



Hoarder H*ll House (Magic and Mayhem Universe)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Merideth Capybarabara couldn't believe she got invited onto a fully-filmed home improvement show with three other contestants. Sure, she's a witch, so her idea of being handy is just casting a quick spell, but she's sure she can both win the contest and manage to use her magic to do it.

Jeremiah and Jimothy James, home improvement brothers, aren't worried about her or their competition, hot shot internet décor star Bodie Hammersmith. They're sure they can prove who is the best decorator among them, and for sure, none of them intend to fall in love.

The ghosts might have other plans...

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As sunshine slanted through the front window of the three-bedroom, one bathroom, ranch-style home, Meredith Capybarabara watched dust motes dance in the light like glitter.

The bones could be seen, despite the smell and state of disrepair, and Meredith could imagine what it would look like when it was finished.

At one point, it probably was a gorgeous home.

The front entranceway could be transformed into a mudroom of sorts, a place for the family to take off their shoes and coats before they entered the main house.

Once inside, the warm fireplace would welcome them as they reclined under the domed living room ceiling.

A centerpiece of any home, the kitchen opened up into the dining room, allowing for conversation and food to flow freely between the rooms. Spacious bedrooms with excellent closet space, probably... the house could be beautiful.

Currently, she couldn't see most of it, so she based her assumptions off the listing, since the stacks of sheer stuff towered above her head and touched the ceiling.

No fireplace, for instance, was visible whatsoever.

They couldn't even actually get inside the house—the fireplace had to be less than twenty feet away—the amount of debris so great, even the camera crew stopped behind them, at a loss.

“As I was telling you,” Marshall Dobbs, the show’s host, explained in his terrifically cheerful and fake voice, “You’ll each select rooms once you’ve gutted the space.

In your chosen area, you can feature your personal style, and our panel of online judges, made up of our viewing audience, will decide who does the best job.

The winner will become the new owner of this house! Does anyone have any questions?”

“I do,” Jeremiah, one of the two construction brothers who ran a popular show on some home improvement channel, said, raising his hand as if they were in school.

“When you said we had to gut the house first, I assumed you meant pulling up carpets, removing subfloors, knocking out drywall, probably some electrical or plumbing work. This house is full of stuff—you want us to get rid of all of the stuff before we can even start working?”

“That’s part of the challenge!” Marshall said with a little enthusiastic fist bump.

“It’s a hoarder house,” Jeremiah said, again trying to make his point.

“Yes, exactly! Hence the title of the show—Hoarder Hell House Home Improvements! You have one month and less than twenty-thousand dollars to complete your remodel. The time limit is tight!” Marshall grinned at them each in turn, as if they would share his enthusiasm.

“We’re allowed to order dumpsters, right? Or will they be provided outside of the budget?” Bodie asked, chiming in for the first time since they got out of the van from the airport. “Are there laws against burn piles in this area?”

“ And you can auction or sell anything you want to sell,” Marshall pointed out. “So,

despite your budget being twenty thousand, it could be more money, depending on the value you are able to gain from the contents of the home.”

His smile didn’t melt the sheet of ice coating the inside of Meredith’s throat.

For some reason, she assumed their accommodations would at least be comfortable while they worked on the project for the show, yet the house smelled strongly of both cat urine and rat fecal matter.

She reminded herself again of the prize—the entire house would be hers if she won.

With her magic, winning should be easy enough.

Actually, remodeling the entire house in a second would be beyond easy, if she could just use her magic, but she would have to be sneaky. ..

“I’m still willing to do it,” she said aloud, glancing at the three men who won the right to compete against her in the online contest. If they dropped out, it would mean no one there to see her when the cameras were off. “Are you still in, or is this a dealbreaker for you?”

Bodie grinned, his expression neutral and unconcerned. “For a house? In this economy and this neighborhood? Worth it.”

“I don’t know,” Jimothy began, but his brother nudged him hard in the ribs.

“We’re in,” Jeremiah said, speaking for them both.

“Great!” Marshall said, clapping his hands. “I’ll leave a single camera here for your first day, and good luck! Lunch will be delivered around one, dinner about six!”

Marshall fled the room as if the smell might follow him if he stayed a moment longer.

Meredith couldn't blame him. If she could walk back out the door and not deal with the mysterious piles of boxes and clothing, she would.

But she could use the house—she needed a personal base of operations away from her family, and winning the competition would give her one in less than a month with zero lost investment from her savings.

It was perfect—except for the smell. “Where do we even start?” Meredith wondered aloud, glancing around the room, which seemed to have a singular path leading through the ceiling-high stacks.

“If we want a place to sleep tonight,” Bodie said, stepping over a stack and around her to follow the path, “We find bedrooms and start there.”

“He’s right,” Jeremiah agreed.

“Why would you agree to this?” Jimothy asked, nudging his brother back.

“Stop stressing. It’s a month. How much can go wrong in a month?”

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chapter one

Meredith stared at what she could see of her “room” in utter horror. A small path led about two feet into the room, but to either side of it, piles of boxes, clothing, and more towered to the ceiling.

“Where to even start?” she wondered aloud again, not having the vaguest clue how to even begin without at least a little magic.

“With beer,” Jimothy suggested, hefting a box that appeared to be solely old newspapers out of the room he would share with his brother. “And a bonfire.”

“He might have a point,” agreed Bodie, picking up a similarly sized box packed with old, moist TV guides.

“Can’t hurt, and the dumpsters we ordered won’t be here til morning.” Jeremiah grabbed a laundry basket full of more newspapers, so Meredith picked up a box of probably old, wet books.

“Who is getting the beer?” she asked.

“Jimothy,” said Jeremiah before his brother could speak. After a scowl, Jimothy dropped his box in the center of the overgrown back yard and then pulled out his car keys with a muttered, “Fine.”

In moments, the fire cracked cheerfully as it began gobbling up the old paper and a box of mildew, and mouse-pooped-upon clothing that looked like it survived since

the 80s.

Meredith dragged out another box, one full of what looked like old homework from a kid and began to add the contents to the roaring inferno.

They sorted as they went, but for the most part, everything they came across seemed doomed for the fire.

Jimothy arrived with beer, soon, and they seemed to almost gain a familiar pattern in their group.

The guys hauled out boxes while Meredith manned the fire, going through each filthy box to be sure they weren't accidentally burning buried treasure.

Rubbing her nose against her sleeve to stop sweat from trickling off the tip, she wondered if the house even held any treasures, or if they would only find trash.

So far? Just trash, but luckily most of it seemed burnable—which would save them a ton on dumpsters.

“We’ve made a path in your bedroom,” Bodie said, popping a beer tab after dropping another box of newspapers at her feet. “Should be big enough to drop a twin sized air mattress, at least.”

Meredith couldn't think of a single redeeming factor for whatever bed hid further into the depths of her bedroom, so it sounded fine to her. She would have to do something about the smell, but so far, the cameraman, Slater Banks, hadn't stopped talking or filming her for even a second so far.

Slater, she learned, normally filmed pornos, so the pilot for the show was a welcome change for him.

He seemed to enjoy close-ups, zooming in as a child's old homework from nineteen seventy something was consumed next to a dry-rotted and mildew or rat urine-soaked Raggedy Andy.

Part of the reason he liked the new gig was he could talk, which they frowned upon in porn since it could ruin the mood.

Meredith wiped sweat from her brow and tugged over another urine-soaked box, raising a brow at his joyful patter.

Probably easier to be the one holding the camera rather than hauling or burning the gross stuff, she decided.

She almost forgot his presence after a while, half tuning him out enough that she didn't notice when he stopped talking. When she did, she glanced back to find his camera very clearly and closely focused on her ass. "What the hell?" she demanded, swatting at the lens.

Slater at least had the decency to blush, before he explained, "Sorry, I know when I see a money shot, just saying."

Heat flooded her own cheeks as she wasn't sure whether to feel complimented or not. Before she could decide, Bodie dropped another box down next to her and said, "Go have a beer, Red, I'll take over for a minute."

"Red," she asked, wondering if he meant because she blushed at first, because the idea of her behind being... She knew better.

"Yeah, your hair," Bodie said, glancing her direction and noticing her red cheeks for the first time. "Did the camera guy manage to make you blush?" he asked.

“He shoots pornos,” she explained, as if it would explain away the color still heating her face.

“No shit?” Bodie asked. “Hey, Jimbob, did you know we have a camera guy who usually does pornos?”

“Jimothy,” corrected Jimothy, still not looking thrilled with his brother’s impulsive decision. “Jimbob? Seriously?”

“Is the other one Jimbob?” asked Bodie generously, as Jeremiah came out the back door with another basket.

“Are we allowed to punch him?” Jimothy asked Slater.

Meredith, happy not to be the focus of attention anymore, took his advice and cracked open a beer. Her shoulder muscles ached, her lower back throbbed, sweat left her feeling raw under her arms and breasts, and on her neck.

The cold beer slid down her throat a bit like a healing potion, if not as good. She chugged the first and opened a second before she realized all the men gaped at her.

“I thought you were talking about punching each other,” she pointed out.

“Bro, you cannot just chug an entire glass bottle of IPA like that in a crowd of men and not expect us to stop and appreciate,” Bodie said, leering.

She flicked him off. “Were you not allowed to film punching him? What did I miss?” she asked before taking another swig of beer. If she drank it fast enough, her mind might be blurry enough to face the grossness of her bedroom.

“We’re going for PG13,” explained Slater. “So, yeah, all swearing will get bleeped

and anything like fighting or other inappropriate behavior won't be filmed. The livestream basically has a delay, so subscribers won't realize they're behind, but we would have time to make minor corrections."

"Is there a laugh track?" Meredith asked, but in her defense, most witches didn't find themselves spending a day doing manual labor.

"Yes, actually!" Slater said with excitement, clearly not picking up on her sarcasm. "We have lots of room to add sounds, including music overlay, if the budget allows, depending on subscribers."

"Fantastic," Meredith said. "If we're not allowed to punch Bodie, can we smother him in his sleep?"

Slater seemed flustered, at a loss because he didn't expect someone to ask to kill a competitor, apparently.

Meredith smirked, glancing at Bodie, but he didn't seem nervous about her empty threat.

Instead, his head tilted, and he seemed to consider her carefully, as if his first impression might have been off with her.

She snorted. Since not one of them would ever guess she was a witch, she figured a lot of their first impressions were more than a little off when it came to her.

Slater finally found his words, explaining with fervor, "There will be still-frame cameras focused on each of your beds for the nighttime subscribers, so they don't miss a second, but there will never be a camera in the bathroom, unless to film while you're working there. Your contracts?—"

“Do you honestly think a bunch of influencers off a social media app read the fine print, my guy?” Bodie asked, laughing. “Do you honestly believe the Jimbobs can read ?”

“Seriously, I want to punch that guy,” Jeremiah said to his brother.

“Same,” said Meredith raising a hand as if to add her vote. “If they decide to let you, I’m willing to look the other way.”

Bodie flushed and shifted from foot to foot.

Meredith saw a few of his videos online, so she knew his caustic and snide remarks were part of his trademark—along with his savvy and city-slick styling of modern spaces.

Usually, though, he wasn’t living with the people he sniped at, preferring to yell at his camera guys or other crew.

If he wants to work with us, he will have to come up with a different technique, Meredith thought. The chances of any of them actually helping him or trying to make his life easier were zero to nothing currently.

She wasn’t sure why she so easily considered the Jimbobs a part of her team.

She caught the thought, and then immediately chastised herself for using Bodie’s awful nickname.

It would take her a while to be able to tell Jeremiah and Jimothy apart, but in her defense, the two brothers shared a similar build and eye color, as well as hair.

The only actual differences seemed to be the amount of wrinkles around the older

one's eyes and perhaps in the number of grey hairs dotting his brown locks.

If she remembered correctly, Jeremiah was the older brother, but so far, that was the most she knew.

She would do better, she decided, taking another long gulp of beer before dropping the bottle into the box they designated as recycling and grabbing another beer. Since they were her teammates, she should take the time to get to know them.

Not teammates, she reminded herself again. Although she would be living with the three men for the next month, they weren't her teammates or roommates—they were her competitors. That didn't mean, though, she couldn't make temporary alliances to better her chances.

Alliances could mean the difference between winning or losing, if we have to vote on stuff. She watched a lot of reality television, and she hoped it would give her an edge over the men. Well, that and my magic.

Since no one punched Bodie, she decided the brothers weren't willing to give up the entire competition for the pleasure, either, and she knew she wouldn't do it, so she turned to the camera man and noticed the woman.

Her hair was long, nearly to her waist and straggly, about half of it faded brown and the other half greying dramatically, as if she dyed it at some point then just stopped, letting the natural hair grow freely. She wore a bathrobe over a buttoned-up nightgown, and she looked...

Pissed, Meredith decided.

"Why are you burning my things?" the woman demanded.

The camera turned to focus on her, as did all three of her competitors. Once the woman had everyone's attention, she threw her hands in the air then smashed them down. "Stop burning my things!"

When she raised her arms, the entire stack of their bonfire rose up in the air as if airlifted by a crane or something.

The camera swung around to it just in time for the woman to slam her hands down, making all of the fire crash and spray, pieces of flaming fabric, paper, wood, and debris all raining down on them.

Meredith ducked for cover, surprised when Bodie hovered above her, trying to bodyblock her from the disaster. Once the fire all settled, catching a few weeds on fire, they all looked around, completely baffled.

"Where did she go?" Bodie asked, his fists clenched as if he was ready to do physical battle with the tiny old woman.

"Was she a witch?" Meredith asked aloud, before catching herself and adding, "I mean, how else did she pick up a bonfire and throw it like that?"

"I think it was a ghost!" Slater said with way too much enthusiasm than his words deserved. He quickly rewound the video before flipping the screen so they could all see her clearly there, and then vanished when he focused on where she was before she threw the fire.

"Are you suggesting the absolutely gross hoarder house also has ghosts?" Meredith asked, expecting someone to disagree, to explain why she was wrong.

Instead, they all stared at each other, shellshocked, while Meredith chugged another beer.

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chapter two

In the bedroom, Meredith looked at the towers of stuff surrounding the twin air mattress on the floor and sighed.

They couldn't close the door, but then again, they couldn't close any doors—still too much debris for that.

The Shatner brothers were camped out in the living room on a queen-size air mattress, since they weren't able to get much more space cleared than that, and Bodie was in the bedroom on the other side of the house, so they did their best to give her what privacy they could.

