



# More Than Meets the Eye (Tiger's Eye Mysteries #12)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** A small-town mystery with laughter, kissing, mayhem, and magic

When private investigator and tiger shapeshifter Jack Shepherd has to make the biggest decision of his life, everybody in Dead End, the quirkiest town in Florida, wants to offer their advice.

But when Jack's girlfriend, pawnshop owner Tess Callahan, discovers a dead body in her garage, all decisions are on hold until Jack and Tess, with the help of their friends and family, can solve the mystery.

And did we mention the werewolves?

Because nothing will stop justice in Dead End, and sometimes it takes a Tiger's Eye to see the truth.

**Total Pages (Source):** 18

# Page 1

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1

Tess

Something strange was happening in my pawnshop.

And if you knew anything at all about Dead End Pawn, you'd understand that it took a lot for me to label something "strange." If it wasn't a mutant zucchini plant, a gift-stealing Christmas tree, or a dream catcher that only caught nightmares, I wouldn't bat an eye at it.

This, though?

This was weird.

Mr. and Mrs. Frost, who'd seen a combined hundred and eighty years on the earth, were in my shop, which was normal.

They were looking at my small selection of antique weapons: also, normal.

But they were dancing the Foxtrot while they looked, which was definitely not.

Granted, Mrs. Frost was seeing much better after a friend from Atlantis had healed her cataracts, and Mr. Frost got around easily these days with his new hip. But dancing?

Dancing the Foxtrot?

In my shop?

Nope. Definitely weird.

Also, I couldn't figure out where the music came from.

Dancing Cheek to Cheek ?

"I take five minutes to make a cup of coffee, and you two turn my shop into a dance studio," I called out, smiling. "You're great, too. Nigel should ask you to give lessons."

Nigel the ogre ran a dance studio just outside of town with his dangerous wife, Erin, who was a river nymph. He'd had to tell her she couldn't drown the students when they misbehaved, but after that, things went fine.

"Tess! Make that infernal disco ball stop playing this music, or I swear I'll shoot it with my crossbow when I get a chance," Mrs. Frost shouted at me. "I love Doris Day, but I don't want to hear this song one more time!"

"Oh, no," I groaned, looking up. The disco ball hanging in the center of the shop was the last thing my best (and only) employee, Eleanor, had bought before she got married and left on her honeymoon.

Until today, it had seemed to be a perfectly normal, overly large, tacky disco ball. I should have known better. The seller took way too low of a price for it. Granted, Eleanor was a brilliant negotiator, but this had been really low.

"Let me grab my stepladder, Mrs. Frost."

"My bladder is none of your business, young lady," Mr. Frost said sternly.

“I didn’t—” I sighed and went to get the ladder. Between the loud music and the fact that the Frosts preferred to live life “on the edge”—also known as without their hearing aids turned on—it was a conversation I couldn’t win.

When I trudged back out, lugging the only ladder tall enough to reach the ball, the music had changed. Now the Andrew Sisters, one of my Aunt Ruby’s favorite groups, were telling us about the Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy.

And the Frosts were jitterbugging.

Really, really slowly.

If you’ve never seen two ninety-plus-year-old people jitterbugging, I don’t recommend doing so before you’re had your first cup of coffee of the day.

“Tess!”

“I’m coming, Mrs. Frost!”

My boyfriend Jack Shepherd, who was in his human shape instead of his alternate, and fluffier, Bengal tiger shape, walked through the connecting door between my shop and his office and rushed over to take the ladder for me.

“Thanks!”

“What’s happening?”

“Cut in, young fella!” Mr. Frost shouted. “I gotta rest my old bones, and I don’t think that dern thing will let us stop dancing any other way.”

Jack blinked and then looked between me, the Frosts, and the sparkling, rotating,

music-playing mirror ball. Then he groaned. “Not again.”

“I know,” I said sadly. He loved me, and I loved him, but sometimes I wondered how long he’d stick around, considering all the shenanigans that seemed to happen around me.

He grinned at me. “Cut it out.”

“What?”

“Negative thinking. We’ve survived too much over the past year and a half to let a little disco ball get to us.” He took a step forward to put the ladder beneath the ball.

And that’s when he started jitterbugging.

“I didn’t know you knew how to jitterbug,” I said, admiring his form while being completely astonished by it.

“I. Don’t,” he ground out. “Tess !”

Epiphany struck, and I ran to the back and grabbed a pair of noise-canceling earplugs I’d found the other day when I was cleaning. Stuffing them in my ears as far as they’d go, I raced back out to the shop and stumbled to a stop.

Mr. Frost, Mrs. Frost, Jack, Jack’s grandfather, and Jack’s grandfather’s lady friend were all now dancing the Twist. To The Twist .

Millie—also known as Dr. Millicent Hernandez to her history students at the University of Central Florida—threw her head back and laughed. She said something, but the earplugs did their job, so I didn’t hear her.

I dragged the ladder over, climbed up, and found the switch on the side of the heavy ball. The moment I toggled it off, everyone stopped dancing. Since the ball stopped sparkling, rotating, and vibrating, which I guess meant it was no longer playing music, I took a chance and pulled one earplug out—blessed, wonderful silence.

After I climbed down, Jack headed for the back with the ladder, and I rushed over to the Frosts to be sure they were okay.

“That was wonderful!” Millie said. “I love Chubby Checker!”

“Who?”

Jack’s great-great-a-bunch-of-greats grandpa, Jedediah Shepherd, grinned at me. “Even I’ve heard of Chubby Checker, and I was stuck inside a statue for three hundred years.”

He was, long story, but I didn’t have time for Chubby Checker right now. I rushed over the Mrs. Frost, who brushed off my concern and glared at her husband.

“The first time I met you, you were dancing the Twist to that song with that floozy Nancy Joy Neederhouser.” She handed me the giant tote she was using for a handbag and rummaged around in it. “Where is my crossbow?”

“Now, Mrs. Frost,” I said soothingly. “You know?—”

“Don’t you ‘Mrs. Frost’ me, young lady! She was the only girl in town wearing go-go boots !”

“That floozy!” Jack said, back from putting the ladder away. He smoothly stepped between Mrs. Frost and Mr. Frost, who was making good use of his new hip while he rushed to the door.

Jack held out his arm. “How about a hand to the parking lot, Mrs. Frost?”

She transferred her glare to him. “Don’t you dare treat me like an old lady! I don’t need your help.”

Jack looked wounded. “I was asking you to help me . And then I thought I’d butter you up on the way to the car, so you’d make me a batch of your famous walnut-chocolate-chip cookies.”

Tiny Mrs. Frost was no more immune to Jack’s charm and rugged good looks than any other woman in town. She looked up to meet his gaze—he was four inches over six feet, so she had to look way up—and started laughing. “Fine, but don’t think I don’t know what you’re up to.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he said, tucking her hand under his arm and winking.

When they walked outside, with Mrs. Frost talking a mile a minute about the floozy, Jed and Millie walked over to me, still smiling.

“That was quite a blast from the past. It’s never boring when I visit Dead End, that’s for sure,” she said. “Did the disco ball actually make us dance?”

I noticed she and Grandpa Jed were pretty cozy. She’d first met him when she asked if she could interview him as a fascinating subject for an academic paper. Other than vampires and certain other beings who’d eat you if you tried to interview them, Jed was one of a very few humans who’d lived in Florida three hundred years ago and could tell historians what life was really like back then.

Then she’d written a book, and they’d gone on tour together, and there was even some talk of Jed consulting on a few projects in Hollywood. So, we hadn’t seen much of him since the time he brought a live turkey to Thanksgiving, horrifying my

vegetarian little sister, and he ended up in the washing machine.

The turkey, not Jed.

“We’re in town and wanted to invite you and Jack over to the house for a barbecue tonight,” Jed said. “You don’t have to bring anything but yourselves. We’ve got the food covered.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Where have I heard that before?”

Millie looked confused.

“Ask him to tell you about Leroy and my Thanksgiving dinner,” I said dryly, amused to see Jed’s cheeks flush.

Back in the eighteenth century, women didn’t tease men, evidently. Jed was still getting used to it.

Jack finally walked back inside, but he looked oddly perplexed. When I gave him a questioning look, he shook his head, so I figured I’d get the scoop later.

“Tess was telling me about Thanksgiving and Leroy,” Millie said.

“He’s doing great. Still living it up with the Faeries in my backyard,” I told them, enjoying her startled reaction. “Yes, all the wild stories Jed tells you about Dead End are true. Probably understated, even.”

“I was just inviting you and Tess to a barbecue,” Jed told Jack.

If you saw them in the same room, you couldn’t miss that they were related. Jack was a few inches taller, with thick, wavy, bronze hair, where Jed’s hair was the same



bronze but streaked with white. Strong, masculine features on both men framed emerald-green eyes that usually sparkled with good humor and always shone with intelligence.

When they were tigers, their eyes shone amber gold.

“Meat cooked outside. What’s not to like? Tess, do we have anything else going on?”

It still amazed me that our lives fit together so well. “No, I just need to go home and feed Lou. Are you sure you don’t want me to bring anything?”

“Well, if you have a spare pie sitting around, I wouldn’t say no,” Jed said, giving me a big smile.

I had to laugh. “Spare pie? Sitting around? With Jack in the house? Nope. But I’ve got some fresh-baked lady fingers. I can whip up a tiramisu.”

Jed paled. “You ... you bake fingers?”

You’d think nobody would ask a question like that.

In Dead End, you’d be wrong.

“It’s the name of a kind of cookie,” I explained. “What time?”

“Whenever you want to stop by. We’ll eat around seven. Your Aunt Ruby and Uncle Mike will be there, too, with Shelley.”

I hugged Jed, but of course didn’t touch Millie. I didn’t want to know how she was going to die, especially since she might be part of the family soon. They left a few minutes later, and Jack and I chatted about what to do with the disco ball without

coming to any decisions.

Somebody would want it.

I could always find buyers for the enchanted objects, no matter how much they annoyed me. That's why my interest was piqued when Joe Bob Turner walked into the store with a large, badly wrapped package in his hands and a sheepish smile on his face.

"Joe Bob! How are you? We haven't talked since you tried to rob my store!" I grinned at him, but then an angry tiger, albeit still in human form, growled.

"He did what ?"

Oops.

## Page 2

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2

Jack

Roaring wasn't all that impressive when it came from a human throat.

Luckily, that wasn't a problem for me.

When Joe Bob Turner planned his day, he probably didn't expect to be cowering in the corner of Dead End Pawn with a five-hundred-pound tiger snarling in his face.

"I didn't do it! Tell him, Tess! I didn't do it!"

Tess, with the courage of her red hair and Irish ancestry, stepped between me and the criminal and shook her finger in my face. "Jack! Cut it out. He didn't mean it. Remember, we talked about overreacting?"

We had talked about overreacting.

Still.

He tried to rob the woman I loved.

I leaned around Tess's slender legs and snarled at Joe Bob one last time, and then I licked the side of Tess's face to make her laugh. Gently, though, because tiger tongues are like sandpaper.

“Yuck!” She scrubbed at her cheek with her sleeve, but she was laughing. “Stop it! It’s a good thing I don’t wear makeup to work. Now, back to human, or you won’t get any tiramisu.”

When she put it that way ... I shifted back.

Back when I was a soldier and rebel commander, people told me I was still pretty terrifying in human shape, especially when I was angry. The expression on Joe Bob’s face right now said they weren’t wrong.

“I didn’t take anything! She said she’d tell my mama at church,” he said, looking perilously close to tears.

I sighed. Being mean to Joe Bob felt like growling at a kitten. He never meant to do anything wrong; he was just one of those hapless people who had good intentions but usually messed things up along the way to his goal.

“Take this as a lesson. Never, ever threaten Tess again. With robbery or anything else.”

Tess rolled her eyes. “Enough. Leave my customers alone, or I’ll tell everybody about the jitterbugging.”

Joe Bob blinked. “The what?”

“Never mind,” I growl. “What do you want?”

“Jack!” Tess crossed her arms over her chest, narrowed her eyes, and tapped one foot. These were all very clear Danger, Danger signals when it came to annoying my girlfriend.

I held my hands up in surrender and backed away from Joe Bob, but scowled at him one last time over her shoulder.

When he flinched, she elbowed me. “Ignore the mean tiger in the room, Joe Bob. How can I help you?”

Trying not to look at me, Joe Bob unwrapped the large, rectangular, flat package he’d been clutching since he walked in the door. “I was hoping you’d buy this, Tess. I got it for Donna as a wedding present, because she loves magical stuff, but she said this is too weird, and if I don’t get rid of it, the wedding’s off.”

Tess’s shoulders slumped. “Why is ‘if it’s so weird your fiancée will call off the wedding, take it to Dead End Pawn’ a thing? Why?”

His blue-green eyes widened beneath his shaggy blond hair. “Because you always buy it, just like Jeremiah did when he owned the shop.”

My uncle Jeremiah had left half the shop to Tess in his will, and the other half to me. I’ll always be grateful to him for that. If he hadn’t, I might not have ever come back to town after his death, so I never would have met Tess.

That would have been a tragedy.

The stone in my pocket felt like it was burning a hole through the cloth at the thought, and I suddenly realized telling Mrs. Frost about it might have been a bad idea. I’d only been trying to distract her from putting an arrow in her husband, but still. I’d be lucky if she didn’t tell everybody in Dead End by dinnertime.

Or before.

“Okay.” Tess walked behind the counter and pointed to the glass top. “Please put it

here, and let's see what we've got."

What we had was an ornate antique mirror that looked like a prop out of a fairy tale movie.

"That's beautiful," Tess breathed, gently touching the gilded frame. "Scots pine with real gold leaf on the wood. Joe Bob, where did you get such a gorgeous piece? This must be more than a hundred years old. Do you see this sparkly patch here?"

Joe Bob and I leaned over to look.

"And the cloudy bit here? That's from mercury oxidation. Old mirrors were made by layering liquid mercury over a thin layer of tin, which caused a reaction and created the reflective material against the glass. When the mercury oxidizes over the years, it causes this effect."

"I thought mercury was poisonous. Isn't that why they don't put it in thermometers anymore?" I knew I'd heard something about that.

"Yes, definitely. It's really dangerous. That's why today mirrors are made using silver or aluminum. The process is fascinating! First, they—" She broke off and looked up at us, a rueful grin on her face. "Sorry. Sometimes, I forget that not everyone is as interested in how old things are made as I am."

"I think it's fascinating." It was true. I did. But it was also true that I found it fascinating when she read recipes out of her cookbook out loud.

You have it bad, Shepherd.

I put a hand in my pocket, just to be sure the stone was still there.

Joe Bob just looked antsy. “Well, okay, I’m sure that’s awesome, but I have to pick Deese up from school soon. Could we maybe talk about whether you want to buy it, and how much you could offer? I need to get Donna a different wedding gift now, and she hinted pretty strongly that she wanted a red leather love seat she saw over at the Pottery Barn in Orlando.”

Dead End was an hour or two from Orlando, depending on traffic, so residents did most of our major shopping there, other than what we could buy at the Super Target not too far down the road. There’d once been an effort to put up an UltraShopMart, but the project leads had been criminals who’d tried to kill me and Deputy Andy Kelly, so the entire town had banded together to shut that down.

Tess tilted her head, a puzzled expression in her beautiful blue eyes. “I’m definitely interested in an antique mirror of this quality, but you mentioned weird magic, right? Are we talking portal to another dimension or something of the ‘mirror, mirror, on the wall’ variety?”

The mirror’s glass surface lit up as if it had been waiting to hear the magic words, and a shadowy face scowled out at us.

This was not a pretty face.

This guy looked like he’d hit the century mark around 1810 and had only grown older and meaner ever since.

And then he started talking, which made everything worse. “Ha! Like I never heard that before! ‘Mirror, mirror, on the wall.’ So original . And not even correct. Do I look like I’m on a wall, Missy? That looks like the ceiling I’m staring up at. I mean, what do I know? I’ve just lived in this mirror for hundreds of years, and?—”

I grabbed a cleaning cloth from beneath the counter and tossed it over the mirror. He

kept ranting, and he got louder, but at least we didn't have to look at him anymore.

Tess, meanwhile, buried her face in her hands. I wasn't sure if she was laughing or crying, but the sounds coming from her weren't good.

"Tess?" I said.

"Tess?" Joe Bob said.

"Hey, lady! Take this cloth off me right now!" the mirror said.

"Why?" Tess looked at me. "I try to live a good life. I'm a good neighbor. I'm nice to people. Why do these things keep happening to me?"

Joe Bob's face fell. "Does that mean you won't buy it?"

The man in the mirror made a wordless screeching sound and then started categorizing Joe Bob's many failings.

When he got to "brain the size of a walnut," I whipped the cloth off the mirror and leaned over. "I have a hammer."

Mirror Dude narrowed his glassy eyes at me. "You wouldn't dare!"

I slowly grinned, letting him see a lot of teeth. "Wanna bet?"

"Fine." He made a point of turning his back on us.

"Joe Bob, will you wait here a moment, please?" Tess took my arm. "We need to confer in the back for a second."



She pulled me behind her to the back room. “Okay, have you ever seen anything like that before? Is that a real person trapped inside a mirror, like Jed was in the statue? If so, we have to get him out.”

“Really? Imagine how much more unpleasant he’d be, live and in person.” I didn’t want to think about it.

“Jack! You’d be in a bad mood, too, if you’d been trapped inside a mirror for centuries! What does he even eat?”

Oh, no. My tender-hearted girlfriend was now imagining the poor old man starving to death, trapped inside a mirror. This was headed nowhere good.

“I’m sure it’s just a magical construct, not a real person. How could he be trapped inside a flat mirror?”

She looked doubtful. “Maybe it really is a portal to another dimension?”

“Or maybe you should take a pass on this one.”

“Oh, no! I can’t leave that with Joe Bob. What if he just tosses it into a dumpster or something? No, I’ll buy it on contingency, since I have no idea how to value it, and then I’ll call on some experts I know.”

