



Hallowed Tree (The Secrets of Willowhope #3)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Hello. Nice to meet you. I'm Buck, and I haunt the manor in the small town of Willowhope.

My mentor, Harry, takes this afterlife stuff way more seriously than I do, but as his protégé, I'm learning all I can from the distinguished, grumpy older man. Maybe along the way, I can get him to chill out—take off his suit vest, loosen his tie, and live a little. Ha! I said live. Yeah, we're both dead.

The live folks around here usually get to have all the fun adventures because Harry's super-protective of me and won't let me get caught up in any paranormal activities. Which...I mentioned we're ghosts, right?

This time, he can't stop me. The old oak tree in the yard is like, haunted or something, but the mystics or witches or whatever the heck they are can't handle this one! It's gonna be up to me and Harry to go where spirits shouldn't tread. Ohhhh, spooky. How freaking cool is that?

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Prologue

Buck

“Oh, you like me.”

Harry carried the cups from the table to the sink. “What are you talking about? It’s not you specifically. I don’t think any spirits should be around while they deal with that entity in the pond.”

Grinning, I sidled up next to him where he was washing the dishes. “Come on, Harry. Admit it. I’m your favorite.”

Harry sniffed. “You wish. And please address me by my proper name. It’s Mr. Harry. I don’t know how you could possibly forget.”

I bit back a chuckle. He was so much fun to rile up. When I told the other ghosts who live out at Beckoning Pond at the back end of the property line that I wanted to vacation inside the manor, they all thought I’d lost my mind. They didn’t believe for a second that the living would appreciate me checking in to the B&B. How wrong they were. The owner, Chance, and his boyfriend, Jetty, didn’t seem to mind my presence at all. Neither did their friends or family.

The only person who acted put out by me coming into the manor was Harry, but I wasn’t buying it for a minute. It was true that I might frustrate him a bit since he was so uptight and proper, but if he really had a problem with me staying here, he’d never have given me a room. For that matter, Chance would’ve told me to leave based

solely on Harry's say-so.

"Sorry, Mr. Harry. I keep forgetting. We're not as formal in this century." He was from the 1800s, and I was a good old-fashioned 1980s rocker. The differences in how we viewed things was downright comical. He needed to loosen up a little—or a lot—but if I didn't want him to chuck my ass out the door, I needed to toe the line a little.

"What century we were born in has no bearing on the situation. I'm the butler. There needs to be distance between me and my employers. The same goes with you. Mr. Chance and Mr. Jetty allowing you to stay is a privilege. You need to earn your keep and treat them with the utmost respect."

He really was a fussy one. Chance and Jetty were too swept up in this new life they'd been handed, and I knew they didn't have the same concerns as the butler they'd inherited with the house. Plus, earn my keep? They could literally rent out my room to someone, and they'd never even know I was there. Hello, I was legit the friendly neighborhood ghost. "Sir, yes, sir."

Harry's hands stilled as he turned his head and glared at me. "Are you mocking me?"

"Of course not. You run the show around here, and I'm a mere servant."

His eyes narrowed before he turned away and resumed the dishes. Not wanting to push my luck, I asked, "How do you think it's going out there?"

He clucked his tongue. "I have no idea. I don't have bionic vision any more than you do. Mr. Chance is so new to his powers that I'm a little worried. That little poltergeist in the middle of the pond has been luring people into the water and to their death for a long time."

“If you’re worried about her hurting the live ones, why didn’t you want me to go out there? It’s not like she could’ve killed me. Maybe I could’ve helped.”

His back stiffened. “You don’t know what Chance will have to do. He’s never vanquished anyone before. What if things go haywire and his spell gets tossed around all willy-nilly?” He shook his head. “No, no. That wouldn’t do at all. You’re safest in the house.”

“Awe. See, you do like me.”

“If you recall, I also wanted Stevie to stay hidden away in the manor. It wasn’t just you. And can you go somewhere else? Why are you hovering over me?”

Unable to hold it in, I chuckled but crossed the room and leaned against the refrigerator to give him space. It was cute how he just put me and Stevie in the same category. It made sense that he wanted the spirit of Scotty’s brother to remain on this plane and able to manifest. Before coming here, Scotty had thought himself alone in the world, and he’d been dating a total asshole. He’d had no idea that the brother who’d died saving his life was still following him around and keeping an eye on him.

Me, on the other hand, all my family was gone. Hell, my mama and Granny were probably waiting for me to cross over to wherever they were. I wasn’t ready to move on, though. I’d always been a curious sort, so the minute I realized I was dead, I wanted to hang around and check things out. Honestly, I hadn’t really bought into the whole concept of an afterlife. I’d been pretty sure that our spirits just disappeared. Imagine how pumped I was to find out I was wrong. Also, frustrated. Being dead didn’t come with any kind of guidebook, which seemed pretty dumb to me.

“Why are you frowning?” Harry snapped. “What are you thinking about right now?”

I wasn’t going to admit that I was trying to puzzle out the secret of life, or er, death.

No, that wasn't right either. I mean, yeah, to the live ones, Harry, Stevie, and I were dead as a doorknob, but were we really? We weren't always corporeal, and we could do cool things like poof in and out from one place to another and walk through walls, and we'd had to learn all of those things, plus how to actually move objects... Geez, we'd had to learn a lot. There really should have been a manual. But other than all that, I felt like myself.

I was still Buck. The good-natured, happy-go-lucky, bisexual man who loved pretty things. And Harry sure was nice to look at. Between his lithe frame and tight ass, I could gobble him up if he let me. He was also extremely competent, which I hadn't realized was a kink to me until now.

"Just wonderin' what's going on at the pond. Are you sure I can't go check? I'll pop out there and be right back."

Harry

My chest seized where my heart used to be, and I stiffened like a three-day-old corpse. "Most certainly not."

I stared out the window over the kitchen sink, wishing I could see my humans. As the longest resident of Willowhope Manor, it felt like my duty to keep them safe. But alas, they were alive, and I wouldn't risk Buck by going out there. If it had just been me, I'd have gone, but I'd been living in this form for so much longer than him. For goodness' sake, he didn't even know how to change clothing unless it was something he'd owned before he passed on. Ridiculousness.

No, him going out there right now would never do. I didn't like that Stevie had gone either, but he had more to tether him to this plane since his brother was by his side. But Buck, no, he could end up being flung to goodness knew where if he was out there right now. Not that I wanted him to stay here. In fact, it would be preferable if

he went back out to the pond once they took care of that little hellion, but that didn't mean I wanted his spirit scattered to all ends of the Earth.

“Okay, what should we do then? I'm feeling antsy waiting on them and not knowing what's happening.”

I was feeling the same way, not that I'd admit that to him. “I'm going to make a cake,” I said decisively. “They'll need a treat when they get back.”

Buck fist-pumped the air. “Yes! A congratulatory dessert. I'll help.” He went to where I kept the baking ingredients and began pulling them out of the cabinet.

“What are you doing? We don't have to make anything from scratch. Chance bought a lovely assortment of boxed cake mix and frostings.”

There was a lot of things that I didn't particularly care for in this era. With the introduction of technology, people had lost the ability to interact with each other and entertain themselves. They had nature for a playground, and yet, they'd gone from staring at the box with moving pictures in the living room to those stupid cell phones that they carried around all over the place. I hadn't minded telephones too much since they were at least still communicating with each other. Seriously, the art of conversation seemed to be deader than me.

But mixes and other helpful tools for the kitchen and house? Those I could appreciate. It was no easy task running a home as large as this one, especially since this owner and the last had turned it into a place for tourists to stay. Goodness, people were messy and had no appreciation for those of us who had to clean up after them. The easier it was to create sweet treats, the better. Not that I applied that to real meals. Those frozen dinners were disgusting.

Buck balanced ingredients in one of his large arms while sticking his finger in his

mouth and making a horrid retching sound. “No way am I using those.”

“Buck, I want it to be edible.”

The obnoxious man rolled his eyes at me. What a child. Really, I should’ve sent him out with the rest of them and left him to his fate. I didn’t need an annoying man-child messing up my kitchen.

“Calm down, Harry. I’m a baker.” He tilted his head to the side. “I guess I was a baker, but still...alive or dead, I know how to make the most scrumptious, yummy desserts.”

I glared at him. “For the last time, that’s Mr. Harry to you! And what do you mean a baker? Like that’s what you did in your spare time? I thought you were a fisherman.”

Proving that he wanted me to have a fit, he started banging around in the cabinet with the mixing bowls and other supplies, emerging with the fancy KitchenAid Chance had brought with him.

He shook his head. “No, I fished for a hobby, but I was a pastry chef by trade. Don’t you worry yourself, Har—Mr. Harry. They’re going to love my super special chocolate cake. It has a secret ingredient that puts it over the top.” He winked at me.

Something fluttered where my stomach used to reside. What was that about? This man had me so...so...I didn’t even know. He was disruptive. If he was going to make dessert, what was I supposed to do? He really was a nuisance. “I guess I’ll help you then.”

“Nope,” he said, popping the P. “Then you’d find out my secret ingredient. I can’t have that.”

Planting my hands on my hips, I asked, “Why on earth not? It’s not like I’d steal it and make it for myself.”

“When you see how much they love this, you’re going to be so sad you can’t eat it, too. Next thing you know, you’ll be baking it for them so that you can get all the praise.”

Affronted, I tugged on my vest. “I don’t do things for praise. It’s honorable to do an honest day’s work.”

Buck winked at me—again! I swear, this man. “How about this, Mr. Harry. As long as I’m around, I’m in charge of all sweet treats. Why don’t you make coffee or something for them for when they get back? Maybe pull the liquor out of the cabinet. I’ll bet Mr. Chance will be ready for a stiff drink.”

I didn’t know about that, but if I could’ve, I would’ve tossed one back. I never was much of a drinker, but my calm quiet life had turned upside down. The big goofy man had taken over my kitchen. Who would’ve ever thought that he could bake? Who’d have even believed he could be helpful? Not me. I hoped they’d finished the nasty business at the pond soon because I didn’t know how much more of this version of Buck I could take.

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Chapter One

Buck

“Mr. Harry’s going to kill you,” Stevie hissed.

I looked up at him from where I knelt in the closet. “No, he won’t. This is perfect.”

“You’re going to freak the guests out. How many times do they have to tell you to keep the hauntings to footsteps in the hall, some banging on the walls, and maybe a spooky noise or two?”

Stevie and I had become good buds since I’d become Mr. Harry’s official trainee, and he’d stayed on to live with his little brother, who was also an employee of the B&B. Not that I actually thought of myself or Harry as real staff, but he sure did.

“Relax. This is going to be great. You’ll see.”

The B&B had slowed down a lot during the winter, but with the introduction of the spring, we were booked back up. Which meant party time for me. With only one or two rooms occupied at a time during the slow season, the hauntings had really gotten boring. Plus, Harry hadn’t had as much to do, so he’d monitored my every move.

Trust me when I say, I loved being in that man’s space. I even enjoyed him bossing me around. Anytime Harry was willing to exist next to me, I was there for it. We’d developed a nice rhythm in the kitchen with him cooking meals while I did all the baking. Scotty had been interested in the baking side of things, so I’d spent the winter

walking him step by step through breakfast yumminess, and we'd filled the alive ones up on muffins and cinnamon rolls and other delights.

As much as I loved that, Harry was an anal taskmaster when it came to the cleanliness of the old house. You'd think we were getting ready to host royalty with the militant execution of his cleaning schedule. It was fine when we worked on a project together, but I'd been relegated to bathroom duty by myself, and that was a complete drag. I swear I was being punished in the afterlife for not being the best about keeping my own bathroom clean during life.

Outside of Harry though, this is why I'd really stayed at the manor. Haunting those with a heartbeat made me giddy. Since I never had a spooky experience while I had a pulse, I tried thinking up all the creepy things that would've given me a rush. Then I cut the ideas in half and then halved them again so I wouldn't get on Harry's bad side. This idea was a winner.

Stevie looked down at me, shaking his head like he was disappointed in me. "I'm telling you. Mr. Harry isn't going to be happy."

Jumping up, I surveyed my handiwork. A couple had checked in for their second honeymoon. At breakfast, they'd told Jetty and Chance how they were going hiking this morning, then coming back to change clothes and go to the boardwalk this afternoon when it was warmer. They'd probably be back at any minute, so I'd finished just in time.

The lady had been super cute, hanging up all their clothes as outfits and lining their shoes on the bottom of the closet as soon as they'd arrived yesterday afternoon. Harry had been thrilled. There was nothing that he liked more than a tidy guest who treated the manor with respect. His joy at her order had given me the best idea.

Their clothes and shoes were now grouped together—his and hers. If I left her skirt

on a hanger, then I replaced the little top with one of his button-down shirts. His dress pants now hung with her crop top. Her right high heel now paired beautifully with his left flip-flop. They were here for the week, so they'd given me plenty of items to work with. They'd brought enough clothes for two weeks, but that was typical in spring. The weather could be such a toss-up.

Flirty chatter and laughter came through the door from down the hall, and Stevie groaned. "No time to fix it now. Mr. Harry's going to—"

As the room to the suite opened, Stevie poofed away. Oh well, his loss. He'd miss all the fun. The woman headed to the bathroom, and the man dropped down on the edge of the bed with a groan. Sitting down on the floor, I leaned against the wall and waited for the show.

Technically, Harry had forbidden me from hanging out in the customers' rooms since they deserved their privacy for sexy times. I had no problem with that. We'd pop in to haunt them once the rooms were dark and quiet. But this was different. It was the middle of the day, and they had a plan that didn't include an afternoon delight. Hopefully. Shoot. If they had sexy time, I'd have to leave, and I might miss the moment they realized their stuff had been re-arranged. That would suck.

In the blink of an eye, Harry stood in front of me with his arms folded over his chest and a rather impressive scowl on his face. "What are you doing?" he hissed quietly, like the husband and wife might hear us. Let's be clear, they couldn't. Only the people close to Chance, since he owned the property, could feed off his gift and see spirits.

"Waiting." I pointed vaguely toward the closet that the wife was just about to—

"Brian! What the hell did you do?"

Ha! The husband, Brian apparently, had one hiking boot half off and blinked up at his wife. “Huh?”

She gestured at the closet. “Did you do this earlier? You said you had to go to the bathroom. Did you come up and destroy all my hard work?”

Harry rounded on me. “What did you do?”