Not that it stopped creatures—probably just rodents?—from skittering around in the piles going about their nightly business. She could hear them moving, and just the sound made her skin crawl, despite her buzz.

Sighing heavily, she realized if she simply magicked the room clean overnight, the guys would for sure think something was fishy, not to mention the fact they said they had cameras installed in the bedroom.

She peered around the room again, not sure how they would have gotten in to install anything.

Regardless, she was still stuck with non-magical cleaning only, but there was no way she could sleep on that mattress without something keeping an eye on her.

She called her familiar, warning him to sneak into the house and make his way to the bedroom rather than simply teleporting into the room—that way, if there were cameras, some would catch his movement through the house, and Meredith could just explain it away as a friendly stray she decided to take in for the remainder of the contest.

After all, she thought smugly, they didn't have any rules against calling familiars or other uses of magical gifts—part of the reason she entered the contest, actually, since it meant she could sneak under their radar. Meredith wasn't against cheating...

Especially not when it worked. Gary, her black cat familiar, made his way into the bedroom then stared at her with large, green baleful eyes. "It stinks," he proclaimed in greeting.

"I noticed," Meredith said, scrunching her nose. "But I can't think of a good way to spell it away without someone noticing."

"Could you at least make us unable to smell it?" the cat asked, holding a paw over his nose as he curled up on her pillow on the air mattress.

"If you poke holes in that bed, I will shave you bald," Meredith threatened.

"Get with the magic and hush," demanded the cat.

Sneaking her wand out of her pants pocket, she extended it like an antenna. With a little wiggle and chant, "We don't want to smell this mess, give us just one less sense!" she ensured Gary and her at least would not suffer the smells of the odious house.

"By the way," Meredith added, as the cat uncovered his nose and inhaled gratefully. "There's ghosts, too."

“Of course there are,” said Gary with a very un-cat-like eye roll.

The music started around two a.m., and at first, Meredith thought Bodie was the one singing off-key and causing the racket.

When she stumbled out of her bedroom holding Gary, though, she saw him come blinking out of his bedroom as the brothers got up from the bed in the living room.

“What is that noise?” Bodie asked, covering his ears. “I drank too much for this.”

To be entirely honest, so did Meredith, hoping the alcohol would further dull her senses and help her sleep.

The caterwauling continued, though, and they followed another path through the debris to another opened door—open only because the stacks nearest it refused to allow it to close, like most of the other doors.

“Is that the basement?” she asked, peering down the stairs.

“Gotta be,” said one of the Jimbobs. She really needed to remember their actual names.

“Where did you get a cat?” asked the other Jimbob, so she scowled at him.

“Do you want to go first?” she replied, answering his question with a question.

Since he backed up a step in response, Meredith realized she might be the bravest of their group— or at least the most likely to be able to magic my way out of whatever might be in the basement .

It is probably just a raccoon or a skunk , she told herself, meaning I won’t even smell

it if the skunk sprays me before I spot it and can magic it to the forest. A camera won't even notice it .

Meredith tucked the cat closer to her chest and stepped in front of Bodie.

“Ladies first,” she proclaimed, and headed down the stairs.

Only a narrow path remained on the steps, stuff stacked to either side ranging from canning jars to what looked like a box of taxes and bills from 1987.

Gripping Gary with one arm, she used the other to wave in front of her to get the cobwebs as she headed toward the dim light coming from a bulb somewhere in the mysterious stacks below.

A camera person appeared at the top of the stairs right about when they all made it onto the steps but not to the basement floor yet—they kept the group tight. A girl camera person, Meredith noted, thinking it very fair , even if I am the only female in the competition.

“Hey, all, I’m Carmen Singleton, and if I’m totally honest, I didn’t think you would be up to much tonight. You all seemed pretty tired.”

The camerawoman held out a hand to introduce herself as the distant singer sang loudly, “I heard his fiancée got a letter...it told how Billy died that day. The letter said he was a hero. She should be proud, cuz he died that way. I heard she threw the letter awa-a-ay.”

“Who is that?” she asked, shaking Bodie’s hand, since he was closest to her as she propped the camera against her shoulder.

“Great question,” replied Bodie. He circled his thumb around at their group. “We’re

all here and accounted for, which means that is?—”

“Are you serious?” asked Carmen, dropping the camera to her hip to gape at him. “We had decent security on this place, and if you even knew how many camera angles...” She rolled her eyes. “Just know it’s all very big brother , other than when you’re in the shitter.”

“Good to know,” said one of the Jimbobs.

Meredith blew out a breath, silently chastising herself again for using the nickname and reminding herself she should figure out some other distinguishing factor between the brothers.

Then she clutched her cat familiar a bit harder against her chest, as if squeezing him would be like launching a spell cannon or something, and headed down the stairs while they got to know one another.

Two more steps, and she would be at the bottom, possibly able to see around the corner.

“Unless it is another ghost,” replied the other Jimbob, his tone ominous and intoning.

“Ohhh!” squealed Carmen before she held the camera up again. “Say that again, exact same tone, please. Let me get it on camera.”

“Money shot,” joked one of the Jimbobs, and Meredith shot a grin back at him.

At the bottom of the stairs, she realized she couldn’t see around the corner, since another ceiling-tall toppling maze of paths waited at the bottom. “Great,” she muttered. “I’ll go straight.”

“I’ve got left,” Bodie replied automatically, shifting to follow that path.

“Wait!” Carmen yelled. “Who should I follow?”

“Meredith has a better butt,” suggested one of the Jimbobs, and Meredith felt heat flood her cheeks as she headed down the straightest path from the bottom of the stairs. “She’s also the only woman, so…” He shrugged.

Not sure whether or not to feel complimented, Meredith didn’t have long to puzzle over the entire exchange.

In just a few steps, she saw light slicing into the room in a rectangle— must be the garage light beaming through a rectangular basement window, she realized.

A small clearing spilled around a man wearing no pants, one sock, and with an American flag tied to his forehead like a bandana.

“Who the fuck are you?” he demanded, but he swayed on his feet when he tried to square off with Meredith.

She could tell he was either really drunk or on a ton of drugs— possibly both —from the way he couldn’t seem to focus his gaze and his slurred speech.

“The better question is who the fuck are you?” replied Meredith, petting her cat with genuine curiosity. She wasn’t afraid of some doped-up guy, especially since she could freeze him with a paralyzed spell in seconds if he came after her.

“This is my fucking house!” screamed the man, stomping his foot.

“Mom!” he yelled. Then his eyes went wide, his fingers rising to his cheeks like someone about to gouge out their own eyes.

“Oh, fuck, I killed her, didn’t I? I killed her, and I shot her dead.

Did I do it? Did I finally do it? Then why am I still here ? ”

He scrambled around, searched through the piles of debris, as if he might find the answer before he faded to nothing and the piles went still.

For a few long seconds, even Meredith breathed in through her nose because, yes, that was scary as shit . Despite it being terrifying, she knew better than to be afraid of a little haunting. She wasn’t, however, above using any ghosts to scare off her competition.

“That was totally a ghost,” she pointed out the obvious, in case any of them missed it.

Bodie blew out a breath. “Nothing in the contract covered ghost hunting bonuses.”

Carmen paused the camera, leaning back against the corner where she stopped to film the whole exchange. “Holy shit. Like...holy shit. I gotta check and see if I got that on film.”

They all gathered as close as they could within the confines of the hoarder house mess and stared as she rewound the video then played back the ghost—because even on the video, it seemed obvious you could see through the guy.

“Do we get a bonus for that?” Meredith asked, genuinely interested. If she could win a house and a lump sum of money in ghost hunting bonuses, she would be set for a while.

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“I literally have no clue,” Carmen practically squealed. “But I’m pretty sure I’m going to win at least a couple of awards for livestreaming actual proof of life after death.”

The excitement practically vibrated off her, so Meredith reached for her arm, pointing out, “Yeah, but that proof means there are literally ghosts around us, right now, in this creepy basement.”

“I’ve got to call my boss,” Carmen replied, disinterested in the danger with dollar signs shining way too bright in her eyes. “I’m a single mom—do you have any idea what this video is going to do for my family? This is the best night ever.”

She bounded back up the stairs, leaving the competitors in a loose square looking at one another. “Scary ghost,” Meredith pointed out again, in case any of them missed it on the first explanation of events. “We just totally got video of a scary ghost in this house. Are you going to stay?”

“I’m going to be really honest,” said Bodie, leaning back against the nearest pile.

It wobbled precariously but then seemed to find enough balance to support his weight.

“I felt like I lost my spark. I haven’t done the hands-on work of a remodel for ages; instead, being in charge of giving other people directions to follow.

My fame got too big. Why do the actual work if I could command an army, right?

I hoped that this competition would bring back my love of the work.

I got into remodeling because I loved the thrift, loved the adventure of seeing how a project went from ugly as hell to something beautiful... ”

He tapered off, staring nostalgically at what looked like a milk crate full of soggy Reader’s Digests.

“I want that again, if you get me. Somewhere along the way, I got lost in the image of some character I played, so as to your question, no, I’m not scared of a ghost. In fact, it’s one of the most interesting things I can think of happening, if I’m entirely honest with all of you. ”

Meredith blew out a frustrated breath. “I’m not afraid of ghosts, either,” she confessed. “I want the house more than I care about it either way.”

“I’m totally cool with pretending to be terrified and— ahhh!— run out of here squealing,” added Jimothy, and for the first time, the slight gay flip of his wrist and tone of voice when he pretended to scream made her wonder if he wasn’t straight. “This place stinks . Let’s bounce.”

“We’re seeing it through,” replied Jeremiah, his tone stern as he glared at his brother. “Our ratings and numbers have been down, and you know it. Ghosts? We’re going to get a ton of hits off this, and then our merch will sell, and that means security. Who walks away from guaranteed security?”

Meredith couldn’t argue with his logic, even if it really made it inconvenient if none of them would run home scared. “So, what you’re saying is we’re still all in this together?”

“Sounds like it,” Bodie said, clapping a friendly hand on Jimothy’s shoulder.

“Though if I’m honest, you didn’t really give scared with the squealing.”

“Fair,” Jimothy said with a shrug. “I’ve seen weirder. Have you been to Iowa?” he asked, leading the way up the stairs.

Nothing else disturbed their sleep, or at least nothing else managed to wake Meredith past the combination of alcohol and exhaustion.

When she stretched in the morning, she disrupted Gary, who basically slept on top of her to avoid touching any of the debris to either side of the bed.

“Thanks for guarding me from the things that went bump in the night,” she said to the cat familiar.

His jaw popped with a yawn. “You’re cute, witch. Unless it crawled on us, I was out, too. Do you think any more ghosts serenaded in the basement about killing their mothers like Norman Bates last night?”

She nudged him off her chest with an elbow. “It wasn’t that scary of a ghost,” she pointed out.

“That was totally terrifying,” argued the cat.

“Bet your ass you’ve gotten a ton of hits and probably at least a couple of brand deal offers.

Whether it is people who want you to wear their clothes while you’re here or people who want you to eat their weight loss gummies, you’re about to make bank from your influencer status. ”

“You’re kidding,” she said, but her throat went a little dry while she searched her

name on the internet.

“ Twice yesterday you caught evidence of the paranormal. Either this show has a way better sfx budget than I heard about or you’re about to make soooooo much money,” the cat proclaimed, nodding as if it was a sure thing.

He wasn’t wrong about one thing, though.

Her email overflowed with offers—some legitimate businesses treating her with respect and others total scams. She looked at one which offered to use her art as inspiration for a special piece for a commission and hit it with the spam filter.

“That wasn’t part of my plan,” she pointed out to the cat.

“More attention means they’re more likely to pour more money into more cameras, so they don’t miss a second of the action. ”

“Well, yeah,” the cat agreed with an impressive eye roll.

“I can’t use my magic if they have a camera filming me,” she pointed out, wiggling her wand to make a box full of garbage vanish in a pop. “I have to literally do all of the work yesterday the old-fashioned way—with muscle and sweat.”

The cat started laughing before she finished. When she did, he gasped for air enough to say, “Sounds like fuck around and find out, if I’m entirely honest. After all, you wanted a free house, and don’t they always say there’s no such thing as a free lunch?”

She flicked off the cat, as she entered the kitchen area, or where she hoped there might be a kitchen area.

She could find a faucet, buried between two towering piles near what she figured

might be another window, once they cleared the stuff in front of it.

The sink was full of moldy dishes, though.

“We can’t even make coffee here,” she pointed out. “Not at this point. We’re utterly reliant on the filming company until we get this room gutted.”

“I’m not really worried about that,” Bodie said, entering the kitchen from another pathway.

He wiggled his cell phone at her with a beaming smile stretched across his face.

“Have you seen these numbers? We’re so golden.

I swear, we could probably get away with not even renovating this place, we could just ghost hunt and make a ton. ”

“I couldn’t live in this for that long,” pointed out Jimothy entering from another pathway. “My car is outside, if we can’t find staff. I’ll get breakfast. C’mon.”

Meredith shrugged at Bodie and followed him as Jeremiah appeared, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “Good morning, team!” he chirped cheerfully.

Meredith scowled at him. She could do a lot, but she couldn’t fake happy before coffee.

In the driveway, the tiny little car reminded Meredith oddly of a cheerfully happy clown car. It had a tall top, so Jimothy easily slid behind the wheel as his brother slid into the passenger side. The mint green threw her off a little, but she had to admit—cute car.

“Do you even know where we find breakfast in this little town?” asked Bodie as he slid in next to her and buckled his seatbelt. “Or do you want me to try to navigate with my phone?”

“We’re actually about five minutes away from the house,” admitted Jeremiah.

“Which is why we heard it was haunted and probably had a much better idea what we were signing on for,” added Jimothy. “I’ll admit that with no cameras in the car.”

“Agreed,” said Jeremiah. “So why have you been trying to back out, considering we planned this for like two years?”

Jimothy sighed, shooting his brother a glance before meeting Meredith’s gaze in the rearview mirror.

She wasn’t sure why, but she thought he looked to her for support or maybe understanding.

“We didn’t sign up to work on a hoarder house,” he pointed out.

“I’m pretty sure this place is hazardous to our health, physically, not to mention the obvious ghost situation. ”

“This is a huge opportunity,” his brother began.

“Back up,” Bodie interrupted. “When you said you guys knew about the house, and the ghost situation, are you telling me you could tell us about the ghosts we saw and anything else that might be waiting in that house?”

Jimothy sighed and Jeremiah pointed, so he turned into a gravel driveway and into a parking spot. “We’ll tell you everything we know. Level the playing field, so to

peak.”

