



Ghost Girl (Dead Girl Duology #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: My husband is a serial killer.

I know, because I caught him.

And he killed me.

Now, I'm out for revenge from beyond the grave.

The grave he dug for me.

Watch out, honey. I'm coming for you.

This is part 1 in a dark, paranormal, why choose duology, meaning the FMC will have more than one love interest and does not have to choose between them. This book contains dark themes and mature scenes, and is not suitable for all readers. Content warnings can be found inside the book.

*Written in British English.

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Chance

My phone buzzed in my pocket yet again, disturbing the silence required for our readings and creating a spike that meant we'd have to start again. For the twelfth time today. Ashe glared, her scowl deepening the lines on her forehead as she jammed her finger a little too hard on the power button.

'Just go,' she told me, already packing our equipment away. 'It must be important if they're calling you that much, and you've been acting weird lately, anyway.'

I sighed, disappointed in the lack of progress we'd made. She wasn't wrong about how I'd been behaving, either. Something was niggling at me, a cold sense of dread I couldn't place. And not only today. It seemed that the universe was telling us to give up, anyway.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket to see a dozen missed calls from different member of my family. Three for Mom, one from Dad, and the rest were all, surprisingly, from Blake.

'What?' Ashe asked when she turned the light on and caught sight of my expression. 'What's wrong?'

I turned the screen so she could see, and she blew a long whistle. 'Who died?'

I blinked at her. Those words settled deep in my gut like some sort of premonition, and I was suddenly afraid to answer the next call. My family didn't contact me unless they needed something. Their disapproval had created a wedge between us that none

of us had ever tried to remove. They lived their lives and I lived mine, and we came together on holidays to play at being a happy family, then we went our separate ways again.

Just how I liked it.

Which was why there was a pool of dread churning low in my gut. They never called.

My phone lit up and vibrated once more, my brother's name flashing on the screen. Ashe, sensing my concern, sidled up beside me to offer some comfort. I answered, putting it on speaker.

'Blake,' I greeted, then tried to push aside my worries with the snark I typically reserved for my Golden Child brother. 'You butt-dialing me or something?'

'Chance...' his voice came down the line strained, and my blood chilled in my veins. Something was definitely wrong.

'What is it?' I asked, cutting through the bullshit remarks that ran through my brain.

'It's Kali,' he said, his voice choking on his wife's name.

Immediately, I was on alert. Had she left him? Or had something happened...?

'Is she okay?'

'She's...' he sniffled. 'She's missing. She went on a girls' trip last weekend and just... she never came home.'

No... No, no, no.

‘Can you come home?’ he asked in a small, vulnerable voice that was so unlike him, I had no choice but to agree.

‘I can get the first flight out there tonight,’ I told him.

‘Where are you?’

‘Louisiana,’ I admitted, though if my family had paid any attention to my life or my career, then they’d know exactly where I was and why. ‘Few miles out from Baton Rouge.’

‘Oh, right. Of course. Do you need me to pick you up from the airport?’ he asked, always looking out for others even when he was the one who needed support. I used to think his selflessness was over-the-top and annoying, but now I just wanted to protect him from himself. He didn’t need to worry about me when his wife was missing .

God, please. Not Kali. Anyone but her.

‘Go,’ Ashe said, pushing me towards the door. ‘I’ve got things covered here.’

‘But the truck...’ I argued.

‘I’ll call Mike. His is bigger anyway.’

‘You sure?’

‘Yes. Now go. Your family needs you.’

She knew as well as I did that my family didn’t actually need me. I’d practically lived at her house throughout my teenage years since I’d felt more welcome there than in

my own home.

She also knew that my concern was mostly for Kali. She was the only one of them that I could tolerate. More than that, she was one of the only people in this world besides Ashe that I considered an actual friend. Her light shone so brightly, keeping me afloat even when I was drowning. And then my little brother had swooped in and stole the show, charming her into his bed, then his life, and eventually put a ring on her finger. She was the best thing that had ever happened to our family, hands down, and deserved a man like my brother. Blake was the nicest guy in the world.

Unfortunately, so much so that our parents had decided he was the only one of their children who deserved their affection.

It wasn't his fault. I didn't blame him. That didn't stop the resentment from sitting like a lead weight every time I thought of him, however. Resentment that I needed to push aside to be there for him.

Please, let her be okay.

'All right. Text me when you get back to the hotel,' I told her.

'Don't worry. I'll keep the equipment safe,' she teased, but it didn't land like it normally would have. Not when Kali was missing...

If she had gone on a trip over the weekend, that meant she would have been due home by Sunday. It was now Thursday. Why hadn't anyone tried to contact me before now? How long had it taken Blake to realise she wasn't coming home? That was four days she'd been missing. Had he waited this long to call the police?

What the fuck was going on?

I ran from the old, supposedly haunted house we'd been investigating in Devil's Swamp, a place we'd picked for its horrific past of murders and slave burials. The scent of rotten eggs and pollution burned my nostrils as my feet pounded loudly on the decking over the murky water. I didn't bother to check for gators in my haste, yet I caught the glint off of a few eyes in my periphery as I jumped in front of the wheel.

My bag was already in the car in preparation for our overnight stay, so I didn't need to run back to the hotel. If I left anything behind, Ashe and Mike would just pick it up for me anyway.

The drive to the airport was fast, only ten minutes, but it was so wrought with anxiety that it felt like a lifetime. My muscles were tense, my head was pounding from the headache that had formed behind my eyes, and my heart hurt at the prospect of anything happening to Kali.

Where are you, Goddess?

I returned the truck to the rental place, impatience making me snap at the slow pace the employee was moving. Thankfully, he sped up, and I was able to make it into the Baton Rouge Metropolitan Airport in under thirty minutes. Once inside, I managed to snag a ticket for a red-eye flight that left in a couple of hours. I would make it back to Oregon in about ten hours.

I texted Blake.

At the airport. Flight leaves at 11. Land at PDX at 6 AM. Meet at yours?

His response was immediate.

At Mom and Dad's. The house is too empty with Kali gone.

Fuck. My heart stuttered at that last word. Gone. She couldn't be gone. The world would be far too dismal without her in it.

No, I had to stop thinking like that. She hadn't come home, but that didn't mean she wasn't still alive. Four days without a word or a sign wasn't good, but this whole thing could still be just a huge misunderstanding. She was out there somewhere, we just had to find her.

'Good evening, passengers. This is the pre-boarding announcement for flight UA4941 to Portland. We are now inviting those passengers with small children and any passengers requiring special assistance to begin boarding at this time. Please have your boarding pass and identification ready. Regular boarding will begin in approximately ten minutes.'

The boarding call jolted me out of my thoughts, and I jerked my hand away from my mouth where I'd been anxiously chewing on my nails. I grabbed my bag and headed over to the gate, hovering just outside the small line that was forming as I waited for my turn to board. There was a man in a wheelchair and a woman with a baby, but the rest of us were solo flyers, it seemed.

Soon enough, I was on the plane and taking my seat by the window. Most of the seats remained empty, including the ones by me, so I took the opportunity to stretch out my legs when we were in the air and the captain removed the seatbelt sign. I tilted my head back against the headrest and shut my eyes, feigning sleep since my mind was a whirlwind of chaotic thoughts. Nobody bothered me, which was the goal.

The problem came with the images my brain supplied me, flashing behind my closed eyelids like some kind of macabre foreshadowing. Visions of Kali being kidnapped, tied up, and beaten in somebody's basement. Or taken to a remote cabin in the woods where a serial killer was digging a grave in the backyard, her body wrapped up in a sheet. Clumps of dirt as they fell on her pale, lifeless face.

I tried desperately to think of her alive, but there must have been a part of me that subconsciously knew. I could feel the despair settling into my soul despite the fight I put up. And I fought. Hard.

By the time the plane landed in PDX, I was a mess of fried nerves, anxiety, and grief. Although I hated that last one the most, it didn't change the fact that it was there. I was feeling it, and it wasn't budging. Instead, as I waited for my Uber to arrive, the emotion continued to build until I knew, without even needing to look at my reflection, that I was a complete wreck .

When my ride arrived, the driver seemed reluctant to let me in, but the wild desperation in my eyes must have softened him enough to follow through on the drive. It was silent between us on the way. He didn't try to talk, though he didn't keep shooting concerned glances at me through the rearview mirror. I, however, sat like a statue. It felt as if I had even moved an inch, then it would make all of this real. That my worst fears would come true.

When he pulled up outside the house I had grown up in, only coming to visit during holidays when my presence was required to pretend like we were just one, big, happy family, it didn't feel like a holiday. It felt like I was arriving for a fucking funeral.

Mom rushed out as soon as the car pulled up, hands waving wildly as she pulled open the door and practically dragged me out.

'Have you heard from her?' she asked. 'I know you keep in touch. She must have texted you or something ,' she begged, hands fisted in my shirt that was already wrinkled from the journey.

My head shake felt like I'd rammed a battering ram right into her stomach. Her legs gave out, and I whipped my arms out to hold her up.

‘This isn’t like her,’ she muttered, though I didn’t think she was actually talking to me, more like speaking her thoughts out loud. ‘She wouldn’t just up and disappear like this. Something bad has happened. I can feel it.’

It was wrong of me to agree, but I couldn’t help myself. The words were ripped from my throat without my permission, the universe demanding the truth, even without the evidence. ‘I feel it, too.’

And when I practically dragged us both inside the house and saw my brother’s face for the first time since he’d called, I could see the truth written there, too.

In the following months, any hope we tried to hang onto was purged, burned from our very souls each time our search efforts came up empty. Eventually, the police stopped looking for her alive and moved her case to the homicide unit. And then her case just went cold. It didn’t matter how many times we begged or pleaded, we were no longer looking for her. We were looking for her body .

Kali was gone, and she wasn’t coming back.

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Kali

He was back.

And he wasn't alone.

The girl was limp as he dragged her unconscious form out of the trunk, throwing her over his shoulder like a sack of rotten potatoes rather than a human being. An innocent woman who had never once asked to cross paths with the evil that was my husband.

Or was it ex-husband now? 'Til death do us part, right?

My untethered form glided behind him, and I enjoyed the chill my presence sent down his spine. I watched as the little hairs at the base of his neck rose, fascinated, yet frustrated that it was all I could manage. I couldn't influence the living world the way I did when I was alive, no longer able to touch and manipulate my surroundings, but that chill was a hard-won victory. A few months ago, I couldn't even manage that, but I'd been practising.

I'd take the win wherever I could get it.

I didn't know how long it would take me until I could actually start to make enough progress to go forward with my plans. I wasn't even sure if my plans would be possible to enact, let alone carry out, but that was the only thing keeping me going. The waiting. The planning. The practising. It was all for one purpose.

Vengeance.

I was going to make him pay for all the horrors he had inflicted on so many unwitting innocents. I was going to make him suffer for his crimes, for the lives he's so selfishly taken. And I was going to make sure the world saw him for the devil he truly was.

His mask was near perfect. I had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker. He was the ideal man, and I'd been so proud to call him mine. My wonderful, loving, hardworking, compassionate husband.

But it was all a lie.

Every word. Every promise. Every touch. Every kiss. All of it was a carefully cultivated facade that I had been so willing to believe. That everyone believed.

There was no sign of that man now. His sunny smile I had loved so much, the one that crinkled in the corners of his eyes and revealed a single dimple in his right cheek, was replaced by a blank, cold stare. There was nothing human about it. No emotion. Not even anticipation of the horrendous act he was about to commit. Just... nothing .

Nothing but the darkness that swirled inside him like a living, breathing, malignant entity.

His name brought a stab of dark humour into my existence. The irony in it was no longer lost on me. It was like his parents foreshadowed his true personality before he was even born. Blake meant black, just like his soul. Withered and rotten, not a glimmer of light to be seen.

A scourge in our midst that had remained hidden so well we hadn't even realised it was sucking our souls right out of us and then giving it a fucking hug.

If my body wasn't decomposing beneath the dirt he'd shovelled on top of it, I would have tried to bleach every inch of myself clean, strip every layer of skin from my body that he could have possibly touched.

Not for the first time since I'd died was I grateful that our attempts to have a child were unsuccessful. I didn't even want to imagine...

The door to the basement squeaked open on rusty hinges, the sound creepy and foreboding, just like in every horror movie ever made. The ones I used to love watching, especially with his brother, Chance, came to visit, his obsession with all things ghostly and paranormal ensuring he only picked the best, most realistic movies. It was because of him that I wasn't surprised that I'd come back as a ghost. He hunted them, after all, and published his evidence for the world to see. Not that everyone believed it, though no one had been able to debunk him, much to their frustration. Chance was the real deal.

I wondered if his obsession with death and the unknown was an indication that he was just like Blake, but there was no way for me to find out. Not unless he showed up here one day, which didn't seem likely. He hadn't so far, and I'd been dead for quite some time now. I didn't know exactly how long. Time moved differently for me than it had when I was alive. I didn't age. There was nowhere for me to be. I simply existed, floating in the aether of the veil of death.

I wasn't alone, either. The souls of the other girls Blake had killed and buried here haunted this place just as I did, though their focus remained on staying as far away from the man who had murdered them. Scared, even in death, like he could somehow still hurt them.

It was ridiculous. He was unaware that we still lingered.

I often wondered if there was some way to move on to a better place, to find peace

and comfort in the afterlife. I didn't think so, though. If so, why were we still here? What was our purpose, other than to watch as life moved on without us? But no matter how many times I asked the question, nobody answered.

Blake's boots echoed off the concrete steps that led down to his murder room, the girl's hair swinging in matted clumps down his back. Those boots were the catalyst to my demise. I hadn't noticed them before, and suddenly they were sitting behind some boxes in the garage, covered in mud and blood. When I'd asked Blake about them, he'd simply looked at me strangely as if I was imagining things, and when I tried to show him, they were gone.

If I hadn't caught that small smirk as he'd turned away, convinced he'd successfully gaslighted me into believing it was all in my head, I would have believed him.

His smug pride got him caught.

My lack of discretion got me killed.

The thud of the new girl's body hitting the thin, lumpy mattress jolted me from my memories and back to the present. I watched, unable to do anything to help her, as he cuffed her wrists and ankles to a chain connected to the concrete wall. It was a position I was familiar with in more ways than one. It was how I found the victim that I'd tried to save. It was also how he'd held me captive for four whole days before finally ending my misery. Or so he'd thought. I was still here, still miserable, only now I had a deep-seated hunger for revenge.

One day, I assured myself. One day, he would experience the same pain and suffering he'd caused us all, and everyone would know what a monster he was.

But something was different this time. Something that froze me where I hovered over them. The glint of a ring on his left hand, right where I had put one all those years

ago. This one was gold instead of silver, with an inscription on it that I couldn't read from here, so I floated closer.

If I'd had working lungs, it would have knocked the breath right out of me.

Always and forever.

The bastard had gotten married.

A hurricane of emotions raged within me as that information sank in.

First, how dare he? How dare he move on after killing me, after everything I had done for him, all the love I had given him? How dare he replace me so easily, like I meant nothing?

Second, fear for the woman he had managed to ensnare had the air around me swirling with a chill that took a lot of energy to create but only succeeded in ruffling Blake's and the girl's hair like a small, insignificant breeze.

Third, had it really been that long? Had enough time passed since I'd been gone that it was now socially acceptable for him to move on? Had I been forgotten, cast aside and relegated to nothing more than a memory?

The disgust I felt for myself over the feelings that still lingered for Blake was the worst, however. I didn't know why I kept expecting him to feel some sort of remorse or grief over what he'd done to me. He wasn't capable of human emotion. Yet, I still found myself wishing and waiting for a sign, any sign, that he had ever actually loved me.

And each time he failed to do so, I let myself down a little more with the disappointment and grief I felt over losing him. Not this creature born for the deepest

pits of hell, but the man I had once known. The man I had loved and devoted my life to. Some part of me held on, refusing to believe he was a fictional character Blake had created to fool me. To fool us all.

But the evidence on the contrary was staggering.

Still, his actions continued to chip away at the tiny flicker of hope I just couldn't seem to extinguish, no matter how many times I watched him kidnap, torture, and murder someone else.

And that, more than anything, was where most of my anger stemmed. I hated that he still had so much power over me. He didn't deserve it. He certainly hadn't earned it. I needed to know what it would take for me to finally acknowledge that my Blake had never existed in the first place. It was like I had fallen in love with a character from a movie, only that movie was my life, and it wasn't supposed to be fake.

It made me question everything I had ever known. Everything I had ever felt.

Fuck him for that.

I watched, equal parts intrigued and repulsed as his hand hovered over the girl's head, like he couldn't decide whether to stroke her hair or leave her alone.

'It's a bit late for that, honey,' I spoke out loud, my voice nothing more than a mere echo that only I could hear. 'You've already irrevocably violated her.'

As if my words reached him, he pulled away, wiping his hand on the front of his shirt like even the thought of touching her made him feel dirty. It was another contradiction about him that made no sense to me. I'd watched him carry countless girls into this very basement, tying them up and showing them a strange version of what could almost be described as affection, only to be repulsed by them a moment

later.

Considering he dismembered the bodies when he was done with them, sometimes while they were still alive, it was yet another mystery that made up Blake Dodd.

His phone rang, cutting through the oppressive silence like one of the knives hanging on the far wall, gleaming with malicious promise. It seemed to take him aback, however. His thick, neatly trimmed blonde brows rose in a genuine display of surprise, but with one last glance at the unconscious girl, he accepted the call, moving the phone to his ear.

It was like watching a completely separate person. As soon as the decision was made to answer his mask fell back into place. The transition was so seamless that it even made me wonder if the man I'd just been looking at was the same.

If I needed confirmation that my Blake was nothing more than a character, then I was getting it right now.

'Hi, honey,' he spoke into the phone, his sunshine smile making an appearance. The same one that crinkled around his eyes and dimpled his cheeks. The one that used to make my heart go pitter-patter in my chest and butterflies swarm in my stomach.

All I felt now was an echo. It twisted inside me like a shadow. Mocking. Taunting. Begging for a reaction, one that it knew I couldn't give.

'What are you doing home so soon?' he asked. If it weren't for his clenched fists, I never would have recognised the frustration thrumming through him. It was a small concession that allowed his true self to peer through the facade. He thought no one was here to see it. Oh, how wrong he was.

'I'm just out running an errand. Don't worry, I'll be home soon. I promise. You can

tell me all about it then, okay, honey?’

If my stomach could have churned, it would have. The thought of him speaking that way to someone so ignorant of his true intentions was sickening. The fact that I was once that woman was even more so.

I followed him as he locked up the basement, jingled his keys, and got back behind the wheel of his car. His dream car. The car I’d bought him for our second anniversary.

If only I’d known why he wanted something with so much storage space...

He drove off, silver paint flashing, until the red of his taillights was all I could see. Eventually, he turned off at the intersection that led to the main road, beyond my sight and my ability to follow.

I wanted to. I strained to. But I couldn’t move. It was like there was some sort of barrier blocking me from moving too far away from my body. At first, it was so small I was restricted to my grave, then I managed to push it further and further until I was able to reach the cabin, then even further beyond that so I could wander the woods. Still, it wasn’t enough. I have to push harder. Faster. I need to break free from this prison.

I just didn’t know how.

I wasn’t strong enough. Not yet. I needed to figure out how to give myself enough power to move freely, to interact with the living realm.

To take everything from him, the way he did to me.

A low groan drifted on the breeze from inside the cabin. It was faint, but the silence

allowed me to catch it. A second noise, louder this time, was followed by a whimper, and I floated back inside to keep her company. It was the least I could do, even if she couldn't sense me.

I'd been where she was, once. I knew exactly what she was going through. The drugs running through her system were making her groggy. Her head would be pounding, her vision blurred, and her body wouldn't respond. At least not right away, but it wouldn't matter, regardless. When she finally figured out how to make her limbs move, they would be stuck by the shackles chaining her in place. The bed and the bucket beside it were the only things she would be able to reach.

And soon, she'd be dead. Just like me. Just like all the others. Just like all the ones still to find themselves trapped in this basement.

And there was nothing, not a single thing, that I could do about it.

For now.

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Chance

‘C hance, are you even listening to me?’ my mother’s voice came down the phone line, frustration tinging her words.

I dragged myself out of my dissociated state long enough to respond, though my eyes refused to refocus and my brain was still moving slowly. ‘Sorry, Mom. I got distracted.’

Her sigh was full of unspoken emotions and opinions, but she wisely kept them to herself. She had been more interested in my life ever since we’d lost Kali, but now that Blake had remarried, she had another girl in the family to dote on.

I hated how quickly everyone had just moved on, like she’d never meant anything. I was pretty sure Mom only felt bad because she no longer had a daughter to go shopping with, but that had been rectified when Dakota had joined the family. I wanted to hate her. She’d replaced Kali in no time. Yet, no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn’t bring myself to hate the genuinely sweet woman.

She wasn’t a problem. She just wasn’t Kali.

Not so long ago, a wet nose would have nudged my hand, demanding attention and jolting me the rest of the way out of my blank stare. My fingers automatically twitched to scratch behind Sage’s ears, until I glanced at the photo of him above the tiny blue urn, and my heart clenched with grief for my lost best friend. It was a theme in my life, it seemed, to lose those I cared about the most.

It took me a while to break through it and finally process what Mom was saying.

‘... orange shoes. I mean, who wears orange with pink? It was absolutely atrocious .’

Ashe. She was talking about Ashe’s sneakers that she’d changed into after wearing heels all day for Blake’s wedding. A wedding that took place two whole weeks ago.

‘Mom, her feet hurt. She changed them while she waited for the taxi so she wouldn’t have to walk over those cobblestones in her heels. I don’t think she cared about the colour. And she was going home anyway. What’s the big deal?’

Her scoff sounded extra loud in my ear. ‘Honestly, Chance. It’s like you have no respect for yourself by continuing to associate with people of her... status.’

‘Mom, life is about more than just money, you know,’ I reminded her, the argument one we’d had many times over the years. It was practically scripted at this point.

‘It’s not about the money, dear, it’s about how one presents oneself. Your little friend does not meet the standards of the family. We are esteemed members of our community, and we cannot continue to be associated with the riffraff. Not after...’

She didn’t have to finish for me to understand. She had always been uptight about the people I was friends with, constantly pushing men and women of a certain pedigree my way, and Ashe had never been categorised as high class. It was what I loved the most about her. But ever since Kali had gone missing – and eventually pronounced dead only a few short months ago, each month like a hot knife digging deeper into my soul – Mom’s distaste for anyone who could be considered beneath us (according to her standards) had increased tenfold. She figured that their smaller bank accounts meant they were criminals, ready and waiting in the shadows to snatch another one of us up.

Just like what we believed had happened to Kali.

Seven years later, and we were still no closer to answers. Her disappearance remained a mystery, but there was no denying that she was no longer with us. Evidence or no, we could all feel it in the core of our beings. She was dead and had been for a long time.

‘I just think you’d be better off with some real friends, with real jobs. You need a wife, Chance. Everyone is beginning to think you’re... gay,’ she whispered the last word like it was some sort of sin. If Blake had come out as gay, everyone would have clapped him on the back and offered up their gay friends as tribute. But he was the Golden Child. More than that, he was the youngest. As the oldest, it was expected of me to fall in line, marry first, produce an heir to our family’s empire, and continue on the legacy of greed. But that just wasn’t me.

My interests were obscure, and my career even more so. I wasn’t highly paid, but my trust fund was more than enough to ensure Ashe, Mike and I had the equipment and the funds we needed to continue our research. Research many considered bogus, but I’d had enough experiences with the occult to know that it was real. I just needed proof.

Proof that had eluded me, just what had happened to Kali.

My heart clenched as her face flashed in my mind. So open, sweet, and innocent. Dark lashes framing big blue eyes. Pink, pouty lips that pulled back to reveal perfectly straight, white teeth, and flawless skin that just begged to be touched. She was a stunner in more ways than one, and I couldn’t understand how Blake had moved on so damn quickly. She was everything to him once upon a time, just as he had been to her.

And now there was another woman in the house that Kali had picked out for them

with the intent to raise a family. A family that had never even had the chance to exist.

‘Mom,’ I said, my tone firmer now that my best friend was being insulted and the memory of Kali had been brought up. ‘Ashe isn’t going anywhere.’

‘You should find a woman of your station, Chance. Before it’s too late,’ she continued to push.

I sighed, the sound long-suffering. ‘How many times do I have to tell you? Ashe is gay. We’re not together.’

But it was clear she wasn’t listening and didn’t intend to. She bulldozed right over my announcement, one I had made countless times over the years, ever since Ashe finally came out when she’d found her now-wife, Gloria. But, alas, when my mother had made up her mind about something, the truth no longer mattered.

‘Just think about it? For me? You’ll be forty before you know it, and I’m still waiting on grandbabies. Lord knows Blake has been through enough, and you know that Dakota is having fertility issues. You’re my only hope.’

I didn’t know that, actually, but my heart went out to her. Dakota and Blake were constantly talking about what they’d name their kids, how they’d decorate a nursery, the type of toys they’d buy, etcetera, etcetera. It was sickening, but only because that was Kali’s dream, once upon a time. She’d always wanted kids. Wanted them with Blake. And now another woman was attempting to live out that dream, except she was struggling with it, too.

Blake sure did have bad luck that all the women he chose ended up with fertility issues, but that was also my bad luck. I was the only screw-up allowed in this family. If he couldn’t produce the heirs Mom wanted and Dad demanded, then I was once again dragged back under the spotlight. A spotlight that highlighted everything they

detested about me.

The disappointment .

The black sheep.

The freak.

‘Well, I need you to be there for the charity luncheon. Dakota is going to be there, but Blake can’t make it. He has a big case at work. He’ll be in surgery for hours performing a groundbreaking new procedure. Understandably, he’ll be too preoccupied to attend, which means you need to step up, son.’

Ah, she was pulling out the big guns. She only ever called me son , a reluctant acknowledgement of our familial ties, when she wanted something from me. And that something usually meant putting on a suit.

‘I’ll be there, Mom. I already promised I would be.’

‘You’d better, Chance. Someone will be there that I want you to meet. She’s from a very prominent and well-respected family, and I expect you to make her feel very welcome,’ she informed me, her tone dripping with insistence and expectation. I pulled the phone away from my face so she wouldn’t hear me sigh. Great. Another one of her schemes.

‘I will be pleasant and welcoming to all the guests, Mother,’ I said, refusing to call her Mom when she was in one of her fix-it moods. I didn’t think I needed fixing, but my mother’s wants were the only ones that mattered, according to her. Overbearing didn’t even begin to cover it.

I couldn’t allow her to respond, however, or I’d give her an opening to keep shoving

her demands down my throat. So, I politely informed her that Ashe was calling, and that I needed to go, then I hung up before her voice could become even more shrill.

The phone clattered to the table in front of me as I buried my face in my hands, fingers rubbing at my temples to soothe the throbbing headache that was forming. The one that hadn't truly gone away since I'd gotten that call all those years ago that had brought me back home.

Home . It was such a strange word. And even stranger concept. What did it even mean? I'd heard some people consider it a place, like a town or a house, something tangible. I'd heard others, like Ashe, consider it a person or a group of people. A family. It didn't matter where she went, as long as she was with her people, she was home.

For me, I'd never found any sort of home, either in a place or with people. The closest I ever got was with Ashe and Mikey as our crew travelled the world documenting and researching the paranormal. I'd always felt a sense of wrongness, like I didn't quite belong, or like I was missing something vital to my being. That sensation grew from a small gap in my heart to a gaping hole in my soul the first moment I realised the Kali was never coming back.

Losing her was like losing a limb, not that anyone understood the scope of my feelings when it came to her. Kali Foster was my friend long before Blake had ever entered the picture, but no one seemed to care, or even remember that little fact. She was the one person on this planet who had grounded me, made me feel safe and wanted and secure. She'd never once condemned me for my interests, obscure as they were. Instead, she'd sat with me for hours while we mapped out the stars and their meanings. She'd researched local places that were said to be haunted, or urban legends with no explanation, giving me something to focus on when things were bad at home. She was patient with me when I went on one of my tangents, though she never once made me feel like I wasn't worth listening to.

Ashe may have been my best friend, Mikey a close second, but Kali? She was so much more.

Living without her felt like existing without breath. Utterly impossible, yet I was somehow still here.

The phone buzzed on the table, the sound drilling into my head with a force that made me groan. Both from the sound and from the prospect of someone else needing me. It took a herculean effort just to reach out and flip the screen upright to catch the name of the incoming caller. I relaxed a bit when I saw it was only Ashe, but that didn't stop the desire to curl up in a ball and wait until my body gave out. I already felt like I was withering away into nothing most days, why not die that way, too?

Alas, there were still people walking this earth that I cared about enough not to give up. Not totally.

I swiped right to answer the call, then pressed the button that put her on loudspeaker so I wouldn't have to hold the phone. 'Ashe.'

'Uh oh. I know that tone. What happened?'

The breath I released felt shallow despite the length, the constriction around my chest refusing to allow enough air to enter my lungs in the first place. At least, that's what it felt like. I hadn't been able to take a full, deep breath in seven long years.

'My mother called.'

'Hit me with it.'

'She hated your getaway sneakers at the wedding. You're riffraff. We're in a relationship, and she hates it. Oh, and she's setting me up at the charity luncheon with

one of her rich friends' daughters.'

'Good. True. Gross. And is she hot?'

I snorted out a half-hearted laugh. 'I have no idea.'

'Chance, if you have the opportunity to get laid, take it. Please, dear god, just take it. You need a decent fuck before your brooding turns you to stone.'

'I get laid,' I argued.

'Your hand doesn't count. You need a real woman. One with a wet, warm vagina for that tiny prick of yours.'

'I take offence to that. Also, you're beginning to sound like my mother.'

'Your mother talks about your tiny prick?'

'No. You know what I meant.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

I clicked my tongue, done with this conversation. 'Why did you call, Ashe?'

'We've got a new job. It's close, too, so you can still make it to all those family functions your mother keeps dragging you to. Honestly, Chance. I don't know why you don't just cut ties already. She's a fucking soul-sucking leech.'

'No arguments there, but you know I'm not sticking around for her.' Blake was the only reason I came back, and he was the only reason I was staying. Despite everything, I loved my little brother. It wasn't his fault our parents preferred him over

me.

Ashe's tone gentled as the topic took a turn she knew would set me down a dark path if she didn't tread lightly. 'He's married now, Chance. Let Dakota take care of him for once.'

'He's married again ,' I corrected. 'And Dakota does enough for everyone as it is. If I can help, even if it's just getting Mom and Dad off her back for a little while, then I will.'

'I know,' she breathed, the sound dejected. I tried not to think too much about why. 'Okay, well, this job is in Klamath County. It's only a few hours' drive away, so you can still be there when the she-devil summons you.'

'Klamath County, huh?' I asked, my interest piqued. 'Tell me more.'

'There've been accounts of a strange man loitering around the Little Deschutes River down in Gilchrist. Sightings have been reported up and down Highway 97.'

'Okay...' I drew out the word, waiting for the punchline.

'Apparently, according to witness statements, people are dying left and right, and this guy is always at the scene. Yet, nobody can identify him, there's no evidence of him left behind. Not a single footprint, fingerprint, or strand of hair. Some even claimed that, as soon as they spotted him, he disappeared into thin air.'

'Wait, so this guy is killing people? Like... still?'

'I don't know. That's the mystery of it. The cause of death for a few of the victims were released, and they all drowned in the river. But get this, there are signs of a struggle, but no signs of anyone holding them under. It's like they were drowned by-'

‘A ghost,’ I finished for her, a flicker of excitement alighting within me. We’d never had a case like this. Most of our research and discoveries were from the past. Ghosts were nothing but echoes of the past that manifested in the present. Some could create cold currents in the air. Others were able to whisper their secrets in your ear. Never had any spectral being had access to the physical realm enough to kill, however. It was unprecedented.

Unless...

‘Not just any ghost,’ she continued, her tone dramatic. ‘A poltergeist.’

‘Fuck,’ I breathed the word, barely above a whisper. The implications of such a discovery were insane. But also dangerous. ‘Whatever this is, it’s not just a ghost. If it turns out this killer is alive, or even if they are a spectral being, people are dying, Ashe. Are you sure this is a case you want to take?’

‘I’ve already cleared it with Mikey and Gloria. They’re in, Chance. You’re the last piece of the puzzle. Say yes.’

I blew out a long breath through pursed lips. ‘I don’t know, Ashe. This could be more than we can handle.’

‘Don’t you worry about that, my friend. We’ve got it covered.’

‘How?’ I asked, unconvinced.

‘Mikey’s already been in touch with a priest that’s been known to perform successful exorcisms, and Gloria’s agreed to come with us on this one. Apparently, business is low and won’t pick up again until spooky season, so she’s willing to use her psychic powers for us.’

‘Seems like you’ve already got things figured out,’ I snarked, though there was no venom in it.

‘Come on, Chance. You know you want to. Just say yes.’

‘You’re not giving me much of a choice,’ I admitted. ‘I can’t let you lot go off half-cocked, even with a priest and a psychic in your arsenal. Knowing you, you’ll get the killer’s attention, and not in a good way.’

Her chuckle was way too mischievous for the accusation. ‘I know, right? Tact isn’t exactly my forte, which is why we need you.’

‘Yeah. You got me. There are so many ways this can go wrong, but... I’m in.’

‘Yes,’ she hissed, and I could practically see her fist-pumping the air. ‘You’re the best, Chance! I love you!’

My lips tilted up in a smile at her genuine enthusiasm, the hole in my heart filling a little even if the one in my soul was too big to ever be sealed. This, right here, was what kept me going every single day. My best friends. The thrill of hunting ghosts. It made it at least a little bit worth it.

Worth it enough to stay.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:20 am

Kali

The girl's throat was raw from screaming, the sound scratching at my own in an echo of my last days alive. Her hair was plastered to her head with sweat, her skin covered in a sheen of perspiration that had her shivering on the lumpy mattress. She'd wriggled so much while trying to free her wrists and ankles that one of the springs had popped through, slicing up her flesh in a macabre foreshadowing of what was to come.

He wasn't going to like that. He preferred to work with a blank canvas. Those knives hanging from the wall weren't just for show. They were his creative muse. His paintbrush, if you will. The only genuine smile I had ever seen on his face was when he was pressing the sharp edge of one of those blades into the unmarred flesh of his victims.

When it was me at his mercy, he'd attempted to show remorse. At least up until I'd called him out on his bullshit and spat in his face. When I'd told him to just get it over with, he'd smiled cruelly, evil glinting in the black depths of his eyes. He'd taken his time, just to spite me.

I could still feel the cool bite of the blade as he made his first cut. The slow drag as it split open my skin. The stinging sensation. The blood that flowed over with every throb of my pulse. The drip, drip, drip of that very same blood as it puddled on the concrete floor beneath me whenever he would leave me alone. He spent so much time upstairs, the sounds of the TV, the radio, and the clanging of pots and pans as he cooked drifted down to me, muffled by the heavy-duty door.

Just as they would have done now, if only he didn't have a wife to go home to again. I'd been that wife once, the one who had dragged him away from his 'fishing' trips because I wanted to spend time with the man I'd loved.

I was such a fucking fool.

'No one is going to hear you,' I told the girl despite knowing she couldn't hear me. 'There's no one around for miles. There are about twenty acres of land between us and the closest neighbour. Screaming is just going to make you more uncomfortable, and pulling on the chains will just waste energy and make you more dehydrated.'

I'd watched countless girls come to die here, all of whom went through the same process. First, there was the begging. The pleading was painful to witness because I knew just how useless it was. That hope of rescue or escape was still present, hence the screaming, but it would soon be extinguished.

Next came the anger. They would lash out, try to fight back, and only succeed in hurting themselves and turning him on. It was his favourite part, because that was where he got to break them. He got off on watching the fight leave their bodies, their will to live diminishing into nothing more than the barest whisper of hope. A dream. A nightmare.

Lastly, they would finally give up. Some became catatonic. Others begged for the sweet release of death's embrace, unaware of the lack of peace coming their way.

And beyond that, when they finally took their last breaths, their souls would detach from their bodies as he buried their segmented bodies in the makeshift graveyard behind the cabin, hovering in the vicinity for all eternity. There was no moving on. No peace to be found. Simply a meaningless existence thrust upon us by the whims of a madman.

A clever madman, however. The holes he dug were significantly deeper than six feet, and he would only fill them up halfway before going hunting. Then, he'd bury the carcass of whatever animal was unfortunate to cross his path. Another measure taken to hide the bodies, just in case the police ever did discover his actions. A cunning means to trick whoever was digging into believing it was just an animal buried rather than a body.

He was the single most devious man I had ever had the misfortune of meeting.

I got bored of waiting for the girl to quiet down. They were the most interesting to me in that limbo state between their panic, realising they weren't going anywhere, and before Blake returned. Their thoughts were a whirlwind behind their eyes, important moments of their lives flashing through their minds as they latched onto whatever good they could hold onto in their darkest hours. I liked to watch, to see their expressions play out on their faces. Perhaps it was invasive of me, but it made me feel just that little bit less alone. Just for a little while. I got to pretend that I knew them. Sometimes I would make up stories about them in my head, giving them a life and memories prompted by those expressions.

But it never lasted. Eventually, they would die, and then they would ignore me just like all the others. A few of the newer ones attempted to talk to me until they found out I had married the psycho. Then bets were off. Most of them stuck to themselves. A few of them clustered together. After a while, none of them talked. It was a miserable, lonely existence.

It made me hate him even more.

Hate didn't even cover it. I loathed the man. Alive, I had never wanted to see him or anyone else hurt. My bleeding heart was one of the things he'd claimed to love about me the most. He'd taken that from me, too, to a degree. I didn't care about the girls beyond adding another reason to the already extensive list for why I wanted him to

suffer.

More than that, I wanted him to beg the way his victims did, only to find no mercy from me. We were far past mercy. Now, there was only Hell, and I would drag him there with me if I had to.

Blake likely wasn't coming back for a while, so I decided to find something else to do in the meantime. I floated through the ceiling up into the main living space of the cabin, leaving the girl in favour of my other favourite pastime. My only other pastime, really. Practicing.

I'd been a big fan of horror stories when I was alive, my bookshelves filled with Stephen King, Richard Matheson, and Ramsey Campbell. I had a few of the classics, such as Poe and Stoker, but I much preferred the modern take.

As much as Blake had supported my interests by supplying my collection, he'd never shown an interest himself. Until I realised he was living a horror story as the antagonist, and then his disregard for it made more sense. Wouldn't want people to think he was anything but the sweet, innocent, life-saving surgeon he portrayed himself to be. No, it wasn't Blake who went to see the latest scary blockbuster with me, but his brother, Chance.

The ghost hunter.

Sometimes I wished he were here, until I remembered that he was related to my killer. I couldn't help but wonder just how close they really were, and how much Chance actually knew about Blake's... extracurricular activities. If he was in on it somehow, using his ghost-hunting business to distract and draw the attention away from Blake, or worse, he was somehow involved in a more hands-on capacity, I didn't know what I would do.

Chance had been my friend long before I'd ever even met Blake. We'd met in middle school and became fast friends, up until Blake and I started dating and he found a closer friendship with Ashe. Still, the love for one another was there and never went away. Besides Blake, he had been my favourite of all the Dodds, even if his last name was Weiss after his biological father. His friendship meant so fucking much to me for so much of my life...

And then there were their parents. Mallory and Calvin. They'd treated me like one of their own from day one. Mallory had been especially excited to induct me into the family. Her desire for a daughter when she'd been saddled with two sons prompted her to treat me like the daughter she'd never had. When my mother had been diagnosed with cancer when I was a teenager, she'd been right there with me the whole time, supporting us all in any way she could. And right behind her had been her doting husband, Calvin, my father-in-law. He'd been as much of a father to me as my own.

If that entire family had duped me, they were all going to pay.

Whereas my fury when I was alive pumped through me with a fiery vengeance, drumming inside of me with each pulse of my heart, I no longer had a pulse to push it through. Now, it was like an ember sparking in my core, catching on the kindling of each and every one of my grievances, and consuming me whole. Most days, I imagined I felt like a witch burning at the stake. Some days I wished I had been, because then I would have been killed for a reason. This nonsensical bullshit, the purposeless way my last breath had been stolen, the inconsequential pain and suffering that no one knew I had experienced because no one had saved me. No one even knew that I'd needed saving in the first place. That's what got me.

Luckily, my anger helped with my ghost girl practice sessions. The heightened emotions gave me something to focus on, a goal, a purpose. That fiery fury filled me with energy, like I was the flame and I was feeding off of all the negative emotions

my death and betrayal had dredged up.

I wanted them. I wanted to consume them. I wanted to use them to learn all that I could, to get as strong as I could. I wanted to weaponise them.

I wanted my face, my rage , to be the last thing Blake ever saw, and I wanted him to realise just how much he'd fucked up.

But to do that, I needed to learn to control it. This power that built within me, this supernatural energy that flowed through my very being, that kept me grounded on this earth even if I was displaced into an overlying realm, was wild and feral. I knew innately that taming it wasn't an option, but it needed direction. It needed to be coaxed. Fuck, it needed to be romanced .