“I may have re-arranged their stuff a little.” I snickered.

“Why?” he asked, throwing his arms up in exasperation.

Okay, I seriously adored Harry, but was he kidding? “To spook them.”

He stared at me, then shook his head. Well, what was his problem? He told me not to scare the crap out of people, just creep them out a little, and this wasn’t that bad.

Harry

This...this right here was one of the reasons it was so hard to take him seriously. “Why on Earth would this scare them?” I gestured behind me where Trisha, the wife, was full-on chewing her husband out. “She’s angry, Buck.”

He rolled his eyes, one of my least favorite of his habits. “Right, but eventually, he’ll convince her he didn’t do it. Like really, when would he have had time? Then they’ll go downstairs and find out that no one here did it, and voila! Ghosts!”

Good grief. I hated the slow season. I really did. It got so dull around here without lots of people swarming the property. Plus, when there weren’t a lot of people, Chance and Jetty usually cooked for themselves and Scotty. It was only when Chance’s parents and their best friends joined them that they let me step in and take

over. The alive ones spent so much time watching TV in the winter months, and I didn't want to intrude too much on Scotty and Stevie so that left me with Buck.

We cleaned together, and thankfully, he spent parts of each day out at the pond catching up with old friends—or making new ones with the recently deceased—and evenings doing puzzles with me or playing cards, but it got boring. It was so much better when the manor was bustling, and there was laundry and cleaning and cooking to do.

Except for this. Ever since we told Buck that he wasn't allowed to give people heart attacks by floating around with a white sheet on and other obviously unexplainable things, he's made it his mission to find some creative way to be spookier without provoking outright terror. And so, this idiocy is what we ended up with.

“Buck, do you really think once she believes her husband, she's going to take Scotty's and Chance's word for it that they didn't come up and mess around in their room? We'll be lucky if they stay and don't leave a bad review.”

“No, you're wrong.” He rubbed his hands together. “Once they realize...” He trailed off, then his juicy bottom lip pouted out. Wait. Juicy? I meant plump. Uh, lush. Wait. No, not that either. Large. His big bottom lip. Not that I'd ever noticed his mouth in any way.

“You just figured it out, didn't you? Unless they'd been staying here completely alone, without another human with a heartbeat to be found, they'll never believe someone didn't just break into their room.”

The argument behind my back escalated as Trisha stomped over and ick, right into my body. Not that she'd known that she'd done that, but still...annoying.

“I can't believe you, Brian. You have no respect for how hard I work to take make

our lives nice,” Trisha complained.

He threw his hands up in the air. “You? I take every bit of overtime they’ll give me and work ten-hour days, six days a week, so that you can have everything you want. Can we not have one peaceful day, Trisha?”

A noise of pure indignant outrage poured out of her throat, and Buck mumbled, “Uh-oh.”

I swear, I had to fix everything around here. Zipping across the room, I ran my hands through the curtains, making them billow. They didn’t notice, and the heated argument continued, so I pushed the alarm clock on the bedside table onto the floor. “You created this mess, Buck. Help me.”

A huge dopey grin split his face, and he moved to the closet, running his hands along the top of the hangers, causing them to jangle together and clothes to slide off onto the floor. I went back to the curtains for another sweep, and finally, we had their attention. Between one breath and the next, their raging ceased as they moved and clung to each other in the center of the room.

Satisfied, I brushed my hands together. “That’s one potential disaster avoided. They might still leave, but at least their review will be that it was too scary to stay.”

Buck nodded happily. “Right? Which is still good for business.”

Huffing, I tugged down my suit vest. “That doesn’t make it alright, Buck. What have I told you about taking the hauntings into your own hands? You’re still thinking too much like a heartbeater, and you go too far.”

He hung his head. “I guess you’re right.”

“I am. Now come on. We don’t let you stay around here to make trouble or shuck your duties. I overheard Mr. Jetty saying he was craving key lime pie. That’s your department, so I need you in the kitchen.” Where I can keep an eye on you, I added in my head.

He nodded happily, because of course he did. I swear the man was never upset for more than ten seconds. How aggravating. I’d get on my own nerves if I was like that. “What about them?” he asked.

I glanced at the couple still huddled together in the middle of the room and shrugged. “They didn’t run out of the room screaming or call the front desk. Let them figure it out. Let’s go.” Then I blinked out, picturing my destination in the kitchen.

Buck

After Harry left, I looked fondly at Brian and Trisha. She was trembling uncontrollably while he rubbed her back and soothed her. I could see that he was literally shaking in his own boot—since he’d managed to get one off—but he was ignoring his own fear to comfort his wife. How sweet.

This was what it was all about. Harry thought I wanted to torment the guests for my own personal thrill, but that wasn’t it at all. They booked into a haunted hotel for a reason, and I wanted to give them something to remember.

I knew Harry would be back in a minute if I didn’t shake a leg and get down there, but I wanted to leave the happy couple with one more little burst of excitement to get their anniversary going. Running around the room fast enough to create wind, I folded back the top of the bedsheets before I popped out of the room. I reappeared in the kitchen a second later.

“What took you so long?” Harry asked. “And why are you laughing?”

Upstairs, Trisha screamed.

“Sorry, Mr. Harry. Can’t talk now. I got pie to make.”

But he was already gone, off to check on the happy couple. Stevie appeared, jumping up on the counter and shaking his head. “You couldn’t help yourself, could you?”

Well, no. No, I couldn’t. I had hours and hours of lectures ahead from Harry, and I wasn’t one bit mad at it. After all, he was my favorite grump.

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Chapter Two

Harry

“Buck. Buck. Where is he now?” Why I’d told the owners of the B&B that I’d train Buck was beyond me. From the minute he’d shown up, he’d been a pain in my—

“What’s up, Harry?” he asked, popping into existence, his face directly in front of mine. And Harry? How dare he still call me Harry. I was his superior, his boss. He was a subordinate.

Sighing, I tugged on my black vest and took a step back. No way I’d admit he nearly scared me to...well, not death. I’d been an apparition for well over a century, and I had no time for Buck’s hijinks.

“Why do you insist on appearing right in front of me? Did no one ever teach you about personal space?” I asked.

Grinning like a schoolboy instead of a grown-ass man, he nodded happily. “Of course.”

That was it. Not even an excuse for why he so obnoxiously subjected me to such an intimate look into his fathomless dark eyes, forcing me to inhale his foresty-fresh scent. Even after months of working with me inside, he smelled like he’d just hiked the woods and sat next to a body of water, trapping all that fresh crispness of the outdoors on his person.

“Of course, he says,” I mumbled, turning away. “Whatever. We have things to do. We have guests checking in this afternoon, so we need to make the beds, empty the dishwasher, and I’d like to clean the baseboards in the parlor.”

Buck frowned. “But it’s so nice outside.” I opened my mouth to remind him of the deal we made—I gave the orders, and he obeyed without arguing—when he rushed on. “You had me strip all the beds after the last guests left, wash the sheets, then remake the beds. And Jetty washed the breakfast dishes before he went to work this morning.”

I felt my lips tip down automatically. “Why in the world did Mr. Jetty do the dishes?” I stressed mister. Mr. Chance had purchased the manor and set the property free of a treacherous spirit. Since then, his boyfriend, Mr. Jetty, had moved in. They were our bosses and worthy of our respect. Not that I could get that through Buck’s thick skull. He was much too irreverent to continue on here at Willowhope Manor, but...

I’d seen a loneliness in him the first time he’d entered our home, wanting to check in like a normal—aka, living—guest. I’d allowed him to stay that first night, telling myself every evening after he retired to his room for the night that I’d tell him to go the next day, but...I mean, he really seemed to enjoy it here. I couldn’t just tell him to go, could I? I wasn’t the most patient man, but I wasn’t a...a...a monster.

Buck snickered. “He said he wanted brownie points with Ch—” He cut himself off as I quirked my brow. “With Mr. Chance.”

“Brownie points for what?” I asked, completely perplexed.

“You know.” Buck wiggled his eyebrows, looking completely ridiculous. Not as bad as I would look if I did the same thing, so I guessed he pulled it off. “Mr. Jetty plans to finish up the job he’s on early and come home before the new arrivals check in later, and he’s hoping to get a little action.”

I sighed. The living were ridiculous. There was no question that the two gentlemen were soulmates. They'd be together forever, which meant plenty of time for carnal activities, and yet, every time I turned around, they were—

“Those two really fuck like bunnies, huh?” He snickered.

“Buck,” I said sharply. “They are your bosses.”

He shrugged. “So? They're my friends, too. It's not like we don't all know they're having sex. It's good for them. Healthy.”

“Ugh. Stop. That's completely inappropriate.”

As were all the blow jobs I'd witnessed before I'd revealed myself to them. I'd seen the horror on their faces when they'd realized I'd been working in the manor, taking care of their dietary and caffeine needs while they stripped half-naked all over the place. In deference to their respectability, I'd never admitted how many times I'd had to leave the parlor...or the kitchen...or the stairwell because one of them was slurping on—

I tugged on my vest, making sure it was straight, and cleared my throat. “I guess we can start on the baseboards then.”

“Harry,” he whined. “It's beautiful outside. I want to go fishing. Let me take you out to the pond, please. You've never come with me, and you promised.”

My head jerked back. “I most certainly did not. I don't waste my time on such things. There is too much to be done. Besides, you're a spirit. What does the weather matter? You don't get hot or cold. You literally can't feel the elements. It wouldn't matter if it was raining or snowing or if lava flowed under your feet.”

Buck blew out a burst of air—air we didn't need—and rolled his eyes. "You're really no fun."

"We're at work. This isn't supposed to be fun when there are things to be done."

He shook his head, and his shaggy hair immediately fell around his face. Really, how had this man made it through life without a proper haircut or wardrobe? I glanced down at his dirty jeans and t-shirt that said Guns-N-Roses with two roses and two guns on it. How ridiculous was that? He said it was vintage, but what did he know about vintage? I'd been dead for a hundred years by the time that shirt was made.

A slow grin spread across his ridiculous face. Oh boy. "I'll make you a deal," he said.

Great. I couldn't wait to hear this one.

Buck

"I'll do the baseboards in the parlor by myself if you spend a few hours at Beckoning Pond with me afterward."

If possible, Harry's frown grew more pronounced. And you know what? I was here for it. The more aggravated he got with me, the surlier he acted, and that was when he felt the most normal to me. Less stuffy and uptight—like maybe it was possible to pull that stick out of his ass. I held in a snicker. He wouldn't appreciate me thinking about his buttocks in any way. Buttocks—what a silly word.

"Buck," Harry said sharply.

"Harry."

He sighed—loudly. "Buck, why are you chuckling? You let your mind wander again,

didn't you?"

Crap. Busted. If I didn't get it together, he'd kick my perfect bubble butt out the door and back to the pond. Which wouldn't be the worst thing. I still had a few friends out there, but most of them had allowed Chance to help them cross over into whatever in the world was next. Yes, I said, well, I thought Chance—not Mr. Chance. They were Chance and Jetty to me. They were my friends. Sure, this was their home and business, but they didn't have to pay us, and I provided a service. A necessary one.

"Buck!"

I jumped. Harry never yelled. "Uh, yeah?"

"Your mind wandered. Again . If we're going to work together—"

"I agree."

His face puckered like he smelled something nasty. "With what? I didn't finish."

"I agree that we should get to work so we can go outside and play later."

He put his fingertips to his temple. "I think I'm getting a migraine."

"Really?" I asked, acting clueless. Like I didn't know that he couldn't get a headache. I did that sometimes—act like I didn't understand what could or couldn't happen now that we'd passed on from our mortal lives.

For example, Harry found my clothes distasteful and had been trying to teach me for weeks how to change my wardrobe. I knew how, of course. That was one of the things I'd mastered back when I lived at the pond behind the manor. I had a whole collection of vintage rock band t-shirts stored in my brain that I cycled through. Harry

thought they'd all been in my wardrobe when I died, and that was why I could conjure them. Wrong. Most of them were my favorite designs from when I'd been younger and a whole lot thinner. But if he knew that I'd mastered conjuring any ol' thing, he'd have me dressed like him, in suits and ties, and I wasn't about that life.

Harry sighed like the weight of the world rested on his shoulders. "Baseboards. Now."

I obediently followed him, first to the mudroom to get cleaning supplies and then into the parlor. As I expected, Harry immediately dropped to his hands and knees and began showing me how he expected me to clean, like we hadn't done this dozens of times. It wasn't the first time he showed me, and I was sure it wouldn't be the last. If he knew how much I enjoyed watching his pert little bottom wave around in the air, he'd be horrified. The man's body really was a work of art.

"Buck," he spat, glaring at me over his shoulder. "Are you going to just stand there and watch or are you going to help me?"

Playfully, I saluted him, chuckling as he huffed and got back to work. For motivation, I drank in one last look at him on his knees, then got busy. Somehow, somehow, I was getting Harry out of the manor today.

Harry

Buck was like a machine today. Normally, he goofed around and chatted nonstop while we worked on a project together. In the past, he'd told me all about his childhood, the friends he'd left behind, and the world outside of Willowhope.

While I hadn't left the property in a century, I'd kept up on the changes in society through the guests that had come to stay at the B&B over the years. Granted, it was different hearing it from Buck than picking up on things here and there as our visitors

spoke amongst themselves. Whatever. That was all inconsequential to me. My only priority was Willowhope Manor, Mr. Chance and Mr. Jetty, and running an efficient, slightly haunted bed and breakfast.

Since I'd only accomplished one baseboard, and Buck was finishing up his third, I walked around, inspecting his work. If he'd taken any shortcuts, he'd be redoing his sections. As I searched for even a hint of dust or dirt, I'd reached the final corner, standing directly behind him, before admitting to myself that he'd done a good job.

"What ya think, Harry?" He grinned at me over his shoulder. "Looks good, doesn't it?" he asked, shaking his...his...his derriere.

No. Surely, he wouldn't try to draw my attention to his body. The big goofy man was merely dancing in place, convinced that he'd won this round, and I'd go out to the pond with him. As if. My gaze strayed back to his backside. He really did have a nice bottom, though. Juicy and round.

"Mr. Harry," Mr. Chance said from the doorway, startling me.

Spinning around to the entrance of the parlor, I adjusted my tie and cleared my throat. "Sir. Yes, sir. How can I help you?"