“Good deal,” Bodie said.

Meredith didn’t say anything at all. She would love it if they all confessed tons, but no way was she telling them her secret...

A witch isn’t that stupid.

chapter three

They ordered breakfasts, though Meredith thought Bodie ordered enough for three with a Lumberjack Breakfast Combo as well as two breakfast sandwiches and a side of bacon. She picked more modestly—just eggs benedict—while the brothers each ordered egg-white omelets and gluten-free toast.

“Never too soon to worry about heart health,” Jimothy added with a sage nod.

“I remember reading about the son or grandson,” Jimothy said, smacking a hand down on the table with a grin.

“Vietnam, right? He shot his mother, which matched our little ghost last night. He didn’t mean to do it, they said.

Mental illness and drugs, or something like that.

She was trying to take care of him after the war, but he came home with a ton of trauma, and the government basically ignored vets while the community leered at them, so he went whackadoo.”

“Basically,” Jeremiah agreed, with a vague tilt of his hand in a sort-of gesture. “Kind of a gross summary of events, but anyway, somewhere between when it got built for the good doctor and one of his kids shooting his mother, they nicknamed the house the home of a thousand souls.”

“Sounds dramatic,” Bodie pointed out, happy when his first plates began arriving at

the table. Before he dug in, he added, “So far, we’ve seen what? Maybe two ghosts?”

“Yeah, but the story says the house is a ghost trap,” explained Jimothy. “It went from whackadoo doctor’s family home to being used as body storage during the Civil War or something, where a bunch of the other ghosts came from.”

“Not body storage,” Jeremiah interrupted in between inhaling his own food.

“The ground was too frozen in winter to bury civil-war dead, so basically, instead of trying to break their shovels digging in frozen earth, they would just pile up the bodies in a house near the cemetery until the ground thawed up again.”

“Gross,” Meredith said, wrinkling her nose.

“One of the stories says there’s a ceiling in one of the rooms with a ghost blood stain, a mark on the ceiling where they stored the bodies above and their fluids soaked through from the attic to be seen from below,” Jimothy added, with a creepy grin.

“No matter how many times it’s been painted, the stain still bleeds through. ”

“Or...” said his brother with far less theatrics and a bored expression, “There’s a hole in the roof somewhere and we’ll find an ungodly large, molded watermark that might fall on us.”

“There’s that, too,” Jimothy agreed with a shrug.

“So, let me get this straight, Jimbobs,” Bodie began.

“Seriously,” Jimothy said with a snarl. “You’ve gotta stop with that. I’ll wear a fucking nametag, if you’re too stupid to tell us apart, but knock it off.”

“I’m honestly not even doing it on purpose at this point,” Bodie admitted blowing out a frustrated breath. “See, that’s what I meant when I said I lost my mojo. I spend so much time playing this character, I don’t even mean half of what comes out of my mouth.”

“So knock it off,” Meredith suggested helpfully.

“You make it sound so simple, like don’t look down,” Bodie said with a sigh. “But it made me so much money being him.”

“I’ll make it plenty simple for you, Bodie,” offered Jeremiah again. “Call us Jimbobs one more time, and they’ll have to cut the footage of one of us punching you in the face because it is well deserved at this point.”

Bodie sighed shaking his head. “Fair enough.”

“You were saying?” Jimothy asked with an elegant wave of his fork.

“We’ve got some lady who looks fairly new there, from what I saw by the fire,” Bodie began.

“I’m betting that was our last owner,” Meredith suggested, nibbling the end of a piece of toast Jimothy passed her with jam thoughtfully. “You know, the hoarder who filled the place up with stuff.”

“It probably isn’t all her stuff,” Jimothy said. “I mean, if we’re assuming someone agoraphobic owned it last, which would fit the state of disrepair of the estate, she likely started with a pretty good stash of the previous owners’ stuff and then added on to it.”

“From what I heard,” Jeremiah inserted, “And this was just some sloppy internet

sleuthing rather than me doing a true deep dive, so take it as a grain of salt, but anyway, no one actually ever moved out. So theoretically, we have stuff all the way back to the 1800s or something, or at least the possibility of it, in this trash pile.”

Meredith considered it, taking a long sip of her coffee.

“We should hire an estate auctioneer, or someone to sell stuff on the internet auction sites for us while we’re doing this,” she suggested finally.

“That would mean sharing our cut,” Jimothy said. “If we work together, we split the cut at the end, possibly even the sale of the house, and go our separate ways with enough money to buy some other place.”

“We would have to agree to that in advance, though,” Jeremiah pointed out. “Preferably away from cameras.”

“I’m in,” said Bodie easily. “A ghost trap won’t scare me off, since it likely just means more promotional opportunities moving forward and increased viewership.

I can only see money there. I disagree with hiring someone, though.

I’m good at hands on, or I used to be, before they hired armies of guys to do my work.

I want to work on the actual house, when we get to that point, so I would rather not be our internet sales guy. ”

“I actually would love that position,” Jimothy said with a little finger wiggle.

“I’m great with inventories, know all the best auction sites for finding cheap bags this season...

I can handle auctioning or selling off anything we find as well as running some kind of local sale, I think.

We'll have a walk-through sale, once we've got the place gutted.

There's a chance ghosts will come out and interact with the people shopping, and we're talking lots of hits online then. ”

“I would not want to be the one responsible for the home insurance on this place,” Bodie agreed.

Jeremiah held up a hand, ticking off points on his fingertips.

“So, we have Bodie on actual construction and ordering supplies—they go together, right? Okay, and we've got Jimothy on selling off the hoard of antiques I'm sure we'll find among the odious stacks of garbage. Meredith, what's your specialty?”

Magic, she thought, blowing out a breath, but instead she said, “For now, I can help man the fire pit and sort to dumpsters. Once we get to the remodel, I'm great with style and paint.”

She could do a whole lot better if they let her wiggle her wand and complete a room in a second, but she didn't figure the cameras would let her get away with doing that...much.

“Fantastic,” Jeremiah said. “As you noticed, I'm good with organizing, so aside from being point person for everyone else to go to when things go wrong, I'm going to try to handle the ghost situation and keep us in constant dumpsters.”

“That is going to be a job unto itself,” warned his brother.

“I’m aware,” Jeremiah said with a sigh.

Just then, the bell above the door jangled as a harried looking Slater stumbled into the room, a camera flopping on his shoulder. “You guys are supposed to let us film you at all times,” he said in greeting, panting between words. “We’ve missed, like, an hour of footage.”

“Oops,” said Meredith, utterly unrepentant.

“Do you have a cat now?” Slater asked, tilting his head at her in confusion. “And why is it in the middle of the craft services table swatting anyone who tries to get cheese?”

“I’ll take care of the cat once we’re back at the house,” Meredith said, standing. The guys stood too, Bodie moving to the register to take care of their bill while the rest of them headed toward the cheerful mint green car. “Sorry we freaked you out, Slater. Any other good ghosties since we left?”

“Actually, yes, but I’m not supposed to tell you about it because it would probably freak you out,” Slater admitted, flipping his camera in his hands like a baton as he headed for his car, parked next to theirs. “Want to hear anyway, so you can be super scared?”

“Hit me,” offered Bodie, despite the shiver that tracked up Meredith’s spine.

“It was a weeping woman,” said Slater. “Carmen caught her at the end of her shift. And when she noticed Carmen filming her crying, she stood up and ran at the camera, screaming, her eyes black until she vanished through the wall behind Carmen. Ran right through her, and Carmen said her whole body went to ice like the air was sucked out of her for a second. Great stuff. We’re going to make so much money.”

“We really are,” Bodie agreed, clapping a hand on his shoulder.

Meredith pulled her phone out of her pocket once she got her seatbelt on and opened her email, not surprised to find that although she missed out on the latest ghost footage, her email got hit again by another flood of offers.

Crossing one leg over the other, she tuned out her companions and decided to agree to a few of the sponsorships and set up a few brand deals while she had the time to herself.

Couldn't hurt to make a few extra dollars from the publicity, right?

By the next morning, they managed to clear out most of the kitchen, their fire grew to be about ten feet tall, and they all looked more like NASCAR drivers than regular people.

"Did you really take the sponsorship from the weight loss gummies?" Meredith asked as she tended the fire in a branded hoodie when Jimothy brought her out another box.

"Did you look at how much they were offering?" he replied, scowling at her. "I wouldn't make fun of me, not in those cute fuzzy earbuds, ya furry."

"I actually like them," she admitted. "So far, I've only accepted deals with brands I actually like or use in my real life. Can you say that?"

She tossed an old catalog into the fire, and it probably weighed nearly fifty pounds between moisture and sheer glossy pages. She followed it with a phone book, watching as both got gobbled up between mattress springs.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:12 pm

“I can’t say that...” said Jimothy, his gaze distant. “I accepted one from a dick enhancement company. I’m not enhancing my dick, in case you’re curious. I just like money.”

“Zero judgement from me,” said Bodie, hefting his own box into the area for sorting. “Do you know, there are butt plugs?—”

“Excuse me!” a woman called, carefully picking her way through the overgrown back yard.

She wore a flowered dress, gloves, and a cute little hat—straight out of the nineteen fifties, if Meredith was entirely accurate.

She wondered if the woman would get ticks from the grass or if she was another of their ghost neighbors. “Do you have a moment?”

The woman seemed to be holding a casserole dish, and her eyes kept darting to their fire before her lips pinched. Meredith noticed it, but then again, she didn’t trust many humans. “Can we help you with something?” she asked the woman.

As she got close enough, the woman held out a white casserole dish with blue flowered print on it. She wrapped towels around either end, suggesting the dish would be hot. “I brought you a little something to welcome you all to the neighborhood. I’m your neighbor to the left, Patty Cruchbullyard.”

Jimothy, closest to her shoved casserole dish, accepted it carefully before shooting Meredith a panicked look. He mouthed the word help , and she realized southern-

styled church ladies probably weren't his strong suit.

"That was so nice of you, Patty. I'm Meredith Cappybarabara, and we're here with Hoarder Hell House Home Improvements, a competitive show being aired on one of the streaming platforms as well as to special subscribers.

Although one of us might end up being your future neighbor, we're unfortunately not yet up to receiving guests, as I'm sure you can imagine.

We're still gutting the house." Meredith added her best society smile while shaking the woman's hand with far too much vigor.

The woman's lips pinched, but she didn't back down from Meredith's confidence. "Speaking of that..."

"Of what?" asked Jimothy, because although he might not be great with church ladies, he recognized catty when it started.

"The gutting of the house. Behind you, is that a fire I see there?"

She pointed, but the bonfire towered over ten feet tall behind Meredith and roared. It wasn't like they were hiding it, or the belching black clouds of smoke billowing up from their constant flame.

"It sure is," Meredith said, her voice full of the same hokey pokey, po-dunk flavor she heard in Patty's tone. "Real astute of you to notice it, actually. We're just burning off some paper and wood we've found in the house so far, as per local ordinances."

Patty's nose wrinkled, an absolutely adorable expression Meredith instantly hated.

"Those sure do look like mattress springs behind you, young lady. And I do believe I

can spot what honestly looks like a tire. You folks aren't burning garbage illegally, are you? Because that wouldn't be legal at all."

"What a ridiculous conjecture," Bodie said, lying with ease.

"I thought so. Nice meeting you folks, and looking forward to you joining the neighborhood," Patty said, picking her way across the field.

Bodie grabbed a beer, popping the top. "Might as well get comfortable out here by the fire for a bit, boys." His eyebrows rose when his gaze flicked to Meredith. "And girl."

"Why is that?" asked Jimothy, beginning to sort through another box and toss stuff into the fire. They at least had a pile of things that might be sellable growing, finally, so it wasn't just straight trash anymore at least.

"Because that nice, flowered-dress casserole lady will call the cops or the fire department on us," Bodie said, dropping into a lawn chair near the fire. "Bet you five bucks."

Meredith grabbed a beer, since it sounded about right to her. "Don't worry," she said, smirking. "I've got this."

Sure enough, a few minutes later, they barely forked into the casserole when a red fire truck pulled into their overgrown driveway, lights on, sirens blaring.

Firefighters poured off the vehicle, bringing a hose with them as they raced to the backyard.

Before they could make it to quench the fire, though, lightning crashed through the trees, striking the middle of the fire, and exploding the bonfire into another rain of

burning projectiles.

Slater pissed his actual pants, his camera still focused on the space where the fire had been moments before, and an actual burned crater remained in the ground.

His camera still rolled, still focused on the scene, but his mouth gaped open, and he blinked at them as if trying to make sense of reality.

The firefighters all froze, some still holding parts of a large hose, some with their heads tilted in confusion, none sure what to do about a random lightning strike.

Even her three competitors stared, frozen with varying degrees of shock on their faces, instead of ducking out of the way of the raining fire and ash.

Then everyone seemed to return into motion at once. “Did you see that?” Jeremiah and Jeremy gasped, grabbing each other’s arms and practically dancing in shock. “I’ve never seen lightning so close before. And we’re still alive!”

“What the actual fuck?” said Bodie, completely baffled as he stroked his chin and considered their former bonfire.

The firefighters seemed equally perplexed, but their leader shook off his confusion the fastest, approaching the crater and the group of rehabbers with a stern expression. “Were you folks illegally burning garbage out here?” he asked, as if recalling why they even came in the first place.

“Where?” asked Meredith sweetly.

He gestured, sputtered, and then put his hands on his hips. “We all clearly saw a huge bonfire before that lightning bolt hit, ma’am, and we got a call from a concerned neighbor.”

“I’m sure you did,” Meredith agreed easily, “But as you can see...” She gestured again; in case he missed it.

“We’ve just been the victims of a completely random act of God himself, and we are of course distressed in this time of natural disaster.

What are we to do with this now burning pit, which might still smolder for days, because of this natural lightning strike, a common occurrence in this area during this time of year? ”

She worded her question specifically, and the head fireman, with his larger hat and more dignified jacket, noticed the specificity.

He tucked his thumbs into his waistband, considering his enemy carefully from head to toe for a few long seconds before responding.

“It probably will smolder, so any calls from the neighbors would be ignored, at least for the next couple of days.”

“Tragic, really,” Meredith said, glancing back at the hole in the earth again.

“What were the chances of lightning hitting in the backyard? We even have a lightning rod up on the house, above the widow’s peak,” she reminded him.