And dammit if I wasn't going to do just that.

If death had taught me one thing, it was that power was the only lover I needed. Power didn't betray me like a man. Power didn't destroy me just for the sake of it. It didn't do what I wanted whenever I wanted it to, but that was because I hadn't earned it yet. I needed to prove to it that I was worth listening to, worth its loyalty, and then we could exist together in perfect harmony.

It wasn't good or bad. There was no hero or villain. Power simply was, and there was a peace in that. A release.

I wasn't human anymore, but something other. Something that now had the ability to tap into the deep well of energy that coursed through everything in every realm. I was a motherfucking ghost, and I was going to be the best there ever was.

As the rage took hold, the heat consuming me, I reached deep inside of myself as I chased it, desperate to grab hold. It wasn't something I could hold in my hands,

however. The power was even less tangible than I was, and I floated through walls, for fuck's sake. When I first started attempting to reach it, I grew frustrated very quickly. So many attempts, all of which failed.

Capturing it was a no-go.

Trapping it never worked.

Trying to force it to obey my commands was ridiculously stupid, because its bite was just as bad as its bark.

I had it figured out, now, though. It required gentleness. A soft touch, just barely brushing against it, teasing it until it wanted more. I needed to get its attention and convince it to channel itself through me the way I imagined.

The only remaining question was how?

As I reached out with my mind, imagining my fingers extending in invitation, I managed the barest graze against it. It paused, curious, and prodded me back, then darted around me in a taunting dance before disappearing entirely.

If I'd had working lungs, I would have been panting from the exertion. As it stood, I was depleted of enough energy that I needed to rest. I didn't sleep. I didn't have a body that needed to shut down to mend itself every night after a day spent exerting energy, but I did still need to recharge after spending so much of myself in my attempts.

Today was a good day. The power had acknowledged me, even interacted with me, before disappearing again. That was a good sign.

It gave me hope.

I smiled to myself as I returned to where the pieces of my remains were buried, eager to sit and be still as I drew more energy from them, but my smile immediately fell from my face as I caught sight of a shadowy figure watching me from inside the treeline. I couldn't see any features. There was no height, no face, no eyes. It was just a shadow, like tendrils of black smoke writhing in a mass that vaguely resembled a humanoid shape. Yet, despite the lack of eyes for me to latch onto, I could sense they were watching me.

They had witnessed my attempt at harnessing the power I had conjured, and something about it must have intrigued them. But was that intrigue innocent or malicious?

'Who are you?' I called out, my voice both loud like a sonic boom through the stillness, yet quiet like a whisper on the wind. Eerie. Supernatural.

Haunting.

Ha. I cracked myself up.

When I got no response, I wasn't surprised, but there was something unsettling about watching the writhing mass of pure darkness as it stared at me, especially considering I was unable to pinpoint its facial features. Did it even have a face anymore, or had it become something so dark and twisted that it no longer resembled a human being?

Objectively, I knew that I shouldn't have been afraid. There wasn't anything that could hurt me anymore, at least physically, because I wasn't a physical being. Yet, there was something so incredibly chilling about the shadow creature, like it was an abomination against nature.

Or perhaps it wasn't so much an abomination, but a being that had been changed by death into something more than just a simple ghost. Something that thrived off death.

A hunter of the dead.

The epiphany settled into my being like a lead weight. I hadn't encountered anything on this side of death that posed a threat to me. I was supposed to be the only threat around here. Yet, I could tell that whatever that thing was, whoever they were now, was bigger and badder than me.

I didn't like that. Not one bit.

Fear tried to take hold, but I refused to let it. I had been the prey in life; I blatantly refused to be anything but the predator in death.

And still, as we continued to take stock of one another, neither one of us made any move to close the distance. We were both simply watching, waiting, allowing the silence to stretch into something else entirely. I got the sense that it hadn't decided yet if I was prey, or if I was something more, but I had already decided long ago that I would be that something more.

'I won't make it easy on you,' I told it, knowing it could hear me despite the distance. Sound here travelled differently than it did in the realm of the living. Everything was simultaneously too quiet and too loud, a boom and a sigh.

The shadows dissolved in response, leaving behind nothing more than a deep, male chuckle that was far more amused than it should have been. The sound reverberated throughout the space, rattling the bound energy that made up my phantasmic form until I felt like I would vibrate apart.

So, it was a game then. Fine. I'd already let one man destroy me, I wasn't about to let some strange, incorporeal bastard do it again.

Game on, shadow man. Let's see which one of us was the bigger monster.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:20 am

Chance

Florence's nails were digging into the skin of my forearm. It was as if she thought that if she buried them deep enough, I wouldn't leave. Fortunately for her and unfortunately for me, Mom was eyeing us across the room with a gaze like a hawk. They were flashing with greed. At one point, as if they shared the same single brain cell, both my mother and Florence licked their lips like they were about to devour my soul and condemn me to the tediously miserable, captive existence of a high-society husband.

No. Fucking. Thank. You.

Florence's high-pitched giggle was a perfect match for her outward appearance. Fake, shrill, and a complete turn-off. The Botox in her forehead made every facial expression look plastic. Combined with the floral monstrosity that was her evening dress and the bleached blonde hair that clashed with the orange of her fake tan and her heavy makeup, she reminded me more of a doll than a person.

A walking, talking, horror movie.

Her needle-enhanced lips protruded from her face in an obnoxious display, and I realised she likely got her nose job to raise it up and away in a feeble attempt to keep her nostrils clear. Even now, I was concerned her top lip would suffocate her, though I doubted that would be a real issue since they were so heavy her bottom lip struggled to close.

She was the loudest mouth breather I had ever met.

‘Oh, my goodness,’ she shrieked, her laughter trilling annoyingly through the room and stabbing at my nerves. ‘You’re so funny, Chancey. I can’t believe you do something so... quaint.’

I tried to school my features into something at least apathetic, but the frown pulled my eyebrows down anyway. ‘I suppose some people might consider it ‘quaint’, but I enjoy my work. If nothing else, it uncovers a lot of history that has previously been ignored or forgotten.’

She waved my comment away like it was an errant fly rather than my passion and my livelihood. ‘It’s a cute hobby. A little morbid for my tastes, but I do enjoy the occasional scary movie. Though I absolutely need a man to hold onto when I get scared. There’s nothing more attractive than a protector.’ She bit her lip coyly as she looked up at me from beneath her ridiculously large fake lashes, like her terrible attempts at flirting would make up for the insult.

‘Really? Personally, I enjoy a woman who can stomach a scary movie on her own. With the lights out. In the middle of the night. There’s nothing more attractive than bravery.’

Her smile stiffened, but she held it in place. ‘I don’t see a reason to watch a movie on my own. It’s much more fun to share the experience with someone else, don’t you think?’

Dakota caught my eye on the opposite side of the room. She was standing by the buffet, and my mother was heading straight for her. The panic and pleading in her gaze gave me the out I needed, and I took it without a second thought.

‘There’s not much room for socialising during a movie. My apologies, Miss Staten, but it seems I am being called. It was lovely to meet you.’

Her claws dug in even further, so much so that I thought she might actually draw blood, but she withdrew with a tight smile that didn't reach her eyes. 'Of course. I don't want to monopolise your time when there are so many other people who would love to speak with you. Come find me later?'

She shot me another coy smile that I ignored, waving off her invitation like she'd waved my interests off before. 'Perhaps,' I replied noncommittally. 'Enjoy the rest of the luncheon, Miss Staten.'

And then I was striding away, my shoulders tight as I felt her gaze boring holes into the back of my head. And my ass.

I barely restrained my shiver of revulsion.

Just as Mom was about to reach Dakota, I snagged her around the waist and pulled her in the opposite direction. I didn't know what I was about to say just yet, but I knew I needed to come up with something on the spot or else her glare would melt me into a puddle of disappointment on the floor.

'What are you doing?' she hissed through clenched teeth disguised as a smile.

'What, I can't come say hello to my mother?' I asked, but she saw right through me. Her red painted nails dug into my forearm much like Florence's pink ones did only moments before, and she dragged me from the room. People attempted to stop us as we wove our way through the crowd, eager to strike up a conversation with her in a bad attempt to surreptitiously get a closer look at the mysterious elder son with the wrong last name.

It was moments like these, however, that I was glad to be separated from the rest of my family in the eyes of polite society. Because I was not a polite man, and I didn't like pretending to be. I let my lips spread wide in a wry grin and enjoyed the way

everyone moved out of our way. Made it easier to get to whatever private place she was leading me. We could get this berating over with.

We rounded a corner, and she shoved me into another room. A glance around showed it was a meeting room with a single, long table surrounded by high-backed, ergonomic chairs. A projector screen was rolled up while the projector itself hung from a shelf on the ceiling directly above the centre of the table.

She left the lights off, keeping us in the dim light of the east-facing windows. When she rounded on me, those shadows made her well-hidden wrinkles stand out as she frowned, the lines on her forehead and around her mouth were more prominent than ever these days, though the bags beneath her eyes had lightened a little. Kali's disappearance and the more recent official declaration of her assumed death had added years to her appearance. Even now, despite her attempts to dye her hair, I could see the grey peeking through.

‘What are you doing?’ she demanded. ‘You’re supposed to be wooing the Staten’s daughter, Chance. There aren’t many more women I can throw at you before you choose one to settle down with. Enough is enough.’

I withheld my sigh. It would only anger her further and raise her blood pressure, which I wanted to avoid since she’d recently been placed on medication for it after a few fainting spells. I honestly didn’t intend to be difficult, but I also wasn’t the kind of man to allow others to dictate my life for me. I’d never once wanted to be a part of this high-society hullabaloo, but I also wasn’t going to take accountability for her inability to listen.

‘Mom, I’m not interested in Miss Staten. I’m not into the whole surgically-enhanced look, not to mention her personality is abhorrent.’

‘Chance Dodd,’ she chastised, then immediately winced when I scowled at her use of

the wrong surname.

‘Weiss, Mother. Perhaps we can have this conversation when you can at least get my goddamn name right.’

I moved to exit the room and re-enter the throng of social climbing vipers, but her hand on my arm stopped me. Not because she placed it there, but because she was exhibiting a rare gentleness that caught me off guard. Just like the open desperation in her gaze. The pleading.

‘I’m sorry. I just... I don’t understand why you never took Calvin’s name. The rest of us are Dodds. Your surname differing from ours just isolates you further.’

I knew she meant well, but this conversation was getting far too close to dangerous waters. ‘Your husband never liked me,’ I reminded her. ‘Even if you forgot Dad and rejected his name, I never will. If that isolates me from these fake-ass people who only want me for what I can do for their bank accounts or social status, then so be it.’

I tore my arm out of her grip and ignored her scowl as I stormed from the room. A deep breath helped me to compose myself before I stepped back into the luncheon that posed as a charity function, but it was really just an excuse for everyone inside to throw around their money like it proved they had the biggest dick.

Or, like my mother and most of the other women inside, they were eager to prove they had married the biggest bank account.

It was truly repulsive to me, particularly because it went against everything my father had instilled in me. Before he’d died, Mom had agreed with him. When she’d become a widow and a single mother in one fell swoop, that had all changed. Suddenly, the only thing she’d wanted was a fresh start with a man who could take care of everything so she wouldn’t have to.

That fresh start had brought my little brother into my life, however, so I tried not to be too bitter about how things had turned out. My stepfather, Blake's dad, had hated me from the onset. It wasn't anything I'd done, besides existing, but I was a reminder that his wife had had a life before him. Proof that he wasn't the only man she'd ever loved. And I didn't doubt that she did, I just knew that she loved his money more.

I had been too young when my father died to remember much about him, but his hard work ethic and morals had stuck with me. His face might have blurred in my memories, but I remembered how he'd thrown himself into his passions with an enthusiasm I'd admired. He had been just as intrigued by the paranormal as I was. It was one of the biggest contributing factors to why I'd chosen my career in the first place.

Alas, I was doomed to be surrounded by vultures in couture. At least until I could find an excuse to leave. Ashe was waiting on me to slip out so we could start the journey to Gilchrist.

'Everything okay?' Dakota asked in her sweet voice as she sidled up to me as soon as I stepped back into the room. She handed me a plate filled to the brim with tiny portions of my favourite foods, and I was irrationally annoyed that she'd paid close enough attention to know what I liked.

I pushed those feelings aside, aware that they came from a place of grief and longing rather than anything she'd done to deserve it. If anything, I was more annoyed with myself for being annoyed. She was a genuinely kind woman, and Blake was a lucky man to have found a second love just as wonderful as the first.

'Thanks,' I mumbled as I lifted a crab puff to my mouth. It was delicious, just like I knew it would be, and I gave her a small smile of gratitude.

'You could probably slip out unnoticed in about ten more minutes. I could cover for

you, if you like.'

I inhaled deeply before releasing it through my nose in a staccato huff. 'That would be greatly appreciated, Dakota. Thank you.'

Her answering smile was bright and relieved. Our relationship was strained, and a sudden stab of guilt punched through my gut. That was my fault. I couldn't let go of Kali, but that wasn't Dakota's burden to bear. She had enough to deal with trying to live up to a ghost, but I couldn't help but keep her at arm's length.

She tucked a piece of her dark brown hair behind her ear, and both the style and the colour helped me to remember that she was completely different from Kali. Dakota wore her hair in a short bob that she curled into gentle waves, and her hair was the colour of dark chocolate with caramel highlights, the complete opposite of Kali's long, platinum blonde hair. It was natural, too, almost white, though despite the icy shade it never retracted from her warmth. A warmth that was mirrored in Dakota, whether I liked it or not.

And who the fuck did I think I was to hate a woman for being genuinely kind?

I was going to have to pick myself up by my bootstraps and stop being such an ass.

'I can stick around for a little while longer, but only if you keep that... thing away from me,' I said, pointing my chin vaguely in the direction of Florence's jealous eye twitch.

'Oof. Yeah, I tried to stop Mallory from playing matchmaker, but it only seemed to spur her on.'

I blinked down at her in surprise. 'You did?'

Continuing with the surprises, her hand patted my forearm, not a single claw in sight. In fact, her nails were cut short with rounded edges and painted a very respectable nude colour. And they remained blessedly out of my flesh.

‘Of course. Blake mentioned how much you hate being tossed at these women like a sacrificial lamb. I tried to at least curb her attentions towards a... well, I’d say a better option, but none of them are, are they?’

I chuckled, and she giggled, a moment of reprieve from my constant battle. Kali was gone, and though it hurt like a bitch, I needed to let her rest. There was no reason for me to take out my anger and grief on Dakota when she had never been anything but warm and welcoming to me. Even now, she was trying.

It was... nice.

‘So, where are you and the crew off to this time?’ she asked.

My entire being lit up at her question. I could tell she was interested and not just making small talk, and it was a pleasant shift from the constant dismissals I’d received in every conversation I’d had today.

‘Klamath County. There’s been a string of deaths down Highway 97, followed by sightings of a mysterious man. No prints, no tracks, the guy just disappears without a trace.’

Her eyes were wide as she took in the information, but then her brows dipped low and little lines appeared at the corners as worry set in. ‘Are you sure that’s safe? I mean, if this guy is somehow connected to the deaths, don’t you think you’ll be putting yourselves at risk? What if he comes after you just because you’re looking into him?’

Her concern was a breath of fresh air I didn't know I needed until I felt it wash over me and fill my lungs, and I smiled down at her with a new tenderness I'd never allowed myself to feel for her before. 'Don't worry about me. It's probably nothing. The Little Deschutes runs through the area. It's more than likely just people being reckless and creating ghost stories out of nothing.'

She didn't look convinced, so I kept going. 'How about this? Why don't I check in at the same time every day so you know everything's fine?'

She relaxed ever so slightly at the concession, and it felt good to have someone other than Ashe, Mikey and Gloria care. 'Okay. I know Blake worried as well, so I'm sure he'd appreciate it, too.'

This was news to me. My little brother cared, I knew that much, but we'd never had the kind of relationship where we openly talked about our feelings. It was mostly just unspoken understandings.

'Well, I'll be sure to keep in touch while I'm on the job from now on, but a little ghost isn't going to scare me.'

She didn't return my smile, her expression one of deep concern. 'And what if it's not a ghost? What if it's a serial killer or something?'

'Then we leave and let the police do their thing,' I assured her softly.

'You don't normally take these kinds of jobs, right?' she asked.

'What kind do you mean?'

'The present ones. The ones where things are happening now.'

‘Ah,’ I said, comprehension dawning. ‘No. We typically stick to places steeped in history. The macabre kind, sure, but the dead are dead, regardless.’

‘Have you ever actually caught a ghost on camera?’ she asked, and I was practically giddy as I answered.

‘Yeah, a few. We mostly catch electromagnetic readings. A few words here and there are pretty common, too, but yeah. We’ve got footage of a ghost or two.’

‘Can I see?’

I grinned. ‘Sure. We post all our findings on our website.’

‘Oh, I didn’t realise you had a website.’

‘Sure do. We get a good portion of our income from our blog, but we sell merch as well as other services.’

‘Other services?’

‘People can hire us.’

‘Really? What kind of people hire ghost hunters?’

I shrugged. ‘It depends. Some people like a good story to tell at a party. Some people just want us to talk about what we do and why. Others want us for our equipment because they can’t afford it themselves and they want to try their hand at it. It ranges.’

‘That’s... not what I expected at all. That sounds incredible. You must have a lot of adventures.’

I laughed at that, the sound louder than I expected, so I quickly dampened it behind my hand. ‘Yeah, you could say that.’

‘Do you think I could come with you sometime? I’d love a front row seat to watch you work. It sounds fascinating.’

Again, she took me by surprise, but pleasantly so. ‘Uh, sure. I don’t see a problem with that.’

Her smile was tentatively hopeful. ‘That would be awesome.’

My phone buzzed inside my pocket, and I took it out to see that Ashe had texted me, urging me to hurry it along. I shook the phone in front of me with a sheepish smile. ‘Looks like I need to get going.’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll keep Mallory off your back. Go catch some ghosts.’

Shocking myself this time, I awkwardly patted her shoulder before skirting around the edge of the room towards the exit. I caught Dakota dragging Florence’s attention away from me just in time for me to slip out the door and rush towards my van. When I was settled behind the wheel, I took my phone out again to shoot Ashe a text to let her know I was on my way, then put the pedal to the floor so I could get as far away from charity luncheons, blind dates, and overbearing mothers as I could.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:20 am

Rhodes

The day was bright and beautiful, directly contrasting with the storm of emotions brewing inside of me. Yet, I forced it all to calm as I walked through the hospital's front entrance and tilted my face up to feel the sun's warmth. It was one of my favourite feelings.

Growing up in and out of the hospital, never knowing if this was going to be it, the sun had become my safe place. My peace. A single ray could change the entire outcome of the day, altering my perspective from doom and gloom to warm and bright.

There was always something to be excited about, even if it was as small as noticing the gradient of colour on a single flower petal. Much like the one I was holding now. Jessica, my favourite nurse, had gifted it to me before I left. She'd plucked it from a patient's wilting floral arrangement, noting how it was different from the others. Said it reminded her of me.

'This one stood out from the rest. Where the other petals were wilting and dull, this one remained vibrant and full of life, even when cut from its roots and plucked from its bloom.'

My sigh was shaky as I thought over what needed to be done. I just had to get my ducks in a row before I could stop worrying and start living. First, my will. Then, my family. It wasn't like I could tell anyone. Both of my parents were in nursing homes for dementia and Alzheimer's. They were so far gone that they no longer remembered me anyway. It was better if I just left it alone. All I needed to do was ensure their

medical bills and the care home fees were paid after I was gone, but that wouldn't be an issue. A few phone calls, some signatures, and that was that.

I didn't have much more than Jessica now, anyway. Sure, I had friends, but we weren't super close. I already learned that bringing other people into my life when my survival wasn't guaranteed was cruel. No one wanted to watch someone they cared about wither away into a shell of their former self before eventually taking their last breath. Terminal illnesses were painful for more than just the sick, and I'd been through this song and dance for what seemed like too many times to count. In reality, I'd gone into remission six times, each time more shocking than the last. I didn't take a single moment for granted.

I supposed I was lucky, then, not to have anyone too close to me. I wouldn't have to feel guilty for the decision I had just made, and I could live out the remainder of my days on this earth without a care in the world.

I inhaled deeply, tasting the sweetness of the air on the back of my tongue and filling my lungs with the life surrounding me. It was beautiful. Even the cars and the people milling around, rushing from one place to another as if they didn't have the option of stopping and just being still. It was strange to me that everyone was so busy that they didn't know how to just stop and simply be. Although I supposed it was a matter of perspective. I'd grown up knowing how precious and precarious life was. Most people did not.

My truck beeped when I pressed the button on the fob, all the lights flashing obnoxiously so there was no reason not to find it. It amused me how many people simply forgot where they'd parked their own damn car. It wasn't like parking lots didn't have identification markers or anything. I patted the hood before I opened the door and jumped in, then ran my hands lovingly over the fluffy pink cover on the wheel.

‘Well, Bessie, looks like you’re gonna need a new best friend soon. We should probably make some memories first, huh?’

I flicked the dreamcatcher hanging from the rearview mirror before tucking the flower petal in its web, then drove off, eager to enjoy the scenic ride home. Bessie had been with me since I was a teenager and was given the first all-clear by the docs. She’d been my first ever independent buy, and I’d loved her ever since. Bessie and me, we were meant to be. She was on her last dregs, too, so we were going to enjoy our last moments of this life together.

I was going to smell every last one of those damn roses everyone talked about. When I turned her off, of course. Bessie was many things, but eco-friendly she was not.

The drive home was long, winding, and typically peaceful, with very few cars on the road alongside me. This time, however, I ended up stuck behind a parade of vans and RVs. What intrigued me the most were the logos stamped and painted all over them. Northeast Paranormal Investigators. Huh. There had always been tales of ghost sightings and such, but no one had ever taken them seriously enough to come investigate before.

A smile spread, slow and excited. They could just be passing through, but if they were sticking around, this could be fun.

I followed them all the way down Highway 97, curious where they were headed. I was pleased when they pulled off onto the side road that led to the local campsite. Not just because it looked like things around here were about to get a hell of a lot more interesting, but because they were right in my backyard. My house sat a few miles up the road, but my family had owned this campsite for three generations. It was the perfect excuse to strike up a conversation, see what was going down.

I followed them in, feeling their suspicious eyes on me through their mirrors. But life

was full of coincidences, and while I wasn't sure I believed in fate, I certainly believed in luck. The entourage pulled up outside the service building where we held the front desk, some showers and other amenities, and a small café staffed by two staff, Fred, the old curmudgeonly chef, and yours truly.

I drove Bessie around them to my designated spot around the back of the building and gave the dreamcatcher one more flick before hopping out. Rounding the corner with my hands in my pockets, an easy smile on my face, I moved to greet my new customers. A tall man with dark, almost black hair that was in dire need of a cut approached, a scowl forming deep grooves between his brows. I tilted my head to the side to study him, something about him screaming familiarity, though I couldn't place where I knew him from. I wasn't one to follow paranormal investigators, so I knew it couldn't have been from his job.

'Who are you?' he asked in a gruff voice, violence brimming in the tension of his admittedly large muscles. 'Why are you following us?'

'Calm down, Chance. He's probably just a fan or something,' a short, dark-skinned woman attempted to de-escalate as she jumped out of another RV, an equally short Latina woman hopping out the passenger side to join her.

'Not a fan, sorry,' I said, leaning casually against the side of the building.

'Who the fuck are you, then? What do you want?' the grumpy man demanded.

'The name's Rhodes.'

'Like the campsite?' the Latina woman asked.

I dipped my chin in acknowledgement. 'Yup. I own the property. Didn't mean to spook you fine folks. I was just coming back from an appointment and happened to

be coming to the same place. How can I help you?’

Grumpy Man’s scowl deepened further, but he backed down when he realised I wasn’t a threat. I’d never met someone as high-strung as him before, and I wondered where the stick up his ass came from.

‘Sorry about him,’ the black woman stepped forward, offering her hand for me to shake, which I took. ‘I’m Ashe. The pretty Mexican lady is Gloria, and the surly one is Chance. Mikey’s in the last van, but he’s a bit shy.’

‘Nice to meet you. Why don’t you come on in, and I can get you set up?’

‘We reserved some spots online this morning. We’re just checking in.’

‘Right. Even better. If you’ll follow me, I’ll get you all checked in and set up.’

They followed me inside, and Fred popped his head out of the kitchen with a scowl even scarier than that Chance guy’s, though that was just his normal face. I waved at him and gestured to the small dining area we passed. ‘Coffee and food are served from nine to six, and we have a few vending machines around back if you’re hungry for a midnight snack. And don’t mind Fred. He’ll grunt at you, but he won’t bite.’

Mister Grumpy broke off from the women to head straight for the coffee bar, sharing a grunt with Fred, who responded in kind before handing over a mug of freshly brewed coffee, then gestured vaguely to the condiment bar.

‘Sorry about him,’ the black woman, Ashe, apologised sheepishly. ‘He’s a nice guy most days.’

‘Just not today, huh?’ I teased with a little smirk pulling up the right corner of my lips as I moved around to the other side of the counter and booted up the old laptop I’d

been using for the past decade.

‘Today’s been a rough one. He’ll be all smiles tomorrow after some sleep, promise.’

‘Nah, he’s fine. We can’t all have good days.’ My smile felt a little more forced when I thought about the shit day I was having. It seemed to be a pandemic. When the laptop finally started, I pulled up their booking information, noting how they hadn’t written in a check-out date. ‘So, how long are you guys here for?’

‘We don’t know yet. We’re investigating the deaths along the highway, so however long it takes, I guess. I hope it’s not an issue.’

My brows rose in surprise. ‘Not at all. You’re welcome as long as you need. So, you’re here about the drownings, then?’

‘Yes. Well, more specifically, we’re investigating the sightings of a potential entity that may be responsible for the drownings.’

‘So what, you’re like, paranormal police?’

Ashe snorted a laugh while Gloria smiled but shook her head. ‘Not exactly. We’re mostly just here to record any paranormal activity. If we so happen to solve a murder at the same time, then so be it.’

‘You guys see a lot of ghosts and shit, then?’ I asked, printing out their parking permit and handing it over. ‘I’ve got you set up for a week. If you need to extend it, just come see me and I’ll print you a new pass.’

‘Thanks, Rhodes,’ Ashe smiled, and I shot her my famous panty-melting smile that showed off my dimples as I openly checked out both girls.

‘Anytime, ladies.’

They scrunched up their noses and laughed, but I didn’t take it to heart. It was clear they were together, so when Gloria pulled Ashe against her side possessively, I winked and leaned back in my chair, arms tucked behind my head so my shirt would ride up and show off my abs.

Ashe flashed her wedding ring at me with a smirk. ‘Sorry, kid. We’re married.’

‘Married doesn’t mean dead,’ I teased, earning a laugh from them both.

‘Oh, trust me. We’ve got no problems there.’

‘Stop hitting on my friends, kid,’ Chance said as he sidled up to them, to-go cup in hand.

‘What, didn’t get me one?’ Ashe asked, pointing to his drink.

‘You’re more than capable of getting your own coffee, lazy bones,’ he replied, a tender note in his voice that I wasn’t expecting.

‘Ah. I see. You’ve already got the meat for your sandwich.’

Ashe’s nose wrinkled in disgust as she blanched, but Gloria bellowed a laugh at the look on their faces. ‘He wishes.’

Chance frowned, his gaze darting between us. ‘I wish what now?’

‘I’m officially out of this conversation,’ Gloria informed us, pulling her wife with her as she left the building.

‘See you around, Rhodes,’ Ashe called over her shoulder before the door closed behind them.

I turned to the surly man glaring after his friends and handed him his pass. ‘Here. I’ve got you down for a week, but if you need to extend your stay, just let me know and I’ll get you another pass,’ I told him.

He took it, his expression closed off but polite. ‘Thanks.’

And then he was stalking out the door and climbing into his van, the door slamming shut behind him. I winced at the way he abused the poor vehicle. There was clearly something more going on with him that was making him so sour, but it wasn’t my business. Maybe I could lighten his mood, though. I had a spare paddleboard he could use for some leisurely time on the river. It might be nice to have some company the next time I went for a lazy drift.

I needed to go again, and soon. Nature was my escape, and I wanted to get as much time with it as possible while I still could.

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Kali

W isps of untethered energy whip around me. Chasing. Running. Taunting. Challenging. They brush against my skin, tug at my hair, poke and prod at me, and still, I am unable to do anything but float here and take it.

Because it was progress.

For the first time, I had made it all the way to the edge of the property, the road in my sights even if it was still just that little bit too far out of reach. I pushed again, desperate to make it at least that far, but the pushback was more powerful this time. That was as much progress as I was making today.

When I felt like the energy's resistance was too strong, like it was draining me dry and shrivelling up my well of power that was keeping me tethered to this realm, screams drifted to me from inside the cabin. The girl's voice had become so hoarse she no longer sounded like a person. It was like an animal had gotten itself caught in a trap and was bleating for help, agony slicing through them, yet no one was coming.

No one except Blake, but even he hadn't been back for days. The girl was starving, dehydrated, and rapidly losing weight and energy. Her reserves were depleting faster than she could keep up, and she was only exacerbating the issue by expending more energy with her attempts to break free and call for help.

When I first started watching the girls he brought here, I had thought that their attempts were admirable. Their fight, the fire burning in their eyes, was something that I craved. I wanted it for myself, so I could go back in time and defeat him before

he destroyed me. Now, though, all I felt was pity. No one was coming to save them. If anything, they should fight harder, weaken themselves faster, because then it would be over sooner. If they were too weak to keep fighting, their deaths would become much easier. Smoother. Less painful.

They could slip away in their sleep as they dreamed of happier things.

But, in the end, it didn't really matter. We all still ended up dead. Our bodies, sawed into smaller pieces, were scattered beneath the soil in deep graves with animal corpses as gravestones. Our souls, still connected to our dismembered bodies through the trauma of our deaths, remained stuck in this limbo nightmare. Somehow, despite our spirits attempting to find freedom from his torture and captivity, Blake still managed to trap us.

Though I was going to make damn sure it wasn't for all eternity.

I had been a pushover in life. He was going to get one hell of a shock to realise what he'd unleashed in my death. He thought he was the monster here? Ha! I'd show him that no matter how big and bad he thought he was, there would always be something bigger and badder, eager to devour him in ways his puny little brain couldn't even begin to conjure up.

Another scream ripped through the atmosphere, vibrating through everything in its path like an earthquake of rage and despair, and digging up more memories of the last dregs of my life. A knife slicing through my flesh. Digging deep into my organs. Tearing through layers of muscle, fat, and tendons so my innards would spill out. I only wished I could say that disembowelment was the worst of it, but he'd made sure the remnants of my agony stuck with me even in death. Even now, a dull throb pulsed through my incorporeal form, like I was expanding and shrinking at the same time in the exact places he'd caused the most damage.

He had carved my scars so deep they had punctured my very soul.

I collapsed, as much as I could without a physical body for gravity to pull down, as the energy left me again. Each time left me strangely bereft, like I was missing a piece of me that I didn't realise I had until it was gone. Without conscious thought or effort, I drifted back to my unmarked grave and hovered over my remains, once again taking strength from them. I didn't know how it worked or why, but the longer I spent with my physical form, the stronger I became. I'd learned that the hard way when I'd avoided the spot at all costs. Now, I couldn't fathom not having access.

I hoped that, if anyone ever did find us and removed our bones, whatever connection we had was to them and not this place. If I was stuck here forever, I didn't know what I'd do. Nothing good. I'd probably go insane.

Actually, there was no 'probably' about it. I would go insane.

As I lay there, staring at the sky, contemplating how far I'd come and how far I still needed to go, a new sound drifted to me. Voices. Male and female.

Familiar.

Chance...

And Ashe. Gloria, too.

They're here, somewhere close by. After all this time. Have they finally found me? Do they know what Blake did? Is doing?

When it was quiet for too long, I began to question if it had all been a figment of my imagination, but no... There it was again.

Laughter. Teasing. Chance grouching.

It's them. It really was them.

I wanted to move, but I couldn't. Doubt niggled at me, itching and persistent. How much did they know? Were they in on it? Was Blake with them?

My emotions were a wild thing, clashing inside of me like bone-rattling thunder. Hope, fear, loss, longing... all of it was so intense that I couldn't grab onto just one. They slipped through my control much the same as the power I was attempting to harness, like trying to cup water through splayed fingers. Instead, it became a tsunami of rage, grief, and frustration.

I wanted so badly to believe that they had finally come for me. Too late, but still searching. I wanted so badly to believe that they were good, that they didn't know what Blake was, that they hadn't seen beneath the mask. Yet, I couldn't. That was even worse. I couldn't let myself believe anything, because I didn't know .

I wanted them to know, because I cared enough to want them to be safe, yet a large part of me hoped that they were just as ignorant as I had been, if only to validate my stupidity. Blind trust. That was what I had given that man. My love, my body, everything I'd had to give, he'd taken as if it was owed to him.

How could I have been so blind?

That question haunted me ever since. Yet, I still had no answer. No matter how many times I thought back on the life I'd shared with him, there were simply no signs that I was married to a psychopath. Which begged the broader question: if I had missed the signs with Blake, how could I possibly know I hadn't missed them with anyone else?

That, I had an answer to, whether I liked it or not: I couldn't.

So, I stayed put, straining my senses as I let the swarm of emotion overwhelm me. All had gone quiet again, the only sounds those of the girl in the basement was making. Desperate and pleading, she still hadn't tired herself out. She was lasting longer than most. The others had given up by now, accepting their fate even if only subconsciously. This one was a fighter.

Blake's favourite.

Mine, too.

Suddenly, the sound of tires crunching over the gravel driveway added to the screams, which only increased as the girl must have heard the approaching vehicle, too. Except her screams wouldn't be useful now. They were only going to make things worse for her because it wasn't a saviour rolling up to the front door.

Blake was back.

His boots scraped against the gravel like he was dragging his feet, which was unlike him. I couldn't see him from my grave, since it was around the other side of the cabin, but I could hear him grunt as he lifted something. But what? What could he have possibly brought here that was so heavy?

It couldn't have been another girl... Right? He already had one.

I would have to use my other senses to figure out what was going on while I replenished my energy reserves. Frustration became the primary emotion, overwhelming all the others as I was stuck resting on top of my bones, the key word being 'stuck'. It didn't matter that he was no longer starving me, carving into me, or taunting me with fake promises of false affection. I was still trapped and at his mercy, even in death.

And that just fucking pissed. me. off .

It was my turn to scream. I felt my jaw drop farther than should have been possible, if only I'd had bones. My mouth gaped open as I released a wail that, by all accounts, was the most terrifying thing I'd ever heard. Frustration, rage, all of it was channelled into that one single scream as I fought to maintain some semblance of control over my own existence. It was the yell of a scorned woman, a betrayed wife, a trapped soul.

Through that single shout, I released it all out into the world. I'd been holding onto it all for so long, using it to motivate me, to give me purpose. But it was moments like these where I was forced to acknowledge the raw, unadulterated truth. I wasn't better than the other girls who haunted their graves. I wasn't more powerful or more cunning. I wasn't different or special. I was simply an angry spirit yearning for revenge, yet incapable of leaving this cursed land.

How the fuck was I supposed to make Blake suffer for his crimes if I couldn't do more than cause a chill or rustle some hair in a supernatural breeze?

Energy pulsed from me in wave after wave of sheer emotional turmoil. The trees bent at odd angles, roots barely clinging to the soil. Birds and other animals skittered away, fleeing my destructive rage. The earth rumbled, a warning of what was to come, dislodging the foundations of the cabin and bringing it crumbling down. And yet, in the living realm, nothing moved. One blink, and the world righted itself like nothing had happened.

Fuck!

Silence.

A flicker of a shadow out of the corner of my eye.

A dark, bass chuckle.

One second, I was lying horizontally on top of my grave, and the next, I was vertical and scanning the treeline for the shadow man. Another flicker of darkness had me spinning to face the western forest, the trickle of the Little Deschutes hidden inside it the only sound I heard for a while. I squinted my eyes as I tried to pinpoint the shadow man's location, but the sun was setting fast, the shadows stretching longer and further until the lights from the cabin switched on to cut through the darkness. They cast slivers of light over the lawn, the tip of one just barely grazing the edge of my grave but stopping before it reached my toes.

A vicious shout reverberated through the atmosphere from inside the cabin, pulling my attention away from my search. The girl was giving Blake what he wanted, it seemed. The fight in her was strong, and he was going to enjoy snuffing it out. He always did like a challenge.

Blake's laughter ran through the air, the sound so light and excitable that it was jarring against the chilling events.

'Eat up,' he told her, his voice muffled through the walls, but still far too loud as it echoed around me. Taunting me. Mocking me. 'I like your fire, sweetheart. I want more of it, and you'll need your strength if you want to keep up.'

'Please, just let me go. I swear I won't tell anyone, just please ,' the girl began her begging.

I could picture what he was doing right now, because he did the same with me. With all of us. His finger would be stroking gently over her jawline, his thumb brushing tenderly over her cheek, but that softness was all an illusion, another way to prove his dominance, to stroke his ego, when she was putty in his hands. A form of mental manipulation he enjoyed using on all of his victims to confuse them. All the while,

his hand would be positioned possessively, keeping her eyes on him even if she tried to look away, tilting her chin up so he could gaze upon her fearful expression with open admiration.

Another tendril of smoky blackness darted out from the corner of my eye before promptly blending into its surroundings, once again invisible. The shadow man was taunting me just like Blake, and I wasn't going to stand for it. Decision made, I pointedly ignored the newcomer, drifting away from my grave towards the house. His answering chuckle followed me as I phased through the walls, like he thought my dismissal was cute rather than the threat that it was meant to be.

But he could stay out there and burn for all I cared. I had other things, better things, to be doing than playing someone else's sick games. The only games anyone would be playing were my own as I stripped them of everything that held meaning to them.

For Blake, that was his god complex. He felt like he had the ultimate control over everyone at any given moment. The girls, when he held them captive, tortured them, made them beg and plead, then he'd watch as the life bled from their eyes, revelling in his power to take it. At work, when he was saving lives, cutting out the rot and stitching them back together so they could live long and healthy lives. That helped play into his role as the doting husband, the do-gooder, the man everyone loved to love.

It was all one giant con created to stroke his ego, to make him feel powerful and important, even when he moved in the shadows. But it was my turn to move in the shadows, to watch him fall apart at the seams as his entire world imploded. I wanted to peel away every layer for the world to see who he truly was beneath all the bullshit. I wanted him to panic, to realise there was nothing he could do as his nightmare came to life.

And then I wanted him to feel the physical pain. I wanted him to drown in his blood

while I tore his organs from his body and forced them down his fucking throat. I wanted to mar his perfect features, the ones he used to trick people into believing he was some sort of saviour, so the outside matched the inside.

I was going to fucking win.

As I entered the basement through the ceiling, I found him exactly as I'd imagined: hand cupping her face, pretending to be gentle and adoring. It was all part of his mindfuck games, and I could tell from the girl's glare and the way she grimaced at his touch that it wasn't working. Yet.

It would, eventually. Given enough time, the Stockholm Syndrome would eventually set in, and that would be when he'd finally strike. No more kind words. No more hot meals. No more soft touches. Just endless pain and the desire for the blissful nothingness of death.

As if death would ever create such peace. Even that was a lie.

But dammit, I was taking him down with me, no matter what it took.

And the entity who caused the ice-cold prickle on the back of my neck as he watched from the deepest, darkest shadows of the room. His gaze was like drowning in a frozen lake, all-encompassing and suffocating, but calm at the same time. The kind of calm only a predator could achieve while lying in wait, patient and still. I'd take him down, too.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:20 am

Chance

My phone lit up on the table before me. Another text from my mother. To say she was displeased with my sneaky departure from yesterday's luncheon would be an understatement. She was livid. And my phone blowing up was only the start of it.

It wasn't just her trying to reach me. Blake had also been texting to ask where I was, Dakota had sent a few messages to warn me of the incoming storm, bless her heart, and even my stepfather joined in with his short, disapproving texts.

At one point last night, I actually thought their barrage of texts was going to break my phone. It froze for about thirty minutes before finally shutting itself off to cool down and reboot. If I didn't need it so much, I would have just tossed it out the window for one of the other RVs to run over and be done with it.

A knock at the door pulled my attention from the little metal brick of emotional torture, and I gladly left it behind to let whoever it was in. Mikey stood outside, a lazy grin on his face.

'You ready to go?' he asked, but I didn't know what he was talking about.

'Go where?'

His smile dimmed, but he kept it mostly in place. 'You didn't get the text? I swear I sent it to you.'

I sagged a little at the realisation. 'I've been ignoring my phone.'

Understanding dawned, and his lips thinned in compassion. ‘The Mom-ster at it again?’

I meant to say yes, but all that came out was a grunt.