Mr. Chance's gaze moved from me to Buck, then back to my face, searching. "Are you okay?" he asked with concern. "Didn't you hear us come down the stairs?"

Mr. Jetty stepped into the room next to his boyfriend, and his eyes narrowed. "Are you blushing?" He turned to Mr. Chance. "Ghosts can blush? Did you know that?"

It took everything in me not to cover my cheeks with my hands. Blushing? Me? That was absurd. I didn't do such things. Plus, what would I have to be embarrassed about? So I didn't hear them come downstairs. Or notice Mr. Jetty coming home for

them to go upstairs in the first place. And no one knew that I'd been eyeing Buck's...uh, backside. But it was like a piece of art. There was nothing wrong with appreciating a thing of beauty, was there?

Mr. Jetty pointed at my face. "Okay, your cheeks just went from pink to scarlet. Are you feeling okay?"

Buck scrambled to his feet and threw his arm over my shoulders. Before I could shake him off, he said, "I think he needs some fresh air."

Mr. Chance nodded. "I think you're right, Buck. Why don't you two go for a walk?"

"That's a great idea," Mr. Jetty agreed. "It's a beautiful day."

Dumbfounded, I gaped at the two of them. Why in the world would they agree with Buck? What did I need fresh air for? I was dead for goodness' sake.

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Chapter Three

Buck

Before he had a chance to argue, I steered a sputtering Harry out the front door of the mansion. We'd reached the bottom of the steps before he regained his composure and yanked out from under my arm.

"I have things to do. I can't be strolling the property. I know you don't mind lollygagging, but I take my job here very seriously."

Affronted, I straightened my spine, pulling myself to my full height. "Now, Harry—"

"Mr. Harry," he snapped. "Everyone calls me Mr. Harry. You can't just go around taking such, such, such liberties."

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. If he thought this was me taking liberties, he'd be shocked to know how often I'd imagined stripping the older man down and having my way with him. Or he could have his way with me. I didn't care much as long as we were touching.

"We finished the parlor, and you promised to take a walk with me by the pond."

He straightened his vest, glaring at me like I'd broken his favorite vase in the front hall. Which technically, I had, but he didn't know that. I'd glued the chip back in place with Jetty's help, and we'd spun the little imperfection around so it was against the wall.

“I most certainly did not. You kept saying it, but I never agreed.”

Sighing, I crossed my arms over my chest and let my head fall back to stare up at the bright blue sky.

“Good. I’m happy you see reason,” he said.

Before he could pop back into the house, I held up a finger. “If you go for a walk with me out to the pond one time, I’ll never ask you to do it again if you hate it.”

He huffed. “Fine.” Then he disappeared.

Laughing, I closed my eyes and transported myself to the pond. I found Harry tapping his foot impatiently six feet from the edge of the water. “What took you so long?”

“Well, the goal was to take a walk out here. Don’t you ever just want to explore the property? Chance—”

“Mr. Chance.”

“Yeah, him. He’s done such a beautiful job with the gardens. Now that the property is cleaned of that malevolent spirit, there are more animals wandering around.”

He held up his hand, stopping me. “What do I care about the outside? The inside is my domain.”

“Think how much watching the birds and butterflies fluttering around would cheer you up.”

He frowned—which I still found adorable, but I’d never tell since then he’d probably stop. “I can hear the birds from inside.”

This man was so ridiculous. “Well, there’s a bunny who seems to have claimed the yard for his home. He’s so cute. Watching him hop around puts a smile on my face.”

He rolled his eyes. “That doesn’t surprise me. You’re like a child. I bet you still watched cartoons as an adult.”

Harry

Buck threw his head back, laughing. “Are you kidding? I still watch them now with Scotty and Stevie. Don’t be so grumpy.”

Ignoring him, I stared out at the water for a minute. “How much longer do I have to stay out here?” I demanded. Our new guests would be checking in any minute, and I really did have things to do. I wasn’t one to waste the day away.

He sighed. “One lap around the pond.” As I side-eyed him, he added, “Please.”

Throwing my arms up in exasperation, I stomped past him to circle the pond once. I saw a few other spirits around who immediately disappeared the minute they saw me glaring in their direction. Good! At least someone realized that I wasn’t one to be trifled with.

Why was I doing this anyway? Giving in to Buck’s silliness wasn’t going to make him less irritating. If anything, he’d probably grow worse. It was time to tell him that he needed to move back out to the pond. Or move on to the other side. That thought made a pang shoot through my heart, which...weird. I hadn’t felt physical sensations since my death except when it came to Buck.

“Here you go,” he said, holding out his arm.

I grabbed onto it and stepped over the large log laying half in and half out of the

water. “Thank you.”

He patted my hand before I could move it. “You’re welcome. I wouldn’t want you to trip.”

A part of me wanted to remind him that, hello...we could’ve just poofed to the other side. Or even hovered over it. We were nothing but spirits after all, but I held my tongue. It really was very considerate of him.

“You know what I like best about Willowhope Manor?” Buck asked conversationally as we continued our stroll.

I snorted. “I know what it is. You like scaring the guests.”

He snickered. “No, but that’s my second favorite thing.”

That surprised me. He’d ended up under my tutelage because he scared a woman so badly that her husband was ready to commit murder. I’d had to explain to him that we give them enough paranormal activity for them to get goosebumps, but not enough to send them running and screaming into the night.

Mr. Chance’s hotel would never survive if people were too scared to come visit. The manor was my home. The thought of it becoming eternally abandoned made a shiver run up my spine. Where would I go? What would I do? I liked serving Mr. Chance’s customers. Buck was still a work in progress when it came to hauntings, but he tried.

“It’s you,” he finally said.

I stopped short. “Me? Why in the world would it be me? All I do is yell at you and remind you of your shortcomings.”

He shook his head, nudging me with his elbow to keep walking. “That’s not all you do. You teach me things about the afterlife every day. You always warn me of danger, and you put your foot down and keep me safe if you think the magic Mr. Chance or his mom are doing might somehow harm me. Plus”—he bumped my arm with his—“I think you enjoy my company as much as I like yours.”

“That’s ridiculous. I keep you with me so you don’t make any messes that I’ll have to clean up later.”

“Mhm,” he hummed, sounding completely unconvinced.

Feeling uncomfortable, I sped up, needing to get this pond-break over with. I didn’t understand why Buck even wanted me outside with him. He’d have a better time if he was alone, free to fish or chat with the other spirits. I knew he was friendly with most of them, and they hid from me.

“Have you ever been in love, Harry?”

My heart thumped, shooting a weird energy through me, and I choked. On what? I had no idea. I didn’t salivate, and it wasn’t like I could choke on air. Good grief. What had come over me today? Maybe it was being outside, away from the safety of the mansion.

Buck stopped, turning me toward him. “Have you?”

I waved him away. “I’m over a century old. There was never time for such things in my lifetime. My parents put me out when I was young, so I learned quickly how to work hard. It’s been my pleasure to take care of others. It’s all I’ve ever needed.”

His expression screwed up in confusion. “Why did your parents kick you out?”

Buck

“Because I liked men, of course,” he said, then slapped his hand over his mouth. Guess he hadn’t meant to admit that out loud.

I shook my head. “I hate people. I’m sorry that happened to you.”

He turned, walking again. “It’s fine. It was a long time ago. Things were different then.”

“It’s still not okay,” I insisted. “So you never tried to...”

He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter, Buck.” Before I could respond, he asked, “What about you? Have you ever been in love before?”

I hummed, giving the question some real consideration. “I thought so. Once. When it didn’t work out, I felt like my heart shattered into a million pieces.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

I shrugged. “It’s okay. Now I know it was a healthy dose of lust mixed with infatuation.”

He glanced over at me curiously. “How do you know that?”

A doe appeared in a break in the tree line, and I pointed. “Look.”

Harry stopped, and I caught the startled delight on his face before he had a chance to school his features into their normal reserved blankness. When two baby deer walked up on either side of their mama, a wide smile spread across Harry’s face. “Oh my.”

We remained silent, watching the trio sniff around. Throwing caution to the wind, I slid my arm around his shoulders and leaned down to whisper, “I knew that it hadn’t truly been love the minute I met you, Harry. The wonder on your face right now is exactly how I felt the first time you spoke to me.”

Harry went stiff as a board under the weight of my arm, becoming more corporeal than normal. I guessed that was a plus. I’d expected him to disappear back to the manor. Even though I’d been quiet, the sound of my voice drew the mama’s attention, and she swung her head in our direction, then nudged her offspring away.

Harry turned toward me. “I don’t understand.”

Since he hadn’t stepped back, I stroked my fingers along his smooth cheek, enjoying the silkiness. “You, Harry. When I first died, the thing that bummed me out the most was that I’d never had a long-lasting relationship. I’d always wanted that, you know? Someone to get up with in the morning. A person I’d want to spend my days with and miss like crazy when we were apart. That special someone that I’d want to tell all about what happened while we were apart and hang out with after dinner. All the things we do now. I longed for that when I was alive.”

“But...” He shook his head. “We work together.”

I smiled down at him. “Harry, we choose to help at the manor. They’re getting free labor because you love it there, and because I love being wherever you are. We’re in our afterlife. Technically, we don’t need to do anything at all. Granted, it gets pretty boring, but...” I shrugged.

Harry blinked several times in a row like he’d gotten something in his eyes. “You enjoy spending time with me? You said I’m grumpy and boring and—”

I pressed a finger to his lips. “I never said you’re boring. I only push you to leave the

house or binge a TV show with me because I want you to relax. You work too hard. These are better than our golden years. We live in a beautiful place, surrounded by wonderful people who adore you, and I want you to enjoy it.”

He clutched my wrist, pulling my hand down. “No one adores me. And you...why would you want to be around me? You’re all sunshine and rainbows. I always think the cup is half-empty and you’re just happy that there’s a cup. We’re nothing alike. Complete opposites in every way.”

Feeling braver by the minute, I slid my arms around his waist, breathing a sigh of relief when he didn’t pull away. “Jetty, Chance, Chance’s parents, Kingston, and Sky all think of you as family. I’ve heard them chatting about how glad they were that you’d stayed on instead of passing into your great reward years ago, or they’d never have had the opportunity to know and adore you.

“As for me? I am a happy-go-lucky guy. I’ve always been that way, I suppose. But the only reason I greet each sunrise with such joy is because I know I’ll see you. You are the cup for me, Harry.”

His pale skin flushed scarlet again. “Well...”

Chapter Four

Harry

What did I even say to that? I'd never had anyone speak such things to me before. After my parents abandoned me, I'd kept my emotions hidden away, never wanting to be hurt like that again. And then there was the fear. I'd been so scared to put myself out there, expose my wants, and have someone reject me or hurt me physically.

Instead, I'd gone into a life of service. Being a butler had been a rewarding career for me, and with Willowhope Manor, I'd found my home. A place that made my soul sing. I'd thought that was enough. That protecting the innocent from the evil that had tried taking over, and then getting the opportunity to be here with the current owners was enough.

But had I been wrong? Did I want a chance at more? An opportunity to have a real relationship? Someone to take walks around the property with or take a relaxing day off? I'd never really done that before. Even when I was alive.

Is that why I'd let Buck stay? Funny, insolent, unruly Buck. This man who'd followed me around like...well, like I'd hung the moon since the minute he'd come into the house. I'd thought he was just kissing up to me so that I wouldn't make him leave, but maybe I'd been lying to myself.

All the occupants of the B&B had embraced and accepted him just as much as he thought they cared for me. And I knew they did, didn't I? It was one of the reasons

I'd stayed when Mr. Chance freed the others to cross over. It felt good to be useful and like part of something again.

Buck's arms tightened around me. "Harry?"

Looking up into his concerned gaze, it hit me like a bolt of lightning. Of course, I liked Buck. More than liked, honestly. I'd let him stay because the thought of eternity without him near me felt dark and gloomy. I hadn't allowed myself to see it because I'd never found my own person in life, so why would I ever expect to in death?

"Will you kiss me?" I blurted.

Buck smiled, slow and sweet. "I can't think of anything I'd rather do."

He lowered his head slowly, brushing his mouth against mine. I'd worked out how to be as human as possible decades ago, even being able to touch, but I'd had limited experience in how that would work with another apparition. If anything, it was better. I'd been kissed a time or two, had one-offs in the still of the night during my years as a mortal, but they'd been nameless men who were as nervous as me.

Not Buck. His lips moved tenderly on mine without hesitation or fear. The limitations of flesh weren't present as we melded together. I felt the pressure, the way his tongue tangled with mine, but it was more. He pulled me closer as he licked into my mouth, and it was as if the fragments of our soul combined.

Buck's hands slipped down, snaking under my bottom, and he clutched my cheeks. Feeling free, I jumped up, wrapping my legs around his waist. He pulled back a fraction of an inch. "I can feel the pressure of holding you, like you're solidly in my arms, yet weightless," he said, sounding awed.

"I know. It's..."

“Everything,” he growled, fusing us back together with a hunger I’d never known.

Everything I’d experienced in the past was about two men wanting to get off, to satiate a need. But this was desire like I’d only witnessed before. Since the minute Chance and Jetty started giving into their carnal pleasures, I’d thought them ridiculous with how they couldn’t keep their hands off each other. I understood it now.

Knowing that Buck wanted me, feeling his arousal brushing mine, the heat of his body setting me a flame, even though we were never hot nor cold, but just existing, it was intoxicating. Magical . I wanted more. “Buck, please.”

He held me securely, bumping and rubbing against me like he held me against a wall. But there was nothing there. Only air, and yet he rutted into me, and I felt secure, safe. How was this happening? He couldn’t even change his clothes without doing it like he did as a human, and yet—he slammed against me, and I cried out. His cock was as thick and meaty as his butt, and I was here for it. I wanted it in me—whether my mouth or my ass, I didn’t care.

He trailed kisses up the side of my jaw and nipped at my ear. “If you’ll allow me, Harry, I’m going to take you to bed tonight and make such sweet love to you. But right now, I want to make you come. Can I do that, love? Please.”

Love? My eyes prickled with tears. In all my years on Earth, no one had ever made me feel special in this way. “Yes. Yes to that. Both of those.”

Buck growled, moving me up and down so that our dicks rubbed against each other through our clothes. With a blink, we were naked from the waist down, and his hardness pulsed against mine. “Wh-what?” I stammered.