“Is there something more we can do as property owners to ensure this kind of thing doesn’t happen again in the future? ”

Probably blinking innocently at him was a stretch too far, even for him, because the firefighter pinched his lips at her before propping his hands on his hips. “If we do have to come back, I guarantee we’ll be here to write you a citation,” he pointed out.

“Fair enough,” she agreed, beaming at him. “Thank you so much for coming out to check on us today. We really do appreciate it, and all you do for the community.”

“We’re going to have to try to put this out to the best of our ability, first,” he said with a smile that seemed particularly devious as he signaled to his crew. “Although I realize it might reignite after we leave, we still have to do what we can. You surely understand.”

Her lips pinched. She couldn’t stop him, but she would be using magic to get the fire going again rather than lighter fluid, so pooh on him and his attempt to stop her.

She watched as the firemen carefully put out the fire, stomping on areas that smoked or smoldered, before packing up their truck and backing out of the driveway.

Once they left, she turned to her team with determination. “First, we take advantage of the fact they put out the fire to get the metal, like the mattress bedframe springs, out of the fire pit. Let’s get them all hauled into the dumpsters, refill our pit, and light her back up again.”

“Won’t the neighbor just call the fire department again?” Bodie asked, clearly not understanding the negotiation Meredith just pulled off.

“No, because it was a lightning strike and not a fire, so it is likely to have caught things like roots and other underground bits on fire as well as the surface fire the fire department put out. Any calls to the fire department about this property for at least the next couple of days will be disregarded as likely lightning-related smoldering smoke from the strike.” She grinned, still proud of her idea.

“But seriously,” said Jimothy, grabbing some metal and beginning to drag it. “What are the chances of lightning hitting our bonfire right as the fire department came? Do you think one of the ghosts did that? I’ve never heard of ghosts manipulating

lightning before.”

He glanced around, seeming more than a little creeped out.

Although Meredith wanted to encourage his fears, hoping he would drop out, they made an agreement to work together.

With a sigh, she told him, “I don’t think it was ghosts.

I think it was karma. I think we just got really lucky, so I wouldn’t worry about it, if I was you. ”

She couldn’t exactly admit it was a spell, and she did it with a simple wave of her wand behind her leg, even if she wanted to comfort him.

Jimothy breathed out a sigh of relief as he headed for the dumpsters, apparently taking her explanation as believable.

Meredith felt a hand at her waist and turned to find Jeremiah closely behind her.

“That was really nice of you,” he said, and she noticed again the way his eyes crinkled just a little at the corners.

Nice eyes, she thought, a warm color she could kind of melt into, if she let herself.

“No problem,” she brushed it off, intending to back away from him, but he squeezed her a bit closer, so she met his eyes again, their breath lingering.

A long shiver went through her body— awareness?

She hadn’t wanted a man for so long, the sensation almost seemed foreign to her, but

she recognized the slow curl of heat in her nether regions.

“Thank you, regardless,” he said, giving her nose a nuzzle before releasing her and stepping away.

Meredith practically sagged, wanting to fan her face like one of those women in movies.

Her gaze met Bodie’s across the fire pit, and she noticed his knowing gaze.

She stuck her tongue out at him unrepentant. He winked at her.

“I see you, too,” Bodie said, after Jeremiah tucked back into the house to get more burnable items. “In case you’re curious. Haven’t caught a moment like Jimbob just did, but I’m watching you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Meredith asked with a scowl, patting Gary’s head before she returned to sorting through boxes. The latest box seemed to be mostly filled with clothing, but all too mildewed or dry rotted to be sellable. “You should be watching your work.”

“I think you know what I mean, Red,” Bodie said, hefting another old catalog into the pit. He turned to head back into the house for another load, but he added, “And I think you feel it, too.”

Meredith swallowed hard, focusing on the muscle strain of hefting things into the fire and, in the few seconds when no one was around, she reignited the thing, casting both a drying spell and lighter fluid over their pile in a rush.

If she focused on the work, she didn’t have to consider his puzzling words, or the shiver of sensations caused by Jeremiah nuzzling his nose against hers.

Who even did that, anyway? It was so ridiculous.

So why did she shiver again, just remembering it? The problem with hard physical work was it gave her mind plenty of time to spin fairytales and make up stories that were literally impossible in the real world.

For instance, her imagination could easily imagine Jeremiah backing her up against a wall, pinning her hands above her head before he practically growled and tasted her lips.

Their kiss would linger, until she practically struggled to get free of his restraining hands to touch him, but instead of releasing her, he passed her to Bodie, who gripped her ass and lifted her into his arms, grinding her body against his hardness.

Pleasure would arc up her spine, then Jeremiah could cup her breasts from behind, stretching her between them?—

“Your face is getting pretty flushed,” Bodie pointed out, dropping a box near her with a thud that startled her. “Should you go take a break?”

She stood, brushing her hands down her pant legs, cheeks on fire, because even though he couldn’t read her mind, she knew what she just imagined. “Probably,” she agreed, since cold water on her face couldn’t hurt.

“What were you thinking about, Red?” he asked in a lower voice, one that caressed across her flesh like a touch.

“Nothing!” she replied, way too quickly.

“You let me know when you’re interested in turning some of those thoughts into reality,” he said, glancing back as Jeremiah exited the house with another load. “I’m

betting farm boy would be into it, too, if we asked.”

Did he just suggest a threesome? she wondered, then she darted into the house, practically dizzy from the amount of fire in her cheeks.

Splashing cold water on her face helped some, even if it did mean looking at the moldering sink again.

She entered the contest to win a house, she reminded herself.

If she also won money, great. She most certainly didn't come to hook up with two guys...

chapter four

Opening the garage on the third day was Meredith's bright idea, and she coughed at the dust released once they managed to get the sliding door to raise despite the overgrown weeds and brambles.

More stuff piled all the way to the garage door—a freezer, Meredith wondered, considering the white rectangle to the far right of the garage.

“In theory,” she began, “If we gut this out, we could keep the sellable stuff in here while we worked on rehabbing the interior.”

“It's not a bad idea,” Bodie agreed, scratching his chin in his characteristic thinking expression.

“And it even looks like we could take a three-pronged approach. There's the garage door here, a man door at the back of the garage, and another on the side nearest the fire pit.

Everything comes out, sellable stuff onto the driveway, burnable to the pit, and dumpster into the hauler. ” He nodded, satisfied with the plan.

“Remember being about, oh, I don't know...twenty or so, and facing off with this kind of project? Just seems to me there were less repercussions back then, if you get me,” Jeremiah admitted, stretching as he looked at the towering stacks of stuff.

“I heard it used to be a carriage house,” said his brother. “Could be more antiques.”

“If we find a body in this house,” Jeremiah said, and Bodie reached for a box.

“Dibs on not being the one to open that freezer,” Bodie called out, heading for the fire.

“Dibs,” called both brothers, so Meredith sighed at their childishness as she began to pick her way through to the freezer.

Luckily for them, it only held one box of entirely melted popsicles and a mystery meat blob long gone green, so Meredith helped Jimothy push the freezer onto the driveway where Jeremiah began to hose it out.

“If it still works, we can sell this for a pretty good amount,” he pointed out, and Meredith nodded.

“I think I see a mower, maybe some other mechanical bits in there too,” she told him.

“Giant wrench things, like they use on semi-trucks or school busses, too. I believe they go for a decent amount as well, but you may want to set those items aside for the local sale rather than trying to auction them off.”

“I think I found my first real antique!” called Bodie, his voice tinged with actual excitement.

Everyone loped over to look inside the box he held, where it looked like a pair of dueling pistols and the accompanying bits were stored in dry rotted velvet casing. “Is it real or some kind of film or play prop?” Meredith asked.

“We’ll have to get an antique guy out here to look at stuff, find out for sure,” Bodie said. “Not my area of expertise.”

“Me either,” admitted Jimothy. “But from a ton of episodes of Antiques Roadshow , I’m going to guess this is worth a decent amount. I found a bunch of bicentennial glass, too. Score!”

“I’ll kill you all!” screamed a voice, just as a man ran at them full speed, brandishing a sword. He wore a uniform—probably Civil War era, if Meredith had to make a guess—but right as they all screamed, he ran through them and vanished.

They breathed heavily for a few minutes, the dueling guns still clenched in Bodie’s hands as if a lifeline. “I’m not going to lie, they do freak me out,” he admitted. “But they can’t do anything to us, can they.”

Jimothy and Jeremiah shared a glance then reached for boxes at the same moment. Meredith noticed, so she asked, “The ghosts here can’t actually do anything to us, right?”

Jimothy sat his box down with a huff, placing one hand dramatically on his hip for emphasis.

“In reality, no! They’re ghosts, so what could they possibly do to live, corporeal creatures.

That said, rumors circulate locally about this house, which is part of the reason it sat abandoned after the last person moved or died or whatever happened to her.

Ghost stories, mostly, the stuff of urban legends that kids tell each other around the fire to try to look cool. ”

Slater zoomed in on his face, and Jimothy swatted at the camera in annoyance. “Too close, man” he muttered, to which Slater simply said sorry, then resumed circling him for his shots.

“Anyway, there are stories about kids who dared other kids to stay the night here and died. There are stories about people who had their car break down and ended up coming to the house for shelter in a storm and died... It’s an old house.

They all have a thousand stories, right? ” Jimothy finished with a shrug.

In the distance, thunder rumbled, the afternoon thunderstorms threatening despite the heat of the day beating down on them. The timing made Meredith shiver, as if it boded ill.

“Sure,” Bodie agreed easily enough. “Tons of old houses have ghost stories or legends built up about their general disarray, and a lot of houses, like Remington Mansion on the west coast, make a lot of tourism bucks off people’s curiosity about the unknown.

That said, how many houses get named a ghost trap?

Neither of you really explained that one to my satisfaction yet. ”

Digging deeper into a box that seemed to mostly be a collection of old roller skates, Meredith glanced up in interest. She would be lying if she pretended the idea of a ghost trap didn’t catch her attention, too, but she never heard of such a thing.

Surely, if they existed, she would’ve heard of them before coming to the competition, right?

“You have to understand,” began Jimothy, his storyteller tone activating again, “That this is all based on local mythology, urban myths, and superstitions from the Appalachian Mountains. They say there are caves here so old, there aren’t even bone remains in them because the caves existed before animals formed bone. ”

Meredith cycled the palm of her hand in a speed-it-up gesture. “Less setup, although I appreciate the theatrics.”

“So anyway, it’s mirrors, really. Supposedly the Menger hotel in San Antonio is a ghost trap, too, and it’s how they set up the mirrors in the house.

They reflect back on each other, causing basically tunnels of nothing that the other side can use to transport themselves back and forth.

” Jimothy shrugged. “I can’t really explain it better than that. ”

“You can’t even see any mirrors in this house,” Meredith pointed out. “We literally haven’t found a single one yet.”

He shrugged again. “You asked me for the story, not for me to explain how the magic worked.”

She shivered again, despite the heat, because of his mention of magic.

So far that day, she never got a moment free of cameras to magic anything away or speed up her work beyond that which she could physically complete.

Although she knew she might have a good shot against the competition without her magic, she would be unstoppable with it, so she needed to start sneaking in more spells.

“I’m going to run to the restroom,” she said to the guys and Slater, who zoomed in on the contents of a box that seemed to be filled with baseball cards.

“Anyone need drinks or anything while I’m in the house?

” They still hadn’t managed to dig their way to the refrigerator, but they had a couple of coolers of drinks stored on the back porch on ice.

“I could use a water,” Bodie replied from deep inside a box to the back of the garage.

“Me, too,” replied Jeremiah, scrubbing sweat off his forehead from by the fireside.

“Nothing for me,” Jimothy said, but his eyes followed her as she headed to the house. If she wasn’t wrong, he suspected something was up with her.

“Not that he would ever guess the truth,” Meredith muttered to Gary, who snaked in between her legs, making it nearly impossible to walk.

“That you’re a witch?” the cat asked, peering up at her. “You know, I’m pretty sure you being a witch isn’t even the weirdest thing in this house. You’re, like, mundane in comparison.”

Meredith snorted, rinsing her face off after she used the facilities and then scrubbing her hands. “You aren’t actually buying into this ghost trap stuff, are you?”

He didn’t answer, so she scrubbed her face with a towel. “Gary! Seriously, are you buying into it?”

But when she dropped the towel to look at him, he wasn’t glancing in her direction.

Instead, his hackles stood on end, his body puffed out to its fullest floof, as he stared in sheer feline terror toward the doorway of the bathroom.

A quick slice of fear spiked down Meredith’s spine, but she forced herself to look, to see what freaked out her usually unflappable familiar.

Water dripped down from her hair, long hair, that hung nearly to her knees.

The white dress she wore seemed almost translucent, but she wore so many layers of fabric, it kind of globbed into a mass of whitish grey.

Her head was down, the hair dropping water onto the floor with loud plops of sound, which drew Meredith's gaze down to the girl's bare feet, the toenails blackened, obviously that of a corpse.

When the creature raised its face to gaze at Meredith, she thought it might say something to her. Maybe warn her she could be trapped too or tell her something about the ghost trap in the house. Instead, the creature screamed.

The sound wasn't like any scream Meredith ever heard before, an ear popping high pitch that physically hurt, making her clutch her head and bend in pain.

It went on and on, too, for what seemed like forever, and when the sound finally stopped, it left a silence so loud, it almost hurt more than the scream.

Its black eyes still focused on Meredith, unblinking and empty, like staring into the void itself. When the creature spoke again, it said simply, "I love adding a witch to my collection."

Then it vanished.

Meredith clutched her chest, breathing hard, the cat still hissing at her feet. When she finally found words, she asked the cat, "What the fuck was that?"

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“A ghost?” Gary guessed, stalking around in circles with his tail twitching in annoyance. “A creature of some kind, who built the trap? How would I know? I’ve never seen anything like that thing.”

Meredith still clenched her chest, as if the thing reached inside her body and squeezed her very heart with its cold, clammy, black-fingernailed hands. “I’ve never even heard of a ghost trap before. You have to go ask my aunt what the hell it means.”

Gary shot her a glance, his ears pinned back in annoyance.

“That’s totally cheating. You’re allowed to look up stuff on your phones, you’re allowed to call people, you’re allowed to research, sell, and buy whatever you need within the twenty-thousand-dollar budget, but I don’t remember anything in your contract about sending your familiar off to do research with older, wiser witches. ”

“Exactly,” Meredith agreed breezily.

“Exactly what?” asked Gary.

“There wasn’t anything in the contract about it, which means I can do whatever I like. Go, find my aunt, get me answers,” she ordered adding a shooing gesture.