Experts in nasty old guys trapped in magical mirrors?

Well, those leprechauns took a liking to her that one time.

When we walked back out into the store, Joe Bob was standing several feet away from the mirror, which was still raving at him.

I looked down at Mirror Dude again and gave him a warning frown, but this time, he scoffed.

I may need to work on my warning frowns.

“What’s the matter, kitty cat? Cat got your tongue? Need to cough up a hairball?”

“How does he know you’re a shifter?” Tess asked me, and I shrugged.

“I may have said something,” Joe Bob said timidly. “Sorry. He finagles things out of a person.”

“Okay, I’ll buy this on contingency,” Tess told Joe Bob, who perked up. “That means I don’t know how much it’s really worth, so I’ll give you an amount I’m sure I can afford. After I get an expert valuation or, even better, a sale, I’ll give you a percentage of the total.”

“Ha! Are you going to trust this woman? Did you know, in my day, we thought women with red hair were witches! Why, we used to?—”

Tess leaned over the mirror and spoke calmly but firmly. “Sir, I’d like to ask you to please be civil. I’m going to help you if you’re trapped in there, no matter what. But it would be nicer for all of us if you were ... less unpleasant. My name is Tess Callahan, and I’m glad to meet you. This is Jack Shepherd. Will you please tell me your name?”

Mirror Dude’s mouth fell open mid-rant, and he froze in the glass like a computer screen sometimes freezes. I was tempted to tap on the glass and say, “Is this thing on?”

When he started talking again, I was glad I hadn’t, because he was actually ... well,

not pleasant. But less unpleasant. To be fair, that was what she'd asked.

"My name is Horatio Mercury, Miss Callahan," he said with dignity.

Mercury. Really?

"Mercury? Really," Tess said, delighted. "That's fascinating, since, as I'm sure you must know?—"

He rolled his little mirror eyes. "Yes, mirrors are made with mercury. At least this one is. I'm trapped inside it. I'm not stupid, and if you think?—"

Horatio peered up at Tess and suddenly seemed to think better of what he was saying. "Sorry. Yes. I know."

"I'd love it if we could talk about mirrors and history and anything else you want to talk about," she said, and all three of us, tiger, wanna-be pawnshop robber, and mirror dude, could plainly see her sincerity.

Tess was a really good person. Which was why, with my past, I wasn't sure I deserved her.

But I wasn't about to let her go.

"That would be ... welcome," Horatio said. "But I'm tired now. We can talk later."

With that, the mirror clouded over, and he vanished.

"Wow," Tess said, clasping her hands together as if I'd just given her a present. "This is going to be amazing."

One of these days, I was going to talk to her about using more of a poker face in her business dealings. “Amazing” when you’re about to negotiate a sale is like saying “I love it” to a used car salesperson. Never a good idea.

But despite an overly kind and trusting nature, Tess had made a genuine success of the shop. She was the living proof that integrity can be its own reward.

She also looks scary in the mornings when she wakes up, my inner voice, who was scared to death right now, muttered in my brain. Talk about bed head.

I grinned and ran a hand down her gorgeous waist-length red ponytail.

I could live with bed head.

After they agreed on a contingent price and did the paperwork, Joe Bob, now grinning ear to ear, rushed out of the shop. “Thanks, again, Tess! I’ll give Donna your love!”

Then he stopped and looked back at us, stricken. “I just, ah, well. Donna isn’t sure about you coming to the wedding anymore. I mean, after what happened at Eleanor and Bill’s reception ... I’m sorry. I can talk her back around. Bye!”

He was gone before I could growl at him. Instead, I wrapped my arms around Tess and gave her a sympathetic hug. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know,” she said glumly. “It’s just ... why do so many things have to be not my fault?”

It took me a moment, but then I understood, and I laughed. “Do you think that dress is salvageable?”

“Who would want to salvage that dress?” She shuddered. “I’m never going to live this down.”

I kissed her, which was such an excellent idea that I kissed her again, for about five minutes, and then the chimes over the door signaled customers.

“Okay. I have to run some errands. It’s almost five. See you at home soon?” I still hadn’t grown used to having a home, after all those years camping out in various far-flung, dangerous locations.

“I’ll close up at five exactly,” she promised.

When she went to talk to her customers, I headed out to my truck. For a minute or two, I just sat there, turning the sapphire over and over in my fingers. It was the most perfect jewel of all the ones the king of Atlantis had given me for helping save the city from demons, and it was the exact color of Tess’s eyes.

I already had a jeweler on standby.

But now, I needed to find the courage to utter the four scariest words in the English language:

Will you marry me?

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:31 am*

3

Jack

The Frosts lived in downtown Dead End in a two-story Victorian house painted pink, green, and yellow, three of the traditional colors of a Painted Lady. It was a lovely house, and I knew my friend Dave, Eleanor's son, had done some work on it, keeping it in perfect condition.

When I knocked, hoping to talk her into keeping my secret if she hadn't already taken an ad out in the Dead End Gazette, Mr. Frost opened the door with a worried expression on his face.

"She's baking. A lot." His frown told me he was the only person in Dead End who'd be upset about his wife baking. Her cookies regularly win baking competitions.

"Well—"

"She only bakes this much when she's upset," he whispered, leaning closer. "I'm going to the store for milk, eggs, and ten pounds of flour. This is serious."

"I—"

"Do something!" He pushed past me and walked as fast as the new hip could take him to his car, then he peeled out like he was heading for the racetrack.

I shook my head. The woman was tiny. How could he be so scared of her?

Then I heard the metallic clatter of pots and pans. “And let me tell you something else! That floozy Nancy Joy Neederhouser never in her life made cookies as good as these!”

On second thought, maybe I had time to mow the lawn at Tess’s house before the barbecue.

I was quietly closing the door when Mrs. Frost toddled out of the kitchen, swinging a skillet around. “Have nothing to say to that, do you? Oh! Jack! What are you doing here? Where’s that husband of mine?”

She peered around the room suspiciously, as if poor Mr. Frost might be hiding behind their ancient beagle. Mr. Rogers was sleeping on his cushion in his “dead dog pose,” with all four feet in the air, tongue hanging out of the side of his graying muzzle. When I looked at him, I was glad to see his tail twitch. You had to root for the old guy. He was anywhere from eighteen to a hundred years old, from the look of him.

“He said he was going to buy you baking supplies.”

She snorted. “The least he can do after dancing with that hussy.”

“Um, how long ago was that, exactly?”

She squinted, looking back into her memory, then thumped her hand against the bottom of the skillet. “1958.”

There’s holding a grudge, and then there’s holding a grudge. If Nancy Joy Neederhouser was even still among the living, she should be glad she wasn’t standing within range of the deadly kitchen pan held by a woman who was still mad about a dance that happened almost seventy years ago.

That old saying about discretion and valor popped into my head, and I edged toward the door. “I don’t want to bother you. I’ll just?—”

“Don’t be silly, young man. I’m just finishing up the second batch of those cookies you like so well.”

Discretion is overrated.

“Mrs. Frost, there isn’t a person in all of Dead End who doesn’t love those cookies,” I said sincerely.

She sat me down at the table with a plate of cookies and a glass of milk, like I was five years old. Then she bustled about, taking trays out of the oven and putting others in. I offered to help several times, but she shooed me away, saying she was the only one who cooked in her kitchen.

Feeling like I’d given it my best valiant effort, I heroically contented myself with eating a few—okay, a dozen—of the best walnut-chocolate-chip cookies ever baked.

“Well, let me see it,” she demanded after she finished up with cookie tray duty.

“What?”

She held out her hand. “Let me see the ring. I’ve known Tess longer than you’ve been alive. I need to approve the ring before you can propose.”

That didn’t make sense, since Tess was six years younger than me, but I let it go, thinking of Nancy Jo and the skillet.

“I don’t have a ring,” I said apologetically. “Not yet.”



Shock spread over her tiny wizened-apple face. “No ring? How are you going to propose, boy?”

Feeling uncomfortably like I needed to defend myself, I put my hand around the sapphire, but I didn’t pull it out of my pocket just yet. “I’ll show you what I have, and I’d love your advice, but can we please keep this just between you and me for now?”

Plain as day, I could see the two warring emotions fighting inside her: she wanted to be the one who told everybody else in town, but she also wanted to hold it over everybody else’s head, especially her bingo club, that I’d come to her for advice first.

I thought of Tess’s Aunt Ruby’s reaction when she heard either version and mentally groaned. I was in so much trouble.

“I promise. I didn’t tell Mr. Frost, because I was so mad at him,” she finally says. “But you’d better ask her soon, or I’m likely to burst wide open with the news. Now, show me.”

I pulled the gem out of my pocket and put it in her outstretched hand.

She whistled—a surprisingly sharp and loud whistle coming from such a tiny person. “Jack. That’s beautiful! Such a vivid blue, too. But it’s huge! That must be three carats!”

“Four,” I mumbled. “My jeweler friend?—”

“Oh, good. You know a person. My third cousin, once removed, is a jeweler, too, if you want a second opinion. Do you know the source? I once saw a Kashmir sapphire from high in the Himalayas.” She sighed. “So beautiful. Nobody can afford those, though.”

“This one is from Atlantis.”

She almost dropped the gem; she sat abruptly. “Oh, my word. It must be priceless. I always forget you and Tess are friends with them, and after that nice priest healed my cataracts, too. Did he ever say if he wants me to get him in touch with my friend about raising champion hogs?”

I had to fight to keep a straight face at the idea of reminding Alaric, former high priest of Atlantis and the scariest and most powerful wizard the lost continent had ever known, if he wanted to talk about becoming a pig farmer.

“I think he’s pretty busy these days. But what about the sapphire? Is it okay? Will she like it?”

Her entire face lit up, and suddenly I could see how incredibly beautiful she must have been when she was younger.

How beautiful she still was today.

“She’ll love it, Jack. If I were twenty years younger and didn’t have Mr. Frost, I’d be tempted to steal you away for myself, just to get my hands on the ring this goes into.” She grinned at me with her new “weather girl” white teeth, and I fell a little in love.

When she handed the sapphire back to me, I leaned over and kissed her cheek. “I hope he knows how lucky he was to catch a beauty like you, Mrs. Frost.”

Her cheeks turned pink, and she swatted me with a dishtowel. “You go on with your charm, young man. Take a plate of those cookies with you, now. Just bring me back the plate when you get a chance.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And choose a simple, elegant setting. Tess likes classic things. She won’t appreciate something gaudy. This gem is just barely small enough for her to wear without being overwhelmed by it.”

I had to choose the setting? I thought Tess would help me pick out the one she wanted.

Mrs. Frost must have recognized the confusion and dismay I was feeling, because she laughed. “I’d be happy to go with you, but I think you’d be better off to ask Ruby what she thinks Tess would want. These modern girls sometimes like to design their own rings. Ruby will know.”

I groaned. “I still haven’t told Ruby and Mike.”

She looked scandalized, but also a little smugger. “What are you waiting for? Get out of here and go talk to them right now!”

I thanked her again—for the cookies and the advice—and said goodbye to Mr. Rogers. When I was almost out the door, she called me back.

“How are you planning to propose?”

“What? Just ask, I guess.”

“Well, I know you’re going to ask. But where? It should be something exciting and someplace fancy!”

Oh, boy. This was getting more complicated all the time.

“Do you have any ideas?”

“Yes! We can fasten the ring to an arrow, stand Tess up against a tree with an apple on her head, and then I’ll use my crossbow and shoot the apple! When she gets over the excitement, she’ll find the ring, and you can fall to one knee right there!”

“Wow. That certainly would be exciting. I’ll keep it in mind. Thanks again, Mrs. Frost.”

I alternated laughing with eating cookies all the way to the house I shared with Grandpa Jed, imagining the look on Tess’s face if I let Mrs. Frost, cured cataracts or not, shoot an arrow at her head.

Then I imagined the look on Mike’s face when I told him I wanted to propose and choked on my cookie.

When I arrived, it was after six. I waved at Jed and then took the cookies inside, only mildly mortified to see there were only three left. I said hi to Millie, who looked down at the plate in confusion.

“Ah ...”

“Sorry. I had a lot to think about on the way here. There were two dozen, but ...”

She laughed. “Enough said. I’ve been traveling with Jed for quite a while, so I’m familiar with the appetite of a tiger shifter. We bought twenty steaks, plus veggie burgers for Shelley.”

I grinned at her and took another cookie. “Only twenty? What are the rest of you going to eat?”

I headed out to the side yard after she told me she didn’t need any help and found my ancestor messing around with the grill.

“Hey, old man. Did they even have electric grills back in the 1700s? Or did you just roast your dinosaurs over an open fire?”

“Smart Alec,” he said, his green eyes, so like my own, sparkling. “Mostly, we just burned pieces of the ark when Noah wasn’t looking.”

We were happily trading insults and discussing house maintenance— we needed a new hot water heater, stuff like that—when Mike, Ruby, and Shelley showed up ten minutes later.

Tess’s Aunt Ruby and Uncle Mike raised her after her mom died and her dad ran off, so they were practically her parents. Ruby had always been kind and welcoming to me; Mike made a lot of “jokes” about tiger-skin rugs.

I hoped they were jokes.

We’d started getting along better for a while, taken a few steps back when Tess and I started living together, and were back on good footing now. He’d told me once that he’d never think anybody was good enough for Tess, but I came close.

It was high praise from a man I respected and admired as much as I had the uncle who’d raised me. Hopefully, this conversation wouldn’t set things back again.

I caught myself toying with the sapphire again and stopped. I was going to lose it if I didn’t stop fussing with it.

Ruby and Mike carried dishes inside, and Shelley skipped to us, her pug puppy Pickles in her arms.

“I taught her another trick, Grandpa Jed!”

Shelley was a recent addition to the family, after she'd been through a pretty rough and nearly fatal time after her mom died. She was only recently coming completely out of the sadness.

Pickles helped. I liked to think I did, too.

But now she had the normal ebullience of a ten-year-old girl, and she only spoke in exclamation points.

"Show us," Jed said, after leaning down to get a hug. My great-great-three-hundred-year-great grandfather had been so happy to have a family to love again. We hadn't talked through all the details, but I knew he'd lost loved ones to illnesses and injuries back in his day, so I was glad Shelley and Tess embraced him as a new grandfather with open arms.

Well, Shelley gave him the stink eye for a while after the Leroy situation, but we were well past that now.

Shelley pointed at Pickles, who instantly dropped onto her wiggly butt in a sit.

"Hover dog," Shelley shouted, and Pickles leaped up into the air and floated in a circle around us, barking wildly the whole time.

I blinked.

Nope. Not a hallucination brought on by a cookie overdose. The pug was floating through the air around the three of us.

"Shelley?" Jed crouched, arms out and ready to catch the little dog. "What's happening?"

“Pickles and me just watched Back to the Future !”

I laughed. “That’s a great movie. Have you seen it, Jed?”

He shook his head, still mystified and alert for falling pug.

“It’s a classic. A kid goes back in time to save his parents from something. I don’t remember what. I fell asleep when Tess and I watched it. But the kid gets to ride a hoverboard in one of them.”

“One of them?”

“Yeah, he goes into the past and then the future, and I don’t know. It was just fun. And Tess wanted a hoverboard.” I remember trying to find a hoverboard for her with no luck. Even if I’d been able to find one, Tess had a minor tendency toward klutziness, so maybe not the best idea.

“But how are you making the dog fly?” Jed’s confused expression cleared when he looked at Shelley again. “Oh. Right.”

Shelley, the daughter of a witch, had pretty strong magical powers of her own. In fact, a friend of mine had told us we needed to get her some training soon, before she hurt herself or others.

Tess and I needed to get on with that.

Pickles, looking a little dizzy, barked again, and Shelley gently lowered her to the ground, where the pup wobbled for a few steps and then raced off to water the flowers by the porch.

“She loves it!” Shelley told us, and then she ran after her dog. The two of them

headed for the backyard, where I'd set up a swing and a hammock.

Jed shook his head. "Where does that girl get her energy?"

"She's ten," I said ruefully. "Remember ten? We had that kind of energy, too."

"No. I don't remember much about ten," he said dryly, and we were off on another discussion of dinosaurs when Uncle Mike walked out of the house, his arms full of steaks.

"Are you going to help me with this half a cow you bought, or am I just going to eat it all?" Mike grinned at us.

Mike Callahan was a retired engineer and Tess's dad's older brother. He wore blue jeans and flannel shirts, only drove American, could fix anything—probably even a Delorean time machine—and loved Tess fiercely.

I swallowed a momentary sense of unease. He'd be fine with me asking Tess to marry me.

He would .

Wouldn't he?

I helped him carry the steaks, and the three of us got the meat going on the grill, and then I decided enough was enough. I'd faced entire blood covens of murderous vampires with less nervousness than this. It was ridiculous.

"Mike? Will you please ask Ruby to come outside? I need to talk to the three of you about something before Tess gets here."



Mike gave me a sharp look but went to get his wife.

Jed took one look at me and then grabbed me in a rough hug, pounding on my back. “It’s about time, my boy. I couldn’t be happier for you. Tess is one of the best people I’ve ever met.”

“Thanks. I hope she says yes,” I mumbled.

Jed threw his head back and laughed. “She’s as gone over you as you are over her. And, hey! My new granddaughter-in-law is the best pie baker in six counties! Big win!”

I shushed him when I saw Mike and Ruby come outside, serious looks on their faces.

When they reached us, Ruby gave me a hug and burst into tears. “Jack Shepherd, if you’re about to tell us you have to move out of Dead End for that Consortium foolishness, I’m going to ... to ... tell the sheriff to put you in jail!”

Mayor Ruby Callahan still had a slightly shaky grasp on how much she could order Sheriff Susan Gonzalez to do, but I was pretty sure arresting me wasn’t part of it.

“No, no, no,” I rushed to reassure her. Then I took a deep breath. “In fact, just the opposite. I plan to ask Tess to marry me, and I was hoping you’d give me your blessing.”

Ruby started crying again, but this time, they were happy tears. “Why, that’s wonderful, Jack! We’ll be delighted to have you as part of the family!”