‘Right, well, we’re taking the equipment for a spin. Heading up and down the highway to see if we can catch any readings along the way.’

I dipped my chin. ‘Got it. Which van are we taking?’

‘Ours,’ Ashe’s preppy voice preceded her before she rounded the rear of my van. ‘Hurry up, dweebs. My wife’s getting impatient.’ Then she spun on her heels and sauntered off back to said wife. I didn’t have a problem with Gloria; in fact, I really liked her, especially how happy she made my best friend. My annoyance was with her general impatience. I’d never met anyone who demanded everyone work on their timeline more than her, and I was raised around some of the most impatient people on this planet.

‘Go on,’ I told Mikey, watching him visibly relax. None of us liked to get on Gloria’s bad side. ‘I’ll catch up. Just need to grab a few things, then I’ll be right there.’

He shuffled away, dragging his feet like he always did in his scuffed-up sneakers. Mikey had been one of my best friends for a long time, but he didn’t like socialising even with me unless he had to. Our friendship was based on quiet, distant support over anything else. I knew he was there for me if I needed him, just as he knew I was here when he needed me. What more could a guy ask for in a friend?

I quickly grabbed my phone and stuffed it into my pocket, shoved on my boots, and snatched up my case full of equipment. We wouldn’t need any of the communication devices for now, especially with Gloria joining us, but we would need my EMF Metres and thermometers. I had multiple kinds to cover all bases, plus my

excessively large stash of batteries. We could never have too many batteries. We'd learned the hard way to keep a stash of extras on one of our first hunts. Most of our equipment died, and we lost our shot at capturing evidence of that particular spirit after accidentally scaring them off.

I know, right? Us , scaring off a ghost ? What most people didn't realise was that ghosts were pretty darned skittish. It was why catching evidence of them was so difficult, and why so many didn't believe in their existence. That was the main goal of our team: to record enough evidence that would be impossible to debunk to prove the existence of the paranormal.

So far, we had been lucky. Over the past twelve years, my team and I had gathered enough evidence to back up our claims that we'd garnered international attention. Sure, it was small compared to other avenues of fame, but we were well-known within our field as legitimate and credible. Our hope was to create credibility for our field itself, and this job may just help us to achieve that.

I locked my van behind me, turning on the security to ensure no one tried to break in. There was a lot of expensive equipment in there that I didn't want to lose. I could replace it if I had to, but it was a pain in the ass.

Ashe, Gloria, and Mikey were already waiting in the RV when I jumped in. I took a seat in the back, locking my case of equipment in the compartment beneath it before strapping in.

'Finally,' Gloria snarked. 'I was beginning to think you were ditching us.'

'Oh, hush, babe,' Ashe admonished her wife with a light-hearted smack on the arm. 'He gets enough nitpicking from his mother. Let the man be.'

Gloria sent Ashe a dirty glare, to which the latter merely grinned back

unapologetically. 'Ex-fucking-scuse me? Who are you married to, me or him?'

Ashe simply shrugged her shoulders and started the engine. 'I'll make it up to you tonight with lots of orgasms. I'll even do that thing with my tongue that you like so much.'

This revolting exchange seemed to mollify Gloria, and she leant over the centre console to press a lingering kiss on Ashe's cheek. However, before she pulled away, she sank her teeth into the soft flesh and licked a line up the side of her face. 'I'm holding you to that.'

'And that's quite enough of that,' I said, thoroughly disturbed by the unwanted insight into their sex life.

'Shut up, man,' Mikey hissed from the seat on my right. 'This is the most action I've seen in months. Don't ruin it for me.'

Ashe immediately stomped on the brakes, throwing us all forward before we slammed back into the chairs. My seatbelt dug into my shoulder painfully, so I reached up a hand to pull it away and rub at the bruise that would no doubt be forming. Both women swivelled around to glare at our friend, who was now cowering as far away from them as the small space would allow.

'This is a no perv zone, Mikey. You gonna shut it, or get out?' Gloria snarled threateningly.

'S-sorry,' he stammered, his face turning an alarming shade of red.

'Oh, give him a break,' I teased, a smirk pulling at the corners of my lips. 'It's not every day a man gets a front row seat to his biggest fantasy. Let the man dream.'

‘He can dream on his own time,’ Ashe said, but cut the tension with a chuckle. She enjoyed teasing Mikey. He was easy to pick on, so I made sure to be the buffer between the two. Their animosity was usually friendly anyway.

Gloria, on the other hand... her mumbles and grumbles remained for the rest of the drive to the end of the highway. We were starting the trip further south at La Pine and making our way slowly up towards Bend, but each of us was perfectly positioned in the van. Ashe was the camera girl, so her skills weren’t going to be utilised just yet, hence the reason for her place behind the wheel. Gloria needed to be front and centre to pick up on any psychic readings that came her way and note their locations, which put her beside Ashe. Mikey was our tech guy, so he was in the back with me, keeping track of our readings while I pointed the devices out the window.

We always made sure to turn off anything inside the vans that could give us false readings. Ashe and Gloria didn’t have a microwave or other such appliances that could mess with the data, and we kept the radio off so we wouldn’t pick up on any radio waves by accident. It was Mikey’s job to keep track of those readings and point out anything that could be considered abnormal.

Our team worked like a well-oiled machine, each of us already understanding what part to play and doing so without the need for direction. We had our routine down pat.

In one hand, I held my TriField Natural EM Meter to try to catch any electromagnetic fluctuations, while in the other hand, I held the TriField 2 Meter to compare against the other one for man-made electrical fields. Both devices were connected to Mikey’s laptop, where he was deciphering the readouts in real-time. So far, only the latter was lighting up, but that didn’t mean much. It was likely just fluctuations brought on by passing by someone’s home or car with the radio on.

‘Over there,’ Gloria suddenly said, pointing a shaky finger towards an offshoot road

to the right. 'Something is happening over there.'

Ashe and I shared a glance that was both filled with excitement and trepidation through the rearview mirror as she immediately turned the van down the side road Gloria had indicated. The psychic herself was in the midst of some sort of trance, the kind that only happened when an entity was actively attempting to communicate with her.

'He's screaming,' she said, her voice low and trembling. 'He's still being attacked...'

'Who?' Ashe asked, keeping her tone gentle and quiet so as not to disturb Gloria in her element.

'I don't know. He's begging for help, but his voice... It's getting quieter, like he's being pulled away.'

We rounded a copse of trees only for Ashe to stomp on the brakes for the second time today. I leaned my body to the centre at the same time as Mikey to see what was going on, but we ended up butting heads in the process. He pulled away, rubbing at his skull, but I stayed put to see what was going on. Police tape cordoned off the area, and a uniformed officer was approaching with a scowl dipping low over his eyes, his lips pursed in displeasure.

Ashe rolled down her window before he could knock on it.

'What are you folks doing here?' he asked.

'We're following a lead,' Ashe told him, keeping things vague. Most people scoffed at us when we told them we were following a psychic's directions, so we avoided it when we could. 'We're paranormal investigators, and we got a hit over this way and decided to follow.'

‘Ghost hunters, huh? Just fucking perfect. Who leaked about the crime scene?’ he grouched, demanding an answer that would likely put a damper on our investigation.

Mikey leaned forward to take over. ‘No one, officer. Like my friend here said, we were just following a lead. We got a spike in our EMF Meter down this way, so we decided to check it out.’

‘EMF Meter?’ the officer asked, looping his thumbs through his harness as he settled in for a longer conversation.

‘It detects potential paranormal activity through spikes in electromagnetic fields,’ Mikey explained.

His eyes flickered to the side of the van where our team’s logo was blatantly displayed. ‘I see. And you think that gives you the right to drive onto private property?’ The officer pointed to a sign that clearly stated that this land belonged to someone, but this was the first sign we’d seen so far to indicate ownership.

‘We would have turned around as soon as we saw the sign, sir,’ Ashe told him. ‘As you can imagine, we weren’t expecting to run into a crime scene. Can I ask what happened here?’

The officer sighed, seemingly put out, but surprised me by actually answering our question. ‘Another one of them drownin’s. Nothing to be concerned about. It’d be best if you folks went on your way and let us finish up in peace.’

‘Of course, officer. We apologise if we got in your way. We’ll leave.’

She rolled up the window as soon as he stepped back, but Gloria looked even more pale by the time we got back to the highway.

‘He’s gone.’

I frowned, confused. ‘Who’s gone?’

‘The spirit. The man who drowned. He was murdered, I know that much. His soul was restless, but he was still being hunted. Whatever we’re dealing with here, I think it’s somehow killing people’s physical bodies to gain access to their souls after death.’ She turned to Ashe with fear clear in her wide, bloodshot eyes.

‘Why would anything do that, though?’ I asked. ‘We’ve never come across a malignant entity that wanted to harm other spirits. It doesn’t make sense. What does it want with them?’

‘I don’t know,’ Gloria admitted gravely. ‘I don’t think we should continue this investigation. It’s not safe.’

‘Why don’t we head back to the campsite, and we can sleep on it before making any decisions?’ I offered, not wanting to shut things down before we could even get started.

‘I don’t know... I don’t feel comfortable continuing with this. If there’s an entity murdering living people, then we’re not safe.’

‘But if there is a malignant entity out there actively causing harm, don’t you think we have a responsibility to stop it?’ I argued.

‘And how do you propose we do that?’ she retorted.

‘We’ll figure it out.’

‘That’s not good enough. We can’t just go in half-cocked and rely on luck. People are

dying , Chance,' she pointed out hotly.

'Exactly. We're the only ones who have any possible idea what's going on. If we don't do anything about it, who will?'

'Okay, that's enough,' Ashe cut in, glancing between me and Gloria as much as she could while still focusing on the road. 'You've both brought up very valid points, but there's nothing we can do right now. I agree that we should head back to the campsite and think things over. Chance is right that we're the only ones who will be either willing or capable of doing anything to fix things. Plus, when our priest arrives, we'll have another weapon in our arsenal. However, Gloria is also right. We need to seriously consider the implications of staying and continuing the investigation. This is serious.'

'To the campsite, then,' I agreed, and Gloria grumbled her acquiescence while biting her nails. The sound was grating, but her nerves were more frayed than my own, so I didn't make a fuss about it. I couldn't begin to imagine what it was like to witness the entities the way she did, let alone ones that were suffering. Usually, she avoided them as much as she could and asking her to stick around to face horrors only she was privy to was a big ask.

But at the end of the day, if there was something paranormal killing the folks of Klamath County, didn't we have a moral obligation to do something about it? We dealt with death every day, but typically not when it was so fresh. Yet, death was still death, and we were still paranormal investigators. If we could help, shouldn't we?

Except, these people surrounding me, my friends, my chosen family, they didn't have the same mindset as me. They had something more to live for, whereas my reason for existence was torn from me seven long years ago. I was barely hanging on as it was, but could I drag these people into danger with me if it came down to it?

I didn't know.

I already knew in my heart that I was staying, but I wouldn't begrudge the others if they decided it was too much for them. I didn't want them getting hurt. The decision was theirs, and whatever their choice, I would respect it.

My phone buzzed again inside my pants pocket, jolting me from my thoughts. I groaned as I pulled it out, dreading the name I would find flashing on the small screen. My eyebrows shot up when I saw who was calling, however, and I tentatively answered, my curiosity winning out.

'Dakota?'

'Chance, thank fuck. I've been trying to get a hold of you for ages ,' my sister-in-law's voice came through harried and a little nervous.

'Is everything okay? Has something happened?' I asked, my thoughts immediately drifting to Kali's cold case, but I quickly pushed those hopes down.

'Yes. Well, sort of. I'm so sorry, Chance. I tried to stop them, but I couldn't.'

I frowned. 'Stop who? What's going on?'

But as we pulled into the campsite, my question was already answered. There they stood, Dakota with Blake, Calvin on his other side. And standing right next to my mother?

Fucking Florence.

Dakota turned at the sound of our wheels crunching over the stones, her expression anxious and apologetic. Into the phone, she whispered low so the others wouldn't

hear her. 'I'm sorry, Chance. I tried.'

My forehead smacked against the back of Ashe's headrest as I sagged in my seat, already exhausted from this new development, but it was Ashe who vocalised what we were all thinking.

'Well, that's just fucking great.'

Dakota

Chance's expression was withdrawn and tired when he exited the van, and I caught my lip between my teeth as I watched him approach. We'd never been close, but I still cared for him. I wanted to change our relationship for the better, but Blake told me he'd taken his late wife's disappearance a lot harder than anyone, including him. Something about them being childhood friends.

I knew not to take it personally, so I've been patient. Recently, however, since the wedding, I decided it was time to finally push a bit harder to close that gap. Being ambushed by the very people he was so eager to run from, family or not, was not the best way to begin those efforts.

I might have succeeded in holding Mallory back, and consequently Calvin and Florence, if it weren't for Blake's unusual eagerness to join. I hadn't had a moment to ask him why he was so adamant that we join everyone for the impromptu camping trip, but I intended to as soon as we found a moment alone.

'What are you doing here?' Chance asked as soon as he was close enough, but kept himself at a distance, refusing to welcome us. I didn't blame him, especially when his eyes flickered briefly to where Florence was batting her oversized fake lashes at him.

'We just wanted to support you in your... hobby,' Mallory finished lamely, the sincerity completely lacking in her tone. I never liked the woman. She was just as fake as the other society women. I fully believed she had once been a woman of kindness and morals until her induction into wealth. Now, however, she was constantly searching for some means to control and micro-manage every aspect of the

lives around her. I had become quite adept at giving her what she wanted without actually giving her anything, but, like now, I couldn't win every battle.

'My career ,' he stressed with a sneer, 'has never been of any interest to you so far. Why now?'

'Chance, don't go making a scene. We've come to support you. You should be grateful. Why are you not happy to see us?' Mallory simpered, laying her trap.

But Chance had never cared for her games, nor did he play them. 'Now's not a good time, Mother. I'm working.'

'Don't you speak to your mother that way,' Calvin chastised when Mallory's lip began to wobble. I kept my expression neutral, but it was difficult when I was so desperate to roll my eyes at her blatant crocodile tears. 'We have decided that a short family vacation will bring the family together. You will join us.'

'I will repeat myself until you hear me, Mr. Dodd. I am working. I do not have time to vacation. I do not interrupt you when you're at work, I expect the same courtesy.'

Calvin's face turned bright red, then purple as the vein on his forehead pulsed dangerously. He took a step forward, threat in every line of his ageing skin. 'Now, you listen here, boy...'

'All right, that's enough posturing for one day, I think,' Blake stepped between them, cutting the argument short before it could escalate further. Ashe and Gloria chose that moment to join Chance outside, though Mikey stayed within the safety of the van. I didn't blame him. I wish I could hide in there, too. 'Dad, why don't you take Mom and Florence to get settled in. I'll talk to Chance.'

Calvin's displeasure would have been clear to a blind man, but he battled his demons

back down to where they simmered just beneath the surface, his mask of composure back in place. Flicking an imaginary piece of lint from the shoulder of his jacket as if he were dusting Chance off of him instead, he turned back to face Mallory and the vapid bitch they'd brought with them, his expression softening immediately. 'Come, darling. I will need help setting up the tent.'

By 'help' he meant 'sit back and watch while I do all the work', but the three of them sauntered away regardless. It would be interesting to see what they considered 'camping', and I was fully expecting some sort of elaborate glamping set up. I knew Blake was the outdoorsy type, constantly going on weekend fishing trips to decompress after a long, hard case at work, and I was also aware that he got his love for the outdoors from his father, but I had never seen it myself. At least beyond our skiing trips. We did that quite a bit.

'Are you okay, bro?' Blake asked Chance, who visibly sagged as the others retreated out of sight.

'Just wasn't expecting to deal with this shit right now. I'm sorry, Blake. I've just got a lot going on with this case.'

'I'll say,' Ashe muttered under her breath, but we all heard it. Blake's ears perked up at the prospect of gossip. He wasn't as into the paranormal as Chance was, but he was still more interested the most. He would always pick Chance's brain whenever he came back from a case.

'What's going on?'

Chance sighed, his shoulders drooping even further like he was being weighed down by the world. 'We ran into a problem. There have been a series of drownings up and down the highway. We believe they're intentional murders committed by an entity for reasons unknown. Unfortunately, we came across one of the drowned victims

today when we almost ran through some police tape.'

Blake frowned, concerned, and I stroked his arm soothingly. He shot me a loving smile that I returned before turning back to his brother. 'Things get dicey when the police are involved.'

'Forget the police,' I said, wondering why that was what he chose to focus on out of what we were just told. 'I'm more worried about you, Chance. If people are being killed, you could be putting yourselves in danger.'

'That's what I said,' Gloria chimed in, vindication colouring her tone. 'After what I sensed from this entity and the screams from the newly deceased spirit, I don't like the idea of continuing. We should let the police deal with the situation.'

'The police can't arrest a ghost, Gloria,' Chance argued. 'If we leave it up to the professionals, it's still us dealing with it. We're the professionals, here.'

'Okay!' Ashe stepped between them, much like Blake had stepped between Calvin and Chance. 'We have a lot to mull over. Let's just sleep on it and come together in the morning for a team meeting. Yes? Okay. Let us know if you need us, Chance.' And then she was dragging Gloria away to their RV, leaving the three of us alone.

Mikey stuck his head out, saw that the area was clearing up, and made a dash for his own RV. His was the biggest, likely to make room for his computer set-up, if I remembered their jobs correctly. Tech guys had big computers, right?

'I'm sorry, Chance,' Blake apologised. 'I didn't think it would be a big deal. I thought you might like it if Mom finally showed an interest. I should've asked.'

Chance released a heaving sigh and ran a hand through his hair, mussing the brown strands that seemed to be peppered with more and more grey each time I saw him.

‘No, it’s fine. I just... need a minute to decompress.’

My husband nodded in understanding, his expression open and compassionate, one of the reasons I’d fallen in love with him in the first place. He wore his heart on his sleeve and was the kindest man I had ever met, always looking out for others above himself. That’s why I thought his actions the past couple of days were so strange, but now I could see it for what it truly was. Just a little brother wanting to spend time with and support his big brother. A brother who was very clearly struggling.

‘Why don’t you join us for dinner tonight?’ I offered. ‘We were thinking of checking out the café.’

Though he didn’t smile, the muscles around Chance’s eyes softened, smoothing out some of the wrinkles there and making him look younger. ‘I... Sure. I’d like that. Let me just get my head screwed on right and sort through some of the data we got today, and I’ll meet you out front at six?’

‘Six it is,’ Blake said, brightening immensely. I knew how much he looked up to his big brother and how much he missed him. I hadn’t known Chance before Blake’s previous wife went missing, but I’d heard he was a lot more fun and easy-going. There was something more to his grief that went over everyone else’s heads, but I knew a man in love when I saw one. He had loved Kali with everything he had, which added an immense strain to his relationship with Blake, and my dear, sweet, innocent husband was so oblivious it was kind of ridiculous. I never said anything. That was so not my place, but I definitely wanted to help them rekindle their brotherhood. They both deserved that, at the very least, despite the gaping wound Chance’s secret created.

Every time I thought about it, about her and what she must have been like to have garnered such unwavering and unconditional devotion from both brothers, I could only conclude that she was one hell of a woman. I found myself daydreaming about

meeting her, even though I knew that she was most likely gone from this world. Sometimes, I would imagine her waltzing right back into Blake's life, into the home we shared that she had picked out, and demand I give him up, but something always switched up the daydream. From what I'd heard about Kali, she was kind and sweet, the perfect woman for a man like Blake. The image of her I created wanted to be mean and cruel, but I just couldn't bring myself to keep it up.

If what I'd heard was true, in another life, we might have been friends.

As Chance trudged away to his van, I turned to Blake. I didn't have to say anything because he was already giving me a sheepish look.

'Yeah, I know. You were right, honey. I'm sorry, I should have listened to you,' he said, pulling me close and resting his forehead against mine in a tender moment that made my heart melt for him even more. I didn't think it was possible to love this much any more than I already did, but he continuously proved me wrong time and again. Every day, I woke up next to this wonderful human being, and he would give me another reason to fall a little more.

'Your heart was in the right place, babe. He knows that,' I assured him.

His breath ruffled my hair and ghosted over my face in a sweet-scented caress. He'd always had a sweet tooth, and I loved that every time I kissed him, he tasted like sugar. Sweet in every possible way.

'I love you. So does your brother. Now let's go help your parents set up the tent.'

He scoffed, the sound full of wry amusement. 'You mean help Dad set up the tent while Mom and Florence watch. Speaking of, why is she here again?'

'Your mother is playing matchmaker.'

‘Oh. Right. Because that’s going to end so well.’

I snickered when he wrinkled his nose in disgust. ‘You should have seen her at the luncheon. At one point I thought she was actually trying to crawl inside his skin. She’s a nightmare.’

He pulled another face, this one comically horrified. ‘Help me run interference?’

‘Of course. That’s what I’ve been trying to do this whole time.’ I gave him a pointed look.

‘Yeah, yeah. I get it. I messed up. I’ll fix it though, I promise.’

He leaned down to smack a kiss against my lips, and I took the opportunity to deepen it. Slipping my tongue past the seam of his lips, I tangled mine with his, eating up the groan he made while I pressed my body flat against his. I had never wanted a man as much as I wanted Blake Dodd, and I was one lucky fucking woman that he wanted me just as much. As evidenced by the thick, hot rod currently poking my stomach.

He pulled away, using my body to hide as he discretely adjusted himself. ‘Goddamn, woman. I love you so fucking much. I can’t wait to have you all to myself tonight. I’m going to make you see stars.’

I caught my bottom lip between my teeth and gazed up at him coyly through my lashes. ‘I want whole galaxies.’

He laughed, still a little breathless, but I enjoyed the way his eyes lit up and that dimple in his right cheek stood out. ‘Oh, is that all? Baby, I’ll give you the whole damn Milky Way.’

I took a deep breath, sucking in his scent. Sugar and musk. Delicious. But then I had

to pull away, because people were waiting on us. 'Come on,' I said, grabbing his hand and tugging him along behind me. 'Your mother is probably wondering what's taking so long.'

He groaned disapprovingly. 'What a way to make my boner deflate.'

I grinned at him cheekily from over my shoulder. 'I'll reinflate it later, babe. Promise.'

His answering grin was a little lopsided, but a lot heated, especially when his gaze dipped to where my jeans hugged my ass like a second skin. 'Fuck, I love you. How did I get so lucky?'

My smile softened into something more tender, and my heart went pitter-patter inside my chest. 'I'm the lucky one.'

Kali

The shadow man was really starting to piss me off. My feelings towards him were beginning to rival my feelings towards Blake, and that was saying something about his ability to get under my skin.

It was constant. Constant watching. Constant taunting. Sometimes, he openly mocked me, yet not once had he shown himself. Even now, he remained in the shadows, his eyes boring into me as I watched the girl. She was crying now. Her screams had died out a few days ago after Blake's last visit. He's left her with enough food to last a week, some of it hot, though it cooled too fast for it to mean much, but most of it was pre-packaged snack food. Cheez-its, goldfish, a few sandwiches, but mostly potato chips and Twinkies. Those had always been his favourites, his sweet tooth even worse than my own.

Her wrists and ankles were still bound, but he'd pulled up a bedside table that consisted of three drawers that he filled with the food. There was a pitcher of water on top, both the pitcher and the cup made from plastic. Less likely to break and be used as a weapon against him. Such irony, that he enjoyed doling out the pain, yet he couldn't take it himself. Fucking coward. She could reach it all with her left hand if she pulled against the chains enough, but she kept getting frustrated as they tangled from her struggles, further restricting her range of movement.

It didn't matter if she could reach the table, though. She was starving herself, hoping to choose her death rather than be killed at the hands of her captor. It wasn't going to work, but it wasn't like I was in any position to warn her. She couldn't fucking see me.

The now familiar dark chuckle resonated throughout the room, bouncing off of walls and reverberating back to me with danger in every echo. The sound lingered like a bad taste, yet something about it called to me. Something I couldn't name. Still, the shadow man was stalking me, then had the audacity to laugh at me when I became frustrated in my helplessness. Progress was still progress, but did it have to be so goddamn slow?

‘Pathetic, useless little girl,’ he mocked from the darkest corner of the room. I couldn't see him, but if I squinted, I could just barely make out the thrashing of his smoky tendrils.

‘What do you want, asshole?’ I snapped, addressing him directly for the first time after days of ignoring him.

‘Ah, so you've finally given in and deigned to speak with me. It's about time.’

‘I'll stop if you keep avoiding my questions. I still don't know who you are or what you want, so either tell me or shut the fuck up and leave me be.’

His laughter was richer, darker, like smooth, melted chocolate. ‘If you want to know the answers to those questions, then you will have to earn them.’

I rolled my eyes, my patience running thin. ‘And how would I do that?’

‘You are attempting to harness a power beyond your reach, but it remains so because you are missing one vital piece of information. Figure it out, and I'll tell you whatever you want to know.’

‘Why don't you just tell me what I'm missing, and then we can bypass these stupid games?’ I snarked back.

‘Because that would defeat the purpose of the test. Either you figure it out, or you don’t. I suggest you put the pieces together before I lose interest. You are amusing, but you won’t always be.’

I felt more than saw his presence leave, and I spat as many curse words as possible in the corner he had just vacated. Fucking bastard. I wasn’t here to solve anyone’s riddles, and I certainly wasn’t here for his fucking entertainment. I had a job to do and power to harness, and I was going to do it with or without him stalking me.

I’d dealt with worse than a stalker. I might not have survived, but I was still here, even if in a different way. I was still fighting.

Angry and also bored of watching the girl cry, I left as well. I wasn’t following the shadow man, even if a part of me was curious where he went whenever he disappeared (and how he did it, because that sort of power was the goal, here). I just needed to get out of that damn basement, leave that fucking cabin in my dust, and never look back. Unfortunately for me, unless my bones were moved, I was stuck here. It didn’t matter how far I pushed the barrier and widened my spherical prison, I would always need to come back to my bones to replenish my energy reserves.

Yet another thing that was pissing me off lately.

I decided to glide over to the edges of my domed cage, though I didn’t intend to push any further today. I simply wanted to watch and wait. This side of the property backed up onto the neighbour’s house. I could tell that someone lived there, but I’d never seen them. I was curious about them. They lived beside a serial killer, surely they’d heard the screams? Felt the presence of the spirits that had died so close to where they rested their head at night?

I had spent most of last night imagining it was an older couple, too decrepit to acknowledge the evil happening less than a mile from their cosy little home. It was a

single-storey house, mostly well-kept, though it was in dire need of a new paint job, and there was a dirt driveway with tire tracks that proved at least one vehicle was still coming and going. Little plants that needed watering lined the pathway to the front door, an array of colourful blooms and multicoloured grasses caging in a cut little cobblestone path. It was picturesque, if you looked past the signs of recent neglect.

Still, it was sturdy. Homely.

The sun was just beginning to set when the rumble of an old, weathered truck reached me. My gaze immediately darted to the road, where I watched a beat-up pickup truck with peeling red paint ambling up the driveway. Even from this distance, I could see the pink, fluffy steering wheel cover and gaudy dreamcatcher hanging from the rearview mirror.

What I couldn't see was the driver. Until he stepped out. If I'd had breath in my lungs, it would have hitched. This man was one of the most beautiful creatures I had ever seen. Lush caramel curls dipped low over his head, and he raised a muscular arm to push them out of his eyes. Eyes the colour of the ocean framed by thick, dark lashes that only seemed to accentuate his raw beauty. He caught his full bottom lip between his teeth as he patted the truck lovingly, and my attention drifted down. His shirt was tight enough that he may as well have forgone wearing one entirely, and highlighted his trim waist and washboard abs. And his ass...

Oh, fuck me sideways, his ass was a work of art. Plump and bouncy when he walked, perched perfectly above a set of deliciously thick thighs that I bet looked fantastic spread apart while he clutched at a woman's hair. I imagined saliva dripping from my mouth as I gawped at him.

My reaction to him was so visceral that I was stunned. It was almost reminiscent of when I'd been turned on when I was alive, the sensation like my clit was throbbing, only it sent tingles throughout my entire form rather than focused on that tiny nub,

like every atom of my being was clenching, desperate to squeeze around a cock as it plunged inside me, but I was empty and bereft. I hadn't felt any type of arousal since I'd died. I didn't think it was even possible.

Who was this man to generate such an impossible reaction from me?

As if he could sense eyes on him, he paused when he reached his front door, key pointed at the lock just shy of being inserted. Then he turned, scanning the trees as if he were expecting someone to jump out. When his gaze skipped over me, a part of me was disappointed, like I had subconsciously been anticipating him seeing me. Another impossibility.

Until he did a double-take and his ocean-blue eyes held mine, a single eyebrow arched in a silent question. Surely not, though. I hadn't met a single individual who could sense me in any capacity since my death. Not Blake. Not any of the girls he brought to the cabin's basement.

'Can I help you, miss? Are you lost?' he asked, his voice running over me like the thick, sweet honey. I glanced behind me and peered through the thick foliage that separated this property from Blake's but found no sign of another person.

There was seriously no way...

'Yes, I'm talking to you, pretty woman. Is there someone else with you?'

I gaped. I couldn't help it. My jaw stretched comically wide until it practically hit my chest as I stared at this mystery of a man in wide-eyed wonder. I pointed to myself, just to be sure, and mimed the word 'Me?'

He was gazing at me as if I had a few screws loose, and I didn't blame him. If he could see me, did he not realise I was dead? 'Yes. You. Are you okay? Do you need

help?’

He was moving towards me with long, fast strides now, eating up the distance between us like it was nothing. I was frozen in place, unsure of what the hell to do, or even what I was supposed to do in a situation like this. Death didn’t come with a handbook. I didn’t know how long I’d been dead. I had no idea what year it was, or how long I’d gone without any real interactions. The ghosts of the other girls didn’t count, mostly because they shunned me as soon as they realised I was their monster’s wife. The shadow man sort of counted, but I was pretending like he didn’t. He could go fuck himself.

But this beautiful man now standing right in front of me, looking at me with earnest eyes filled with concern, was the first real person to actually see me in a long time.

‘Miss, do you need me to call someone? Would you like a ride into town?’

My head shook, almost imperceptibly, but all I could think was What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?

He fidgeted, shifting from one foot to the other as his frown deepened, his frown deepening even further as he scanned my form. Checking for injuries, perhaps?

‘Are you hard of hearing? Do you need a translator?’ he asked, slowing his words down and enunciating each syllable in case I needed to read his lips.

I shook my head ‘no’ again, but no sound would escape the lump currently blocking my throat. I wasn’t even sure I was trying to speak, afraid that he wouldn’t be able to hear me anyway and know straight away that I wasn’t a person. Not anymore.

‘Why don’t you come inside, hmm? Get something hot in you and then we can figure out who to call?’ He tried to reach for me, but I stepped back and out of his way,

pushing myself through a gap in the foliage so he would have to work for it if he wanted to touch me. Not that he could. This body was nothing more than smoke. An illusion. And for some reason, I didn't want him to figure that out.

He raised his hands, fingers splayed as he backed away, softening his features to make himself seem less threatening. 'Okay. All right. No touching. Got it. But you're really starting to freak me out now, miss. I can't help you if you don't let me.'

I had two options here, as I gazed upon his openly compassionate expression. He truly was concerned for my well-being. I was a stranger to him, and from his perspective, I was trespassing on his property, yet he was still extending me a kindness I had learned the hard way was more than likely an act. Except, I wasn't that same naïve woman I was when I was alive. He might be another Blake in the making, but there was nothing he could do to me. I was already beyond his help.

So why was I still hesitating to try to communicate?

I knew the answer, of course. I didn't want to get my hopes up in case his ability to see me was limited to just that. I had no clue how my voice would sound to him. He believed me to be a solid, tangible human being, so it could mean that he could hear me like I was one as well, right?

Only one way to find out...

'I'm Kali.'

He blinked once. Twice. Then a broad, bright smile stretched across his cheeks to reveal two deep dimples in his cheeks and straight white teeth that gleamed in the setting sunlight. 'Kali. It's nice to meet you. I'm Rhodes.'

'Rhodes...' I repeated slowly, rolling the name around on my tongue to get a feel for

it. All the while, I was immensely pleased that I must not have sounded like something from a horror movie to him. He seemed to be registering me as if I were alive, and that built an excitement inside of me, momentarily feeling the gaping hole that loneliness and the need for vengeance left in its wake. I realised with startling clarity that I had been lonely, and that I didn't want this interaction to end.

But luck had never been on my side.

His phone rang, the ringtone cutting through the thoughts racing through my mind with the implications of this discovery. The familiar guitar solo from Thunderstruck filled the space between us, and he pulled it out to check who was calling. He raised a finger to me, asking me to hold on a moment while he took the call, but another sound drifted to me that he couldn't seem to hear. A deep, warning growl echoed out from the shadows of the trees, and I knew my time was up.

I knew innately that the shadow man could and would hurt Rhodes if I stayed any longer. I almost believed he was jealous that this man had stolen my attention, even if only for the briefest of moments.

I slunk back behind the trees, and my heart clenched painfully in my chest when I watched from behind a trunk as Rhodes noticed I'd disappeared. He frowned into the foliage, hanging up the phone to step over the property line as he searched for me, calling out my name.

But I couldn't let him get close. With my stalker now in play and Blake's murderous tendencies hanging over our heads, it wasn't safe for him to be near me, no matter how much my soul screamed for the companionship he could offer.

' Mine . ' The shadow man materialised in front of me, close enough to touch, but his tendrils still blurred his features to hide his face, but then he was disappearing again, leaving me with one last parting phrase that sent chills racing through me. ' You're

mine .'

Rhodes finally gave up after one last glance into the woods, accepting that I was long gone and out of his reach and leaving me more alone than I had felt in a long time. I just hoped that, one day, we could have a real conversation. One where I told him my story. One where I might be able to recruit him in my vengeance. Soon, I would destroy my husband the way he had destroyed me, and this strange man with the ability to see through the veil might just be my only hope.

Rhodes

I was still debating whether or not to call the police when I pulled Bessie back into my parking space behind the service building. The entire gang of entitled pricks I'd checked in early today were already waiting by the locked door, arms crossed, feet tapping, and lips pursed in impatience. It was the type of pose only the rich could pull off, and I immediately disliked them.

'What seems to be the problem, folks?' I asked in my best customer service voice. The one that said what the customer wanted to hear, but really meant fuck off, you prick.

'We have been waiting for over an hour, Mister Rhodes. We need access to the facilities at all hours, not just when you deign to grace us with your presence. I suggest you open this door before I sue you out of home and country,' the elder gentleman threatened, and I was so going to enjoy watching him fall off his high horse.

'And you thought this was something I needed to come handle after I'd already gone home for the night, did you?' I asked, hiding my derision behind a sickly sweet voice.

'How are we expected to survive the night without use of the facilities, sir?' a younger woman asked, her lips so large that they flapped about whenever she spoke. Or moved. Or breathed.

'Perhaps you could start by following the signs and entering the correct door. The bathroom facilities are open twenty-four-seven, which I informed you of while you

checked in. May I also remind you that contacting me out of hours is for emergencies only ,’ I deadpanned.

The younger married couple with the group chose that moment to exit the shower room, hair still wet from their showers. They noticed the pile-up in front of the closed main entrance and changed directions to see what was going on.

‘Is something the matter?’ the man asked.

‘No, sweetheart. Everything is fine. Just a misunderstanding,’ the older woman responded with a huff, her voice terse. No one blinked an eye, so I assumed that was just her normal voice. Poor guy, stuck with parents like that. I’d watched the whole debacle when they’d ambushed that Chance guy, and all the pieces fell into place. With a family like that, no wonder he was such a grump. He had every fucking right to be.

‘All right,’ the younger man said, unsure where to put himself until his wife stepped forward.

‘Why don’t you get a hot shower and wash off the day, Mallory?’ she suggested, expertly manoeuvring the tense older woman in a way that didn’t demean her uppity attitude while working to calm her. What a woman. Her husband was a lucky man.

‘Yes. I do feel quite awful after a day spent travelling and setting up that tent. Florence, darling, let’s wash off the day’s grime so we can be fresh and rested tomorrow. Calvin, honey, you too. You worked up quite the sweat today.’

I watched as the trio headed into the shower room without any towels or toiletries, and decided it was best to leave before they demand I supply those, too. What a waste of my damn time, especially when it should have been spent trying to find that Kali girl. I couldn’t believe how quickly she’d disappeared into the trees, and I wondered

way she came from. I was worried about her.

I turned to the remaining duo, anxiety thrumming through my veins. 'You'll have to excuse me. A woman was wandering the woods, and she stumbled upon my house. She seemed pretty lost and confused, so I need to call the cops.'

'Oh, god, I hope she's okay,' the woman said, genuine concern drawing her features into a frown.

'A woman? What did she look like?' asked the man, and it struck me as a bit of an odd question to ask. Unless...

'Do you know someone who's gone missing?'

He shook his head, something indecipherable flashing behind his eyes before he quickly masked it. He cleared his throat and looked away, like he was suddenly sad. But there was something about the action that seemed a little too practised to me, like he was putting on an act.

'No. I just thought if we had her description, we could keep an eye out for her,' he explained, and I couldn't fault his logic, even if there was something I felt like he was withholding.

'Oh, sure. She was tall, maybe about five-eight, five-nine. Platinum blonde hair that she wore long and loose. And she had these big blue eyes, super pretty, but also kind of haunted like she'd been through some shit.'

The man's face paled at the description, but his wife didn't seem to notice. Instead, she gave me a knowing smirk. 'Of course. And what was she wearing? Just so we can keep a lookout for you.'

I didn't correct her assumption. If I were being honest with myself, then I could admit that Kali had captivated me, but this wasn't about searching for a woman for any other reason than legitimate concern for her safety, so I gave a quick description of what I remembered of her clothes.

'She was wearing black leggings and a pink tank top. Beyond that, I don't remember much. She was gone before I could see too much of her, and she was mostly shadowed by the trees.'

'Well, if we see here, we'll let you know,' she winked, but her husband was already walking off, lost in thought. She shot me an apologetic look before he gaze travelled back to her husband, expression dropping into something sad. 'Please excuse him. He knew someone who went missing a long time ago.'

'Oh, I'm sorry.' That was probably what I was sensing from him before, and now I felt bad. 'I didn't mean to drag up bad memories.'

Her smile didn't reach her eyes as she bid me goodnight, then jogged to catch up with her husband.

I climbed back inside Bessie and called the police.

???

I left the police station the next day more frustrated than not. They weren't going to send out an officer or begin a search party when it could have been just a trespasser who was more than likely long gone, though they had logged the incident as such, but they were at least going to search through the missing persons database with her first name and description in mind.

I supposed that was all they could really do, anyway. I'd played my part, now it was

time for them to step up.

Was it bad of me to hope she came back, not just for her safety and wellbeing, but because I wanted to see her again?

All I could see whenever I closed my eyes was her haunted, icy blue ones, gazing at me with open surprise like she couldn't quite believe I was noticing her. But I didn't understand how anyone could overlook someone so gorgeous. Her features were unique, everything about her shining with a light that gave off the impression she was pure. Except for those damn shadows in her eyes. I hated them. I wanted to know who put them there, because a woman like her deserved so much better.

A woman like her ... what was I thinking? I didn't even know her, let alone well enough to make that conclusion. For all I knew, she could've been a serial killer. I doubted it, though. She had the perfect opportunity to kill me, and she hadn't. Fuck... I hoped she hadn't escaped from one.

Now that the thought had come to me, it settled in with a chilling permanence. I had more questions than answers, and my mind was running scenario after scenario about what had happened to her, why she had shown up on my property. None of them were good.

I decided to head back to my house before making my way to the campsite, just for one more look to see if she would show up again. Maybe she'd never even left? I knew that was wishful thinking, but something was calling me to her. She had found her way to my house, and I did not believe in coincidences. Especially when she'd seemed as shocked as me to be there.

However, to get to my house, I had to drive through the campsite, and I was flagged down by none other than the paranormal investigators. Thankfully, the other group were nowhere to be seen, so I pulled Bessie to a stop in front of them. I didn't get out,

though, instead choosing to roll the window down to save time. Hopefully, whatever they needed wouldn't take too long, or I could handle it when I got back.

'Rhodes,' the surly guy, Chance, greeted, still sullen. Perhaps even more than yesterday.

I had a bad feeling about this...

'Hey, do you folks need something?'

'We were just wondering if we could chat with you about something? When you have a minute to spare, of course,' Ashe asked, shooting a nervous glance towards her thin-lipped wife. I wasn't sure I wanted to get involved in whatever their dispute was, and I hoped they weren't trying to rope me into it.

'Uh, what about?'

'Just what you said yesterday. To my brother. About the woman,' he answered.

'He told you about that, huh?'

'Dakota told us about it, gave us the description in case we ran into her,' Ashe informed me.

'Dakota is...' I prompted.

'My brother's wife,' Chance replied, though something in his tone said he hated that fact. I wondered what the story was there, but decided to let it go since it was none of my business.

