



Ensnared by the Stone Freak (Twisted Carnival #2)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: At the Twisted Carnival, the 'Stone Freak' can turn anyone to stone—but when he meets her, she's the one who stops him in his tracks.

CamrynBeing called the 'Ice Queen' stings, but after my ex shattered my trust, keeping my distance feels safer. When my best friend drags me to the Twisted Carnival, I expect a night of cheap thrills—not a collision with the impossible.

The moment I meet the Stone Freak's gaze in the middle of the ring, my world tilts. Heat ignites, shattering the walls I built. Halvard is powerful, mesmerizing... dangerous. But for the first time in forever, I want to take a risk.

Forget contracts and a stalker ex—I'm about to embark on the wildest adventure of my life. And it begins with him.

HalvardMy gift was once a blessing. Now it's a curse. My gaze turns flesh to stone, making me a monster in the eyes of the world. The Twisted Carnival is the only place I belong—until a Seer's prophecy changes everything.

Then I see her. Camryn. My mate. And suddenly, nothing else matters.

I will seduce her. I will claim her. I will show her that a life with a Stone Freak is the greatest adventure of all.

But when her past comes hunting, I'll do more than fight—I'll unleash the beast within. No warlock, no shadow, no force in this world will take her from me.

Let them try.

This standalone novella is part of the multi-author Twisted Carnival series. It features a passionate half-gargoyle, half-basilisk 'Stone Freak,' a pet boar named Hogzy, a lawyer with a stalker, and a guaranteed steamy HEA.

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Camryn

“You can’t flake on us again, Cammy,” my friend said from the doorway, startling me as I pored over the papers on my desk. Jerking my gaze away from the contract’s fine print, I squinted as I realized how dark it had gotten inside my glass-walled corner office. Outside, the city glittered below, while the stars glittered above. Time had slipped away from me again, and yet, the pile of paperwork didn’t seem any smaller. Funny how that worked.

Sighing, I rose and stretched, my neck and shoulders popping as I uncurled from my cramped position. With a hand at the small of my back to rub out the last kinks, I surveyed the work left behind and began to shake my head. “I can’t, Lis. There’s still too much left to do. My dad...” She hissed like a kitten, offended by my words, and prowled into my office in her teetering heels, much like a slinky cat.

“Don’t do that, Cammy. That’s just an excuse not to go outside. You know it is. You’ve got to face the real world at some point.” I shot her a glare, but damn it, she was right. Three years ago, straight out of Yale, I’d accepted a position at my father’s prestigious law firm thinking I’d never stick around. I had dreams, ideals back then. I wanted to help people. Now I was turning into the workaholic my dad was, and he hadn’t even been the one to pressure me into staying.

“You know why, Liz,” I said to her and hid a wince when those words came out cool and sharp. She was not ruffled by that, but that kind of patience wouldn’t last long. At some point, I’d drive away even my oldest friend. We were simply too different—polar opposites. Case in point: she slunk around the edge of my desk in a seductive manner, then perched against the mahogany slab with perfect poise. I could

never slink around like that, especially not in heels as tall as the ones she wore.

“You know what they call you behind your back, don’t you? I heard you shot down Greg in accounting this afternoon. It was brutal.” She was laughing as she said it, her dramatically made-up eyes twinkling with amusement. I knew why: Greg was a buffoon and an idiot, and he had deserved what was coming to him. But that did not change the fact that it was the third time this week I’d turned down a date. I had not had a date in months—not since... I did not want to think about the reason, and that was why my tone was even sharper when I demanded an answer.

“Ice Queen,” she responded just as sharply, “and don’t turn that on me. You know you’re hiding, running away. You can’t keep doing this.” She twirled a lock of her blonde hair between her fingers and narrowed her eyes at me. I knew she was trying to figure out if that name hurt my feelings, but I just felt numb. How did you respond to that? Did it even matter? It felt like there was a block of stone inside my chest these days anyway—not a heart. What good was a heart when it tricked you?

“How original,” I snarked, which made my friend laugh. She caught my wrist and drew me away from my desk. Lis made those few steps look like dancing, shimmying across the carpet as if we were already at a party. In contrast, I felt like a block of stone—dead weight. Boring, incapable of change, incapable of opening my heart and loving someone.

“Come on, there’s a carnival in town. It’s supposed to be pretty spooky! Everyone is talking about it.” When Lis said “everyone,” she really meant it. That woman knew all the high-flyers, all the debutantes—every rich guy in town had her number. She was the most connected person I knew. She was, in fact, my main source for turning down dates, as she’d been trying to set me up for months.

I gave her a suspicious look, half-expecting her to have turned our standard Thursday night drinks into an ambush date. She was capable of that kind of subterfuge—I

really wouldn't put it past her. But I wasn't ready to trust a guy again; I didn't think I ever would be. I clearly wasn't built right for a relationship. No heart. No warmth. Hah. The office gossips had no idea how close they came with that nickname to the truth: Ice Queen.

Lis was a good friend—the best. She proved that when she slipped her arm through mine and kept urging me out of my office with gentle pressure. “Look, Thorn is not going to be there, okay? It's totally not his scene. So you're safe. It's a circus show and a traveling carnival—just some harmless fun between the two of us. Kay? Come on, Cammy! I've been dying to go there! Do it for me?” When she batted her long lashes at me, there was no way I could say no. A circus show did sound fun. If only I'd truly known what I'd just agreed to. My life was about to change. But was it destiny? Fate? Or was it something else—something sinister—that drew us to this carnival?

Halvard

“You need to get laid,” Freddy jeered at me from where he stood in front of the mirrors, checking his costume. His bare arms were covered in tattoos, the ink shimmering on his skin. They writhed, appearing to move when seen from the corner of your eye, and it always made me slightly uncomfortable to look at him. His artwork was never the same. It wasn't right. But then, this was the Twisted Carnival, and nothing was ever right here.

Raising my hand, I flipped him the bird without answering. It was the same old refrain anyway. Many of the guys here were my friends—brothers, if you will. We took care of our own, had each other's backs, and we always would. This place was home, for better or worse, and the outside world had nothing to do with us. They came for a night, for an afternoon, to get their kicks, to be thrilled, wowed, or scared.

To see things they knew could not exist but brush them off as careful illusions or tricks.

But we did not dabble in illusions and trickery; we were the real deal. That created a bond—secrets had a way of doing that. Ever since my particular skill set had gotten twisted up, tangled, and warped, all my friends had been trying to get me back on the market. “Just for a fling,” they’d say. “You don’t have to take off your sunglasses; they’ll just think it’s part of the mystery.” I’d been there, I’d done that. Contrary to what they seemed to think, I was no saint. It didn’t make me feel any less lonely. In fact, it made me feel hollow inside.

“Ignore Freddy,” Sally said in her creaking voice. The old fortune teller always had mischief on her mind and a twinkle in her eye. She was supposed to be outside, manning her booth as droves of visitors arrived on the carnival grounds. Her scarves jingled when she sidled closer to me, the many gold chains around her neck hidden but heard. “Tonight is the night. Remember that. A gaze is all it takes.” And with those mysterious words delivered, she was off, slipping through the throng of showmen and women preparing for tonight’s show.

Sally had a way of vanishing in crowds like that; my eyes lost track of her almost as soon as she stepped around the Fire Breather in her burlesque-style outfit. I thought I caught a glimpse of her on the other side of Boris, our Strongman, but I could just as easily have imagined it. Now I had a prophecy hanging over my head—a vague one. That did not help me feel less tense about tonight’s performance. Funny how a year made such a difference. Once, I’d lived for a packed tent and a huge crowd, but now the fear kept me from enjoying what I’d once loved.

A gaze is all it takes, Sally had said. Didn’t I know it. One look from me, and anyone who looked back turned to stone. Thankfully, it only lasted a minute, but it was not a fun minute. Some people found it terrifying to be frozen in place like that—unable to move or speak, unable to feel the beat of their heart or the breath in their lungs. A

gaze was all it took? That was nothing new at all. It was a stupid prediction. It wasn't even a prediction, so why had she said it like it was?

“Groink?” There was a nudge against my leather-clad thigh, followed by a bump strong enough to nearly knock me over. I laughed, the strange prophecy momentarily forgotten at the rough greeting from my favorite companion. Hogzy always made people think he was part of one of our many acts, but other than entertaining kids on the carnival grounds when he felt like it, he deftly avoided the limelight.

“I don't have any apples on me,” I told him, but he nosed my pocket anyway, making a mournful noise. He had a fantastic nose, so I knew he knew I did not have his favorite treat. This was an act designed to take my mind off the pre-performance jitters. Scratching him behind his tufted ears, I heard a satisfied noise from him before he threw himself onto his side and rolled to expose his fat belly. I got the message and squatted down to give him a good petting. It helped, and by the time I had to step out into the big ring, I was completely relaxed. The words Sally the Seer had said to me were all but forgotten.

So when I locked eyes with the pretty brunette in the first row, I did not expect her gaze to hit me in the gut like a punch. My sunglasses shielded her from the effects of that look, but she jolted in her seat. A gaze was all it took. Was this what Sally had been talking about?

The woman was dressed in a business suit with a crisp white shirt beneath it. Golden hoops gleamed from her ears, and freckles dotted her nose. She elbowed her friend, a blonde wearing a slinky red dress more appropriate for a nightclub than the big top. Unless, of course, she expected to be in the ring. My mind whirled, and I locked gazes again with the freckled brunette. Tonight was the night. Would my curse be broken? Would I finally stop turning people to stone? Only one way to find out. I had to start the show.

Stepping from the shadows and into the light, I raised my arms and began.

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Camryn

The field in which the carnival was set up was slightly damp and soft, causing my heels to sink into the surface with each step I took. Even Lis struggled to look graceful as we walked from her German sports car to the entrance of the grounds. The ticket booth sat beside a pair of imposing gates, their metal twisted and warped, with the spikes at the top reaching to ward the bright, starry sky.

My eye was instantly drawn to a macabre shape sitting atop the booth — a gargoyle, of all things. The type of statue that wouldn't seem out of place on the side of a church: angry, scowling features; hunched forward on its legs; brawny shoulders exposed. It was a "he," there was no doubt, and I felt drawn to him — which was ridiculous because he was a statue. A statue that had been decorated with a pair of sunglasses perched on his rugged nose. He wasn't looking my way but had his head angled toward the forest in the distance.

I elbowed Lis to point him out to her, but she was staring through the gnarled gate, completely entranced. The big top loomed in the distance, once striped in white and yellow, but the colors had long since faded. More tents with a tattered appearance dotted the field, and rides sat between them that looked rusty rather than inviting. "Lis, look!" I said. But when she finally glanced up to where I was pointing, there was nothing to see.

The ticket booth was a movable trailer with side panels that opened and a simple flat roof. There was no sign of the big, macabre shape of the gargoyle. I had to have imagined it, but I couldn't shake the feeling that he was real — very real — and it made my heart pound in my chest to think about it.

Once we bought our tickets and entered the grounds, I was caught in a vague sense of unease. Something was wrong; something was different here. Shadows were where they shouldn't be, and things were in too much disrepair to make sense. And yet... a huge crowd had gathered tonight, throngs of people clustering around each attraction. A line snaked outside of a tent that promised fortunes read by a Madam Sally. There was a show featuring a bearded lady and other strange sights to draw the eye. A merry-go-round with chipped, nightmarish-looking horses played music that was just a tad too slow to sound cheerful.