The four of them ranged around a foldable table in the back yard, since the house still smelled too awful to eat inside of it.

Pizza boxes flipped open between them and Carmen, who came on for her night shift a few minutes before the pizza arrived, as they stuffed their faces after a day of hard

work.

“We have most of the garage gutted,” Meredith pointed out as she reached for another slice. “Tomorrow, we could use those tables along the back walls to start setting things out like the glassware and antiques we plan to sell, separate it from the trash that still needs sorted.”

“Is your cat missing?” asked Bodie, glancing under the table. “Every other time we’ve eaten, he is right in the middle of the damn table.”

“Sorry,” Meredith said, but she didn’t sound altogether that apologetic. “He has no manners. Most cats don’t, though. They say people who like to have control get dogs. People who don’t mind having no control prefer cats.”

“Do you prefer cats, then?” asked Jeremiah, glancing at her.

If she didn’t know better, he was trying to get to know her better. She bit her lip, almost amused at her own silly flirtations. “I wouldn’t say I prefer them, but I will say he’s fine. Probably off hunting or doing some other cat business.”

“I’m hungie!” said a voice nearby, and they all swiveled to see the mostly naked guy appeared again.

He still only wore one sock, an American flag as a bandana, and had some of the floppiest junk Meredith ever saw.

She considered the junk carefully, wondering if it was caused by poor maintenance or simply the ravages of old age.

“Want a slice of pizza?” Meredith offered the ghost, congenially enough.

“Where is my mother!” he screamed. “And who are you people?”

He lifted his hands, much as the woman had the day before with the bonfire, but this time their pizza boxes and pizza flew into the air.

Carmen scrambled for a camera, filming between the naked guy and the flying pizzas before he threw his hands down, spraying pizza in every possible direction.

Pepperoni dripped down a flagpole, while one piece dangled at an almost flag-like angle out of the door of a birdhouse, the cheese and toppings dripping slowly off to the ground below.

“They have got to stop doing that,” Meredith muttered.

“I can’t believe I caught that on film!” Carmen practically squealed.

“How are you people so calm about this?” Jimothy asked, hands shaking as he used a napkin to wipe his fingers before crumpling it and throwing it on the table. “The paranormal activity is increasing the longer we stay in the house.”

“I wouldn’t say increasing,” Meredith corrected with a shrug. “It isn’t decreasing, though.”

Jimothy pinched his lips at her, while Jeremiah squeezed his arm. “You know I’ll always look out for you, little brother. We can do this.”

Jimothy didn’t look as sure, but then again, if Meredith was right, he didn’t seem sure about a lot of the home renovating stuff.

Decided, she stood. “How about if we go on a nighttime, after-dinner walk around town while these guys clean up,” she suggested to Jimothy. “You wouldn’t mind,

would you?”

Jeremiah and Bodie didn't argue, especially since Jeremiah still looked a bit worried about his brother, so soon they meandered their way down Main Street together. “It's a pretty enough town,” she said in opening.

He snorted. “It's fucking precious,” he said in response. His dark hair matched the American dream around them, very wholesome and clean cut. “I'm gay, by the way, if you're trying to hit on me. I did find the host kind of cute, but you're really not my type.”

Meredith snorted, too. “I picked up on it. Your brother isn't,” she admitted, thinking of the moment when he nuzzled her nose. Why would he even do such a weird thing? she thought again, still touched despite herself.

“No, yet our parents haven't figured it out, somehow or another. So, do you want to hear my full sordid backstory, or are we too late in the game for sharing those?” Jimothy asked.

“Share away,” she said with a smile. “I figured we could both use a break from the smell and maybe some talking time.”

“So, I always planned to be the next big thing online, right? I was going to be so internet famous, I knew it from a young age, and no one could tell me differently. I think I started my first gaming channel at about age eight or something ridiculous? It's still live, but mostly because my mother likes to go look at videos of me before my voice changed to its much manlier tones.

” He deepened his voice in theatrics, and Meredith smiled at him.

“It worked out,” she said. “The James Brothers is a really well known?—”

“Let’s not lie about fame, okay? I’m the camera guy.

I’m the comic humor. I’m the one that fucks up whatever my brother is trying to do, which set up a familiar and likeable show people want to tune into.

I’ve been trying to make our show fail for ages, hoping to start a solo show about hiking and foraging on my own, but instead...

” He gazed off into the distance, snapping off a piece of someone’s evergreen hedge as they walked past it.

“We just keep getting more and more famous.”

She scuffed her shoe on the cement, glancing behind her, glad for once to lack the camera person following them. “You make the famous part sound like more work than it is worth.”

He shrugged, staring at the fire station in the distance.

Maybe he thought about the firefighters that visited their house before the lightning hit the day before.

Maybe he imagined dating one of the firemen.

Maybe he thought about none of it at all, simply watched the flag flipping in the wind.

Either way, he finally said, “Fame is funny. Everyone thinks they want it, but what they really want is the people who they care about to see them. I don’t think fame helps with that, if I’m honest. If anything, it makes it even harder for you to see you anymore, if you get me? ”

She thought about it, continuing to easily match his pace and meander through the early evening while lights began to flick on in the homes around them. “So, by being seen by so many, you’re less likely for anyone to see the real you, even you?” she tried.

“Basically,” he agreed. “How do you start a relationship, create intimacy, build trust with someone if all they see is the facade?”

Strangely, it made Meredith think of Bodie, with all of his cocky arrogance and whiplash fast comebacks. Did he struggle with the feeling no one could see the real him, too? Did Jeremiah? Did she? She wasn’t sure.

“Are you actually afraid of the ghosts?” she asked him, cutting to the root of their actual problem. “Do we need to get you out before more happens, or are you okay?”

Jimothy went still, his eyes focusing on her for long moments before he answered. “See, I expected you to try to get rid of people to narrow the playing field, but this isn’t that, is it? You’re genuinely asking me if I’m going to be okay through all of this or if it will mess with me, aren’t you?”

Meredith nodded. She wanted to win, sure, but she wasn’t a monster. She liked Jimothy.

“I’m good,” he said, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “But I wouldn’t mind if you tried to get some time with my brother away from the cameras.”

Her eyes darted to him, instantly remembering her earlier fantasy and thinking that her alone with either Bodie or Jeremiah likely would be the worst possible idea. “Why?” she asked bluntly.

“I don’t think he actually wants this either,” Jimothy said, holding his hands out and

staring at his empty palms. “This life? This show? I think he’s doing it for me, or that he feels responsible for me because our parents died when I was still only seventeen, so he was basically my parent for a year.

Whatever the reason, I don’t think I’m the only one who wants out of this whole rigmarole, but I don’t know how to bring it up. Could you talk to him for me?”

Meredith opened and closed her mouth twice before she managed to find words. On one hand, she wanted to help Jimothy, and if his brother really wanted out of the reno life too, it made sense for them to have a talk about what would come next.

On the other hand, she wasn’t sure she could keep her hands off Jeremiah, given time alone with him. Something about his eyes...she shivered, just remembering it. “I’ll try,” she finally promised.

Jimothy squeezed her arm. “That’s the most I can ask for. Thank you.”

Don’t thank me yet, she thought. Wait and see if I manage to do it without boinking your brother before you thank me.

chapter five

With the garage cleaned out, they managed to begin inventorying the items they thought they might be able to sell, along with the items for the local sale and the possible ones for online auction.

The garage, once gutted and swept out, became their main area of operation, the base where they stored everything from supplies to their inventory of items.

Ghosts still visited them, at least three a day, but they almost got used to the interruptions and expected them, although cleaning up after them didn't help their timeframe any.

“Well, hey, hey, howdy ho, my good friend, how goes it on this Magnificent Monday?” asked a familiar voice.

Meredith looked up from the box of glass cups with silver-lined tops she slowly wrapped and sorted into a box to see the host of the show, Marshall Dobbs, silhouetted by the bright sunshine outside the garage. “What are you doing here?” she asked him bluntly.

“Two-pronged reason for my visit, actually,” he said, clapping his hands together. With a gesture at Slater, he said in a different tone of voice entirely, “Cut the camera, kid. I need to talk to them off record.”

Slater brought the camera down to his lap, but Meredith noticed the green recording button stayed on. Slater did that a lot, likely from his time in the porn industry. He

never missed a money shot.

“Firstly, I want to congratulate all of you on your successes up to this point. There have been ghosts, there have been tensions, it has been great entertainment, and the numbers blew out of the water all of our expectations when we planned the pilot episode and stream,” he said, tucking his hands into his pockets and rocking back on his feet.

“Have you ever heard of a shit sandwich?” he asked.

“I have,” said Meredith, raising her hand as if they were in class because she saw the others do it. “It means you compliment, criticize, then compliment, and it’s purpose is to make the listener realize you’re not trying to hurt them, because you like the product, but improve it nonetheless.”

“Wordy,” said Marshall, his face scrunched in a sneer. “But close enough.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” asked Jeremiah.

“So, here’s your shit sandwich,” continued Marshall, his voice oily with corporate sleaze.

“Despite numbers being faboo, despite ghosts being constant, people are tapering off in interest. Yeah, sure, it’s great to see a real live dead ghost on screen in a stream in real time and watch the people react, but we want more to this stream than that.

We want human emotion. We want connection... ”

“How is this a shit sandwich?” Jeremiah repeated his earlier question.

“We need a romance element,” Marshall explained. “Maybe a love triangle? Maybe a

love square? I don't know, but to be honest, we figured if we put people in their twenties in the same house, it would work itself out." He shrugged. "So far, you people are boring."

As the only female in the group, Meredith felt heat flooding her cheeks again. There was always a chance, despite their limited options and close proximity, the men simply didn't find her attractive, something the network execs likely thought of already.

"Are you adding another female, to sex it up more?" asked Meredith, proud her voice didn't crack on the question, despite it stinging her pride.

"No!" Marshall said with a smile. "We already have you, and they already like you. We have tons of video of them staring at you longingly, so it's great!"

New heat flooded her cheeks, and she felt a little lightheaded. She didn't dare look at either Bodie or Jeremiah, knowing they meant they had video of them looking at her. So, they were interested? Like, for real real? some teenaged version of Meredith's memory asked.

She breathed through her nose, still unable to meet anyone else's eyes, and still wondering furiously if Marshall might be right—if they might like her.

"If you already have tons of footage, what are you asking for?" Bodie asked, snapping to the point.

"Dates," Marshall said clearly. "I want time alone with her for each of you, a few hours of it a day, to allow the tension to build naturally and organically. We're not asking you to pretend anything, since the viewers are loving the truthfulness and honesty of the programming, so it isn't really about changing what you're doing at all. It's really about...improving it"

“Improving,” Meredith repeated, finally sneaking a glance at Jeremiah and Bodie. Both men stared at her openly, their interest obvious and blatant.

“So that’s your shit sandwich,” continued Marshall. “Ghosts look great, remodel is going fabulous, interactions are terrific, just add dates.” He clapped his hands, brushing them off as if he finished a task.

“So, the camera will go with us on these dates?” Bodie clarified. “You want to film us with her, but you said you wanted PG13,” he pointed out. “I’m not making any promises.”

Marshall flushed, seeming to realize perhaps for the first time the intimacy of his request and the sheer impropriety.

“It will be for subscribers only, and we will leave you alone if things begin, shall we say, heating up. We’re going for fade to black, not reveal every single sordid detail of your love lives. ”

“How are you so sure that we can date her and maintain a working relationship?” Jeremiah asked, gesturing with a thumb at Meredith. “How are you so sure nobody is going to get jealous?”

“We’re not,” Marshall admitted bluntly in the flat, non-announcer voice. “If there is drama, it will just add to the subscribers and merch sales, silly boy.”

As he walked away, he gestured with one hand and said, “Slater, start filming again. We want one of them tonight, mind you. Set it up.”

Meredith gulped. “Did we just get ordered to date and remodel a hoarder house with a budget of less than 20k in less than a month?”

“Yep,” agreed Bodie, glancing at Jeremiah. “Rock paper scissors for tonight?”

“I love how everyone automatically assumes I don’t want dates,” Jimothy said with a sniff.

“Do you want to date her?” asked Jeremiah, one brow cocked at his brother.

“No, but we could get coffee and compare your dick sizes, that could be fun,” Jimothy suggested. “So, let me into the schedule, too.”

“Are you seriously going to?—?”

Before she could ask, they in unison said, “Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!”

Bodie won the first date, and his eyes scanned over Meredith in a way that made her shiver despite the heat of the day and their roaring fire. “Go put on something nice. We’re going out to dinner, Red.”

“I’m not wearing this.” Meredith stood in the bathroom, the only room they successfully fully emptied down to bare bones so far. The intern or whatever shifted from foot to foot, shoving the black lace confection at her again.

“They said it was in your contract,” random intern replied, eyes closed as they continued to hold the fabric out in offering. “Page forty-seven, section c.”

She never read the damn contract, other than ensuring nothing specifically forbade the use of magical interference, familiars, or anything else that might turn out to be a loophole they could use if they caught her cheating.

She blew out a breath, since if they said it was in there, it seemed likely they probably didn’t lie.

In her experience, she couldn't trust corporations or entities whatsoever, but they rarely lied.

Like Fae of olde, they kept their word...to the letter.

She accepted the black fabric then slammed the door in the intern's face.

It wasn't their fault, but still, she had to take out her frustration where she could.

Gary, perched on the sink, purred at her.

"You're nervous," he pointed out. "I haven't seen that in a long time. "

"Shut up," she snapped, not wanting to talk about it.

She considered her reflection in the mirror for a few long seconds, taking the time to breathe and ground herself.

In a blink, she replaced her clothing with the outfit they picked for her—a black lace dress over a nearly nude underfabric.

Off the shoulder, it tucked in tight at the waist before flaring out and ending in fringy dangles near her knee that matched the seam at the top, which sliced like a line from shoulder to shoulder.

Pulling her hair out of the restraint she used during the day while manning the fire, the thick red curls fell around her shoulders in a tumble, and she added a touch of red lipstick to further the drama.

"This should get them some decent ratings," Meredith said aloud, before she puckered up and kissed the mirror, leaving behind a red lip print.

“You look hot, not going to lie,” Gary said, washing his face as if not paying too close of attention to her, though she saw his whiskers twitching in consideration. “You going to tell me yet why you’re so nervous about dinner with a guy? It isn’t like it’s your first date.”

“You always say that like I’m old,” she snarked, giving him a scowl, but the cat wasn’t wrong. In witch years, she had been around a while, even if she still looked early twenties. “I’m not nervous because it is a date.”