When she calmed down enough to quit crying and chattering, I turned to look at Mike. He calmly studied me with his light blue eyes until I got nervous.

“Sir?

“No.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:31 am*

4

Jack

I've read books where a character says, "My heart dropped into my stomach."

I always scoffed.

That's not how anatomy works.

But standing there, staring at Mike in shock ...

My heart dropped into my stomach.

I heard a funny sound and realized Jed was standing next to me, growling softly, and I shushed him. Not that Mike looked the least bit intimidated by the two tiger shifters facing him.

He winced, though, when Ruby punched him in the arm. "What in the world is wrong with you? Our girl loves this man! And he loves her. If you think?—"

"No," he repeated, and she trailed off, clearly speechless with surprise.

"I expected a stern talking to," I said carefully. "Maybe of the 'hurt my Tess, and I'll make sure they never find the body' kind. But 'no'? Just, no?"

Mike shook his head. "Tess would never forgive either of us if you asked for

permission, or I thought I had the right to grant it. She's an independent woman."

"Oh. Oh. " Relief flooded through me. "No. Of course. I wasn't asking permission to marry Tess. That's between me and her. I was hoping you'd give me your blessing to be part of your family if she says yes."

Mike's stern expression finally faded into a grin. "Well, of course we will, Jack. The only way I ever get bacon for breakfast is if you visit!"

He shook my hand. Ruby hugged me again, and Jed thumped me on the back so hard I almost knocked over the grill.

And then a ten-year-old dynamo came racing around the corner, a pug puppy chasing her and barking, and Shelley leaped into the air and into my arms.

"I KNEW IT!" she shouted so loudly I thought my eardrums might be permanently damaged. "I KNEW YOU LOVED TESS! NOW YOU'RE REALLY MY brOTHER!"

I hugged her and kissed the top of her head, feeling a lump form in my throat. "Can I still go to the father-daughter dances?"

"YOU BET!" She threw her arms around my neck, kissed my cheek, and then jumped down, scooped up her pug, and started dancing and singing.

"Shelley!" I had to call her name a few times to get her attention. "I haven't asked Tess yet, so it's a secret. I want it to be a surprise, okay?"

"YES! Ooh! I know! You can tie the ring to Pickles's collar, and I'll hover dog her into the room!"

Ruby clasped her hands together. “Oh, that’s right! I forgot! You need a special proposal. And the ring—can I see the ring?”

“Special proposal?” I tried to smile. “I thought I just asked?”

Jed and Mike gave me blank looks and shrugged.

Ruby rolled her eyes. “Not today! These days, you need to do something super fancy for the InstaSpace or FaceGram or whatever.”

“I don’t think Tess?—”

“I know!” Her pink cheeks flushed even rosier, and her “I love my hair stylist” blonde hair fluttered around her face as she whirled around with excitement. “You can rent out city hall and get it all decorated and ask everybody in town to come! I know the mayor. You can get a great deal on renting the hall.”

“That’s a bad idea,” Mike said.

“Thank you,” I began, horrified at the idea of a huge spectacle.

“I mean, he’s going to be family. We should cover the hall rental,” Mike said solemnly, but then he winked at me.

I’m going to have to kill him. He’s going to be my father-in-law, and I’m going to have to kill him. I’ll just tell him to lie down in front of the tractor, and ...

“Is anybody going to help us with this?” Tess called out from the kitchen door, smiling.

With all the excitement, I’d only barely registered the sound of her car driving up a

few minutes before. I stared at her blankly until Jed poked me in the ribs.

“Act normal, or you’ll give away the surprise,” he hissed.

“We’ll talk about the ring later,” Ruby whispered, and then she rushed over to the house.

Mike, Jed, and I stayed by the grill, and I tried not to look as gobsmacked as I felt.

“The town hall? She was kidding, right? Ruby doesn’t really expect?—”

“What if we go borrow Leroy the turkey?” Grandpa Jed said, looking thoughtful.

“We could ask one of those little pixies to ride in on Leroy, carrying the ring.”

I closed my eyes. This was going to be a long week.

Dinner, despite all the excitement that preceded it, was fairly uneventful. Jed and Millie’s announcement wasn’t really a surprise: the two of them were going to move out to Los Angeles for a year to consult on a film.

“And you’re all invited to the premiere!”

Tess smiled, but looked concerned. She didn’t like to go anywhere with sizeable crowds, which heightened the chances that she might inadvertently touch somebody. Tess’s gift—or curse—was that sometimes, when she touched a person for the first time, she could see how that person was going to die. The vision was more like stepping into the reality, she’d told me, and she’d suffered through some terrifying experiences since the ability showed up when she was only eighteen.

Everyone at the barbecue knew about this, though, even Millie. Tess has touched us all, too, except for Millie.

Jed leaned over and patted her arm. “Don’t worry. People in L.A. are weird. They won’t bat an eyelash if you wear elbow-length gloves everywhere you go.”

“Ooh! Like Doris Day in Pillow Talk !” Ruby said. “I love Doris Day!”

“In a funny coincidence,” Tess said, laughing, and then we had to tell them about the disco ball and the Frosts.

Everybody was howling with laughter at the end of the story.

“What exactly happened at Eleanor’s wedding?” Jed asked, leaning forward. “My new phone blew up with the town texting tree. I’m sorry I missed it.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Tess mumbles.

“Oh! I meant to tell you, I got that stain out of your dress,” Ruby said.

Tess closed her eyes and moaned. “Please. Please give it to Shelley for Pickles’s dog bed.”

“It’s never a dull moment with you, Tess,” I said, putting an arm around her where she sat curled up next to me on the couch.

Shelley was across the room sneaking pieces of veggie burger to Pickles, who looked like she’d rather have steak. When Shelley started making kissing noises, I threw a pillow at her.

She laughed and whipped it back at me. “Pickles can’t have that dress! Aunt Ruby says she’ll cut it down to my size for the next school dance!”

“And it will be beautiful on you,” I tell her, ignoring Tess’s elbow jabbing into my

side.

After that, we all pitched in and helped clean up, because Jed and Millie were flying out of Orlando the next morning.

“So soon?” Tess hugged Jed.

“Life’s too short to waste time,” he said.

“For some of us,” I pointed out, grinning when he pretended to glare at me.

“I have that new smartphone Jack gave me,” Jed said. “Millie has been teaching me how to use it. I’ll call and text so much you’ll be tired of me.”

“Never,” Tess said, and then she hugged him again. “We’ll miss you.”

“I’ll visit a lot. It’s a lot easier to travel by airplane than it was by horse and wagon,” he said.

I gallantly refrained from any comments about chariots and shook his hand before pulling him in for a hug. “Call me if you need anything. I know people out there.”

My grandad shook his head. “Why am I not surprised? You know people everywhere.”

“I’m surprised you’re not part of the newly formed North American Consortium of Shifters,” Millie said. “It seems to be a big deal and picking up steam.”

“I’m happy to avoid big deals, especially those picking up steam.”

We all hugged goodbye, and Shelley was careful enough to wait until Tess went back



inside to stage whisper at me. “I didn’t tell! But you have to hurry! I can’t hold this secret in for long!”

I’ve heard that a lot today.

I stopped by the side of Uncle Mike’s truck to talk to Ruby. “No town hall proposals, okay, Ruby?”

“Hover pug?”

“No, Shelley. No hover pugs. I appreciate both of you and your ideas, and I’ll keep them I mind, but I think I want to do something more personal.”

“Don’t forget to get down on one knee,” Mike advised dryly. “Or you’ll never hear the end of it.”

They were happily bickering when they drove off.

I waited for Tess by her car. “Catch a ride? I can get my truck in the morning.”

“Sure.” She stretched and then handed me the keys to her new Mustang, a gift from her banshee grandmother. “Or you could drive. I’m pretty tired.”

Banshees had good taste in cars. Who knew?

We talked a little about not much on the way home, and I was content just to be with Tess. Despite the disco ball, Joe Bob and his attempted robbery, Horatio the snarling magic mirror dude, and Mike nearly giving me a heart attack, it had been a pretty good day. I’m pretty sure I was even smiling when the garage door opened.

Until we saw the dead body.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:31 am*

5

Tess

“Not again,” I said, and then I put my head in my hands and sighed.

Even a little over one short year ago, I would have shouted, cried, or yelled. I’d have been shocked to come home and find a dead body.

But, like I said, that was more than a year ago. Now, to my instant shame, I caught myself wondering how long all the police stuff would take and how long it would be until I could go to bed. It had been a really long day.

That was a person. Is a person, I reminded myself, and my usual compassion and sympathy, emotions that life had battered lately, returned in a flood of sorrow.

Jack was already on the phone with Susan. We never needed to call 911; we had all the members of the sheriff’s office on speed dial. He spoke briefly and then ended the call.

“Susan and Lizzie are on their way out. It’s Andy’s day off.”

“I bet they draw straws to see who has to respond to phone calls from us.” Then I raised my head and gathered my gumption, as Aunt Ruby would say. “Should we go out and look? In case it’s anybody we know?”

Jack shook his head. “Nope. We don’t want to contaminate the crime scene. In fact,

I'm going to back up out of the way, so they can get in there easier."

Since my little house wasn't far outside of town, we could already hear the sirens. Sheriff Susan and our new Dead End deputy, Lizzie Underhill, were almost here. Susan was a great sheriff. She'd had to fight to keep her job when Dead End's former sheriff, a scumbag murderer, had been in the office. Now that she was in charge, life in Dead End was a lot better. Criminals probably avoided our town, since she wouldn't let them get away with anything.

If they knew that.

How would they know that?

"Maybe there's a criminals' texting tree the way we have one for the town."

Jack gave me an odd look. "Tess? Do you want to go inside and make some coffee? I know you're exhausted, and I can stay out here and deal with this. I bet they'd appreciate the caffeine."

I knew he was coddling me, but I was too tired to be offended by it. "Sure."

Suddenly, I realized what was itching at my mind. "Lou! What if they went inside and catnapped Lou?"

Before Jack could answer, I slammed the truck door open and headed for my house. The door was still locked and didn't look damaged or like anybody had tried to force it open.

"Tess." Jack was behind me. "She's fine. I heard her when we rolled down the windows. And there's nobody else ... alive ... on the property."

I sometimes forgot that Jack has superior tiger hearing.

Still, my fingers shook when I fitted my key into the lock—locking doors in Dead End is another relatively recent development—and finally got the door open. I was so happy to see my cat I almost cried.

“Lou!” Formerly a stray who’d showed up on my porch one night in a rainstorm, Lieutenant Uhura was the first feline love of my life. She weighed about eight pounds, but it was eight pounds of pure love. I dropped my bag, rushed over to the couch, and happily cuddled her in my lap.

“I’ll make coffee and check the security camera footage,” Jack said. “You stay here. That’s Susan now.”

I kept forgetting that the Fox brothers set me up with cameras after one of our many misadventures. That would come in handy.

Sure enough, lights and sirens filled my driveway and then, only a few minutes later, Susan walked in.

“Again?” She sighed and leans back against the wall.

“Sorry. You look tired. Rough week?”

“You could say that.” She looked up when Jack walked into the room with three mugs of coffee. “You, sir, are a gentleman.”

I waited for her to drain half the mug in one long gulp. “Do you know who it is?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s Quark.”

I stared at her. “It’s an elementary particle and a fundamental constituent of matter?”

“What?”

Jack sighed. “We’ve been watching a science series about the Large Hadron Collider.”

“Oh.” She still looked mystified, but shook her head. “No. It’s a deputy from Riverton named Quark. No first name that I know of. Or maybe that’s his first name, and he has no last name.”

Lizzie knocked on my door.

I waved her in. “Hey, Lizzie. Just walk in. Everybody else does.”

“Yes, ma’am,” she said. Lizzie was nearly six feet tall and sturdy. She looked like she could throw a bad guy to the ground and put him in cuffs. No problem.

Of course, she might also be able to do that because she was almost a werewolf.

“Just Tess, please. Or should I call you Deputy Underhill?” I felt bad. Maybe they tell deputies to stick to protocol and I was messing things up.

“No, Tess. Lizzie is fine.”

Jack held up a mug of coffee, but she waved it off. “No. Thanks. Actually, I wanted to talk to you as well as to the sheriff.”

“Me? I mean, of course. It’s my garage. I was at work all day, then I came home to change clothes and feed Lou, and then?—”

“No,” Lizzie said. Then she pointed at Jack. “You. The dead guy is a werewolf.”

“So, you knew him,” Susan accused. “Why did you lie?”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:31 am*

6

Tess

“I didn’t know him. We don’t all have a club,” Jack said with more than a little sarcasm.

“Actually, you kind of do,” Susan shot back, frowning. “The news of this NACOS is out on all the police wires. There’s been a lot of violence surrounding meetings.”

“NACOS?”

Lizzie looked troubled. “The North American Consortium of Shifters, Mr. Shepherd.”

Susan’s phone buzzed, and she walked out onto the porch to take the call.

“Call me Jack, Lizzie. Does Susan know?” Jack’s voice was low.

Lizzie shook her head, her dark eyes serious. “I haven’t told her about it. I mean, it’s not really true. Yet.”

Lizzie was almost a werewolf, which I hadn’t known was a real thing. Werewolves had bitten her, and she’d briefly died. I knew all about it because she’d made the mistake of grabbing my hand, even though she’d been warned not to touch me, and I’d seen her die.

They’d attacked her at night. In a park. She’d worn a pretty red party dress, but the

blood had still showed horribly against it. And she'd been with another woman; a friend. The friend died, too.

With my curse that Jack insisted on calling a gift, there was a glitch. If anyone died and came back to life, like with CPR or as a vampire, if I saw their death, I usually saw that first one. It's how I saw Lizzie die, and how I saw Jack die at the hands—and fangs and swords—of vampires.

But she was only almost a werewolf, because she'd never shifted. She had some of the nifty supernatural abilities, like the enhanced sense of smell from her wolf half, but she'd never gone all the way, so to speak. Jack said this was terrible for her, and if she couldn't reconcile her two sides and shift, eventually she was going to get sick or go mad.

It was ridiculously unfair, and all of it made me so sad I just wanted to go take a shower and hide beneath my blankets until next week. At least it was Saturday night, and my shop was closed on Sundays. I needed a day off.

Badly.

Susan came back inside, looking angry. "The crime scene people say they can't come for at least an hour. I don't know what to do until then."

"Call Reynolds in Riverton," Jack suggested. "And here's more bad news I didn't mention yet since you were accusing me of lying. The killer did something to the outside cameras. We don't have any footage of the murder."

Susan sighed. "I'm sorry. I know you're not a liar. I'm in a terrible mood."

Jack shrugged it off. "Understandable. Us, too."



I decided to lighten the air. “More coffee?”

Susan declined the coffee but took Jack up on the suggestion and called Reynolds. It was a quick call, and he agreed to come right over.

“You knew he was a wolf shifter?” Susan aimed a steady look at Jack. “I thought it wasn’t a club.”

Jack shrugged. “If there’s a club, I’m not in it. I met him when I was helping Brenda with Sheriff Lawless. The Riverton Sheriff Lawless.”

“And you just knew Reynolds was a shifter? Did he know you were?”

“Yes,” he drawled. “We have a secret handshake. The decoder ring says Drink More Ovaltine. ”

She blew out a sigh of frustration. “Not funny, Jack. I’m dealing with a dead deputy who my deputy tells me is a werewolf, so I ... Wait.”

Susan whipped her head to the right to stare at Lizzie. “Mind telling me exactly how you knew he was a werewolf?”

“We prefer wolf shifter,” Lizzie whispered, unable to meet her new boss’s gaze.

“ We ?” Susan’s accusing stare snapped to Jack and then to me. “You two knew?”

“She’s only almost a werewolf,” I said helpfully.

Turned out, nobody found that helpful.

Explanations ensued.

By the time Sheriff Reynolds showed up, I was only still awake by sheer willpower and the two cups of coffee that roiled around in my stomach like acid. There was still a dead guy in my garage, and searching online for “garage corpse cleanup” was not a good idea, let me warn you.

Reynolds, Susan, and Lizzie went out to the garage. Reynolds and Susan came back, leaving Lizzie to stand guard over the scene, and confirmed that, yes, dead guy.

Yes, dead werewolf.

Yes, dead deputy.

It was even worse, though. Quark was also the beta of the Riverton werewolf pack.

“Will this be a serious problem for your power structure?” Jack asked. “Do you have anybody in line to be the next beta?”

It took me a minute to realize Jack was asking because Reynolds wasn’t just the sheriff, he was the alpha of the Riverton wolves. It made sense, because he was a big guy about the size of a bear and almost as hairy.

Wow!

I wondered if bear shifters existed, but I decided to ask later.

“Not unless you’re volunteering,” Reynolds said, his low rumbling voice wry.

Jack just shook his head.

“Okay,” I said, interrupting all this hearty shifter banter. “Why is he dead? Who killed him? Why did they kill him? How did they kill him? I imagine

werewolves?—”

“We prefer wolf shifter,” Reynolds said seriously.

“Are hard to kill. But, most important to me, and I’m sorry if this sounds selfish, is this: What was he doing in my garage? At my house?” I realized my voice had risen in both tone and volume when Lou scrambled out of my lap and ran for the safety of my bedroom.

Reynolds nodded. “That’s a good question.”

“I was hoping for a good answer,” I muttered.

“The only thing I can think is he told me he was going to give Shepherd a call and ask him about NACOS. Maybe he came in person.”

Jack growled. “I keep telling everybody I don’t know a thing about NACOS. Tonight is the first time I ever heard anything about it.”

“Um, Jack?” I waved my hand. “Remember all that mail you brought over here to sort a few weeks ago?”

“Yeah?”

“When I moved the bowl to dust, some envelopes fell out. There was more than one from NACOS.” Jack knew I cleaned when I was happy, when I was stressed, and when the house was even a little dirty. So, piling a foot-high pile of mail in a too-small bowl hadn’t been my favorite thing he’d done that week.