In the distance, a Ferris wheel rose behind the big top, its carts swaying in the wind as it spun gently. The sight of that giant metal wheel, rusted and worn, made my stomach shrink. There was no way that thing was safe. Why were people tempting fate by getting on it? Then I caught the look on Lis's face and realized she was as entranced as the rest of the crowd. Her eyes were huge, her pupils dilated, and she kept twisting her head to catch every sight, like she couldn't stand to miss a thing.

"Come on," I said, drawing my friend to the side when a huge pet pig suddenly trundled by. He was black, with rough, coarse fur and a set of very impressive tusks. Did pigs even have tusks, or was that more of a boar thing? I wasn't sure, but he had to be tame because he wore a leather collar around his huge neck, decorated with metal spikes. "Let's get to the big top now so we can get good seats." And so I could prevent my entranced friend from suggesting we get on any of the derelict-looking rides.

The tent's interior made me forget how dark and shabby everything outside had seemed. We'd gone from horrorshow to circus by ducking through the large canvas flaps. Lights hung from the tall poles that held up the tent roof, aimed toward the ring at the center. Already, people had begun to file in, but there were still plenty of good seats. It wasn't a surprise when Lis squealed with excitement and began pulling me to seats in the front row. "What if they ask for volunteers?" I hissed at her, but that was no deterrent; it was only fuel for her eagerness.

The seats were slightly uncomfortable when we sat down, the lights still bright and the crowd murmuring with excitement. Across from us sat the entrance to the ring where the performers would enter , giving us the perfect view. I had to crane my head to look at the masts w h ere a trapeze dangled, but there wasn't so much as a hint of safety nets anywhere. Then my gaze landed on a shadowy shape across the ring, moving from one side to the other before ducking into the back where the performers were getting ready. My skin broke out in goosebumps , and a shiver shot down my spine.

It was a woman with gaunt features and a rail-thin body, tall enough to make me feel as if she w ere towering over me, even from this distance. Wild hair , streaked with silver, framed her sharp features . Though I could not see her eye color from so far away, it was something different — impossible. Like everything else in this place. Even the way shadows clung to her shimmering black robes felt wrong. Blood-red light glinted at the tips of her fingers, which reminded me far too much of claws as she ducked through the flaps and vanished into the tent's shadowy depths.

“Did you see her?” I asked Lis, but my friend only looked confused when I described the gaunt, shadowy figure. I wanted to put words to her — spider, black widow, sorceress — but that was too fanciful for my normally spreadsheet - and contract - focused mind. Twisting my head, I wondered if it was too late to get up and leave ; I had a bad feeling about this place. And then the lights went out , and the crowd hushed. I felt trapped in place, though this should have been a fun night out. Why did everyone around me act like this was the greatest thing since sliced bread? This was the creepiest place I'd ever seen — didn't they sense the danger?

The crowd was transfixed even before a voice echoed through the dark—the ringmaster welcomed us to the Twisted Carnival of freaks and magic, featuring all the things that go bump in the night. I was as entranced as everyone else now, my eyes locked on the light glowing at the center of the ring. Wasn't there usually a jaunty man with a top hat? Where was he? Then, the flaps at the back opened, and the first

act began. I forgot all about wanting to leave at that point—who would want to leave when the show opened with a real freaking lion? I had never been this close to a beast like that, and he was magnificent, as was the blonde-haired woman who guided him through his tricks.

Three acts later, everything felt like a blur, and my mouth was dry because I'd forgotten to close it half the time in amazement. Lis was right, after all. This show was insane — scary, thrilling, amazing, and absolutely worth my money and time. I never wanted to leave. I wanted to figure out all the tricks — all the magic that shouldn't be. How did that trapeze artist look like she was flying? How could the fire breather make her flames turn blue? Everything was magical, bizarre, mind-bending.

Then he entered the ring : a man dressed in leather pants and boots and nothing else, his muscled chest gleaming beneath the colored spotlights. He looked like he could give the strongman a run for his money while maintaining the sleek composure of the incredible athletes from the trapeze act. Everything about him exuded strength, steadiness, and firmness—like a rock. The firm angle of his chin reminded me of granite ; his black hair with bluish hints brought to mind jet. I was willing to bet his eyes would gleam like tiger's eye, sapphires, or maybe even emeralds, but they were hidden behind a pair of sleek shades.

With great flair, they strapped him to a spinning, rotating wheel, and it made my stomach twist, too. Watching him get tied up with leather straps shouldn't have looked as sexy as it did, but it really did. The bands around his biceps only accentuated how big they were. That strap around his chest made me want to lean in close to admire his heavy pectorals, trace a path down his ridged abs, and follow the trail of fine black hair that led into his pants. Okay, he was totally hot and possibly the first person in months to wake up my slumbering libido. I guess that was a good sign, but I wasn't certain. This was hardly the time or place to feel attracted to anyone. Thorn had ruined me for anyone new anyway ; I had sworn off dating altogether.

“Who said anything about dating?” Lis whispered under her breath in response to my thoughts. For a brief, insane moment, I thought she’d read my mind, but I must have said it out loud. “You can stare at the eye candy, can’t you? He’s hot. And if he asks for your number...” I knew she had to be wagging her eyebrows at me, but it was too dark in the audience to see.

My eyes didn’t want to leave the sight of the daring hunk strapped to that wheel anyway. A knife thrower was lining up in front of him, a knife held delicately between her two fingers as she took aim. She bounced on her toes, her tight black curls with colorful highlights swaying around her shoulders. I held my breath as the knife winged through the air and loudly clattered against the spinning wheel. Not only had I held my breath, but I’d also squeezed my eyes shut, and when I blinked them open, I expected to see either blood or that knife embedded in the wooden wheel.

It wasn’t anywhere I expected it to be. Instead, it lay in the sand beneath the slowly spinning, hunk - decorated wheel. The second knife flew before I could brace myself, but I saw it this time — saw it but was certain I was mistaken. Just before the knife struck, the bound man turned gray as rock and — bam — the knife struck him dead center in the chest, then clattered harmlessly to the ground. He jeered at the knife - wielding lady, “Is that all you’ve got, Nakusha? I didn’t even feel it! Come on, throw harder!” His voice was a heavy bass with a deep rumble, like gravel rolling down a slope. It evoked images of rockslides and avalanches, of something deep and primordial, elemental.

His partner in the ring growled bloodthirsty threats that made the audience laugh and point, surprised at so much venom coming from a pint - sized woman with childlike features. I only had eyes for him, my gaze locked on his dark sunglasses, wishing I could see beneath them. What color were his eyes? Was it any of the colors I’d guessed? I was about to have my answer, but I wasn’t ready for it.

After several more daring knife throws that should have hurt him but bounced harmlessly off his skin, he called for a volunteer to check the knives and prove they were real. The crowd held its breath as people stuck up their arms and waved, hoping to be picked. Lis bumped my shoulder, urging me to volunteer, but I clamped my hands beneath my armpits and refused. “There, the lovely lady with the freckles and the hair like fine chocolate , ” t hat deep, husky voice drawled, and his bloodthirsty knife - throwing assistant paraded my way with a feral grin on her pixie-like features.

“This won’t hurt a bit,” she assured me as she took my hand and drew me from my seat. “Not at all,” she added , but I didn’t believe her for a moment. She brought me to the table where her knives were lined up and bade me check them. They were real, as I knew they’d be. Then she told me to test all the knives that lay at the bottom of the still - slowly - rotating wheel with the impervious hunk strapped to it.

My face was on fire as I knelt in the sand ; all eyes were on me, and I hated that. It made me feel like I was doing something wrong, like I was about to trip over my own feet and embarrass myself. Then there was the shirtless, leather - wearing man spinning right in front of me, my face at crotch height. Oh god — his grin as his head dipped low was devastating. How did his glasses stay on during this? My belly ached with a desire that had no place in this moment. Tension filled my body as I fumbled with the knives in the sand.

One of the razor - sharp and very real blades nicked my finger, and with a gasp , I held it up for the audience. My eyes slipped from the spinning man’s far - too - attractive chest to the audience. “Real! I cut myself!” I said, my voice carrying surprisingly well from the center of the ring. I shot to my feet like the sand was on fire, eager to get out of there. Somehow, I managed to rise right as the knife thrower’s target came back to upright , too. It felt like our gazes collided, but his were still veiled by the black - tinted glasses.

I froze, ensnared without knowing why, trapped in place. He hissed between his

teeth, barking at his assistant to untie him. He seemed upset, maybe even angry with the assistant , but I couldn't make my feet move. As soon as his hand was free, I knew he'd do something I truly wouldn't be able to escape. And yet, I still didn't move.

His hand was warm and rough when it closed around my wrist . Then he raised it to his mouth , and warmth closed around my sore finger. My belly swooped, then dropped, my abdomen clenching tightly. It was the closest I'd ever come to orgasming from a single touch — in front of an audience , no less. The tilt of his mouth as he released my finger told me he knew exactly what he'd done. Still , I did not walk away. I should have , but I was caught in his spell now, and I didn't want to leave.

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Halvard

It was her. Damn it, Sally was right. How could she be right? I didn't deserve this. I was cursed; my talents had turned sour years ago, weighing me down rather than empowering me. I could not have a woman—I did not deserve a mate—when every minute in my presence risked turning her to stone. She had already proven to be particularly sensitive to my gaze. I had turned her to stone even i my tinted, enchanted lenses. She had returned to flesh and blood quickly, but I had seen the moment she froze in place.

Then I'd done the stupidest thing I might have ever done in my entire life: succumb ed to temptation. She had pricked her finger on one of Nakusha's knives, right there at the bottom of the knife - throwing wheel. I'd grabbed her slender wrist by instinct and brought that bloody finger to my mouth. Our fates were sealed now ; my beastly side had her taste, her scent. I could never let her go, and when I risked one last look in to her wide brown eyes, I knew she didn't want me to.

I stepped away from the knife - throwing wheel, put ting that part of my act behind me as though it hadn't happened. I was in control now, direct ing my still - stunned woman to the center of the ring and announc ing to the crowd what I was going to do next. There was no way I could bring myself to turn her to stone again ; that was so inherently wrong that I did n' t want to risk it. Once was enough, and I count ed myself lucky that she did n' t look terrified but stunned and enthralled instead. "Another volunteer ! One who isn't afraid of a little magic . I need a strong man who thinks he can resist the power of my gaze. Who here thinks he can avert my magic and refuse to turn to stone?"

As always, there were plenty of eager men willing to test their mettle — men who thought they saw through the tricks of this carnival, who thought they could resist the magic and shadow that clung to everything like a second skin. I picked three specimens: men from all walks of life. A bodybuilder, because it always looked extra dramatic when even someone as strong as that could not lift so much as a finger. A man in a suit, because everyone liked to see the rich humiliated. Lastly, I picked an average Joe to make sure that every single man in that audience could identify with what they were about to see.

My woman, with her lovely freckles, stood next to me. A flush of red colored her cheeks, her knees shook, and I had to keep hold of her slender wrist or she'd bolt. I savored the silkiness of her skin and the rapid pounding of her pulse beneath my thumb as I made these men line up in front of me. Then it was time for the final part of my act. I braced myself because this was always the unpleasant part — unpleasant only because I could no longer control it the way I used to. "Look into my eyes and resist my magic," I drawled dramatically. Then I lowered my ensorcelled sunglasses and stared each male in the eye, one by one. "My lovely assistant will now try to move each of them. Go on," I said to my woman, and finally, I let my fingers slip from her wrist.