'Right. Little red-headed lady. She seems nice. Tell her thanks for passing on the

message.'

'Sure thing, but about that chat?' Ashe pushed.

I sighed, impatience urging me to end this interaction so I could see for myself if Kali was back or not. 'I have something I need to do first, but I'll be back soon. I don't know what your plans are today, but you can find me in my office later.'

'We'll be there,' Chance said, ending the conversation by stepping back to let me drive off.

Both groups were odd in their own ways, and normally, I would have been eager for the change of pace. After Kali showed up, however, my mind was more focused on her. She was taking up residence inside my head, even though our meeting was so brief and cut short. I couldn't explain it, but I realised I didn't want to.

I didn't have much time left on this earth, and going with the flow was my only real option now. That said, I was definitely willing to allow Kali to hoard my attention.

Lady Luck must have been on my side, because I caught a flash of white darting through the trees as I pulled up my driveway. I immediately turned Bessie off and jumped out, heading straight for the section of trees where I'd just seen her.

But when I got there, there was no sign of her.

'Kali!' I shouted, but got no response. 'Kali, wait!'

I picked my way through the underbrush, holding onto the trunks where I could. I didn't spend much time this way since these trees marked the border between my property and the next, and I suddenly wondered if perhaps she was a new owner. I'd never met the guy who lived there, but perhaps Kali was his daughter? Niece? Fuck,

please, anything but his wife.

Then...

There.

‘Kali, hold on a second,’ I called out, rushing as fast as I could to reach her without tripping on a root and falling on my face. I preferred to exude suaveness.

Much to my delight, she stayed put, eyeing me critically as I approached. She was still cast in shadows from the trees, and I wondered if that was purposeful or merely coincidental. The mystery of her only grew.

‘Hey,’ I said, panting slightly as I stopped a few feet from where she stood. Something told me if I got any closer, she might spook and run off again, and that was the last thing I wanted.

‘Hi,’ she said back, almost timidly. I said ‘almost’ because her chin was raised and there was a challenge in her gaze. For me, or for herself? I was eager to find out.

‘You ran off pretty quick yesterday. I was worried.’

‘I had to go.’

I hummed, not knowing how to respond to that without prying. ‘You never answered my question,’ I said instead, and almost wanted to face-palm when she cocked her head at me in confusion.

‘What question?’

‘Are you okay?’

She let out a humourless laugh that told me she was anything but, but a quick scan of her showed no physical signs of injury or abuse. That meant her struggles were internal. I knew a lot about those.

‘Define okay ,’ she finally responded.

‘Do you need help?’

She smiled, but it was small, brimming with sadness. Yet at the same time, her eyes flashed with a fire that I felt might have scorched me if it were aimed my way. ‘Yes, but I doubt you can help me.’

‘Well, I can’t try if you don’t give me the chance,’ I prompted, but she merely shook her head, her shoulders slumping in defeat while simultaneously looking ready to burn down the world. She was quite the enigma, wasn’t she?

‘I would love your help, Rhodes, but I fear it’s too dangerous. I’m not selfish enough to drag you into it. You’re young and have your whole life ahead of you.’

I frowned, my concern for her ratcheting up to new heights. ‘Kali, if I can help you in any way, I want to.’

Her expression softened, something akin to caring flashing through her eyes. A dangerous emotion when it came to me, since I wasn’t going to be easy to care about. Not when my end was fast approaching.

‘You can help me by being my friend,’ she offered, a hopeful glint sparking in her eyes.

I was more than willing to accept. ‘I’d love that. If that’s what you want, I could be your friend.’

She took on a faraway look, like she was caught in a memory. It didn't seem like a good one, though. 'I haven't had a friend in a long time,' she admitted, and my heart squeezed painfully inside my chest.

'Me neither. But, I have to warn you, I'm probably not the best choice for a friend,' I confessed.

'How so?'

'Because...' I paused, unsure if I was actually about to say it out loud or not. This would be the first time I would admit it with words, putting it out there into the universe. There was a finality to it that scared me, like some part of me didn't want to admit it yet. I may have accepted my lot in life, but that didn't mean I wasn't still mourning what could have been. But watching Kali's expressive eyes, seeing how she wore her heart on her sleeve. Her concern for me was just as powerful as mine was for her, despite being strangers, and I knew she was safe to admit my condition. I wanted at least one person to know, to remember me fondly after I was gone.

'I'm dying,' I told her, and her breath hitched. It drew my attention down to her chest, and then the bountiful mounds of her breasts as they rose higher into the air. Beautiful. But I was a gentleman, so I forced my gaze back to hers.

'Why do you say that?' she asked, trying to hold back her reaction. I saw it anyway, the confusion, the compassion. No pity, though. I appreciated that.

The words spilled from my mouth like verbal diarrhoea at her question, like she'd just given me permission to unload everything that had been on my mind since I'd found out a few days ago. 'I have cancer. A brain tumour. Glioblastoma. It's inoperable, and I've declined treatment. Wouldn't have helped, anyway. I've got about three months left to live, if that. So, if you want to let me in on your dangerous situation, I'm not fussed about putting myself at risk, not when I'm already dying.'

‘That’s...’ she began, fighting to find the right words. There were none, but everyone still tried. Her eyes darted to the side, but I saw nothing but shadows. She sighed, her defeat evident in the way her body practically caved in on itself.

‘This danger goes beyond death, Rhodes. I’m sorry, but I can’t.’

And then she was practically merging with the shadows, disappearing before my very eyes like a spectre in the night. I didn’t bother looking for her again. I had the feeling that she would only let me find her when she wanted to be found, and I was surprisingly okay with that. Not because I couldn’t see her whenever I wanted, but because I knew she would return, and it would be her choice.

And that meant something. Something important. Something worthwhile.

I gave the woods one last lingering look before making my way back to Bessie. I had another conversation waiting for me.

Chance

My phone burned a hole in my pocket, its contents the cause of my tense shoulders and the few more grey hairs I'd found this morning after my conversation with Dakota. She's come bearing gifts of eggs, bacon, pancakes, and coffee, with a side of bittersweet hope. If this was just some elaborate, sick joke, heads were going to fucking roll.

One hand was tapping anxious fingers against my thigh while my nails on the other hand were being bitten down to small, painful nubs. That tiny bite of pain helped to ground me, assuring me that I wasn't dreaming, but also reminding me that my life so far was one tragedy after another. I couldn't get my hopes up, yet every cell inside my body, every atom of my being was screaming for my hunch to be true.

Please, please, please...

'Chance, chill. Rhodes will be here soon, and then we can get some answers, I promise,' Ashe soothed, cupping my hand in hers to halt my nervous tapping.

'What if it's not her?' I asked in a tight voice.

'The likelihood of it being her is already practically non-existent, Chance. Don't get me wrong, I hope it's her, but I doubt it. We can only ask and put the matter to bed.'

'I don't want to put it to bed. I want answers. I want to fucking find her, goddammit.'

'I know, but stressing and making yourself bleed isn't going to change the outcome

of this conversation. Get your hands out of your mouth. Maybe pace a bit if you've got too much energy, but stop hurting yourself.'

My inhale was stuttered, and the release was just as shaky. Still, the oxygen helped to clear my head enough to realise that she was right. As soon as I removed my nails from between my teeth, my feet were moving. Back and forth I paced, my boots digging into the mud and leaving deep grooves. I was wearing a new path right in front of the service building, but I couldn't care about that. I didn't think Rhodes would mind anyway. He seemed like an easy-going guy.

The sound of his beat-up old truck rumbling down the dirt road had me freezing in place, my head snapping up to watch as he ambled closer. By the time he had parked in his spot behind the building, I was about ready to jump in and drag him out if necessary. Did he have to drive so damn slowly?

He sauntered over to us at a leisurely pace, hands stuffed inside his pants pockets, a thoughtful expression on his face. He didn't seem to see us, too lost inside his head as he walked by with barely a head nod to acknowledge us. We trailed behind him, and I gritted my teeth at how slow he was being, like he had all the time in the world and we weren't about to ask him a potentially life-altering question.

Finally, he unlocked his office door and we pushed inside. Ashe and Gloria each took a seat on the couch that took up one of the walls, and Rhodes settled in behind his desk, which seemed to be strewn with some sort of organised chaos. Messy though it may have been, I did notice how that mess was segregated and kept within its allocated space. There were a couple of armchairs off to the side, as if they were stored out of the way only to be dragged in front of the desk if they were needed. I chose to ignore them in favour of standing. I didn't think I could sit. I was practically vibrating with anxious energy, my hands shook with adrenaline, and my stomach twisted itself into knots.

I opened my mouth to demand answers, but Ashe beat me to it, shooting me a look that spoke louder than words ever could. Sit down and shut up before you piss him off and he won't want to talk.

I didn't sit, but my jaw slammed shut with a clack of my teeth, causing both Ashe and Gloria to wince. Rhodes merely studied me, seeing way more than they should. I felt the probe of them on my soul, and I wanted to scream and shout, and thrash about to shake him off.

'Thank you for seeing us,' Ashe began. 'This is a bit of a sensitive topic.'

Rhodes' confusion was plain on his face, but he didn't back away from the discomfort of the moment. Instead, he seemed to embrace it. 'I'm a sensitive guy. I'll be as delicate as I can. Now, does someone want to tell me what I'm trying not to break?'

'It's about the woman you saw,' Ashe said, but he only nodded, waiting patiently for us to continue. He already knew this conversation was about her, just not the reason why. 'Did she tell you her name?'

'Yes, but I'm not sure I should divulge that information until someone explains to me what this is about.'

It was a noble sentiment. If only it didn't make me want to wring his neck to squeeze out the information we were seeking.

'Right, well, the description you gave to Blake and Dakota was similar to a woman we knew who went missing about seven years ago,' Ashe finally explained.

'Oh,' Rhodes muttered, a frown pulling low to shadow his eyes. It made their dark blue take on an almost black hue, his pupils more difficult to differentiate from his

irises. ‘She said her name was Kali.’

I stopped breathing. I think we all did, but I was too focused on his words bouncing around in my head and the ringing in my ears to pay much attention to anyone else.

Kali... she was alive?

‘Chance,’ Ashe’s voice drifted through the fog, slowly bringing the world back into focus. ‘Breathe, Chance. Breathe.’

My mouth opened and closed for a beat without any results, but I was eventually able to gasp in enough air to kickstart my brain, which sent me swaying in a dizzy spell as soon as the oxygen hit.

‘That’s it. Let’s get you in a chair, Chance,’ she said, uttering words of comfort as she led me to one of the armchairs. I fell into it, the armchair creaking with the sudden weight, and my ass smarted when it hit something hard. Still, it was nothing compared to the sheer agony burning through my veins. It was like my entire body was unravelling and then being sewn back together by threads made of fire.

‘Fuck me. You think it’s the same Kali?’ Rhodes asked, one hand tangled in his hair as his face paled significantly. If he wasn’t sitting, he might have keeled over. I knew the feeling. ‘Do you have a picture?’

I nodded numbly, fumbling around my jeans until I felt the opening of my pocket and pulled out my phone. My fingers were trembling so hard, however, that Ashe pulled it from my grasp before I could drop it and punched in the passcode – I’d have to ask her later how she knew what it was, the sneaky bitch – and pulling up a picture. I could see the screen clearly from my vantage point, and couldn’t help but wince at the stinging in my eyes as she pulled up the one of me and Kali together, beaming smiles on our faces as we stood in front of my van. I’d just bought the thing and had

it custom painted to include the team's logo. She'd been so proud of me.

Ashe placed the phone, screen up, on the desk in front of Rhodes, and his face paled even further. He took a deep breath, then his eyes locked onto mine, the truth shining through, only marred by his own emotional reaction to this revelation, before he even said the words out loud.

'That's her. That's Kali.'

A wretched sound echoed throughout the cramped space, and it took a moment to realise it was coming from me. All the grief and anger and longing I'd felt since Kali's disappearance came to a head as I slid from my seat and collapsed to the floor.

Ashe and Gloria surrounded me and wrapped their arms around my frame as if their embrace could hold together the pieces that threatened to peel away. I couldn't hear anything above the buzzing in my head. I couldn't think beyond those words of confirmation bouncing around inside my skull. I couldn't see beyond the picture on my phone, still lit up with our smiling faces like it was only yesterday that it had been taken.

Kali was alive? She'd been alive this whole time, practically down the road?

I couldn't fucking breathe.

'Why?' I asked, the sound of my voice barely audible. I didn't know if that was because my lungs weren't working properly or my ears were too fuzzy.

'I'll tell you what I know as soon as you regulate your breathing, okay? It's...' Rhodes paused, mulling over his words with a frown. 'Just... I don't want you passing out on my floor. I'd have to call an ambulance, and it would be a whole thing.'

He waved his hands about like the mere thought was causing me stress, but I could see that he was merely trying to diffuse the situation. Surprisingly, it was working. I focused on the way his hands fought to stop clenching into fists, like he was actively trying to relax himself and seem uncaring when he was anything but. Whatever was going on between him and Kali, he cared, and that was enough to bring me back down from the brink.

If she was still capable of making everyone fall in love with her, then she was still the same Kali I knew. My Kali.

No, not mine. She would never be mine.

The reminder was like a bucket of ice water drenching my emotions, and it was enough to push me that last sliver of a gap towards calm. I found, however, that instead of levelling out my emotions, I was completely numb. The ringing in my ears was still present, but it was more of a background noise that allowed me to hear and process what the others in the room were saying. Gloria was suggesting we call the police, Ashe was still whispering words of comfort to me while stroking back my hair, and Rhodes was trying to placate Gloria, saying he'd just come back from the police station this morning.

'You reported her?' I asked him, my voice hoarse but steady. I coughed a bit, and a water bottle was thrust in front of my face. I took it gratefully, chugging it down quickly, then refocused back on Rhodes. He was eyeing me with concern, but I could also tell he was eager to get this conversation over with.

'I told them about a woman I thought might be lost and potentially in trouble. I gave them her description and her first name to look through the missing persons database. I guess we should all be expecting a call to say they found a potential match.'

I released a long breath as I processed his words. 'All right. Okay. So she's alive, but

there's something you're not telling us,' I prompted, earning a grim look in response.

'She's tight-lipped, but she's definitely in some sort of trouble. She debated asking me for help, but she said it was too dangerous and she didn't want me getting hurt. I told her I didn't care about that, but she was adamant. She said something about the danger reaching beyond death, but I don't even know what that means.'

Gloria cursed. 'It's him. The entity that's responsible for the drownings. She's somehow caught up in it, isn't she?'

She shared a look with Ashe, and they came to some sort of unspoken understanding, one that Gloria did not like. Not at all. She hated it so much, in fact, that she stormed from the room, hands yanking at her hair and a growl stuck in her throat.

Ashe turned to me, her eyes uncharacteristically hard, yet still shining with understanding and compassion. 'Don't mind Gloria. She'll come around, she's just scared. This entity has really freaked her out. We're going to see this investigation through, Chance. I promise.'

'Can someone please explain to me what's going on?' Rhodes cut in, and I realised he had risen from his chair to start pacing behind his desk.

'We ran into a snag in our investigation yesterday,' I began. 'Gloria is a psychic, and she caught wind of something paranormal. We were following her directions when we practically drove right onto a fresh crime scene. It was another drowning victim. I think the police are starting to catch on after so many that they aren't mere accidents.'

'You think there's a serial killer in town?' he asked in a voice pitched higher in his shock.

'We believe there is an entity that has somehow figured out how to interact with the

living, and is killing them,' I said bluntly, deciding it was best to just rip the band-aid off rather than beat around the bush. I studied him closely as I watched for his reaction, and he didn't disappoint. He fell back into his chair, pushing it away from the desk with his weight and almost falling off, but he scrambled to catch himself just in time.

'So, what, you're saying some dead guy is killing the good people of Klamath County? A freaking ghost?'

'Ah, you're a sceptic. That's okay. Most people are,' I said, and I couldn't quite hold back the derision in my tone. The majority of people didn't want to believe, so they turned a blind eye to the uncanny, explaining it away with logic that made them feel better. People feared what they didn't understand, and it had always bugged me that no one ever really tried to understand in the first place. It seemed Rhodes was one of these people.

And here, I'd had such high hopes for him.

'I've never seen a ghost, nor have I seen any evidence that they exist, so you'll have to excuse me if I don't immediately believe you,' he deadpanned, and I felt a little guilty for jumping down his throat. He had every right to want proof before throwing his lot in with the likes of us. I forgot that, sometimes.

Ashe jabbed me in the ribs with her elbow and I cleared my throat. 'Right. Of course. We can provide that, if it would help,' I offered.

'Please. If Kali is trapped by some homicidal spirit, I want to know. I want to help.'

'Trapped...' I mulled the word over in my head as if it would somehow make sense. 'But if she was trapped, how could she have been by your house?'

Rhodes blinked. ‘Come to think of it, she wasn’t technically on my property. I’ve only seen her twice, but both times she was in the trees separating my land from the neighbour’s.’

‘What if that’s the hub?’ Ashe asked me. ‘What if she physically can’t move past the property line?’ Then she turned to Rhodes. ‘Do you know who owns that land?’

He shook his head, his lips pursed into thin, white lines. ‘No. I’m sorry. I know someone owns it, and I see them coming and going sometimes in an old SUV, but I’ve never actually seen them.’

‘Then that’s where we start digging. We find out who owns that land, and maybe we can get Kali out of there.’

‘We can’t go to the police with this, can we?’ Rhodes asked, worry lining his face and ageing him significantly. He really did care about Kali, didn’t he?

‘No, we can’t,’ I confirmed. ‘They can’t help us. Not with this.’

He took a steadying breath, then met my eyes with a determination that matched my own. ‘I want to help. In any way I can. Just bring me up to speed with this whole paranormal shit. I can be the one to put myself out there if it’s dangerous, too. My life is less important.’

‘Whoa, hold up. Why would you say something like that?’ Ashe asked, her tone laced with both anger and concern.

He shrugged, and through his relaxed demeanour, I could see the lines of tension running through him. Whatever it was, it was bugging him, but he didn’t want anyone to know it. ‘I’m already dying. Only have a few weeks left to live, so I may as well make the most of it. If I can give my life to save someone else, then I will.’

I slumped back in my chair, seeing him in a new light. ‘Shit, man. That’s... rough.’

‘It is what it is, and I meant what I said. If this is really as dangerous as you think it is, then let me be the cannon fodder. I want to help. I want to help her.’

I huffed a small laugh, the irony of the situation not lost on me. ‘You too, huh?’

I tilted his head, confused. ‘Sorry?’

‘He means you’ve got feelings for Kali, just like him,’ Ashe explained, and Rhodes’ eyebrows disappeared beneath his bangs.

‘Even I was a little bit in love with her,’ Ashe said, though she was mostly joking. Everyone loved Kali. She was just that kind of person. It was impossible not to.

‘I’m... shit. Do you want me to like, back off or something?’ Rhodes floundered.

‘There’s nothing to back off from,’ I admitted, a little sulkily. ‘She married my brother.’

‘Wait, the one out there? The one who married that Dakota chick? How...?’

‘Kali was legally declared dead earlier this year. She’s been missing for seven years. Blake moved on,’ I said, though I couldn’t quite contain my feelings on the matter.

‘Oh, shit. This whole thing is one big mess, huh?’

‘Yeah. No kidding.’

‘So you were in love with your brother’s wife?’ he asked me, but there was no judgment in his tone, merely curiosity.

‘She was my friend before they even met,’ I defended myself anyway. ‘My feelings for her were present long before they were introduced.’

‘And they were that strong that they never faded,’ he surmised. ‘That shit’s heavy as fuck. Damn, man. I’m sorry. Did she know?’

I shook my head. ‘No.’

‘He thought he was doing what was best for her by letting Blake steal her out from under him,’ Ashe said, her disapproval obvious and something that we had argued over a lot when Kali had first started dating Blake.

‘Shouldn’t we tell him?’ Rhodes asked, unsure how to proceed with such delicate information.

‘No,’ I practically shouted. ‘No, we can’t tell him anything. Not yet. He and Dakota just got married, and they’re not exactly big believers in the paranormal. They would just get in the way, and poor Dakota... I’m not sure how she would react if she knew Kali was still alive. I mean, technically, she and Blake are no longer married since her death was made official, but that’s a whole can of worms I’d rather stay firmly closed until absolutely necessary.’

‘Okay. Understood. I won’t tell them anything unless you give the go-ahead.’

My smile was more genuine, even if it was still tight. ‘Thanks.’

‘Why don’t we start by showing me that evidence, then, yeah? Get me up to speed with what we’re dealing with.’

‘You’ll have to come with us. Mikey keeps a record of everything on the computers. He’s our tech guy, but he’s a bit shy, so we’ll need to go to him,’ Ashe told him, and

he nodded his understanding.

‘Yeah, I figured as much. He seems pretty skittish, from what I’ve seen.’

‘You don’t know the half of it,’ she joked. ‘Even with us, he still gets shy sometimes, and we’ve been friends since we were teenagers.’

I trailed behind them as we left Rhodes’ office, Gloria falling into step beside me as soon as I stepped out.

‘You heard all of that?’ I asked her.

‘Yup.’

‘You good?’

‘No, but this isn’t about me. If Kali is in trouble and needs our help, then that’s what we’re going to do. She’s been stuck for the past seven years, Chance. I’m not so much of a coward that I’d leave her to suffer any longer.’

‘I know. I never said you were.’

‘But you were thinking it,’ she muttered.

‘No, I wasn’t,’ I argued, and I was being honest.

She sighed, her shoulders slumping as if the weight of the world was crushing them. ‘I’m scared, Chance. And not even for me. Ashe... she jumps into dangerous situations like it’s nothing. I’m afraid I won’t be able to keep her safe here. Not with this. Not against this entity.’

My steps halted as I turned to face her full-on and look her in the eyes. She needed to see how serious I was. 'I'm not going to let anything happen to her. If you heard anything Rhodes said in there, you'll know he offered himself up to do the dangerous shit. Even he's trying to protect us, and he doesn't even know us, let alone owe us anything.'

She nodded, but I could tell it was more of an action rather than an agreement. 'We'll see. I don't have a good feeling about this at all, Chance, but I don't know what else can be done.'

And then she was walking off, hurrying to catch up to her wife before they knocked on Mikey's door.

She was right, though. This was the most dangerous situation we had ever found ourselves in. Emotions were high, people were dying, and Kali was alive.

Fuck. Kali was alive.

I'll save you, Kali. I promise. No matter what it takes, I'll get you out of this mess, I swear it.

Mortimer

My body was moving through the motions, stalking the piece of shit that dared to suffocate the world with his own, personal brand of evil, but my mind was elsewhere. It was unusual for me to focus on anything but the hunt, yet I had found a different sort of hunt that had sparked my interest.

That, in and of itself, was odd. My interests were solely based on ridding the earth of the scourge that was infecting it, but lately, my attention had been drawn elsewhere. To a woman, no less.

I had no need for women. The pleasures of the body had long ago been purged from my being, at the same time as I'd lost the breath from my lungs. But I hadn't let that stop me. I might have been dead, but I certainly wasn't gone. Nor was my wrath.

I stalked my prey from the shadows, my power swirling around me in dark tendrils that kept me camouflaged, blending me into the darkness like I was just another flicker out of the corner of your eye—a trick of the light. No one ever saw me coming. No one could stop me. I was death incarnate, come to make them pay for their sins.

He was completely unaware of my presence as he gobbled down his disgustingly greasy food, smearing it around his mouth and dripping stains onto his off-white wife-beater. An apt name for the article of clothing, considering the man wearing it did, indeed, beat his wife. The woman was so bloodied and bruised that she was utterly incapable of leaving the house, or else her husband would end up behind bars in an instant. She was too afraid to take a stand, firmly wedged beneath his dirt-

encrusted thumb, which was where I came in. I wasn't afraid to do what was necessary.

Sadly, that wasn't going to happen today. With the wife stuck inside the house, my prey was taking the opportunity to intimidate her further by hovering while ordering her around. He was treating her like a slave, then using some random excuse to beat her for not performing to his satisfaction, yet she would continue to try to please him to no avail. There was no satisfying this man. He was merely looking for a punching bag, one made of meat and flesh, blood and bone. Something that would whimper in pain as he embedded his fists into them. Unfortunately for this woman, she had agreed to play that role for him the moment she'd tied her life to his through marriage.

But now, I was bored. My mind wandered back to the spirit with hair so white, it was almost like a beacon of her purity. And that's exactly what she was, despite her adorable attempts to seem badder and stronger than she was. In life and her death, it was obvious she had never so much as hurt a fly. Her soul was untainted, but her pain, her fury, and the injustice she wished to right would eventually taint her if she were successful.

I wanted to see her flourish, to embrace the darkness in her quest for revenge. Perhaps then I could have a companion in this never-ending hell. I had learned early on how to become the antagonist in order to survive. She didn't know what she was doing, but she would figure it out. There was an intelligence in her pretty little head that defied the binds that restrained her, pushed through the cage she was held captive in. Her killer, still at large, had trapped her even in death, and her desire for vengeance tasted oh, so sweet.

I crinkled my nose when the waste of space I was watching belched in his wife's face, the scent of bile, beer, and grease drifting to me in my perch on the outskirts of the small, dimly lit room. I wasn't getting anywhere with this idiot today, so I made

the uncharacteristic decision to leave and find the newest object of my obsession.

It wasn't difficult to merge with the shadows and use them to pull me where I wanted to go. I bypassed the regular, slower, mortal methods of travel, enjoying the sensation of the cool bite the shadows provided. They were frigid, almost to the point of pain, but it was a coldness that felt wonderful on my incorporeal form. Mostly because I was feeling something at all. If I wasn't careful, I would forget what sensation felt like at all.

I found the girl talking with the living boy again, the two of them conversing far too close to my liking. I had already informed her of my claim, yet she dared speak to the same man again? A man who was not even of our realm? He was nothing but a mere mortal, easily manipulated and toyed with. Perhaps that was what she was doing, but the keen glint in her icy eyes twisted something ugly inside of me, an emotion I had never experienced and so could not name.

It irked me enough that I didn't immediately make my presence known. I stayed far enough away, hiding within the trees as I used the shadows to spy on them. Their voices drifted to me with a single-minded clarity, all other sounds fading to the background, and then to nothing.

'Because... I'm dying,' the man announced, and my ears pricked up at that information. I sent a tendril of shadow to confirm, and yes, right there. His brain was riddled with cancer. He was going to join us sooner rather than later. I didn't like that. He would get in the way. His soul was just as bright and pure as hers, and if he found her in death, he had the potential to bring her back from the brink of darkness. He could derail everything.

I could not allow that, not when she was so close.

She must have noticed the shadows doing my work, however, because her gaze

followed the tendril as I brought it back to me, and she began to pull away from him. 'This danger goes beyond death, Rhodes. I'm sorry, but I can't.'

Ah, so his name was Rhodes . An interesting name that I begrudgingly admitted suited the man. No wonder she was so drawn to him. I had a feeling he was going to be just like his name suggested, growing life and beauty wherever he stepped, because he was just that pure. My exact opposite.

When she merged into the shadows as if she belonged there, and I would make sure she would soon enough, the man – ' Rhodes' – scanned the trees one last time before taking off, climbing back inside his truck and driving away. I listened for a while longer just to see if he was truly leaving, and sure enough, he stopped at the campsite where he was met by his anxious guests.

I doubted they would be a problem, but I was keeping a close eye on their little psychic friend. It was cute that she thought she was powerful just because she was tuned into the veil. That's what happened when you had experienced death or came close to it. She wasn't as special as she thought she was. Take Rhodes, for example. He was dying and had accepted that fact, so he was able to interact through the veil of death with greater accuracy than the psychic.

Hence why he was able to see and speak with the girl.

It was a revelation that sent me into a cold fury, my shadows whipping around me in response to the sudden emotion. This was my hunting ground. How dare these psychic mortals encroach upon my territory and interrupt my hunt? How dare they disrupt my chances to entrap this woman to share the same fate? It wasn't like she wouldn't thank me. I would be helping her, after all, even if I was taking something for myself out of it all at the same time.

My shadows were a step ahead of me, dragging me through them until I was no

longer within the trees as I watched the girl, but in a small office where both the troublesome psychics currently occupied. They were joined by the tall man and the short, dark-skinned woman, and they were deep in what seemed to be an emotionally draining conversation.

A conversation in which they confirmed the identity of my soon-to-be corrupted ghost girl. Kali, they called her. A beautiful name for a beautiful woman, one that was more fitting than they realised. My ghost girl shared her name with the Hindu goddess of vengeance and destruction. It was such a perfect parallel, my lips spread wide into a pleased smile. These mortal men and women may have been after her for their own reasons, but I knew now that they could never pull her back from the path she was on. Her fate was set, seemingly since her birth, and cemented in her death.

Excitement thrummed through me at the prospect of a companion, someone to share my eternal afterlife with as we grew our power and ruled from the shadows. When the female psychic stood and stormed out in a huff, it only exacerbated that excitement, drawing on that malicious part of me that hungered for blood, for the taste of my prey's fear. She was running, and I wanted to chase.

So, I did. I had learned enough from observing their conversation, so I shifted through the shadows one more time until I was just outside the office we had just vacated. She was pacing back and forth down the length of the hallway. Fingers clutching anxiously at her clothing and her single thick braid, teeth dug into her full bottom lip, and her breaths came in heavy pants like she had just run a long distance. Her face was flushed with anger, but it was obvious it was an internal battle more than an external one. She had lost the argument in the office, and now she was throwing a fit about it.

How... immature.

She hadn't noticed me yet, despite the shivers racing up and down her skin, likely

attributing the goosebumps pimply her arms to the propped-open front door. The breeze was tepid, cooled by the darkness of the interior of the building rather than the soothing warmth it had been when it had entered.

I decided to simply continue observing for a moment, to gather as much information on this woman as I could. I hadn't seen any indication that she was one of the monsters I typically hunted, but if she was going to insert herself in my business, in the business of the dead, then I would ensure she had the right to. I wasn't adverse to altering my rules to get rid of a nuisance, but only if it became a necessity.

She was muttering beneath her breath, her words loud in the stillness despite the sounds of the others' voices filtering through the closed door. She didn't have very nice things to say about me, and I found it immensely amusing. This puny, insignificant mortal woman had caught on to my dark energy and wanted to flee. Now that I had experienced death for myself, it baffled me how people were so afraid of what came next. The veil between the living and the dead was thin at best, their ability to sense us an innate ability within each of them, yet they ignored it. Purposefully. As if that would make it go away.

But that ignorance turned into a fear of the unknown, and even when an individual had accepted the ability to touch the veil, they still feared what was on the other side. It was a ridiculous conundrum, but one that I used to my benefit.

The conversation inside the officer was over before I could have any fun, the door opening to expel its occupants one after the other. Finally sensing me, though too late for me to truly enjoy teasing her, the psychic woman immediately latched onto the tall man. It was more amusing to watch them squirm when they were on their own, because human beings were pack animals and drew strength from another's presence.

Pity, but there would be time for that in the future. For now, I would simply watch and wait. I wanted to gather more information before I acted, because it seemed like

these mortals were my ghost girl's loved ones, and if I hurt the people she cared about, I doubted she'd stick around willingly.

I paused, mulling over the shock that revelation caused. I had never cared about another's willingness, not since before I died. So, why was this time different? I could have bound her to me, hunted her through any realm she tried to hide in, but though the idea of hunting her appealed to me, it wasn't the same sort of appeal I was used to in my prey. This one was... different. Complicated. Complex. I could have collared her, kept her as a pet, but that didn't fit the shape of these strange feelings burning through me.

I wasn't used to burning. I was used to the cold bite of the shadows, the numbness of death. I wasn't sure what this urge was, but I knew it needed to be mollified or else I would spend eternity wondering, plagued by unabated curiosity. I refused to let something like this pass me by, even if I was clueless about what it actually was.

I would just have to figure it out.

Kali

The tangy, metallic scent of blood permeated every nook and cranny of the basement. It was hot, acrid, and stifling. I couldn't escape it. It had been one of the worst parts of my own torture, forced to endure the scent of the blood of all the girls before me, mine dripping down to soak into the concrete, mixing with theirs. It was a foreboding precursor to when I did join them, my body rotting away beside theirs in the dirt behind the cabin.

It was yet another method that Blake used to taunt me, to prove that I wasn't getting out of this basement alive.

You're just like them, Kali. You could have been so much more, but you just had to poke your nose where it didn't belong, and now you're nothing more than a bloodstain blending in with all the others.

Sometimes I would forget that those were his words to me. Lately, my mind had been adopting my own voice whenever I remembered them with increasing frequency. Some part of me had always agreed, even when I reminded myself that it wasn't my fault my husband was a killer. I'd only followed him that night because I thought he was cheating on me. Never in my wildest dreams could I have ever imagined he'd been kidnapping, torturing, mutilating, and murdering girls in the basement of a cabin he'd secretly acquired before we had even married. Still, he'd bought it sometimes during our years together.

It was why I was still so suspicious of his family's involvement. Surely, at least one of them had to know about his psychosis. Chance was my first guess. Mallory had

always doted on Blake, oftentimes leaving Chance out of their family bonding moments because Calvin had never really liked the fact that he wasn't his own flesh and blood. A reminder of Mallory's love and loss from before him.

Ergo, my second guess was Calvin. While Blake and Chance had always been close, Calvin exuded the sort of calm, simmering anger that never really went away. It was always present, in the background of every interaction, every business deal, every disciplinary action taken against anyone who had stepped out of the net of control he had painstakingly woven.

It had been hard living up to his ideal of the perfect wife for his favourite son. One of my biggest regrets from the life I'd lived was pandering so much to the man when I could have been living my life the way I'd wanted to. Mallory wasn't the only one of my in-laws who micromanaged. Even down to the way I wore my hair or my career. Eventually, I'd given up on my dreams to support Blake through his.

I'd thought that was enough for me, which was one of the biggest reasons why my suspicions that Blake was cheating had hurt so much. I thought I'd given up everything for a man who hadn't respected me enough to remain faithful.

Not for the first time did I wish I'd run in the opposite direction.

The girl's screams drew me out of my thoughts, and I turned back in just in time for the begging to start. Blake ran the tip of one of his knives over the curve of her neck, nicking a small cut just above her collarbone. He watched, enraptured by the little bead of blood that welled to the surface. It was too small to drip, a tiny mark of colour against her alabaster skin. He had a type, it seemed. All of us were as pale and close to pure white as we could get. Our skin tones, our hair, even our eyes. He wanted to dirty us up, destroy our purity, starting with our looks.

I had always suspected he did this to them because of me. I was almost certain the

killings began after we had started dating as teenagers. It was like he was killing these girls because he couldn't kill me, not without drawing too much attention to his after-dark activities. I assumed he only made me one of his girls because I'd given him no choice, but I hadn't been able to confirm my theories. He never let any of us know why he was this, or why us. It was merely a conjecture I had made through piecing together the pieces of the puzzle I had managed to collect. There were still large chunks missing, but it didn't really matter, did it? He was going to pay, regardless.

'Please, don't do this,' she begged, tugging on her restraints and pulling herself closer to the wall, but there was nowhere to go. Nothing could save her from his evil now. 'I swear I won't tell anyone. Just let me go, please. I promise, I won't be any trouble. I won't say a thing. Please.'

Blake merely tutted in response and sliced a larger, though still shallow, cut in her shoulder.

'Please, I have a family. My boyfriend will be wondering where I am. I have a little sister who relies on me, and sick parents who need me to care for them. I'm a person. I have a life. I'm needed. Please, don't do this. Let me go. Please.'

Ah, bargaining as well as pleading. She was trying to appeal to a side of him that would see her as more than a victim, but it was clear to see she was only making things worse. He liked that he was taking her from the people who loved her. He liked that she was begging because it gave him a sense of power. The control he wielded over her life was a drug to him, singing to him like a siren's song. Her words only made him hard inside his jeans.

She noticed.

'No, please. Please, don't. Please.'

‘I’m not going to fuck you, pretty girl,’ he whispered against her ear, then licked up the blood that had bubbled to the surface beneath his blade. She whimpered and tried to pull away from him, tears cascading down her cheeks to mix with the blood on her neck and dampen her hair. It clung to her now, both with her tears and the sweat from her efforts to escape. It would only tangle and eventually matt, and I didn’t think hers would be combed like mine had been. Despite his efforts to torture me physically, his tender, almost loving care was another method he used to get inside my head. To confuse me. To break me.

She should count herself lucky he wouldn’t do that to her. That was the type of psychological torture you could never come back from, apparently even in death. Still, I continued to find myself searching for that elusive sign that what we’d had was real, some acknowledgment that I hadn’t completely fucked up my entire existence because I fell for this shithole. However, after however long it had been, there had been none. That ring still glinted on his left hand, taunting me, evidence that I was nothing but a ruse to him. A cover. It was finally beginning to sink in that it had all been in my head.

‘Stop,’ I begged her, tired of the show. ‘You’re only egging him on. Give it a rest and die as peacefully as you can in this shithole.’

When Blake passed the knife over that life-sustaining artery on the side of her neck, something clicked inside of her. Suddenly, she was gasping and gaping for an entirely different reason as her eyes locked onto me.

‘Please, help me. Don’t let him do this. Please, I’m begging you.’

Holy. Fucking. Shit. She could see me.

Blake froze, confusion twisting his features as he followed her gaze to where she was pleading with wide, terror-filled eyes for me to save her. He scanned the room,

finding nothing, and I was both relieved and disappointed. I wanted him to see me. I needed him to see me coming and be completely helpless to stop me. But I wasn't ready yet. I wasn't strong enough.

He turned back to the girl and dragged the knife from the side of her neck to the hollow beneath her throat, dipping the tip into it with enough pressure for her blood to start pooling. She stayed perfectly still, the only sign of movement coming from her trembling. It rippled in the blood, vibrating it in a way that caught Blake's attention, until his phone rang and cut through the moment. He wrenched his gaze away with visible effort and took a few deep breaths through his nose to calm himself down, already redonning his nice-guy mask.

The girl released a heaving sigh of relief that she choked on as she sobbed, her eyes still latched onto mine. Blake placed the knife back in its place on his wall of weapons, peeled off his gloves, and reached into his back pocket to pull out his phone. One glance at the caller had him cursing beneath his breath and thundering up the stairs to take it. He'd walked right through my incorporeal form to get to the stairs, and I took a small amount of pleasure from the way he shivered like he'd walked into a freezer, his skin pebbling with goosebumps that he rubbed away with one hand. I heard him answer the phone, and the reinforced door between him and his ensured that the girl could make as much noise as she wanted, but whoever was on the other end of the call wouldn't hear a peep.

I could still hear him, though, and I was grateful that sound on the other side of the veil travelled differently without solid objects getting in the way. It was his wife calling, something about him not knowing where he was, if he was okay, and wondering when he was coming back. I could even hear Mallory, Calvin, and... was that Florence in the background? What the fuck was happening there?

No. Nope. Not my problem. Let the living do what they would. That was no longer my business.

The girl was still staring at me, the helplessness clear in her gaze as her brain slowly processed what she was seeing. 'Y-you... you're... one of... them.'

'His past victims? Yes.'

Her lip wobbled as she accepted that information. 'W-w-why?' she stammered.

'Why what? Why you? Why now? Why me?'

'Y-yes.'

'Something about our pale features. I don't know his timeline. I've lost track of time now, anyway. It no longer matters. But he got me because I caught him. He was my husband.'

She flinched away from me at that news, likely worried I was in on it with him. If she hadn't seen him walk right through me like I didn't even exist, perhaps she might have continued believing that.

'How c-can I s-see you?'

'I don't know,' I admitted. 'It's been happening a lot lately, people seeing me. It's a recent development. Although... the other guy is dying from brain cancer, and you're not far off, so perhaps that's the connection,' I muttered, no longer talking to her but mulling my thoughts out loud.

'Will you h-help me?' the girl asked, her voice small but hopeful.

I faced her again, her eyes locking mine in place with her tears that she refused to let fall again. My lips tipped down in a sad grimace, and she flinched before I even uttered the words. 'I'm sorry. If I could, I would, but I can't interact with the living.'

‘Can’t or won’t?’ she asked, her voice stronger in her anger and frustration.

‘Can’t. I physically can’t even touch things. The best I can do is let you know when he’s coming back. Give you time to prepare.’

She nodded sullenly, her eyes losing focus as she was lost to her thoughts, so when she spoke, I jolted a little in surprise. ‘My name is Bianca. Bianca Devlin. I’m twenty-three years old. My parents were in a car accident, and both need a full-time nurse to care for them while they heal from their injuries, though most of the damage was in their brains, so they’re pretty much gone now, anyway. My little sister, Reina, she’s only ten. She has been struggling with seeing both of her parents turn into vegetables. She’s been acting out a lot, and I’m all she has, but now that I’m gone...’ She paused, catching her breath as her emotions clogged her throat. She cleared it a few times before she could get another sound out. ‘She’s going to lose everything. Her entire family... gone. She’ll be all alone.’