“Ah. That feels good. I hoped we were connected enough right now that I’d be able

to—”

I slammed my mouth to his, shutting him up. We'd be having a long conversation later about how he'd managed to disrobe us, seemingly without thought, when he'd deliberately and consistently ignored my wardrobe suggestions for a butler at the manor. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that he'd been tricking me.

But I didn't care. Buck's casualness was part of what drew me to him. And I was so, so drawn to him. He slipped his large hand between us, wrapping it around both our cocks and began to stroke quickly and furiously. His touch consumed me, and I was certain we'd both flare out of existence as our release barreled down on us.

We both erupted at the same time, and I swore that our spirits became one. I felt his pleasure and his joy. The truth of his words, that I was his cup, that he considered me his great reward, was so clear within me that it was like they were my own thoughts. It was fascinating. Overwhelming. I needed a minute to think. I wished for more right now.

“Oh, Harry,” Buck groaned out. “You really do like me.”

If he saw into my heart and mind like I'd seen into his, then he'd seen the truth. The one that I barely knew how to process for myself, much less admit. But that was good. He'd give me time to come to terms with this. I knew it as surely as I knew my own name.

Carefully, Buck set me back down on two legs, and I was back in my trousers before my feet touched the ground. “Did you...” I trailed off, embarrassed. In my dalliances in the past, we each took care of cleaning ourselves. Scurrying away from each other as fast as possible.

Buck's sweet smile returned. “I cleaned us both up as I redressed us.” His grin

widened. “I’ve been practicing on myself in case you ever gave me a shot.”

I felt my face heat again. Did that mean he’d masturbated and then... Of course that was what he meant. I’d never thought of myself as prudish, just uncaring of the living’s desires of the flesh. I guessed it was different when I thought I was past having anything like that in my life again. I found myself equally embarrassed and aroused at the thought of Buck touching himself, then practicing this little trick, all so he could use it with me.

To cover my awkwardness, I narrowed my eyes at him. “So you do know how to do more than you originally said? Like you can change your clothes into something brand new?”

He shrugged balefully. “Sure, I can. It’s not like I left the hospital and found my way to the property in a hospital gown.”

I rolled my eyes, but then we both laughed. Holding out my hand, I asked, “Would you be so kind as to walk me back to the house?”

His whole face lit up. “Really? You don’t want to just poof back?”

Shaking my head, I said, “No. I think you’re right. Maybe it’s time for me to slow down and smell the roses.”

He beamed, and I found myself smiling back. “Woah,” came a voice from beside me. When I looked over, an older deceased woman pointed at me. “I didn’t think your lips moved like that. You’re always such a sour puss.”

Her words went right over my head as I realized what we’d done, out here in front of all these spirits. Buck winked at me. “I hid us in an air pocket, so no one saw.”

“Oh, good,” I said, relief washing through me. No, wait. “A what?”

Buck smiled mischievously, grabbing my hand. “You’ve been stuck in that mansion for so long that I might just have a couple of things to teach you, love.”

Running my gaze down his beautiful form, I zeroed in on his crotch. “I sure hope so, Buck.”

He threw his head back, his gigantic laugh booming through the yard.

Buck

“Where did you two come from?” Kingston asked, startling Harry so badly that he jump-floated ten inches off the ground while clutching his chest.

Reaching up, I grabbed his elbow and pulled him back down next to me, tucking him into my side. Since I’d created the air pocket that I’d hidden us away in, I’d noticed Kingston as I released it. “Hey, what are you doing?” I asked, hoping to distract him from the fact Harry and I were canoodling. That wouldn’t work with any of our other friends, but Kingston tended to get lost in his own head.

Taking the bait, he lifted his arms to encompass the fire pit area that he was standing in. “I came out to see if anything jumped out at me.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked as he walked over to Kingston. Like a puppy on a leash, I followed right on his heels. If he thought I was up his butt before, he hadn’t seen anything yet now that I’d finally gotten my hands on him.

Kingston shook his head. “I’ve been having the same dream for a while about this fire pit. I thought maybe it would go away after they banished the girl in the pond, but...”

But it had gotten worse. I knew this because I'd spent plenty of time sitting out here on the logs with him while he contemplated what his dream meant. I think he'd hoped that he'd realize why or remember something he'd forgotten about the dream if he spent enough time out here. "Maybe there's nothing to it," I suggested.

Kingston frowned, and both Harry's eyebrows rose up to his hairline. "Buck, you can't believe that's true. This is Willowhope, and we're on the ley lines. Generally speaking, if something seems not quite right, it's not."

Kingston planted his hands on his hips, and his head fell back as he sighed. "That's just it. I've had dreams before, and they always led to something. It used to be things like tombstones or property lines, and if I looked for facts in the town records, I discovered something from the past that we needed to know now or for the future. But there's nothing to find out about this particular spot."

"That's curious," Harry said. "I've lived here for over a century, and I don't remember ever hearing anything special about the fire pit. I know that ghosts who don't move on by themselves tend to gather around the pond."

"Maybe that's it," I said. "Chance has been coming out every week or two and making sure no one needs help crossing over. Do you think maybe inside the logs used to be some kind of doorway to people's great reward?"

"No, I asked Elyse what she thought about that, and she didn't get any special read on this area. She said the spirits were drawn to the pond, but they could just as easily come up to the house, and Chance could help them from there."

"Curious," Harry said again. He walked around the fire pit, then popped to the other side of the logs that surrounded it and walked the perimeter. "I don't really see anything—"

He broke off, his face going ashen as he disappeared, reappearing at my side. I couldn't complain about that since I liked him next to me, and it gave me a little thrill that he'd sought me out, but I didn't like how panicked he seemed. "What's wrong, Harry?"

He pointed at the tree he'd been standing next to. It was an old blonde oak tree that had one low, thick branch that extended over the water. "Something feels off over there."

"Evil?" Kingston asked, all signs of frustration gone and replaced with gleeful hope.

Harry moved in closer to me, close enough that our bodies began to merge. "Not evil but dark."

Kingston bopped on his toes, giddy with the prospect of more other-worldly activity, which was really freaking adorable for such a tall man. "Malicious?"

Harry shook his head. "No. Not like that. But like a dead zone, for lack of a better way to put it. Almost blank."

I eyed the tree in question, surprised at his response. I'd lived out here for a while before I'd moved into the manor, and my friends and I had spent hours sitting on the big branch talking about our former lives. "That's not good. It didn't used to feel different than anywhere else out here. Even the pond, with all its bad energy, hadn't felt that way."

Before we could stop him, Kingston ran straight for the tree. His long legs ate up the short distance easily.

"No," Harry cried out.

Kingston stood still, then hung his head. “I don’t feel anything,” he mumbled.

“Well, you’re lucky,” Harry said crossly. “What if it had been some human-sucking black hole?”

Kingston’s head panned around, and he stared at Harry incredulously. I didn’t blame him. It was like our sexy times had changed Harry’s personality from the calm stoic butler we all knew and loved to a man a little more in touch with his emotions. I grinned. I’d done that.

Kingston’s gaze moved to me. “What’s wrong with him?”

Harry clucked his tongue. “Nothing. But it’s my responsibility to take care of you all. Including you, Kingston. What would Mr. Jetty say if something had happened to you?” His voice rose toward the end, and he stomped his foot.

Snorting, I hugged him and kissed his forehead. “Calm down. Everyone knows how Kingston is. Why don’t you pop back to the house and have Chance and Jetty meet us out here? See if you can find Elyse and her Mr., too.”

“Good idea,” Harry said, then he was gone, slipping from my arm like mist.

Kingston glared at me accusingly. “You never answered my question. What were you two doing out here?”

With a smug smile, I sat on one of the logs and patted the spot next to me. “Come here and let me tell you how I landed my man.”

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Chapter Five

Harry

Leaving Buck and Kingston out by the pond, I went straight to the parlor of the manor. It was Mr. Chance's favorite place in his home. Unsurprisingly, I found him and Mr. Jetty making out on the small settee, grinding their lower halves together. At least they were still dressed. For the first time, after having my interlude with Buck, I understood why they couldn't keep their hands off each other.

"Mr. Chance! Mr. Jetty! Come quick! We need you out at the pond!"

Mr. Jetty's head fell onto his boyfriend's shoulder, and he groaned. Mr. Chance looked up at me through heavy-lidded eyes. "Is it important? Can we do it later?"

Trying not to fret, I rubbed my hands together anxiously. "No, please. You must come now. It's urgent. Buck and Kingston are waiting for us."

That caught their attention, and they both scrambled off the couch, shoving their feet into their shoes. They ran out through the kitchen door with me floating along beside them, urging them to hurry.

As we crossed the lawn, Chance's mother, Elyse, called out to us from where she sat cross-legged meditating with Skyler and Marc, Chance's father. "Where are you three going in such a hurry?"

Looking over his shoulder, Chance yelled, "Mom, come quick! We might need you."

I heard them jumping to their feet behind us, and knowing they were all on their way, I blinked back to Buck's side. "They'll be here in a moment."

Kingston jumped off the log he'd been sitting on as soon as he saw his friends. Waving them over, he said, "We think we found something at the tree."

Skyler blew past Chance and Jetty, going right to Kingston's side and gripping his biceps in both hands. "Are you okay?"

Kingston took a hasty step back. "Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

Skyler pushed into the much larger man's side, batting his eyelashes up at him. "I don't know. You've been so hung up on this place, and they ran out here like their asses were on fire. I thought maybe something happened."

Skyler and Kingston had been involved in some bizarre mating ritual for months. Honestly, I wasn't even sure that Kingston knew what was happening. But we didn't have time for that nonsense right now.

Pointing at the oak, I said, "There's some kind of strange energy emanating from the tree."

"Really?" Chance asked, walking briskly over and examining it.

Elyse and Jetty followed him, but Marc made his way to me and Buck. "What did you see?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but Buck grabbed my hand and squeezed. "Well." He studied the branches of the massive oak. "We don't rightly know. Kingston didn't feel anything when he got close to it, but Harry sure did."

Marc hummed under his breath. “You’ve spent the most time out here, Buck. You’ve never noticed that before?”

Buck shook his head. “I can’t say that I have.”

“Oh shit!” Chance exclaimed, hunching down at the juncture where the tree met the large branch that extended over the pond. “This fungi right here? This is disease.”

Jetty stepped up next to his boyfriend. “Are you sure it’s not just moss or something from it being over the pond?”

“No, I’ve seen this before. It’s—”

Elyse leaned down next to her son. “Oh my. Chance is right.”

The mother-son duo both had green thumbs, the earth responding to their mystical gifts. If they said this wasn’t normal, it wasn’t.

Chance stood, looking around at the assembled group despairingly. “This isn’t good. Right after we lifted the curse, I had a service come out and check the health of every tree on the property.”

“That’s why you had the one cut down up by the house, right, son?” Marc asked.

“Yeah. It was dying, and there was no saving it.”

That wasn’t good. “But that doesn’t explain the odd energy I felt coming off of it.”

Chance shook his head. “No, it doesn’t.” He looked helplessly to his mom.

She appeared just as confused. Jetty clapped his hands together. “I don’t think there’s

anything we can do but have the company come back out and check this one. I know the other one was in way worse shape than this one.” He patted the side of the tree trunk. “Maybe this old girl can be saved.”

Chance brightened. “True. I’ll go to the house and call now.”

“Wait,” Buck said, then glanced down at me. “You came to my side pretty fast after feeling that void, love. Did you see the fungi they’re speaking of?”

“No.” I leaned into him. “I hadn’t reached the branch when I felt that weird...nothingness.”

Elyse clapped her hands together in front of her face as she wiggled her hips happily. “Aww. Isn’t that so sweet?”

Skylar narrowed his eyes in my and Buck’s direction while Mr. Chance and Mr. Jetty exchanged looks of astonishment. What in the world?

Buck chuckled and pulled me firmly into his side. “I think we surprised them.”

“Because I didn’t examine the tree? Why?” Smoothing my hands down over my vest, I continued, “I admit I’m normally a little more on top of things, but this isn’t my normal purview. I take care of the house.”

Marc snickered. “I’m not sure this is about the tree, Mr. Harry. I think they’re shocked that you allowed Buck to refer to you as love and snuggled into him.”

Kingston sighed loudly. “Yeah, yeah. Buck finally got Harry to cave. I’m not sure that’s what’s important here.”

“It’s not?” Skylar screeched. “I’m pretty sure it’s the most important thing I’ve heard

all day.”

Elyse raised a hand in the air. “I agree with Skylar.”

“Mom,” Chance said, sounding perplexed, but then his gaze returned to me and Buck. “Okay, he might be right. I’ll call the landscaping company in a minute. First, can you explain this?” He waved his hand around, indicating the two of us.

Kingston huffed and stomped back to the mighty oak. “We are in the middle of a crisis, people. May I remind you that I keep dreaming about this fire pit? Every. Single. Night. It’s waking me up and haunting me. I’ve searched town records and found no explanation whatsoever about why this area is important. Harry moved close to the trunk and was scared half to death—”

“That’s a little dramatic,” I said softly. I was deceased, after all.

He rolled his eyes at me. “And now there’s fungi on this limb that wasn’t there before, and it could potentially kill this tree.” He patted the bark. “Buck and Harry’s romance can wait.”

I hoped with everything in me that my face didn’t show how close to combustion I was. Having this...this...whatever it was with Buck laid out before everyone before I’d even wrapped my head around it was so embarrassing.

Buck burst out with that larger-than-life booming laugh I’d grown accustomed to. “Kingston’s right.” He turned and kissed my cheek. “Since I’m the only one who hasn’t gotten close to the tree, let me take a look at whatever they’re seeing, and then we can go back into the house so Chance can make his call.”

Buck

“No!” Harry whisper-yelled, gripping my bicep between his hands. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. If they can’t feel what I did, then it must be something happening in our realm. I don’t want anything—”

Resting a hand over one of his, I shushed him soothingly. “It’ll be fine, love. You got close and made it back to me safely. I’ll do the same and come straight back to you. I’ve spent the most time out here, though, so it only makes sense for me to take a look and see if I notice anything different.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t before,” Jetty said practically.

“Aww,” Elyse sing-songed. “He was too busy falling in love.”

“That’s not fair.” Skylar stomped his foot on the ground. I was pretty sure he was pouting that I’d made way with my man while he’d made little to no progress with Kingston. There was nothing I could do about that, so I focused back on Harry.