She was beginning to turn pale rather than flushed pink from her awkwardness in the spotlight. Still, she performed her task exactly as she should, touching each man by the arm and trying to move them. When that didn't work, I suggested our strong man give it a go. Boris lumbered out of the back to give the stone-turned men a good but very useless shake. My ability to freeze them had given each male a gray cast to their skin, but their eyes were wide and panicked in their faces. They saw and heard everything, but they could neither breathe nor feel the pounding of their hearts. In this state, they did neither — it was a form of suspended animation.

Terror wafted from their stone shapes, thick tendrils curling into the air. It was a power source for the Carnival; everything here fed on that kind of fear. Even I felt

the jolt of it as it thrummed through the air between us. Oddly enough, my beautiful brunette was beginning to look calmer by the minute , as if she were getting used to being at my side — to being in the spotlight with me.

“Come on, anyone else think they can move these men — these statues of mine? Or shall I release them from my grasp?” I asked the crowd. Several young adults leaped eagerly into the ring at that challenge, but they soon admitted defeat with laughter and slaps on the shoulders. By the time they had returned to their seats, the effects of my gaze finally began to wear off, and first one , then the other spluttered back to life and bolted from the ring as if the hounds of hell were on their heels.

That was my cue to let my woman go, but I couldn't let her slip from my grasp without so much as knowing her name. “A round of applause for my volunteers,” I called to the crowd, and they supplied it eagerly—thrilled to have been entertained, and glad to laugh at the fear I'd instilled in my victims. I used the cover of that noise to glance at her from the corner of my eye. “What's your name, darling?” I asked. She did not reply, only staring at me with wide eyes and her pink mouth slightly open. “Why don't you meet me at the side entrance, and I'll show you around? Would you like that? I am Halvard, at your service.” I dipped into a bow, as much for the audience as for her, but she slipped from my grasp like water.

I watched her go with regret in my heart, but I knew this wouldn't be the last I'd see of her. I had tasted her blood ; that was enough to tie us together. All I had to do to find her was close my eyes and search for her. I did just that, still standing in the ring as the ringmaster's disembodied voice shouted accolades and announced the next act. Dipping into a bow by instinct, my focus was entirely on the pull I felt inside my chest.

Camryn

I sank low in my seat the moment I reached it, my face on fire and my heart pounding. Thrilled, excited, wowed by these acts? Yeah, no kidding. I was all of those things — but meeting Halvard the Stone Freak was in a league all its own. Not only was his act pretty cool (it really had felt like he'd turned people to stone somehow), but he was also potently hot. And he'd asked me to come see him, to meet him at the side gate for a private tour. If Lis knew, she'd make me go, so I was going to keep my mouth shut and make up my mind in private first.

Did I want to see him again? Did I want to feel that kind of crazy desire at first sight? I had done that once, and it hadn't turned out so great for me. The attraction to Thorne had soured so fast when we'd proven to be wholly incompatible in virtually every way. Fear crawled up my spine, and it had nothing to do with the creepy act an illusionist was putting on right now. Remembering Thorne always made me feel that way — sick to my stomach, ashamed. Lis didn't know how bad it was — just that we'd broken up, that he was an ass, and that I didn't want to date.

Considering my past experience, my risk-averse nature wanted to tell me to stay the hell away from Halvard. He was a Stone Freak in a carnival, a traveling performer who would leave as soon as the carnival left. There was no future in a relationship with a man like that. My mind latched onto that : no future. It was quick, harmless, just fun. Maybe that was exactly what I needed — a rebound guy, a stranger to shake things up. I was certain that was a plan Lis would approve of.

“So,” my friend whispered, leaning close to make herself heard over the sounds of the act and the audience, “ did that sexy man talk to you ? Did he say anything? You sure got close. Come on! Spill the beans, I'm dying here...” It was a miracle she'd lasted this long without asking, as she'd practically been bouncing in her seat the entire time. Patience was not a virtue Lis had in spades, and it made me smile, the weird fog of fear falling away.

“Yeah, he invited me to go see him after the show... Private tour...” I said. My friend

squealed, loud enough to make several people around us hush us with angry stares. Thankfully , the illusionist ignored us, though I was certain it had disrupted his concentration. “Yes, I am going , ” I agreed . W hen Lis opened her mouth, it tilted into a very satisfied grin instead —w ide and smug , like the Cheshire C at.

“Good,” was all she said. I had a feeling it wasn’t going to be good ; it was going to be spectacular.

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Camryn

Lis had her arm looped through mine and was steering me through the busy crowd with a firm grip. I knew what she was up to—she did not want me to lose my nerve and back out. She might be right about the urge; it was very hard to keep going and not start voicing all the reasons why this was a bad idea. The stack of paperwork on my desk was starting to look tempting, and that, more than anything, made me bite my lip and keep walking. I was not letting that asshole turn me into my father, the workaholic.

The carnival grounds were even more crowded than before, though most of the visitors now were of the adult variety. Darkness clung to everything, but torches, neon lights, and candles gave it a mysterious ambiance. It was starting to look less spooky and more cozy to me, but maybe that was just me getting used to the place.

We stepped around a hand - painted wagon that boldly proclaimed it self to be the apothecary. Herbs, jars of spices, and all kinds of strange , magical - looking items were displayed. Scented candles with strange names were being sold by the bushel. I nearly bumped into a man hurrying off while surreptitiously tucking a bag of herbs labeled “aphrodisiac” into his pocket. That made my nerves vanish, and I was smiling, telling Lis about it, when I saw him.

He stepped out from between two attractions : the strong man on a small stage showing off and a tent selling concessions. The scent of corn dogs, caramel, and spun sugar filled the air —s cents so incongruous with him that my brain struggled for a long moment to figure out if he was real or not. “Ah, fuck,” Lis exclaimed. “Why is he here?”

I knew why. There was only one reason Thorne would deign to step onto a muddy field and mingle with the common folk here to be thrilled: me. That might sound conceited — and considering he'd been so... negative throughout our brief time dating — surprising too. But it was the truth : Thorne did not want to let me move on . He did not want me to forget our time together.

Blind panic struck me when Lis confirmed that he wasn't a figment of my overzealous imagination. The crowd was huge, but Thorne stood out—tall and commanding. As he started walking toward us, his eyes locked on my face, and everyone scurried out of his path. They slipped away like water, fearing his wrath without even knowing why. He was simply that intimidating.

“You go that way. I'll distract him,” Lis said with a snarl, her beautiful face contorted in to a killing look. I was very glad I was n' t on the receiving end of her glare, but I also knew it wasn't enough to do more than delay Thorne. With a nod, I ducked around a wide-shouldered man in a long black coat, nearly tripped over a tent rope, and then I was off. My low heels made running on the muddy ground difficult , as did the crowd, but all that mattered was getting out of Thorne's sight. After that, I needed to find a good hiding place and hope he gave up before I did. I ducked into a narrow passage between two tents and found myself behind the main thoroughfare , standing next to the sickly yellow - and - white-striped side of the big top once again. “ Side entrance,” my brain yelled at me, and I sprinted along the tent, hoping I could find it.

A stack of barrels and crates blocked my circuitous path around the tent, and I was forced to turn back toward the crowd, stepping around a tent featuring a BB gun shooting game. The bang and pop from the players, along with their cheers as they struck their targets, drowned out every other sound in the vicinity. Confused and a little disoriented, I spun in place and tried to figure out which way I should go. Everything looked the same now—glaring lights, flames, so many faces, and impossibly long shadows.

Shouting drew my attention, yanking my eyes away from the big top to the crowded carnival. The carnival - goers parted like the R ed S ea , expos ing Thorne as he strode down the path in my direction. How he'd known which way to go, I wasn't sure, but there was no mistaking his purpose. He saw me ; he knew exactly where I was. Lis was the on e shouting, hanging from his arm and oblivious to the stares of the crowd. "Stop , you bastard ! L eave her alone! She doesn't want to see you!" Ah, my friend was such a brave, loyal soul.

"Seems we're not the only show in town, are we?" a low male voice drawled from nearby. My eyes jerked away from the distressing approach of my ex and landed on the man who'd suddenly popped up at my side. He wore leather pants and a leather jacket over his otherwise bare chest. Sunglasses perched on his straight nose, silky black hair sl ic ked back in to a neat style , and a smirk curled his lush mouth — Halvard the Stone Freak; the very man I'd been trying to meet. Except Lis and I had gotten a little turned around while trying to find the big top's side entrance.

"He's here for me," I said to him, surprising myself with how candidly I spoke. Only Lis knew of my issues with my ex — and she only knew the bare minimum — but I was willing to ask this total and bizarre stranger for help. That's how dire it was. "I was coming to see you, I swear. Right now , I'd settle for a quick getaway to the exit..." I glanced from Halvard's sexy, stubborn chin and intriguing smirk back to Thorne and winced when I realized he was getting closer. Lis had given up on physically holding him back, but she was trying to incite the carnival - goers to stop him, sadly to no avail.

"I'll do you one better, darling," my leather - clad, sunglasses - wearing companion said. His voice sounded anything but amused now — it sounded deadly, sinister. A shiver shot down my spine that had nothing to do with fear and everything to do with attraction. I was nuts. Halvard stuck his fingers between his teeth and whistled, the sound loud and shocking as it cut through the noise of the carnival. He jerked his chin toward Thorne once the sound died out, but if it was a signal to others, I could not tell

to whom.

A noisy snuffle came from behind me . “Groink?!” Something brushed past my leg, and I sidestepped reflexively , colliding with my handsome Stone Freak. Halvard immediately slid his arm around my middle and hauled me closer, nearly lifting my heels out of the muddy grass. A huge, dark brown , and extremely hairy pig trundled past me on thick, stumpy legs. A spiked leather collar around its thick neck made it clear it was someone’s pet.

“A whole basket of apples, Hogzy. How does that sound? Seems like a fair deal for some mayhem. You like mayhem.” Halvard’s words made the pig —or rather, the hog — snort again, and then it charged. Shockingly fast for such a big, chunky animal , it raced straight at Thorne. Lis barely had enough time to get out of the way, but Thorne wasn’t as fortunate. The animal’s two sharp tusks narrowly missed him , but he went sprawling backward into the mud, ruining his expensive suit. It was immensely satisfying to watch him stuck in the muck he so despised.

“Come on, this way, darling,” my impromptu hero said at the same time, spinning us around and briskly starting to walk. I felt like I was floating above the muddy grass rather than being stuck in it with every step. My heels skimmed the ground , my weight supported by that snug arm looped around my waist. I should have felt trapped — this man made it seem like we were strolling, when really, he was practically carrying me wherever he wanted me to go. It didn’t even cross my mind to protest ; all I felt was light and relieved.

He ducked us around the side of a tent, out of the carnival - goers’ paths , and then around several trailers and old - fashioned traveling wagons. There was a gleaming silver Airstream with several conspicuous dents along one side that he approached. It was dark inside, but fairy lights had been strung along the outside , glittering like the rest of the Twisted Carnival. Glittering but also casting shade, I noticed. Here, in the camp’s private area, where the performers lived, the shadows were even more

pronounced.

