curled up. Just a little.

“I was lucky,” I said flatly. “I had half a clue about what I was doing, and managed to find a way to fix things. I’m almost certain there were other ways I could have managed it. Other ways you would have dealt with Percy, if it had been you.”

“No one knows if my way would have worked. Yours did. That’s enough.”

“No, it’s not nearly enough. I bumbled around and I jagged it. If something like this happens again, I won’t be as lucky.”

“This is Haighton,” Trevalyan said. “Chances are good something like this will happen again.”

“I don’t want to be blindly groping for options, when it does.”

Trevalyan nodded and used the pestle to grind down more of the hissop. “What do you want to do about that?”

I pushed my hands into my jeans. “I’ve got some time after lunch today. Want to watch me sort leaves?”

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The next day, Ben stepped into the kitchen as I was preparing lunch. He waited out of the way at the end of the worktable, for me to look up and pay proper attention.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hi, yourself.”

“I’m not here to talk.”

“But you’re talking.”

He smiled. “I think...it’s more of a warning.”

“Uh oh.” I put the knife down.

“Axel King.”

My mind leapt guiltily to the moment King had his arms around me, in the parking lot. “What about him?” I said stiffly.

“He likes you. A lot.”

“Liked. He’s gone.”

“He’ll be back.”

I stared at him. “He has no reason to come back.”

“He has just one. You.”

I shivered. “Why are you warning me? You want me to raise the drawbridge or

something?”

“I think if anyone could do that with Haigton, you could,” Ben said. Then he shook his head. “He’s a federal agent, Anna. He’s an investigator. He likes puzzles. He’ll come back here because you’re here, but he’ll say it’s the town that brings him.”

There’s something about this town

“We can’t have human authorities studying us too closely,” Ben added.

“No, we can’t,” I said softly.

“Well...” He swiped at the steel surface.

“I have to get lunch finished.”

“Yes, of course.” He straightened.

“But afterward, I have a little time. Maybe we could risk a cup of Hirom’s coffee and kill off a few stomach cells together?”

Ben smiled.

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On the fifth day after Beltane, Ghaliya went into labor. She was carrying a pot of coffee from the bar to the locals table but stopped with a gasp halfway across the floor. The coffee pot smashed on the floorboards and mingled with the fluids dripping from Ghaliya, as she looked down with astonishment.

“Oh, the baby is on the way!” Olivia squealed, bouncing to her feet. “I’ll get the car!”

She raced out of the bar.

I hurried over to Ghaliya. “Your water broke.” I was smiling. I couldn’t help it.

“I’ll get my bag!” Trevalyan cried, hurrying to the door.

“It’s just water,” Ghaliya told me. “It feels like I’ve peed my pants, but I can’t stop it.”

“See you there!” Broch announced and strode for the side door.

“The contractions will start soon now,” Ben said, coming up to us. He took Ghaliya’s arm. “I have a whole delivery ward just waiting for you.”

“You do?” Ghaliya said, startled.

He nodded. “In the house behind mine. Wim sterilized the whole house—he can smell bacteria.”

I had a feeling Ben was not speaking metaphorically. “Come on, sweetheart. Olivia will drive you around to the house and we’ll help you inside.”

“I’m not an invalid!”

“No, you’re having a baby,” Ben told her.

“A baby!” Juda repeated from the locals’ table. “What can I do?” He lifted his finger. “I’ll go and find out.” And he disappeared.

“I’ve got her, Anna,” Ben told me.

I let Ghaliya go, and Ben guided her to the door.

I did a slow turn on one heel. The entire bar was empty. Even Hirom had disappeared. Only Frida remained, curled up on the corner of the window seat.

I went over to her. "I'm sorry you can't join us. It seems like the whole town will be over at the house."

Frida waved toward the puddle of water and coffee on the floor and mimed mopping motions.

"That would be a good idea," I told her. I watched Olivia's tank of a car roll slowly down the street, carrying Ghaliya to her delivery bed. I'd join them in a minute. First deliveries always took longer.

My gaze fell upon the crossroad, where the soot and ash of the bonfire lingered in a dark, round circle. "The town thought something was coming, and it did come. Lucien Harrow returned. That should be the end of it. Am I right?" I turned my head to look at Frida. "It's just you and me," I added.

Frida studied me for a moment. "It's not the end," she said. "This is just the beginning. I brought you here because you will be needed before the end."

I shivered. "You have to stop hurting people," I whispered. "No one will help you if you do. Not even me."

"If you do not help, then you are all doomed."

Then Frida blinked and shook her head. She hopped up, making mopping motions, and headed for the cleaning closet in the hallway.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:17 am

SAMINA DIANA CRACKSTONE WAS BORN at seven minutes past three in the morning of May 7th, and though slightly premature, was pronounced healthy. While everyone cooed and ahhed over the baby in the incubator that Ben had insisted be used for the first few hours of Samina's life, and while Ghaliya slept, I walked back to the hotel and climbed the stairs to my apartment, stiff, aching and tired.

I seriously considered flopping onto the sofa. Climbing six more steps up to my bedroom and changing into a nightgown seemed like far too much effort.

I sat on the wingchair for a moment, debating upon the bed or the sofa.

"Finally. You took your sweet time, didn't you?"

I swiveled on the chair, then lurched to my feet. The woman standing barefoot at the end of the apartment wore a white, old-fashioned nightgown. Her silvery white hair hung to her waist. She wore a long chain around her neck from which dangled an iron pendant shaped like a stag's head.

I took in the high cheekbones, and the square chin. The green eyes that were just like mine and the strongly arched brows over them.

"Mom?" I whispered.

The third book in the Witchtown Crossing series will be released soon.