For the second time, I watched transfixed as his appearance flickered like a flame as a blush disrupted his energy to stay corporal. Biting back a smug grin, I left my man—yep, Harry was mine now—and strode toward the largest limb. I felt a little silly that I hadn’t gone over and at least checked the energy myself before now, but it had freaked Harry out so badly, and then I’d been so excited to tell Kingston that I’d finally wheedled my way into Harry’s bubble, that I’d simply left the oak for the humans to figure out.

“Be careful, Buck,” Harry called out.

I smiled at him over my shoulder, then got closer to the tree than I had on our stroll around the pond. A weird absence of space gripped me immediately. Harry had been right. This was disconcerting. No wonder he hadn’t wanted Kingston to go near it initially. It felt like a wormhole, a space where you might disappear and cease to

exist.

Not wanting to be close to this thing any longer than necessary, I hustled to where they'd pointed out the fungi and stopped short. "Uh, guys..." I trailed off.

Harry appeared at my side, then popped me back into the center of the circle. Bewildered, I blinked at him. "You moved me. How'd you do that?"

He huffed. "You said you'd hurry, and instead you stood there for hours staring at that thing."

Jetty coughed, doing his best to cover his chuckle.

"It was more like half a minute," Chance said. "But I agree with Harry. It was creepy the way you just froze."

Thirty seconds? I would've sworn I'd only gotten a brief glance before Harry appeared, swooping me away. I shook my head and faced the human residents of the manor. "Did any of you notice that the fungi or whatever it is was glowing?"

"Glowing?" Chance hustled back over and bent down, peering closely. "Buck, what are you talking about? I only see the fungus growing and overlapping on top of each other."

"What color are they?" I asked, needing to distinguish between what they saw and what I did.

Jetty joined his boyfriend, studying the limb over his shoulder. "I'd say a combination of cream and a light brown."

Shaking my head, I focused on Harry. "That's definitely not what I saw. It's more

purplish black and navy green, and the whole area is a glowing sludge. I'm surprised we didn't notice it when we walked by earlier."

Elyse, Marc, Skylar, and Kingston all squeezed in around their friends, staring at the fungi. Their brows were furrowed as they backed away. "Are you sure?" Chance asked, wringing his hands. "That can't be good that you're seeing something totally different than us. Mr. Harry, would you look and see if you—"

Harry shook his head so emphatically that Chance cut off. "I'd rather not get near there again, Mr. Chance." There was a tremble to his voice.

Chance ran a hand through his hair. "Of course not. I'm sorry. I just don't know what to do. What to think." He cuddled into Jetty, laying his head on his chest.

With our employer—and I used that term loosely—upset, Harry transformed back into the picture of the uptight butler I'd first met. "Sir, given the circumstances, I think we should all head back into the house. I don't believe standing out here exposed to whatever it may be is sound or practical. I'll prepare a snack so that we can discuss this reasonably away from whatever...that may be."

He didn't have to say what he was thinking because we were all wondering the same thing. Was this some new energy or entity? Was it here to harm the spirits at the pond or was it some insidious substance coming to attack the humans? Harry was right. Until we had more information, we all needed to vacate the premises. It was now a safety issue.

"I'll help." The two of us returned to the kitchen in the manor without waiting for the living ones to respond. "Have you ever seen anything like this?" I asked, pulling him into my arms in the center of the kitchen.

Harry's mouth tightened, and he wiggled out of my embrace. "We have work to do."

He pulled cheese out of the refrigerator.

Oh boy. We were back to this again. “Harry—”

“Mr. Harry,” he hissed.

Hurt, I flew back like he’d punched me in the stomach. I thought this afternoon had meant something to him. I knew it had. I’d been inside his body, felt his emotions. Sure, the business with the old oak had thrown a wrench into our plans, but did that mean we had to go back to being butler and apprentice?

Harry winked out of existence, reappearing before me. “I’m sorry. That was unnecessary. You didn’t do anything wrong, but I’m frazzled. This is the first time in my one hundred and sixty-five years on this property where I’ve had no idea what’s going on. It’s unnerving.” He patted my chest. “I don’t mean to take it out on you, but I need my routine right now, which means taking care of this place and its inhabitants. Do you understand?”

Stroking a lock of hair off his forehead and back into its place, I realized how off-balance he was. My Harry was controlled with his appearance, nary a hair out of place or a wrinkle in sight. We weren’t mortal beings who had to worry about those things anymore. Everything about our existence now was our choice—except being alive. That part was over.

Leaning forward, I brushed a sweet kiss over his lips, then stood back. “I do. I’m sorry for being insensitive. I forget that you’ve been at this dead thing for decades and decades longer than me.”

He raised a finger. “Throw in a century.”

“How could I forget?” I hummed. “What would make you feel better? Would you

like me to help or go away? I want to give you whatever you need.”

Harry’s distraught expression softened into something that more resembled the man who’d accepted my affections back at the pond. “Thank you. Would you mind terribly if I prepare the snack alone? I need to think, and you’re distracting.”

Waggling my eyebrows at him, I teased, “Distracting, huh?” Sobering, I nodded. “I’ll go find Scotty and Stevie and let them know what’s happening and give you some time alone.” Then I kissed him and faded from view.

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Chapter Six

Buck

“Holy shit, do I have news!” I exclaimed, scaring Scotty right off his stool and on to his butt on the floor.

Stevie glared at me, solidifying his form and helping his brother back to his feet. “Buck, be careful, man.”

“Sorry, Scotty. I’m just excited.”

Scotty brushed off the backside of his pants—like Mr. Harry allowed dust or dirt to exist anywhere inside the house—then planted his hands on the desk in front of him. “Does this have something to do with why everyone’s been out at the pond?”

“Well, that’s part of it. That’s not what I’m so hyped about, though.” I proceeded to tell them about my walk with Harry—minus the sexy times—and then continued with the mystery of the old oak tree.

“I can’t believe you got Mr. Harry to cave.” Stevie smirked. “You must really have mad moves, Buck.”

Scotty’s jaw dropped as he glared at his brother. “There’s something out there that only spirits can feel and see, and you’re worried about his love life?” He stomped his foot. “Stevie, I just got you back, and I don’t want to lose you. You’re forbidden from going out to the pond.”

Stevie patted his brother's hand. "I'm sure it'll be fine. I was out there this morning, and I didn't notice anything weird. I'll stay away from the branch hanging over the water."

Scotty shook his head. "That's not good enough. Until Buck figures out what's happening out there, I want you to stay inside with me."

Startled, I looked back and forth between the two brothers. "Me? Why do I have to figure it out? Why do you expect me to figure it out? This is Chance's deal." He owned the property, not me. I had no skin in this fight.

Scotty rolled his eyes. "That's pretty obvious, don't you think?"

"True," Stevie said.

I slumped against the front of the desk. "What am I missing?"

"Where's Mr. Harry?" Scotty asked.

"In the kitchen," I said, feeling frustrated that I didn't understand what they were asking of me.

The slam of a car door outside alerted us to the arrival of the new guests we'd been expecting. "You two get lost," Scotty said. "I've got a job to do. Stevie, explain to Buck why this is his mystery to solve. And stay inside, please."

The concern on his face guaranteed that Stevie wouldn't be stepping one foot out of the manor until his little brother gave him the go-ahead.

After he hugged his brother goodbye, we both blinked out and reappeared in the bedroom I'd claimed as mine. "What are you and your brother going on about?"

Stevie shook his head. “Mr. Harry giving you a little affection has clearly rattled your brain. If Chance and Elyse don’t sense anything wrong out there, and Mr. Harry is freaked out, that leaves you.”

Exasperated, I fell back on my bed. I’d been working hard at getting past Harry’s barriers, and instead of being able to celebrate, they wanted me to...what? I didn’t know anything about trees.

Stevie sighed. “You really don’t get it, do you? It’s Chance’s property, right?”

“Exactly,” I said, happy he acknowledged that.

“And he takes care of us, and helps the spirits ready to cross over, right?”

I barely contained an eye roll. “Yes.”

“And from what I’ve heard, he’s been setting things to rights since he bought this place.”

Rolling my hand in a move-it-along gesture, I asked, “So what’s your point?” I needed him to hurry this up. I wanted to go check on Harry sooner rather than later.

“Well, if a man who sees spirits, and it’s his job to help them, can’t even sense what’s off, and it’s supernatural, then obviously it’s up to one of us to solve the problem. If all they’re seeing is a natural fungus, and they can’t feel anything weird in the air, then this must be an us problem. As in, those of us who are deceased. Scotty’s forbidden me from going out to the pond so that only leaves you to investigate.”

Shaking my head, I admitted, “I’m confused.”

“Let me put it like this. The glowing fungi—”

“No,” I said. “They saw fungus, but I saw glowing sludge.”

Stevie’s head tilted. “So it didn’t even kind of look the same to you? Buck, that can’t be good. I know most of the live ones don’t have any real mythical powers and can only see and hear our side of things because of the ley lines and Chance, but don’t you think they should still feel and see what we do?”

“I mean, come on, what if Harry had felt that weird absence of space and then just disappeared out of nowhere? What if that goo is part of the void, and it’s here to get us or trap us or something? Maybe they can’t see it because it doesn’t affect the living.”

I shook my head, clearing my thoughts. He was right. That explained why everyone, including Harry, had been freaking out. I really thought I’d been paying attention, but Stevie had been spot-on. I was so enamored with Harry and pumped about the progress I’d made with him today that I hadn’t been taking the situation seriously enough. This had to be a spirit realm issue, and I wouldn’t risk losing Harry now that he was finally open to giving me a shot.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I asked, “What do you think I should do?”

Stevie frowned. “I’m not sure. You’ve been here longer than me. Once I died, I only concentrated on trying to get Scotty to know I was still with him. If you think about it, I didn’t actually accomplish that on my own. It was Chance and his property that gave me the opportunity to connect with my brother again. I’d say ask Harry to help you figure it out, but...”

I shook my head as he trailed off. “That’s not an option. He was really freaked out.”

“So what are you going to do?”

Wasn't that the million-dollar question?

Harry

Buck had been acting strangely today, odder than normal. I'd grown so accustomed to his lumbering presence hovering over me that his absence felt abnormal. I had to admit—if only to myself—it was stressing me out.

Had our interlude earlier meant nothing to him? Now that he knew I was interested, was he done with me? Fiddlesticks. I was too old for this. I was too dead for this. This kind of emotional turmoil was for the living.

“Mr. Harry, are you okay?” Skylar asked from the kitchen table.

I jumped at the sound of his voice. Elyse and Marc had left hours ago, and Chance and Jetty had retired to their room shortly after our guests turned in for the night. I thought the only people left roaming around down here were us ghosts. “Sorry, I didn't realize you were still here.”

He stood up from his chair and joined me at the kitchen sink, staring out the window into the darkness. “Kingston went back out to the pond. I kind of wanted to wait around until I knew he returned safely.”

Skylar had lived in the manor for a short while before moving out to live in Jetty's house since he'd moved in with Chance. He was here more often than not when he wasn't working, either spending time with his best friend or with Elyse, who was training him in all things magical. “I see.”

He side-eyed me. “Do you?”

I patted the abnormally quiet man's shoulder sympathetically. Skylar usually zipped

through the house like lightning or bounced around like he was on a pogo stick. “I’m pretty sure we all do.”

“Not Kingston,” he said with a sniff.

Relationships were not my forte, as proven by how Buck had treated me since we returned from the pond. However, some things were common sense. “Have you considered telling him how you feel?”

His shoulders slumped. “I throw myself at him every chance I get. I don’t know what else I can do.”

“Tell him.”

“What if he suspects, but he doesn’t want me, so he’s playing dumb to keep from hurting my feelings?” he whined.

Were we speaking about the same man? There was no question that Kingston was wicked smart, but he was also a tad socially awkward and not generally aware of the people around him. Unless they were dead. His focus increased drastically once the entity in question had no pulse.

“As much as I don’t think Kingston would ever hurt anyone on purpose, I also don’t believe he has the aptitude to play games. If he realized you were interested and he wasn’t, he’d bumble his way through an apology to let you down gently.”

“Bumble?” Skylar asked indignantly, lifting his chin.

There was the feisty man I’d come to know. It was one thing for him to mope over his unrequited love, but a potential insult to the man in question? Unacceptable. I held up my hands placatingly. “I’m not insulting Kingston. I only meant that he’s

uncomfortable with attention on himself in the easiest of conversations. Can you imagine how hard it would be for him to hurt someone's feelings?"

Skylar tilted his head thoughtfully before a fond smile spread across his face. "It would be the worst. The poor guy would be a mess."

I dipped my head in acknowledgment. "Exactly."

A calculating expression replaced his amusement. "Soooo , Mr. Harry. With all of the commotion of the weirdness at the oak tree and the new guests checking in, we never discussed what's going on with you and Buck."

My mouth drooped into a frown before I caught myself. Skylar's eyes widened. "What's wrong?"

Clearing my throat, I turned away and floated toward the refrigerator. I didn't need anything, but I wanted to avoid his scrutiny. Earlier, my biggest concern was the teasing I'd have to endure with giving into Buck's pursuit. Now, I was more worried that everyone would know my humiliation. "Nothing."

Skylar skipped across the room, cornering me in the opening of the door. It would be nothing for me to poof out of the room and avoid him altogether, but really, that would be rude. "Come on, Mr. Harry. What gives? You two looked pretty chummy at the fire pit."

"Perhaps, but he hasn't exactly been around today, has he?"

Skylar's lashes fluttered like he was checking his internal hard drive. "What do you mean? He's come in to check on you every half hour, at least. He doesn't always say anything, but he appears and makes sure you're okay before he disappears again."

My head jerked back in surprise. “He has?” How had I missed that? I’d been keeping one ear on the discussion between Chance and his crew about what might be going on at the pond now and what they should do about it, but I’d been cognizant enough of my surroundings that I’d faded away any time guests were around. And I’d noticed Buck a time or two, but not what Skylar was suggesting. I wouldn’t have felt so abandoned if I’d seen him checking on me.

Skylar giggled. “Ohhh, you got it bad.” Since I was corporal, he patted my chest. “Yes, he has. Maybe you should go check on him this time. Last I saw, he was in the parlor putting a puzzle together with the brothers.”