“Welcome to my home,” Halvard said as he swung open the door to the Airstream and flicked on the lights. It was still fairly dark, as though the lights had trouble fighting the shadows even inside what had to be my Stone Freak’s haven. A bed was against one wall, cozy and surprisingly big. There was no sign of a kitchen area, but a kettle on a hot plate sat on a table. Everywhere I looked, I saw evidence of his profession: a set of shimmering juggling balls on a table, dozens of sharp knives next to them. Masks, costumes, and a whole lot of leather spilled out of an open closet. But there was also a long shelf filled with jars of herbs, carefully labeled by hand in neat block letters, not herbs — teas.

“Thank you for the rescue back there...” I said, hesitating just inside the door, which Halvard had left open, possibly to give me a feeling of safety. Really, all it did was let the cold and slightly humid night air in, and I was beginning to feel it.

Halvard had gone straight for the hotplate and was making tea with quick, experienced hands—a ritual he’d performed a million times. It was a domestic sight that looked impossible when performed by a dark-haired man wearing all black leather. And yet, he was still wearing sunglasses, even though we were inside and it was quite dark.

I opened my mouth to ask him why when my eyes caught on the windows that dotted the traveling home’s interior. There weren’t many, and they were small, but each was covered from the inside with some kind of shimmering black foil. There was no way to look out of them, and I had the distinct feeling that looking in was just as impossible. Why had he done that?

“I still don’t know your name, darling. I think I deserve to know your name, don’t you?” my host drawled, twisting around to look at me through his dark glasses. He propped himself against the side table, posing in a long, dark line of sinew and

muscle. His chest was bare and visible through the open front of his leather jacket, and my mouth went dry as I stared at his abs rather than his face.

“It’s Camryn Mayfield,” I said by rote. “Cam or Cammy to my friends.” I didn’t know why I added that ; it wasn’t like anyone but Lis called me Cammy. Over the past year, I’d sort of drifted away from all my other friends — not that I’d been particularly close to anyone. Except Lis , of course, but she was the only one who truly understood my relationship with my father, and I the one she had with hers.

“Nice to meet you, Cammy,” Halvard said, and I shivered at the sound of my name coming from his lips. He was too sexy, and that voice sounded like sin. He said my name the way a lover might in bed, twisting my insides with desire and nerves. Once upon a time, I had thought Thorne was potent, but Halvard was in a league of his own.

He straightened from the side table with his tea setup and prowled closer. Steam was beginning to waft from the kettle behind him, but he paid it no heed. “So, Cammy, tell me — why was that man after you? If I’m going to be protecting you, I’d like to know why.” His question made my mouth go dry. I did not want to talk about Thorne to anyone, least of all this sexy - as - sin man —this man I’d decided could possibly be my first foray into passion again. If I was even capable of that kind of thing . I felt it in my belly when I looked at him, so I was hopeful for the first time in months. The first stirrings that told me Thorne was wrong.

I twisted my head to look out the open door and saw nothing but shadows and the glittering lights of the carnival beyond the nearest row of mobile homes. Then I leaned out and caught the door handle, purposely pulling it shut , enclosing us inside the warm but slightly gloomy interior of Halvard’s home. “I don’t want to talk about Thorne,” I said to my companion. “I want to learn more about you.” That was a cliché pickup line I’d had turned on me more than once, but I meant it . I really did want to know more about him. I wanted to know everything, because he was the most

interesting person I'd ever met.

Halvard angled his face toward the closed door, taking it in and analyzing what I meant by doing so. His mouth twisted into a slightly sinister smile again, but I didn't feel scared. If anything, I felt safer now that the door was closed and I knew nobody could look inside. I'd been terrified back in the ring, kneeling at his feet as he spun and spun in gentle, languid rotations —s careed out of my mind when I'd pricked my finger and he'd sucked the wounded digit with his warm, sinful mouth. But now, I was all out of fear. That confrontation with Thorne had drained the last of it. All that remained was the simmering, molten desire I felt for this stranger.

He stepped closer, his body heat crashing against my chilled skin. A big man with the body of an athlete, he towered over me, but that only made me feel sheltered. I wanted him even closer, so I reached out and grabbed the lapels of his jacket. "You feel it?" I asked, my voice little more than a breathy whisper. When he nodded, I raised myself on my toes, and he dipped down. Our mouths met in the middle — a meeting of body and soul that felt profound, somehow.

The kiss went from a fervent meeting to a clashing of wills, of fire and passion. His arm came around my middle, yanking me close, lifting me. I felt the door press against my back, the cool metal chilling me through my jacket, while he was an inferno against my front. His cock pressed shamelessly against my belly, a steel bar contained by his leather pants. It was so blatant, so wild, that all I could do was surrender — cling to him and let him take. I loved it; my body loved it. It sang for him.

He was the one who broke the kiss, long after the kettle had begun whistling with a pure, high note. It was then that I saw he still wore those dark glasses, and before I could stop myself, I reached up and impulsively pulled them from his face. I wanted to know the color of his eyes so badly that I did not stop to ask, did not stop to consider the consequences.

For a long second , we stared into each other ' s eyes. His were as black as jet, as coal, shimmering like mirrors. They held me ensnared, trapped in his gaze, and I didn't want to move — I just wanted to keep staring , as if his eyes were magnets to mine, drawing me in, and all I wanted was to cling there. To s ee into his soul, to let him see into mine, and to spill all my deepest , darkest fears and secrets. I had never felt that way before — so unguarded, yet so fearless — and it made me feel like I was flying.

Then Halvard snapped his eyes shut with a growl, his entire body jerking backward, away from me. “Ah, curse it! Cammy, what did you do? ! ” I stared after him , wide - eyed, as he fumbled , eyes scrunched shut , past his open, spilling wardrobe to a cabinet with drawers. Blindly, he began to search for something, his hands knocking over a small lockbox and a bowl filled with glittering gemstones.

He was making such a ruckus that he didn't hear my heels clicking on the wooden floorboards. “What are you looking for? Can I help?” I asked, sounding contrite. Guilt twisted in my chest because I'd caused this with my impulsive actions. I should have known better ; obviously, he wore them for a reason. At the sound of my voice near his elbow , he jerked back, his shoulders straightening and his head lift ing. There was a mirror above the chest of drawers, and our gazes collided in it. His eyes glittered fiercely, his expression grim and shocked, and his lips cur led back into an angry snarl . If I didn't know any better, I'd say he appeared to have fangs — like a vampire, or maybe more like a vicious dog or wolf — but that was silly. A lmost a s silly as a man freaking out over the loss of a pair of shades .

“You're not stone,” he said, his snarl dropping to make way for confusion. “How are you not stone? You looked me right in the eye, from really close, for at least a second. Cammy, you should be frozen in place...” He flung out a hand and pointed at the spot near the door where we'd been a moment ago. “A statue...” My eyes grew as wide and surprised as his still were when I began to put together what had happened.

“You think your gaze really turns people to stone? Halvard ... that’s impossible. It was just an act, a show. I’m sure those guys were your colleagues, plants in the audience. You don’t have to keep up the act for me.” My words made him bark out a raw, husky laugh, and then he slowly turned around, his gaze hooded as if he feared looking at me. As his eyes opened and connected with mine—not through the mirror this time, but directly—bare and unshielded, just like earlier—I felt a shiver shoot down my spine. I felt a lot of hot, crazy, lust-filled emotions, but I did not turn to stone. To prove it, I raised my hand and cupped his square chin in my palm. “See, not stone.”

“I can’t believe it . I don’t...” Halvard said softly, and his gaze swirled as he stared into my eyes , no sunglasses between us. “You are immune.” Then he tossed his head back and laughed in a wild, unfettered way that had me utterly entranced. The next thing I knew, I was swept off my feet and tumbled onto his unmade bed. He prowled on top of me, fire in his black eyes. “You are mine, darling. This proves it.”

A man had said that to me once before — claimed me as his. It hadn’t worked out, though I knew that Thorne still felt his claim held sway. It was absolutely terrifying to have a man repeat it to me once again, part of my brain certain that history was about to repeat itself. Then all concerns were swept away on a tide of passion : h is mouth on mine, tongue sweeping past all my defenses. His hands roamed, stroking my curves, my waist, cupping my breasts . T hen they began unbuttoning my pants.

I wasn’t even out of my coat yet . The teakettle was still whistling with a gentle, pure note —a stark contrast to the shrill tone of my own kettle at home. Neither of us stopped to bother with any of it; we simply went up in flames together. His fingers slipped into my panties, accompanied by a deep growl from him and a soft sigh from me. After that, I could do nothing but writhe and moan beneath him as he worked my clit with expert precision. Any doubts I’d had about my sexuality after meeting Halvard vanished completely. I had never come for a man before—not without some help of my own—but this strange, sinfully sexy circus performer had made me shatter

in less than a minute. Clearly, all it took was the right man.

Once the last shudders subsided, he slowly withdrew his fingers, raised them between us , and , while staring me straight in the eye, began to lick them clean. The obvious delight on his face gave m y whole body a flush, and I was still tingling like mad when , a few seconds later, scratching at the door interrupted the intense moment.

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Halvard

I stared into Cammy's unprotected, unshielded eyes for several moments, savoring her soft, pliant body beneath me , even as our gazes remained locked . She did not turn to stone — she was immune. Those facts still absolutely blew my mind, and I could vividly recall the terror I'd felt when she'd yanked my glasses from my face earlier. None of this should be possible, yet there she lay on my bed, pinned beneath me , h er expression soft and rosy, filled with wonder. The scent of her arousal hung thick in the air, and my cock was an aching bar pressing against her soft thighs.

When the scratching at the door came again, I groaned, not ready to end this moment. The noise made Cammy's eye lids lower, and the first stirrings of unease cross ed her face. She was worried about who it might be, scar ed it was the man who had chased her across the carnival grounds. I rose, my body protesting as the cold air replaced the warmth of my soft, vulnerable girl. Turning off the kettle on my way to the door, I felt the first stirr ings of a smile on my lip s. She was immune to my gaze — what a miracle. S till , I picked up my en chant ed glasses and slipped them on to my face before I reached the door.

"I'm coming, Hogzy," I said when the scratching came again, a little more roughly this time, so that the Airstream rocked on its footing. I cast Cammy a glance over my shoulder as I opened the door and saw that she had risen and begun to fastidiously straighten her clothing. She looked delectable , with her coat askew and her blouse half undone. I couldn't even recall doing that, but I was definitely responsible for her open pants and wet panties , w hich I could smell, much to my delight, even from across my small home.

Opening the door, I was greeted by a blast of cool air and a loud snort from my best buddy. Hogzy raised his head, his snout pulled into a grin, his black eyes glittering, and then he barreled inside. The step gave him only a small pause, as did the tight squeeze through the door. Then he was inside, and I leaned out to lock eyes with our chef, Eugene , who was standing in the shadows next to his own home. When he gave me a nod and a wink, I knew the job had been done. “Mission accomplished?” I asked Hogzy anyway and was greeted with another loud snort.

“Groink,” he said and butted his head against my thigh. I had to brace myself or risk getting knocked over, especially when his second nudge was even firmer. I knew what he wanted, but my eyes caught on something dangling from one of his tusks. I ducked down and caught his snout in my hand so I could free the scrap.

“I’ll get you your apples. A promise is a promise,” I told him as I raised the scrap to the light to study it. Black, muddy, but the delicate pinstripes were still visible. “Where did you get this, buddy?” Of course , my pet boar wasn’t going to answer that, and I had a suspicion I knew anyway. I dropped the scrap on my table and moved to one of the high cabinets where I kept my apples —well out of Hogzy’s reach , or he’d destroy my furniture to get to them.