Living together took compromise .

“Oh.” He looked far more upset by this than I thought made sense.

“Hey, no problem. It was just a little mail.”

He didn’t answer me, just jammed his hand in his pocket and stared off into space for a second or two, then he headed down the hall. “Easy enough to figure this out, then. Tess, is the mail still there?”

“As far as I know.”

When he came back out, he carried a thick stack of envelopes. They were all heavy, embossed paper with a snarling wolf logo.

“That’s a problem right there,” Reynolds said. “Using a wolf as a logo rubbed a lot of the other shifters’ fur the wrong way right out of the gate.”

Heh.

Rubbed their fur the wrong way.

Jack handed a few to each of us. “If we read one or two each, maybe we can figure out what caused Quark to want to see me so badly he drove out here without bothering to call.”

Susan looked impatient, but the crime scene people weren’t on the way, and it’s not like we had anything else to do. I went and piled cookies on a tray, made another pot of coffee, and brought it out for anyone so inclined. When Reynolds thanked me but looked at the cookies and sighed, I thought about Jack and the legendary shifter appetite.

“Sheriff Reynolds, can I make you a sandwich?”

“Oh, I don’t want to be any trouble,” he protested, but I stood.

“Sheriff—”

“Please. Call me Paul, Miss Callahan.”

“Paul, then, and call me Tess. I live with a shifter. Cookies won’t cut it.”

“If you’re sure, I’d definitely appreciate it. I missed dinner tonight.”

Susan waved a hand. “I could eat something if you have extra, Tess. Lizzie and I missed a dinner break, too.”

Hungry shifters can become short-tempered, and probably hungry sheriffs, too. I didn’t want that. While everybody else, all of whom were law enforcement, shifters, or both, read the letters, I went to the kitchen and fed Lou some chicken. Then I built a dozen enormous sandwiches, since it had been hours since Jack ate his three steaks at the barbecue. I put the sandwiches and pitchers of lemonade and iced tea on the kitchen table.

“Come and get it.”

I took two sandwiches and a bottle of water out to Lizzie, who thanked me but wouldn’t let me near the garage.

“It’s not good, Tess. You don’t want to see this.”

When I got back inside, my kitchen looked like a swarm of locusts had attacked. There was nothing left of the sandwiches but crumbs. Everyone was still reading, too, but they looked more energetic about it.

“Okay,” Susan said finally, putting another letter down on the table. “If we put these all in chronological order, we’ll have a better idea of precise timing, but I think we know enough to start.”

“I can do that,” I said. Everybody handed me their letters. I went and got my stapler and fastened envelopes to letters, in case the postmarks became important later.

Yes, I read a lot of mysteries.

Here’s what we learned:

About two months ago, NACOS reached out to Jack to ask him to consider taking the job of president of the board for a stipend of \$100,000 per year. Or at least become a board member for a little less. (That number wasn’t specified.)

A couple of weeks after that, they wrote to say they were increasing the stipend to a cool quarter of a million dollars per year for president.

One month ago, NACOS sent a packet of sucking-up letters from various important people in the shifter community. They all wanted Jack to take the job. Now there was talk of expense accounts, introductions to important people, and other unnamed “perks.”

At this point in creating the list, I looked up at Jack. “If you don’t take the job, can I have it? I bet the president of NACOS doesn’t have to deal with magic disco balls or rude magic mirrors.”

Then I had to explain that to Susan and Reynolds.

More letters with higher, better, and more ridiculous offers followed.

“Why didn’t they just call you?”

Jack gave me a sheepish look. “I’ve been getting a lot of spam calls. I just send them to voicemail and then delete them.”

I looked down at the letter in front of me and read off the number. “Sound familiar?”

He pulled out his phone and grimaced. “Exactly that.”

I held out my hand for his phone. “Why don’t we settle this right now?”

When I started dialing, Sheriff Reynolds gave me a surprised look. “You’re calling important people at one in the morning on a Saturday night?”

“Watch me,” I said dryly.

When a man answered, I put the phone on speaker, turned up the volume, and set it down in the middle of the table. “Tess Callahan, calling for Jack Shepherd.”

Jack rolled his eyes but waited for the man to say something.

“Shepherd? Yes! Yes, we’ve been trying—put him on the phone right now.”

“Watch how you talk to Tess,” Jack growled.

“Jack? Jack! I’m sorry! I’m sorry, Tess—Miss Callahan. Jack, I am so glad to hear your voice. The man I sent to talk to you fell off the grid hours ago, and things are at a critical juncture, and?—”

Reynolds, his face like a thundercloud, leaned over the table to speak into the phone. “This man. Is his name Quark?”

Silence. Then the voice said tentatively. “Who is this?”

“This is Sheriff Paul Reynolds from Riverton. More to the point, I’m Quark’s boss.”

Silence.

Reynolds growled and continued. “And his alpha. Or at least I was. Whatever you sent him into got him killed.”



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:31 am*

7

Tess

“This is why we need you, Shepherd. The danger lives right next door to you,” the NACOS guy said.

“In Riverton?” I asked.

“No. Miss Callahan. Literally next door to you. Carlos Gonzalez is the killer. He wants to stop NACOS from existing. He and the rest of the vampire high council.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I said hotly. “Carlos isn’t a killer!”

“He’s a vampire, Miss Callahan,” the voice on the phone said slowly and condescendingly.

“How did you know Carlos lived right next door to Tess?” Jack asked in that deceptively calm voice that meant he was a hair’s breadth from violence. “Are you spying on us?”

“We have ... information.”

“Does your information also tell you that the Dead End sheriff is Carlos’s sister?” Susan’s laugh was an icy sound. “Are you accusing my brother of coming to his friend Tess’s house and killing a deputy sheriff in her garage ?”

Click .

“He hung up on us!” I grabbed Jack’s phone and hit redial.

The number you have dialed is not in service.

Please hang up and try again.

Sheriff Reynolds finally spoke up again. “Guy’s got some juice to get his phone disconnected so fast.”

I waved a hand. “It’s an app. Anybody can do it. But we can track him down from?—”

“No need,” Jack said. “I know who it is. I’ve never met him, but I’ve heard his voice on conference calls. And yes, he has juice. Things just took a turn for the worse. As far as I know, he’s still at the Pentagon.”

Susan ran her hands through her dark hair. “Name?”

“Brigadier General Barstow. Career Army. Ran Special Forces missions. Lucky and the boys would know him. He is not a good guy.”

Jack had his understatement face on.

“Brigadier General?”

“A one-star. I never met him. I don’t like that he knows my name, although I’d have expected that, after the first vampire war. But that he knows about Tess? And where she lives, and that Carlos lives next door?” Jack shook his head, and flickers of hot amber glowed in his green eyes. The tiger wasn’t far beneath the surface tonight. “I

may need to take a trip to D.C. and remind some people why they never, ever want to get on my bad side.”

Sometimes, it was easy to forget how dangerous Jack really was. But he’d been the North American commander of the forces that put down the rogue vampire uprisings, and that wasn’t a job they gave out for being nice. After the vampires had brainwashed a lot of important people into creating a third house of Congress specifically for vampires, they’d then tried to take over the country through vampire-first laws, banking, and more. Jack had been one of a rebel force that worked and fought hard to pull the vampire-induced wool off everyone’s eyes, so they could see what was happening. When they were finally successful, the end of the vampire aristocracy taking over the United States occurred pretty quickly.

But a lot of very important people owed Jack a lot of very big favors.

We in Dead End had known for a very long time—since the town’s founding—that the Fae, vampires, shapeshifters, and other “mythical” creatures and beings really existed, but it hadn’t been even two decades since the rest of the world found out. The shock waves from that discovery had smashed their way around the globe, causing wars and terror and worse.

I reached over and squeezed Jack’s hand, maybe too tightly. I was awfully glad that he’d survived.

I think he saw what I was thinking, because he leaned over and kissed the top of my head. Then he stood up, and everybody else did, too.

“Okay. Tess is exhausted. She went to work at six this morning to do the inventory. Can we do something about getting the body out of here so we can get some sleep?”

Reynolds nodded, but his expression was troubled. “Not meaning any offense,

Sheriff, but are you sure your brother had nothing to do with this?”

Susan leveled a steady look at him. “Yes. I’m sure.”

“He’s a vampire .”

“And you’re a werewolf. Does that mean you’re a suspect, based simply on that? Is Jack a suspect, too, then? Tess’s grandmother is a banshee. Does that make her a suspect?”

“No, but?—”

“No, period.” Jack said, cutting off any incipient argument. “Let’s regroup tomorrow. Oh, Reynolds, speaking of wolf shifters, though, can we talk to you about Lizzie?”

Reynolds tilted his head in almost exactly the same way that Shelley’s pug did sometimes. I managed not to tell him this, but I was exhausted, so it was a close thing.

“I thought I smelled something,” he rumbled.

“She’s almost a werewolf,” I said.

“Ah.” Reynolds nodded. “No shifting yet?”

“No, but I hoped that if you took her on your moon run tomorrow night, your pack might help her over the last hurdle,” Jack said, leading the sheriffs down the short hallway toward the front door. “What do you think?”

“Traumatic start?” Reynolds asked with compassion. “We’ve had people with that. Sure. I’ll talk to her tonight.”

“Thank you. And I’m sorry about your man,” Jack said, shaking the Riverton sheriff’s hand.

I shook off my tiredness. “Yes. I’m sorry, Paul, I should have said that first thing. I’m so sorry for your loss. Both as your deputy and as your beta. Does—did he have a family? Can I take a casserole somewhere?”

Reynolds smiled with obvious effort. “That’s really nice. I’ll let you know, but I doubt it. Quark was from up north, and he hadn’t made many friends here yet outside the pack. I know he doesn’t have a wife or kids. He was only beta because our last beta moved away, and nobody else wanted the job.”

A siren and lights heralded the crime scene people finally arriving, so the sheriffs went outside to deal with that. Jack started to follow them out and then turned around and pulled me into a warm hug.

“I’m so sorry about this, Tess. Having shadows of my old life haunt you wasn’t anything I ever wanted. I hope you don’t decide I’m more trouble than I’m worth.”

I hugged him back and then kissed him. “Funny, I was thinking the same thing about you today when you started jitterbugging.”

“I’m just glad there’s no video evidence of that,” he said with a heartfelt groan.

“As far as you know.”

I enjoyed his look of terror for almost three seconds before I burst out laughing. “I didn’t make a video. But maybe I need to check the interior security cameras ...”

“Get some sleep if you can,” he said. “I’ll watch over this until they’re gone, and then I’m going to patrol and see what I can see. I’ll be in as soon as I can, but you and Lou

are perfectly safe.”

He didn’t need to tell me that, but I appreciated the thought. “Jack. I’m always perfectly safe when I’m with you.”

When he kissed me this time, it was a “sweep me off my feet” kind of kiss, and I felt a little dizzy when he put me down.

“Get some sleep. I promise I’ll take care of General Barstow and NACOS, too.”

“Okay.”

After I cleaned up, brushed my teeth, and changed into my Wonder Woman PJs, I texted Carlos that I certainly didn’t believe he killed anybody.

Then Lou and I curled up in bed, and I tried not to think much about the poor man who died in my garage, other than to be sure to find out if there was anybody at all to take food to or even send a card.

When I finally fell asleep while waiting for Jack, I dreamed about mirrors dancing beneath the disco ball across the floor of my shop.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:31 am*

8

Jack

Susan and Reynolds did their thing, and the crime scene folks did theirs and left. Then Reynolds and Lizzie went for a walk around the house, so he could talk to her about wolf stuff. I figured I should wait until Susan and the other two left before shifting to tiger shape to patrol, so I crossed the lawn to talk to our sheriff while we waited.

“I’ll text you the name of a crime scene cleanup crew,” she said. “Tess doesn’t need to see the mess.”

“Didn’t look like a knife did that,” I said, not happy about it. “That was claws.”

“Funny how shifter violence ends up so close to home when NACOS is on the rise,” she said dryly.

“Yeah. Funny.”

“I left my brother a voicemail message telling him we need to talk ASAP. I can’t believe that jerk was trying to blame Carlos for this.”

“Let him know I’ll be glad to fill him in on what I know, too, not that it’s that much.”

“Jack—”

“Goes without saying. I’ll tell you everything I learn as soon as I learn it,” I said mildly, wondering when she’d fully trust me.

But she laughed. “I know that. I was going to warn you about something else and also offer my help.”

“Warn me? Do you know somebody else who’s after me? Or Tess?” I could feel my tiger side clawing to get out at the idea of Tess in danger.

“No! Relax. This is an entirely personal kind of danger. The cat is out of the bag, so to speak.” She chuckled. “I didn’t mean to make a cat pun. That should tell you how tired I am.”

“What cat? What bag?” I showed her my teeth. “I’d like to see someone try to put me in a bag.”

“I’d kind of like to see that, too, for the entertainment value, but then there’d be mess and ambulances, and nobody needs that. No. The personal kind. Granny told me you’re going to propose to Tess.”

I groaned.

“Normally, I’d ask you if it’s true, because Granny doesn’t always have a firm grasp on reality. But when I picked her up from bingo club today, Mrs. Frost was holding court, and I heard some of what she was saying. A priceless Atlantean sapphire? Maybe don’t let Tess know that, or she’ll be afraid to wear it.”

I leaned on the car next to her and groaned again. “Mrs. Frost promised she’d keep my secret until I had a chance to surprise Tess with the proposal. I haven’t even gotten the ring made yet.”



“That’s where my offer of help comes in,” she said.

“You know a jeweler, too?”

“No, I?—”

“You have a better idea for a proposal than shooting an arrow off Tess’s head with your crossbow? Or renting out town hall and inviting all of Dead End?”

“Really?”

“Shelley said I could attach the ring to her puppy’s collar, and she’d make the dog float into the room wearing it. Can you imagine? What if Pickles suddenly needs to water the bushes? All over Tess’s floor?”

Susan was laughing so hard by then she held up a hand for me to stop. “No. Please. I can’t. Anyway, no proposal ideas. But if you didn’t already buy the ring or have one made with your sapphire, I have thoughts about that.”

She pulled her phone out and scrolled through her photos before handing the phone to me. “When we went shopping a couple of years ago, looking for Christmas presents for Ruby and my granny, we stopped in a jewelry store at the mall. Tess fell completely in love with this ring—she said she didn’t much care for diamonds, but she loved the setting. I don’t know why I snapped a photo, but I just had a feeling she might want to see it again one day.” She shrugged. “Anyway, if you know a jeweler or can find one, you can ask her to do something like this.”

It was a beautiful ring. Simple, but elegant, with clean lines. Exactly Tess’s style. As soon as I looked at it, I could tell why she loved it.

And I was glad to hear about the diamonds, because I’d gone back and forth about

sapphire or diamond until I was tired of myself.

“Susan, this is perfect! Thank you so much. I know a jeweler. I ... do you think it’s too soon?” I heard the uncertainty in my voice, but this was Susan, who’d become one of Tess’s closest friends. “If you think it is, I can postpone, maybe.”

“Jack. It’s not too soon. You two are great together.” She sighed, and even in the dark, I could see the wistful sadness in her eyes. “If I find someone one day who’s as perfect for me as you two are for each other, I’ll snap him up in a heartbeat. Even if I have to handcuff him to do it.”

“Susan. I say this with great sincerity and respect, even knowing that you carry a gun. If you offer to pull out your handcuffs, he’ll be a very lucky man.”

She grinned at me. She might have been blushing, too, but it was too dark to tell. Then she gave me a quick hug, surprising both of us, just before we heard Lizzie and Reynolds coming back from their walk.

“We’re all set,” the deputy said, trying but not succeeding too well at hiding her nerves. “I’m going on my first full moon run tomorrow. If that’s okay with you, Sheriff! I mean, my sheriff.”

“I understood,” Susan drawled. “Yes, of course. And it would be a good idea for you to put the full moon days in the calendar for the year, too, so we’re sure not to schedule you to work those days.”

“Wouldn’t hurt to make it a three-day period,” Reynolds said. “When we first shift, the moon holds more sway than it does later. Lizzie will be tired, at the least, on the day after, and too revved up to work efficiently on the day before.”

“Got it.” Susan shook Reynolds’ hand. “Let’s keep the lines of communication open.

On this case, and on any shifter stuff I need to know.”

“Sounds good.”

I watched them leave in the Dead End and Riverton sheriff’s cars, and my phone pinged. When I looked, I found Susan’s text with the photo of the ring.

While I had my phone out, I forwarded the picture to a guy who owed me a pretty big favor.

Then, I called my granddad.

“Jed? Tess is in danger. I know you’re leaving tomorrow, but I could use some backup.”

“I’m on my way.”

“Millie?”

“She drove back to Orlando to deal with some things and finish packing.”

“This won’t mess with your flight?”

“Jack. You and Tess are my family. Los Angeles can wait. I’m on my way.”

I put my phone on the seat of my truck and the sapphire inside a small, velvet-lined wooden box in my glove compartment. Then I shifted to tiger and prowled the borders of my territory.

The territory that an enemy had breached today.

Never again.

9

Tess

When I almost tripped over a tiger on the rug next to the bed, I didn't pay much attention. Sometimes, after Jack patrolled, he liked to curl up and go to sleep in his big cat form so as not to disturb me. (I'm a sprawler when I sleep.)

But when I stumbled to the kitchen in search of much-needed coffee, I glanced out at the family room and saw another tiger, this one draped over the couch. Priorities firm, I continued on to the coffeepot.

A few minutes later, mug in hand, I wandered out toward the couch and looked down at my small cat sleeping on top of an enormous cat.

"Oh, hi, Grandpa Jed. I thought you were leaving for Orlando this morning."

One eye opened, and he made a chuffing noise. Then he rolled over—no easy feat for a quarter-ton tiger on my couch—and went back to sleep.

Okay. I'd ask the other shapeshifter in the house.

"Hey, Jack. What's going on?"