I didn’t know what to say. There wasn’t anything to say. She was a dead woman whether she liked it or not. All she could do was accept her lot in life, that her parents would no longer receive the care they needed, that her sister would end up alone, bouncing from house to house in the foster system. It didn’t sound like she had any family to take her in, but there wasn’t anything to do about it now.

I knew that sounded harsh, but that was reality. Life waited for no one. Death embraced us all.

‘Can you help me after he... you know?’ she asked, resignation dimming the hope in her tone, but it was still present. This woman... man, she had balls of steel. Blake really went all out with his victim choice this time. I legitimately felt bad for her, but my hands were tied.

‘I’m not sure how I can help,’ I admitted.

‘You said you talked to another guy, right? The one with the brain cancer?’

I caught on, but I was selfishly hesitant to broach such a topic with Rhodes. I liked the fact that he was unaware of my ghostly status. I was enjoying someone believing I was alive. Real. Tangible, even if maintaining the illusion meant avoiding his touch. It would have shifted right through me, regardless. A dead giveaway that I was... well, dead.

I didn’t want to completely crush her hopes, though. I wasn’t that cruel. So, instead, I tried to find some truth that I could tell her without completely destroying my own selfish wants and desires in the process. I had spent far too long when I was alive acting at the expense of myself, constantly putting others before myself. Now, I wasn’t going to do that. But maybe I could do something .

‘I’ll see what I can do, but I can’t make any promises. Even if I do manage to get a message to him, there’s no guarantee that he would even be able to help, or live long enough to do so.’

It didn’t upset me that Rhodes was dying. If anything, his impending death was brimming with potential. Maybe, just maybe, I wouldn’t have to be alone anymore.

Shadow man, withstanding.

Speaking of, I wondered where he had run off to. Not that I was complaining about the reprieve from the chilling sensation of his eyes constantly watching me from behind his little magic trick of shadows. That was one treacherous mystery I was sure I could do without, so I decided to continue what I was doing. Ignore him. No one could say I didn’t learn from my mistakes. Maybe he’d get bored and finally leave me alone, and then I wouldn’t have to feel so shitty about the risk I was taking every time I went to see Rhodes.

It was going to head over there again in the morning to try to catch him before he left for work, and hopefully, we would be alone. No shadowy visitors stalking us from the darkness. And certainly no declarations of possession like I was some kind of object to be obtained and kept. Fuck that. I'd married one asshole, I wasn't about to let another one trap me. Never again.

Dakota

Gentle fingers threaded through my hair, rousing me slowly from my sleep. I sighed and nuzzled into the familiar warm palm.

‘Good morning, my love,’ Blake whispered against my lips before pressing a soft kiss to them.

‘Mm, good morning,’ I mumbled sleepily, but then my hand landed on the space beside me on the cot, only to find it cool to the touch, and the previous night came rushing back to me. I’d meant to stay awake while I waiting for him to return. I remembered the first rays of light peeking through the trees, so I must have fallen asleep around dawn. Still, had he been out all night?

‘You just got back,’ I accused.

His gaze fell, suddenly more interested in a random spot on the blanket than me, and he bit his lip nervously. ‘I’m sorry, honey. It’s just, the whole thing with Rhodes finding that girl...’

Immediately, my annoyance fled only to be replaced by guilt and concern. And perhaps a dash of jealousy, but I was only human, and it was hard to compete with a ghost. Especially when all I had learned about said ghost made her sound like a genuinely wonderful human being.

‘It reminded you of her.’

He released a heavy sigh, his loss something that I had long since accepted he would never truly get over, no matter if he had moved on. I didn't doubt his love for me, but I went into this relationship fully aware that his heart would always belong to another, even when he had somehow made room for me. I was okay with it, but that didn't mean it still didn't sting sometimes when his grief pushed forward again. It felt like I was in a relationship with her as well, though that feeling was more often found when I tried to talk to Chance. I was glad he was coming around to the idea of me, though this business with Rhode's mystery girl had certainly put a damper on that progress. He'd been MIA ever since I'd given him and his team the girl's description.

And so had my husband.

His entire demeanour softened when he looked up. There must have been some sort of expression on my face that showed my true feelings, and he jumped to reassure me. 'I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean to make you feel like my past was more important. I love you, and I'm so happy with you. I swear, I was just caught off guard and needed to process, but I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere.'

I relaxed at his words. I hated that I still needed that reassurance, but it felt nice that he was so willing to give it. Not many men would have been patient enough with my insecurities. I loved him with all my heart, and the gaping chasm that Kali had left behind with her disappearance had been a huge block at the beginning of our relationship, and I could admit that there were some residual feelings about that.

Blake was my husband, however. He had married me and tied our lives together irrevocably. There was something to be said about actions speaking louder than words, and he proved to me every single day that our love was real and most definitely worth it.

When my eyes darted down to his lips, then travelled further until my gaze landed on the bulge beneath his zipper, he smirked at me knowingly. 'Does my wife need a

reminder that her husband finds her beautiful?’ he asked, leaning in to brush his lips against the corner of my mouth in an almost kiss. ‘That I find her sexy?’ His lips pressed every so gently against my jaw. ‘That I love her so fucking much?’

I released a shuddering breath, and that seemed to be the catalyst for the moment he lost control. His hand, still tangled in my hair, gripped my head to pull me to him, and his lips landed on mine in a bruising kiss. His tongue parted my lips and plunged into my mouth, tangling with mine as we tasted one another. I moaned into his mouth, and he groaned right back, grinding his growing erection into my leg.

‘Fuck, baby. I need you. I need to prove to you how much you mean to me with my cock buried deep inside your warm heat. Let me show you how much I fucking love you.’

I whimpered at his words, my legs already parting for him as a surge of wetness trickled from my core. ‘Yes,’ I hissed. ‘Show me how much you love me with that big, fat cock of yours.’

Another groan tore from his chest at my words, the sound low and vibrating. ‘Fuck, I love that dirty mouth of yours. You’re such a whore for me, aren’t you baby?’

I tilted my head up and nipped at his chin. ‘Only for you, babe.’

‘That’s right. Only for me. You’re all mine.’

His spare hand traced circles on my hip, then my waist, my ribs, until eventually he cupped my breast, flicking his thumb over my nipple. It perked up, poking through the flimsy fabric of my nightdress. He smirked at my breathy sigh, then bent his head to suck on my other nipple through the material. The sensation of his hot, wet mouth over the fibres on my sensitive bud had me arching my back to get closer to him, eagerly chasing the pleasure that he was withholding from me. He was teasing me,

giving me just enough to soak through my panties, but not enough that I was quickly becoming frustrated.

I pulled away, tugging frantically at his clothes. 'Off. Take them off. I need to feel you, baby.'

He complied, moving away from me to strip until he was naked before me, his thick cock jutting out, the head red and angry as it seeped precum from the tip. It twitched beneath my scrutiny, seeking what we both wanted.

'Soon, baby,' he promised. 'But first, let's get you out of your dress so I can make you feel good.'

He peeled my nightdress over my head and tossed it haphazardly to the side. I didn't see where it landed, nor did I care when I had my husband's beautiful, toned, naked body in front of me, his weeping cock just begging to be devoured.

'I need to taste you,' I whispered, unwilling to break the tension between us by being too loud. 'I want to choke on you cock, baby.'

He smirked down at me, then adjusted himself so he was on his knees, leaning back, hips thrust forward for easier access. 'Well, what kind of husband would I be if I denied you? Especially when you ask so prettily.'

I grinned, the expression more feral than the demure mask I donned in public. That was one of the things I loved the most about my relationship with Blake: that we could act like boring, upstanding members of society in public, then become animals behind closed doors. It was freeing. Intoxicating. Our sexy little secret.

I licked the bead of clear liquid that had gathered at his tip, tasting his salty, musky, manly taste, and moaned. I loved his flavour on my tongue.

‘Come on, baby. Don’t make me wait. Take me deep,’ he all but demanded, thrusting his hips up so his cock poked at my lips. I obliged, just as eager as he was, and wrapped my lips around his mushroomed head. I sucked and swirled my tongue around his tip, teasing him before the main show. I watched carefully for every twitch, shudder, gasp, and moan, taking him deeper into my mouth each time I made him make one of those delectable sounds.

‘Fuck, baby. Yes. Just like that,’ he praised as my tongue flicked around the underside of his shaft while I took him to the back of my throat. He moaned when he hit resistance, his hips jutting forward of their own accord until I was choking and gagging on his thick length. My eyes welled with tears, but he didn’t let up, and I didn’t want him to. Instead, I breathed through my nose, relaxed my throat, and let him slide all the way down until my nose brushed against his pelvis.

‘Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck, wait. Stop, baby. I’m gonna blow if you keep doing that,’ he panted as he pulled out of my mouth.

I’m squirming as he gazes at me from beneath eyes half-lidded with lust, but it’s like neither of us can wait a moment longer. He pounces, pushing me until I’m on my back beneath him as he hovers over me, his hot shaft rubbing deliciously against my clit. My pussy clenched around nothing, the ache becoming painful with need.

‘Please, baby, fuck me. I need you inside me,’ I begged

‘The hell if I’ll say no to that,’ he joked, but my smile disappeared in favour of a gasp when he pushed inside, taking me to the hilt in one long stroke. He stayed put, letting me acclimate to the sudden intrusion, but I didn’t want to wait. I wanted him to fucking move.

I shifted my hips, twirling them so his cock was brushing those little spots of pleasure deep inside me and I released a wanton moan, hoping to spur him to move. It worked.

With a half chuckle-half groan, he pulled out, the slow drag of him lighting up my nerve endings perfectly, but when he thrust back in, it was hard and fast. Our skin slapped as he drilled into me, each pump of his hips hitting me just right as his balls smacked against that small sliver of skin between my pussy and my ass. If he didn't feel so damn incredible in my pussy right now, I might have asked him to take me back there instead.

'I'm gonna come soon, baby,' he panted above me, then proceeded to grunt as he held back. He always made sure I came first, so when his hand snaked between us and he started thumbing my clit, I knew I wasn't going to last much longer, either.

'Fuck, yes, right there,' I moaned, my walls starting to flutter around his length until my pleasure crested and I clenched around him, locking him inside me. My mouth opened in a silent scream, but he covered it with his hand anyway, just in case a sound escaped. We may have been in a tent, but we weren't truly alone.

He jerked inside of me, his hips stuttering as his own orgasm crested and I felt the first spurts of his cum streaking my inner walls. His arms gave out as he panted, and he collapsed on top of me. I didn't mind, though. I liked how close we were, the sensation of our sweat-slick skin sliding against each other, his hot, harsh pants blowing into my ear and rustling my hair.

'Fuck, I love you.' He punctuated his declaration with a nip to my earlobe, and I shivered beneath him, winding my arms around his torso to keep him in place.

'I love you, too, Blake. You're my everything.'

His nose nuzzled into my neck as he kissed, licked, and nipped down to my shoulder and back up again, then he lifted himself onto his elbows so he could look me in the eye. His expression was tender, loving, and brimming with affection solely kept for me, and me alone.

I wondered briefly if he had looked at Kali that way, too, but cast the thought aside as quickly as it came. I wouldn't allow her memory to tarnish the best thing that had ever happened to me, even if I did still feel that twinge of guilt deep in my stomach, like I was somehow stealing her man. I wasn't, I knew that, but I couldn't help but feel like he would also belong to her first.

It was a bittersweet moment as we held each other in the afterglow of our lovemaking. One filled with love, but was twisted by my insecurities that refused to budge, though I did my best to focus on the sweet over the bitter.

Sounds trickled in from outside. Birds chirping, trees rustling in the breeze, the shuffle of people rousing from sleep. The sun was fully up now, shining through the tent to bathe us in a green glow. When the first squawks of a displeased Mallory cut through the quiet peacefulness of the morning, both Blake and I sighed. He hefted himself off of me, rolling to sit on the edge of the cot and to gather our clothes. He picked up my nightdress and used it to clean me up, gently collecting evidence of our intimacy before folding it and putting it aside. It was sweet of him, but I wished he'd used one of the towels. I didn't have any more nightwear.

'Nothing like your mother's voice to break through the moment, huh?' he teased, and I sent him a thin-lipped smile in response. He noticed I was a little out of sorts and frowned, pausing in his quest to find some clothes to give me his full attention. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing. It's... nothing. I'm just worried about you,' I admitted.

His smile was soft, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. 'There's no need for you to worry, honey. I'm fine, I promise.' He pressed a quick kiss to my forehead, finished getting dressed, then told me he'd meet me in the café for breakfast once I was ready.

My smile vanished as soon as the tent's flap fluttered closed behind him. Maybe I

should join Rhode's efforts to get the mystery of that girl solved so we could get some closure. Kali had been gone for seven years. She had been legally declared dead earlier this year, and she wasn't coming back. I hated to see how her absence was still hurting the people I cared about all these years later, but there wasn't anything to be done for it. Grief had no set rules, and all I could do was love and support them while they dealt with it.

But Rhodes' description of her, closely followed by Blake's reaction, not to mention Chance's, sat heavy in my heart, taunting my persistent insecurities. What if it was her? What if she was in trouble, and we saved her, only for her to find me living her life in her place?

I couldn't even begin to imagine how that would feel. Yet, I also couldn't imagine doing what was necessary to bring her home. Blake was mine now, but that didn't mean I had to be cruel about it. I wouldn't let her suffer just because life had moved on without her. That was a torturous enough prospect in itself.

That settled it, then. I would talk to Rhodes and see if there was anything to do to help, because despite the part of me that acknowledged her return could destroy everything I had built for myself these past few years, I could not bring myself to sit back and do nothing just to keep it for myself.

Rhodes

I couldn't stop my gaze from drifting towards the treeline as I left my house in the morning, even if I'd wanted to. My emotions were going haywire this morning. I couldn't decide if the prominent emotion was anxiety or dread, but they were also warring with the excitement I felt over the prospect of seeing Kali again. I couldn't have stopped my heart from fluttering when that excitement crested when I spotted the object of my most recent obsession already there, waiting for me just inside the treeline. She beckoned me closer with a wave of her hand, and like an infatuated idiot, I followed without question.

She could have been a siren sent to lure me to a watery grave, but I was dying anyway, so why wouldn't I follow the beautiful, mysterious woman into the woods?

She led me further into the trees than we had gone before, and I kept checking for those little markers my parents had left to point out the property line: three vertical slashes on the bark of certain trees. I had seen them on the other side of the property plenty of times, because of the campsite boundaries, but I didn't recall ever coming this way before. Or had I? The longer I thought about it, the more my head pounded and the fuzzier it became until I couldn't remember what I was thinking about so hard. Why was I in the woods?

'Rhodes?' a sweet voice called out to me from somewhere to my right. I followed the sound to a vaguely familiar face, and I stared at her strikingly pale, ethereal features as I tried to place her. 'Rhodes, are you okay?'

I blinked, the memories trickling back in as I finally realised why I recognised her. I

grinned, shaking off the brain fog. 'Kali, hi.'

'What just happened?' she asked, and though her tone was soft, they were also blunt. I decided that I appreciated it. I hated it when people walked on eggshells around me, because it went hand-in-hand with the pity I so detested. Talking to Kali was a breath of fresh air. What wasn't, however, was the confusion her question brought on, and I glanced around me at the trees, wondering how and why I had walked into them. Seeing Kali before me, I realised I must have spotted her and followed her in, but I didn't remember.

I gave her the only answer I could give, tapping my head with a mocking smile that I used to hide my wince. My head fucking hurt, and the tapping only exacerbated the throbbing. 'Brain tumour. Sorry if I acted a bit strange. I don't... my memory isn't what it used to be.'

'Your memory?' she asked, concerned.

'I... I don't... um,' I stumbled over my words, trying to piece together what was happening.

'What was the last thing you remember?' she asked, her tone so gentle and patient that it brought tears to my eyes. Not because of her kindness, but because she wasn't making me feel like a burden just because I was sick.

'Uh, I think... I was putting my shoes on, and then... I don't...' My head began to swim, my vision doubling, tripling, and eventually blurring into indecipherable blobs of colour.

'Okay. I don't think you lost much time...' She paused. A white blur I deduced must have been Kali suddenly appeared right in front of me, taking up my entire field of distorted vision. 'Rhodes, do you need to sit down?'

I nodded, then winced at the sensation of my brain smacking against the inside of my skull. I squinted my eyes and leaned my shoulder against a nearby trunk, completely disoriented, and barely even felt the scrape of the bark against my arm as I slid to the ground. Leaves and twigs crunched beneath my weight, but I barely heard or felt a thing as the thrumming pressure grew too much to bear. My hands flew up to the sides of my head, and I squeezed in a feeble attempt to relieve the pressure. When it didn't work, a groan of pain escaped my mouth without my permission, and I tipped over to lie on my side, the trunk at my back the only thing letting me know where I was.

'Rhodes?'

'M-med... M-med'ca-tion,' I slurred. 'T-truck.'

'Fuck, Rhodes. Shit. Okay, you're medication is in your truck?'

My only response was a whimper of pain.

'I'm sorry, but I can't get it for you. You need to move. Can you sit up?'

Her words were simultaneously too loud and too muffled, and it took me a while to sift through them to finally comprehend. She couldn't help, or wouldn't?

'W-why?' I asked, my mouth struggling to form the word through the pain.

'I can't, Rhodes. I'm so sorry. There are so many things I can't do yet, but I can sit with you. Would that help?'

I could hardly think over the sheer agony shooting through my brain that was slowly starting to travel down. My neck tensed, then my shoulders, and then I felt it. My mind was slowly shutting down in preparation for the seizure coming in hot.

The last thing I managed to think was how I found it strange that this mystery of a woman wanted to offer me moral support, but refused to retrieve my medication from my car.

???

Everything hurt.

I wasn't sure what happened, but my head pounded, my muscles were stiff and achy, and my eyes felt like they were about to pop out of my head. It was all-encompassing, and I struggled to push through the fog coating my brain to focus on anything else.

Sounds were muffled and incomprehensible, just like everything else. I couldn't make sense of any of it. I tried to open my eyes to see where I was, but they were either glued shut or I was too weak to pry them open. A groan rumbled in my chest, but barely made it past my throat, which felt closed off. I wanted to panic that I was going to suffocate to death, but I didn't have the energy. I felt weak, pathetic, and absolutely useless as I lay here, pushing my brain and my body to start working properly.

It came slowly, starting with my senses.

Touch came first. If I'd thought things were painful before, I was in a whole world of hurt now. Every movement, every brush against my skin, all of it combined into an amalgamation of torture.

Then came the taste. Bile and something metallic that I hoped wasn't blood coated my cotton-like tongue. With the way it throbbed, I had a feeling I'd bitten it.

My hearing came next, and that was what finally provided me with enough strength to peel my heavy eyelids open. The sweet sound of a woman's voice humming a

lullaby nearby was like a balm to my soul. I couldn't quite pick out the words, nor could I determine the owner of the voice, but it helped to relax me enough that the pain began to ebb. My vision, however, was just as fuzzy as my hearing. I could see blurred colours, lots of greens and browns and a large blob of blue that I assumed was the sky, but it was the slice of white that stood out starkly against the darker colours of the world around us that truly drew my attention. I stared, focused hard on that sliver of white nearby, until it finally came into focus.

No, not it, she. The source of the beautifully haunting singing.

She must have noticed me coming to because her lovely song suddenly cut out, and then she was kneeling in front of me, twin orbs of icy blue studying me with concern and a level of care I wasn't sure I had earned.

'Rhodes, can you hear me?' she asked, her speaking voice just as pretty as her singing voice, though a little huskier.

I mumbled unintelligibly, but she seemed to get the message.

'Okay, that's good. Do you think you can sit up? I'd let you lean on me, but... I can't touch you.'

I wondered what she meant by that, but another wave of pain had my body locking up when I tried to move, so I assumed she meant she didn't want to make it worse by touching me.

After a while of lying there, waiting for the pain to subside, Kali's sweet voice humming soothingly in my ear, I was finally able to open my eyes without feeling like I was being stabbed in the skull. Still, I groaned as the light attacked my sensitive eyeballs and raised a shaky hand to shield them from the sun. It was higher in the sky than I remembered, but I couldn't trust my memory right now. I didn't know if it was

lower when I went down, or if my memories had tangled and converged.

I was pretty sure I'd just had another seizure, but without anyone to help keep track of me and my illness, I was going to struggle until my body eventually gave out and I passed through to the next life.

When I felt my pulse throb inside my skull, I knew I needed to get to my medication before it got any worse. I patted my pockets, only to find them empty of everything except my wallet and my keys. 'Fuck, where are they?'

'Where are what?' a feminine voice spoke unexpectedly from beside me, and I startled, swivelling to see who was there. It took me a moment to push through the foggy confusion, but recognition hit quickly enough.

'Kali?'

Something flashed in her icy blue eyes too quickly for me to catch before she schooled her features into something patient and kind. 'That's me.'

'What... how did I get here?'

'We were going to talk, then you collapsed and started seizing,' she explained, confirming my suspicions. 'You seem to be struggling to remember. Are you finding it a bit easier now, or are things still a little fuzzy?'

I frowned and mulled over the question. Were things fuzzy? Yes. Yes, they were. Another hard pulse rocketed through my head, and I felt a little dizzy, but it reminded me of what I was looking for, and I began patting the floor around me as I searched for the little orange tube.

'Where are they? Where are they? Where are they?' I chanted beneath my breath,

dread and panic twisting my stomach into knots.

‘Where are what, Rhodes?’

‘Meds. Where are my meds?’

‘You said they were in your truck,’ she reminded me lightly.

‘My truck... My Bessie. Yes, they’re in Bessie.’

‘You named your truck Bessie?’ she asked, her amusement lifting the tone of the moment, and my eyes were suddenly glued to the way her full, pale pink lips tilted up into a smile. The skin crinkled around the corners, adding a depth to her otherwise flawless features that only endeared me to her more. I wanted to lick them to see if they tasted as frosty and sweet as the rest of her looked.

‘Rhodes? Did you zone out again?’

I blinked rapidly, cursing my brain for failing me in more ways than one. I was behaving like such a creep. ‘Sorry.’

‘Can you stand up?’ she asked.

I tested my achy limbs, finding they felt stronger than before, even if they still throbbed painfully. ‘I think so.’

When I didn’t immediately stand, she sat beside me for a while longer before eventually releasing a small chuckle. ‘Are you going to stand or sit here all day?’

‘Oh, right. Standing. I can do that.’

On wobbly legs, I managed to haul myself into an upright position, though I needed to lean heavily on the nearest tree trunk to do so. The scrape of the bark against my skin helped to ground me, the sensation reminding me that I was alive. I had survived another seizure, though there wouldn't be much more luck like that in my future. It was a stark reminder that I was running out of time, and I was suddenly filled with the overwhelming need to make the most of it.

'Walk with me?' I asked Kali as I began to stumble my way out of the woods. She nodded, motioning for me to lead the way. The toes of my boots kept snagging on roots, sticks, and underbrush, but luckily, I was able to keep myself from falling. I was dreading when the trees would end, for I wouldn't have anything to hold me up, and Kali was keeping her distance, careful not to touch me.

'You won't hurt me, you know,' I told her, pleased when my voice came out stronger than before. There was still a small warble, but it was now inconsequential.

'I know,' she said, her voice small but sure.

'Then why...?' I began, looking over my shoulder with the question in my eyes, only to freeze at her stupefied state. She was like a statue, eyes wide with despair written plainly across her features as she stared out at something in front of me. A knock sounded, and I turned back to see Chance, Ashe, and Gloria standing on my porch.

'Hey!' I called out, grabbing their attention. 'A little help here, please!'

They rushed over, each of them wearing expressions of concern and alarm when they saw me stumbling onto my front lawn.

'Jesus, what the fuck happened to you?' Chance asked as he took one of my arms to steady me. Ashe propped me up on the other side, and it was a little awkward with the height differences, but we made it work.

‘My truck,’ I guided them. ‘I had a seizure. My meds are in the glove compartment.’

‘Here,’ Chance said, snatching my keys by the lanyard which was dangling from my pants pocket. ‘You stay here. I’ll grab them.’

I watched him jog away through squinted eyes, panting at the amount of energy it was taking to keep myself standing through the increased pounding inside my skull. Gloria came to take Chance’s place, propping me up a little more evenly since the girls were around the same height, though it was still a bit awkward since I was about a foot taller than them.

‘You okay, Rhodes?’ Ashe asked me, her voice strained beneath my weight. I realised I was leaning more heavily on her at the same time as Gloria, and we worked to rebalance me.

‘Been better,’ I admitted, then I realised something else. Kali hadn’t joined us. I glanced over my shoulder again to see her still frozen, half hidden in the shadows of the trees. Her gaze was fixed firmly on Chance, but her expression was... fearful. Cautious. Not pleased, or at the very least nervous.

Ashe followed my line of sight, squinting much like I was, only for a different reason. ‘What are you looking at?’

‘Are you coming?’ I called back. She tore her eyes away from Chance, but only for a moment. They flickered right back to him and stayed put as he jogged back, and her bottom lip trembled before her expression completely shut down.

‘No,’ she said simply, then merged with the shadows, effectively disappearing from view. I knew from experience that we wouldn’t be able to find her if we tried to follow, so I faced forward again, only to feel Gloria tense beside me. She was almost as rigid as Kali had been.

I wasn't the only one who noticed. 'Babe? What's wrong?'

'Kali...' All the blood drained from Gloria's face as she breathed the name.

'What?' Chance was suddenly even more alert, scanning the area for any sign of the mysterious woman. 'Where?'

'Gone,' Gloria and I said simultaneously, but our tones brokered vastly different meanings. Mine wasn't the only head that whipped towards the small Latina.

My gaze bounced between them all as they seemed to have a silent, grim conversation, but I couldn't figure out what they were saying. When Chance staggered back like the breath had been knocked out of him, his eyes wild with the sort of pain I had only seen during my stints in the hospital, something niggled at the back of my mind. Something important, but it wasn't quite connecting.

'No...' Chance whispered in a broken voice. 'No, you're wrong. Not after... But Rhodes said...'

'Rhodes is dying,' Ashe pointed out, and an understanding passed between them that I was also excluded from.

'What are you talking about?' I asked, needing to be clued in.

Ashe turned big, sad brown eyes on me. 'You saw Kali, right? Talked to her?'

I frowned, but answered despite my confusion. 'Yes.'

'Did you touch her?'

I reared back like I'd been slapped. 'What? No.'

‘Not like that,’ she rushed to elaborate. ‘I meant, have you brushed against her by accident, or patted her arm, anything like that? Has any physical contact between the two of you been made?’

I thought back to when I woke up. My brain was still a little fuzzy, my memory of everything that had happened today hazy around the edges, but I could distinctly remember her telling me that she couldn’t touch me. A statement that had stuck with me because I’d needed her help, and she’d refused.

‘No,’ I answered. ‘I don’t think so. She said we couldn’t...’

A sound of pure grief tore from Chance’s throat, and he collapsed onto his knees.

‘What...?’ I began to ask, but I didn’t even know what the question needed to be.

Gloria was the one who filled in the blanks, but she did it with a tear tracking down her cheek. ‘This is the cruellest way to discover the woman you love is dead.’

My breath hitched. ‘Dead? Who’s dead?’

‘Kali.’ Her voice broke as she uttered the name that sent confusion and dread rolling through my entire body. ‘I can talk to spirits, Rhodes. And so can you. Likely because you’re so close to death yourself.’

If what she was saying was true, then that meant... Kali was...

A ghost.

Chance

She was truly gone.

There was no denying it now. Kali was dead. She had likely died somewhere nearby, and brutally, if she was still lingering as a spirit all these years later.

It shouldn't have hurt as much as it did. She'd been gone for seven whole years, and some innate part of me had already known that she was no longer of this world. Yet, Rhodes had given me hope. There was no body, no evidence to suggest she was dead beyond her disappearance, but Gloria's words were irrefutable evidence, at least to me. Evidence that was given too late, since I had already been led to believe she was alive and needed help.

Far quicker than I expected, my grief became numbness, and I sat back on my heels to tilt my face up to the sky. I barely felt the tears tracking down my cheeks, though I knew they were still leaking.

There were so many questions, and if Gloria was correct that Kali's spirit was still lingering, then the answers to those questions were within reach. I didn't think I could stomach those answers yet, however. There was too much chaos still wreaking havoc on my mind and emotions. I could barely breathe. It was just like that phone call all those years ago when Blake had first called me home. The sinking feeling in my gut had apparently only been floating all this time, because it had only just officially sunk.

'Chance... Rhodes needs his medication,' Ashe prompted firmly, but I didn't

respond. She didn't wait for me to, either. Instead, she pried open my fingers that were still clutching the little orange bottle and took it to where Rhodes was swaying in place. A quick study showed he was paler than before, his face scrunched in pain. Was it just physical? I thought so. He had no reason to mourn Kali. Not like I did. He could see her, speak with her, like she was a regular, living person, and he would soon join her across the veil.

Would she accept me if I joined her, too?

It wasn't the first time the thought had crossed my mind. After the first search parties came back with nothing, I'd gone into a deep, dark place in my head, and the only way out I could think of at the time was to just end it. If I wanted her so badly and she wasn't here, then why was I sticking around?

The only thing that had stayed my hand back then was the thought that she might not have wanted me with her. We were friends, but despite the way I had always wanted more from her, she had never shown any signs that she returned those feelings. And I'd never pushed. I highly doubted she was even aware of my feelings, especially considering she had married my little brother instead.

My regrets plagued me, even more now than ever before. I'd never spoken up, never fought for her the way I should have, and I would never know if she could have felt the same way about me, because now she was gone.

I could ask through Rhodes or Gloria, but was it worth it?

Yes, I decided. That was a stupid question. I should have begged for the answer to that question when we were still kids, before my golden boy little brother weaselled his way into her heart.

'Is she still here?' I asked, my voice sounding muffled to my own ears like I was

trying to talk underwater.

‘No,’ was Gloria’s one-word answer. Short, succinct, and crushing all at once.

No matter. I would stay put until she came back. I could ask her my questions then. I was a patient man, after all, and my love for her superseded death itself. If I could be with her, I didn’t care if my form was physical or paranormal, just as long as she was there .

Well, that answered one question. It seemed it didn’t matter much if she was in love with me, so long as I no longer had to face any kind of existence without her in it. I should probably get my affairs in order if I were to follow through with this line of thinking. And I would. The decision settled in with a sense of rightness, peace spreading through my veins like this course of action was long overdue.

But not yet. I still needed to speak with her, to confess my feelings, not to mention all the other logistics that needed to be settled. And then there was the mystery of her death. If she was murdered, and it was pretty damned obvious at this point that she was, then I was going to see that fucker pay for his crimes before I joined her in the afterlife.

I watched absentmindedly from my periphery as Ashe and Gloria lowered Rhodes to the grass and helped him put his head between his knees like he was dizzy. Ashe then left Gloria to take care of the younger man while she moved to kneel in front of me. Her expression was closed off, and we both knew she was aware of the dark path my thoughts had taken. I had known in previous instances that my thoughts were something to be concerned about in the past. That was the difference between now and then, though. Then, I wasn’t ready. There were too many unanswered questions, too much hope still flickering desperately inside me.

Now, I was just ready to move forward with what I knew in my very soul I needed to

do. It was a peaceful kind of resignation, because I was finally admitting to myself that I wasn't meant for this world. I wasn't meant for any world without Kali in it.

'I don't like that look,' she told me, but I couldn't bring myself to reassure her.

'There's no look,' I objected, though we both knew that was a bold-faced lie.

'Don't, Chance. Please, just... don't do something stupid that you can't take back.'

'I promise. I'm not going to do anything stupid.'

She eyed me suspiciously, but there wasn't anything she could say or do that would fix this. Seven years was a long time to keep pushing forward when I had nothing to show for it at the end of the day. I needed to fix things, and there was only one way to do that.

'Guys, Rhodes needs to get inside, and I can't carry him on my own,' Gloria called out, cutting through the tension. I appreciated the distraction, especially with a task that gave me something useful to do with myself besides sitting around moping. That wouldn't bring Kali back. Nothing could. But I was certainly looking forward to joining her.

Making the decision had lifted the weight from my shoulders, and though my heart hurt, I felt like I could breathe for the first time in seven long years.

My strength returned to my extremities immediately after my decision had settled into my bones, and I pushed up easily from the grass. Almost too easily. I felt almost weightless. Even when Rhodes leaned his full weight against me as I half-dragged, half-carried him back to his house, I barely felt a thing, like I was pulling along a cloud. And Rhodes wasn't a small guy.

I still had his keys, so I pulled them out, found the one that wasn't connected to a fob, and inserted it into the keyhole. I pushed the door open once I heard the click and let the sick man direct me to the living room. I placed him gently on the couch. It was an old thing, brown and floral like something from the seventies. Ugly, but it looked comfortable, like it had been recently reupholstered. My theory was confirmed when I sat beside him, and the cushions were firm and comfortable with just enough give to cup my body without fully sinking in.

'Do you need anything, Rhodes?' Ashe asked. 'Water? Hot tea? A blanket?'

'Water would be great, if you wouldn't mind. Glasses are in the first cupboard, and the filter's in the fridge. I need my phone, too...'

Gloria handed him his phone, explaining that it had fallen from his pocket outside and she'd picked it up. He thanked her, took the cool glass of water from Ashe when she returned, and gulped it down. Then, he held the phone up to his ear and started talking to someone on the other end of the line.

'I'm not coming in today, Fred.' He paused like he was listening, then responded to whatever they said. 'Yeah. Cancer's back. In my head this time. I was gonna tell you soon, but I just hadn't gotten around to it yet. You can come over later and we can talk.'

The conversation went back and forth for a while, and I gathered Rhodes was handing over the reins of the campsite to Fred while he was out sick. But what stuck with me were those two little words that brought into focus the struggles this man must have survived already, only to get taken out by it anyway.

'Cancer's back?' I asked once he hung up the phone. 'How many times have you had it?'

‘This would be the sixth. I’ve had some form of cancer eating away at me my entire life,’ he responded candidly.

‘Jesus. All those times you beat it, only for it to keep coming back. That’s rough, man.’ I meant it. I was in awe of him. He must have suffered greatly his whole life, constantly sick, in and out of hospitals, wondering if this time was the time that would get him. I guessed this time was it.

He just shrugged and used the now-empty glass to cool his forehead. ‘I’m just glad I made it this far. A lot of people didn’t think I’d make it to adulthood, let alone almost to thirty.’

‘How old are you, anyway?’ I asked.

‘Just turned twenty-seven this past May.’

‘Damn. You’re almost a decade younger than me. You’re tough as hell, man.’

He snorted, amused. ‘And you’re old.’

‘It’s the grey hairs,’ Ashe teased as she sat on the opposite couch with Gloria at her side.

‘Maybe, but he pulls off the salt-and-pepper look. I bet a silver fox like you gets all the ladies,’ he winked. His comment brought uproarious laughter from Ashe and an amused giggle from Gloria.

‘Chance doesn’t date.’

Rhodes’ eyebrows disappeared behind the hair that was flopped over his forehead. ‘No? Why not? I bet you’d pull whatever girl you wanted.’

But I was already shaking my head. 'There's only ever been one woman I wanted,' I admitted with a sadness that was embedded so deeply inside me it was like it had been carved into my very bones.

'But she married your brother, and now she's... dead,' he surmised. 'I'm sorry.'

'Nothing for you to apologise for, Rhodes. Don't worry about it.'

'You never told her, huh?' he guessed.

'Nope.'

'Why not?'

'I figured she was happy with Blake. They both deserved to be happy. I didn't want to ruin that.'

'Oh, you're the noble type. Gross.'

His comment, alongside the way he wrinkled his nose in genuine disgust, set off my own laughter.

'Right?' Ashe agreed. 'He totally lost out because he's too damn kind and selfless. It's legitimately sickening.'

'Give me a one-night stand any day,' Rhodes said.

'At least I'm not afraid of commitment,' I teased, and he gasped dramatically.

'Ouch. Straight for the gonads,' he joked, but then quickly sobered up. 'It's easier not to make deep connections, you know? If I'm going to die, I don't want to bring

someone else in to suffer for my fate. I'm not that cruel.'

'Shit. Sorry,' I apologised. 'I didn't even think about that.'

'It's cool. I made my peace with it a long time ago.'

His admission shouldn't have surprised me, but the thought of dying was scary, even if I had chosen to face that fate sooner rather than later. 'You're not afraid?'

He studied me, but it wasn't judgmental. Understanding dawned as my plans must have shown on my face. I pointedly avoided looking at Ashe or Gloria, keeping my gaze fixed firmly on Rhodes'. I didn't mind that he'd figure me out, but I didn't want Ashe, Gloria, or even Mikey to try to talk me out of it. My mind was made up, even if there was a lingering doubt about jumping feet first into the unknown.

'Not really. What is there to be afraid of? I've known since I was a child that death is inevitable, and that fearing it won't make it go away. I've been surrounded by the dead and dying my whole life. It just is.'

I hummed thoughtfully, processing and internalising his words. There was a truth to them that I hadn't truly acknowledged, which was ridiculous considering my choice of career. Or perhaps that was why I had chosen to investigate the paranormal in the first place, and I had only just acknowledged that fact. I wasn't afraid to die, I was afraid of what happened next, because I didn't know. I supposed that there was a sort of solace in the compiling evidence that there was, indeed, and after .

'Why are you asking these questions, Chance?' Ashe asked me, her voice pitched ever so slightly higher with her rising panic.

'You seem awfully calm after learning about Kali,' Gloria pointed out bluntly. I wanted to wince at her accusation, but the knowledge of my decision kept me from

making any outward reactions. Namely, because I didn't have one.

'I wouldn't say I was calm,' I objected.

'Then what are you feeling, Chance? Because you've just learned something devastating and you're worrying me with your lack of reaction,' Gloria accused.

'I wouldn't say he didn't react,' Rhodes backed me up. 'That's twice now I've heard him scream with grief as he collapsed to his knees.'

'Yes, but...' Gloria began, and then trailed off. What could she really say? I felt a little guilty that I was worrying them, but I couldn't let that stop me from following through.

Rhodes yawned and stretched his stiff arms over his head as far as he could manage. 'Well, I'm exhausted. I'm gonna take a nap. You're welcome to stay as long as you want. Or leave, it's up to you.'

Then he rose with a groan from the couch and headed for the stairs, grunting with effort with each step. Luckily, there weren't too many, and we heard his bedroom door close, followed by the squeak of his bed as he climbed in, and then his rumbling snores that let us know he had fallen asleep. It didn't take long, practically as soon as his head must have hit the pillow. I didn't blame him. Dying wasn't for the weak, it seemed.

Ashe moved to take the seat that Rhodes just vacated, snaring me with her laser-like gaze. 'Talk to me, Chance. I'm worried about you.'

I sighed, momentarily defeated. 'What is there to talk about?'

'I know you, Chance,' she pushed. 'I know what's going through your head, because

I've already talked you out of it enough times. Please don't make me do it again.' She scooted closer until she tucked herself into my side, and I moved my arm so I could hug her back. 'You're my best friend, and I love you. I don't want to lose you.'

I pressed a kiss to the top of her head, avoiding looking at Gloria the whole time. She would see right through me if I gave her the opportunity, and the last thing I wanted was to hurt either of them. I knew Ashe would grieve me once I was gone, but she had Gloria and Mikey to get her through it, not to mention a family that adored her and would support her through it. Gloria would be fine, too, since she had the same support system as Ashe. Mikey might suffer a bit more since he wasn't the most social of men, and losing me would mean losing one of his only friends, but I knew he would be fine.

Blake was my biggest concern. He had already lost his wife. I didn't want to hurt him by making him lose his brother, too, but Kali... she was everything to me. Some days, I truly believed I loved her more than Blake ever did, because he had moved on when I couldn't. But perhaps that was a good thing. If he could survive losing Kali and still thrive afterwards, then the same could be said for me.

As for my parents... Well, in all honesty, I didn't really care. Calvin wouldn't shed a tear. In fact, he would likely rejoice at finally being rid of me. Mother hadn't cared about me in a long time, so I didn't see her crying anything other than crocodile tears to keep up the image of the grieving mother. Poor Mallory, losing her son that she loved so much. If it were Blake, I didn't doubt her tears would have been real. I was just the disappointment. The reminder of a life they would all rather forget.

No, they would be fine. Life would continue on without me.

I should probably have been more upset about that, but I couldn't bring myself to feel anything other than relief. I still needed to speak to Kali, even if it was through Rhodes, but this felt right. More right than anything had in a long fucking time.

Exciting, even. Perhaps it would be my next big adventure. And if by some miracle Kali accepted me at her side in the afterlife, in whatever capacity she would take me, then I would happily spend eternity with the woman I loved.

Yes. This was my path, and it would always have ended like this. There was no existence without Kali in it, and I would follow her anywhere. My only regret now was that I hadn't done so already. Soon, I would rectify that.

I couldn't wait.