“Is that a piece of double - worsted pinstriped wool?” Cammy asked as she gave my boar a wide berth to get to the table. She was peering at the scrap with a smile pulling at her pretty pink lips, and I paused , mid-reach for the apples , to stare, enchanted by the sight. “This is a piece of Thorne’s suit,” she said in wonder. Then she caught me by surprise — most normies thought boars were scary . Dropping to her knees, she threw her arms around Hogzy’s neck , her fingers expertly digging into the scruff behind his tufted ears to give him the kind of scratches he loved. “Good boy! Did you take a nice big bite out of him? Give him a proper mud bath, did you?”

Hogzy seemed to forget all about his coveted apples , and with shameless moaning and snorts , received all the adoration Cammy was willing to bestow on him. With a

thud that rattled the rafters, he threw himself onto his side and exposed his round belly. Cammy did not even seem to mind the spray of mud that had dried in his coarse fur as she did exactly what he wanted. “How on earth did you end up with a pet pig, Halvard?” she asked.

That made Hogzy snort indignantly , and I laughed. “He’s not a pig but a boar. A wild boar , technically. I found him when he was a baby, and we’ve been pals ever since. Right , Hogzy?” My buddy seemed to remember his apples now and took his chance, rising with more agility than you ’d expect a big beast like him to have. He yanked the basket straight out of my hands and , with a gleeful snort , scooted beneath the table, rattling it roughly because he didn’t quite fit. Then he threw himself onto his sleeping pad and happily began munching.

When Cammy rose from her crouch, I knew exactly what she was about to say, and I didn’t want her to end this. “Will I see you again?” I asked before she could speak. I moved around the table quickly , though I tried not to rush and make her feel threatened. Slipping my glasses from my face simply because I could, I tucked them into my pocket and reached out to cup her face. She let me kiss her, her pulse pounding in her throat, her breathing filled with little shudders and moans.

“Yes... Halvard... I want to.” Her eyes flicked from my face to the bed with its tangled sheets , where we’d spent several very pleasurable moments. We had not finished what we’d started, but I was much more a predator than she knew . I could be patient. I knew she was thinking about what we’d done —what we’d shared — when we’d barely said a word to each other. My brain whirled as it filled with ideas, with all the things I wanted to do to her.

I settled on the one thing I knew would make her feel safe —something that would feel familiar to a woman like her. I couldn’t throw her in the deep end in just one night ; I had to make this easy for her. Learning that my ability to turn people to stone was real — that was enough. “How about a date? Dinner at a restaurant. Tomorrow is

my day off ; I could pick you up...” I trailed off, my mind floundering as I tried to remember what a normal date was supposed to look like.

Cammy saved me by smiling — a warm, wondrous kind of smile — her eyes filled with discovery. “Yes, I’d like that very much. ” And then she pulled an honest - to - God business card from her coat pocket. Flipping it over, she wrote her personal number on the back . “Text me the details, yes? Tomorrow, seven?”

The business card was printed on thick, luxurious paper and gold - embossed with her name : Camryn Mayfield, Attorney at Law. Ah , fuck, she was a lawyer. She was so educated and fancy . How could the two of us possibly make this work? We were from completely opposite worlds. Tucking the business card with her number into my jacket pocket, right over my heart , I was determined to try. Sally the Seer had made a prediction about tonight : a gaze was all it took. I hoped she was right.

“Let me escort you to your car, darling,” I offered, suddenly feeling like I was part of her world. I felt important, fancy, as she slid her arm through mine and let me glide her from the Airstream. Too bad I was taking her to her car instead of on the tour I had envisioned. I didn’t want her to go—I wanted tonight to last forever. When we left the campgrounds and entered the still-crowded carnival grounds, I didn’t forget the fear my mate had felt here—the fear of the male whom Hogzy and my Carnival brothers had taken care of for me. If they’d done their jobs right, they would have driven him away. But I wasn’t taking any chances.

“I called my friend Lis ; she’s meeting me at the car,” Cammy said, leaning in close to speak next to my ear to be heard. Music was blaring — slow and out of tune — from the merry-go-round, but the eerie sound only made the crowd more rambunctious. There was a hint of fear, of unease, a thrill of adventure they could not resist. I searched around us for any sign of the man Hogzy had taken a bite out of, but did not see him.

“Why was he after you, Cammy? Are you going to be in danger when you leave?” If the answer was yes, I knew I wouldn’t let her go — not without me to accompany her. I was braced for a fight, but she shook her head firmly, her jaw set at a stubborn angle.

“No, I’ll be fine. Thorne only cares about what I do in public. He’s...” S he sighed, and when she looked at me, I knew she was struggling to say what she was thinking. It was shame that held her tongue, so I waited — no urging, no prodding. “He’s my ex, and it ended badly. At least, it ended for me, but he still seems to think he has a claim. He makes trouble for me as soon as I so much as go on a date or show up at an event.” She held her tongue after that, but I heard what she wasn’t saying. Going on a date with her tomorrow could spell trouble. It could mean this Thorne would show up again to start something. Excitement thrummed through me at the thought. He’d be in for a surprise if he tried anything with me.

“Bring it,” I said with a smirk. The words had only just left my mouth when we reached the edge of the carnival grounds. Here, a big, empty field had been converted into a parking lot. Testament to the carnival’s twisted popularity, it was still very full, despite being almost midnight. Listening to Cammy’s softly murmured instructions, I guided her between the rows of cars, my eyes searching for any sign of danger. There was a prickling at the back of my neck that warned me of danger, and I was not an idiot — I trusted my instincts.

Cammy was not leaving my sight.

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Camryn

When I showed up on Halvard's arm, I knew Lis was going to squeal with happiness—I could feel it coming. I thought that would make me nervous, but instead, I felt a warm, glowing ball of happiness in my belly. It felt good. The more I thought about it—and I was thinking about it a lot—I realized it was because I was finally telling Thorne to fuck off. Screw him. Halvard was a strong, mysterious enigma, but he made me feel safe. For once, I was not scared of what would happen to my date; rather, I had a feeling Thorne was finally coming up against a wall he wouldn't be able to knock over. His bully tactics weren't going to work on a man like my leather-wearing Stone Freak.

I had no right to feel possessive of Halvard. We hadn't gone on that date yet, though what we'd shared had been far more intimate than anything I had experienced with my nasty ex. Pushing thoughts of the future away, I tried to focus on the here and now : t he cold that made my breath fog in the air, the way my arm was warmly tangled with his, and the subtle musk of his scent in my nose. I could hear laughter behind me coming from the c arnival and the squelching, plodding steps of Halvard's pet boar , Hogzy , as he trudg ed through the field behind us.

When Lis's sporty car came into sight, I saw that my friend was draped a cross the hood, huddled deeply in her thick fur coat. She had to be freezing in her spiky heels and slinky dress , but she was all warm, beaming smiles as she saw us. "Ah, lovebirds! I'm so happy to see you guys. Too bad you missed Thorne's dramatic exit! It was beautiful!" she said in a happy waterfall of words.

Halvard's head dipped to mine, and even with his tinted glasses on his handsome

face, I could sense the amusement. I rolled a shoulder, smiled back at him, and knew we understood each other. We were both amused and endeared by Lis's loyal words and happy laughter. It was impossible not to like my friend, but there was no reason to envy her for it.

"Hi," I said, reluctant to part ways with the object of my newfound passion. He was warm and safe, steady as a rock as he stood at my side and shielded me from the worst of the cold autumn breeze. "Thank you for distracting him!" I told her. As he'd gone above and beyond. Halvard withdrew his arm slowly, but his hand lingered on my hip for a second. Then he boldly cupped my chin, tilted my head, and kissed me right there in front of my friend.

I was tingling all over — cold forgotten, blood on fire. My breathing came in a soft, surprised gasp as he swept his tongue into my mouth and laid claim. "Goodbye, darling Cammy. I'll pick you up tomorrow for our date." He pressed a kiss to my forehead, then stepped back, leaving me a gooey, melted puddle at his feet. "Good night, friend of Cammy's," he said politely, though his voice was rougher than it should have been. He dipped into a bow for Lis, then for me, all showy showmanship.

"Bye, Halvard the Stone Freak! Thank you for seducing my friend!" Lis jauntily waved at him as she spoke. While I was still a blushing fool, she grinned, and Halvard smirked. He began to walk away, his boar ducking out from between two cars and following him. A chill skated up my spine, dispelling the lovely warmth Halvard's kiss had left behind. My chin went up, my eyes searching the darkened field, but I could not see what was wrong.

I turned to Lis, certain she was going to smile and laugh before diving headfirst into an interrogation of what I'd been up to. But my friend was no longer slouching against the hood of her car; her eyes were sharp as she searched the darkness. I wasn't imagining things. Something was out there. I spun toward my handsome,

mysterious stranger, fully intending to warn him. About what, I had no idea. All I knew was that something was stalking us. Something evil.

The shadow that suddenly rose from behind the next car was exactly what I expected—yet nothing like it at all. My mind couldn't make heads or tails of it. The shadowy shape was too tall, too big to be a man, but it was man-shaped. Despite its lumbering size, it made no noise as it stepped over the car and loomed directly over me. I dimly heard Lis screech, but the pounding of my heart drowned out everything else.

Halvard was between me and the ogre - sized shadow so quickly that I had not seen him move. I just knew that he was suddenly there, shielding me from the massive , shadowed paw coming down toward me. He caught that hand with his upraised forearm, the blow reverberating through his chest. It proved that it was real — not just some weird trick of the light and shadows.

From behind Halvard's wide, leather-clad shoulder, I saw just enough to make my stomach turn. That shadow had glowing coals for eyes — an ogre or a giant made of darkness. "Leave her alone!" my protector roared in the face of those writhing shadows. Then he lifted his hand to his glasses and yanked them from his face. The red gaze in that shadowed face collided with the Stone Freak's , and that was it. The shadow turned to stone, black as obsidian and shiny like glass.

With a roar, Halvard pulled back his fist and punched the newly formed statue right in the face. It exploded into a million fragments—obsidian glass that flew in every direction with a clatter—thudding into cars, raining down onto the muddy grass, and tinkling against my skin and hair. One little chip nicked me right beneath my eye, but the sting of pain was nothing compared to the fear that roiled through my mind. What had just happened? What was that thing? And why was it after me?

"Are you hurt? Did the shadow golem touch you?" Halvard spun around and caught

me by the shoulders, his dark, unshielded gaze frantic as he searched my body. His hands were warm and firm against my cold skin, heating me even through my coat. Then , he lifted one hand to slide his thumb over the cut beneath my eye, raising the pad between us, glistening with blood. “Damn it, I am going to kill that bastard!”

“Who?” I said through numb lips, my gaze clinging to Halvard’s jet - black eyes. There was safety in those orbs — I couldn’t explain it, not when he turned out to be speaking the truth about everything. He really did turn people to stone with that gaze — people and shadow golems , apparently. I would have thrown myself into my protector’s arms, but I forced myself to stand back and watch. My world had just gotten rocked — no pun intended . I needed to figure out what I thought of all that before I made any hasty choices. Not that I even once considered backing out of my date tomorrow night. Even if I needed some distance now, I knew I had to see him again.

Lis took Halvard’s place when his eyes shuttered and he stepped back, his tinted glasses sliding back in to place over his face. My friend curled her arm around my shoulders, looking far less shocked or stunned than I was . She was taking everything in stride, calm now that the bizarre, terrifying creature had been vanquished. Hogzy was snuffling his way through the pile of rubble with loud, disgruntled snorts that steamed up the air. The carnival still buzzed with voices and music in the background. Everything was oddly quiet by the car, but I did not believe the danger had fully passed.