It was a tempting idea. I’d missed the big lug, especially after what we’d shared earlier, but I also didn’t want to be annoying. I bit my lip as I considered my options. There was work to be done to get ready for the breakfast buffet in the morning, but that didn’t have to be done now. It was helpful if—

“Mr. Harry!” Skylar whisper-yelled. “Go check on your man and make sure he’s alright. I’m going to wait for Kingston a while longer. I know his sleep has been trash because of his dreams, but he still needs to get some rest.” I flickered but hesitated. “Go.” Skylar smacked his hands together like he was a magician, and I performed upon request.

I guessed this time, I did.

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Chapter Seven

Buck

Tingles went up my spine, and I knew Harry must've been behind me. Stretching wide, I leaned back in my seat to see him peeking around the corner and watching me, Stevie, and Scotty while we were working on a puzzle. "Hey, love."

Straightening his spine, he came into the parlor fully, fiddling with his cufflinks like he hadn't been spying on me. Pride filled me knowing that he'd sought me out. Not even his mumbled, "I'm just checking the house to make sure everything's closed up for the evening," phased me. If pretending he wasn't here for me made him feel better, then so be it.

"I already checked all the doors and windows, Mr. Harry," Scotty said. "We're all locked up."

"Oh. Well, good." Harry turned, walking slowly to leave like he couldn't have just popped from here to wherever he hid away.

"Why don't you come help us with this puzzle?" I asked, stopping him in his tracks.

"You definitely should," Stevie said, rising up from his chair. "Scotty and I were getting ready to go up to his room and play video games for a while."

Scotty's head shot up, staring at his brother in confusion. "We were?" Stevie widened his eyes, and Scotty giggled, hopping up. "You're right." He hit his palm against his

temple. “Silly me. I must’ve forgotten.”

Harry blinked after them as they quickly left the room with only the sound of Scotty’s footsteps and their laughter following them. He faced me, face flaming red as he flickered. Would I ever get enough of his blushing? Probably not. “Uh, I didn’t mean to disturb you and your friends.”

I pushed Scotty’s chair back with one foot, an unspoken invitation for my skittish butler to sit down. “Come hang out.”

He thumbed back over his shoulder toward the hallway. “I should probably—”

Appearing in front of him, I gripped his shoulders. “What you should do is come hang out with me. If I recall correctly, we had plans for tonight.”

The flickering began again as his eyes roamed the room, looking anywhere but at me. Oh yeah, my Harry was embarrassed. How freakin’ cute was that?

“Well. I mean, yes. We did, but things have obviously changed now.”

Capturing his chin between my thumb and index finger the best I could with his quivering image, I tipped his head back to meet my eyes. He immediately settled, and his form completely solidified like I grounded him. Huh. Good to know. “What’s changed, love?”

“Well, with whatever’s happening with the oak, everything is all...” He fluttered his hands at his sides.

“What’s happening out at the pond is perplexing, but that little mystery hasn’t done anything to dampen how much I want to spend time with you.”

“It hasn’t?” he asked breathlessly.

Bending in, I pecked him on the tip of his cute little nose. “Not even a little bit. If anything, it reminds me that we don’t have this afterlife all figured out. Not even you, which means we should snatch every opportunity we can spend together and cherish it.”

Harry smacked my arm. “When did you get so charming?”

As if...I snickered. “Is it working? I’m kinda faking it till I make it over here. I wasn’t sure where I stood since you didn’t want to see me today.”

“I never said that,” he protested in his most haughty tone.

“You sent me away.”

“I wanted to prepare the snack by myself while I centered and gathered my thoughts. You’re the one who abandoned me for the rest of the day.”

He sounded so affronted that I realized I’d definitely misunderstood what he’d wanted from me. Was it terrible that it warmed my belly knowing that he’d missed me? “And that’s my bad. I was trying to respect your wishes.”

He let out an uncharacteristic snort. “Since when? I told you to go away a million times since you moved in, and yet, you’re always underfoot.” He frowned. “Until today.”

Pulling him into my arms, I said, “That’s because before, I wanted your attention. I kinda thought I have it now after what happened between us earlier.” I waggled my eyebrows.

His gaze dropped to my chest. “You did...until you ditched me.”

He sounded like a petulant child, and it was the most adorable thing I’d ever heard. I liked him this way. Less uptight and more relaxed. More real. “Forgive me. I promise to ignore your request for space and stay up your ass from now on, love.”

His arms finally came up and encircled my waist, putting him closer to my body. “See that you do.”

With a laugh, I focused, attempting to do what he had earlier when he’d zipped my essence with him from one spot to another. Frustrated when it didn’t work, I tried again.

Harry tilted his head back and peered at me. “What are you doing? You look constipated.”

“Shh. I’m trying to transport us to the settee.”

Harry huffed, then, in the blink of an eye, we were standing next to the small couch. How did he do that? “Here?”

I sat down and grabbed his wrist, pulling him down next to me and lining us back together. It wasn’t a perfect fit. In fact, half of my body hung off, but that was okay. I didn’t actually need the support of the furniture to maintain my position.

“What are you doing?” He squeaked.

“Cuddling you.” I pressed my nose into the crook of his neck.

“Why?”

I bit back a chuckle at his horrified tone. “Because this is what couples do.”

He went dead still. Literally. “Oh.”

“It’s okay, love. Wrap your arms around me and relax. You’ll enjoy it.”

Stiff and awkward, he hesitantly moved his arms back around me. I adjusted around to give him space to slip one arm between me and the couch. Once he settled, I slipped one of my legs between his and inhaled deeply at his neck.

Senses had been interesting in death. Back in the hospital where I’d died, I’d initially been confused as to why no one answered me. It was like they couldn’t see me. Which...hello, it soon became apparent they couldn’t.

Then I noticed that the distinctive smells of the hospital no longer polluted my nose. Those odd medicinal and cleansing product scents were just...gone. Next, I realized I wasn’t cold. How was that possible? Hospitals were always freezing, but there I was, gown on and ass out, and I was comfortable. As I had been ever since.

In the time since, a metaphorical chill would run up my spine on a crisp morning or in the rain. Floral scents would permeate the air around me if I strolled through the gardens, and the beloved smell of yeast and sugar engulfed me when I baked in the kitchen. Of course, it was all nothing more than memories overlapping into my new reality.

Until Harry. Everything with Harry defied the normal rules of death. We never met in life. How could we with the century separating us? And yet, his unique aroma filled me as if we were still alive. Real. Tangible.

He smelled of citrus and sandalwood and mine. I’d been so bummed when I realized my life had been cut short, but now I knew Harry was my fate.

“I think I was destined to find you, love. The universe knew I had to make it here—that you were ready for me.”

He gasped, and I smiled against his skin, pressing a small kiss to his neck. I’d really been looking forward to getting my uptight, grumpy butler naked, but maybe this was where he needed to start. Snuggling and acting like any other new couple.

Harry

Never in my very long existence had a man held me so closely and spoke so sweetly. It was extremely disconcerting. And nice. Really, really nice. Rarely had I found myself at a loss for words since I found my calling here at Willowhope Manor, but I had no idea how to respond to him.

Bringing order to chaos, cooking, cleaning, and all the other tasks it took to run the B&B filled me with purpose. I knew how to serve and treat my employers with respect. But this...personal interaction with layers of intimacy deeper than meeting carnal needs...

“I don’t know what to say,” I admitted softly.

“You don’t have to say anything. All you have to do is relax and let me hold you.”

Was that really all he wanted? All he needed? I felt myself solidifying more as I leaned into him and attempted to just be and enjoy it. As the silence settled around us, the familiar sounds of the house at night grew louder—the click of the second hand on the grandfather clock as it ticked away the passage of time, the creaks in the floorboards above as Scotty moved around his room, the hum of the refrigerator from the kitchen—and I unwound further at the familiarity.

The rustle of the wind in the trees outside drew my attention, bringing the newest

dilemma on the property to the forefront of my mind. Why couldn't we ever have a moment of peace? The absence of space I felt beside the old oak tree really jarred me. I'd never experienced a sensation like that before—living or dead—and I'd happily forgo ever encountering it again. Unfortunately, I didn't think that was possible.

“What are you thinking about so hard?”

“Nothing.” It was well known that I was always the party pooper, obsessed with order and timeliness. Always fretting over every little thing. Just once, I wanted to be like Buck and go with the flow. Why couldn't I ever turn off my mind?

He chuckled. “Hate to call your bluff, but where your hair should be is all wispy.”

“Wispy? What does that mean?” I grabbed the top of my head or tried to anyway. Instead, the whole upper portion of my head was nothing but floating dust—minuscule grains of my essence. “Goodness. What's happening with me lately?”

He cupped my cheek with one large hand. “You can't hide anything from me, love. It's different than for the living, but it seems that even in this form, we have tells. Like when you're blushing.”

Ugh . I'd hoped he'd never mention that. I scrambled out from beside him and floated up over the settee. How embarrassing. For the first time ever, my spirit form was betraying me, and in front of this man who wanted me. This wouldn't do.

Buck joined me in the air and sat cross-legged, grinning widely. “This is fun. You should do it, too.”

The big goof. Why did I put up with his childlike behavior? I stared into his happy face and knew. Because he was fun. It was as simple as that, but for me, complicated.

When had my life ever been fun?

I'd been content. I'd even enjoyed parts of my existence, especially since Chance had purchased the manor. But fun? No, that had never been me. Throwing caution to the wind, I decided to follow Buck's lead and mimicked his position, hovering in the air across from him.

"Cool, right?" At my reluctant nod, he continued, "Now tell me what's got you so rattled your head is blowing away." He snickered at his own joke.

"The tree." I cleared my throat. "I was nervous enough about you or Stevie or even me being near the pond when Chance got rid of the poltergeist girl from hell, but this? We don't even know what this is. And what makes it worse is the living aren't feeling or seeing what we are, and that means..."

Buck sighed. "Yeah, I know what that means. Scotty and Stevie already told me that I need to figure out what's going on. Don't worry, I'll investigate in the morning. There's an old-timer who didn't pass on that might have a clue. By the time you're cleaning up after breakfast, I'll have answers, I'm sure."

My eyeballs felt like they bulged out of my head. "You plan to go out there by yourself?" Did he want to give me a heart attack? Or whatever the equivalent of that would be now.

He cocked his head. "Who else is gonna do it? Scotty doesn't want Stevie out there, and you're terrified." He held up his hand in a stop motion. "Which is fine. I don't really want you out there if it's unsafe."

Well, that was...sweet, but the thought of him going out there alone filled me with dread. What if he disappeared, and I never saw him again? No. No, that wouldn't do at all. "I'll go with you."

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Floating back down, I stood and held out my hand, compelling him to come on and get on with it before I lost my nerve. “Of course it is. We can’t live in fear. This is our home, and the others out at the pond will open up to you. They trust you. We have no choice.”

Buck scowled. “I have no choice. There’s no reason for you to subject yourself to that nonsense out there when I can handle it.”

Planting my hands on my hips, I glared at him. “You’re going from adorable to irritating.”

He grinned and disappeared, popping back with his chest brushing mine. “You think I’m adorable?”

I shook my head. “You’re ridiculous.”

Buck wagged his eyebrows. “But adorable.”

His body so close was distracting, so I stepped back. “Let’s go and get this done.”

It was his turn to scowl. “Now? But we’re spending time together. And I already told you, I’m going alone.”

Poor Buck. He’d forgotten who he was dealing with. I’d mastered the art of looking down my nose at someone bigger than me decades before he was born. “Have you forgotten who’s in charge?”

He crumbled in thirty seconds. “Ugh. You’re impossible.”

I fiddled with my cufflinks. “Yes, I believe I’ve heard that a time or two.”

“If we’re going, then we’re walking. I’ve been looking forward to having you to myself all day, so if you insist on coming along on this quest now, then I demand a moonlit stroll through the gardens first,” Buck said, pouting out his lower lip.

Why was his ridiculousness so charming? “Fine.” I held out my hand.

He grinned happily, and I tugged him toward the door, giving him my back so that he wouldn’t see the smile blooming on my face. I’d never had a suitor, and I didn’t want him to see how ridiculously excited I was for this experience. Not the mystery part of the evening, but the journey out to the pond under the moon. How romantic.

As we cleared the doorway out of the parlor, Buck whispered in my ear, “Enjoy being in charge while you can, love, because once I get you in the bedroom, I’m the boss.”

Oh my. Now I wasn’t sure what had me more nervous. The creepy oak or this confident Buck who had so much more experience than me. What had I gotten myself into?

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Chapter Eight

Buck

I was digging the bi-product of blushing Harry had going on. He was so flickery after my last comment that I didn't even have to see his face to know he was red with embarrassment. I couldn't wait to see how much of his body that blush covered once I got him horizontal, but first the damn tree.

I'd never admit it to anyone, but I'd been giddy about sleuthing since Stevie and Scotty helped me understand why this was my mystery to solve. Like, Chance and Elyse got to do all the cool stuff normally. Yeah, I could see and talk to spirits, too, obviously, but I hadn't been able to until I was one. How lame was that?

They had these cool mythical powers that let them do things that no one else could. I'd always wanted that. As a little boy, I'd dreamed of growing up to be a superhero. But alas, I'd been a normal dude. To get the opportunity to do something special now, something that would hopefully calm and reassure everyone else? It was awesome.

Sure, Harry was coming with me, and Stevie could've, too, but they hadn't formed the relationships that I had with the other ghosts out at the pond. It wasn't that they were mean to outsiders, but Stevie hadn't spent as much time out there as I had because he was usually with his brother. And Harry, well, my grumpy man, was a bit of a snob.

But first, I was going to take advantage of romancing Harry a little while we—

“There’s Skylar. I’d wondered where he’d gotten to?” Harry said, pointing farther out into the yard where Skylar sat on a bench.

“Why’s he here?” I asked, trying to keep the whine out of my voice. Seriously! Couldn’t I just have this?

“Kingston must still be out at the pond. Come on.”

Before I could convince him to stick with our original plan, Harry zipped lightning-fast across the lawn to the other man’s side. Doing what I always did, I followed.

“Kingston hasn’t come back at all yet?” Harry asked.

Skyler looked up at us, worry lines creasing his face. “No, and I’m freaking out a little. He needs sleep.”

Harry huffed. “Come with us. We’re headed out there now to investigate what’s going on with the oak. Maybe that will reassure him enough that you can convince him to head home.”

Oh yay. My romantic stroll through the garden had turned into a family field trip. Again, Harry rushed off with Skylar by his side, leaving me to follow along. I understood Skylar’s concern when we found Kingston circling the inside of the fire pit area over and over. That didn’t look healthy.