Jack opened his gorgeous amber-gold eyes, yawned, and stretched. Then the almost-invisible sparkles of his magic surrounded him, and the tiger turned into the man, who was fully dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt.

Jack's magic was rare in that he was one of the few shifters who pulled clothes into the shift with him. Most had to undress first or face awkwardly struggling out of their human clothes while in their animal form, and then, when they shifted back, they were naked. This could cause uncomfortable situations, as I'd discovered when an eagle shifter came to town.

Jack without clothes was even more spectacular than Jack with clothes, so maybe ... I felt my cheeks heat and hid my face behind my mug.

Jack noticed, though. He always noticed. His grin was as sexy as the rest of him, which was so unfair, considering I woke up looking like I'd been racing through sticker bushes, head first.

"Good morning, beautiful," I said. "Why is Grandpa Jed in the living room? Oh, no! Did he and Millie break up?"

He raised an eyebrow. "What? How did you get that? No. He came over to patrol with me. I felt better having the two of us here after what happened. And 'good morning, beautiful' is my line."

Then he took my mug out of my hands, set it down on the dresser, and kissed the stuffing out of me until I pushed him away, laughing.

"Back, fiend! I have to get ready for church."

"Bet if Jed weren't here, I could convince you to be late," he said smugly.

I bet he could, too, but I wasn't going to tell him that, so I just shook my head. "Coffee's made. Do you want to start breakfast and feed Lou? And are you still going with me?"

Jack had recently started attending church with me. He still wasn't sure about his relationship with God, after things he saw in the war, but he loved me, and church was part of my life, so he came with me most of the time. Sometimes on Sunday, though, one of the swamp commandos—my name for his ex-Special Forces buddies who lived out by the swamp and owned and ran Swamp Commandos Airboat Rides—had a rough day, because of the PTSD many of them suffered. Jack was always available to lend an ear on days like that. He'd take coffee and donuts and spend the day on the water, talking things out or sharing the silence.

Jack never told me much about those days, but I respected their privacy. Some things you had to experience to fully understand. I contributed whatever pies or other baked goods I had on hand, which he said were always appreciated.

Breakfast with two shapeshifters mainly consisted of trying to snatch a piece of bacon from the literal jaws of defeat.

“Hey!” I smacked Jed's hand. “I only had one piece, and you had half a pound. Back off, Grandpa, and nobody gets hurt.”

He laughed at me, but let me have the last piece. “Never let it be said I caused my ... dear Tess to starve.”

I looked a question at him over the weird pause before “dear,” but he didn't meet my gaze, just went on shoveling eggs, ham, and toast into his mouth.

“What's sad is how the two of you can eat like that and stay in such good shape.” I sighed. My nice sky-blue church dress felt snug around the waist. I needed to lay off the donuts, or I'd have to go shopping for new clothes.

And I hated shopping.

Jack patted his flat stomach. “Gotta love that shapeshifter metabolism.”

“Yes, except for the grocery bills,” Jed said. “We spent eight hundred dollars last week and only bought forty pounds of steak!”

“Only? Was there anything else in your cart?”

He waved a hand. “Vegetables, fruit, stuff like that. Laundry soap. Who knows? Millie gave me a list. I bought what was on the list.”

“Huh. And, besides the steak, was there other meat?”

“Maybe a little.”

“Define little.”

“A dozen chickens, maybe? A few pounds of ham. Pork roasts. Hamburger. Sausage was on sale, so?—”

I waved the white napkin of surrender. “Stop, already. Do you see why you spent eight hundred dollars? I’m surprised it wasn’t more.”

He shrugged. “I put the apples back.”

Poor Millie. Maybe I should call her. She might be in shock about the reality of living with a shifter. On the other hand, she’d been traveling with him for quite a while. Also, he had quite a lot of money from the settlement the Fae queen gave him after he got out of that statue.

Speaking of that ...



“I still need to get that Fae gold valued,” I told Jack. “The queen refused to take it back, so I guess it’s mine. It might be a nice nest egg or help me make a house payment or two.”

Jack choked on his biscuit. “A house payment or two? Tess, that was Fae gold. And in the amount she gave you, it’s more likely you can pay off your entire house with it.”

I froze, my fork in mid-air. My entire house?

Nope.

I can’t think about that right now.

“If that’s true, I have a lot to give thanks for in church this morning,” I said lightly, pushing dollar signs and shock out of my mind. “What’s the plan? Are you still going to Orlando, Jed?”

He shook his head. “No. Millie is heading out to California to deal with the apartment we rented and all that, but I’m staying right here until this situation with NACOS is resolved.”

“That may take longer than a week,” Jack said grimly. “But we can figure out who killed Quark and left him here last night, and I intend to do so as soon as possible. By the way, Tess, do you want to tell me why Carlos called me at three in the morning asking why you thought you had to defend him from an accusation of murder?”

I shrugged. “I texted him. Of course he didn’t do it.”

“Yes, but you might have given me a heads up. Or explained more to Carlos, who was understandably concerned.” Jack sighed, probably wondering how his life got so

complicated.

“I was tired, so I didn’t think about all that,” I admitted. “Okay. Let’s clean this up. If you’re going to church with me, we need to leave soon.”

Jed offered to clean the kitchen for us, so I kissed his cheek and went to brush my teeth. Jack changed into a nice green shirt I gave him for Christmas and a pair of black pants.

“Gosh, you clean up nice.” It was almost embarrassing how much I loved looking at him.

“So do you. We could skip church, throw my granddad out, and explore how nice we look at length.” He stalked toward me, exactly as I imagined his tiger shape stalked prey, and I laughed and dodged.

“Not today, buddy. I’m in charge of the bake sale committee this summer, and I intend to do a good job.”

“Maybe ask Mrs. Frost for the recipe for her walnut-chocolate-chip cookies.”

We had a moment of silence for the awesomeness that was Mrs. Frost’s cookies, and then I kissed Lou’s head. “Bye, sweetie. It’s Sunday, so I’ll be home with you most of the day.”

She purred and then rolled over and went back to sleep. The life of a cat who lives in my house is a pretty good one. I’m occasionally envious.

“I’ll try, but Mrs. Frost never gives anybody her recipes. She might bake a few dozen for the sale, though. Especially if you ask her.”

Jed was waiting for us by the front door. “I’m going to head home and do some things around the house. Let me know what our next steps are, Jack. Tess, you’re lovely, as always.”

He patted my arm and headed for his truck. Jack and I followed him down the driveway, and we chatted about everything except dead bodies and evil consortiums on the way to church.

Earlier that year, I’d had a magically instilled moment of beautiful singing, and a few of my fellow churchgoers still hoped it would happen again. More of them, though, flinched when they saw me pick up the hymnal.

Mr. Russell, as usual, made a point of looking at me and turning his hearing aid off.

I just grinned at him and made my joyous noise unto the Lord.

It was an odd morning, though. Every time I turned around, people were staring at Jack with big grins on their faces. When they caught me watching them, they hastily looked away and became fascinated with their keys or phones or hymnals.

“Jack,” I whispered during a lull where the pastor was changing places with one of the lay ministers. “Why is everybody staring at you?”

“I have no idea.” But then he aimed a narrow-eyed stare at Mrs. Frost, who beamed beatifically back at him.

Something was going on, for sure. But I didn’t have the brain capacity for minor stuff. I had a magic mirror to figure out, and I knew just the guy to help me do it.

When services were over, we thanked Pastor Nash, a nice guy who never made me feel bad about my horrible singing. Then we chatted with Uncle Mike and Aunt Ruby

for a few minutes, since we'd arrived too late to sit by them. When Shelley raced out of Sunday School, she ran over to Jack and grabbed his hand.

"Did you ask her yet?" She whispered loudly.

Jack groaned and walked off toward the parking lot, pulling my new sister along with him.

"What was that about? And why was everybody giving Jack weird looks in church?"

Aunt Ruby gave me a shocked look. "Tess Callahan! How am I supposed to know everything that goes on in this town?"

Uncle Mike and I exchanged wry glances. She was supposed to know everything because she always had, even before the town elected her as mayor.

"How's the plumbing?" Uncle Mike asked, probably to change the subject before we had to listen to Aunt Ruby tell us mayor stuff. I loved my aunt, but town politics bored the stuffing out of me. She hadn't said a word about Quark, so Susan must not have reported it yet.

I certainly wasn't going to tell her.

"Plumbing's fine, but I'm having an issue with the electric," I told my uncle, allowing his distraction to work because I really had been having an electrical issue. "The breaker for the kitchen keeps going off if I try to use the mixer and another small appliance at the same time. Maybe the circuit breaker can't carry the load. Jack's not good with electrical stuff, and neither am I."

He held up a hand and flashed a grin. "Say no more. The boy can't help it if he's not as good at me at, well, pretty much everything. Do you have frayed wires? Do the

outlets feel hot? Any sparking or burning smells?”

I shook my head. “No, Uncle Mike, I know the danger signs. You taught me enough when I was growing up. Still, something’s up.”

Suddenly, I realized I didn’t want him coming out to my house until the situation with NACOS and Quark was resolved. “Maybe you can stop by ... sometime next week.”

“Why not today?”

“Oh, I’m busy with a new item at the shop today, and I want to be home to learn when you fix it, so I know what to look for next time.” I kissed his cheek and hugged Aunt Ruby, and we said our goodbyes just as Jack and Shelley returned.

“Lunch?” Jack asked as we drove out of the church parking lot.

“No, we just ate breakfast,” I said absently, texting. “Okay, great! We need to go to the shop.”

“Why? It’s Sunday.”

“Because Phin’s going to help us figure out what to do about that magic mirror.”

Turned out, Phin didn’t have a clue, either, but he was willing to help.

After church, we stopped by Jack’s house to get his truck and then went to the shop, where Phin was waiting for us. Phineas Hunter went to high school with me. After graduation, he moved away, went to art school and vet tech school, and now he was home in Dead End, working at our new vet clinic and doing art on the side. He’d always been fascinated with old mirrors and magic, so I hoped he’d have thoughts.

“I have no thoughts.” He stared down at the cloudy mirror, his warm brown eyes serious. “Are you sure there’s a person in there?”

“Well, no,” I said, frustrated. “I’m sure there’s something in there. Jack saw him, too. But is it a magical construct? A function of an ancient spell? Or a real person who somehow got trapped inside the mirror?”

“You could have just asked me, girly,” the mirror shouted at me.

Actually, Horatio shouted at me, as we saw when he stomped forward from wherever he went.

“I’m sorry. I’ve been so busy, and I meant to?—”

“You meant to,” he sneered. “People always mean to help, and then they?—”

“Somebody killed a man at her house last night,” Jack said flatly. “Maybe give her a break, or I’ll go get that hammer.”

Horatio’s eyes widened, and then I saw what looked like regret in his eyes. That might just have been the cloudiness of the mirror, though.

“I’m sorry, Tess. Are you okay?”

“Thank you. I’m not great, but let’s focus on helping you.”

Phin folded his arms. “Not another word about mirrors until you tell me what’s going on.”

Jack and I gave them both—because Horatio was avidly listening—a quick and very incomplete version of what had happened the night before.

“We’ll let you know what Susan finds out, but let’s get back to this mirror,” I said. “Oh! Aunt Ruby would be so disappointed in me. Mr. Horatio Mercury, please meet Phineas Hunter.”

“Nice to meet you. Call me Phin.”

“Horatio.”

“What can you tell us about what happened to you, Horatio?” I touched the corner of the mirror, half afraid it would suck me into it.

Stranger things have happened in Dead End Pawn.

“That’s the worst part. I don’t know.” Tiny Mr. Mercury started pacing back and forth behind the glass. “I don’t remember anything of my life before this.”

“Is it possible you’re not actually human, but a spell turned sentient?” Phin wondered.

I winced. Phin, the past president of the Dead End High Science Club, didn’t always think about feelings.

But the little man didn’t seem offended. “I don’t know. I thought of that, too. Had a lot of time to think of theories. But I just don’t know.”

Phin nodded slowly. “Okay. I know some people. Tess, is it okay if I take the mirror home with me? It would be good if I had it—him—nearby to test things out as I learn them.”

“You won’t hurt him, will you?” I suddenly felt anxious. Buying a mirror didn’t give me the right to harm the person or being who lived on the other side of the glass.

For the first time, we saw Mr. Mercury smile. “You are a kind young woman. Let Phineas take me home. The sooner we figure this out, the sooner I can find out who I really am and what the rest of my life is going to be. I can’t keep on like this.”

I felt tears threatening, so I quickly nodded and turned away. “Let me get a blanket to protect the mirror in your car.”

Before we wrapped it up, I leaned down to say goodbye. “Mr. Mercury, I wish I could be part of solving your mystery, but I know if anybody can, Phin can. Good luck, and I’ll come over the minute you two learn something.”

“Thank you, Tess. I hope we’ll talk soon.”

Jack helped Phin carry the bulky mirror to his car, and I locked up. I was just stepping off the porch when I heard loud polka music start up inside the shop.

“Yellow Rose of Texas?”

Jack walked over to meet me. “Hey, that’s Willie Nelson.”

“Willie Nelson sang polka?”

Jack looked horrified. “Polka?”

“It’s the disco ball,” I said grimly, pulling my keys out of my purse.

“Oh, no. We can’t fall for its tricks. The next thing you know, we’ll be dancing the polka all day long.”

I shuddered and put my keys away. “Beau’s for lunch?”



On the way to Beau's, I caught myself humming about the yellow rose of Texas and realized I'd been ear wormed.

Jack had to stop me from banging my head against the dash.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:31 am*

10

Jack

As soon as we walked through the door, I knew it was a mistake.

Huge mistake.

Because every single person in the diner turned and stared at us.

And then they smiled.

It was like a horror movie.

“Tess! Jack!” Lorraine swooped down on us, uncharacteristically working on a Sunday. “Right this way.”

She gestured, and Tess headed for our usual table by the window. Before I could follow her, Lorraine elbowed me in the gut.

Hard.

“You didn’t think to talk to me before you told that Robin-Hood-wannabe?” she hissed.

Lorraine Packard had been the head and sometimes the only waitress at Beau’s for more than half a century. She’d also been mayor for a while but had refused to run for

reelection after the flood. She was barely five feet tall in her pink orthopedic shoes, and seventy-something years old.

She'd also once made me and my friend Dave wash dishes to pay for a teen prank, and I'd been half-afraid of her ever since.

"I'm sorry! It just came out. And look what she did, after she promised to keep it a secret."

"Serves you right!"

As we passed Emeril and Harold Peterson's table, the twin owners of Dead End Hardware grinned at me, and one of them poked me in the leg. "Hey, Jack!"

I gritted my teeth, stopped walking, and leaned down.

"How about you hide the ring in a brand-new pink toolbox? We got some in for the ladies down at the store. She'll go looking for a screwdriver and BAM!"

"I'd just hang around waiting until she needed a screwdriver?" I shook my head. I couldn't engage, or I'd be here all week. "I'll keep that in mind. Thanks! Please keep it to yourselves, okay?"

The other Peterson—Tess could tell them apart, but I never could—shook his head, glee mixed with sorrow on his face. "That ship has sailed, son."

I had to dodge Mrs. Quindlen ("Bake it into a cake!"), Rick Peabody, the janitor at Dead End High, who snickered and reminded me of a particularly embarrassing memory ("Tie it to one of those racing pigs!"), and Sapphire Penn, editor of the Dead End Gazette, ("Take out an ad on the front page!") on the way to our table.

If Tess hadn't had so much on her mind, she'd have cut her way through the "subterfuge" like a hot knife through butter. I took a moment to be grateful to Joe Bob Turner and whoever sold Eleanor the disco ball, and then I finally reached our table in time for Lorraine to glare at me and walk away.

"She says we can take the special and like it," Tess reported, looking amused. "You're very popular today."

"We always take the special and like it," I said. "What is the special? And I'm not popular."

I had a sudden, evil epiphany about how to distract her. "Everybody just wants to know the story about you and the cake at Eleanor's wedding."

I almost felt guilty when I saw the look on Tess's face.

Almost .

All's fair in love and secret marriage proposals.

Heh .

Though if I didn't figure out what was going on with Quark and NACOS, it would be better to wait to tie Tess's life any closer to mine.

"Why are you scowling?"

"I'm just hungry." I forced myself to smile and started building a castle out of jam tubs and sugar packets. "What did you say the special was?"

She handed me the small container of butter tubs. "I didn't, but it's pot roast."

“I love pot roast.”

“You love all food.”

“Not Brussels sprouts.” I shuddered. “They smell like feet.”

Within minutes, Lorraine was back with our lunches. She handed Tess a plate brimming with pot roast, potatoes, and carrots, plus a salad and a basket of biscuits.

She gave me a plate with a tiny piece of roast, two pieces of potato, one carrot, and a heaping helping of Brussels sprouts, and then she flounced off.

It’s hard to flounce when you’re wearing orthopedic shoes, but Lorraine managed it.

“What did you do to her?” Tess asked in astonishment.

“I hurt her feelings,” I said grimly, smelling dirty feet. “I’ll be right back.”

I scooped up the plate and, holding it as far from my nose as possible, tracked Lorraine down in the kitchen.

“I’m sorry!”

“You should be!”

“Well, I am! Now, what do I do to make this up to you?”

Suddenly, she burst out laughing. “You look pitiful standing there holding that plate. Here. Give it to me.”

She dumped the plate into the sink and dished me up a tiger-sized portion of pot

roast.

“Thank you,” I said humbly. “Now. Do you have any advice? Wait. Any reasonable advice that doesn’t involve pugs or toolboxes or renting city hall?”

“What?” But then she shook her head, her white curls flying. “Never mind. Yes. Here’s my advice: you and Tess already have a glorious life together. Crazy, sure, but a great life. Your proposal should reflect that and show her memories of your time together.”

With that, she walked out, leaving me staring after her in dismay. “I’m not going to propose to her while we hang upside down from a zip line at an alligator farm!”

But she was gone.

I looked at Beau, the owner and the cook. “Got any ideas?”

“Nope.”

Beau was a man of few words.