“I’ve got her,” Lis said, not to me but to Halvard. The two of them nodded in mutual understanding, and then Lis guided me around the hood of her car to the passenger side. “Come on, I’ll drop you off at home. Thorne won’t bother you there.” Why did she seem to understand exactly what was going on? I was still trying to wrap my head around the appearance of a shadow monster and the fact that Halvard’s petrifying gaze did not work on me. What did that mean? Why did it feel wrong to leave his side? He stood beside the pile of rubble, his back leaning against his thigh, his once

again shielded gaze on me. He looked like a man wrapped in shadows of his own . The carnival was the perfect backdrop for him. He was right at home there, from a world I couldn't possibly hope to ever be part of. But I wanted it — I wanted to understand it all so much.

“I think Thorne might be a warlock,” Lis said as she urged me into the car with a firm hand against my shoulder. I plunked into the leather seat, the air whooshing out of me, and my legs turning to rubber. I thought she was saying those crazy words to me, but no, she had aimed them at Halvard. He nodded, his jaw gritted, every line of his body wracked with tension and aggression. He looked like a man on the brink, holding himself back. Back from what? Drawing me in to his arms? Hauling me over his shoulder like a caveman? Or was he fighting the urge to hunt down my ex and kill him , like he said? Why did all those options send a thrill of excitement through me, rather than fear?

“I suspected as much ; the shadow golem is a dead giveaway,” Halvard confirmed. He ducked so he could catch my eyes through the side window of the car, his mouth twisting into a smile that might have been intended to be reassuring. “We’re still on for tomorrow evening?” I appreciated that he thought to ask, but I could also hear the strain in his voice. He did not want me to say no. Since I didn’t want to say no either, I gave him a smile and a nod. That made him turn away and stalk back toward the carnival with a long-legged stride.

Lis did not say anything as she got into the car and revved the engine. She did not explain why she knew what she knew or why she wasn’t surprised. I was too tired to ask right now, too shaken by all the excitement this night had brought. Once I’d slept, I knew I’d be full of questions, and she’d be the first I’d call. For now, I was okay with the silence.

Halvard

My mate's Siren friend might be certain that this bastard wasn't going to hurt Cammy tonight, but I was not so trusting. I was not going to leave it to fate to see her safe, not when every gene in my body was primed to protect her. I might be a bit of a freak, but my ancestors had been gargoyles with a proud lineage that traced straight back to the protection of churches and holy buildings. The French branch of the family had stood sentinel on Notre Dame herself, while the main line I came from had always lived in Norway, hailing from Trondheim with ties to Nidaros.

"Hogzy, stay at the carnival. I've got business tonight," I said to my friend. He snorted loudly and began digging with his snout and tusks, taking care of the evidence by burying it. I knew by tomorrow not so much as a hint of the obsidian shards would remain. There would be no sign of the golem I had turned to stone or the attack on my mate by the warlock.

I met Eugene by the entrance to the carnival grounds. The large but always generous cook had his arms crossed over his wide chest. His handlebar mustache quivered with tension, but his smile was kind as he nodded toward his parked, shiny motorcycle. "You can borrow it, but not a scratch — or you'll be finding too much salt in your dinner for the next three months."

I tipped my head his way and turned to the bike with a rush of excitement. Perfect. I would follow Cammy home, then perch on the corner of a nearby building for the night and keep watch. She would be safe; I would have something to do other than drive myself crazy with worry, and the warlock wouldn't stand a chance if he made another move.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:57 am

I paced across my living room, my heels clacking against the hardwood floors with every agitated step. After what had happened last night, I thought I'd sleep poorly, my dreams plagued by darkness and nightmares. Instead, I'd sunk into a dreamless void and woken early in the morning with my body aching and aroused. That had never happened before. I'd been drawn to my bedroom windows, feeling as though I wasn't alone—as if I were responding to the unseen eyes of an admirer.

All day, I had been on edge, expecting either Thorne or Halvard to show up at my door at any moment. I'd been so nervous and confused that I'd even called in sick and stayed safely inside my apartment. "Please tell me you put on that sexy black dress with the open back," Lis said through the speaker of my phone. She'd called five minutes ago, no doubt to make sure I wasn't going to back out of my date with Halvard. As if I could. I was dying to see him again, to have him make the world make sense. I wanted explanations. I wanted to feel the thrill of being at his side and seeing the mysteries unraveled. Mostly, I wanted to be in his arms again and feel the passion only he seemed to ignite in me. I wanted to know that I wasn't broken, that I wasn't the Ice Queen they called me behind my back—or the frigid bitch that Thorne had made me out to be.

"Yes, I'm wearing the black dress," I assured my friend as I smoothed my hands over my hips against the silky fabric, subtly patterned with vines and flowers. It was a great dress that showcased all my best assets—probably a little cold for a fall day, but that was a price I was willing to pay. "Lis," I said as I eyed my thick winter coat and scarf, which I'd already set out so I could get ready the moment Halvard arrived. What kind of car would he be in? The Carnival had looked so derelict, but it had been absolutely hopping last night. I hadn't really paid attention to what vehicles were parked on the campgrounds where Halvard's Airstream was located.

“What is it?” my friend asked. Her voice had dropped, growing a little hushed, as if she was anticipating secrets—not the fun gossip type of secrets that she loved to spill, but something much heavier, darker. Secrets that mattered. “You want to know how I know?” I nodded, though she couldn’t see that. But Lis started talking anyway; she knew exactly where my mind had gone.

“I’m the same friend you’ve always had. I just... I like your Halvard, am not entirely human.” Not entirely human? What was she talking about? “I have gifts. That’s why people tell me things, why I make friends so easily. Charm, pheromones—whatever you want to call it—people just like me. I’m not like Halvard and those at the Carnival; their differences are far greater.” Then she hurried to add, “But that doesn’t make them bad people. Just different. In fact, I think Halvard is exactly the man you need.”

This was beginning to be an extremely one-sided conversation, and time was running out. My clock indicated that my date could be here soon, and my belly swooped with nerves and excitement. Since the overwhelming desire was to see him again, I hoped that meant Lis was right: Halvard was the right man for me. This seemed to be more than just a rebound after Thorne—a way to finally kick that asshole from my life. I cared far more about being with my Stone Freak again because I felt like I was truly myself when I was in his arms.

“Okay,” I said to my friend, “I can’t deny that a lot of weird things have happened, and I have no rational explanation for any of them.” Like the way I was drawn to Halvard and his crazy life, and how I was immune to his gaze when he feared turning everyone to stone. After seeing how he could shatter that statue, I now had a much healthier fear of what turning to stone could mean. It didn’t sound fun at all; it sounded dangerous.

Straightening my shoulders, I decided the only way to move on was to charge straight ahead. Pre-Thorne, that had been me too—chip on my shoulder, always with a plan

and ready to do something meaningful with my life. No more dull contracts and working late into the night. Now that I knew what was really out there, it was time to live again—to stop fearing everything and blaming myself for not being what others expected me to be. Our failed relationship was Thorne's fault, not mine. We didn't work, but I was more than ready to believe that Halvard and I had the perfect chemistry—that we did work.

“Okay? Just like that, you're going to be fine with this? Should I come over?” Lis's concerned words made me laugh, warmth filling my chest. Last night, I'd been thinking that blowing her off too much would scare her away too, make her abandon me like other friends had done. I knew better now. Lis was my best girl; she'd always have my back.

The knock on the door made my smile grow wider. “Nope, I've got a date, remember? And he's here. Talk later.” I hung up to the sound of her loudly shouted, “Use protection!” and was still blushing like a beet from that when I opened my door to a bouquet of flowers. Not your average, everyday flowers either—nothing as mundane as roses for Halvard, but pretty all the same, even if I couldn't name anything but the purple thistles that gave the whole composition a punkish vibe.

“Hi,” he said, his mouth pulling into a sexy half-smirk, his eyes bare, and his sunglasses hooked into the pocket of his jacket. He'd taken them off before he knocked on my door, and I loved how happy he looked to see me. He rubbed the back of his neck with one hand, mussing up his black hair. “Flowers are customary for a date, yes? Or is it too much?” The bouquet filled my arms when I took it from him—definitely at least three sizes too large for a simple first date. It was perfect. I loved knowing that Halvard was excited about this, that he wasn't holding back, and that he was as rusty as I was when it came to this.

“I love them,” I told him. “Where did you get these?” I was already turning toward the kitchen so I could quickly put them in water, and Halvard silently followed me,

his gaze bright and warm. I loved that gaze as much as I loved the flowers . I t was so full of appreciation as it skimmed over my dress and curves.

“Ah, Seraphine from the apothecary put it together. They’re all supposed to be plants that promote good health and good fortune.” That explained why they were so exotic, and I loved that he’d given me something so unique and thoughtful. The flowers would have to wait for a proper vase until I got home, but my large mixing bowl would do for now. As soon as I had gently set them down in the water, I realized that Halvard had not just followed me into my kitchen — he was really close. His warmth bathed my side, his scent surrounded me, and excitement began to tingle down my spine, pooling in my abdomen.

I turned my head and got trapped in his gaze, his dark eyes sparkling like the obsidian he’d turned that monster into last night. “Are you ready to go?” he asked, but his husky tone told me he was the one who’d rather stay right here. He had me half-trapped against the kitchen counter, his large body boxing me against the hard surface. That thrilled me, and desire ratcheted up another notch. Stayin g in— what a tempting concept. I very much wanted a repeat of what had happened last night — and more.

My eyes darted to the bedroom door beyond his shoulder , and I opened my mouth to make some kind of sexy invitation. He beat me to it, swooping down to claim my lips, our tongues tangling like our uneven breaths . His arms came around me, yanking me close, and I could feel how his excitement matched mine —h is cock a fierce, hard bar beneath his leather pants, pressing shamelessly against my stomach. “You look too good,” he moaned. “But I promised you a date, so we’re going.” It sounded like he was telling himself that as much as he was telling me.

When he stepped back, I missed his warmth. His gaze was feral and heated as he slid it over me, twisting into a satisfied smirk. Then , he dropped his hand to his blatant erection and adjusted himself again , without shame. He did it with the kind of fla i r

only a performer could muster , posing so I got the full effect of that thick bulge and clearly delighting in my obvious admiration.

“Come, darling,” he said, and for a brief, insane moment , I thought he was ordering me to orgasm on the spot. But he reached out a hand and , like a proper gentleman , helped me into my coat. “We’ve got reservations. I want to show you off.” As he guided me out of my home, I had a sudden feeling that he had an ulterior motive. Seduce me ? Yes. But he also wanted to go out so he could clash with Thorne again. Would that finally solve my problems with my ex? Or would i t put Halvard in danger? I eyed him as he guided me to a large, slightly rusty truck and had to conclude , no — Halvard could handle Thorne, no doubt about it.

“How’s Hogzy? Did he get enough apples today?” I asked, smiling at how comfortable my date looked with the beat - up truck. He wasn’t s elf-conscious about our differences, and he hadn’t batted an eye at my fancy apartment either —l ike wealth did not matter one bit to him. Maybe it really didn’t . A nd wasn’t that a freeing thought?