“Sir, it’s late. You should go home,” Harry said sternly.

Kingston glanced in our direction with bloodshot eyes and shook his head. “I can’t. You don’t understand. All I see when I close my eyes is this spot. It’s like I’m supposed to do something, but I don’t know what.”

Skylar lifted his arms helplessly while watching him. “We have to do something,” he murmured.

Glancing at the three of them, Harry, my love, and then these other two men who’d become the family of my heart, seeing their concern and feeling the full weight of fixing this for them and not just the novelty of the situation, I headed for the oak tree.

Harry gasped. “What are you doing?”

“I need to take a better look.”

“I thought you were going to ask some of your friends?”

Stopping, I held my arms out at my sides and gestured around us. “No one’s come out to say hi. That’s suspicious in itself. I’ll be right back, I promise.”

As I got to the branch with the sludge, he called out, “Buck, be careful.”

The purple and navy sludge glowed even brighter in the darkness than it had in the light of day. Angling my body so Harry wouldn’t see, I poked a finger at it. My finger instantly depressed into the top of the sticky goo. Yuck .

Kingston came up alongside me. “Does it still look like fungus?” I asked him.

“It does. What do you think this means?” he asked.

“I have no idea, but it’s not giving me any answers.” Moving from there, I hesitated. The tree trunk was where Harry and I had felt the creepy void, the thing that had us the most concerned, but I had to check it out. How else would I get answers? After taking a deep breath, I stepped close, reaching out both hands to trail along the bark.

“Buck, don’t!” Harry yelled.

Harry

As Buck’s hands came in contact with the trunk of the oak, his image immediately began to fade. Without thought, I blinked myself onto his back, merging our essence in his disintegrating form.

“What the fuck?” Buck murmured.

Detaching myself from him, I pulled my vest down, embarrassed at my overreaction. “I’m sorry, I was worried the void was going to suck you somewhere, and I panicked and grabbed for you.”

“Harry, are you not seeing what I’m seeing?”

His words made me stop, and I finally took notice of our surroundings. We were no longer standing by the pond with Skylar and Kingston with us but in a small, dark space. “Oh no.”

Buck wrapped his arms around my shoulders and tucked me into his side. “Don’t panic. Listen.”

Opening my senses, I heard the distant voices of Skylar and Kingston screaming our names.

“Wherever we are, we’re not far from our friends,” Buck continued.

Our friends? Sure they were Bucks, but had they become mine, as well? What about Chance and Jetty? Scotty and Stevie or Elyse and her mister? Did they all slot into my life more than I’d believed? A soft pang in my heart region suggested that they

might be. Had these humans, these alive mortals, become something that I hadn't really had in my own life? Wonderstruck, I smiled at Buck.

He blinked. "Um, I'm glad we can hear them, too, but I expected you to be a little more freaked out than this."

I cuddled into his side. "Oh, I am. But—" My cheeks warmed, and I wondered if he could see the blush on my cheeks or my flickering in the dimness.

"Love, did you just realize that they're actually your friends? That you're more than a butler to all of us?"

"I guess I did. It's been a day of revelations for me."

He squeezed me tight. "It has, which means we should celebrate." His head swiveled around. "As soon as I figure out how to get us out of here."

A neon mist emitted from our left, and we whirled together in the tight confinement of the space to face it. I'd thought I'd be scared to face this new unknown, but I wasn't. With Buck by my side, I'd take on anything. Willowhope Manor had been my home for such a long time, and I'd fought tooth and nail to keep the sanctuary I'd always felt so at ease in. But I had more reason to fight now than ever. I had people. Flesh and blood humans and spirits alike who considered me...special—worthy.

I wanted to share all my thoughts and feelings with Buck—because I had that now, someone who cared what about hearing them—but the mist took on a humanoid shape. There was no face or distinct features, just the swirling of an essence, but definitely a being of some kind.

Buck pushed me behind him. "Who are you?"

Like the rustling of the wind through the leaves, voices that were neither male nor female said in unison, “I am the Hallowed Tree. The giver of life to these lands. Also the destroyer.”

Holding onto Buck’s hips, I peeked around him. “What does that mean? Why have you brought us here?”

“I have brought you because of the man who keeps visiting the sacred space, crying out for answers.”

They had to mean Kingston. “So why didn’t you show yourself to him? That’s what you did with that blank space, right? Revealed yourself to us,” Buck said.

“We did. It is not for a human to pass into these borders, and we’ve watched and seen. You, the one who fishes, have befriended him. And you, guardian of this home, have grown fond of these mortals who walk my lands.”

Buck and I side-eyed each other. “This is true, but I’m not the guardian. Chance is—”

“A human. Flesh and blood. He’s the master of this space, and this property responds to him, but you’ve guarded it well for over a century.”

How in the world did a tree spirit know all that? I’d rarely left the manor itself in all the years since I’d been dead, bound to protect people from the evil within the walls.

Buck cleared his throat. “Can we get back to the whole Hallowed Tree thing?”

“I am one of many trees of life scattered across this world. We watch and wait, determining the fate.”

“The fate of...” Buck trailed off.

“Mankind,” the voices said, deep and ominous. “Our spirits know whether the planet is being treated well or abused. In ancient times, the people of this Earth came to us, giving thanks and praise. They cared for the plants and wildlife. Participated in the circle of life. But those days are over. They are no more, and we have begun the change.”

“The change?” I squeaked.

“To let our essence consume. Return all things to dust. Humanity has become lost and adrift, and we grow tired with their pettiness. The death and destruction. We will consume the planet before you kill it.”

Buck shook his head. “But how do you even know these things?”

“There are many of us.” The cacophony of voices from the mist was disconcerting, bordering on scary. “We see far and wide. Our roots meet in the depths of the oceans and seas, in the deserts and plains. We hear, and we see all and understand.”

“I’m not sure you do,” Buck muttered. He cleared his throat. “You said you were drawn to reveal yourself to us because our friend keeps showing up. Explain that.”

“The spot he paces is where the ancestors used to come and commune with us. There are many such places around the world just like it that now sit desolate and empty. These generations have forgotten our importance, to pray and give thanks for all that has been given. Yet, the one comes, and we all want to know why.”

“Because he dreams of that spot,” I said. “Every night, his dreams are of the space within the firepit.”

The mist stilled, the grains of purples and navys hanging in the air. “The human dreams. We thought none dreamed anymore.”

Buck raised his brows at me in question, and I shrugged. I had no idea what that meant. “I’m pretty sure everyone dreams, even if they don’t know it,” he said. “I can tell you, before I died, I used to have some doozies. Nothing quite as wild as this, though.”

The mist swirled again, moving in a frenzied motion. “He walks where he dreams. He walks where he dreams,” they chanted.

“What’s happening?” I whispered in Buck’s ear.

He shrugged, as baffled as me. Gathering my courage, I stepped up next to Buck’s side, and he entwined our fingers as I said, “Listen, if you know as much about me as it seems like you do, you know that my existence has been lonely.”

Buck squeezed our joined hands in sympathy. I smiled up at him. “But it’s so much better now, and it’s not just because of the other ghosts like Buck and Stevie. But it’s the ones with heartbeats—Scotty, Jetty, Chance, and his parents. They’ve given me joy that I never had before. Given me a reason to live my afterlife better than what I had when I walked this plane as a mortal.

“I understand that traditions have been lost through time and that it may be disappointing to you. Made you and your kind feel like humanity is beyond saving. But that’s not true. There’s still so much good in this world.”

“Hallowed Tree, please, tell us what we can do,” Buck begged. “Tell us what we can pass on to those we know. There has to be a reason that Kingston’s been drawn to this place. Give our friends a chance to help make it right.”

“You ask us to let a few be the salvation of many?”

“Why not?” Buck asked earnestly. “It only takes an ember to start a fire, right? Let us

spark the beginning of something new.”

The mist stilled again, motionless. “I will confer with the others. I make no promises.”

“Thank you—” I cut off as I found myself on my butt outside of the tree, with Buck next to me, and all of the inhabitants—our friends—standing over with us with their mouths agape.

Chapter Nine

Buck

The last thing I expected was to be spat out of the oak tree as unexpectedly as I'd ended up inside of it. Having every member of our new little chosen family standing over us gawking was a close second. "What are you all doing out here?"

"Looking for you!" Kingston yelled, gripping his hair.

Skylar patted him on his back. "It's okay, big guy." He looked down at me and Harry. "We called everyone out to help us search for you."

Chance hunched down by our heads. "Kingston thought you two had fallen through a wormhole or something and that we'd never see you again."

Jetty watched his best friend with concern as Kingston continued yanking on his own hair as he began pacing. "He thought it was his fault since he's the one who can't get this place out of his mind."

Harry and I looked at each other, and I rolled my hand in a go-ahead motion. "Tell them, love."

"Come sit on the logs around the fire pit. I've got a story for you," Harry said with more enthusiasm than I'd ever heard from him before.

I knew it wasn't me when Marc's head jerked back, and Elyse covered her mouth,

giggling. My Harry was truly loosening up.

As we sat, Chance asked, “Mom, can you start a fire, please?”

Skylar, who was sticking close to Kingston, said, “Oh, let me.” He flicked his wrist and made a tossing motion toward the stack of wood in the fire pit. It lit immediately. He fist-pumped the air. “Yes.”

Elyse smiled like a proud mother hen. “Very good, Skylar. You are an excellent student.”

Kingston dropped his hands and stared down at the much smaller man. “I didn’t know you could do that.”

“You’d be surprised what I can do,” Skylar said flirtatiously.

Wide-eyed, Kingston stumbled back, and Harry smacked his hands together once, drawing all of our attention back to him. “So that”—he pointed toward the old mighty oak—“is the Hallowed Tree.”

“Huh?” Scotty asked, wrinkling his nose.

“Let me tell you.” Harry went on to explain in detail everything that we’d experienced, including the mist’s image and the myriad of voices when they spoke.

When he was done, Chance smiled warmly at him. “They were right, you know? You are the guardian, Harry. I don’t know what we’d do without you and your friendship.”

My man’s shape fluttered as his cheeks warmed with pleasure. Finally, after all these months, he was truly grasping his significance in all of our lives. When we were done

here, I'd make sure that he really understood just how important he was to me.

"What do you think they meant about Kingston being the walker of dreams?" Skylar asked, sounding anxious on behalf of his crush.

Elyse's tinkering laughter echoed around us. "Only time will tell."

"But what do we do now?" Kingston asked. "There's got to be more we can do than just sit and wait for the Hallowed Tree and those connected to determine our fate." The big man's gaze swung between us. "Right?"

Jetty nodded. "Absolutely." He smiled at Chance. "I think you should lead us, babe."

"Lead us in what?" Scotty hissed quietly to his brother, who shushed him and pointed at Chance.

Chance stood. "On behalf of mankind, let us thank the earth beneath our feet, the trees and the flowers, the fruits and veggies, the animals we've been given, and the stars in the sky. We can do our part to help heal our lands."

"Will it be enough?" Kingston asked.

"All we can do is try," Marc said.

The rest of us rose, encircling the fire, and held hands in unity. Chance led us with words of gratitude for all we'd been given, with Elyse adding her own messages of hope. There wasn't a dry eye amongst the living by the time we concluded. Honestly, I was feeling a little misty-eyed myself. I felt like those amongst us with heartbeats had done humanity proud. I hoped the Hallowed Tree heard the words that had been spoken here.

When we were done, Skylar gripped Kingston's bicep, making him stumble as he pulled him toward the house. "Time for you to get some sleep."

"I was going to—"

Skylar yanked harder. "Nope. You're practically dead on your feet." He grimaced. "No offense, guys."

Stevie waved him off. "None taken."

Jetty took Chance's hand and drew him toward their best friends. "Skylar's right, Kingston. Come on, we'll walk you back to the manor."

"Maybe you should sleep here," Chance added. They'd only made it a few more steps when he ran back and hugged first me, then Harry. "Thank you so much for figuring out what was happening with the oak, Mr. Harry. I've been a nervous wreck."

Harry patted his back. "I'm sorry it wasn't better news. I'm sure none of us were expecting it to be the potential destruction of the Earth. And call me Harry. We're friends, after all."

All jaws dropped, and Chance dove back in, hugging Harry even harder. "Family. All of us."

Elyse spread her arms up into the sky. "Family." Then it was her turn to wrap Harry in her arms. "Don't you worry your pretty head about the tree again. I have a sneaking feeling it'll all work out."

Hm . She had an uncanny sixth sense, so if she was hopeful, I could be, too. Marc winked at me, shook my and Harry's hands, then they trailed after Scotty and Stevie. Arm in arm, Harry and I followed behind them.

We were halfway back when he stopped, watching the bunny rabbit who'd adopted the gardens for its home hop by. He watched it until it was out of sight, smiling softly. It was the loveliest thing I'd ever seen.

"Would you like to come back to my room so I can completely debauch you?" I blurted.

Harry leaned into me. "I thought you'd never ask."

Hell ya!

Harry

Instead of poofing us naked, Buck carefully removed every layer of my clothing, peppering open-mouthed kisses on every bit of skin he revealed. I'd never felt so exposed in my life. It was nerve-wracking and exhilarating. I wondered if this was why romance novels always talked about butterflies fluttering in the stomach.

Once I was naked, he swung me up in his arms and laid me across the mattress in his bedroom. I fought the urge to cover myself with a blanket or my hands and let him drink his fill.

"You're so beautiful."

"Thank you. Are you going to..." I asked shyly. I swirled my hand around, indicating that he should take his clothes off, too. Instead of the treatment he'd given me, his disappeared with a mere thought.

I drank in his form the same way he had mine. He was so stinking gorgeous with his hairy chest and thick, veiny cock. He reached down, making my mouth water as he jacked himself nice and slow. "Do you like what you see, Harry?"

Licking my lips, a, “Mhm,” slipped from my mouth.

Buck laughed, crawled onto the bed, and knee-walked between my legs. His palms traveled around the sides of my thighs, caressing and kneading my skin. So many things in my afterlife had been sensory memories, ones I’d clung to desperately so I wouldn’t forget all of those wonderful sensations. But this? This was new. So many things with Buck were. I’d never had anyone touch me this way, with such desire in the depths of their eyes, so how was it possible to feel him as if we were alive...I didn’t know.