The entire lunch was more of the same. Everyone kept calling Tess over to talk so I’d be left alone and helpless, at the mercy of anybody who wanted to stop by and give me ever-more ridiculous suggestions:

Dress up like the Dead End Swamp Cabbage Festival mascot—a giant swamp cabbage—and chase her around holding out the ring.

Create a music video and sing her the proposal.

Go to Disney World and ask her on a roller coaster so we could get a picture of the

exact moment I proposed.

Put it on a billboard in some town that has billboards.

Wait for next year's town softball game and tape it to the ball and then throw it at her.

Tie it to the neck of Bubba McKee's pet boa constrictor and hide the snake in her living room. When she finds him, voila!

I said "I'll keep it in mind," a lot.

Through clenched teeth.

When we finished our lunch and left, I dropped a few paces behind Tess and stopped by the Frosts' table on my way out.

"Thanks a lot ."

Mrs. Frost tapped her hearing aid and blinked innocently up at me.

She made it until I was almost at the door before she started giggling.

Tess was so quiet on the ride home, I worried she'd overheard something. Finally, when we turned onto her road, she twisted in her seat and stared at me.

"It's not like I plan these things! I didn't start it, either! Why is it my fault?"

Ah.

"Eleanor's wedding, again? Tess. Don't worry about it. Eleanor and Bill were laughing so hard, I was afraid he'd end up peeing his tuxedo."

She sighed. “I know. It’s just ... everybody in Dead End is such a busybody. It’s lovely to live in a small town sometimes. But other times, I wish I could move to a huge city where nobody knew my name!”

“No, you don’t.” I parked and turned to look at her. “You love it here.”

“I do. Mostly. Anyway, I’m looking forward to a nice, quiet afternoon.”

I agreed, but my mind had been working on the problem of General Barstow and NACOS all day.

“It might be time to take this federal. Tess, we should call Alejandro.”

Her face lit up. And if I didn’t know the reaction was all about the babies and not about the overly handsome Special Agent Alejandro Vasquez, FBI Paranormal Operations division, I might have felt a twinge of jealousy.

“Let’s go inside and change clothes. Then we can call, and I can find out how my namesake is doing.”

When events had turned frantic during Rose and Alejandro’s visit to Dead End, Tess had wound up delivering one of their twin babies. They named the girl twin Jasmine Tess Cardinal Vasquez. Tess and I were also one set of godparents to the twins, which meant mostly that we send a lot of presents that Tess happily selects, shops for, and wraps, and that I happily take to the post office.

Perfect division of labor.

After the catching up part of the phone call, during which they promised to send more pictures, Rose rushed off to feed the twins, and we told Alejandro everything.



“That’s not good.”

Since we were on a video call, I could see by his face exactly how not good it was.

“This NACOS is bad news. Not that I think a national organization to protect shifter rights is a bad idea. I think it’s great, and maybe something you should get involved in, Jack.”

“Not me. I’m done with all that,” I said firmly. I’d told him the same thing on the many occasions that he’d asked me to consider joining P-Ops as his partner.

Definitely not.

“Anyway, I talked to Carlos last night and put our analysts here to work. To be honest, I don’t think Quark dying has anything to do with NACOS. There’s a pretty serious split in the Riverton wolf pack. Quark was about to challenge the alpha, a guy named Reynolds, for leadership. There’s a pretty good chance that this Reynolds killed Quark. Everything we found out points to him being a very dangerous guy.”

Tess and I stared at each other.

“That’s not good, Alejandro,” I said slowly. “Because our new Dead End deputy sheriff Lizzie Underhill, a currently non-shifting werewolf, and I are scheduled to go with the Riverton pack for the full moon run tonight.”

“We wanted to get Lizzie help, so she could learn to shift,” Tess said worriedly. “Alejandro, what do you think?”

“I think Reynolds may be a killer who’s going to take advantage of the situation. Be very careful, my friends.”

11

Jack

Just after we hung up, my phone buzzed, and I glanced down to see a text from Alejandro.

Carlos told me. Good luck! She's too good for you, as Rose is for me, so that means we count our blessings every single day, right, my friend?

Finally. Was that so hard? A simple offering of good luck wishes, without some wild proposal suggestion, and ... another text came through.

Also, you can tie the ring to a basilisk and let it loose in the pawnshop. If neither you nor Tess turn to stone, you'll know it's meant to be.

I sent him the poop emoji, because there's no emoji for "I'm going to run you over with the tractor," as far as I know. I should look into that.

Or create one.

I'd have gotten a lot of use out of it over the past few days.

Tess planned to take a nap and then do some cleaning, so I helpfully assisted her in changing out of her clothes, which is why it was nearly two hours later when I left to go talk to the guys at the swamp.

When I got there, the business was in full swing. Warm, sunny days attracted tourists to airboat rides like bees to honey. Darius, Charlie, and Mateo were out on boats, helping people who were tired of amusement parks try something different on their vacations, but Lucky had a minute to talk.

I plonked the beer and deli sandwiches I bought on the way down on the picnic table, keeping a wary eye out for the old dude, a twelve-foot-long alligator who probably weighed seven hundred pounds. He liked to hang out in the shade next to the table, probably hoping a sandwich—or one of the tourists—would fall on the ground to be snatched up for a snack.

“Have you heard from Molly lately?” Tess’s best friend, Molly, and Lucky had been casually dating, but Tess didn’t think it was going to last.

Molly’s band was about to hit the big time, and she was constantly touring. We were thrilled for her, but Tess missed her a lot. I was hoping to surprise her with a trip to one of Molly’s concerts soon.

Maybe as part of a honeymoon?

I froze, unable to believe I’d just had that thought. I hadn’t even proposed yet. There was no guarantee she’d say yes if I ever got up the nerve.

Honeymoon ?

“Dude,” Lucky said. “Why do you look like somebody just punched you in the face?”

“Just a random thought. Never mind.”

He grinned. “So, it’s not because you’re planning to ask Tess to marry you?”

“Argh! Even out here, you heard?”

He pointed to his phone. “Text messages blew up. You’d better get on with it before Molly finds out, because she’ll tell Tess the minute she hears.”

I sighed. “So, you and Molly are still good?”

“We decided we’re better as just friends. She’s great, and I wish her the best, but I had my time out of Dead End, and I’m not interested in a life of concert tours and international travel. She’s going to be a superstar, and I’m thrilled for her, but she needs somebody who’s into that life.”

“Are you okay? Is she?” I was surprised Tess hadn’t told me about it. I’d had to hear way too much about the dating lives of all her friends.

“Yeah, we’re fine. She felt the same way. We were never particularly serious, just good friends, so it’s not a huge breakup or anything. But tell me about this ring.”

I pulled the sapphire out and showed him.

“She’ll love that. But I think you’ll have a better chance of her saying yes if you put it an actual, you know, ring.” He grinned when I punched him in the arm.

“Listen, I didn’t come out here for girl talk.”

“We could braid each other’s hair,” he said, backing out of reach.

“Brigadier General Barstow.” I dropped the name like the bomb it was.

Lucky’s smile instantly disappeared. “Let me get Mickey and the Fox brothers. That is a really bad guy, Jack. You should stay clear.”

“I’m trying to, but he doesn’t seem to want to let me,” I said grimly.

Dallas, Austin, and Mickey joined us at the table and all tore into sandwiches while they listened.

The Fox twins were both former Army Rangers and computer geniuses. They specialized in cyber security in their consulting business, but they were also part owners in the airboats.

Dallas and Austin turned identical faces toward each other when I said Barstow’s name.

“Very bad news,” Austin confirmed, his dark eyes serious. “He ran Special Forces for a while.”

“A short while,” Dallas said. “Luckily for his people.”

“That bad?”

“Worse. He was a seething ball of ambition, only thinly covered with a veneer of political savvy. He was directly responsible for more deaths in the ranks than anybody who ever ran Special Forces before,” Mickey replied, his hands clenched into fists on the table. “Friends of mine died because of him.”

“Then why is he still at the Pentagon?” I watched Mateo expertly dock the boat and a group of sunburned tourists disembark.

“Because he has money and connections,” Lucky said. “Jack, I’m really not happy that he knows your name. That he knows Tess and where she lives and who lives next to her? Nothing about this is good.”

“A giant cluster?—”

“Hey! Look at that enormous crocodile!” one tourist shouted, standing perilously close to the edge of the dock.

Mateo yanked the guy away from potential death by foolishness and herded the clueless clients off the dock. After some chat, the tourists climbed back into their giant air-conditioned tour bus and drove off.

Mateo walked over to us, cracked open a beer, and downed half of it. “These people! I tell them, stay away from the alligators, and do they listen? No, they do not. One of those women was hanging halfway off the boat trying to get a selfie with a ten-foot gator!”

“On the bright side, the rest of them would have had killer videos of a gator eating a tourist,” Mickey said, handing Mateo a sandwich.

We filled Mateo in, but he had nothing to offer, other than: “If you need us, we’ll be there.”

The others added their agreement to that.

“I appreciate it.”

I stood to leave, but Lucky put a hand on my shoulder and pushed me back down. “Not so fast, lover boy. We have thoughts on your proposal.”

I groaned. “You would not believe some suggestions people have hit me with so far.”

Mateo grinned at me through a mouthful of chicken sub sandwich. “So, we get some champagne and candles, and then we set up a really romantic airboat ride, and?—”

I cut him off. “A romantic airboat ride?”

Everybody laughed.

“Okay, hear me out,” Mickey said. “You get the clowns to do it.”

He meant actual clowns. Tess and I had helped a troupe of clowns once, and Mickey’s girlfriend was part of the act.

“No. No clowns.”

“Wait! They can all parade into the pawnshop, playing their ukuleles, and do a singing proposal! Like, Tess, will you marry Jack, but singing, right?”

I was going to need a really big tractor to run all these people over.

I bared my teeth at him. “Wrong. No singing clowns. No ukuleles.”

“Jack’s right!” Lucky said.

“Finally,” I said. “The voice of reason.”

“We get a ribbon and tie the ring around the old man’s neck. Then Jack wrestles the gator, and the winner gets Tess!”

I stared at him in disbelief, but it wasn’t until his face turned red that I realized I’d actually grabbed him by the throat. I lessened the pressure, but I didn’t let go.

“The winner gets Tess? So, if by some horrible circumstance I lose to the gator, then I’m dead and she’s lunch?”

Lucky made a choking noise.

I scowled at him, but let go.

He grinned. “Yeah, so I didn’t think that all the way through.”

“How about I tie you around the old man’s neck?” When I stood, Lucky ducked away from me, laughing so hard he almost fell over.

“How about something simple, like you put the ring in a pinata? When she cracks it open, she gets the ring, and you get candy,” suggested Austin, noted sugar addict.

I sighed. “Look, you boneheads?—”

But they were laughing so hard they didn’t hear me.

When they finally caught their breath, Lucky thumped me on the back. “Tess is an amazing woman. You’d be lucky to have her. Good luck.”

“Yeah, sure, but tell her I’m free if she says no,” Mateo said, grinning.

A huge tractor.

“Enjoy the sandwiches and beer,” I said. “I have to go talk to a jeweler.”

I was halfway to my truck when I had an idea, so I turned around and went back.

“Hey, Dallas, Austin, do you know a way to modify the town text loop so everybody in town except Tess gets a single text chain?”

They both raised eyebrows at me at the same time. The twin thing was a little creepy



sometimes. “Can a gator eat a tourist?”

“I’m going to take a wild guess and say that means you can do it?”

They shrugged. “No problem. What text?”

“I’ll let you know as soon as I figure it out. How much lead time would you need to set it up?”

They looked mystified. “Lead time?”

“Yeah. Advance warning for all the tech stuff?”

Austin looked at his brother. “Five?”

Dallas nodded. “Ten would be better.”

“Hours?”

They cracked up. “Seconds, Jack. Give us ten seconds. We’ll get set up, so we’re ready to go when you give us the word.”

“Thanks. I mean it.”

“No worries. Good luck.”

“Clowns would be cooler,” Mickey called out after me, but I just waved.

Behind me, I heard Lucky speak up.

“Dude. Clowns are never cooler. Especially with ukuleles.”

The man was not wrong.

I climbed into my truck and called the friend I'd texted the ring photo to the night before. "Is that something you can do?"

"Absolutely," he said. "It's beautiful."

"I need it kind of soon," I said apologetically. "The surprise is in real danger of being busted. I'll pay whatever rush fee you want."

He laughed. "Jack. My friend. I've already started and will be finished by tomorrow, if you bring me the jewel now. And you will pay me nothing at all. After the favor you did for me and my family ... no. Your money is no good here. Invite me to the wedding."

"But I can't accept that!"

"It was a very big favor. Now be gracious and accept. And good luck with the lovely Tess."

I'd shown him a picture. His wife had red hair, too.

"I appreciate it more than I can tell you," I said sincerely. "I'm on my way."

"This ring will be crafted with all my skill, artistry, and love, so it will bring good fortune to your marriage."

"Thank you again."

We could certainly use good fortune.

First, a quick trip to Orlando.

Then, I'd talk to some people about Sheriff Paul Reynolds, who might or might not be a killer.

Just your ordinary Sunday in Dead End.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:31 am*

12

Tess

I sang when I cleaned, before somebody with Superior Tiger Hearing moved in with me and made pained faces when he heard me.

Okay, I wasn't the best singer, but I was certainly one of the most enthusiastic. And Lou liked my singing.

"Don't you, Lou? Lou?"

When I found my cat burrowed beneath not only my blanket, but my pillow, too, I tried not to take it personally.

My phone buzzed. I expected Jack with news, but it was Carlos. Susan's vampire brother was supermodel gorgeous, an important person on the vampire high council, and a good friend of mine. But it was daytime. He should have been sleeping.

"How are you awake? It's three in the afternoon!"

"Very carefully."

"How do two porcupines make love?"

"What?"

“Very carefully!” I cracked up.

Silence from his end.

“See, because they have quills, and?—”

“I understand the joke,” Carlos said. “It’s just not?—”

“It’s totally funny.”

“Tess. You’re in danger. Maybe we should talk about the werewolves and leave the porcupine jokes for later?”

I thought about it. “Nah. What kind of wolf knows she’s a wolf?”

“What?”

“A werewolf!”

Silence.

“Get it? Aware wolf, A W A R E wolf.”

He sighed. “Okay, I give up. Are you ready?”

“Ready for what?”

“How do police catch vampires? With stake-outs. What do you call twin vampires? Dead ringers. What’s a vampire’s favorite fruit? Neck-tarine. What did the vampire say when he looked in the mirror? Long time, no see.”

“Stop!” I was laughing so hard I was crying. “You have to stop. I can’t breathe.”

“What’s a vampire’s favorite TV show? Big Fang Theory.”

I sank down on the couch, holding onto my side. “Okay. Okay. I get it. Stop.”

“How many real vampires are there? None, unless you count Dracula.”

“Hey! Did he really exist? Count Dracula?”

“That’s what you want to talk about when dead bodies keep showing up in your garage?”

“Okay, first, ‘keep showing up’ is exaggerating. This is the first. Second, even if there was once a vampire named Count Dracula, he’s long gone, which makes him much less scary than garage murderers.”

Silence again.

“Oh, no. Dracula’s not dead?”

“I don’t think we should focus on unpleasant details, Tess.”

“Carlos, I will never make pecan pie for you again unless you tell me the truth.”

“Who knows? There have been rumors. Sightings. But there have been sightings of Elvis, too.”

I sigh. “You didn’t call me when you should be sleeping to talk about Elvis.”

“Or Vlad Dracul. But conversations often take left turns with you.”

“How are things with Bram’s? How’s Trinity doing?”

“My Orlando nightclub is doing fine, and I’m sure Trinity would love to see you. You and I should go dancing there one night.”

This time, I was silent.

“Tess?”

“Um. Are you hitting on me, Carlos?”

The way he burst out laughing wasn’t all that flattering.

“Tess. Even if I weren’t involved with someone, and even if I didn’t cherish our friendship enough not to want to risk it, I quite like my neck.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to wake up one evening with a tiger’s fangs in my throat.”

“There you go, exaggerating again. What’s up, Carlos?”

“I just want to warn you: do not find yourself alone with Sheriff Reynolds. He’s a killer.”

“Funny. He said the same thing about you.”

“I’m a vampire,” he said, his voice turning dark and smoky. “It goes with the territory. But I haven’t killed anyone recently, and I never killed anyone who didn’t deserve it.”

“Okaaaaay. But I promise I’m being careful. What about you? Do you—are you safe when you’re asleep during the day?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I’m making pecan pie. Why don’t you come over for a late dinner once it’s dark? Jack was planning to go with Lizzie to the full moon run with the Riverton pack to help her learn how to shift, but I don’t know if that’s still on.”

I was wondering why I hadn’t heard from Jack recently. It made me nervous, since there were killers about.

“I’ll be there at eight-fifteen. Sunset is at eight oh six.”

“Ooh! How do you know that? Is it from your supernatural vampire senses?”

“Weather dot com.”

“Huh.”

“I’ll see you soon, Tess. Lock your doors, please.”

We hung up, and I locked my doors. I also checked my rifle. I’d practiced enough, so I was quite good with it. The killer from last night had better not show his face around here again.

When the doorbell rang an hour later, it was Sheriff Reynolds, and he was alone.

He was also armed.



13

Jack

I made quite a few phone calls on the way back from Orlando. Not a single person I called had a good thing to say about Barstow.

Not one.

I called Alejandro back. He was still stuck on the Riverton sheriff.

“You still think Reynolds might be the killer? I’ve got to tell you; I don’t get that feeling from him. He worked with me on that situation this spring when you were down here, and he was a good guy and a good cop,” I said.

“Good cops can go rogue in their personal lives. You know that as well as I do,” he said.

“I know. I’ll keep an eye on him, but I’m more worried about NACOS and Barstow. I may have to make a trip to D.C.”

“If you do, let me know. I’ll go with you and express our agency’s ... unhappiness ... should anything happen to you or Tess.”