“Hogzy got into the barrels of elephant feed . H e’s currently sleeping off a food coma,” Halvard said with a laugh. The engine rumbled as deeply as his voice when he turned on the truck. Then we were off, driving into the night to some unknown destination. If my father knew about this, he’d have a fit — and that just made it more exciting. I trusted Halvard . I knew instinctively that he’d do everything in his power to keep me safe. That left me free to anticipate nothing but good things for the rest of the night. I was determined to enjoy every minute and make sure we’d get that chance in the bedroom before the clock struck midnight.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:57 am

At the suggestion of the cook — who tended to have his fingers in a surprising number of culinary pies — I'd picked an Italian restaurant. It had a glass - covered terrace that was heated , making it usable even in winter. The restaurant provided a very cozy, romantic atmosphere, with secluded corners formed by potted olive trees. I also knew that the glass walls made us visible from the street, and , as it was downtown, I hoped that would guarantee the warlock bothering my woman got wind of our date. I planned to deal with him tonight.

Some warlocks fell easily into obsession, but once they ran into a wall they could not knock down, that usually fixed it. At least, that was the advice Sally the Seer had given me that morning. I hoped it meant I could be that wall for Cammy — knock the warlock on his ass so hard it shook him out of this obsession. He was a rich one, as was evidenced by the fancy suit, and a powerful one, considering the shadow golem he'd sent to kidnap Cammy last night — all in a ploy to get her away from me.

“This is lovely,” Cammy said as she eyed her plate of fresh pasta and rich - smelling marinara sauce. It was, though I was not even close to considering the food. The candlelight made her features glow, her freckles a temptation I wanted to lick. Her brown eyes were warm and lovely, and I wished I could see them without the shield of my ensorcelled glasses. It was not a risk I could take in a crowded restaurant like this, and I hoped I could entice Cammy to my mobile home for our next dinner.

We'd been here a while, smack in the middle of our meal, and still no sign of the warlock. I would have been disappointed if not for the fact that the conversation had been flowing easily, and every new thing I learned about my pretty woman was a delight. She was a lawyer — I knew that — but she was dying to get out of the contract stuff and do something meaningful : protect the rights of minorities, fight

for justice. It matched so well with my gargoyle heritage — to want to protect those smaller than me, those who couldn't fight alone. Cammy was perfect for me in every way . N ow , I just needed to figure out how she fit into my life, or how I could fit into hers.

When I talked about the places I'd been and the things I'd seen, her eyes lit up, and I realized my girl had an undying appetite for adventure. I could work with that. What bigger adventure was there than travel ing with a paranormal carnival? "Where would you like to go if you could go anywhere? Anywhere at all?" I asked her in between bites of my delicious seafood linguine. My plate was almost empty, but she'd only managed to get halfway through hers.

"Anywhere at all? Probably Paris or Prague. I'd love to see some of the old cities — feel like I'm part of history , " she said dreamily. Reaching out, I cupped her chin and leaned in to kiss her cheek. She was adorable when she got that faraway look in her eyes, like she was already picturing herself there.

"See some gargoyles?" I couldn't help but tease . When her wide, startled eyes met mine, I smirked. She hadn't pieced it together yet: my ability to turn people to stone, transform myself in to stone, and those ancient 'statues' that so often adorn ed old buildings. "You could do that right here, with me." I wagged my eye brows , and her laughter was music to my ears. I would have basked in the moment, but the fine hairs on the back of my neck suddenly rose without warning. Something dark was watching me — something predatory , brimming with killing intent. Thorne was here.

Camryn

This was , by far , the best date I'd had in years. Our chemistry was off the charts — I knew that already — but Halvard was a quick - witted, clever table companion. When

we talked , it felt like I was on the same page with him, like he understood me the way only Lis did sometimes. He had a strict father who had high expectations , just like I did, but , unlike me, he'd shaken that life and carved out one of his own that he loved. I wanted to follow his example . I was ready to leap without looking after tonight —a nything to keep feeling this alive, this accepted for who I was.

When he went from laughing and relaxed to tense as stone, all my senses roared to life. Fear curled up my spine. This was it ; Thorne had found us. On t he rare occasion s when I'd tried dating shortly after I'd left Thorne, i t had never ended well — m y date always terrified, running for their life, though they never seemed to come to any true harm. For the first time, I felt like Thorne wouldn't be able to scare my date away. It hadn't happened last night, and Halvard seemed to relish the thought of a confrontation.

He rose from his seat, folding his napkin neatly and p lac ing it on the edge of the table. It was honestly sexy how calmly he moved as he got up and settled himself, yet I could see the watchfulness in the tight pinch of his lips. "Excuse me for a minute," he said in a gravel l y tone that made my nipples grow tight beneath my dress. "I have to take care of something." He smirked, a tilt to his lips that made me wish he wasn't wearing his tinted glasses — I was certain there would be mischief dancing in his eyes.

Watching him stalk out of the restaurant made me feel like I was watching a tiger on the prowl — or more aptly, a panther. Halvard seemed to have only one color in his wardrobe: black, but it suited him. The appreciative stares he drew from the female guests made me all too aware of just how good the black leather looked. Then he stepped outside, facing something he seemed to have sensed but that I had not noticed . It had to be Thorne, and I frantically scanned the windows, searching for a sign, but I couldn't even spot Halvard now.

This would be when a more cynical person might think they'd been walked out on

and stuck with the bill. I knew that wasn't true, but I raised my hand and flagged down a waiter. "I'd like to pay, please. Could I have the bill?" He obliged but gave me a sort of sad, pitying look that made me want to stick out my tongue. He didn't know a thing, and it wasn't right to judge me. I wasn't going to let it bother me, either.

Rising, I shrugged into my coat and hurried out of the restaurant, my eyes searching for any sign of my Stone Freak as he confronted my stupid ex, who was apparently a warlock. "Damn it, Halvard, where did you go?" I muttered under my breath. My words formed fog in the air, but they did not mysteriously guide me in the right direction. A sound drew my attention around the corner, where the parking lot was.

I turned toward it and almost immediately spotted the slightly banged-up truck that Halvard had picked me up in. The tan color looked even more like rust in the muddy lantern light than it had at my apartment. Something else was there too — shadows that clung to the fender and swirled beneath the car's body. Then I heard the voices.

"I'm telling you one last time, warlock: leave Camryn Mayfield alone. She is not yours; she will never be yours. You do not own her." That was Halvard — there was no doubt. His voice was cold and sinister as he spoke, sounding like a threat, as though he were going to wring Thorne's neck if he did not obey. Yet every word was carefully measured and perfectly correct. A shiver shot down my spine in warning, even though I knew he was on my side. He was saying those words in my defense, but they held such cold malice that even I felt the urge to obey.

I sidled around the side of Halvard's truck slowly, walking on my toes so my heels would not click against the pavement. Prepared for a standoff, for the implicit threat of violence, I should have expected what I found. Yet it still caught me by surprise. Halvard stood with his legs braced apart over a sprawled-out shape on the ground. A large puddle spreading from beneath Thorne's shoulders and head gave the impression of a pool of blood — or maybe a mirror. It was just rainwater, but I had to

look twice to see that.

My ex had a busted lip, red dripping from his mouth and nostrils, while one eye struggled to open — injuries that proved Halvard had already struck a few blows. Thorne was a tall, handsome man : polished and suave. He came from money, just like Lis and I did. The contrast between the two men couldn't have been more pronounced , but at the same time, I saw a similarity too. Thorne had an edge of danger — a wolf in sheep's clothing — while Halvard's danger lay right there on the surface. Knowing what I did now about the supernatural, I wondered if that was what I had been sensing.

Thorne's eyes were green like ivy, glowing brightly in his face . They flashed from the threat above him to me. I saw something flicker in that green that I couldn't place, but my stomach flipped , and the back of my neck tingled with awareness. Halvard never looked my way, but when he shifted to stand protectively between me and the downed man, it was obvious he knew I was there.

I had dismissed the shadows beneath his truck as something that came from the carnival ; that's how accustomed I had already become to the strangeness Halvard brought with him. When they slithered like tentacles from beneath the chassis, I hurriedly stepped out of their way, my instincts roaring that they were wrong — dangerous. That quick sidestep , driven by a gut reaction before I'd even fully processed their presence, was the only thing that saved me from being grabbed.

Halvard, with his back turned, was not fast enough, and they curled around him — grabbing, writhing, squeezing. He groaned, but then darkness slid into his mouth. Thorne rose from the ground with a triumphant grin, followed by a macabre laugh. “Not so tough now, are you, Freak?” he drawled. As he began to circle Halvard, I knew he was going to try to grab me personally. In that instant, everything boiled over inside of me, heating to a flashpoint. I 'd had enough — enough of my ex controlling my life and threatening my date, enough of holding myself back because

of what others wanted me to be.

Ducking down, I yanked my heel from my foot and flung it as hard as I could at Thorne's face. It glanced off his sharp cheekbone, then bounced against his shoulder. He cursed but kept advancing, so I grabbed my other shoe and threw that too. That one struck him in the chest — far less painful — but he halted and looked down, confused. "Why are you doing that?" he demanded. "I am protecting you! Don't you see that?" The nerve this fool had. Protecting me? As if!

"I don't need you, Thorne. Get lost! I don't want you in my life. Leave! And let Halvard go, right now." He blinked his green eyes, twisting his head to look at the shadows that held my brave Stone Freak immobile. No, not quite — Halvard had gotten closer, shadows and all. His entire body was straining and fighting against whatever it was that held him, and though that fight was silent, he was making progress. It wouldn't be long before he broke free. Thorne seemed to see it too, and he raised his hands as if to do something about it.

"No!" I snapped. "Stop it!" My stocking-clad feet were cold and wet against the pavement, but that did not stop me from leaping forward and swinging my purse as hard as I could down on his outstretched arm. I knew it wasn't much of a blow, but it did catch his attention. His mouth dropped open in surprise as he turned back and looked at me. For the first time since I'd broken things off with him, I saw a hint of the Thorne that had convinced me with suave charm to go on a date — a hint of the vulnerable man behind the power and money.

"No?" he said. His arms dropped, and he took a step back, his eyes blinking as if rousing from a deep slumber. "No," he repeated more firmly. Then, with a very confused expression, he looked at me. "You don't want my protection?"

"This isn't protection, Thorne!" I exclaimed, throwing my hands in the air in frustration. "This is obsession! This is stalking! We are done, and I am free to

choose who I want to date! You have no say in that.” It felt good to get those words out — freeing — and it was poetic that , at that moment, Halvard shook his shadow chains with a grunt. His glasses had fallen in the struggle, and his eyes were wide and pure as they locked with mine. In them, I saw all the things I had been missing with Thorne : t he love, the protection, the desire to help me be my best self, and the willingness to support me like a true partner. Case in point , he tempered his desire to fight when he realized that I was in control of this confrontation , s imply moving to stand at my side — a silent, supportive figure.

“I don’t understand...” Thorne muttered, but he was smart enough not to look Halvard in the eye and , by extension, never raised his gaze to my face. “Not needed?” he asked, and when I nodded firmly, he shuddered. Then, without a backward glance, he turned and began walking away. Shadows skipped and warped along the ground and the walls where he went, reacting unnaturally to his presence, but the shadows beneath Halvard’s truck were normal now.