“Stop thinking, love,” he said with a chuckle.

“I’m sorry. I can’t help it. It just feels so...”

“Real.” He leaned down, brushing his lips gently across mine. “It does for me, too. It proves what I’ve been thinking all along.”

I looped my hands around his neck. “What’s that?”

“We were created to be together,” he said seriously without even a hint of joking.

“But how? That would be impossible. I’m so much—”

Buck covered my mouth with his fingertips. “We didn’t get an instruction manual, so how do you know?” He dropped his body on me, allowing me to feel the full weight of him, and it was amazing. The pressure was so ridiculously real, so much like how it had felt when my heart still beat, that I wanted him to stay like this forever.

“I’m going to make love to you now, Harry. Let you feel what you’ve missed out on, what you’ve always deserved. I’m going to pound you so good with my cock that you’ll see stars and wonder if you’re at Heaven’s pearly gates.”

I laughed, but he didn't. "You're serious?"

He brushed my hair back from my forehead. Whispered a kiss across my eyelid, my cheek, my lips. "There's no messing around when it comes to matters of the heart. We're so damn lucky, and now that I have you, I'm going to do my best to make up for every year of your life that you were mistreated or alone. Loving you is it for me, Harry, and I have no intentions of failing this assignment."

He squirmed around, positioning himself with my legs out to the side. Our kisses were deep, passionate, and I was ready to cry or come just from the care he was taking with me. As he poised at my entrance, he brushed another soft kiss to my lips. "Are you ready, love?"

"Yes, Buck. Please. Show me. Love me. Fuck me."

He chuckled. "I will. I do. Now take it." He slammed into me in one long push. My body opened naturally, accommodating him perfectly. He smirked down at my disbelief. "Another advantage to being dead. Our bodies are only as corporeal as we want or need them to be."

A slow smile spread across my face. "So we have no limitations."

He wagged his eyebrows. "Only whatever restrictions—" He pulled out, then smacked back in, and I groaned. Good grief, it had been, like...forever, but had it ever felt that good before? No, definitely not. "You put on us."

Trailing my fingertips around his pert, pink nipple and through his dense chest hair, I said, "Any and all carnal activities are your call, Buck. I'm too shy and inexperienced to even know what I want or don't want."

His eyes twinkled wickedly. "We're going to have so much fun, love. Wait and see."

He pumped in and out of me two more times, turning my brain to mush. I opened my mouth, and he did it again. His large hand encircled my penis, and his movements synched as he drove me out of my mind with his body and his warm, wet kisses.

Unused to sex outside of my own hand, it didn't take long for the tension of a quickly approaching orgasm to work its way up my spine. Buck smirked knowingly, and I grabbed his face, holding him still. "I need to tell you something."

His hips faltered. "Is everything okay?"

"More than okay." Leaning up, I kissed him hard, sweeping my tongue into his mouth and dominating him like he'd been devouring me. Coming up for air—that I didn't really need—I said, "I love you, Buck. You're not chasing me. You're not alone in this. I love you, too."

His mouth fused to mine as his body partially merged with mine, and I felt all the sensations he felt, as well as my own, like we were on some sort of intoxicating loop. Our orgasms hit together, and it was like every granule of my essence exploded with pleasure as my cum coated his belly and his filled my ass.

It was dynamic, and magical, and everything wonderful. "From now on, we're going to have the best afterlife," Buck mumbled into my neck. "I love you."

Grumpy, grouchy Mr. Harry, who'd kept people at arms-length was gone. I was sure he'd try and rear his prickly head again at times, but after the events of today and now what I'd experienced Buck, I was determined to loosen up and just live.

Five minutes later, I decided being twined with my big, adorably sweet man was my new favorite thing. He made me feel warm and safe and like I never wanted to leave the bed. Except... "Buck?"

“Yes, love?”

“Do you think the sludge is still there on the branch?”

“I’m honestly not sure. I can’t help but wonder what the process is for all those trees to communicate through their roots. Does it take seconds like a text message or is it more like a carrier pigeon delivering a note?” He chuckled at his own imagery, making me fall for him even harder.

“That’s an interesting question, but that isn’t really what I meant. Do you think the prayers around the fire helped sway that Hallowed Tree at all? They’re so majestic, and now we know how powerful they are. Do you think they laughed at our puny attempt?”

Buck kissed my temple. “I think that your orgasm has faded, so you’re back in your head. It’s barely dawn. Would you like to take a romantic stroll and go check on the tree?”

Rolling over, I propped my chin on my clasped hand so I could read his expression. “Do you mind?”

He shook his head. “Not at all. I planned homemade muffins for our guests this morning, and with all of the drama from yesterday, I never got around to it. We can walk out to the pond, check the tree, and then pop back into the kitchen and get to work on the breakfast buffet.

Groaning, I flopped onto my back. “Ugh. What have you done to me? You’re being responsible, and I want to go check on the tree limb, then come back to your room and...”

“Fuck like bunnies?” he asked with laughter in his tone.

“No.” He snorted. “Yes,” I admitted. “But you’re right. We have work to do.”

We dressed in a blink of an eye and began our slow trek out to the pond. It was peaceful in the pale light of morning. The soothing sounds of nature waking up around us, and I thought perhaps I’d like to do that every day. “This is nice.”

He brought my hand up to his lips and kissed the back. “It is. We should do this every morning.”

How had he read my mind so easily? Was I that transparent to him? Was it even a bad thing if I was? I thought about Chance and Jetty and how wholly and completely they loved each other and decided that I was going to enjoy having someone know me like that. I pulled him to a stop and kissed him senseless for pursuing me, for waiting on me, for loving me. “We should.”

Always one to go with the flow, Buck grinned happily, and we made our way to the branch hanging over the pond. “Buck,” I gasped.

“Heck ya!” He fist-pumped the air with the hand not holding mine. “The sludge is gone!”

An overwhelming feeling of gratitude flooded my being. As one, Buck and I made our way to the tree trunk, and with our hands still joined, we hugged it. “Thank you, Hallowed Tree,” I said softly into the morning.

The bark grew less real under us, and we glanced at each other, smiling, before stepping into the heart of the oak. The purple-green mist swirled into being before us. “Thank you, guardian.” It stilled. “I apologize. I see you have bonded your souls for eternity. Thank you, guardians, for all you have done. For waking your people up to the call of our hearts.”

“You can see it?” Buck asked. “That will be together forever?”

The many voices of the mist laughed, and I rolled my eyes. “He meant you’re welcome, Hallowed Tree.”

“Yes, I know,” they said, sounding amused. “And yes, I can see the twining of your spirits. Your own but also together.”

That had to be the best thing I’d ever heard right after Buck telling me he loved me. An entity who was older than...old, saw our bond. Joy sang through my essence.

“What made you decide to give us another chance?” Buck asked curiously.

“You and your friends helped, but mostly, it was the walker of dreams. We thought they were gone forever, but with him and his soulmate, there is hope for mankind.”

“Soulmate?” Buck mouthed to me.

Of course, the big softie went straight to Kingston’s love life. “I’m not sure what a walker of dreams is,” I admitted.

“You shall see. For now, be well, love hard, and guard well. This land is safe for a long, long time.”

A gentle breeze blew, and we found ourselves back next to the pond. Buck picked me up and swung me around. “Did you hear the Hallowed Tree? You’re truly mine forever, love.”

Smiling down at him, I cupped his cheeks. “Forever.”

As our lips came together, I lost myself in his kiss. There would be more trying days

ahead. Evil spirits, wayward ghosts, whatever adventures were ahead for Kingston, and possibly a broken heart for Skylar, depending on who Kingston's soulmate turned out to be. But there was also friendship and family, love and forever.

We pulled apart at the sound of someone clearing their throat. An older apparition I'd never seen before stood nearby. Buck glanced from the man and then to me. "Would you like to meet some of my friends who live out here at the pond, love?"

His life was mine and mine was his, and I was ready to embrace it. "I can't think of anything I'd rather do."

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“His biceps bulged as he carried the largest box, the one filled with all the resources I’d collected on mysticism, spiritualism, and witchcraft, into the tiny bungalow. Sweat glistened on his brow after all the in and out of moving me in. Damn, the big man was so sexy.

“Uh, where do you want this, Skylar?” he asked.

I went to him, trailing a finger down his arms. “What I want is for you to call me Sky, and I’ll call you King. We’re friends now, right?”

Pink bloomed on his cheeks, and he shuffled his feet. “Uh. No one really calls me that.”

“Mm, it can be my special name for you.” I winked and crooked my finger. “Follow me. I know exactly where you can set that.” With a swish of my hips, I led him into my bedroom and stopped next to the bed. I’d put the sheets on already for this reason, the opportunity to get King into my bed. “You can set it there.”

He crossed to the corner of the room, gingerly setting the box down, and turned back toward me, rubbing the back of his neck and shifting awkwardly on his large feet. I wanted—no, I needed—to know if the rumors were true. If his feet were any indication of the size of his dick...my mouth salivated, hungry for a chance to suck him down.

I crooked my finger again, drawing him toward me. He came hesitantly, stumbling a little as he rounded the corner of the bed, ending up nice and close, right where I wanted him.

“Sorry, sorry,” he mumbled, attempting to back up.

Reaching out lightning quick, I grabbed the front of his shirt, pausing his retreat. “Don’t go. I haven’t properly thanked you for helping today.”

His gaze fell to my hands. “I don’t mind. You—”

“Can I kiss you, King? Please. Just a little one.”

His previously pink cheeks flamed red, and his arms flopped at his sides. “You don’t have...I mean, if you want...uh, maybe—”

Standing up on tiptoes, I yanked him down and pressed my lips to his. King froze, and for a second, I worried I’d misstepped and moved too fast. I knew the big bumbling man desired me. I’d seen it in his eyes. I also knew he was shy and awkward. I was pretty sure he hadn’t had a lot of sexual experience, but that was okay. I’d had plenty, enough for both of us.

Before I pulled back, our lips warmed, and he returned the pressure of my kiss. I hummed in the back of my throat and swiped my tongue along the seam of his lips, squealing in my head when he opened for me and let me lick into him. The taste of citrus and honey exploded on my taste buds, and then something else, something special, that could only be King’s unique flavor.

I stroked lazily inside the hot heat of his mouth, and his tongue met mine shyly. Gah, he was kissing me back. I’d been dreaming of this moment, and it was better than I’d expected. Not wanting to startle him, I slowly let go of his shirt and reached for his hands, drawing them to rest on my ass. His touch was tentative, but as I continued kissing and licking and nipping at his mouth, his courage grew, and he cupped my butt cheeks more firmly. Then I struck.

Jumping up, I wrapped both my legs around his waist, throwing him off balance and

sending us crashing to the bed. He jerked his head back, face even redder if possible. “Oh my gosh. I’m so sorry.”

I giggled and cupped his cheeks between my hands. “I’m not. I finally got you where I want you,” I said as I bumped my hard cock up to rub against his— wow ! Okay, maybe there was something to that myth. The hard length inside his pants was...wow!

His pupils dilated when he felt the evidence of my own desire, and I quickly rolled him. It was kind of exciting that little ol’ me could move this big beast around so easily. He went to his back, and I straddled his hips, making damn sure he knew how much I wanted him. Wanted this.

“Skylar?”

I heard the questions in my name. What is this? What are we doing? You want me? Yes, yes, I did. “Sky,” I reminded him, then bent down and fused our lips back together.

I made out with him until he relaxed enough that his arms slid tentatively around me of their own accord, then I rocked against him, grinding our hardness together. “Sky,” he gasped.

“Mm,” I whispered against his lips before sitting back on him and whipping my shirt over my head, tossing it carelessly at the stack of boxes by my closet. King’s gaze devoured me, drinking me in. I felt so powerful with him watching me, and I wanted him out of his head. Rubbing my hands over my chest, I tweaked my nipples and continued rubbing our clothed dicks together. How I wished we were naked. Then we were.

Somewhere in my brain, I thought this must be a dream, but I didn’t care. I didn’t want to wake up from this. I wanted it to be real.

Lifting up on my knees, I glanced down and gasped at the monster pointing up at me, straining toward me. “Damn, King. God blessed you most abundantly.”

“The goddess,” he said.

“What?”

His gaze slid to the side as he mumbled, “The goddess blessed me.”

I threw my head back and laughed, then gripped his big, beautiful cock in my hand. “Yes, she did.” Stroking my hand up and down, I spread my fingers, drinking in the sight of the thick vein and purple head. The large balls beneath were swollen and screaming for my tongue.

“I...I don’t really know what to do,” King admittedly bashfully.

Why was that the most erotic thing I’d ever heard? Why did that turn me on even more? I could admit that I was a bit of a bossy bottom, but I generally went for domineering men. Ones who would toss me around and dick me down good. King had the strength for that but lacked experience and confidence, and it was like an aphrodisiac. My dick got impossibly harder.

“Don’t worry, baby. I got you,” I promised. Adjusting on top of him, I lined us up and wrapped as much of my small hand as I could around our cocks and began to stroke.

King’s hips lifted reflexively as he grunted, and I preened inside. I was doing this. Getting the gentle giant to lose himself to passion and fall apart. My eyes popped open as I felt fingers on my nipples.

“Is this okay?” His gaze went to the side again, self-consciousness in his tone. “You seemed to like it when you touched them before.”

“I love it,” I promised huskily. “You can do it harder.”

And he did. As I pumped us up and down, King twisted my nipples harder as he grew more confident, and I threw my head back...

The sounds of nature greeted me as my senses came back online. Fuck . My dick throbbed between my legs, ready for release. I pummeled my mattress with my balled fists. Why did I have to wake up now? I'd been so close to getting dream-King off, to seeing him spill that luscious cream.

Resigned to the fact the real world had pulled me back from sexy times, I reached down and gripped my cock tightly, moaning. Damn, I ached, needing to come, wanting King's touch, wanting his attention. It took an embarrassingly short time before I came like a geyser and lay panting with cum pooling on my belly. I should probably feel guilty for taking the big man in my sleep, but I couldn't.

A bird call outside pulled me back to reality. I couldn't remember a time in my life when I'd ever been able to hear birds chirping over the hustle and bustle of traffic or people. A year ago, I'd been in the city, sure that I was living my best life. I had my dream job as an interior designer, my best friend, Chance, was also my roommate, and there were men to meet and fall in love with. Okay, I generally only fell into bed with them, but still, there was a plethora to choose from.