“So...?” Gary blinked at her, waiting.

Blowing out a breath, Meredith sat on the toilet, since the bathroom was the only guaranteed camera-free zone. “I like him,” she admitted.

“That’s handy,” replied the feline.

“I like Jeremiah, too,” she pointed out.

“You also like Jimothy,” the cat agreed.

“That’s different.”

If a cat could give a satisfied grin, Gary would’ve. “So, it sounds like they’re going to try to pretend there is a love triangle, which means they’re actually going to pay you to date the two hot men. Since when is that something that would bother you?”

“Since I liked them the way I like them,” she said, frustrated because she knew it didn’t explain things away. “Just trust me. This is a bad idea.”

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“Poor little witch,” Gary said sympathetically. “You have to wear the gorgeous dress and go flirt with the hot men. How will you survive this latest tragedy?”

But Meredith still stared in the mirror, and she noticed something about her eyes.

Are those wrinkles? Impossible, yet as she watched, they seemed to spiderweb their way out from the corners of her eyes like a rash spreading.

At the same time, her hair, so dark and lush moments before, went a bit wiry, white strands filtering through the mass of curls like confetti thrown on an abandoned party room floor.

Cheeks that, moments before, arched high instead hollowed out, veins becoming visible through her skin as it thinned with lost collagen as she aged in the glass.

Her hands shook as she placed the wrinkled and gnarled things against the soft, yet fragile, wrinkles of her face. “Uh, Gary,” she managed.

Then the glass cracked, the old woman emerging from the mirror to scream in Meredith’s face. She screamed back, the black-eyed creature and her still screaming at one another when Jeremiah busted down the door and erupted into the room.

Then it flew through her, ice stealing her breath for a second as she stood there gasping. In the broken shards remaining of the mirror, splinters of her normal face reflected back at her, shocked gaze, blinking in horror.

“Ghost?” asked Jeremiah.

“That one scared the shit out of me,” Meredith muttered, still gasping for air and clutching her chest. “If we weren’t making so much money off them, I would say we should figure out how to get rid of them.”

“We could get rid of them?” Jeremiah asked, following her from the bathroom as she began to unsteadily make her way down the hall toward the back door. “You know, I honestly never even considered that an option before.”

“I’m sure we could,” Meredith said, opening the back door and stepping onto the porch—another of their wins, insofar as no debris filled the sunroom or mudroom, whichever they chose to call it, anymore either. “There has to be a way, right? Especially if the house is a ghost trap.”

“We should talk about this more,” he began, so she paused and turned back to him. “But I wanted to catch you for a minute alone before your date.”

“Yeah? What’s up?” she asked, as Gary twined around her ankles.

“Just this,” he said, then he dragged her close to slant his lips across hers.

Fire ignited in her veins, her hands automatically clutching at his shoulders as he blasted through her defenses and heated her bloodstream.

When he came up for air, he added, “I wanted to make sure you still thought about me tonight, too, despite the date with Bodie.”

She still gripped him, not sure she could stand on her own while her senses still exploded in response.

“Can’t forget you,” she joked, but it wasn’t a joke, not really, and she figured they both knew it.

She didn't know how it would work out, or how she could even juggle the idea of the two men, only that she wanted them both.

"Time for your date," he said, taking her arm to escort her to the back yard. "Now, while your cheeks are still flushed and your eyes look drunk with wanting me."

"Pissing on a tree?" she asked, feeling like something a dog marked.

"No, reminding you that he's not the only one who wants you. Maybe reminding him, too," Jeremiah said as Carmen ducked toward them with the camera.

"You look gorgeous!" Carmen enthused. "I wish you could pull up the comments on your phone in real time. People love that dress on you."

"You guys picked it," she pointed out.

"You ready?" asked Bodie, and for the first time, she looked at him.

Her breath sucked in despite her intentions to keep her face neutral. They dressed him up, too, the first few buttons left undone on his dress shirt and the sleeves rolled up to give him a casual air. Despite that, the cut of the fabric and the way it clung to his pecs?—

The bulge. Her eyes shot back up automatically after she caught a glimpse of it past his dress pants, heat flooding her cheeks. Despite her best intentions, her gaze shot down again, as if she needed to verify what she saw in the first place, but there it was, a beast.

"Hi," she managed, her throat suddenly fully dry.

Bodie stepped closer, his scent somehow dominating her spell insofar as she could

pick up on the spicy masculinity of him. His warmth practically pulsed into her, like a heartbeat or a light tempting a moth to their demise. “You look hot,” he said.

She swallowed again before gesturing from his head to toes, her eyes again wandering to the bulge. “You... you!” she managed.

He stepped closer, one arm slinging around her waist to pull her nose to nose against his hot body. “I’m going to take that as a compliment,” he said.

“Okay,” she said.

“You’ve got to do better with the comebacks, Meredith,” Carmen complained, dropping her camera to the side. “Like, I get it. You can’t see chat. That said, you’ve gotta be wittier than this.”

Embarrassment nearly made Meredith duck back into the house and out of the date entirely, but Bodie caught her arm, tugging her against his side. “You said you wanted a date, is that correct?”

“Yes!” Carmen said, flopping her arms dramatically.

“Then if she’s turning me on, is she still saying the wrong thing?”

Carmen gaped at him, slowly lifting the camera again to his face. “Say that again?” she requested sweetly.

“I said, if she’s turning me on, is she saying the wrong thing?”

” But this time, he emphasized his statement by turning to sweep Meredith into the second kiss of the last few minutes.

She would swear, she heard her last few brain cells pop and sizzle into oblivion and didn't even mind the loss.

When he finally came up for air, he said again, "Did I mention I liked the dress?"

"I think so," she whispered.

"Ready for dinner?" he asked.

She nodded, and he tugged her into a spin that landed her back on her feet but did nothing to stop the spinning in her head.

Her eyes kept swinging back to him, and each time she looked at him, he stared back, his interest both obvious and determined.

"I'm not sure anyone ever looked at me the way you do," she admitted, as he opened the car door for her.

Carmen jumped in the back, but no one held the door for her.

Bodie smiled, closing the door before coming around the car and getting in the driver's side. "I'm probably not the average guy," he admitted. "My life experiences so far have been pretty unique."

She leaned back in her seat, buckling the belt and happy for a chance to get to know him a little better. "I figured you wanted promotion, hence joining the contest in the first place, like the rest of us?"

"No, honestly...I probably brought a lot of publicity to the project, and I'm not saying that to be arrogant.

I started with one home improvement show and that led to a couple of different series.

When covid hit, I went online and ironically, became even bigger than before.

The bigger I got, though, the less I got to work with my hands, which was the whole reason I went into remodeling.

If I'm totally honest. I'm autistic. It's revealed online, so likely a lot of the show's viewers already know anyway.

Due to that, and the combination with ADHD, I like to keep busy.

I'm not saying I dislike getting more of my ideas done because I have whole teams, but I miss doing it myself.

I miss getting my hands dirty, literally, you know? ”

She wrinkled her nose. She was a witch—given the preference, she would rather not get her hands dirty whatsoever.

If she could wave her wand and make it happen, why sweat?

But she did understand the need to keep busy.

Since she wanted the same thing. “I can't say I get you exactly, but I think we do come from very different backgrounds. ”

“Is it a dealbreaker for you?” he asked, and an edge of nerves snuck into his voice as he turned into the small-town restaurant, the only one open for dinnertime in the town nearest the house project. “You can be honest.”

“No, but I feel like I should tell you more about myself, if we’re trying to get on even ground,” she said, opening her car door once he put the car in park.

He jogged around the front of the car to meet her and offer his elbow, though again Carmen was left to fumble with her gear as she got out of the car on her own. “It only seems fair.”

“So, you aren’t internet famous,” he said, leading her to the door then holding her seat as she sat. Once she did, he positioned himself across from her and they ordered their drinks—as did Carmen, with a scowl, from her end of the table as she posed the camera to hopefully get a good shot.

“No, the opposite, really. I was raised by my grandmother in a tiny town in the West Virginia hills called Assjacket—no, don’t look it up, I know you haven’t heard of it, because only about five people live there.

” She laughed, but she couldn’t help the little twinge of homesickness when she thought of Assjacket.

“I ended up a little agoraphobic, according to my therapist, a condition not helped by my social anxiety. Since my grandma died, though—nevermind, ha. That part was silly.”

She accepted the strawberry daquiri when the waiter brought it and he took his white coconutty looking beverage before he asked, “What part was silly?”

“Oh, I just had a dumb thought cross my mind,” she admitted.

“Spill,” he demanded.

“I think since my grandma died, I’ve been looking for someone who sees the me

beyond all the things I'm afraid of, if that makes sense." Saying it out loud felt silly, and wildly vulnerable, but his hand came across the table, catching hers before he rubbed his thumb over her knuckles.

When she met his gaze, he said, "I actually get that more than you realize. People see my persona, the internet character I built, but do they actually see me ? I wonder the same thing all the time."

chapter six

“I’m not sure if I expected him to push her back on the table and molest her or what I was hoping for,” Carmen admitted to Slater in the kitchen later as they changed shifts.

“It was a lovely date. They seemed to have a good time. They shared some very sexy kisses. Everyone went home to their own rooms. They’re the most boring young people in history. ”

“Thanks,” said Meredith, sipping her coffee while they discussed her sex life.

“I mean, you’ve been here nearly two weeks. In half a month, what have you done?” Carmen demanded.

Meredith glanced around the room. The large window and skylight let in a lot of natural light, since they cleared the debris from the room.

Even without cupboards and just a subfloor and bare, patched drywall, the room looked so much better than before.

“I would say we’ve done a lot,” Meredith said.

“And not everything is for your viewing audience,” said Bodie simply, catching the tail end of the conversation. “Speaking of which, I know we have a date later tonight, but Jeremiah and I were wondering if you would meet us in the bathroom before breakfast?”

Meredith scrunched her brows, taking another bracing gulp of coffee while she considered the offer. “You want to meet in the bathroom?”

Carmen sighed. “It’s the only damn room without cameras.”

Bodie pointed at her and winked. “Exactly.”

“See?” Carmen complained to Slater again. “They literally suck.”

“I’m sure they do,” replied Slater, the tone of his voice exactly what Meredith expected from a porn cameraman. “Don’t worry, we’ll catch that part on camera eventually.”

“You’re absolutely filthy,” Meredith told him, but she headed for the bathroom.

“Says the woman meeting two men in a bathroom,” pointed out Slater as a parting shot.

Bodie closed the door behind himself, and Jeremiah stood in the shower. Meredith burst into giggles. “Well, at least you guys opened the window to let in a breeze.”

“There’s no other place for us all to talk alone,” said Jeremiah with a shrug. “No guarantee the ghosties won’t come visit, but we three at least can avoid being filmed for a few minutes.”

“I get that,” said Meredith. “I just didn’t get why you wanted to talk to me alone.”

“We like you,” Bodie admitted, slicing right to the point. “So, we wanted to talk to you about what that means to each of us, and how we want to proceed moving forward.”

Meredith backed up until her back hit the wall by the towel rack. She glanced between Bodie, at the door, and Jeremiah in the shower. “Are you asking me to pick? Because no fair.”

“That’s the part we wanted to discuss with you, actually,” Jeremiah admitted, nerves cutting him off before he said more. He glanced at Bodie for support. Bodie, full of confidence as usual, picked up the ball with ease.

“We want to share you.”

Meredith blinked at them. “What does that even mean?”

Her mind had no problems with the idea, though. Immediately, she remembered imagining Bodie’s kiss, him holding her arms above her head, then stretching her between himself and Jeremiah. Her breath sped just thinking about it, in fact.

“I think you already have some idea, Red,” Bodie said, his gaze hungry as it scanned her face. “Your cheeks just flushed so pretty pink, I can see it clear down to the tops of your pretty breasts, where they’re peeking through the top of that oversized hoodie.”

Her breath trembled out, but she managed to say, “I can’t believe you just tried to pretend an oversized hoodie is even a little sexy.”

“On you?” Jeremiah asked, licking his lips slowly as his gaze also wandered over her like a physical touch.

“It is more than a little sexy. It’s so loose, all I can think about is how easily I could slip my fingers under that fabric and touch your skin.

Would it be hot for me? Are you hot for me, Meredith? ”

This time, her breath shuddered out of her as her hand came to her throat as if to hold in the needs flooding her system. “No fair. You guys are for sure cheating,” she pointed out.

“But we wanted to talk to you first,” Jeremiah explained, stepping out of the shower to come closer to her, practically crowding her into the corner. “To see if you were interested in the same thing we wanted.”

“What do you want?” she whispered, but she said the words against his lips as they brushed hers with a featherlight touch.

“We want you,” he admitted, then his hands closed around her waist, and he lifted her, sliding her legs around his waist as he took her lips and pressed her into the wall with the weight of his body. She moaned, a greedy noise as she dove under, drowning in the taste of him.

Practically drunk with needing him, she arched against his body when it felt like the room spun.

Then she realized it wasn't the room, it was her, because Jeremiah spun her body around to press her into Bodie's body.

Bodie's greedy lips chased up her neck, nibbling once he got near her ear. “She tastes so damn good,” he moaned.

“I know,” Jeremiah agreed, bucking against her, which only pressed her harder against Bodie, who moaned. “I want more.”

But then Bodie caught her head by the hair at the nape of her neck, twisting her face until he could see her eyes. “You haven't answered, Red. You haven't said yes if you want this, too.”

“I want you,” Meredith admitted. “I want both of you.”

“Which one of you decided you should have barriers and that you wanted to be careful what you gave the cameras for free again?” Jimothy asked the next day as he patched and plastered the doorways of the living room.

Apparently, one of the former owners were wheelchair bound, leading to the ramps they had to tear out in each doorway and, since it had been a motorized chair, all of the dings and dinks in the plaster where the old man wrecked his scooter like he played demolition derby with the walls.

Meredith, on the floor where they spread out tarps to paint the edging, glanced his direction. “One of them, for sure.”

“What do you mean for sure?” he asked, daubing another spot.

“I mean, I wanted to fuck them both in the bathroom ten ways from Sunday,” Meredith admitted.

In fact, she wanted nothing more than to spread her legs for both men like the biggest slut in history.

That they were the ones protecting her frustrated her, even if part of her found it sweet.

“In their words, we’ll be out of this house in like a week and a half.

Anything we do from then on is between us, not shared for clicks or money or ad bucks. ”

Jimothy leaned on the wall, considering her carefully. “It’s so romantic, and I would

be lying if I said I wasn't jealous. Not only did you get the girl, but you got both girls. Who even does that?"