Despite everything going on, I grinned. “Aw. So nice to know you care.”

“Don’t push it, kitten.”

After a little trash talk, Alejandro hung up to go write reports—yet another reason I’ll never join a government agency—and I kept driving. When the phone rang again, I almost ignored it, but glanced down and saw it was Tess.

“Hey, cupcake.”

“No,” she said firmly. “No food words. Not pumpkin, peaches, or cupcake.”

“Not sweetie pie ?”

“Do you want me to call you Brussels sprouts?”

I shuddered. “Fine. No food. I’m almost there. Sorry I didn’t call sooner, but I was on the phone with Alejandro. He still thinks?—”

“Jack, I’m so glad you’re almost here,” she said in a completely artificial voice. I called it her shop voice; the cheerfully polite voice she only used with especially difficult customers.

“What’s wrong?” I put my foot down harder on the accelerator. Risking a speeding ticket was nothing if Tess was in danger.

“Yes, you’re right,” she said brightly. “Sheriff Reynolds is here. No, just him. We’re going to have some coffee and chat until you get here. Yes, let Susan know. What’s that?”

I heard a deep male voice rumble in the background.

“He says we don’t need to involve Susan, but you know how she gets, so please let her know. Yes, thanks, honey! I’ll see you soon.”

Now I was seriously worried. Tess didn't call me honey. She considered it a food word.

I made the rest of the half-hour drive in fifteen minutes, but Susan beat me there.

When I raced up the stairs and into the house, the sight of Susan, Reynolds, and Tess calmly sitting in the family room drinking coffee helped take my blood pressure down to a manageable level.

"We were just chatting about sports memorabilia," Tess told me, her smile still a bit off, no matter that Susan was there. "Paul says he has an entire collection of Miami Dolphins memorabilia. He'll show us sometime."

"You could come for dinner. My wife is a superb cook, and I've got a mean hand with a grill, if I say so myself." Reynolds grinned, evidently unaware of the tense undercurrents in the room.

"Sounds good," I said noncommittally. "Tess, is there any coffee left?"

She jumped up. "Let me go see."

"No, I've got it," I protested, knowing she'd ignore me so I could corner her in the kitchen and find out what was going on. "Anyone need a refill?"

Susan and Reynolds shook their heads, so I followed Tess down the hall and then took her hand and pulled her out the door to the back porch. "Why were you so scared? Did you talk to Alejandro?"

She hugged me, and I realized she was shaking. "No. Carlos called. He's convinced Reynolds is the killer, too, so when he showed up alone, I got scared. He seems so nice!"

“I’ve got some calls in to some people to see what I can find out. Let’s go back inside and get rid of him. Then we can find out what Susan knows.”

We made coffee, and I carried my mug down the hall.

Reynolds was on the phone, his face grim, but he ended the call a moment later. “I need to go. Kids in a traffic accident in town. One girl, a high school senior, might not make it. I hate when it’s kids.”

Susan and I nodded. We both had experience with that.

“Listen, I just stopped by to chat about tonight. Are you going to still bring Deputy Underhill? I think she’d be more comfortable with somebody she knows there.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Great. I’ll text you directions. Sheriff. Tess.”

After he left, Tess and Susan both started to talk, but Tess gestured at Susan to go first.

“Called a lot of law enforcement I know. Sheriff Reynolds has a reputation as a good man, good cop, and person of integrity on all sides. Even from people who love to dish the dirt.”

“I found out there’s been some pack strife, but nowhere near the level of a battle for alpha. Quark was relatively new, and not that many of the pack would have backed him for the top spot,” I told them. “He was only beta because the old beta moved away, like Reynolds said.”

“People in town like Mrs. Reynolds, quite a lot,” Tess reported. “She’s active in their

kids' school and with the Friends of the Riverton Library. Plus, she works at the diner next to the sheriff's office, so a lot of people know her from going in for coffee. She always has a friendly word. This doesn't seem like a couple who are running around killing people."

"Nobody accused her of killing anybody," I pointed out.

Tess shrugged. "I read a lot about true crime. Except in the cases of psychopath serial killers, who are experts in covering their tracks, spouses generally know when their partners are out committing murder. Even if Sheriff Reynolds somehow got past all our radars and he really killed Quark, he doesn't strike me as a psychopath."

The logic felt convoluted but also made sense, so I nodded. "I'll watch him really closely tonight when Lizzie and I are out there."

Susan shot out of her chair. "You don't really mean to take her out there after all this, do you?"

"I have to. Shifters have to shift. It's the most basic fact of our nature. If we can't help Lizzie do it the right way, she could wake up one night with half her body human and half wolf, and not in a cool comic book superhero way, but in a 'help, my liver is outside my skin' kind of way."

The sheriff pressed her lips together but didn't argue with me, which I appreciated, since I was the only shifter in the room.

"I have some other news." I held my phone up and pressed a few buttons. "I listened to the voicemails I thought were spam after what happened with the mail."

The harsh female voice thundered into the room in a series of messages:

Jack Shepherd, you need to back off Sheriff Reynolds, or you'll be dead.

Beep.

Jack Shepherd, you'll never be the top shifter in Florida. You should move out of state. Now.

Beep.

Jack Shepherd, don't make me warn you again, or your pretty girlfriend might be in danger.

"That's all of them. I may have deleted some a couple of weeks ago, but I can't figure out how to access deleted voicemail. I'm going to ask the Fox twins if they can."

"If they can't, I may have somebody official," Susan said, but she didn't offer to take over the task from the brothers. She knew their capabilities.

"You should have played the messages for Reynolds. He might have recognized the caller," Tess said. "It's not necessarily a woman. He or she is using a voice-disguising app. But the phrasing in the messages might be familiar to him."

"Whoever it was isn't attacking him, though. The opposite. You're sure about the wife being good people, Tess?" Susan looked thoughtful when Tess nodded. "Jack, should I come with you tonight?"

I shook my head. "You don't have jurisdiction, and they won't want you there. This is a shifter thing. I'll call you if anything happens."

"Okay." Her phone buzzed, and she glanced down. "That's my contact with the Highway Patrol. There was, in fact, a nasty accident involving high school kids in

Riverton an hour ago, so Sheriff Reynolds wasn't lying to us to get away."

Tess shivered. "That's some heavy-duty suspicious nature, Sheriff."

Susan sighed. "Learned the hard way, I can assure you. I need to get going. But here's news that won't surprise you: Quark's throat was torn out with claws, and there was wolf DNA in the wound."

"Somebody didn't want Quark talking to you, Jack," Tess says slowly.

"Or it was a crime of opportunity," I said.

"I guess we'll see. Jack, remember. Call me if anything— anything —happens with Lizzie or with Reynolds."

I promised. After she drove off, I looked at Tess. "So, any thoughts about dinner? Lizzie and I don't have to go out there until well after dark. Probably around ten."

"Okay, good, because Carlos is coming over for dinner. I'm going to go make him a pecan pie."

"Why does he get pecan pie?" I definitely did not sound sulky.

She laughed and kissed me. "You absolutely get pecan pie. Oh, and I'm going with you tonight."

"Oh, no, you're not," I growled. "And, before you say it, I don't care if you threaten me with not getting any pie. Your safety is more important than any baked goods."

"Wow. You really must love me." Tess walked into the kitchen and put her rifle back in the closet. "But I'm still going with you."

“Absolutely not.”

I was still arguing in the truck when we went to pick up Lizzie three hours later.



14

Tess

(At my house, before we left to collect Lizzie for the full moon run)

Dinner was fun. Jack and Carlos did their usual chest-puffing banter, and I mostly ignored them. But when the talk turned to serious things, we shared information on Brigadier General Barstow, and most of what we thought we knew was smoke and air.

“Brigadier means one star, right?” I thought he’d said so.

Jack nodded. “Yes. With a rep like his, they won’t let him get much higher, but he’s a fixer, and the military does like their fixers.

“The vampire high council has no dog in this hunt, as our father liked to say,” Carlos said, startling me. I mean, I knew he was Susan’s brother, but it was hard to think of a vampire having a dad.

“You don’t care about NACOS?” Jack looked skeptical. “Hard to believe.”

“It’s not that we don’t care. We think you’d be better off with a unifying organization. It’s more that it’s none of our business how you do it. Unfortunately, however, we, too, have heard of this General Barstow. The elders among us hate him like fire.” Carlos looked at me with a hopeful smile. “Is there more pie?”

I laughed. “For you, yes.”

After I put another slab of pie on his plate, Carlos continued. “If Barstow has his sights set on you, we need to find out why and encourage him to back off.”

“We?” Jack asked.

“Yes. It’s not random that he knew I lived here. Definitely not random that he called you to accuse me of murdering someone. Enormously not random to accuse me of murdering someone in Tess’s garage.”

“A shifter killed him,” I said. “The M.E. confirmed it.”

“Susan told me. But shifters can work with vampires, so it’s not like Barstow will believe I’m innocent. Or, if he’s trying to frame me, he’ll continue to accuse me of hiring someone to do the job. What about this internal pack warfare?”

“Not really a thing,” Jack said. “And Tess says Reynolds’ wife is very well-liked by everyone in town. I don’t think he’s our killer, but it sure is convenient to throw him under the bus for it. That may have been the reason behind the phone calls. Make it look like Reynolds or one of his allies is threatening me, so we’ll start looking at him.”

“Subtle and twisty,” I said with a hint of admiration. “If so, we have that rarest of killers: a smart one.”

Carlos laughed, but Jack didn’t.

As I thought more about it, my smile faded, too. “The last thing we need around Dead End is another intelligent, twisty criminal.”

Carlos nodded. But then he brightened and grabbed a small brown paper sack he'd plopped on the seat next to him at the kitchen table. "I almost forgot! I brought you something from Romania."

"You really went to Romania? A little on the nose, isn't it?" Jack asked dryly.

I just laughed. "It's on brand, Carlos."

He narrowed his eyes. "I didn't choose the location. Anyway, the innkeeper was a lovely lady and a great baker. I told her about you, and she pointed me to the man who hand carves her baking utensils. I got you a mortar and pestle."

He handed me the bag, careful not to touch me.

"Carlos! You didn't have to do that!"

"Jack said I couldn't give you a BMW." He gave Jack a sly grin. "This was the next best thing."

I pulled out the lovely elm mortar and pestle, which the artist had carved with great skill. "Thank you so much!"

"You're very welcome. Oh! One more thing." He pulled an envelope from a pocket. "She gave me this for you with her best wishes. It's the recipe for her prize plum cake."

"Ooh! Gimme! Thank you, Carlos. And you have to give me her address so I can write and thank her!" I was already pulling the handwritten recipe card out of the envelope.

"It's written in Romanian, but I knew you'd find a way."

“I will!”

“And make it for me.”

“For us,” Jack said pointedly. “And hey, vampire. Are you busy later tonight?”

“No, shifter, not particularly. What do you need?”

Jack told him about the full moon run. “Might not hurt to have stealth backup. Tess is going to stay here, where it’s safe.”

“Wasn’t safe last night,” I remind him. “What if I’m here alone, and the killer comes back? I’m going with you.”

Carlos laughed. “You’ve met your match in Tess, my friend.”

We talked over and around the problems until we were all sick of talking, and then it was time to go pick up Lizzie. Carlos said he’d meet us in the forest, but we wouldn’t see him unless Jack or I gave the signal. When I asked what the signal was, my vampire friend only raised one eyebrow and said, “Yell, ‘hey, Carlos.’”

Everybody’s a comedian.

“Jack? What happens if Lizzie isn’t able to shift?”

His jaw clenched, and I saw his hands tighten on the steering wheel. “That would be bad, Tess. Really bad.”

Considering all the things that had gone badly recently, we were thrilled when one thing went completely, magically right:

Lizzie was a beautiful wolf.

The special magic that happened when a pack got together beneath the full moon helped her transform for the first time. One moment, Lizzie stood there, naked under a blanket—none of the other wolves bothered with blankets, to my embarrassment—and the next moment, a gorgeous, chocolate-brown wolf with huge brown eyes and a splash of white fur on her chest stood looking up at me.

“Lizzie! You did it!”

The new wolf was unsteady on her paws for a few moments, but her new pack mates surrounded her, welcoming her, and soon they all bounded off together. Jack waited until they entered the woods, and then he looked at me and smiled.

“Tess, you are so tenderhearted,” he said, hugging me.

“I know,” I sniffled. “It was just so beautiful. I’m so happy for her.”

“Me, too. But I’m also wary. Even if Reynolds isn’t our killer, one of his pack may be. I need to get out there with them.”

“Okay, but be careful. I worry about you with all those wolves.”

He grinned, and then a tiger stood next to me.

“I worry about the poor wolves with you out there,” I said dryly. “Go! I’ll be in the truck, reading.”

Jack bounded off in gigantic leaps. He’d catch up to the wolves in no time. I went back to the truck and picked up my book, but I locked the doors.

Just in case.

When a woman banged on my window twenty minutes later, I shrieked.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she said loudly, to be heard through the glass. “I’m with Sheriff Reynolds. I thought maybe we could wait for them together.”

“Oh! Whew. You startled me.” I unlocked the door and stepped out of the truck. “I’m Tess. Tess Callahan. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Kay. Nice to meet you, too.” She was medium-tall, with black hair and dark brown eyes, and she was pretty in jeans and a T-shirt. She smiled at me until I closed the truck door, and then she leaned close, her smile changing into a scowl.

“Stay away from Paul,” she spat. “I know your type, hanging on the powerful men like a groupie. He’s taken. Stay away, or I’ll hurt you.”

“I don’t want Sheriff Reynolds,” I tried to explain, shocked. “I?—”

“Don’t make me warn you again!”

Before I could even think of how to respond, she raced off into the woods in the direction everybody else had gone.

It was at least five minutes before I remembered the signal.

“Hey, Carlos!”

When Jack and the wolves returned, most of them were wary when they saw the vampire. But Sheriff Reynolds immediately shifted, pulled on his clothes, and then crossed over to where Carlos, Jack, and I stood.

“What happened?”

I didn't know how to talk about this. I could feel my face heat, and I was hideously embarrassed for both of us. Nothing I'd heard from friends in Riverton had made me expect Mrs. Reynolds would act like that.

“Sheriff, I am so sorry, but will you please tell your wife I don't have any ... um ... romantic intentions toward you?”

“What?” Jack said.

“What?” Reynolds said.

“I didn't really have time to explain before she shifted into her wolf form and followed you guys. I'm so sorry if I ever gave the impression?—”

“Wait.” Reynolds held up a hand. His face was a study in consternation. “Did you say shifted? Vicki isn't a shapeshifter.”

I blinked. “Who's Vicki? She said her name was Kay.”

15

Tess

On Monday morning, I was happy to get back to the relatively safe and normal environment of my shop. Before I walked in, I listened for the disco ball, but all I heard was silence. Jack had promised to take the thing down when he got here, but he had errands to run all morning. He was still trying to learn more about NACOS and General Barstow, so we could figure out a plan there, even though we were now pretty sure we knew who'd killed poor Quark.

After I'd inadvertently dropped the bombshell about Kay, Reynolds told us the whole ugly story. She was a female wolf shifter he'd only dated twice several years ago, before he met Vicki, his actual wife. Kay had acted like a normal person, but a little needy, and hadn't seemed to be very hurt when he broke things off.

Then, a couple of years ago, something in Kay's life must have changed, because she came roaring out of the woodwork with a vengeance. She started calling him to tell him he "deserved" a shifter wife, and that nobody else could really love him.

She wrote him long, passionate letters about their glowing future together. After tearing up the first few, he put the new ones, unopened, in a file folder in his desk at work labeled "In case I disappear."

Worse, though, was when she'd started going after Vicki.

Reynolds' fists had been clenched tight when he told us this. "I had to get a



restraining order. Let me tell you, that was fun. Big, strong shifter who's also a sheriff getting a piece of paper telling a bitty woman she had to leave me alone. I took some teasing for it, but it was important to get on record."

It hadn't helped, though. She'd kept up the barrage of contact until Reynolds had driven to Alabama and confronted her at her job. This was maybe six months ago.

After that, he'd thought she'd finally gotten the message.

Apparently not.

He'd found a picture of her on social media and shown it to me, and I confirmed she was the person who'd threatened me. I'd also remembered that the words she'd used were the same as Jack's caller used:

Don't make me warn you again.

Sure, many people said things like that, but this seemed like too big a coincidence to ignore. Reynolds immediately called his wife and then his deputies to warn them.

Jack called Susan and told her.

Then Reynolds and his pack took off back into the woods to see if they could track Kay down. Literally track her—wolves' senses of smell were very keen.

We hadn't waited for the results, just headed home, dropping Carlos at his car first.

"Thanks for the help," I'd told my vampire friend. "That woman left me feeling pretty shaky."

"See? 'Hey, Carlos' was a perfectly good signal." He'd grinned, his teeth gleaming in

the moonlight, and then he'd climbed into his car and headed home, with us following.

After a night of restless sleep, we woke up to a bright, sunny Monday morning and a full week of work ahead, which made me happy.

My days off were rough .

Today, I happily rang up customers, took a few non -magical items in pawn, cleaned counters and shelves, and lived the ordinary life I imagined a normal pawnshop owner who didn't live in Dead End might live.

Bliss!

The tourists on the weekly Golden Years Swamp Tours bus bought a lot, too, which was good for the bottom line. Not that I might need to worry so much about the bottom line if what Jack said about the Fae gold was correct.

I added "get Fae gold value" to "find out about magic mirror" on my to-do list and then shot a text to Phin.

Any luck?

He didn't answer right away, which I hoped meant he was hard at work figuring out how to help Horatio.

An unusually high number of Dead End residents stopped in, but they didn't buy much, just gave me weird smiles and said odd things, like "Oh, you're still here?"

They must have heard about the dead guy in my garage.

I kept smiling and saying yes, I was still here. As it got close to lunchtime, the traffic slowed. Just when I was thinking about what to eat, the chimes rang, and the doorway darkened with the unmistakable bulk of Rooster Jenkins.