Kali

My heart was so torn. When I first heard Chance and the others in the neighbouring campsite, I hadn't heard them again, so I thought I'd just imagined it. Wishful thinking, or something like that. But no...

Seeing Chance again was tearing me in two different directions. Part of me couldn't believe that he would have had anything to do with my murder, or any of the girls Blake kidnapped. And yet, there was no way to know for sure. Not without some digging. I just couldn't make sense of anything. How could he not know, but also, how could he know?

I wanted to scream.

So I did.

I released my warring emotions in the loudest, rawest yell I could muster. It echoed around me, scaring off the ghosts of the other girls as they lingered by their graves until it was just me, my rage, my sadness, and my confusion.

I just wanted everything to make sense for once. I wanted answers before I went insane searching for them. I didn't want to end up like those poor girls' spirits that slowly withered away into nothing, their minds no longer capable of keeping their forms in one piece. I'd watched a few of them slowly lose their grip on reality and blow away in the breeze.

That was not my fate. I couldn't let it be.

Shadows twitched in my periphery, and I knew I was no longer alone. I ignored him. I was in no mood to deal with the shadow man's cryptic antics, not when my entire being throbbed with my emotional torment.

'You are upset,' he stated. I almost acknowledged him in my shock over him breaking the silence first, but I caught myself at the last moment. Instead, I pointedly gave him my back and floated away. My grave was calling my name. I needed peace right now, or at the very least the illusion of it.

'The silent treatment is beneath you, ghost girl,' he taunted, following close by. I still refused to acknowledge him, but it only made him release that now-familiar dark chuckle. I didn't have the energy to respond or argue with him in any way. I still didn't know what he wanted from me, but I was losing the will to care. He was insignificant in my quest to seek the truth and my revenge.

'Or perhaps you are not the woman I thought you were,' he mused, a tendril of shadow snapping out to flick at my cheek. It was almost like a caress, if it didn't feel like half of my face had been frozen solid from the contact.

'Immaturity is so... tediously unattractive,' he continued, but I wasn't stupid enough to take the bait. He usually left when he got bored of waiting for me to bite back. I wasn't capable of adding him to my list of problems right now, though, so I stared down at the grass that blended into the rest of the lawn, successfully hiding where my body was buried.

'He's coming, ghosty,' he finally said after sitting in the silence for a while. 'Perhaps he will help to loosen your sweet tongue.'

I felt his presence leave, like the sun had come out to spread its warmth after a cold, dark night. It was an odd sensation, but I couldn't say it was bad. I would never admit it out loud, but it was almost soothing. There was so little to feel here in the

realm of the dead, so there was a sort of solace to be taken from any physical sensation to be had.

Not a moment later, the wheels of Blake's car crunched over the gravel again. He was coming and going more often than usual, but since Chance and the others were around, it made sense. His attention was being pulled in multiple directions, and it was clear as he stepped out of the vehicle, grumbling under his breath, that it was starting to get to him. He didn't seem to be mumbling any words, just nonsense noises to express his frustration. That, combined with the slamming of doors and the stomping of his feet, told me that he would be taking his anger out on the poor girl in the basement.

When her first screams reached me, I knew that she was in for a terrible night. From the sound of things, he might actually end up killing her tonight. Probably sooner than he planned, since the more he killed, the longer he liked to draw it out.

I was proud of her when she didn't beg. Her screams were involuntary, a survival response she couldn't refuse. None of us could. Yet, she was accepting her fate, embracing the pain. She didn't cry. She didn't plead. She knew there was no way out, and she was ready for the killing blow.

Eventually, her screams became so hoarse that her voice finally gave out, and I figure she might like a familiar face to greet her when her spirit separated from her physical body. I knew how disorienting it could be, especially with a dead as brutal as ours. It was incredibly jarring to find oneself hovering over the man dismembering your body, especially when you hadn't quite processed the fact that you were dead, and watching the horrific scene from beyond the veil. For me, I could still feel it. Every cut, slice, and break, the rendering of my flesh. He was still somehow torturing me from beyond the grave.

And when he'd buried me, I'd felt every shovel-full of dirt as he chucked it on me

until the weight became suffocating. It took me even longer to figure out that I didn't need to breathe, or that I was no longer connected to my physical form.

For all the girls that had come after me, I had never once tried to ease their passing. Perhaps it would make a difference.

As if I had summoned him with my thoughts of doing something kind for someone else, like the very idea was appalling enough that he needed to see it for himself, the shadow man returned. This time, he didn't bother letting me ignore him. He appeared right in front of me, the shadows writhing like a mass of snakes to shield his features, but I could still see the way he tilted his head to the side as he contemplated me.

'What?' I snapped tersely. 'What do you want now?'

I immediately regretted giving in when I sensed more than saw his lips spread wide into a pleased grin. 'I want to see what you will do.'

And then he disappeared again, but not completely. He was still lurking in the shadows, but he had somehow made it inside the basement before I could even think of moving from my spot.

I rushed to follow, stopping short as soon as I entered the dank space at the horrors I'd just waltzed into. Blood was sprayed on every wall, every surface. It even dripped from the ceiling like an upside-down puddle. Bianca wasn't unconscious, but she wasn't present, either. Her moans of pain were barely more than whispered whimpers fighting to escape. Her chest rattled in that familiar death rattle we all made right before our bodies gave out.

But it was the way he used her intestines to tie her up like some fucked up form of Shibari that truly caught my attention. He had gauged deep grooves into her flesh that he had used to wedge the length of her internal organs into, twisting and tying them

until she was trussed up like a pig with her own innards as the rope.

Blake was in the process of stabbing her repeatedly, the force of his movements harsh and aggressive. Typically, he was precise and careful with his incisions, almost delicate, like the doctor he was. His kills were like artwork to him. It seemed that poor Bianca had been subjected to his artistic tendencies before he'd lost his temper. Whatever was going on with him, it was messing with his murderous hobby to the point where even I flinched away, despite knowing he couldn't hurt me anymore. At least not physically. His mental and emotional torment would forever remain, likely long after he had died himself.

Bianca went silent, her body going fully limp as her last breath bubbled out of her in a bloody mess that leaked from her lips, and I was glad it was over for her. No one should have to suffer through something so horrific, so evil . I had seen it happen over and over again, but something made this time different. He was killing out of anger, his face twisted into something hideously monstrous. His careful composure was broken, and I didn't know why. For the first time since he'd killed me, I was genuinely afraid of him.

Bianca's spirit tore from her body with an audible snap, a sure indicator of her eagerness to depart the realm of the living. Blake kept stabbing, slicing, cutting away slivers of her flesh and gouging deep holes into what was left of her body. She was mutilated beyond recognition, and the horror on Bianca's ghostly face had me springing into action.

'Come here,' I told her firmly, though not unkindly. 'You don't need to see it.'

Watery eyes met mine, and her face crumpled as she wailed for what was done to her. 'Why?'

'I don't know,' I answered honestly. 'I don't know, but you don't have to watch.'

You've suffered enough.'

She averted her gaze, my words penetrating through the haze of her violently forced transition. When I extended my hand in invitation, she took it without hesitation, desperate to escape the grizzly scene before us.

'Get me out of here,' she begged, and I complied wholeheartedly, dragging her through the walls and outside in the blink of an eye. It was faster than I had ever moved before, but I didn't dwell on that development. Instead, I focused on Bianca and her soul-wrenching sobs.

I pulled her to me, the urge to comfort her too strong to deny. No one had comforted me. Some of the girls would comfort the others when they passed over, but they were the ones to lose their minds the fastest. They didn't offer me the same kindness, however, not after they had learned of my connection to our monster. I understood it after a while. I was their version of revenge. They couldn't attack him, so they attacked me through their silence.

But the others had stopped caring now. Where the girls had congregated before at each other's deaths, now they pretended like it was nothing. Like it wasn't important. I didn't want Bianca to suffer further for their apathy.

As I embraced her, she trembled against me. It felt less like a physical shake and more like a vibration of chaotic energy. She hadn't settled. She likely wouldn't for a very long time. She sobbed, screamed, lashed out, anything she could think of to relieve herself of her agony; she tried, and I held her through it all.

'I'm going to make him pay, Bianca,' I told her, stroking my hand over her hair. It was soft and pliant, like I was skimming the surface of a pond rather than her hair. Neither of us was tangible in any real way, but our energies seemed to make contact almost as if we were, but just barely not. A magnetic pull that pushed away just

before we could sink into one another and merge into something new.

She pulled back, her eyes shining with emotion, but not puffy and red like they would have been when she was still alive. Instead, they held a vast ocean of injustice and desperation, but also determination.

‘Do it,’ she told me, her voice wavering slightly but still firm. ‘Make him suffer for what he’s done. Take from him like he took from us.’

Those words snapped something within me, and I couldn’t stop what happened next if I’d tried. I wasn’t even sure what was happening, but I felt it the moment that thin shield that made us separate dissipated. The only way I could describe what happened when we touched was that she fell into me. Her spirit latched onto mine, which sucked her in so deep that she became a part of me.

Memories and emotions that were not my own bombarded me. A smiling couple gazing lovingly down at me that I didn’t recognise, yet I did. A young girl was clinging desperately to my legs in a hospital room where that same couple were resting in consecutive beds, wrapped in bandages as plaster casts, hooked up to machines that beeped and oxygen tanks that whirled in a constant pattern. The scene morphed once again to an attractive young man pulling silly faces to make me laugh before leaning in to press a sweet kiss to my lips that quickly turned passionate. His face merged with another’s. A man with a hood covering his face, shadows obscuring his features, only for me to knock it off when he tackled me to reveal none other than Blake, gazing at me with cold, dead, evil eyes. And then I was looking at myself over his shoulder from the familiar position of being strapped to that damn bed in the basement, my expression grim and resigned as I met my eyes – Bianca’s eyes – before filling of fury as I glared at Blake’s back.

Then came the emotions. Happiness, fear, heartbreak and love, a lifetime of emotions compounded into one brief moment. The sadness, the helplessness, the terror. The

pain she felt as Blake continued to mutilate her corpse. All of it was reminiscent of what I'd felt when it was me subjected to his instruments of torture.

Her energy continued to flood into mine with increasing persistence. What started as a gentle warmth when we first connected soon became a blazing fire as more and more of her essence merged with mine. Our emotions and memories tangled until I struggled to pick apart which ones were mine and which ones were hers. My head spun with the whirlwind of images I was bombarded with. Separate childhoods, opposing dreams, joyful moments interspersed with despair. I was being picked apart into tiny fragments and sensations that no longer made sense.

Who was I?

Why did I hurt?

Was I even hurting at all?

And then a chilling, otherworldly voice hissed in my ear. Eager. Wanting. Excited. 'Yesss... Consume her. Take it all.'

Pain seared through every part of me, burning away the torrent of memories and emotions until my mind was nothing but a blank canvas, but it wasn't peaceful. My every essence was being torn apart and reformed, reshaped into something new and unrecognisable. All I could focus on was the pain. The frigid burn, like I was being frozen solid from the inside out. It was unlike anything I had felt before, and I wasn't sure I could handle it.

I couldn't. It was too much. Too powerful.

So I did the only thing I could do and let it shred me to pieces, embracing the end of my existence as I knew it and faced head-on the abyss of nothingness.

Mortimer

She did it.

She actually fucking did it.

I wasn't alone anymore.

I didn't know what this meant for me. For her. I didn't care, because it meant something . Whether we spent eternity at each other's throats or looked to one another for companionship, I was positively giddy that I was no longer alone .

I was transfixed as I watched her transition. It was like she was simultaneously emitting light while sucking it all into her like a black hole. It was stunning, confusing to witness, but awe-inspiring all at the same time. It pulsed from her, was sucked back in, and then repeated the process again and again. Each time, the pulses became stronger, faster, shorter, until eventually she was vibrating with energy. The same energy she had been attempting to harness as a mere ghost. Now, she would be able to access that power whenever she pleased. She could grow it with each soul she consumed, becoming one of the most powerful entities to exist.

I could taste her potential from the moment I first caught wind of her, the fight inside of her calling to the deepest, darkest parts of my withered soul. She was the first to snag my attention in such a way, the first to prove themselves worthy of the transformation she was so close to completing. The white flame that called to me so persistently.

She was everything .

The pulses of energy finally calmed, so they were no longer attacking everything surrounding her. Instead, they encased her in a cocoon of power that she fed from as her entire being morphed into something new, like a moth. It was an analogy I had used on myself more times than I could count. Going through a metamorphosis that changed the very structure of her being, she would emerge a dweller of darkness, drawn to the light, and consuming power while leaving beautiful destruction in her wake.

I couldn't wait to see what she would be capable of in her newly elevated state of being.

When she didn't move, not even a twitch, I settled in for a long wait. I did not know how long it would take. I had no one with me when I underwent my own transformation, and I had never seen it happen myself. My personal experiences were the only ones I could draw information from, but there was no guarantee the girl's path would be the same as mine. Her power could be different or weaker. Possibly even stronger. She could emerge as an entirely different being than I had, though I hoped that wouldn't be the case.

The loneliness that I had held off for so long, that I had convinced myself was no longer present, had rushed back into me with a crushing force when I had first discovered my ghost girl lingering over her grave, watching her killer destroy more of his victims. I had come across the other spirits as they moped about, which was typical of them, but she was different. She hadn't been moping, she had been plotting. Planning. Spewing venom from her glares as if they could harm the man who had wronged her so viscerally.

Yet, despite the hopes I had involuntarily placed on her, she hadn't figured it out. I still wasn't sure she had, yet she had blown through my disappointment and had

succeeded anyway, purely by accident. But oh, what a beautiful accident it had turned out to be.

My shadows converged beneath me to form a seat, cupping my body comfortably in the icy tendrils as I settled in for the wait. I had a feeling it was going to be a long one, but I wasn't missing this for the world.

Kali

‘Honey, can you pack the cooler? I need to get on the road before the traffic hits if I want to make it to the river on time.’

I sighed, annoyed at his lack of planning, but I had married him with the full knowledge that the man I loved had the time-keeping skills of a plank of wood. Luckily for him, I had already planned for his mad dash this morning, so I didn’t even have to drag myself out of bed as I yelled out from beneath the blankets.

‘I packed it last night, babe. You just need to put it in the trunk.’

Footsteps approached before the blankets were pulled back, and Blake’s handsome, smiling face hovered above me. He pressed a kiss to my forehead that lingered for a beat before he pulled away, love shining in his eyes that made me want to grasp his collar and drag him back to bed so I could make him gasp and groan in pleasure, my tongue laving at his fucking incredible cock.

He did groan when he saw the heat in my eyes, but pulled away. I pouted, and he chuckled, running a hand through his thick, luscious hair as he debated the merits of a quickie before he had to be on the road. A few more minutes couldn’t hurt, right?

But no. He bit his fist as he moved further away, shaking his head. ‘Sorry, honey, but I really have to go or I’ll be late.’

‘Do you have to go?’ I whined, curling the blankets back around me to get comfy again. He had let the chill in when he’d pulled them off me.

‘I promised the guys I’d be there, and the cabin is in my name. I’d cancel if I could, but they’re relying on me,’ he explained for the umpteenth time. He seemed mildly annoyed at the repeated question, but he tempered it with a sweet smile. ‘I’ll be back as soon as I can, and then I’ll wine and dine you, I promise.’

I sighed, already knowing there was no talking him into staying. It was his post-surgery ritual. Every time he took part in a complicated medical procedure, he took a week or two off with the guys. They would rent out a cabin down south, pull out the poles, and fish to their heart’s content. The problem was that I’d never met the guys, nor had he ever named them. As far as I knew, they were coworkers, fellow surgeons who worked with him on his more intense cases, but none of whom I had ever actually met.

I was beginning to think they didn’t exist. Some part of me hoped I was wrong, that Blake’s friends were real and they truly were going fishing, but my suspicions grew the longer I didn’t meet any of the so-called ‘guys’.

The last time he went fishing, he came back smelling like a woman’s perfume, and that was when I had started snooping. I hadn’t found anything yet, so I was taking that as evidence that I was just being paranoid. I hadn’t brought it up with Blake, afraid that I was just overthinking things. I didn’t want to ruin what we had with false accusations, but that feeling in my gut was there. He was keeping something from me, I knew it. I just didn’t know what.

But... that wasn’t true. I did know what he was keeping from me. He wasn’t just meeting women behind my back, he was killing them.

...Right?

So... how was I in my bed, back at home, still married to the man who had murdered me? I didn’t just dream that all up. There was no way.

‘Right, I’m off! I’ll call when I land. See you in a week, honey. Love you!’

‘Love you, too!’ I called back automatically, as if I had no control over my mouth. ‘Have a nice trip, and drive safe!’

My brows dipped low in a scowl as I fought to keep the words from leaving my mouth. The last thing I ever wanted to do was tell that piece of shit that I loved him. I hadn’t loved him in a long time, even if – and I was ashamed to admit it - I had stupidly held onto that love despite him killing me. And for quite a while.

Yeah, I hadn’t handled his particular brand of betrayal very well, had I? Talk about denial...

Without warning, the world started tilting around me, the walls waving like I was viewing them from underwater. They twisted, getting faster and faster, then they swirled, taking me on a dizzying journey of psychedelic confusion that had my stomach twisting in a surprisingly strong bout of nausea.

I didn’t know what pissed me off more: the baffling distortion, or the sickness it wrought, because for the first physical sensation I had felt since I’d died, why did it have to be nausea, of all things?

Slowly, the distortion abated, settling into a brand new scene that I took a moment to process. I was no longer in my house, no longer curled up beneath my blankets, and Blake was nowhere in sight. Instead, I seemed to have found myself back in the hallway of my old high school. The one where I had met Chance all those years ago in a moment that had irrevocably changed my life. I had once thought it was for the better. Oh, how naive I had been.

‘Hey, you,’ Chance’s familiar voice sounded from behind me. I spun to see him in all his teenage glory, pimples and braces and all. He was grinning at me, flashing the

metal on his teeth as he sidled up next to me. I realised that we were by his locker. I used to wait for him there between classes. I glanced towards the back wall where the oversized clock ticked away above our heads, and realised it was lunchtime.

‘Hey, back,’ I responded in our typical greeting, once again against my will. It was like I was reliving my memories without being able to change them, yet I was doing small things that I hadn’t done before, like remembering my husband was a serial killer, or looking at the clock.

‘What are you doing after school today?’ Chance asked, trying and failing to seem nonchalant. I remembered this. It was the day I met Blake for the first time.

‘Nothing much. Why?’ The words spilled from my mouth without permission.

‘Do you... want to come over? There’s something I want to show you.’

I blinked at him in surprise, though I was anything but. I was screaming inside my head. No! Abort! Don’t do it! Run as fast as you can!

‘Like, to your house?’ I asked, internally cringing at how ignorant I sounded. Of course, he was inviting me to his house. This was the first time he had ever invited me over, however, and the giddiness I had felt as I thought he was asking me out would soon be crushed, only to be replaced with a new kind of heart-pounding excitement when Blake had swooped in. He had charmed me in an instant, and I quickly forgot about my unrequited crush on my friend in favour of the brother who actually saw me as a girl.

This was the moment that set me on the path to destruction, but no matter how hard I screamed inside my head to stop, to say no, to find another friend who I didn’t have a crush on so I could live a long, happy life and not marry a serial killer, there was simply no changing the past.

‘Oh, uh, sure,’ I stammered, blushing up a storm. My cheeks were so hot that it was a wonder how Chance never noticed my pathetic little crush on him. Or perhaps he had and was just being polite by not mentioning it. Either way, it ended with the same result.

He didn’t reciprocate those feelings, and I ended up dead.

Chance’s face caved in on itself, the vision grotesque enough that I actually blanched and stumbled away from him. The vision was followed closely by the scenery joining Chance in its macabre display of deformation. The world was warping again, and I was once again shoved from one memory and into another with only the bile-raising knotting of my stomach to show for it.

On and on it went, memory after memory, each one showing me a moment in time where I made the wrong fucking choice. If only I had said no. If only I’d let things be. If only I hadn’t snooped or tried to put myself out there. If only, if only, of only.

But what if’s weren’t going to help me now. There was no changing the past, only embracing the future. The real question was, what kind of future could I have now that I was dead? I knew that I needed to avenge not only my death but the other girls’ as well, but how could I do that from beyond the grave? And how could I get this memory bombardment to stop?

I didn’t know what was happening to me, or why. I hadn’t slept since I’d become a ghost, for obvious reasons, so I could determine that I wasn’t asleep. I wasn’t dreaming. It had to be something else. But what?

Bianca’s terrified expression pushed to the forefront of my mind. Her blood. Her screams. Her agonised sobs. Her demand that I make him pay.

Something clicked inside me, then, like she had somehow given me the permission I

needed to follow through on that very demand. Our desires had aligned, and we had merged.

Holy shit. I ate Bianca...

Now that I was thinking about her, it was like I could feel her presence in the back of my mind. Not like a physical presence, but more like an echo of her. That echo grew and grew until I could feel her in every atom of my being, like they had sucked her energy into each and every cell.

Which was strange, because I was a ghost, and I no longer had cells. I wasn't a physical being... so why did I suddenly feel like I was?

It wasn't the same sensation as when I'd been alive. I was pretty sure I would never feel that again, and I wasn't sure I wanted to. There were some aspects of having a physical form that I missed, but for the most part, I enjoyed not being beholden to the needs and limitations of a body. I missed the taste of my favourite foods, but I did not miss the emptiness of hunger. I missed the sensation of being touched, the pleasure of being brought to a climax, but I didn't miss the bite of pain that came from being sliced apart, broken, and chopped into pieces.

Even though I'd felt a continuation of the searing agony after my death, each carving Blake had made, each clean break of my bones as he dismembered me and cut me into smaller pieces, it wasn't the same as if I had been alive. Sure, it was torture in and of itself, but the sensation was different, like I was being pulled apart at the seams and was barely holding on by a thread. It had taken me ages, possibly years, to feel like I wasn't going to fall apart if I so much as turned my head.

Something about the mere thought of Bianca flipped some sort of switch, and the memories stopped, my senses slowly rousing. I could feel myself again. I could feel that I was lying prone on the ground, sticks digging into me and blades of grass

tickling my skin. It was odd, since they were both tangible objects. They should have drifted right through me, not pushed up into me or brushed against me.

What the fuck was happening?

I inhaled deeply, out of habit rather than necessity, and jolted at the shock of the sensation of air moving through my nostrils, my lungs inflating, the rush of oxygen hitting my brain.

‘What the...?’

The air moved back out through my throat, drying my mouth and making me cough. I shouldn’t have been coughing. There shouldn’t have been any air moving through my body at all, unless it was through me. What was happening to me?

‘Yes, ghost girl. That’s it. You’re doing so well,’ the now-familiar voice of the shadow man praised from somewhere nearby, but I was too overwhelmed and overstimulated to even begin to try to open my eyes to look for him.

Instead, I sank into the awaiting darkness, eagerly embracing its promise of peace.

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Kali

My muscles ached in a way they hadn't done in a long time. They throbbed like I had a pulse, and my head pounded in much the same manner. The annoying whistling sound didn't help matters much, either.

When I tried to move, I groaned as my entire body protested, and I stilled in the hopes that it would stop. Everything hurt. Why?

The whistling stopped when the pained noise released itself from my chest, unbidden. A rustling sounded, and then someone's breath ruffled my hair around my forehead.

'Welcome back, ghost girl.'

This time when I groaned it was for an entirely different pain. A pain in my ass. 'Great,' I croaked, coughing again from the dryness of my throat. 'It's you.'

He chuckled in his deep, bass voice, the sound travelling to parts of me I didn't think existed anymore, lighting me up from the inside out and igniting something inside of me that I had thought long dormant. Did I... like it?

'As always, ghost girl, it is a pleasure.'

'You keep calling me ghost girl like you're not a ghost yourself,' I pointed out, digging for information about the annoyingly mysterious shadow man.

'I am dead. I have not been a ghost for a long, long time, though.'

I blinked rapidly against the bright light as I forced my eyes open, needing to see him. He sounded less distorted than usual, and I had a feeling his shadows were momentarily taking a break from keeping his identity a secret.

‘Do you have a name?’ I asked, swallowing thickly in a feeble attempt to whet my dry mouth. I didn’t produce saliva anymore, and yet... it worked.

‘It takes a while to get used to it,’ he said, deflecting my question. I wasn’t going to let him get away with it, though. He had been stalking me for days. Possibly even weeks. I had more questions than answers, and he seemed to understand what was going on far more than I did.

‘Your name,’ I prompted, the blurry film covering my vision slowly receding enough to make out thick black hair, black eyes, a chiselled jawline, and a full-lipped smirk. The weirdest part, however, was that his shadows were still covering his face. I was seeing through them.

He studied me for an extended beat, leaning forward to run his gaze over my still prone form before he answered. ‘Mortimer.’

I snorted. I couldn’t help it. There was just no way.

‘Mortimer?’ I asked, trying to hold back a bigger laugh at his affronted expression.

‘Yes,’ he frowned. ‘Is there something funny about my name, ghost girl?’

I inhaled a deep breath to compose myself, wrinkling my nose the scent of freshly dug earth and the metallic hint of blood that I almost choked on in the process. God, what a fucking nasty smell.

He mistook my disgust as directed at him, and he sneered down at me. ‘My name

offends you, does it?’

‘No! No,’ I said, finding enough strength to sit up and face him. ‘Sorry, it’s not that. Your name is pretty fitting actually, since we’re dead and all.’

He hummed, unimpressed, but backed down from where he had begun to loom menacingly over me. I was woman enough to admit his intimidation tactics had almost worked, a thrill of danger skittering down my spine at the death that shone in his eyes. This man was not safe, and I couldn’t forget that. I didn’t know what he was capable of, but I knew instinctively that he could hurt me if he wanted to. I needed to tread lightly.

‘It just smells like death,’ I admitted, explaining the source of my revulsion.

‘The girl is being buried.’

I blinked blankly, processing that information.

‘How long was I out?’

‘Time has no meaning for us, ghost girl. You should know that by now,’ he admonished, and I bristled at his pompous demeanour.

‘It might not have meaning for you, but it means something to me,’ I snapped back, earning a raised eyebrow from Mortimer in response.

‘You must release your concepts of mortality, ghost girl. They are irrelevant to you now.’

‘I disagree.’

‘You can disagree as much you want, it doesn’t change the facts. You are not beholden to mortal concepts such as time, and you would do well to remember that.’

Generally, I knew he was correct, but he didn’t know that I had goals that needed to be accomplished before Blake died. I was beholden to the mortal concept of time, because I was dealing with a mortal. His refusal to listen just made me want to punch him in the throat, and I glowered at him as I rose from the ground.

I was momentarily distracted by the sensation of a stone digging into the sole of my foot, yet the physical bite of pain contrasted oddly with the weightlessness I still felt as gravity completely disregarded me. But I shook it off to focus back on the bigger problem at hand.

‘What do you want, Mortimer?’ I asked him, skipping the small talk and in favour of getting to the point. He had been circling me like a shark in the water for too long for me to believe he didn’t have some sort of vested interest in me. What concerned me was that I had no clue what that interest was, or why.

He hesitated, seemingly taken aback by my question. ‘What do I want?’

‘Yes...’ I drew the word out, uncertainly. ‘You clearly want something from me, since you’ve been stalking me. What do you want?’

‘I...’ he paused, and I took pleasure in the fact that I had made him speechless. ‘It doesn’t matter. I’ve already got it.’

‘Then why are you still here?’

My question set something off in him, something dark and dangerous. The change was sudden and swift, and he looming over me again in the blink of an eye. His expression was closed off, the only sign of his anger was the flash in his blackened

eyes. The shadows swirling around him were even more active, like they were reacting to his negative mood and were ready and eager to lash out at his command. Or perhaps they would act on their own. I didn't know how they worked, but they emanated a malicious intent that had me stumbling backwards away from them.

'Scared, ghost girl?' he taunted, a wicked smirk tilting up one side of his mouth.

'Should I be?' I asked, putting on an air of false bravado that I hoped would fool him. It didn't.

'Yes, ghost girl. You should be afraid.'

'And why is that?' I asked, proud that there was no shake in my voice to betray the fear I felt pulsing through me.

He drifted closer, close enough that he was only a breath away. His nose brushed against mine as he licked his lips, his tongue lashing against my lips by accident. His eyes flashed again, this time in excitement, and it took every ounce of willpower to stay where I was. I refused to let him to intimidate me into submission. I would never allow another man that much power over me again.

'You are still weak, ghost girl. You cannot overpower me.'

His words sparked a challenge, one I was more than willing to meet head-on, even if I did not yet understand the rules. 'Why would I try to overpower you, Mortimer?' I whispered against his lips, the thrill of being so close settling deep in my core. If I had been alive, I would have been dripping.

Except, when I shifted my legs in the familiar action meant to ease the ache between them, my inner thighs were slick. I was dripping. Holy shit.

I knew I should have been shocked at my reaction to him, but I couldn't bring myself to care. All I could focus on were his lips so close to mine, his breath cool and fresh against my face, and instead of body heat he emanated a frigid chill that was somehow even more alluring. I could imagine how it would feel against my skin, a bite of pain to counter the pleasure I could see in his gaze.

And I wanted it.

I didn't think. I didn't question myself, or my actions. I just acted.

My lips pressed firmly against his in a furious kiss that he met with just as much force. My hands rose to stroke my fingers through silky hair, which I then fisted to keep him firmly in place. The last thing I wanted was for him to break away. This was the first time I had felt anything so strongly since death, and I wasn't ready to let it go just yet.

Neither was he, it seemed, because he matched my fervour with his own. His arms wrapped around me, pulling our bodies flush together so he could rub his heavy erection against my stomach. His leg wedged between mine, giving me the friction I needed to start chasing my pleasure as we ground against one another like two horny teenagers.

When his hands drifted lower to grasp my ass and control the motion and pressure of my thrusts, I growled into his mouth. The sound only spurred him on, and he was suddenly pushing me backwards, knocking my feet out from under me so he could lower me to the ground. His weight was both there and not as he pressed against me, the odd feeling foreign and difficult to wrap my head around, but I soon lost all thoughts beyond the pleasure as he ground his hips into mine, his cock thick and heavy against my core. There were clothes between us, but they didn't seem to be in the way. If anything, they only added to the sensations that were driving me wild.

A moment later, they were gone, disappearing into the aether like they had never existed in the first place, and the thought briefly struck that perhaps they hadn't. All I knew now, though, was the feel of Mortimer's skin against mine as the shadows parted fully for the first time since we'd met.

And fuck, he was beautiful. Hard lines, lean muscles, pale skin. He looked like he was carved straight out of marble, and I was so fucking here for it.

'More,' I snarled in his face. 'I need more.'

'Greedy little ghost girl,' he chuckled, but he was just as lost in this as I was. Whatever this was.

'I need to be inside you,' he growled, and I lifted my hips in response, eager for the same.

'Yesss,' I hissed, which turned into a moan when he dipped his head to take my nipple between his teeth. I gasped, both from pleasure and pain when he bit down, because he wasn't being gentle. I didn't think I could handle gentle from him, but I wasn't about to let him get away with it. My hands, still tangled in his hair, stroked lower until I reached his back. There, I dug my nails in as deep as they would go and scraped them down until I reached his ass. He yelled out in response and bared his teeth at me before clamping them over my other nipple so hard I feared he might actually bite it off. I yelped, but something about the roughness of the moment made me want more. I needed more.

'Fuck me,' I demanded, digging my nails into the plentiful flesh of his ass to pull him closer. 'Now.'

He didn't wait. He wasn't gentle. He thrust inside me in one harsh shove, bottoming out immediately. I was slick enough that he slid right in, but my body needed time to

adjust to his impressive size and girth that he didn't give me. He pulled out and slammed back in with even more force, and I was incapable of doing anything but holding on for dear life as he pounded into me.

His shadows lashed out, flicking at me, whipping me, and squeezing me as they, too, joined the battle of primal lust. The pain and the pleasure mingled as we continued tearing at one another, fighting to be the one to cause the most damage while using each other to chase our release. I could feel it climbing, a heat that swelled and swirled in my stomach as I was pushed closer and closer to the edge. Mortimer was grunting and growling above me, meeting my moans and cries with a ferality that turned me on more than I thought possible. Seeing him unravel before me was a pleasure in and of itself.

'Yes. Oh, fuck. Right there. Don't fucking stop,' I panted out, forcing my eyes to stay open so I could watch him come undone above me despite the curling of my toes. 'I'm gonna come!'

'Come,' he demanded, his voice so low it was more of a vibration than a sound. 'Come all over my cock, ghost girl. Milk me dry.'

One of his hands grasped my hair and yanked my head back, giving him access to my throat which he covered with his other hand and squeezed. I didn't need to breathe, but the implied danger was what finally drove me over the edge. I screamed as I fluttered and clenched around him, sucking him in ever deeper and locking him inside me. The action set off his own climax as he roared above me, his hips pistoning hard and fast as he rode us both through our orgasms with a violence that shouldn't have done it for me, but it really did.

He didn't collapse on top of me, instead keeping himself propped up so he could glare down at me with the intense, black pits of his eyes. I didn't push him off, either, meeting his glare with one of my own. It was another challenge. Who would move

first?

It wouldn't be me.

'Was that what you wanted from me, then?' I asked, my voice more dangerous and taunting than it had ever been before. It was such a startling difference that I almost caved and pushed him off, but I refused to bend. It didn't take long for the pride to sink in. I wasn't the same soft-spoken girl that I was when I was alive. I was something more, something dangerous. I could feel that knowledge settle as deep inside me as his cock still was, filling me with a confidence I was sure would get me in trouble. But I also knew that backing down wasn't an option. Not with my shadow man. Not with anyone .

'For now,' he said with a cruel twist of his lips. His shadows converged around him and pulled him away, dragging him into the darkness in a way that should have terrified me but excited me instead. I could feel a new sense of purpose bubbling up inside me, filling the space he had just vacated.

I didn't take his cruelty as an insult. Instead, I weaponised it into motivation. Motivation to become stronger, strong enough to take him on if I needed to. I didn't know what the future held for us, but it was undoubtedly going to be explosive. I just needed to hold onto my convictions long enough to enact my vengeance before it came to that.

Chance

There was a knock at the door. Maybe. I couldn't tell, because it was so quiet, it was like a delicate little mouse knock. I thought I imagined it, but no, there it was again.

'Hello?' a female voice called out, which had me immediately tensing with dread. Did she seriously follow me to Rhodes' house?

'Hello?' she called out again, quickly followed by another soft rap of her knuckles against the piece of wood separating us.

She did it again, louder this time, like she was gaining confidence in her mental instability. Fucking socialite. Always thinking about appearances before showing their true colours when they didn't immediately get their way. She quickly dropped the meek and polite act in favour of knocking loudly and practically screaming through the door.

'Hello? Chance, I know you're in there!'

Fuck. If I were on my own in my van, I would have just let her knock and shout until she tuckered herself out and fucked off, but I couldn't let her wake up Rhodes after his seizure. He needed rest, not drama.

So, I threw my head back and released a groan of pure annoyance, then got up and stomped towards the door. I snatched it open, barely avoiding her raised fist before it collided with my face instead of the door. I scowled down at her, hoping to exude enough malice to intimidate her into leaving of her own accord. Naturally, she

ignored it, smiling up at me through fake eyelashes and way too much makeup in what she must have thought was an innocent, alluring smile. It was anything but. My stomach clenched uncomfortably as I swallowed back bile.

‘Florence. What do you want?’

‘You’ve been avoiding me, Chancie. I came all this way to see you, and you haven’t even said hello. It’s been days.’

I breathed through my nose, wrinkling it when I caught a whiff of her overly sweet vanilla and floral perfume. She had doused herself in enough of it, I wondered if I lit a match, would she go up in flames? It was a pleasant thought.

‘This isn’t even my house. You shouldn’t have followed me up here. And I’m working. You need to leave.’

Instead of obeying or following any rules of common decency, she attempted to push past me inside the house. I blocked her path with my entire body, refusing to let this woman inside Rhodes’ home, especially when he was sleeping and unwell.

She pouted, the expression wrong as she tried to look sweet and childish. Instead, she looked like her puffed-up lips were about to drop right off her face. ‘Come on, Chancie. Let me in.’

‘No.’

‘But...’

‘I said no. This isn’t my house, and you do not have permission to enter. Go back to the campsite and find someone else to bother.’

She reared back like I'd hit her, crocodile tears shimmering in her eyes that I didn't believe for a second. 'Why are you being so mean?' she whined.

'I'm not being mean. You're trying to insert yourself where you're not wanted. It's time for you to go before you start a scene. The owner of this house is sick and is trying to sleep.'

Her tune changed so quickly I felt like I was getting whiplash, but she still wasn't taking the hint. 'Who's in there? Is it a woman? Are you cheating on me, Chancie?' she shrieked, and I wanted to duct tape her mouth shut to stop any more noise from escaping.

'No. And even if there was, it would be none of your business. You and I are not a thing. Now stop being such a delusional bitch and go, before I call the cops.'

'How dare you?' she seethed. For a moment, I felt a pinch of guilt and wondered if I'd gone too far, but then tilted her nose up in the air and sniffed in that self-important way all the ditzy socialites were so good at, and I couldn't bring myself to care. She needed to fuck off before I said something worse. 'Your parents will be so disappointed in your behaviour, Chancie. How could you do this to them?'

I couldn't stop my eyes from rolling if I'd tried. 'Yeah, that shit's not gonna work on me, Florence. Now fuck off and don't bother me again.'

Her lips pursed as she contemplated her options until, finally, she got the memo that she wasn't welcome. 'Your parents are going to disown you if you push me away, Chance,' she said, ditching the act in favour of the truth. 'You'll regret this.'

I merely shrugged, completely unfazed by her threat. Or my parents', for that matter, because I had no doubt she hadn't come up with that threat on her own. I made my own money and avoided dipping into the trust fund Calvin had set up for me at my

mother's behest unless I was investing into the business. It was petty of me, but they hated whenever I splurged on a new device almost as much as they detested my career choice, but it wouldn't matter soon anyway. I would have no need for it when I joined Kali. There wasn't much holding me to this life anymore anyway. All of it was just... irrelevant.

Thankfully, Mikey chose that moment to come chugging up the driveway in his overpriced, two-storey RV, interrupting the silent stand-off that had commenced in the wake of Florence's threat. He parked up and hopped out, then stopped short when he saw Florence standing in the doorway with me still blocking her way in. She sneered at my friend and stormed off, keeping a wide berth between them and the RV – like she thought one or both would bite and give her rabies or something.

It would have been amusing if not for the way Mikey wilted beneath her disapproving stare. If she wasn't already walking away, I would have dragged her out myself. I was a gentleman, but I was also protective of my friends. I had no problem man-handling a woman if the situation called for it. It seemed she was suffering more than enough, however, when his stupid choice of high-heeled footwear sank into the dirt and skidded on the gravel. Her ankles rolled painfully, but she kept her nose in the air and fought for her balance as she wobbled away.

Mikey relaxed as soon as she disappeared down the driveway, though he still remained closed off after the interaction. He was a shy guy and had always been treated poorly by his rich peers, and it had stuck with him well into adulthood.

'Good timing,' I told him with a lopsided grin. 'I was struggling to get rid of her.'

He met my grin with one of his own, even if it was smaller and meeker. 'Glad to be of assistance.'

I let him in, locking the door behind us as I led him into the living room. He perched

on the edge of the couch, uncomfortable in the unfamiliar space, but he quickly relaxed back into the cushions when he saw me treating the place like it was my own.

‘What brings you up here?’ I asked him. ‘I thought you’d be with the girls.’

‘They needed some time to themselves. They’re arguing again.’

I sighed. ‘This is becoming way more complicated than we’d planned.’

Mikey shook his head, a sad down tilt to his mouth. ‘They told me. About Kali.’

I nodded numbly.

‘I’m sorry, Chance.’

‘Don’t be.’

‘I hoped she was alive, too,’ he admitted, his voice breaking as his emotions clogged his throat. Kali had been his friend, too. One of the only people who had never judged him or treated him as anything other than an equal. I forgot sometimes that I wasn’t the only person who had lost her. I wasn’t the only one grieving.

Doubts trickled in about my decision. Maybe leaving Mikey behind would devastate him more than I thought. Oh, who was I kidding? Of course, it would. We were family, and the sudden realisation of how selfish it would make me if I took my own life when I had someone like Mikey in my corner slammed into me with the force of a battering ram. I gasped.

‘Hey, you okay, man?’

I nodded, but I could feel my forehead creasing and my cheeks aching as my entire

face drooped downwards, revealing the thoughts and emotions running through my head.

He gave me a miserable, watery smile that proved he knew me better than anyone. Except maybe Ashe.

‘You need to talk to her before you make any decisions you can’t take back,’ he said, his voice warbling as he held back tears.

‘I...’ I began, but I didn’t know what to say, or even if there was anything to say.

‘I get it,’ he said. ‘I do. You love her. I’ve been waiting for you to make this decision for seven years.’

‘You have?’