Halvard

“You were amazing, Cammy!” I whooped after the warlock had turned the corner and disappeared well and truly from sight. Gone at last. My body thrummed with a battle high, though it felt a little dissatisfied that the scuffle hadn’t given it more of a workout. None of that mattered, because, in the end, it was Cammy who had put a hard stop to the warlock’s obsessive behavior. It didn’t work that way with most stalkers, but it was the warlock’s shadowed nature that had led him down this path in the first place. I was so proud of her. She was magnificent.

Her startled, pleased smile made it clear she had not even realized what she’d done until now. “That was pretty cool. Do you think he’ll stop now?” When I nodded, she did not seem to fully trust the answer, staring in the direction the warlock had gone, as if she expected him to come back. I gave her a moment to come to terms with the new situation, but when she shivered, she was out of time. I swept her into my arms and turned to my truck to put her inside.

“Your shoes? And your purse as a weapon, really?” I teased. “My Amazon.” That made her laugh and slap my shoulder, but her eyes turned serious again when I located her heels and tucked them into the well at her feet. “Home? I think I owe you another dinner and dessert.” She must have paid the tab to come out after me, and that didn’t sit right with me. I wanted her to know I could take good care of her, provide for her.

“Deal,” she agreed. “I don’t suppose you have any chocolate at your trailer, do you?” She patted her purse. “I stuck an apple in there. Does Hogzy mind if it’s a little bruised?” My heart started pounding furiously in my chest. Did those words

mean what I thought they meant?

When she cupped my cheek, I dutifully leaned in, smiling when she kissed me. Oh yeah—she did. She wanted to come home with me . If she were anyone else, I would have thought she just wanted to complete the fantasy—to sleep with the carnival freak in his mobile home. But this was Cammy. I knew she was my mate—and now, I could feel that she knew it too. Breaking the kiss was hard when I was ready to burst at the seams. If she'd asked me, I would have fucked her right there in the parking lot—privacy be damned. But my Cammy deserved better than that—a bed, my bed, and all the pleasure I could give her.

Jogging around the truck, I climbed into the driver's seat , my cock straining against my zipper. As we sped from the lot toward the Carnival's temporary home, I had to ask , “Are you sure about this? About us? I am not Thorne.” By that, I meant I was not filthy rich, did not own a suit, or even a house with a foundation. Though I could not promise to avoid a little obsession myself, I was already obsessed with her.

“I don't want Thorne . W e didn't work for many reasons. I want you, Halvard. I don't know how this is going to work between us , but I know I don't want to miss my chance.” That was good enough for me. Skidding my truck to a stop as close to my Airstream as I could get, I leaped out and ran to get her door. She was still shoeless, so I picked her up again, enjoying the way she curled herself against my chest and tucked her head beneath my chin.

My door wasn't locked—I didn't need to lock it. Nobody would ever dare to set foot on the private camping grounds. They would never dare to enter my domain or steal what was mine. And now, that included Camryn. When I shouldered my way inside, Hogzy snorted from his sleeping mat and rose with a happy, squealing greeting. “Hey, buddy,” Cammy greeted him, and though I was loath to delay what I planned to do to my girl, I set her down so she could greet my pet.

There were some scritchies, the bruised apple from her purse was eagerly accepted, and then Hogzy , thankfully , saw the writing on the wall. With a snort and a swish of his short , bristly tail, he squeezed himself out the door and began rolling in the dewy grass outside. I swung the door shut behind him with an eager grin and turned to my girl, pulse pounding, mouth dry with excitement. “And now, you’re all mine,” I told her.

Camryn

I felt a hint of nerves shiver along my spine when Halvard closed the door behind his pet boar. Now , we were well and truly alone, and I wasn’t quite sure if we both expected the same from this relationship. Rebound? I had really been fooling myself for thinking that when we met. Halvard was nobody’s rebound guy — he was too much for that: a little dangerous, all adventure, but also kind and generous.

When he swept me in to his arms and claimed my mouth, any worries about the future — about crazy, messy feelings — were swept aside. There was no time to think when he tangled his tongue with mine and made me back up with every smooth step he took to glide us across the room. It felt like a dance — one where he was in full control. The master of his domain, I was his puppet, my strings pulled and tugged until my body was singing with pleasure.

I knew what his mouth could do now, knew what his fingers were capable of, and even knew the power that hid in his black eyes. So , when he swept me onto his bed, with sheets that look ed suspiciously tangled from our last round here, I let him do whatever he liked. My dress was slipped from my shoulders by rough fingers, then pooled around my waist when he impatiently yanked up my skirt. There was no undressing for this first round, and I loved it all the more. Urgency pounded in my pulse and throbbed between my thighs, and I loved knowing he felt the same.

When he began sliding my silk stockings down my legs, I shivered at the sensuality of it . Our eyes locked, his fingers rough as they trailed along my skin. Then he found my feet, which were still a little cold and damp from standing in th e parking lot without my shoes. He hissed softly with displeasure and then spent a long m oment gently rubbing my cold toes until they were toasty warm. “So brave you were,” he murmured, lift ing my foot to his mouth and press ing a gentle kiss to my arch. “So beautiful,” he added, a s his lips glid ed along my flesh, kissing my instep, my shin, and the ticklish spot behind my knee.

My breath shuddered, then hitched when he pressed warm, open-mouthed kisses to my bare thigh —s o close to where I ached for him, wept for him with desire. Halvard’s eyes gleamed, the jet - black orbs like shimmering mirrors. “Ah, you smell so good, my sweet Cammy.” Then he licked me, his tongue pressing against the gusset of my panties, warm breath ghosting over my sensitive nerves. I shouted, my spine arching, and he laughed — a dark, almost sinister sound tha t made my veins sin g with adventure, with life. That sound was a reminder that I was not in bed with a man — I was about to be fucked, pleased, loved by the Stone Freak.

I was so lost to the pleasure he drew from my flesh that I barely noticed how he skimmed my panties down my legs. All I felt was his tongue as he lapped at my clit with expert precision. I spiraled higher and higher, buoyed by the knowledge that Halvard would keep me safe — that he was my rock, my shelter. Close to falling off the precipice, I clutched at his hair and drew him closer , s hattering beneath him when he curled one finger into my core and strok ed it. “Aaah, Halvard...” It soothed something inside of me, like last time, to know that , to this man, I responded like wildfire. The passion between us was intense ; it was powerful.

When he rose between my thighs, his smile was smug, his eyes dancing with satisfaction. My body still trembled and shook, but I knew this wasn’t over —n ot this time. There was only one place I wanted to be: right here. Halvard was exactly who I wanted to be with . H e was gorgeous and all mine. His leather jacket had been

discarded, and the black long-sleeved shirt he wore strained around his muscular arms. His leather pants hugged his thighs and clung to the thick bulge of his erection.

My mouth actually watered when he flicked open the button and began to undo his zipper. He wasn't wearing underpants — going commando beneath that leather — and his cock was a work of art: thick as my wrist, the mushroom head ruddy and weeping with precum. Thick veins ran down the shaft, prominent enough that I imagined I might feel them. Licking my lips, I flicked my eyes from that imposing cock to his face, and my body pulsed with desire. No man had ever looked at me the way he did right now — as if I were the most precious, most beautiful being on the planet. And I was all his, because there was no mistaking the claim in his eyes.

When he lined us up, the thick head of his cock kissing my entrance, I knew what this was. After this, I wouldn't be the same woman — I would be Camryn, Halvard's other half. That should frighten me, but I spread my thighs for him instead, canting my hips so he began to slide inside. I hissed; he growled — a deep rumble I felt in my bones. At first, it was too much — he was big, and I had not been with anyone in quite some time. Then, my body adjusted. He slid deeper with each breath I took, with each push and pull of his hips.

I was right—I could feel the thick veins on his cock, the texture rubbing along my walls with perfect friction. My nerves were on fire for him, my body slick and wet. When he lowered himself above me, his mouth finding mine, another orgasm was almost within reach again. I loved the feel of his pants against my legs, how I was almost bare while he was still dressed. When he cupped a breast and squeezed my nipple, I was done. Screaming his name, I came apart—and this time he was right there with me.

Halvard came with a shout, followed by a deep moan that sounded very much like my name. I felt his cock kick deep inside me, almost certain I could feel it as his seed erupted from him in hard bursts. My body felt like liquid around him — soft, ready to

float away, and still warm with pleasure. Warm with him braced above me, surrounding me , protecting me. The kind of protection I knew wouldn't smother. It was perfect, and I wanted this moment to last forever — or to repeat it as many times over as we could.

Halvard

Lying side by side on my bed, I forced my breathing to slow, but my heart still thunder ed in my chest. Cammy was a warm, soft weight against me , her silky brown hair tickling my chin. She felt perfect there —a perfect fit. If she said she wanted to go home now, I knew I'd never sleep peacefully in this bed again, not without her in it. Thankfully, my Cammy was a brave , adventurous soul — just like me.

“I want to stay,” she said in the darkness of my mobile home. We had not bothered with any lights, and I liked how intimate it made the moment, how only the lights from the other homes and the carnival filtered in through my windows. “You’re going to think I’m crazy, Halvard. But I want to come with you... I hate my job . I want to go chase my dreams. I think my dreams have you at my side.” She snapped her mouth shut , as if she feared she’d said too much . For most men, this probably would have sent them running for the hills. Not me, because I knew she was my mate, and I wanted what she was saying so badly I could taste it.

“Yes,” I agreed, my voice a rough growl that made her shiver, goosebumps chasing down her spine and rising along her delicate shoulder. “Yes, I want that. You’re not crazy ; you’re my mate. You’re in my world now, Cammy. This is how it works. Does that scare you?” I held my breath as I waited for her answer, but he r soft sigh, the way her body relaxed, said it all.

“Okay. When does the Carnival leave? I’ll need to pack some of my things, put my furniture in storage... s ay goodbye to Lis,” Cammy said as she raised a hand and began ticking off fingers. I laughed, folding my hand around hers and pressing it against my heart. So practical, but those concerns would come tomorrow.

“You are certain about this? I can find a job in town . I have more skills than turning people to stone, you know . If you’d rather stay here, I can make that work.” It would be hard to find a place that would allow me to keep Hogzy, but not impossible. My pet would hate not being as free to roam about, but I’d make certain he w as pampered wherever we ended up living.

Of course, I should have known that Cammy, who had leaped with her eyes closed more than once, wouldn’t be satisfied with city life. No more than I would. She propped herself up on her elbow to glare at me in the dark, but her lips curved into a smile. “No, I want to travel with you. I want to help people wherever we go, and I want to live —not be buried in contracts and fine print. I want this.” I wasn’t about to argue with that, so I lifted my head and kissed her.

“Good. I don’t think I would have liked city life, and with you at my side, maybe this curse is finally over.” She raised her eyebrow and pointed at my unshielded eyes . “The uncontrolled turning - to - stone thing. I used to be able to do that only if I willed it, but using it every night in my act... I think that turned it ‘on’ permanently. Except it doesn’t work on you. So maybe the curse is gone.”

She nodded seriously, nibbling on her bottom lip. “You know what’s funny? They were calling me ‘Ice Queen’ behind my back, the lady with the heart of stone. Because I refused to date... And now I’m with the Stone Freak, the one person he can’t turn to stone. Fitting, don’t you think?” It was very fitting, but I was still going to teach those guys who’d given her the nasty nickname a lesson. She’d withdrawn to protect them. She did not deserve their scorn. My Cammy was all fire and passion, and to prove it, I eagerly fanned the flames.

“I do believe I promised you chocolate, didn’t I?” I drawled. And then I set out to eat des s ert right off her skin.

THE END

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