I'd known Rooster since I was a little girl, when he'd seemed to be the size of an actual mountain to me. He was in his late sixties now and had to weigh over four hundred pounds, but he carried it well on his nearly seven-foot-tall frame.

"Rooster! No more goats to pawn, I hope?" He was the one and only customer from whom I'd ever agreed to take a live animal, and I didn't plan to repeat the experience soon.

I never got the stains out of those shoes.

He held up a bag. "Nope. Brought you lunch, though. Meat loaf sandwiches from Lauren's Deli. One for you, three for me, and another six in case that man of yours is around."

Rooster had been fascinated to meet somebody who could eat more than he could at one sitting. After Jack and I had saved him from being falsely accused of murder, he dropped by occasionally to say hi and bring lunch.

"I'm always glad to see you, and you don't need to bring food. Just your own lovely self," I told him, as I always did.

He grinned at me. "Sure. But I'm even lovelier when I bring meat loaf sandwiches."

"Isn't everyone?"

I locked the door and put the AT LUNCH, BACK IN 30 MINUTES sign up, and then Rooster and I headed into my back room to eat and chat.

He told me about what was happening on his farm, and I tried to avoid shuddering at the memory of his flock of dangerous geese. I told him about life in the pawn business, focusing on the funny stuff.

“I haven’t danced the polka in thirty years!” He gave me a look filled with anticipation.

“Sorry, but not today. I’ve had too much weird this week. I’m looking forward to a nice, quiet afternoon.”

Rooster flinched. “Tess, you know better to say something like that in Dead End.”

I groaned.

He wasn’t wrong.

Not long after Rooster went home, Phin rushed into the shop carrying the mirror.

“We figured it out!”

“That’s wonderful! Tell me!”

I unwrapped the mirror and waved hello to the distant figure of Mr. Mercury, who was trudging toward the glass.

“It’s a spell of three, so we need all three of us to say the words to get him out of the mirror!”

I took a step back, frowning. “Okay, a few things. First, you found out for sure he’s a ...” I switched to a whisper: “Person?”

When Phin nodded, I held up a second finger. “What happens when he comes out? Does the mirror explode? Will there be shrapnel? Should we do this outside or at a firing range or with the bomb squad from Orlando?”

“No, it’s perfectly safe,” Phin said, impatience snapping in his voice.

“Perfectly safe!” Mr. Mercury shouted.

Since he could hear me anyway, I moved back to the counter and looked down into the mirror. “You regained your memory?”

“I did! I was—I guess I am a wizard. A spell went wrong, and I got myself trapped in this mirror.”

Okay.

“Are you a good wizard? You won’t do something evil when we get you out of there, right?”

Horatio drew himself up and looked down his tiny mirror nose at me. “I am a very good wizard, in all meanings of the word. And I would never harm those who’ve helped me.”

I blew out a breath. “Okay, I guess that takes care of all my concerns, except the most important one.”

“What’s that?” Phin asked.

“I can’t help you perform a spell. I’m not a witch!”

Turned out, I didn’t need to be.

Phin had pages from a grimoire one of his friends sent him, and all we had to do was read our lines.

[I won't include those here, because they're secret.—Tess]

First, we put the mirror on the floor, standing up against the wall, to help Horatio climb out if it worked. Then we took turns reading from the pages. After Horatio said the last line, the mirror lit up, and Phin and I both backed away.

Just in case.

The glass surface shimmered and rippled, expanding, and then Horatio stepped out of the light and into my pawnshop!

Where he immediately collapsed.

When I rushed over to him, he looked up at me and smiled. “Gravity is tricky after all those years.”

“You really are real!” I was so happy for him. “We should call an ambulance, though. Who knows what kind of health issues you might have after such an ordeal?”

Phin called 911, and I sat on the floor with the wizard to wait.

“I think I’ll destroy that mirror, just in case,” I told him. “I don’t want anybody else getting trapped inside it.”

“It’s perfectly safe,” he said, looking around with wide eyes. “I was the problem, not the mirror.”

“Maybe,” I said doubtfully. I didn’t feel like taking any chances. “Can you tell me

how you got stuck in there in the first place?”

He grimaced. “No. Better to not go into details. I’ll never do that again.”

I smiled at him. “I’m just glad you’re out now. I wish I could give you a hug, but?—”

“Phin told me about your condition. Believe me, I don’t want to know anything about how I might die after I just escaped that prison.” He looked wistful, though, about the hug.

“Hold out your arm,” I said impulsively.

When he did, I patted his sleeve. “Not quite a hug, but the best I can do.”

He smiled at me, and he had tears in his eyes that both of us ignored.

“All right, Tess Callahan. Thank you for being the first person to be kind to me in centuries, and I’d like to offer you a wish.”

“But you’re not a djinn, right?”

“Correct. Not a djinn, but still a wizard. What can I do for you?”

I smiled at him. “Not a single thing, Mr. Mercury. I have everything I ever wanted, and more than I deserve. My only wish?—”

He leaned forward, careful not to touch me. “Yes?”

“I only wish that you have a wonderful life, now that you’re free.”

He was still smiling when they took him off on the stretcher for tests and IV fluids

and whatever other medical procedures somebody trapped inside a mirror for centuries might need.

Phin lingered to talk to me. “Thanks for calling me, Tess. That’s one of the most fascinating things I’ve ever been involved in. Horatio promised to stay in touch. I think I could learn a lot from him.”

“Just be careful around mirrors,” I said dryly. “Is he going to stay with you?”

“No, he has family coming to get him.”

“Ooh! Where’s he from? Please tell me it’s somewhere exotic like Madagascar? Where do wizards live?”

He grinned at me. “Boise.”

I hugged Phin—because I could; I had before, and he was safe—and thanked him again. And then he drove off to meet Horatio at the hospital, so the old wizard wouldn’t be alone.

For the rest of the afternoon, I kept catching myself grinning at the idea of Boise wizards. I couldn’t wait to tell Jack.

At just before four o’clock, the chimes over the door sounded, and I looked up and smiled, expecting him.

Kay the stalker walked into my shop and locked the door behind her.



16

Tess

“You are not Sheriff Reynolds’ wife, and I want you out of my shop,” I said, reaching for the baseball bat I kept behind the counter.

“You can’t have him!” she shouted. “I’m the only one who’s good for him. Once I get rid of that horrible woman he married?—”

“She’s not horrible! She volunteers at the library!”

I’d learned that yelling completely irrelevant details at an attacker sometimes caught them off guard.

Three guesses how I’d learned that .

It worked this time, too. She stopped walking and stared at me with a puzzled look on her face, her head cocked to the side in what I thought of, since Pickles, as the puggy head tilt.

“What are you talking about?”

I held my bat up to show her. “Nothing. Listen, I have a boyfriend. Jack Shepherd. The guy you left the threatening voice mail messages for.”

She circled to the left, and I could see from her tense muscles she was preparing to

rush me. “Those weren’t threats. They were gentle warnings.”

“Okay. Sure. Consider this a gentle warning from me: get out of my shop, and I won’t hurt you with this bat.”

“It’s too late for that!” Her eyes were wild, and her pupils were dilated. Maybe she was on drugs?

She glared at me. “I had to kill Quark. He was going to fight Paul for the alpha spot. I had to take him out. After I get rid of you and that useless Vicki, Paul and I can be together. Forever.”

Her voice turned sing-songy. “Forever and ever and ever. Just like we always dreamed about.”

One thing I’d learned in my true crime and psychology reading was that damaging a delusional person’s fantasies could turn dangerous, fast. So, I wasn’t about to tell her Sheriff Reynolds wanted nothing to do with her.

But I had a question on a different topic. “Kay, are you a member of NACOS?”

She did the head tilt thing again. “What?”

“Does the name Barstow mean anything to you?”

“The town in California?”

“What? No. General Barstow.”

She shook her head. “No. And quit stalling. I need to kill you now so I can get on with my day.”

She said that like I'd say, oh, sure, don't want to hold you up, just kill me now .

I clutched the bat tighter. "Kay?—"

She leaped clear over my counter and wrenched the bat away from me.

That's when I saw my life flash before my eyes. "Kay! Please, I don't have anything to do with Sheriff Reynolds!"

"Then why did he go to your house?" she screamed, so much frustrated anger in her voice it made me shake.

"Because that's where you killed his deputy!" I screamed right back. And then, before she could rip my throat out, I closed my eyes and blasted her right in the face with the pepper spray I also kept beneath my counter.

By the time I heard sirens, I'd put on my box-opening gloves and wrapped Kay up in so much duct tape she was never getting free. I'd also poured water over her eyes to flush them out, because I wasn't a monster. Then I unlocked my door, made a few phone calls, and settled in to wait. When Jack burst through the door right in front of Susan, I was sitting on my counter, watching Kay struggle and resisting the urge to kick her in the ribs.

Okay. I wasn't a monster, but I maybe had a few monster-ish tendencies. She had tried to kill me, after all.

Jack strode straight over to me, lifted me into his arms, and hugged the breath out of me, and then Sheriff Reynolds rushed into the shop.

"Jack. Jack! Can't breathe!"

“Don’t care,” he said into my hair, and then he kissed me as if he’d almost lost me.

When I realized he had almost lost me, I kissed him back, ignoring Susan, the stalker, and even Sheriff Reynolds for a minute.

After that, it was all about the details.

Susan and Andy took Kay into custody, since it would be a conflict of interest for Reynolds to do it.

Reynolds apologized to me and thanked me, over and over, until I signaled Jack to steer him out of the shop and get rid of him by promising we’d come to a barbecue soon and look at his sports memorabilia.

When Jack came back in, I was cleaning up. Kay the stalker had knocked some things off the shelves when she attacked me.

“I ought to send her a bill,” I said darkly.

“I’m sure Reynolds would pay it,” Jack said. “He’s so thankful you caught her. She was threatening to kill his wife next.”

“I know.” I put the broom aside and sighed. “Life’s too short for all that drama, you know? Why couldn’t Kay just find somebody new and leave Reynolds alone?”

Jack stared at me as if I’d started speaking an alien language.

“Jack?”

“You’re right,” he said slowly. “Life’s too short. Tess, can you wait here at the shop? It’s four-thirty, and I need to make a couple of phone calls.”

“Well, I was planning to close up now. You have your truck here, so you don’t need me to drive, and?—”

“Thirty minutes! Thanks! Don’t go anywhere.” He kissed me, hard, and hugged me. And then he raced out to his truck, but he didn’t drive away, he just picked up his phone.

Shrugging, I started cleaning again. I wasn’t sure what he was up to, but thirty minutes wasn’t very long. If it made him happy for me to wait, I’d do it.

I put the CLOSED sign on the door, though.

I’d had enough excitement for one day.

Fifteen minutes later, cars started streaming into my parking lot. When I walked out to the porch to see what in the world was going on, Jack ran up the stairs, kissed me again, and went back inside the shop. I followed him in, only to see him haul the ladder out and set it up directly beneath the disco ball.

“Jack! What are you doing?”

He looked at me and pointed to the earplugs in his ears. “Can’t hear you,” he shouted.

I held my hands over my ears, just in case, and watched in astonishment while he lifted the heavy ball off its hook, carried it carefully down the ladder, and walked out the door with it.

“Oh! Don’t get rid of it, Jack! I can sell that to a magical items collector.”

But he carried it over to his truck, which now sat in the middle of dozens of cars, with more driving into the parking lot every minute. There were even cars parking on the

shoulders of the road and people walking from there toward the shop.

Two men—were those the Petersons?—were helping Jack put together an odd metal-framed tripod-looking thing in the bed of his truck. When they accomplished that, they carefully hung the disco ball from a hook at its apex.

I just stood and stared, my mouth hanging open, while what looked like most of the population of Dead End arrived at my pawnshop.

Then my Aunt Ruby and Uncle Mike showed up and parked right in front of me on the sidewalk, since there wasn't any other room for his truck, and Shelley jumped out and raced over to Jack.

“IS IT TIME? IS IT TIME, JACK?”

Jack smiled at me with his heart in his eyes. “It's time, Shelley.”

He reached over and switched on the disco ball.

And then hundreds of Dead Enders did the Chicken Dance right there in my parking lot.

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Jack

By the time I danced my way over to the porch and took Tess's hand, the Chicken Dance had turned into a waltz. I pulled her into my arms and looked down into her beautiful eyes while we performed a dance perfectly that I hadn't the slightest idea how to do.

All around us, what looked like the entire town of Dead End waltzed along, including Mr. and Mrs. Frost, smiling at each other now, Nancy the floozy forgotten. Mike and Ruby danced nearby, Uncle Mike's white eyebrows raised nearly to his hairline when he looked over at me. Shelley and her friend Zane, at ten far too young to even know what a waltz was, danced on the porch.

The Petersons.

Angela Lovesberry.

Rooster Jenkins, dancing with Lauren from the deli.

Deputy Andy and our new vet, Charithra Kumari.

Lorraine and even surly Beau.

Lots and lots of McKees.

Joe Bob and Donna.

All the swamp commandos, dancing with the toddlers from Sally DeSario's daycare.

The Gardner goblin family and Prism.

Mrs. Hamilton and Rick Peabody from the school, with several other teachers.

My uncle Jed, dancing with Granny Josephine.

Connor Murphy from the pub and his new waitress.

Otis, dancing with his greyhound, Beauty.

And so very many more.

The parking lot was as beautiful as a ballroom to me, because I had the woman I loved in my arms and all our friends and family around us. We danced and danced and danced, Tess laughing and smiling up at me.

I was the luckiest man in the world, and I finally knew it.

No more doubts.

No more hesitation.

Life was too short.

When the music switched to a tango, everyone else slowly moved away from me and Tess, until we were dancing alone in the middle of that huge crowd. I glanced over at the Fox brothers and gave them the signal, and they turned off the disco ball.



Tess, breathless with laughter, kissed me right there in front of everybody. “What is this, Jack?”

Everybody had said to do it right, so I pulled the small box out of my pocket and got down on one knee, right there in the parking lot. Tess gasped, her hands flying to her face.

“Tess Callahan,” I began, and then realized my voice was on a loudspeaker.

The Fox brothers grinned at me and held up sound equipment.

I just shook my head and started over. “Tess, you have brought love and light and joy to a heart I thought was long dead and crumbled into dust, and you gave hope to a war-hardened soldier who’d found very little of that. You’re the center of my life and the warmth inside my soul. You are compassionate, warm, funny, and brilliant. I can’t imagine living a single day of the rest of my life without you in it. You taught me how to laugh and how to be part of a family. You and all of Dead End taught me how to be part of a community, no matter how hard I tried to fight it.”

A swell of laughter rose.

“So, I knew they needed to be here and be part of this moment. Tess, I love you with everything I am and everything I will ever be. Will you please marry me and make me the luckiest man who ever lived?”

She reached out with both hands and pulled me up. “Jack, I never thought I could find love. I certainly never dreamed of finding it with the best man I’ve ever known. You’re so smart and kind and funny, even when you’re singing sea shanties at three in the morning. My heart never dared to hope before you walked in my door that day. Yes, I will marry you. Yes, yes, yes, a million times yes!”

I kissed her, and everybody cheered.

“You forgot to give her the ring, boy!” Mrs. Frost shouted.

“Oh, no!”

Tess looked dazed. “All this and a ring, too?”

Hastily, I opened the box, took out the ring, and tossed the box to Mike. Then, with hands I was surprised to find were shaking, I slid the ring on her hand.

“Oh, Jack,” she whispered. “It’s the most beautiful ring in the world.”

“AND I GET TO BE A brIDESMAID!” Shelley shouted.

Tess and I laughed, and then the Fox brothers turned the disco ball back on, and all of Dead End danced and danced and danced, accepting congratulations and best wishes from everyone.

And then we invited the entire town to our place for a barbecue.

“We’re going to need more steaks,” I whispered to Tess.

My fiancée .

“People will bring stuff. Don’t worry. It will all work out.” She said, and then she kissed me again.

And she was right.

It all did.

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*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:31 am*

Tess

It was almost midnight before everybody went home, and I was worn out but completely, entirely, incandescently happy.

Jack sat down next to me on the porch swing and pulled me into his arms. “Do you remember when you sat out here breaking up with that Snodgrass guy back when I first knew you?”

I smiled at him. “Owen is doing very well. He’s married and has a baby on the way.”

“Is this real life?” Jack tensed. “I can’t help but worry that maybe I’m not meant to be this happy. That life is too perfect.”

I laughed and then kissed him. “We’re both meant to be this happy. But I can fuss at you once in a while about leaving enormous stacks of mail lying around, if it will make you feel better.”

“Maybe later,” he suggested, standing and sweeping me up into his arms. “I’d like to make love to my fiancée now.”

“What a wonderful idea.”

I decided the next morning to take a rare day off work on a weekday. Tuesday seemed like a good day to lie around being lazy and answering a billion phone calls about the engagement.

I talked to Molly for nearly an hour, and then she had me put Jack on the phone, so she could threaten his life if he ever hurt me. We promised to fly out to one of her concerts within the next month, and she promised to come home and help me with all things wedding.

It was an idyllic day, after an idyllic night, but we knew Wednesday would be back to real life.

NACOS was still an issue.

General Barstow was still out there.

And—even more terrifying than both—we had to plan a wedding.

“You know,” Jack said, when we were cooking dinner. “We’re going to have to invite half of Atlantis.”

I almost dropped my spoon. “Oh! And the Fae queen and her court. After Aunt Ruby gave her the key to the city, she takes things personally. It might be a massive insult to her honor if we don’t invite her.”

“And all of Dead End, pretty much,” Jack said, resigned.

“What about all your buddies from your soldier days? And Frazzle and all the pixies.”

“I draw the line at Leroy,” Jack said.

“This is going to cost a fortune,” I groaned.

Jack just laughed and hugged me. “Luckily, we have Atlantean treasure and Fae gold.”

“Okay, but you have to make me one promise.”

“Only one? I’d promise you the world, Tess.” He grinned at me. “What’s the promise?”

“No disco balls!”