He nodded, his eyes downcast and shut tight as tears finally began to spill over. ‘You were always going to follow her to the ends of the earth. You just needed proof before you felt safe enough to do it.’

‘Mikey...’

‘I’ll miss you, but our line of work is proof that it’s not the end. We’re good, Chance.’ He met my eyes as he said this, letting me see the depth of his grief, but also the acceptance. ‘Kali’s lucky to have you, and she’d be stupid if she stays blind to what the two of you could have together. I always knew you were soulmates, even if she didn’t quite get the memo.’

I laughed at that. It was true. My love for her had become such an intrinsic part of me that there was no chance of separating myself from her anymore. I had stopped living my life the moment she’d died, and I would be happy even if she didn’t love me in

quite the same way I loved her, as long as we faced whatever the future held together.

‘I just... I need to talk to her. Whoever hurt her needs to pay for what they’ve done before I can join her, so I’m not going anywhere yet.’

His smile was a little brighter, and a little meaner, as my words sank in. It was a look I had very rarely seen on him since he didn’t have a mean bone in his body, but he could be just as protective over those he loved as me when warranted, it was just rare to push him to that point. I could only recall one time in our youth. Our group had gone to see a movie when I was backed into a corner by a group of bullies. They targeted me for not being Calvin’s true son, calling me name after nasty name, until words were no longer enough, and they had started beating me. There were seven of them and only one of me. Kali had just left with Blake to continue their night as a couple, so she hadn’t known what was happening. Ashe had run off to get help, but Mikey? He lost it. He wasn’t a fighter by any means, but that just meant he came prepared for worst-case scenarios. He’d whipped out a bottle of pepper spray and went at it. He had terrible aim, so of course I got caught in the crosshairs as he sprayed wildly, but they ran off and never bothered me again.

‘I’ll help in any way I can,’ he promised me. ‘Let’s get the fucker.’

‘I hope I’m not interrupting,’ Rhodes’ tired voice sounded from the stairs, and my head snapped up. I hadn’t even heard him rouse, let alone come down the stairs.

‘Hey, how are you feeling?’

‘Fine,’ he answered with a dismissive wave of his hand. ‘Nothing I’m not used to. I’ve been dying my whole life, this time is just gonna stick.’

‘You’re dying?’ Mikey asks, and I forgot for a moment why he would be so shocked. None of us had told him about Rhodes’ condition.

‘Glioblastoma. Not long left now,’ Rhodes explained with a shrug, completely nonplussed.

‘Shit...’

‘It’s fine. Not my first rodeo, but it will be my last. Can’t say I’m too upset about it now I’ve met Kali, though,’ he grinned. I frowned as I tried to decipher his comment, and Mikey shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

‘Speaking of. When are we setting up the reunion?’ Rhodes asked as he settled into a lone armchair off to the side of the room with an air of carefree interest. It creaked beneath his weight, the sound making me wince in concern for the structural integrity of the old thing, but it held him up, nonetheless.

‘Do you want me to call the girls back for this?’ Mikey asked me, his eyes still watery with emotion that he was continuing to beat back.

I shook my head. ‘No. I’ve got my equipment in my van, and you’ve got yours. They don’t need to be here for this.’

He nodded, silently acknowledging the words I wasn’t saying out loud. I didn’t want Ashe or Gloria to worry about my decision any more than they already did.

‘I’ll grab my stuff. Where do you want to set up?’

‘What stuff?’ Rhodes asked, leaning forward as intrigue sparked in his eyes that excitedly bounced between us.

‘Our gear.’

‘Like, to catch ghosts?’

‘To record them, but yes,’ I corrected him.

‘Can I watch?’ he asked with an alarming amount of energy as he bounced in place so hard I swore the armchair was going to finally break.

‘Sure,’ I agreed easily. ‘We need you to show us where she usually shows up, anyway, so we can set up in the right spot.’

He was nodding so hard I wondered what would kill him first, the brain cancer or whiplash. ‘Sure. I just need to throw some clothes on, and I’ll show you where she keeps popping up.’

I clapped my hands and stood, nervousness clashing with excitement inside me at the prospect of talking to Kali for the first time in seven long years. ‘Then let’s go.’

Kali

I was free. That was the first thing I realised after Morty disappeared in a dramatic whirlwind of shadows. I was no longer constrained to the property near my grave. In fact, my grave no longer called to me like it did before. My bones felt worthless. Insignificant. Like I had drained them of all the energy they'd contained.

I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. A large part of me felt like I should have been more guilty over consuming Bianca's soul, but there was something about the way her energy buzzed inside of me that told me everything I needed to know. She was happy to be there, eager to help me avenge us in any way she could.

She wasn't a voice inside my head or a second consciousness attempting to take control of my body. Whatever had happened when we'd merged, it was more like she had become a part of me, both of us accepting each other until she resided peacefully, like she was asleep, somewhere in the back of my mind. Her energy thrummed through me, but it was mine to use now, not hers. The contentment I felt from her... I couldn't say for sure, but my best guess was it was the last thing she felt as I absorbed her, because the warmth of the feeling was countered by the chill of her fear, the pain of her brutal death, and sadness of the life and loved ones she had been forced to leave behind. Yet, there was a sense of rightness, of peace.

She had given herself to me willingly despite not knowing what would happen, and I was the prominent emotion I felt because of it was gratitude, not guilt.

She had saved me, and I had given her soul a way to rest. She didn't have to fight anymore, because the weight of that responsibility fell on my shoulders instead. I

wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

Her sacrifice had allowed me to push past the flimsy barrier that had kept me prisoner since my own death, which was how I had found myself walking down a gravel path towards the campsite nearby. The campsite where I could hear Blake's voice.

He was staying right next door, pretending as if he wasn't torturing and murdering innocent women one property over and then burying their dismembered bodies in the backyard.

When the campsite finally came into view, my nose wrinkled in disgust at the scene that I found. The entire Dodd family had set themselves up in the largest space they could find, taking up multiple designated areas for parking and tents. Their setup was extravagant and was essentially a polyester mansion. They even had collapsible steps leading up to the damn zip, space heaters wedged into the ground, and a garden set up outside, sun loungers, umbrellas, and even pots of flowers set up like they were moving in long term.

I didn't even have to see Mallory and Florence (what the fuck?) lazing in bikinis, sipping some sort of frozen drink that undoubtedly contained too much alcohol on the lounge chairs to know this abominable affront to nature belonged to them. I'd bet there were actual furniture and appliances inside as well. These people took glamping to a whole new level, and I was thoroughly repulsed. When I was alive, I had gone camping a few times with Blake, and sometimes with Chance, Ashe and Mikey. None of those times had I been subjected to this monstrosity I had just stumbled upon.

And it was the most horrific collection of clashing neon colours. They probably denoted which room was which. I had a feeling the pink one was Florence's. She was easier to pick out in a crowd with her closet of the most garish colours she could find.

Even now, her bikini was blinding. This one was a bright orange with red and pink

zig-zag stripes, and I fought the urge to shield my eyes as the tiny triangles of fabric barely covered her privates. Upon closer examination, I took note of how she had been nipped and ticked so many times that her skin pulled unnaturally, her nose was practically non-existent and was almost completely swallowed up by the size of her lips. And her tits were so clearly fake, but to the stage where they didn't even look like balloons. It looked like someone had implants two large boulder into her chest, stuck some nipples on top to ensure they poked out, but I had a feeling those had also been adjusted to make it look like they were perky, because heaven forbid her tits started to sag.

I wasn't adverse to plastic surgery, but there came a point when someone had to say no. Like when a bartender took a customer's keys when they were too drunk. The poor girl looked so stiff and constricted inside her own skin, it was a wonder she was even still able to move.

I was about to dismiss them and move on to find where Blake was currently staying, since he was undoubtedly around here somewhere, when the woman began to speak. It wasn't the gossip that caught my attention, however, so much as the subject of it.

'I must apologise on behalf of my son again, Flo, dear. His behaviour has always been abhorrent, but it haven't been able to get through to him for... well, years ,' Mallory said while continuing to sip her drink. It was red, and I was now close enough to smell strawberries, sugar, and rum. Of course, they were drinking strawberry daiquiris. I should have guessed. It was Mallory's vacation drink of choice.

I clocked a mechanical churning and poked my head around the tent's opening to find a makeshift kitchen. An industrial, portable battery was connected to multiple appliances, but the whirring came from the slushy machine propped on top of a foldable table, red-tinted ice churning around inside. Multiple bottles of rum, a cooler full of chopped strawberries, bottles of strawberry syrup, and emptied plastic bags

that had once contained the ice littered the surrounding area, and I rolled my eyes. I had known both women for a very long time, and neither one of them could be found without some form of alcohol nearby, so it wasn't that surprising.

That wasn't what had me wrinkling my nose, however, because despite the frivolity of bringing their own slushy machine camping, it was pretty ingenious. No, what really got me was the full kitchen setup with a fridge, a stove, an oven, and even a portable microwave. And, of course, the full drinks refrigerator completely stocked with an array of alcohol. Beers, spirits, and liqueurs were stacked neatly inside a glass-doored refrigeration unit, and beside that, a full rack of the most expensive wines just waited to be opened, even though most of them wouldn't see the light of day until they had returned home. I doubted they would be here for much longer. They could bring as much luxury with them as they pleased, but it would never be the same as their impeccably (and impersonally) styled mansions. They would miss their staff soon enough.

I grinned to myself when I realised I didn't have to temper my opinions about the ridiculousness of their frivolous lifestyle, and I greatly enjoyed the eye roll I didn't bother holding back. It would have taken Calvin and Blake a good, long while to set all this up between the two of them. I wasn't sure if Blake's wife would have tried to help or not, but Mallory would have never permitted it.

Florence's response to Mallory's apology drew my attention back outside, and I settled in to eavesdrop, leaning against the pole of the tent and enjoying the fact that I could actually do so now without falling through.

'That man is a lost cause, Mallory. I know you mean well and want the best for him, but Chance is the farthest thing from marriage material. His job is a joke, he treats women poorly, and I'm pretty sure he's... Well, I hate to say it, but there isn't a man on this earth I can't seduce, and he hasn't shown an ounce of interest in me. I can only conclude that he's one of those... homosexuals,' she finished, whispering the

last word like it was some sort of dirty secret. I laughed, then laughed harder when Mallory gasped in horror. Not only were they bigots, but they were idiots, too. Chance was the furthest thing from gay a man could get. He loved women. He loved their bodies. He loved sex. I would know, since he told me all about his conquests, and I'd played his wing woman more times than I could count.

Chance. Gay? Ha!

What was even more laughable was the incomprehensibly delusional confidence Florence was exuding. She looked like a silicone cyborg, half human, half Barbie doll, with a dash of ready-to-burst balloon chucked in there for the extra flair. There wasn't a single natural thing about her that had survived, yet she thought Chance of all people, who detested everything she stood for, would fall for her charm? Please. Even that was false.

And the fact that Mallory was pushing her on him? It just proved how little she actually knew about her firstborn son. How little she truly cared about his happiness. All she wanted was for him to stop embarrassing her, to fall in line and become another little rich-boy clone to fit in with her picture-perfect image she had painstakingly curated. She may not have had as many procedures as Florence, but she was just as fake.

'He is not a...' Mallory trailed off, completely affronted at the prospect of a gay son. 'Chance is straight, I can promise you, Florence. Perhaps you are just not as desirable as you believe yourself to be,' she snipped, turning things back around onto Florence, who, of course, took immediate offence to the slight.

'I see who he got his bad manners from, Mallory. Perhaps I should leave and let you pick up the disgusting pieces of your pathetic son's mistakes.'

She stood, not a single jiggle in any of the places a body should jiggle, and tossed the

remainder of her daiquiri on my mother-in-law. Well, ex- mother-in-law, now. And good riddance.

I decided, since she was being such a prissy little bitch, that I should test my newfound abilities on her to see what I was capable of. So, as Florence was walking away, I stuck my foot out and focused all of my energy and willpower on making it as solid as possible.

She walked right through me like I wasn't here.

I bit my lip and considered how to make myself more tangible. I didn't know if it was even possible, but since I was able to touch things, perhaps I could move something? But what?

I scanned the area to find something small and light, because it was better to start off easy and work my way up to the heavy stuff, right? But there wasn't much around. Everything I saw was too large or too dense. Until I saw the perfect opening. Mallory huffed and picked up her phone, typed out a message, and then placed it back down on the table beside her after she sent it. Her phone was face up, unlocked, and just begging to be messed with.

So, I poked at it with my forefinger, just to see. Then did a little happy dance when the screen lit up, the message thread to her husband right there for me to see. Since I was a ghost, there was nothing to stop me from being nosy, so I read the message she sent.

Florence is a bust. Need a new plan.

The phone buzzed with an incoming text, and I managed to catch what was written before Mallory picked it up to read it herself.

Do better. That boy is ruining our reputations. Fix it. Now.

I had never seen confirmation of their plots before, and I still wasn't sure if Chance was involved in Blake's murder spree, but the larger part of me that had cherished our friendship for so long wanted to get some petty payback on his behalf. And so, when she put the phone down again and read her response, a plan quickly formed in my head. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

I've got another woman lined up with a respectable background. I'll send Florence home and ask Jerica to join us instead.

Mallory's eyes were closed beneath the shade of her sunhat, and I took the opportunity to type out a message myself. It took some concentration, but I was able to exit out of the chat thread with Calvin and bring up the rather empty one with Chance. All the messages were mostly from Mallory, interspersed with sparse, one-word replies from Chance. I realised he would be more likely to ignore any messages from his overbearing mother, so I went back to the text thread with Calvin and started the hard, arduous process of typing out a text.

It was slow-going, and I was exhausted by the end of it, completely depleted of my energy reserves to the point where I was legitimately worried for the first time in forever that I was about to pass out, but I managed to type out the message and hit send before that could happen.

Florence might not be right for Chance, but she could be good between us.

Immediately, the little white 'delivered' beneath the message changed to 'read'. Those three little bouncing dots appeared as Calvin began to type, then they disappeared just as quickly. They popped back up again a few times before they went away for good. No message was sent.

I hoped, at the very least, that this would drive a wedge between Mallory and Calvin. It would serve them right for meddling because they couldn't accept Chance as he was. Their love was conditional, and I had always hated them for that.

Calvin chose that moment to come storming out of the blue section of the tent, which I deduced must have been the mancave section. His eyes flashed with something I could discern, but very much didn't want to, and I realised I had one thing left to do on Mallory's phone to make it even sweeter.

'Since when were you interested in a threesome with a woman, Mal?' he hissed as he approached, but his words drew me up short. With a woman? Had they had a threesome with a man? And then spewed homophobic bullshit?

One: gross!

Two: what a hypocritical bitch!

I deleted the message as quickly as I could, my entire body slumping with the energy I needed to expel to get it done, but the aftermath made it so worth it. Mallory's shades were suddenly discarded so her husband could see the full force of her glare.

'What the fuck are you talking about, Cal?'

'Florence? Really?'

'The pickings are slim, Cal. We don't have many options left.'

'We do not invite women into our bed, Mallory.'

'Of course we don't,' Mallory replied, confused, which only made Calvin confused.

‘Are you saying... Is that why Chance doesn’t want her? Because she’s a man?’

Mallory reared back in shock. ‘A man? What on earth are you on about, Calvin?’

Now that I had confirmation for that piece of information I most certainly did not need or want, I chose to leave the quarrelling couple in favour of finding Blake’s tent. It wasn’t difficult to find. It was the same one we had used together when we were married. Now, it seemed, he was sharing it with a different woman. A different wife.

I wondered if she was just as ignorant and naïve as I had been, or if she was onto him. Perhaps he had found himself a serial killer wife, to create a little serial killer family? But no, I doubted that. Blake’s whole public persona was based around surrounding himself with genuinely kind people. It was why he’d married me, after all. I was the perfect victim to fall for his lies. My parents had died when I was still young, so I had sought out love and acceptance in others. He had given it to me in spades, reeling me in without any real effort at all.

When I approached, the sun shone through the tent to reveal the shadows of the objects inside, but there was only one body. A woman’s. Presumably, the new wife. Blake was nowhere to be found.

I debated leaving, or at least keeping my distance until he returned so I could follow him from there, but something about the defeated slump to the woman’s shoulders as she moved about inside had me floating through thick polyester walls of the tent.

The first thing I noticed was that she was stunningly beautiful. Even with mussed hair and no makeup, eyes still drooping with fatigue, she was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen. Bright red hair that I could see was real rather than dyed was styled into a short bob that perfectly framed her heart-shaped face. Freckles dotted over her cheeks and nose, giving her an innocent vibe that went well with the sleepy look she was currently rocking. I’d bet she was a great woman to wake up next to

every morning.

And her body... Holy shit was she hot. Perfectly perky tits, a waist that dipped in deliciously before flaring out at her hips, and her ass was round and toned, the perfect little handful. She had the type of hourglass figure people like Florence paid good money for, and even I was a little jealous.

But that jealousy shrivelled up and died when I saw the sadness in her eyes. She glanced back at the double camping cot and heaved a world-weary sigh. I could see why. One pillow held a prominent dip in the middle, clearly used, while the other was perfectly plumped and very clearly un used. So Blake hadn't come home last night, huh?

Fuck... Was he still dealing with Bianca's body, or was he already out hunting for new prey?

Was she... feeling neglected? Was she catching on?

Oh, shit... Was she about to make the same mistake I did?

I saw myself in her, the start of the questioning of Blake's actions. The wondering where he was, who he was with, and if I was just being paranoid or going crazy. I rushed forward with the intent to comfort her before I realised I couldn't. There was no comfort she could take from me. Quite the opposite, really. If I were even able to make my presence known, all it would do was scare her or make her uncomfortable. Likely both. I pulled up short before I could reach her, chiding myself for my rash actions and thanking my lucky stars that she couldn't see the blunder.

Unfortunately, in my sudden urge to comfort this woman I had never met, but had unwittingly taken my place in this dangerous game of life and death, I had accidentally made myself a little bit more tangible and knocked into the cot in my

haste. The sudden jostling startled her, and she bolted to her feet, scanning the room with wide, frightened eyes.

‘Hello?’ she called out softly, backing away from the cot. ‘Shit... Hello?’ she tried again, and I realised she must have believed in ghosts if she was this terrified. I hadn’t meant to make my presence known. I’d seriously fucked up here, hadn’t I? The last thing I wanted to do was scare her.

And then a thought struck, one that would have knocked the breath from my lungs if I had any. Maybe this wasn’t such a bad thing? If she was ignorant of Blake’s... hobbies, then maybe I could save her? If I could just get a message to her, tell her to run and never look back, maybe I could spare her the pain, the fear, the sheer, unadulterated misery that would come with her discovering her husband was a serial killer.

Was it worth it? It had to be. I had to try, because if she was innocent in all of this, and I highly suspected she was, then she didn’t deserve to go through that level of suffering.

I mentally thanked Bianca again, because she had given me the power to help this woman, and I was now pretty damned sure that she needed it.

Dakota

I woke up alone. Again.

My husband's side of the bed was cold and untouched . Again.

Blake wasn't giving me any reason for him to leave so often. I had been patient after the most recent Kali debacle, but now it was just getting ridiculous, and I'd had enough. I knew everyone said that the first year of marriage was tough, but this wasn't tough; it was practically non-existent. Lately, I felt like he was only keeping me around for the sake of having a wife more often than not, and that was not okay with me.

I was sitting on the edge of the cot, shoulders slumped and a stress headache pounding through my skull, when the cot suddenly jolted like someone had bumped into it. Except, there was no one there...

I jumped to my feet and scanned the area, searching for an animal that had somehow snuck inside the tent, but, again, there was nothing there. Our reason for following Chance down south for an impromptu camping trip flashed through my mind, and I wondered if I was somehow meeting the ghost they were hunting.

'Hello?' I called out, but my voice was quiet, stuck behind my suddenly constricted throat. When I received no answer, not a single sign that I wasn't alone, chills spread throughout my body as fear tried to take hold. Where was Chance when I needed him?

‘Shit... Hello?’ I tried again, panic starting to set in.

‘Okay,’ I muttered under my breath in a feeble attempt to soothe myself. ‘It’s okay, Dakota. It’s just a spirit. Chance and his team deal with them on a daily basis, and they’re doing just fine. There’s nothing to be afraid of.’

When nothing else moved, not even a chill in the air, I relaxed a little. Perhaps they were merely wandering through and accidentally bumped into the cot. Did ghosts stub their toes, too?

I physically shook those thoughts from my mind, actively ignoring the sensation of eyes watching me from the shadows, and decided now was as good a time as any to get ready for the day. It was already late, sometime in the afternoon, but I had lain awake in bed while I waited for Blake, hoping and praying that he would return. But he never did.

I paused on my way to my suitcase to check my phone for the umpteenth time. Nothing. No missed calls. Not a single text. Radio fucking silence.

Anger bubbled to the surface, pushing away the sadness and loneliness I’d been feeling for a while now. I was used to him disappearing whenever he went on his fishing trips, but even then, he somehow managed to make time for a phone call here and there. I always woke to a good morning text and went to sleep with him wishing me a good night.

Something was wrong. My gut was screaming at me. My first thought was born from my insecurities within past relationships. The thought of him cheating on me made me physically sick, my stomach twisting painfully in protest, but he had given me no indication that he was unhappy with me. As far as I knew, we had our problems just like anyone else, but we were happy. We’d just gotten married.

Then, I wondered if he'd been called into work for an emergency and had simply forgotten to let me know, but that wasn't like him. He always managed to get a message to me to let me know what was going on, so it just didn't make any sense that I wouldn't have heard from him by now. This was the third night in a row that he hadn't come to bed, but at least the first two times he had shown up in the morning. But there were only so many times he could claim he needed to 'clear his head.'

My anger dissipated when the fear settled in, the only other possibility one I didn't want to consider. What if he wasn't here because something had happened to him? What if he was hurt... or worse?

No. I couldn't think like that. He would let me know where he was and that he was safe eventually. He wouldn't leave me in the lurch like this without a good reason. He just wasn't that kind of man, and it was one of the reasons I'd fallen in love with him in the first place. He was steady. He was sturdy. He was present.

And until recently, I'd believed wholeheartedly that he loved me. I just needed to get the fuck over myself, because he deserved better than that from me.

I also deserved better from him. If he was fine and was just milling about, minding his own business, ignoring his wife, then he had better hold onto his testicles before I ground them into dust.

I bent down to hide the phone and its lack of communication inside my handbag, but when I stood up, I froze. The small, circular makeup mirror I had placed on the fold-up table to the side showed I wasn't alone. I wasn't alone at all.

I swivelled around, my hair flying out as adrenaline coursed through me and made my movements far faster than usual, but there was no one behind me. Shaking, I darted a glance back to the mirror and, sure enough, a white-haired woman who looked remarkably similar to the woman I had seen in photos stood by the cot.

‘K-Kali?’ I stammered, a hurricane of emotions roaring inside of me as I stared at her face. She flickered in and out of focus, like my brain was refusing to acknowledge what I was seeing as real and was trying to erase the evidence of her presence. But I couldn’t. She was here.

I watched in morbid horror as she dipped her head, acknowledging my question, but my nerves couldn’t handle any more. I stumbled away from the mirror, threw on whatever clothes I grabbed first, and rushed from the tent.

I needed to find Chance, and I needed to find him now .

Florence stormed past at that moment, almost running into me as she teetered precariously in her ridiculous heels that were by far the most stupid thing I had seen her wear. They were muddied and were in the process of getting increasingly dirtier as they sank further into the ground.

‘Watch where you’re going,’ she snapped at me in her annoyingly high-pitched, nasally voice. She’d complained about a deviated septum too many times to count, but there wasn’t much septum left to deviate, so I knew it was just her voice.

Before she could storm off in a snit, I grabbed her wrist to keep her from leaving. ‘Hey, wait. Do you know where Chance is? Or maybe Ashe or Mikey?’

She sniffed haughtily like the question offended her and tore her wrist from my grasp. ‘He’s at the house on the other side of the trees.’

I took off at a run and yelled a thank you over my shoulder. I was too far away to hear what she grumbled, but she seemed put out by my actions. Nothing new, but also not my concern.

The trek to Rhodes’ house was longer than I thought, and I was glad I’d slipped on

my sneakers even if they were flopping around on my feet, the laces tucked in rather than tied. The ground was uneven, so I put my weight on my toes rather than my heels as I ran, trying to avoid the divots in the grass so I wouldn't roll an ankle. When I reached the gravel driveway, it wasn't much better. The rocks spread out beneath my feet almost like I was slipping, but I slowed down now that the house was in view. When I reached the door, I was panting. Sweat plastered my clothes to my skin and my hair to my neck, and I wished I'd had the forethought to tie it back, but there wasn't any time. Without the mirror, I had no idea if Kali had followed me or not, but I needed to let them know that she wasn't alive.

Fuck... Kali truly was dead. And she was haunting me.

I began to sweat again when no one answered after I'd knocked multiple times, my anxiety ratcheting up to new heights with each second that ticked by without at least another living person present. I tried not to freak out when my last attempt also went unanswered, but it was too late for that. I had seen a ghost. And not just any ghost, but the spirit of my husband's missing wife.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

But then I heard it. Male voices. Behind the house.

Chance .

'Chance!' I shouted, still breathless enough that I wasn't sure I was loud enough for him to hear.

'Hey, guys, did you hear that?' I heard his friend Mikey ask.

'Hear what?' Rhodes asked.

‘I thought I heard Dakota for a second there. Sorry.’

‘You did!’ I shouted again, stumbling around the side of the house to see the three men in the process of setting up some devices whose purpose completely eluded me. His name tumbled out of my mouth again on a terrified whimper.

Shocked to see me, and in such a state, he almost dropped the device he was holding, but scrambled to catch it at the last second before handing it off to Mikey. ‘Dakota? Are you all right? What’s wrong?’

My mouth opened, but the words got stuck in my throat. How was I supposed to tell him Kali was dead?

He was in front of me now, hands on my shoulders to steady me as he bent down to keep our eyes connected.

‘Dakota, what’s wrong? What happened?’

I couldn’t hold it in anymore when I saw the genuine concern in his eyes. Chance was such a good man, one of the best, and we had only just pushed past the barrier that had prevented us from forming any sort of relationship. What I was about to tell him could derail that before we ever got the chance to build a familial relationship, but he deserved to know, dammit.

The words came tumbling out before I could stop them, uncensored and panicked. ‘She was in my tent. I saw her... She bumped into the cot, but there was no one there, and then she was in the mirror. Kali was there, Chance, but she was a ghost.’

His reaction wasn’t what I expected at all. In fact, it was such a drastic difference from what I had expected that I stumbled away from him in confusion. He gazed down at me with knowing eyes, soft eyes. Eyes that spoke of a lifetime of hurt and

loss, yet there was a peace in them that terrified me more than anything I had seen today.

‘Chance, what...?’

‘I know she’s dead, Dakota. I mean, it wasn’t hard to figure that out. She’s been missing for seven years. But we already figured out that her spirit is lingering.’ He glanced behind him at where Mikey was instructing Rhodes on how to set up a particular device, his demeanour entirely too calm for the situation at hand.

‘I don’t understand,’ I admitted.

‘We believe she was murdered somewhere nearby, and her spirit is stuck in the area. We’re setting up our gear to try to communicate with her.’

‘But if Rhodes can see her, then why do you need your gear?’ I asked, latching onto that rather than the fact that he was unfazed by Kali’s ghostly status.

‘Rhodes has seen her, sure, but this isn’t an exact science. There’s no guarantee he’ll be able to see her again, or when.’

I frowned, deflating. This morning had been a rollercoaster ride of emotional whiplash, and I didn’t think I had the mental capacity to handle much more. ‘Oh.’

‘Did you really see her?’ he asked, something like hope flickering behind his eyes.

‘I think so. I recognised her, and I asked her if she was Kali. She nodded.’

‘What did she look like? Did she seem okay?’

‘I-I,’ I stammered, unsure what answer to give. She was a ghost. How was she okay?

‘Shit, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be bombarding you with questions. Are you okay, Dakota? You look pretty freaked out.’

‘I’m being haunted by my husband’s ex-wife,’ I said in a small voice. ‘I’m not sure how that’s okay.’

‘Kali wouldn’t hurt you. Ghosts can’t physically interact with the living, so she couldn’t even if she wanted to. Which she wouldn’t,’ he hurried to add when my face drained of blood.

But his words weren’t comforting. ‘She moved my bed.’

He blinked at me, slowly processing what I’d said. ‘Sorry. What?’

‘I was sitting on the edge of my cot, and it was like something bumped into it. It moved, Chance. She moved the bed.’

‘But... that’s not possible,’ he argued. ‘Are you sure you didn’t just move it by accident?’

I felt like I was going to be sick, and my head swam nauseatingly, making it worse. ‘I didn’t move it, Chance. I was literally just sitting there. I was still. I didn’t even twitch.’

His eyes were wide, his shock and disbelief evident. I could tell he believed me, but he was also struggling with the new information that directly opposed the knowledge he already had. The knowledge he had worked for years to curate and compile into evidence to prove the existence of the paranormal.

‘Holy shit.’

‘I know,’ I agreed wholeheartedly. ‘I came running to find you as soon as it happened.’

A sharp, high-pitched, mechanical whine pierced through the air and was quickly followed by shouts of alarm and excitement from Mikey and Rhodes.

‘Come quick!’ Rhodes yelled, bouncing up and down like an excitable puppy. ‘We’ve got a hit!’

Chance

We had been sitting out here for hours with no results. Every one of our devices was going off, each one lit up and either buzzing or beeping with sounds that were just annoying us at this point, because we were getting nothing. No attempts at communication were being made by whatever entity was present, and Rhodes had confirmed that he wasn't seeing Kali.

I had a bad feeling about it. I suspected that we were in the presence of the very entity that was responsible for the drownings, and I was concerned we were putting targets on our backs. No, they were already there.

I had tried to tell Mikey and Rhodes to leave, to get somewhere safe, but both of them had refused. Dakota had been spooked enough that when I sent her back to the campsite, she went willingly with a parting order to call her if we heard from Blake.

That was another issue we had to deal with. No one had heard from my little brother since yesterday, and it was causing quite the stir. I had a feeling he was trying to decompress a bit by shutting himself away from the world. Hearing that Kali might have been alive and nearby was hurting him just as powerfully as it had struck me.

Blake was struggling, but he had Dakota now. He would get over it eventually because he had already moved on. If he would just pull his head out of his ass. Dakota deserved better than that, and he knew it, too. He would be so mad at himself when he finally snapped out of it.

Footsteps crunching over sticks and dead leaves preceded Rhodes as he came back to

check on us, greasy paper bags in each hand. 'Figured you guys might be getting hungry. Hope nobody's a vegetarian, 'cause I got burgers.'

'Burgers are great,' Mikey said with a grateful grin, taking the bag Rhodes handed him and immediately shoving a fistful of fries into his mouth. He moaned as he chewed, closing his eyes in satisfaction.

'Well, now. I've never made a man moan quite like that before,' Rhodes teased as he placed the other bag down beside me.

Mikey blushed a deep red colour that I had seen on him pretty much every day since we'd met. 'Sorry,' he muttered shyly around the mouthful of food.

'You sleep with a lot of guys, Rhodes?' I teased the younger man right back, drawing the attention away from Mikey, whose shoulders slumped in relief. He struggled to relax under scrutiny, even in social situations. Hell, even with me and the girls. I'd never met anyone as shy and introverted as him, and Rhodes' bubbly personality was a stark contrast that was, quite frankly, jarring in comparison. Luckily, I was used to it with Ashe and Gloria, who, come to think of it, hadn't made any reappearances since they'd left this morning.

My brows pulled together in a frown as I considered their absence. That was three people total who were now missing.

I unwrapped the burger, noting how it was wrapped in tinfoil, which meant it was more than likely cooked by Fred. He was a cool guy. Didn't care for nonsense, which I admired, but I hadn't seen the older man over the past couple of days, choosing to make my own food instead since I was out and about more often than not. I made a mental note to drop by to say goodbye to the old man before I left.

The first bite was delicious. Juicy and flavourful, with crunchy lettuce, perfectly

melted cheese, and homemade sauce. There was no special flair added to make it something it wasn't. It was just a simple burger, but one that was made to go straight to a man's heart, because damn . I understood why Mikey let that moan slip out, because this was practically orgasmic.

'Party in your mouth, right?' Rhodes commented, licking his lips. 'I already ate mine, but fuck if I wouldn't make room for another if I could.'

I snorted, then sputtered as I tried not to spit out my half-chewed bite. I swallowed it hard, almost choking on it as it went down, but shot him a sly smile. 'That's a deflection if I ever saw one.'

He laughed, the sound boisterous and carefree. 'Nah, man. No dick for me, except my own. Sorry to disappoint,' he winked.

I shook my head with a chuckle, settling back against the trunk I was leaning against to get more comfortable. My ass was numb from sitting for so long, but I was enjoying the rare moment of levity and peace before the world inevitably came crashing down again.

'She's not showing up tonight, is she?' Rhodes asked after a few minutes of comfortable silence.

'Did we... scare her off, or something?' Mikey asked dejectedly.

'I don't know, but I have to keep trying,' I said, determination filling me. I may have not been able to feel my ass cheeks, my legs tingling with pins and needles while my head pounded from stress and lack of sleep, but I wasn't about to let that stop me from talking to Kali. I had waited seven years for this, and I was a patient man. I would camp out here for as long as it took.

I wasn't leaving until we talked.

'Do you think she's shy?' Rhodes asked contemplatively. 'She seemed pretty timid each time we spoke before.'

'Kali has never been shy,' I informed him. 'She was always the life of the party.'

'What if she's avoiding us?' Mikey asked, eyes glued to a beetle scuttling over the fallen leaves.

'Tough shit,' I said, perhaps a little too harshly because Mikey flinched and Rhodes arched a brow. 'Sorry, I didn't mean it like that.'

'You're not letting her get away again,' Mikey finished for me with a dismissive shrug. 'I get it.'

'You really loved her, huh?' Rhodes asked me, openly curious.

'Always have. Always will,' I answered honestly.

'How come you two never got together, then?'

'Because he's a pussy,' Mikey answered for me, shooting me a pointed look when I went to argue.

I sighed, accepting the criticism for what it was. 'He's right. I was too scared to tell her, and I lost her before I could pluck up the courage.'

'To your little brother?' he whistled. 'Damn, man. That's rough.'

'Yeah, well. I lived my life full of regret. I won't be doing that anymore.'

‘What do you hope to achieve by talking to her now?’ he asked, digging into the root of my emotional torment without trying.

‘I just...’ I hesitated, mulling over my thoughts to try to put them into the right words. ‘I need to know what happened. I need to fix it, you know? I can’t bring her back, but I can help her put the fucker behind bars, even if it’s the last thing I do.’

Mikey tensed at my comment, but quickly composed himself to hide his feelings on what we both knew was inevitable. His mask didn’t slide into place fast enough, though, and Rhodes caught it. He was remarkably observant.

‘Wait, hang on a minute. You’re not planning on joining her, are you?’

I didn’t answer, but I didn’t have to. It was written all over my face.

‘That’s messed up, man. And sickeningly romantic. I wish I’d had the opportunity to love someone at least half as much as you love her.’

We sat in silence for a beat, contemplating our life choices and what had brought us to this moment. It was heavy, incredibly depressing, but also enlightening. The rightness of my decision was becoming more apparent the more I let it settle, and I was confident I was making the right choice.

The moment was interrupted by the EMF going off, beeping loudly as it picked up on a ghostly presence joining us again. The lights were flickering wildly, the beeping more rapid than before to the point where it was almost a single, solid noise. Whoever was here they were practically on top of us.

‘Right,’ I said, clapping my hands on my knees before hauling myself to stand. ‘That’s my cue. Rhodes, do you see her?’

He shook his head, scanning the darkening woods as the sun was descending for the night. 'No. I don't see anything.'

I figured as much. I was almost certain this entity wasn't Kali. I didn't think she would mess with us like this.

'Hello?' I called out, stepping closer to the spirit box that was placed in a small clearing nearby. 'If you can hear me, let me know. You can talk through the spirit box right here, and it will pick up your voice so we can hear you.'

When I got no response after waiting for a few minutes, I tried again. 'Can you tell me your name?'

Nothing.

'Kali? Are you here?'

The spirit box lit up at her name, and excitement burst inside me, thinking it was her. But that excitement was quickly doused by the decidedly male voice that came through.

'She's... mine.'

'Who's yours?' I asked, dread starting to sink in. Was he laying claim to Kali? Why? What could he want from her?

The spirit box crackled again before the entity repeated his words. 'She's... mine.'

'Who?' I asked more insistently, the bad feeling growing until I felt like I was about to be sick. 'Who's yours? Kali?'

‘Yes...’

I exchanged a startled glance with the others, and it was Rhodes who asked the question I couldn’t seem to vocalise. ‘What do you want with her? Kali doesn’t belong to anyone.’

‘She’s... MINE!’

I jumped back when the spirit box was suddenly launched into the air by some unseen force, then Rhodes was forced to duck as it was thrown at him. It missed, thank fuck, but it was thrown so hard that it smashed to pieces when it collided with the tree behind him, leaving a significant dent where it hit.

Rhodes glanced between the tree, the obliterated device, and back to where the entity was presumably standing, eyes wide with both fear and exhilaration. ‘Holy shit...’

That shouldn’t have been possible. Not once in all my years of paranormal investigating had I come across a spirit that could manipulate tangible objects, but with such strength. I didn’t understand, and I was suddenly more sure than ever that whatever Kali had gotten herself into, it was dangerous even beyond the grave.

Was this entity the reason why she hadn’t shown up today? Was she hiding from him? I didn’t think I could wait much longer to join her if she was in trouble.

‘What do you want?’ I called out despite our only means of communication being destroyed. I didn’t expect an answer, but the chills that ran across my skin when I heard his voice whispering through the breeze had adrenaline coursing through my veins in an instant.

‘Leave.’

My jaw clenched, a protest sitting ready on my tongue, but I already knew that arguing with this thing would be futile, so I bit back the urge to argue. Instead, I tried a different tactic and asked a question I desperately needed the answer to.

‘Do you want to hurt her?’

‘LEAVE!’

Out of the corner of my eye, I swore I could see the shadows becoming denser, darker, that they emitted a chill that exceeded their typical temperature on a warm summer evening like tonight. I realised we were fighting against something much too powerful and beyond our scope of understanding, and it was no longer safe for us to stick around.

I raised my hands and backed up a couple of steps to show that I was giving in to his demands, our safety currently more important than the answers it clearly didn't want to give. ‘All right. Okay. We’re leaving.’

Mikey and Rhodes didn’t need any more prompting, both of them darting towards the house without looking back.

I wasn’t so quick to disappear, however. There was something that was keeping me rooted in place, staring at the shadows of the woods. I didn’t know what, but I could feel eyes on me from multiple directions. In possibly the stupidest move of my life, I turned my back on the angry entity to scan the woods in the other direction.

‘Kali?’ I called out hopefully.

The only response I received was a deep, primal growl that rattled my bones and had me finally shooting off back inside the house. It was an involuntary action, my fight or flight activated by the threat of the unknown entity that was far more powerful

than it should have been. It was a predator, I could tell that much, but to what degree? And was it a threat only to the living, or to the dead as well?

Before I closed the door shut behind me, I looked back out to where I'd felt that second pair of eyes, and just knew that it was the woman I had loved and lost.

'I'll see you soon,' I vowed, my voice quiet, but steady and strong. 'I promise.'

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Dakota

I was panicking. There was nothing I could do about it, either. My breaths were coming in sharp, short pants, and I was unable to suck in enough air to actually breathe. My chest was constricting, my lungs seizing on the inside, and a cold sweat had broken out all over, drenching me and sticking my clothes to my skin.

Fuck, this was too much. Too much to process, too much that I didn't understand...

The note fell from my hand, my fingers too weak to even hold it up when the words finally hit. They weren't even bad, but I had never felt so abandoned before in my entire life. Where was my husband when I needed him? When I was scared and confused, and in desperate need of a fucking hug? Oh, right. Gone.

Kota,

My head is a mess, and I need to clear it.

Gone fishing for a few days to process.

I love you, I just need some time.

My parents and Chance are there if you need anything.

I'll be back soon.

-Blake

He fucking left me.

I was pissed . Understanding and compassion could only go so far. I had given him everything I could, pushed aside my own wants and needs in favour of support him, but I needed him now more than ever and where the fuck was he? Fucking fishing.

I released a scream of frustration, pushing my fear and loneliness into it as well in an attempt to relieve myself of their weight. What was I supposed to do now, just sit back and wait for a ghost to keep me company? And not just any ghost, either. From what I'd gathered, my only choices were a potential murderer or my husband's dead wife.

Fuck!

My hands were in my hair before I could stop them, tugging and yanking painfully at the strands in an attempt to drag me out of this pit of emotional torment. It was the method I had used as a kid when my parents brought the bad men around. Bad men who were now in prison for a colourful array of crimes, such as assault and battery, rape, money laundering, drugs, and kidnapping. You know, just to name a few.