Meredith laughed. "I haven't had either of them, remember." But she wanted them. Her body ached with needs. Instead of thinking about it or allowing her imagination to wander—again—she waved a roller at Jimothy. "And I read a rumor in the chat room about you."

His mouth dropped open before he glanced at the camera in the corner. The cameraman of the moment, Carmen, was shadowing Jeremiah and Bodie, so the company wouldn't have sound so long as they didn't face the camera—in which case, someone for sure would be a lipreader in the chat. Guaranteed.

He turned his back at the camera before he said, "Which rumor? Some of them are bullshit, but some of them have at least a grain of salt, if not a brick. Spill."

Meredith lifted the nearby towel she used for wiping up splatter to cover her mouth when she replied, "I heard you have a thing going with the host."

"Marshall Dobbs?" said Jimothy, his back still to the camera. "That old fart?"

"So, it isn't true, then," Meredith said, surprised. She saw some pictures, but they could have been AI...

"Oh, it is fully true," admitted Jimothy. "I've been fucking him since a month before we started filming, if we're honest. Initially, it started because I hoped it would give me an edge. Now, I just like it when he gives me the edge, if you get what I'm saying."

Meredith blushed, but she did. "So, it is true, then? Are you like a thing, or is it just a sex thing or..." She trailed off, since she knew situationships came in a lot of shapes

and forms.

Jimothy dropped to sit cross-legged in front of her. “I think I’m going to move in with him when we finish filming. Full time. Real deal. Actual attempt at a full-on relationship, no weird rules. I’m petrified.”

Meredith blinked back tears and reached forward to grab both his hands. “You have got to tell me how that one worked out, because you’re right, he’s old and so totally doesn’t look like your type.”

“Right?” Jimothy sniffled, clutching her hands back as they leaned close to laugh and snifle. “Love is so fucking wonderful, isn’t it?”

Meredith wasn’t sure about love, exactly, but as Bodie and Jeremiah entered through the back door, they more than caught her eye.

What was it about them that made her catch her breath?

It wasn’t just sex, though she could list, in detail, the many physical needs they weren’t yet meeting but could.

Something more, something undefined, something that kept her eyes wandering back to them even when they weren’t doing anything particularly interesting.

“Have you guys been back to the second bedroom on the second floor today?” Bodie asked them. “We worked in there til late last night, and we’ve been looking forward to showing you.”

“I know you’re not talking to me, but I’ll pretend for the sake of team spirit you do, and I’ll look later,” Jimothy said, fanning himself with a paint can lid.

Meredith laughed before she admitted, “No, haven’t been up there yet today. You wanted to show me?”

“Yeah, we did,” Jeremiah agreed, reaching down to give her a hand to her feet. “Come on. Carmen, you’re down here with Jimothy.”

Carmen, focused on the chat since there was a contest running with some of the sponsors, gave them a nod and a vague wave as they headed up the stairs.

“You want to show me alone?” Meredith asked, surprised. Other than their stolen moments in the bathroom, both men tried to avoid being alone with her since their heated exchange. They both touched her—constantly, it seemed, in small inconsequential ways to remind her they were near.

“Yep,” Bodie said. “Quick, get in the room and lock the door before it occurs to Carmen that we’re being sketchy.”

Meredith sprinted up the remainder of the steps, giggling at the idea of getting caught. Each room had cameras, so it wasn’t like they would have actual privacy, but once she got into the bedroom she spun around?—

And her breath caught. Her hand came up to cover her mouth in surprise.

The domed ceiling in that room made them think of a castle, so they painted it white to make it bright, and it gleamed over the dark teal walls and dark green trim.

Bookshelves lined one wall, and a window seat made of gleaming polished wood was decorated with overstuffed and soft pillows.

“When did you have time?” she asked, because none of the rooms were so close to completion that they could move in furniture, to her knowledge.

“We stayed up late last night,” said Jeremiah coming up behind her to stroke his hands up and down her arms. She heard the lock click, and knew Bodie got the door. “We wanted to surprise you.”

“Well, I admit it,” she said, sitting down in the window seat to look outside. From up there, it looked so scenic, not overgrown and needing work. “I’m surprised. This is stunning.”

“We took out the camera,” added Bodie.

“You what?” she asked, her gaze snapping to his face.

“Last night,” he said, approaching her like a predator. “We searched this entire room and made sure we removed every single camera. By tomorrow, they will notice and reinstall them.”

He knelt in front of the window seat, looking up at her.

“But for now,” Jeremiah added, sitting next to her on the window seat.

“For now?” she asked, going breathless.

“We have a little time to ourselves.”

With that, he pulled her close and kissed her like he did in the bathroom. But it wasn’t like the bathroom, Meredith realized, because he restrained himself before. The kiss he gave her wasn’t kind, it was teeth and needs, so she answered in kind, clawing at him, trying to get closer.

Lips began to trail up her spine, a teasing sensation that had her arcing her head back to gasp. “Bodie” she whispered, then his mouth covered hers despite Jeremiah’s arms

around her body.

Before she knew it, her body lay tangled with theirs, skin brushing skin with hot needy gasps.

She knew she should ask them questions—discuss logistics, jealousy, possible future problems—but right then, she couldn't think past the sensual storm of their hands, their nails, their teeth and tongues tracing over every crevice and dip of her body as if in worship.

One of them entered her, the slide another layer of pleasure, and her mouth opened in a gasp of surprise.

Something nudged at her cheek, and she opened her eyes to see Jeremiah posed above her, his thick cock straining in his fist as he waited.

As Bodie plunged deeper into her body, she swallowed Jeremiah's cock on a moan.

When fireworks exploded behind her eyelids, she heard glass somewhere in the house shatter, but she didn't stop moving to investigate the noise. Her body quaked, the orgasm leaving her trembling as the two men gasped, spent, in a pile with her.

chapter seven

“I still can’t believe you took the cameras out of the bedroom,” Carmen complained for the third time at the craft services table as they all sat around eating.

“Slater literally films porn. He would’ve done a beautiful job capturing a moment of love between the three of you, and can you imagine the clicks?”

The ads? We would’ve made a fortune, not to mention the women’s right aspects.

I mean, think about it! How empowering for the girl to not only get the guy, but get both guys? ”

Carmen sighed, hands clasped like a princess from a cartoon. Meredith rolled her eyes, not for the first time. “We weren’t doing porn for the show. We already gave you unexpected ghosts on top of hoarder hell house, what more do you want?”

“You broke the ghosts,” Jimothy pointed out. “We haven’t seen a single ghost since I found the mirror in the wall that shattered when you guys...” He waved his fork as if searching for a euphemism before saying, “Came.”

“That’s not true!” Meredith pointed out. “The old lady is still here. We’ve seen her like six times since we banged.”

Carmen rolled her eyes. “Yeah, we’re pretty sure she’s going to stay with the house. I think that was the last owner, the agoraphobic hoarder lady who got the house into the state you restored. I don’t think she was actually trapped at all. I think she just

chose to hang out here.”

Meredith thought about it, glancing around the now mostly empty garage.

With a new layer of flooring and painted walls, the space didn’t look anything like when they showed up a month ago.

It amazed her what twenty thousand dollars and working herself to the bone—when she couldn’t sneak in the use of a spell, which she did, and often—could do to a house, she thought in amusement.

“That could’ve been me,” she pointed out, waving her own fork before stabbing a shrimp. “I was raised by my grandmother and for years, I never left our house. I was terrified to go anywhere. Agoraphobia runs in my family.”

Bodie snorted. “You like adventure too much, and you’re braver than you give yourself credit for being.”

“Agreed,” said Jeremiah and Jimothy in unison before they glared at each other. For brothers, they sure didn’t care for it when they agreed, which still amused Meredith.

Standing, she brushed her hands off on the peasant style skirt the design team chose for her for the final episode.

“Are you guys almost ready to go in? I think the open house has been going for about an hour now, so if anyone bothered to stick around and wants to talk numbers, it should be our moment.”

Although they all loved the house, they came to the agreement that they would sell the house and take the combination of remaining funds from their auctions and sales of the home’s interior, then put it all into a single fund that they split evenly between

them.

“She’s not wrong,” said Bodie, standing. He sighed. “If I’m honest, I’m not looking forward to going back to the real world. I’m going to miss doing things myself. I really did miss being hands on.”

“On Meredith?” quipped Jimothy, which earned him a nudge from Bodie. “No, I get you. Do you have to go back to the way things were? Can’t you make a big change, go a different direction, strike a new path—all the euphemisms?”

Bodie opened his mouth, as if to list the reasons why he couldn’t, but after a second, he closed it again. “You have a point. What are you going to do after?”

“Surprisingly, the James Brothers are retiring from home improvement,” Jeremiah admitted, slinging an arm across Meredith’s shoulders. “I figured it was time for me to settle down and be a house husband.”

Meredith rolled her eyes. “You’d be bored in a week.”

“No, but seriously, I want to work with the community more. I never liked home repair, and I only got into it because I thought it was Jimothy’s dream.

We kept going, both of us stubbornly trying to make the other happy, never realizing neither of us was getting what we wanted or needed out of either the relationship or the show.

” Jeremiah shook his head. “Long story short, he’s starting a new channel about hiking and foraging, and I’m taking some time to figure out what it is I want to do.

Everyone deserves a dream, and mine was to take care of my brother—honorable, but he doesn’t need me for that anymore, right? ”

Jimothy rolled his eyes. “Absolutely do not need that, thanks. But I do love you.”

“You’ll always be my baby brother,” Jeremiah added.

“I’m like a year younger,” Jimothy said, punching his brother.

“Jimboobs,” Bodie said, earning glares from both brothers. “I thought we agreed to go inside and see how the open house is going? Or are you scared?”

Meredith sucked in a breath, shooting him a glance and wondering if he somehow read her mind.

Usually, she didn’t get overly attached to projects.

Maybe it was because she completed so much of the house hands on instead of using her magic, or maybe it was because she slept with two men in the second bedroom, but she felt a strange attachment to the Hoarder Hell House.

Not as attached as the hoarder lady, but still...

They crossed the sidewalk to the back porch—originally, they didn’t even know a sidewalk hid under the weeds in the back yard. They dug it out during the third week, after they cleared off the back porch, which now gleamed with fresh paint and a new door.

“It looks so much better,” Meredith said. “You should feel really proud of what we did here.”

Bodie tugged her into his side in a one-armed hug. “We all should feel proud,” he said. “We did good.”

The living room, formerly dark and overwhelming in smell and debris, stretched in front of Meredith as they entered the house via the back door.

A large stone fireplace crawled up the wall, with inset shelving of the same stone peeking out for them to add a few accent pieces after they scrubbed the rock and redid all the grouting.

Light beamed in through the huge windows, glittering off the chandelier and sending a thousand rainbow prisms dancing around the room.

“Beats dust motes,” Meredith said, remembering her first look at the space.

She followed her competitors—teammates—to the dining room where someone set up triangular celebratory banners and a huge cake waited in the center of a large crowd of people.

“What’s all this?” Bodie asked, glancing around at the faces. Meredith managed to pick a few familiar faces out—the woman from the grocery store, a man from the local gas station, another who worked at the liquor store she frequented in the first days, when the house smelled the worst.

“We’re celebrating the end of the season, your successful remodel, and the sale of the home!” Marshall said, popping a bottle of champagne as he enthusiastically grinned at them with his announcer face.

“Wait,” Meredith said, holding up a hand in surprise. “The house sold? Like, it’s gone? Someone else owns it now?”

She wasn’t sure why, since it was the entire goal, but something in her ached at the idea of it being gone. She couldn’t imagine not being allowed to run her hand down the ornate stairwell or glance out the second story balcony window.

“You’re not going to believe this,” Marshall continued, pouring the wine into flutes and gesturing for staff to pass out more glasses from pre-prepared trays.

“But it is going to be a local museum. They want to use some of the rooms as kind of a community center, where they can hold classes like yoga and stuff, and otherwise...the property will be fully used and a part of the local environment. We couldn’t have come up with a better ending for the series if we plotted it! ”

Marshall laughed, clearly thrilled at the turn of events, but Meredith had to admit she was pleased, too.

After the last owner shut herself up in the house, no one got to enjoy the space.

They set empty, and ghosts filled up the void.

Now living people would fill it with their energy and life again, and Meredith sighed, pleased at the outcome.

“What comes next for you?” Marshall asked, passing her a glass of champagne.

“I’m not sure yet,” she replied, but her gaze strayed to Bodie and Jeremiah, who looked back at her as if they sensed the weight of her gaze.

Something connected them still—like a thread.

If she was honest, she figured their one experience together would be it.

A wild and crazy sexual exploration they would all look back on, remember fondly, maybe admit in secret to their grandkids one day...

She didn’t want it to be a one-time thing, though.

She knew it wasn't reasonable—a woman couldn't be in a relationship with two men, especially not two exceptionally masculine men.

As she looked at them, she pulled her phone out of her back pocket.

Better to make a clean break, she decided, and blocked both their numbers.

They wouldn't notice, not until later, but it would be easier if they didn't have a big scene to end things.

chapter eight

Meredith sat cross-legged on the back patio of the estate, gazing out over the jagged teeth that made up the Idaho mountain range.

Sawtooths, she remembered, but they didn't look like a sawblade to her, too fractured and brittle to be anyone's functioning teeth.

She traveled ever since the show ended, searching for...

Bodie and Jeremiah. She rubbed at her chest again, as if her hand could soothe the ache that lived there ever since she got on the plane and left without saying goodbye.

She wasn't an unrealistic witch—she knew she couldn't juggle a relationship with two men, nor would they want to do that, even if she was willing.

But seeing Bodie's hand on Jeremiah's ass did something for her, she wouldn't lie. She didn't just love them touching her, she liked to see them touch each other, loved the couple of times she caught their hungry mouths meeting as they mated in one big tumbling pile of pleasure.

Her breath trembled out of her again, but she brushed the hair back from her face and reminded herself it was for the best. Toeing the ground, she set the seat to rocking as she watched the sun begin to redden the sky.

It would be a lovely sunset tonight. Was it silly she wished they were there to share it with her?

“For fuck’s sake, Red,” she heard, as clearly as if Bodie actually was there. She closed her eyes, blinking back tears at how real her imagination made his voice sound. “Where the hell have you even been going, anyway?”

She opened her eyes, the world blurry, but it wasn’t her imagination. He was there—on the porch of the house she rented in Idaho. A noise came from her throat, but she couldn’t tell if it was joy or pain or what stole the sound.

Jeremiah joined him, coming around the corner of the house with a huff of frustration. “Seriously, where in the hell even are we at this point? You could run away to anywhere in the world, and you went to fucking Idaho?”

She stumbled up from the swing, not sure whether to tumble into their arms or run away, so baffled by the emotions rioting her system. “You’re here!” she managed finally.

“Well, yeah, Red,” Bodie dropped to the swing behind her, scooping her into his arms and rocking her back with him. “We would’ve been here sooner, if you told us where the hell you were going.”

Jeremiah dropped onto the swing on her other side, making the ropes wheeze in complaint. “Where the hell were you going, by the way? Neither of us figured that part out still, because it honestly looked like you went in circles for a while there.”

“Why would you both come here?” she asked, still blinking back tears.

“You didn’t want us to come?” Bodie asked, but because of his confidence, it came out less like a question and more as if he would be surprised if she agreed.

“Yes, I wanted you to come,” she admitted. She touched both their chests, their faces, her hands diving into their hair as if to verify their realness. “Of course I wanted you

to come. How could I not want you to find me?"

"You sure as hell didn't make it easy, Red," Bodie confessed.

"I was going for a clean break," she admitted, plucking at his shirt and unable to meet his eyes. "I didn't want to have to have a big scene, where you both explained to me how it couldn't work out when I knew, I understood, I couldn't have both of you."

"Who says?" asked Jeremiah.

"Yeah, where is that in the contract?" Bodie asked. "I know I didn't read the damn thing, but I'm pretty sure I would've noticed that part."

"No, I mean—" Meredith gestured vaguely, as if hoping to encompass everything and all of it. "In the real world, one woman does not hook up successfully and form a long-term, healthy relationship with two men."

"In whose world?" Jeremiah asked. "In my world, that sounds pretty great, especially if the woman in question is you."

"Agreed," Bodie said. "I'm also a huge fan of that plan. Why doesn't that work?"

"I'm a witch," she blurted.

"I'm allergic to nuts," Jeremiah confessed. "Sorry I didn't tell you all before."

"That's a really dangerous allergy," Bodie pointed out. "You probably should've mentioned that sooner."

"You're both ignoring the witch part," Meredith pointed out. As if to make a point, she pulled her wand out of her back pocket then extended it. "See? Wand?"

“Can you do magic?” asked Jeremiah, appearing curious for the first time.

“Can you do kinky magic?” Bodie asked, his mind clearly stuck on one thing.

Since her mind was stuck on the same thing, she bit her bottom lip, then glanced down at his bulge before meeting his eyes. “Yeah, I can do kinky magic.”

“I have ideas,” Bodie said, rolling closer to her to nuzzle at her neck. “You didn’t really want to break up, did you?”

She could hear the actual vulnerability in his tone even as his lips traced fire across her neck. She sighed. “I did not, but I thought it would be inevitable, so therefore easier if I ended things that way.”

“What if we didn’t want things to end?” Bodie asked.

“Remember how Jimothy asked me why I thought I had to go back to living my life the way I did before the contest? We both asked ourselves that question when you left. The answer was, we didn’t want to go back to the way it was before.

Even if it meant living in absolute filth, with things crawling around in the darkness, I would rather be with you, Meredith, than without you. ”

“I can’t say it as poetic as him,” Jeremiah pointed out. “I’m not as good with words, but I can tell you, I’ve missed you, Meredith. I want to see where things go.”

“It probably won’t work out long-term,” she pointed out to him. “I don’t know of a lot of poly relationships that work well.”

Jeremiah laughed. “Then we’ll break up and scream at one another. Maybe Bodie can punch a hole in a wall.”

“Luckily, she knows how to fix that,” Bodie pointed out.

She stared between them both, not sure what she did to deserve them. “We’re really going to do this?”

Bodie cupped her breast, tweaking the nipple between his thumb and forefinger. “I’m going to call this a yes.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:12 pm

They never held a wedding on the property before, but then again, for many years, you couldn't even tell there was a gazebo in the backyard because it was so overgrown. The bride waited, her male of honor by her side, and looked in the oval mirror at her dress one last time.

The dress resembled the first-date dress the staging company selected for her insofar as it featured some black embroidery over a mesh with nude fabric underneath, but where the dress they picked had been cheap and a little fast fashion, her gown looked like a gown.

It swept in a sweetheart neckline down before the weight of fabric dangled to the floor in a long, elegant line.

Her hair, curled and in an updo, allowed her to show off oversized earrings in a fun turquoise they found while traveling out west—her something blue.

It turned out they all enjoyed adventure, regardless of the shape or flavor.

Jimothy squeezed her hand. "You look so beautiful. I might cry."

"You'll ruin your guyliner," she said to him, blinking back her own tears. "Come on, I don't want to wait anymore."

Taking his hand, he walked out with her toward the back yard of the house. They decorated the interior, too, the sweeping cathedral ceiling now hung with flowers, alive in a way they couldn't have imagined when they first stepped through the doors of the Hoarder Hell House.

In the back yard, behind the garage, Meredith followed the stone path past the small pond where a crane dipped his head until it spotted them, flying away with a small splash of sound.

Around one last corner, and she spotted the two rows of white chairs neatly set up, leading to the round floral centerpiece they chose for the ceremony.

“It’s time,” she whispered to Jimothy, who sniffled next to her.

“I can’t believe you guys are doing this,” he sniffled. “This is the sweetest thing ever, even if it has zero legal relevance whatsoever in our modern society.”

She elbowed him, grinning. “Are you here to be supportive or give me shit?”

“Both,” he suggested, giving her a squeeze. “Either way, I made you smile. Let’s go get you married.”

With that, he led her down the aisle toward her grooms. Bodie and Jeremiah both waited at the end of the aisle, looking dashing in very different ways and taking her breath away.

Something extra sizzled down her spine when she noticed the small bite mark on both of their necks, near their jawbone on the right side—her mark, she told them, since they got to put rings on her to pee on her like a dog on a tree.

They laughed, but they both let her mark them. They wore those marks in public in pride, like she would wear their rings.

She joined them at the altar and Jimothy stepped back, sniffing while Marshall, his announcer voice retired for the day, caught him into a hug.

“You ready for this?” she asked Bodie, as the officiant stepped up behind the small

podium. “This is some serious shit.”

“I’m ready,” Bodie said, taking her fingertips in his hand.

He held his other hand out toward Jeremiah, who took it without hesitation.

The men became close over the months of their tenuous and strange relationship.

Maybe they didn’t love one another—probably they never would.

Although Jeremiah seemed to have some pan tendencies, Bodie seemed to be much more straight in his preferences, but despite that, they loved one another.

Meredith sighed. It would be a big commitment for them, coming out openly to the public as being in a relationship with another man, but it was a big commitment for her, too. It wasn’t every day a witch promised happily ever after to a man.

They said their vows simply, with little additional inflection, and in moments, it was done. “We’re married?” she asked, blinking up at Bodie, who pulled her into a hug. “Who do I kiss first?”

Bodie leaned over, giving Jeremiah a smacking kiss on the lips before grinning at her. “There, I took care of first kiss. You pick second.”

She cupped his face in her hands and sank into his lips, reveling in the special magic of his touch against her skin.

Right as she was breathless, a little lost, and probably drunk on his taste, her other husband spun her around, taking her lips with his softer mouth, teasing her needs even higher until she gasped for them.

“Congratulations!” Everyone around them yelled, but Meredith only had eyes for her

husbands.

“We still have to make it through the reception,” Bodie pointed out, squeezing her ass from behind with both hands so she sighed for him. “How the fuck do people make it through the whole reception?”

“You’re looking at this the wrong way,” Jeremiah said, scooping up his new bride and tossing her over his shoulder. “Follow me.”

He hauled her cheerfully into the house as giggles erupted from her throat, the thud of Bodie’s following footsteps close behind him.

When she again was flipped upright and placed on her feet, she stood back in the bedroom with the window seat.

“Oh,” she whispered, trailing her hand over the polished wood of the window seat.

They polished it until it shined, cleaned this house til it sparkled, and rebuilt it into something beautiful. They did it...together.

“Our room,” said Bodie, spinning slowly in the center of the room. “I do like where your thoughts are, Jeremiah, but do you really think we could get away with that before our reception?”

Jeremiah didn’t answer, walking over to the double doors, clicking the lock, then removing the key to place it on the mantle above the fireplace. “I thought we already agreed that we weren’t living by anyone else’s rules anymore, and instead we were living by our own rules?”

“We did,” Meredith agreed, slipping pins from her hair so it fell around her shoulders. She watched Bodie as his eyes followed the weight of the silken mass—her hair flat out did it for him.

“If we’re making our own rules, who says that the couple doesn’t get to shag before the reception?

We’re the ones who just vowed to stay together forever.

We got married. Shouldn’t we immediately reap the rewards of our labors?

” Jeremiah asked, unbuttoning the back of her dress.

Despite knowing she had magic, her lovers often preferred to take their time when stripping her, removing each layer as if opening a gift.

“Nobody said we can’t do it after the wedding,” Meredith pointed out, turning to nibble on his jaw. “But we have guests waiting for us.”

“We’ll be quick,” Bodie promised, hiking up her skirts from behind so he could slip inside her.

She moaned for him, arching into Jeremiah as the pleasure began to build deep within her core. “Moan for me,” Jeremiah begged, tweaking her nipples and rubbing himself against her. “Moan louder, Meredith. Let everyone at this wedding know how your husbands pleasure you.”

She couldn’t hear him, lost in the pounding thrusts from Bodie as his thickness filled her, stretched her, left her trembling. Before she could recover the experience, Jeremiah pulled her atop him, sliding inside her still quaking body to moan. “You’re still so damn tight,” he whispered.

Bodie grabbed her hair, yanking her head back, then ordered her to ride Jeremiah. “I said now, Meredith. Ride him.”

She obeyed, arching above her husband and bucking as Bodie’s lips suckled at her

breast greedily.

When she shattered, she lay limp on top of Jeremiah, Bodie's weight limp on top of them both, panting as she tried to remember how to think.

"Do you think that will ever get old?" Bodie asked, rolling to the side to pull his bride and groom closer.

"No," said Jeremiah easily, bunching up his jacket to give to Bodie to use for a pillow. This will always be magical, because Meredith is magical."

She sighed, pinching him. "My magic isn't what makes this magical," she pointed out. "I hardly got to use any magic, because they had cameras on me the whole time."

"You still cheated," Bodie pointed out. "That's hot."

She punched him, too, for good measure before laughing. "So, you're telling me your idea of happy ever after is hooking up with a cheater?"

He kissed her, his tongue tangling with hers until she again became breathless, needing him again as much as she did mere moments before. She wasn't sure she would ever stop needing him, craving his touch and his pleasure. "If you're the cheater, then yes, witch."

"What is with the name calling?" Jeremiah asked, tucking her butt closer to his dick. "It's very immature."

"Shut up, Jimbob," replied Bodie, earning him a punch from Jeremiah.

Once they caught their breath, Meredith magicked them back to their pre-sexual bliss appearances. Magic might not solve every problem, but it was a wonder for fixing hair, she thought for not the first time.

They walked together out to their reception, hand in hand. Meredith never would've imagined her version of happy ever after involved two men, but she also would've never thought they could actually manage to gut and remodel that house in under a month with only a budget of twenty thousand dollars.

When she glanced back at the house, one of the rafters started to fall, so she pulled her wand out and gave it a little wiggle behind the back of her leg. No one caught her using magic during the competition, nor did they ever accuse her of cheating.

"I saw that," Gary said, appearing near her side. "You're not as sneaky as you think."

"Nobody even noticed," she pointed out. "It didn't harm a thing."

The cat sniffed, glancing at the house. "How much of that house is held together with magic and duct tape, because you only had a month to finish, but no one realized it yet besides you guys, despite the cameras," he wondered aloud.

Meredith wrinkled her nose, remembering the piece of ceiling, which had fallen in on the laundry room, so she gave it a quick zap to put it back into position.

She also remembered a few of what Bodie called structural pieces that she magicked back to being solid when she realized how badly the termites ate away at the wood.

"Let's just say it's a good thing I am not still in to remodeling homes," Meredith agreed, giving the cat a gentle scratch. "It turns out, it isn't my strongsuit."

"So, what are you into now?" Gary asked, considering the crowd of guests there to celebrate the wedding.

So many people turned up to celebrate their day, from locals in the small town where they filmed the show, to Carmen and Slater as well as members of their own families—even a few witches could be seen among the guests.

“Oh, it’s not nearly as dangerous as home improvement,” Meredith said, heading for the cake. They already did the official slicing, but it never hurt to grab a second slice.

“Not much is as dangerous as home improvement,” Gary pointed out. “You used power tools. Saws. You had hammers, big hammers, and smashed down walls. You?—”

“I don’t need a summary,” she pointed out.

“I’m just saying not much else could possibly be as dangerous as home improvement, even if it is considered somewhat the neighborhood of women’s crafting.

I always said...where are you going, Meredith?

” Gary followed her as she snuck behind the garage.

Spotting one of her husbands, she signaled to him, gesturing wildly and pointing. He grinned, jogging to catch up.

“Don’t stress,” Meredith said. “It’s a honeymoon. All couples have a honeymoon, so why shouldn’t we? Are you suggesting because it is a non-traditional marriage, we don’t deserve the same traditional ceremonies and experiences?”

Gary scowled at her or gave the closest approximation of a scowl that a cat could manage.

“You know perfectly well I wasn’t suggesting anything of that nature,” the cat said, his expression deeply offended.

“You’re fully allowed the full range of experiences.

For instance, if you decide to become a mother, I don’t see why you should just have

one child.

Why not have one of each then compare them, like baby gladiators in a tiny ring... ”

“You’re brutal, Gary,” she pointed out. “But this is why you’ll like the honeymoon.”

“Is that a spaceship?” Gary asked, his face horrified as she approached the glowing lights running up the edges of the metal walkway. They blinked a rainbow of colors, like a disco on aluminum.

“Sure is,” Meredith agreed, and Bodie joined her, taking her hand as she stepped inside. Jeremiah, seconds later, followed the couple and Gary sighed deeply.

“Does this mean I seriously have to also go on the spaceship?” he asked.

“Honeymoon,” Meredith repeated. “You’re really just looking at this whole experience the wrong way.”

With that, she buckled her seatbelt, took one of each of her husband’s hands, and prepared to launch into the future.

THE END