My mind took me back to when I hid in the bathroom, inside the cabinet beneath the sink. How I'd folded my small body to squeeze in the tiny space, my hands covering my ears and my eyes squeezed shut. How my breathing would pick up when I heard footsteps outside, or when one of them would come in to use the toilet. Sometimes they would stay, and I'd hear chopping sounds followed by snorts. I hadn't learned until much later what they were doing.

But that little cabinet had become my safe place. No one ever found me there, wedged between the bottles of cleaning supplies. Now, whenever I began to feel myself start to panic, I would crave a small, cramped space to hide inside. That had translated to hugs when I'd grown up and gone through countless therapists, but in

times like this, it wasn't enough.

Which was why I crawled beneath the cot and curled up into a ball, desperate to make myself as small and hidden as possible. My carefully curated mask of healthy coping mechanisms fell away, revealing the lost and broken girl I truly was inside.

My eyes were focused on the crumpled-up piece of paper lying on the floor where I'd dropped it as my breathing became too shallow, too strained, and I finally passed out from the lack of oxygen.

???

'Dakota? Sweetheart? Oh, dear. Dakota, honey? Can you hear me?'

Mallory's voice cut through the peaceful darkness of unconsciousness, her tone lighter and gentler than I had ever heard it before. For a moment, I wondered if I was making it up, like a dream or a hallucination, because Mallory Dodd was many things, but maternal wasn't one of them.

'What's wrong with her?' My father-in-law's voice was harsh and cutting, slicing through the softness Mallory was trying to exude. That was what made me realise that this was real and not a figment of my imagination. Mallory truly was trying to be kind right now.

How odd.

'Dakota, dear. Are you okay?' she asked again. 'Can you come out?'

'Why is she under there in the first place?' Calvin snapped. 'She's behaving like a child.'

‘If you’re not going to help, Cal, then get out. Something must have happened, and you’re not helping things by snapping at her like that.’

He huffed, but he made no noise. He wasn’t speaking, and he wasn’t walking away, which meant he was listening to his wife. Also odd.

My eyes cracked open as confusion took over, my body aching from being curled up on a cold, hard, lumpy surface for who knew how long, but I couldn’t remember how I got here. I stretched out my limbs to shake out the ache, only to find them blocked by something on top of me. When my head cleared enough to process what I was seeing, I realised I was under a cot. My cot, from my tent, which I shared with Blake.

Who wasn’t here.

My gaze darted to the note that was still on the floor, crumpled and dirty and stuck beneath Mallory’s shoe, and it all came rushing back.

Waking up without Blake. Kali. Chance, and his ghost hunting gear going off like crazy to prove the presence of an entity. Blake’s note.

Fucking hell...

‘Blake’s gone,’ was all I said when I met Mallory’s concerned, surprisingly soft eyes. I watched as they widened, shock and then panic replacing the worry for a beat before she locked those emotions down. When she extended her hand to me beneath the cot, I glanced between it and her face.

‘Come on out, sweetheart, and you can explain to me what’s happened.’

I didn’t think much about it when I placed my palm in hers and let her pull me out from beneath the cot. Her nose wrinkled when she saw me properly for the first time

since she'd found me, but she quickly smoothed her expression out again as she guided me to sit on the very cot she'd just pulled me out from.

'Now,' she said, taking a seat beside me and raising her hands to my hair. She smoothed it down, running her hands through the messy strands to untangle the knots. I was thankful for the short style, because there wasn't much that needed to be done to fix it. 'What happened?'

I released a shaky, breathy laugh that was more manic than anything, causing her brows to pull together in a frown. 'I don't think you'll believe me if I told you.'

She pursed her lips together, thinning them into a white line, clearly not liking my attempt at deflection, but her words shocked me. 'Try me.'

My head shook like I was physically denying what had occurred, what I'd discovered. My mind didn't want to acknowledge it as truth, but I knew what I saw. I wasn't crazy. It had happened, and Chance, fuck, even Rhodes could back me up.

When I looked into Mallory's eyes, I saw a determination there, a strength that I had never seen from her before, and I decided to take the risk by being honest. 'I don't know where to begin,' I admitted.

'From the start, sweetheart,' she prompted.

I released a heavy sigh, but started talking. I told her about Rhodes and the description he gave of the mystery girl on his property. I told her how Blake had taken the news and kept disappearing. I told her how I'd woken up this morning to find him still gone, then the cot moving on its own. How I saw Kali in the mirror and discovered she was a ghost, which led me to Chance at Rhodes' house and the events that happened there, before coming home to find the note, which I gestured to on the floor.

Her expression remained closed off as she listened, and she didn't even blink when Calvin scoffed and stalked from the room. When I motioned to the note, she bent down and picked it up, smoothing it out to read its contents.

Then, she folded it up neatly and tucked it into the shallow pocket in her cardigan. 'I think I need to speak with my son.'

I sniffed, suddenly realising that I was crying. When had that happened? 'Which one?' I asked her.

'Both, preferably, but since Blake isn't here, I shall start with my eldest.'

She stood, brushed off the lint from her skirt, from the blanket she'd been sitting on, and left the tent, leaving me on my own again. That seemed to be a common theme lately, and I was fucking done with it, so I leapt up to follow her, only to stop in my tracks at the piece of paper that floated through the flap of the tent, falling at my feet.

I stared at it for a beat before slowly bending down to pick it up. My fingers were trembling so hard that I couldn't grasp it properly in my first few attempts, but I eventually managed to get a hold of it. It was no longer folded, but the words written in my husband's familiar script were the same ones I had read earlier. The same ones that had driven me into a panic.

I breathed in deeply through my nose, shoving down the chill that tried to rise. It was just the wind. Mallory must have dropped it. Her pocket was pretty shallow, and her lightweight cardigan wasn't exactly sturdy enough to hold anything. Its pockets were merely for decoration, so it was no wonder that it hadn't stayed put.

I tossed it onto the table, turning my back on it as I moved to follow Mallory again, then changed my mind at the last minute to check my phone. I dug it out of the recesses of my handbag, clicking it on to check if I had received any messages from

Blake, but of course, there was nothing but a blank screen. The picture of us from our wedding day smiled up at me, almost tauntingly, especially beneath the time and date. It was morning. I had slept through the night. No wonder I was sore if I'd been curled up on the floor like that all night.

I moved to put the phone back in my bag, but a flash of white caught my eye.

In the mirror.

Like yesterday on repeat, I swivelled around to see who was there, despite already knowing I would see nothing. Trembling, I slowly turned my head to the mirror, and there she was. Kali was standing beside the table where I had tossed the note, a look of severe concentration on her face as she scratched against it with a single fingernail.

I could hear it, too.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

My breaths started to hitch again, but I forced myself to breathe deeply, refusing to let the fear take hold. It was just Kali. She may have been a ghost, but she was the woman my husband had loved once upon a time, and I feared still did. She was the woman Chance had loved for even longer, even if he refused to admit it, who he had assured me meant me no harm.

But wouldn't I want to harm me, if I were in her position? This new woman that had taken her place and stolen her man. Or would she be happy that he had moved on, that he had found love again and was living his life?

I couldn't say, because despite all the stories I'd heard about her, I didn't actually know her.

When the scratching stopped, I watched her reflection pull back, fatigue clear in the droop of her shoulders and dark bruising beneath her icy blue eyes. Eyes that met mine in the mirror. She pointed a weak finger at the note, then jabbed her finger at it more insistently when I didn't immediately move. I gulped down my apprehension at moving closer to where I knew she was, but turned to face the seemingly empty space. The knowledge that she was there and that I couldn't see her was disturbing, but I chose to trust Chance's assurances and stepped cautiously up to the table and looked down.

She had scratched out Blake's signature at the bottom of the page, a jagged hole now in its place. What the... Why?

'Are you... Do you hate me?' I asked her, my insecurities pushing to the forefront with enough force to knock the breath from my lungs.

I chanced a glance at the mirror to see her reaction, but it was not what I expected. She was looking right at me, close enough that I could feel a chill on my arm raise goosebumps over my flesh, but her expression wasn't angry. It was kind. Sad. She shook her head slowly, reaching out a hand as if to touch me, but pausing before it could make contact.

Then she pointed at the note again.

I didn't understand. 'Are you mad at Blake?'

Her eyes flashed, and she dipped her chin to acknowledge my question.

Oh... Oh.

'Don't be mad at him,' I rushed to his defence. 'Please don't hate him. He still loves you. I'm not trying to erase what you had, I swear.'

Her shoulders slumped as if my response wasn't the one she had hoped for, a deep sadness penetrating the room until I felt like I was going to cry on her behalf. Fuck. This was not what I wanted. I didn't want to upset her or think she was replaced. That wasn't the case at all.

But I didn't get the chance to try to talk about it further. My phone rang inside my purse, as my head snapped around at the sound. I jumped, startled, then decided to ignore it to focus back on Kali. But she was gone. There was no more cold spot. The note sat motionless on the table.

I glared at it, then turned from it with an aggravated huff. The phone was still ringing, and hope lit up inside me like a wildfire at the prospect of talking to Blake, but the number wasn't his. It wasn't one I recognised, either.

Tentatively, I answered, bringing it up to my ear. 'Hello?'

'Hello,' a female voice responded on the other end. 'I'm looking for a Mrs. Dakota Dodd?'

'Speaking,' I confirmed, a bad feeling beginning to swirl in my stomach.

'Mrs. Dodd, my name is Detective Benson. I'm calling from the Klamath County Police Department. I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about a case I'm working on?'

I blinked, stunned. 'Uh... sure. What is this about?'

'It's not something I feel comfortable speaking about over the phone. Would it be possible to set up a meeting to talk in person?'

'Um, yeah, that shouldn't be a problem. Is everything okay?'

‘I’m hoping you can give me an answer to that question, Mrs. Dodd. Would you be able to come into the station?’

‘I... Yes, I can come in. Am I in trouble for something?’

‘No, no, it’s nothing like that. You haven’t done anything wrong. We would just like to ask you a few questions about an individual that has come up in our investigation.’

‘Can I ask who?’

‘Again, I’m sorry, but I would prefer to speak about this in person.’

‘Right. Okay. Sure.’

‘Perfect. Can I schedule you in for tomorrow? Say, around one o’clock?’

I nodded, then realised she couldn’t see me, so I verbalised my agreement.

‘Great. I’ll see you then, Mrs. Dodd. Be safe.’

The dial tone rang out when she hung up, and I stared dumbly down at the screen. Be safe? Was that the normal way the police down here said goodbye? I was probably overthinking it. I tended to overanalyse every small interaction after a panic attack, and my anxiety was already through the roof.

My eyes snagged on the note again, and I studied Blake’s scratched-out name, contemplating what had happened and coming up short. Maybe Chance would have some insight into what this all meant.

Chance

My mother's face was purple by the time she was done screaming at me. Oh, wait, she wasn't done. She was still going.

'How dare you bring your hocus pocus nonsense into their relationship? And how dare you bring Kali into it, too? Why can't you just leave them be? Hasn't your brother been through enough? Kali is gone, and she's not coming back. Don't you sully her name any further, and stay away from Dakota. She deserves far more than the likes of you shoving Kali in her face, and in such a horrific manner. I don't even want to see your face again, Chance. You are a disgrace, and are no longer a part of this family.'

Wow.

I was speechless. Some part of me withered and died at finally being cut off, but it was so small now that I didn't care. I simply pushed it to the side and glared down at the woman who had birthed me yet was treating me like shit on her shoe.

'Fine,' I agreed. It would make my loss hurt less. If it would even hurt her at all, which I doubted. She hadn't loved me in a long time, and apparently, she was done pretending now, too.

Her face bloated with building anger as she tried her best to hold it in. Couldn't even let her own son see her lose her cool, but then again, I wasn't her son anymore, was I? I hadn't been for a long time.

It seemed that both of us had expected this outcome sooner or later, and now that it was done, there was no reason for her to stay. She blew out a long breath, sniffed haughtily in a way that reminded me of Florence and had me physically recoiling in disgust, and stormed off down the driveway. Calvin had joined her for the short walk, but had stayed behind to loiter at the edge of the driveway, letting his wife do what he'd been begging her to do for years. He tossed a smug little grin over his shoulder, then followed her before she could disappear around the tree.

Smarmy bastard. Good fucking riddance.

'Sorry to say this, man, but your mom is a bitch,' Rhodes said as he came up behind me, peering over my shoulder at their retreating backs.

I sighed. 'I know. And she's not my mother anymore.'

'Good,' he grunted, then clapped me on the shoulder. 'You deserve better.'

I hummed my agreement, no words needed as I closed the door and headed back inside the house. Mikey was at the kitchen table, multiple laptops spread out as he monitored the readings still coming in from the devices we left outside. So far, we had surmised that they were picking up on multiple energy readings, as in a shit load of ghosts wondering the neighbouring property. It wasn't a good sign, and we were worried we had a serial killer on our hands. One that had gotten Kali.

I tried not to think too much about it, the overwhelming emotions it brought on distracting me from my purpose. I had one thing left to do, and it was to figure out who it was that killed her and hand it over to the police. They wouldn't accept our readings in court, but they would accept an anonymous tip. It would help if we had a little more evidence to back up our claims, because 'there's lots of ghosts' would just get us dismissed and laughed out of town. It was something we were used to, but this was too important to fuck up because of sceptics who wouldn't take us seriously.

Ashe and Gloria had joined us earlier this morning, but they were still off in their own world and practically ignored us men while they continued whatever argument that had them so enraptured. I'd caught snippets of it, but nothing I hadn't already heard before. Gloria was more adamant than ever that we all leave, claiming the dangers of this case weren't worth it. Ashe was more adamant than ever that we stay now that Kali was involved.

There was more to it, but I didn't try to eavesdrop. This was between them, and I knew from past experiences that if I tried to get involved, I'd just make things worse. So, Rhodes and I joined Mikey at the table to let the married couple bicker in privacy.

Mikey didn't even glance up when we joined him, his eyes glued to the screens and the information on them.

'Anything new?' I asked as I settled into the seat to his right, Rhodes taking the seat opposite us.

'Not much. There have been a few fluctuations, particularly with the thermometer readings, but other than that, it's been a steady influx of data.'

I chewed on my bottom lip as I read the readings for myself, noting the influxes he was referring to. They were bigger than I expected. Much bigger. The temperature outside was around eighty degrees. The temperature around the spirits dipped down to a range of around sixty to seventy degrees. These were dipping close to freezing temperatures, and my concern over the power this particular entity wielded was growing at an increasingly rapid rate.

'That's not just a few fluctuations,' I pointed out. 'And they're coming from two different places.'

'What?' Mikey asked, immediately scanning the data for what I had seen. His eyes

widened comically when he finally caught it. 'Holy shit. How did I miss that?'

'What did you find?' Rhodes asked, leaning forward excitedly.

'There's two of them,' I informed him breathlessly. This was... I didn't know if it was a good groundbreaking discovery or if we were in for a whole world of hurt.

'Two? I thought you said there were dozens?' Rhodes asked, his face scrunching in confusion.

'Dozens of spirits, yes, but the strong entity that we encountered last night seems to have a friend,' Mikey elaborated.

'Is it a friend, though?' I mused out loud. 'They rarely show up in the same place at the same time. It looks like one is chasing the other.'

'Holy shit. No way. That's epic.'

'It's something,' I acknowledged.

Another knock banged on the front door, and we all jumped. We had been so engrossed in the data and what it could mean that we had stopped paying attention to our surroundings.

Rhodes groaned and leaned back in his chair, tilting it back to balance on its rear legs like a petulant child. 'That had better not be round two with Mommy Dearest.'

I started to rise, but sat back down when I heard Ashe move by instead, her focus still on Gloria as they continued to bicker back and forth.

'Jesus, babe. You need to chill out. I'm just answering the damn door,' she threw

back before we heard the door open. Then her confused, 'Dakota?'

'Hey, um... I need to speak with Chance.'

'In here!' I called out, already scooting my chair back again to get up. I greeted her in the doorway, Ashe scooting past to get back to her argument with her wife.

'What's up, Dakota?'

'I saw her again.'

My eyebrows shot up to hide beneath my hairline. 'You did?' She nodded, her lips pursed in a grim line. 'Alright, come on in and tell me everything.'

Mikey looked up when I led her through to the kitchen, his face flushing a bright red shade as soon as he clocked that there was a woman nearby. One that wasn't gay, even if she was married to my brother. He'd reacted the same way to Kali once upon a time, and I suddenly wondered if that would still be the case, even though she was dead.

'Sit,' I ordered, pulling out the chair I'd just vacated and ignoring the death glare Mikey sent my way for putting her so close to him.

'You look a bit pale,' Rhodes observed, also standing. 'Are you all right? Do you want some water, or something?'

'Water would be great, please. If it's not too much trouble,' she said, giving him a small smile.

He scoffed. 'How is getting a glass of water trouble?' he muttered under his breath in disbelief. I felt a similar way about socialite manners. Most of them were thinly

veiled jabs that exuded entitlement, but Dakota had never meant them in that way.

He passed her the glass, and she gave him a grateful smile, then proceeded to chug most of it down in the most unladylike manner, a trickle of liquid escaping from the sides to dribble down her chin. I grinned. She wouldn't dare do something like that in front of my mother, and I was pleased she was letting her guard down around me.

'Okay,' she said, like she was gearing up to reveal something earth-shattering. 'When I got back yesterday, Blake had left me a note. He's struggling with the idea of Kali being alive and close by, but I haven't had the chance to tell him otherwise just yet. He said he's gone fishing to clear his head... but that's irrelevant,' she waved off her last comment.

'Go on,' I urged when she didn't immediately continue.

She took a deep, shuddering breath, clearly spooked, and I was more curious than ever what had gone down between her and Kali.

'Anyway, Mallory came to check on me and I showed her the note-'

'We know,' Rhodes deadpanned, earning a confused look from Dakota. 'She just left. Tore Chance here a new one and basically disowned him.'

'No basically about it,' I corrected with a shrug.

'Wait, what? What the fuck?' she exclaimed, offending on my behalf. It was nice of her, but unnecessary.

'It's whatever. She told me what you told her, and she was mad at me. Nothing new,' I waved this side conversation off, ready to get back to what really mattered. Kali.

‘That’s... I’m sorry, Chance. I didn’t mean for that to happen,’ she apologised.

‘She didn’t say anything about Kali showing up today, so I’m assuming that happened after she left?’ I blatantly redirected, refusing to talk about something as unimportant as my mother.

‘Oh, um. Yes. She had folded the note and put it in her cardigan pocket. When she left, it sort of just, uh, flew back inside and landed at my feet. At first, I thought it was just the wind, but when I put it on the table, I saw Kali standing there in the mirror again. She scratched out Blake’s signature.’

I froze. Why would she do that?

‘Do you have the note?’ I asked, careful to keep my tone even.

She nodded, then dug around in her own pocket before producing a folded-up piece of paper and handing it over to me.

Sure enough, it was a note written in Blake’s handwriting, a jagged hole replacing where he had signed his name. I read through it a few times, just to be sure I was reading it right. It didn’t make any sense. He had never run off like this before. Sure, he was known for his fishing trips after a big case, but he didn’t just abandon people while on vacation. This wasn’t like him, and something wasn’t adding up.

‘He just left?’ I asked her.

‘He took the car, too.’

I reared back, like my shock was a physical slap to the face. ‘What the fuck?’

Her lip quivered as she looked down, avoiding our eyes. ‘I know,’ she whispered.

‘This isn’t... I don’t... Fuck, Dakota, I don’t know what to say. He’s never...’

‘I know. This isn’t like him. And I got a phone call from the police right after Kali scratched his name out. They said they wanted to ask me some questions, but they didn’t say what it was about, just that it was something to do with a case they were working on. I’m supposed to go down to the station tomorrow.’

‘Hang on... Wait... Stop.’ I held up my hand as if I could ward off what she was saying, and the thoughts that were now swirling around in my head, but she kept going as if I hadn’t spoken, too lost in the memory of what had happened to hear me.

‘I think she’s mad that he remarried. She looked so fucking sad. I don’t know what to do. I don’t want her to hate me, but Blake has every right to move on, you know? But now I’m afraid he hasn’t let her go. Why would he marry me if he was still struggling with losing her?’

I heard what she said, but it didn’t sit right. Kali would have wanted him to move on, to find love and keep living his life. She wouldn’t have been upset that he’d done just that. In fact, she probably would have loved Dakota.

I’m afraid he hasn’t let her go...

The words echoed around inside my skull, right alongside all the new information. All the ghosts. Kali showing up. Blake disappearing. The police...

No. Oh, no. Oh fuck, please... No...

‘Are you okay, man?’ Rhodes asked, alarmed. ‘You look like you’re gonna be...’

I didn’t let him finish his sentence before I rushed from the room, straight to the bathroom, where I bent my head over the toilet and emptied the contents of my

stomach into the bowl.

When I concluded that I needed to have a little chat with my brother, my stomach lurched again.

When I realised I knew exactly where to look for him, the force of my heaves were so strong that I almost passed out.

It couldn't be true. It just couldn't. It didn't make any sense. I had to be wrong, there was no other option.

So why did it did the pieces slot so perfectly into place?

'Shit, Chance. Are you okay?' Ashe asked from the doorway. With my face pressed against the toilet seat, I turned my head to look at the small gathering just inside the door. All five of them were staring at me like I'd lost my mind, but it was Mikey's expression that really cinched it for me.

I wasn't the only one to come to the conclusion that I had.

Fuck.

'All right, everybody out,' Rhodes ordered with a clap of his hands that made me wince. The sound drilled through my skull to hit every part of my brain that was suffering from what couldn't be true, yet logic said otherwise.

Gloria obeyed, dragging a reluctant Ashe behind her, leaving Rhodes, Mikey, and Dakota behind.

I wiped my mouth and sat back, leaning my head against the wall as they studied me, but it couldn't be helped. I need confirmation. I needed the truth.

‘Dakota, go back to the campsite.’

‘But-‘

‘No, Dakota. Go back and wait there.’

Rhodes, seeing her protest brewing, wrapped his arm around her shoulders and gently manoeuvred her away, leaving just me and Mikey left. We listened as Rhodes convinced Dakota to leave, promising her he’d tell her if something happened, and then the door snicked shut behind her. I heard her footsteps walking away on the gravel of the driveway, pausing for a moment like she was debating the action, then continuing, and I breathed a sigh of relief that she wouldn’t be around for this.

My stomach revolted at the taste of bile in my mouth, and when Rhodes came back in, I asked if he had a spare toothbrush I could use. He ran upstairs and came back with an unopened toothbrush, some toothpaste, and a bottle of mouthwash, each of which I took gratefully.

Both men kept me company as I rinsed out the bad taste from my mouth, but I stayed in the bathroom in case the conversation we were about to have made me sick again.

I had a feeling it would.

Mikey surprised me by bringing it up first. ‘It can’t be him, can it?’

‘Him? Him who?’ Rhodes asked, his gaze darting between us as his brow twisted in confusion.

‘I fucking hope not.’

Looking a little green himself, Mikey nodded, grim understanding darkening his

entire aura. 'What are you going to do?'

'I need to know,' I admitted.

'Need to know what? What have you two figured out?' Rhodes pushed for his own answers, and I realised it was probably a good idea to let him know. If I was right... fuck, I didn't want to think it, but if I was, then I might not be returning. Not tonight. Not ever.

Mikey's breath hitched before a sob tore loose, and he was suddenly wrapping his long, lanky arms around my much taller and thicker frame. Tears soaked through my shirt in seconds, and I returned the hug with just as much fervour.

'Shit, guys. You're acting like this is a last goodbye,' Rhodes commented, and I watched as realisation hit and his eyes widened in shock. 'Oh...'

'I'm so fucking sorry, Chance. I'm so sorry. You both deserved better,' Mikey whimpered into my shoulder. 'None of this should have happened. If it is him,' he pulled back to look me in the eyes, the depth of this betrayal echoing between us, 'make him pay.'

'Make who pay? What the fuck is going on?' Rhodes demanded, his voice rising in pitch as his anxiety and frustration bled through.

I didn't answer. One shared look with Mikey told me he wouldn't force me to say it out loud. He would handle it because I was very likely about to confront the man who murdered the love of my life.

My brother.

Chance

I snuck out the back door so Ashe and Gloria wouldn't see me leave with one last final glance back at my friends, both old and new, as I potentially walked right into my grave.

The shadows pooled in dark puddles when I entered the woods, pulsing with a freezing cold energy when I was forced to brush by them. And I meant it when I said forced. They followed me, pushing me in one particular direction. Or herding me, more like. I couldn't tell if they were trying to push me towards the neighbouring property or away, but I did my best to ignore them and the shivering they caused.

It didn't take long to make it to the other side of the woods, though I kept just inside the treeline to get a lay of the land before I went ahead and trespassed. It wouldn't be worth it if it wasn't Blake, because then I'd have lost my chance to find justice for Kali's death.

The property was sprawling, with chunks of the lawn either missing or showing signs of new growth. Graves, perhaps? Fuck, was Kali buried back here somewhere? The thought made me physically ill, and I had to swallow down the bile as it rose up my throat. I couldn't throw up here. The sounds of my retching would give me away before I could get the information I needed.

A small log cabin was perched in the centre. It looked cosy, like a romantic getaway spot or something. It was utterly innocent in its looks, with no signs of anything evil happening within its walls. In fact, the entire property was beautiful. The front lawn, or at least what I could see of it from my vantage point, was well manicured and

functional, but there were no flowers or plants to give it a lived-in feel. It was plain and functional.

Behind the cabin, the trees were sparse at the edge of the land, leading towards a winding section of the Little Deschutes River as it ran through the property. The trickle of water was a deceptively soothing backdrop to what I feared was an incredibly macabre site. But nature didn't care about death or grief. It didn't care how gruesome the manner in which a person was killed. It just absorbed the death into itself and continued on like nothing had happened.

When there was no sign of life, no movement, for so long that I began to worry that no one was home. The only thing that kept me in place was the black SUV sitting out front. I suspected someone was inside, and I just couldn't see them.

But any hope I had that my brother wasn't responsible for his own wife's death, that all signs didn't point to him being a serial killer, was doused when he walked out of the cabin toward the SUV. Worse was when he opened the trunk. I couldn't see from here, but when he closed the door and walked back into view, something large and long and very human-shaped was slung over his shoulder.

Jesus fuck. No. No, no, no. I couldn't believe it. I didn't want to believe it. But the evidence was right there in front of my eyes. Blake wasn't fishing like his note had claimed. He was bringing a victim into a cabin he owned in secret.

I felt faint.

Oh, Kali...

Deep breaths, in through my nose and slowly out through my mouth, were the only thing that kept me from completely falling apart. My grief over losing Kali merged with the lies and betrayal of my own fucking brother being something so sick, so evil,

and the anger rose, quick and sharp and burning . It seared through me like a wildfire, singing me from the inside out. I felt like smoke was seeping through my nose as my breath turned into heavy heaves.

I acted without thinking, all rationality gone as my emotions took over.

‘Blake!’ I bellowed, stepping out from the trees. My hands were shaking in tight fists at my sides as I stalked to where he was frozen still, like a deer caught in headlights.

‘Chance? What...?’

‘You killed her. You killed Kali, you sick bastard. How could you?’

‘What the fuck...?’

‘How many?’

‘Chance, stop.’

‘No! How many people have you killed, Blake? Are they all buried here?’

‘Shut up!’ he bellowed, shocking me into silence not with his words, but with the malignant sneer on his face. It was so unlike him, it just added to the surreality of the moment. Dumping the woman that was over his shoulder to the floor, he rounded on me, violence burning in his eyes in a way I had never seen on anyone before, living or dead.

‘You fucking nosy bastard. You couldn’t leave well enough alone, could you? You just had to dig, and dig, and fucking dig . You’re just like her, a self-righteous pig!’

I took a step back involuntarily, fear unlike anything I had ever known momentarily

replacing my fury, but all it took was one flicker of my eyes to the motionless form, bound in ropes and zip-ties with blood seeping from the side of her head, and suddenly it wasn't some random woman I had never met. Her blonde hair lightened a few shades until it was almost white. Her nose narrowed and tilted up at the end in that way that had almost made me want to kiss it. Her eyes opened to reveal icy blue orbs that stared at me with such betrayal, like I had let him do this to her.

It wasn't a stranger on the floor, but Kali.

And the rage came back tenfold.

With a roar of pure despair, I launched myself at the man I no longer recognised, hands raised to wrap around his throat, but he dodged at the last second. I stumbled past, and he took the opportunity to kick out my knees, so I crumbled to the floor in a heap beside his latest victim. The impact knocked the rest of my anger from me, and I stayed where I was, no longer having the energy to fight my own brother, murderer or not. Tears sprang to my eyes, unbidden and unwelcome, but persistent, nonetheless.

But I was closer to the woman now, and the new perspective showed me something I hadn't noticed before. Something I just knew would be his downfall. A police badge poked out from the top of her shirt, the bronze identifier on a cord around her neck as it glinted in the high noon sun.

He'd kidnapped a fucking cop.

As he loomed menacingly over me, I saw him in a completely new light. No, that was the wrong term. There was only darkness as he glared down at me, and I couldn't help but wonder how I'd never seen it before. How much of it was a lie? What the brother I had loved all these years ever even existed, or was it just a carefully curated mask to hide the monster beneath?

Memories of our childhood flashed through my mind, of the kind young boy who had followed me around, copying everything I did because he'd looked up to me. Of the sweet adolescent that had charmed the girl I loved right out from under me, and I hadn't even been mad about it because he was such a genuinely kind guy. Of the successful surgeon so eager to save lives.

'Was any of it fucking real?' I asked out loud, though I wasn't sure if it was just to speak it into existence or to actually seek an answer.

'You're so fucking pathetic, Chance. You always have been. Your emotions have always gotten the best of you. But now you know too much. How?'

I smirked at his question, ready for his reaction. He had never truly believed in the paranormal. His interest was in the morbid side of things, like the history of how people died. Fuck, I should have known. I should have seen it. How hadn't I?

'Kali.'

'Kali's dead. I killed her, Chance. She's buried right over there,' he pointed, mocking me with his words. I inhaled sharply at the admission, my emotions warring inside me so painfully that my brain shut it all down to escape the torment.

'I know she's dead,' I said numbly, but then a trickle of smugness pushed through, and I laughed. It was weak, sad, and utterly painful, but it irked him further, so I took it as a win. 'She's been sending messages. Little things here and there. The note you wrote to Dakota? She scratched out your name right in front of her.'

His nostrils flared as he processed what I was saying, a wildness in his eyes that wasn't there before. No matter how hard he tried to hide it, he was unravelling, wasn't he?

‘How much does she know?’

I hesitated, suddenly realising how much I’d fucked up. He was going to hurt her, too, I could see it in his eyes. I’d just endangered everyone I was close to.

Fuck.

But she didn’t know anything, did she? Maybe I could salvage this and save her. ‘She doesn’t know anything, Blake. She thinks Kali’s upset because you remarried.’

‘She’s seen her?’

I kept silent. He didn’t deserve an explanation. He deserved to burn in hell for all eternity for what he’d done.

‘Fine. Keep your silence. It won’t matter, anyway.’

The last thing I saw before he brought his boot down on my face was the crazed look in his eyes that gleamed with violent delight.

???

‘Wakey, wakey, big brother,’ a familiar yet unfamiliar voice dragged me from my sleep, and I roused, confusion making my head swim.

Or perhaps that was the headache pounding through my skull. Jesus, how much had I had to drink last night?

An odd, sharp sensation dragged across my skin, and I groaned as I tried to move away, but I couldn’t move. I tried to lift my hand up to swat at whatever it was, but it was like I was bound or something as my movement was blocked. Something cool

and hard tugged on my wrist, scraping over it uncomfortably.

‘That’s it, Chance. Wake the fuck up.’

Blake? It sounded like him, but not at the same time. Like someone had possessed him and was speaking with his voice, but it was so clearly not my brother.

My eyes cracked open, but they didn’t open very far. It was enough to get a blurry vision of my little brother standing before me, a knife glinting in his hand.

A knife...?

I realised then that my eyes wouldn’t open because they were swollen shut, and with a great effort, I was able to shift my head down to look at my wrists. They were cuffed and connected to a chain that was drilled into the wall.

The memories slammed into me like I was being buried beneath a rockslide. Boulder upon boulder of crushing weight dragged me down until I felt like I was going to sink right through to the centre of the earth to burn in the fiery pits of hell.

Blake killed Kali.

And not just her.

Blonde hair and a police badge flashed through my mind, reminding me of what I’d stumbled upon in my search for the truth. Was the cop here, too? Was she even still alive?

‘Eyes on me, big brother,’ Blake ordered, and a feminine whimper drifted over to me from the other side of the room. I guessed that answered on question. The cop was alive, but not for much longer. Would she be forced to watch me die before he killed

her, too? Or the other way around?

I couldn't decide which option I hated more.

I obeyed him, not because he held any sort of power over me, I had already accepted I was going to die, but because I didn't want him to turn his ire on the woman if I didn't give him what he wanted.

There wasn't anything he could take from me anymore. I had said my goodbyes, though I would regret not giving Ashe one more hug. I couldn't have let her in on my plans, however, or else she would have done everything in her power to stop me, and I didn't want that. It would have hurt more in the long run because it wouldn't have changed anything. At least this way, she couldn't blame herself for my actions.

'Ah, there he is. Welcome back, big brother. You're in for quite the show,' he grinned, but there was no humour in it. Only malice.

'Just get it over with,' I told him, turning my head so I wouldn't have to look at him.

'What's this? Giving up already? You're more pathetic than I thought.'

'I was already planning on dying, Blake. It makes no difference to me if it's by my hand or yours,' I admitted, and he was silent for so long that I wondered if he was even still there. My head lolled when I rolled it back to face him to check, but there he was, glaring at me with a... was he pouting?

'Such a pity. It's no fun when they don't fight back. The least you could do is pretend to be scared.'

I tried to shrug my shoulders, but I didn't think I was very successful, so I settled for staring at him with a deadpan expression.

He pursed his lips in annoyance, and heaved a sigh like I was the most frustratingly disappointing thing he had ever come across. Good. I wasn't going to make my death fun for the sick fuck.

'Why do you want to die so bad, anyway, Chance? Got nothing left to live for or something?' he taunted with a slimy little smirk, but he wasn't going to get a rise out of me.

'Precisely.'

My easy agreement seemed to throw him a little, but he tried again. 'It was easy, you know. Taking her from you. I could see the way you looked at each other, and I just knew, you know? She was the one. I got to hurt you and keep her for myself, and then I got to watch you pine for her like the fucking lovesick idiot you are. It was so much fun, flaunting it in front of you. I actually missed her after she was gone. I couldn't play anymore.'

Nope. Don't react, Chance. Don't give him what he wants.

'Ugh, why are you so boring? I should have fucking guessed you'd be no fun,' he whined, and then brought the knife down into my stomach in a single swing. I didn't feel the pain at first, but then the blood gurgled from my lips, and I struggled to breathe, and then it hurt. It started off slow, like a pinprick on my skin, but then it spread, the sting of rendered flesh mixing with the throbbing ache of a deep wound, and I wanted to cry. Not because I'd been stabbed, but because it wasn't a killing blow.

He was going to drag this out, wasn't he?

'The last girl was much more fun,' he kept talking, his tone conversational like he hadn't just started gutting me. And I quickly realised that was exactly what he was

doing. The knife carved the hole even wider, opening up my body for him to do with as he pleased. His eyes lit up with excitement when he examined my insides, like my organs were a toy for him to play with.

‘She screamed and she fought. It was much more exciting than this. I wonder if I can make you scream as loud as her.’

His hand replaced the knife, wriggled around inside my abdomen, and squeezed on something that I could only guess were my intestines.

I released a weak whimper, more than ready for this to end, and all it did was make him scowl and pout even harder. He removed his hand, examined the bloody mess, then licked a line through it. I heard a gagging sound from the cop I’d forgotten was there, and felt sorry for her. She had to watch before she had to endure this torture herself. It must have been torture in and of itself.

But I couldn’t let myself care about her. There was nothing I could do. No one was coming to save us, and I didn’t want to be saved.

‘Just... do... it,’ I wheezed.

He huffed like I was annoying him, and I supposed it was. But when he brought the knife to my throat and slid it through my neck, I smiled. I didn’t feel the pain. It was like my mind was guarding me from it in my last moments, and I was happy with this result.

Not my brother murdering me, that part sucked, but the release of the burdens this life had held. I had suffered for far too long, and I was finally going to see the woman I loved again.

I’m coming, Kali. I’ll see you soon.

To be continued...

Nova Academy

Prologue

T

The lack of communication devices on the subjects was making things more difficult, but I managed to connect to the electrical grid to communicate that way instead. My job was easy enough: flash the lights in the direction they needed to run and unlock the doors that stood in their way. All from a distance, of course. I couldn't have them discovering my identity when I needed to keep my true allegiances under wraps.

'They need to go left,' a familiar male voice spoke softly yet urgently from beside me. 'There are more guards coming up ahead, and they're turning right.'

I relayed that information with a flash of a light down the left corridor. They followed.

'They need to hurry,' the only female in the room commented, her voice soothing just like it always was even when tinged with anxiety. 'The guards are changing trajectory and heading for the exit. If they want to make it, they'll need to pick up the pace.'

We watched through the security cameras as their speed remained steadily the same. Corridor after corridor. Up and down multiple flights of stairs. I guided them the best I could around the dangers. But it wasn't enough.

‘They’re not going to make it,’ someone else said over my shoulder.

Unfortunately, they were right. Just as the two women began to run down the hallway that led to the outside world, the guards converged around them from every direction.

They fought. Oh, they fought valiantly. Their abilities were beyond comprehension. Their fists caved in skulls like they were made of wet clay. Their speed was phenomenal, so much so that I struggled to keep track of their movements as they took out each and every obstacle that tried to prevent their escape. And their synchronicity as they moved together, back-to-back, predicting the movements as if they were a single entity.

But then the scientists came. In a flurry of white coats, they stuck to the edges of the fight, well out of the way, but they hadn’t arrived without weapons.

They didn’t want them dead, which was the only solace I could find. But when they aimed a stun gun at the two women, my stomach dropped.

No...

They shot, and the brunette dodged, but the blonde dropped to her knees as she fought the convulsions. The brunette attempted to pick up the slack, but there were just too many to fight off while dodging the scientist’s long-range attacks.

Eventually, they shot the blonde with a tranquiliser dart, and she fell to the ground. I could hear the shouting through the speakers.

‘A, you have to go!’

The brunette kept fighting. ‘No, L! I’m not leaving you!’

‘You have to! I’ll be fine. They won’t kill me. But I’m not making it out of here

today,' she continued to shout at her friend while her body was being restrained by a couple of guards that had managed to break through the brunette's defences.

'No...'

'Run, A! Go now! Please!'

When the guards' focus was directed more towards the blonde than her, the brunette hesitated, and I swore, even with the distance between us, I could feel her devastation.

'Please,' the blonde croaked through a small gap in the mass of bodies converging on top of her. 'I'm not going to make it, but you can! Be free. For the both of us.'

'I'll come back for you,' said the brunette as they began to cart her blonde friend back inside. She dodged a few more long-range attacks as she ducked out the door and disappeared into the night, leaving nothing but the echo of her heartbreak behind.

Nobody moved. Nobody spoke. The room was completely and utterly still as we watched our efforts simultaneously get thwarted and find success. Only one of them had managed to escape, but it was one more we had managed to save.

I grabbed a piece of paper and a pen and started scribbling, knowing what I needed to do.

'You're staying, then?' the woman asked, running her fingers over the spikes on my head with a maternal tenderness.

'She'll be okay. She knows what to do. I'm needed here more,' was all I said.

I knew she would struggle out in the real world. She had grown up in a state of survival. She'd been confined and hidden away from anything but The Program. She

would have to adjust, but we'd done our best to prepare her. I could only hope it had been enough.

The plan had been for me to follow them, to help them find their way in a world they had never before been awarded the opportunity to experience, but I couldn't do that. I knew how much L meant to A. Leaving her behind would have been the most difficult, guilt-inducing personal crime she had ever committed. L was her entire world, and we all knew she would be back eventually. We didn't have much time if we wanted to ensure she remained free.

In the meantime, she would be fine. She was strong enough to figure it out, and I had spent the better part of the past few solars training her for this very moment.

If there was anything A knew how to do, it was survive.

The group let me go under the guise of joining the other guards to search for the escaped subject. It went a long way to show that the Tornu guards were still involved, still doing our jobs, still on their side to see me hunting alongside them despite our notable absence during the escape.

Close to the rendezvous point, I broke off from the others momentarily to place the letter down, keeping the mask over my face. If A were here and she saw me, she would eventually learn more than I ever wanted her to. More than I wanted anyone to. No one could know I existed. Not yet.

I stared glumly at the letter I'd left behind, knowing it wasn't the only thing I was abandoning out here. But it was the best I could do for her for now. She had never needed me the way I'd wanted her to, and it was time to let her go.