



Someone Save My Midlife Tonight (Good To The Last Death #13)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I've said it once, and I'll say it again...

Whoever said life begins at forty must have been heavily medicated, drunk, or delusional.

Three funerals without the deceased present? Crisis.

One wedding run by drag queens with questionable taste in music? Semi-crisis, but doable.

Dead showing up on my porch who have already crossed over? Colossal sh*tshow.

This is what forty looks like for me. But now I have an even bigger problem. The Higher Power wants my daughter. It's not happening. Period.

With the love of my Immortal life by my side, along with the profane Keeper of Fate, a gaggle of mostly-intact ghosts, and a few former enemies I'm going to end the madness once and for all. Hopefully, I don't die trying.

Midlife's a journey. Enjoy the ride. The crisis is definitely included.

However, anything, and I mean, anything, is possible as long as I believe.

Oh, and wine helps too.

Total Pages (Source): 14

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:31 am

CHAPTER ONE

Last year, if someone had told me that I would travel to a plane that wasn't on Earth and that I would battle fake Alex Trebek, fake Bob Barker and fake Monty Hall for my life along with the lives of my dead grandmother and grown daughter who was supposed to be a baby, I would have tossed them into the trunk of my car and dropped them off at the looney bin.

That was then. This was now.

Now was terrifying.

Candy Vargo often said that things could always get worse. Her words were coming true.

The plane of existence was unfamiliar, the rules were unknown and although I was assured I couldn't die permanently here, I wasn't so sure...

When Alana Catherine's freeze spell wore off, the Higher Power flew into a rage. It destroyed the entire soundstage with a flick of Its finger, then shrieked so loudly the rest of the building fell around us. I covered my daughter and Gram to protect them from a large beam crashing toward us, but in a poof, it disappeared. The wreckage of the game show set began to morph and transform until it turned into a stunningly gorgeous field in a valley of wildflowers. It was surreal.

The beauty of the surroundings clashed with the fury of the being who resided on this plane.

“You shall pay,” It snarled. “None of you will leave this place. Ever. You fucked around and you’re about to find out.”

“No,” Alana Catherine said. “You’re wrong.”

The Higher Power was taken aback at my daughter’s words. It was crazy, but I thought I saw fear for a brief moment in Its eyes. That had to be wrong. Why would It be afraid of us?

“I. Am. Never. Wrong,” It snapped. “My word is the law. The laws have been written in stone, and a little half-breed girl can’t subvert her way around them.” It laughed menacingly. The sound shook the ground we stood on. “I made the laws, and I’m the only one allowed to break them.”

“I call bullshit,” she said. Alana Catherine clapped her hands. An ancient book appeared. It floated in the air in front of her. The Higher Power gasped. Its eyes narrowed to slits, and It punched a hole in the ground, creating a huge crater.

Crap. The divide was vast, and getting over it to get to the Higher Power was going to be a challenge.

Gram grabbed my hand. “Daisy girl,” she whispered. “I know that there book. I seen Heather use it.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“I’m thinkin’ it’s the Immortal Book of Law,” she said, sounding a little frantic.

That was nothing. My stomach was one big painful cramp. “Why does Alana Catherine have access to it?” I asked under my breath.

“Goin’ out on a limb here, but I’m gonna say our little gal might be the future Arbitrator Between the Darkness and the Light. ”

I looked at her askance. How was that even possible? As of five minutes ago Alana Catherine was the future Death Counselor and possibly the future Soul Keeper. And now? I had no clue what my child was destined to be.

When the skunks flew out of my daughter one by one, the Higher Power backed up a bit. Even though the crater was a barrier, It wasn’t pleased that the skunks had shown up. I recalled Alana Catherine’s words—Spiritually, skunks symbolize fearlessness, protection and balance. The black and white of their fur embodies the balance between the dark and the light... Was the Higher Power afraid that Its careless disregard of balance was going to bite It in the ass? Did the skunks come out of my child to remind It of that?

The adorable little stinkers were armed to the butt. They surrounded my daughter in protection. I wish I could say that it gave me a sense of peace, but it didn’t calm me at all. Not one little bit. I’d watched them get decimated by a machine gun-wielding Fake Vanna White less than an hour ago. What could they do against a being that had created life as we knew it?

Again, I felt like I was in the middle of a fever dream. This didn’t look like it was going to end well. Mentally, I gauged the distance that It was standing from me. Alana Catherine’s safety was my biggest concern. She was powerful, but how could someone who was a freaking baby this morning fight the Higher Power with a book and a bunch of cute mammals? She couldn’t. However, I could kill the bastard and get us out of here. I knew the Higher Power wouldn’t die permanently, but it could buy us some time. Jumping the crater was iffy, but I was fast. If I got up enough speed, I could make it.

“Gram, when I say go, I want you to cuss like you’ve never cussed before.”

“You want it worse than the string of words I strung together a little while ago?”

I glanced over at her. “You can be nastier than that tirade I lived through?”

“Way,” she assured me with a thumbs up. “You should hear Candy Vargo in her sleep. It’s a hot mess of poop words. I might be old and technically dead, but I got a memory like a steel trap. I can sing the hair right out of your ears.”

That news was frightening and fabulous at the same time. “You’re going to distract It. I’m going to kill It. Then we’re leaving.”

“We takin’ the skunks home?” she asked. “I think Alana Catherine will be real dang disappointed if we don’t.”

“Umm... I wasn’t planning on it, but I suppose I could make it work.”

“One more quickie,” Gram said. “How we gettin’ out of here?”

“I’m gonna click my heels three times and say there’s no place like home,” I told her.

“Works for me,” she said.

I sure as hell hoped it worked for all of us.

Seconds before I gave Gram the go-ahead to set the world on fire with her filthy mouth, Alana Catherine spoke. Her voice was loud and clear. Her words were damning. She knew it. Gram knew it. I knew it, and the Higher Power knew it. It trembled with so much outrage, I wondered if It was about to obliterate the entire plane.

“You have broken the laws you created,” my child said, pointing at the book. She

glowed brightly in every color of the rainbow.

“Well, I’ll be,” Gram muttered. “I’d put up with all kinds of rain to see a rainbow like that. ”

“You,” Alana Catherine continued, her voice booming through the valley. “You have removed souls from the Light who did no wrong. You pulled them out for your own selfish reasons.”

“So what?” the Higher Power snarled. “What do you think you can do about it?”

Alana Catherine was calm, cool and collected. Her skunk army hung on her every word. Their asses were directly aimed at the Higher Power. A group butt blast probably wouldn’t kill It, but that wouldn’t be what anyone would call fun. “It’s not what I will do about it. It’s what you will do about it. The punishment for your crime is death. You wrote the law. You wrote the punishment. The question that hangs in the balance is what are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing,” It snarled.

“That’s stupid,” Gram yelled. “What in tarnation have you been smokin’, Fake Monty Hall? Laws are laws. You heard my great-grandbaby. Ain’t no one above the dang law. Not even the real Bob Barker. I’m thinkin’ it might be time for an Immortal election. Y’all need to get you a new leader that ain’t batshit crazy.”

“Fine,” It bellowed, causing a harsh wind to whip through the field. “You win this round. Leave my plane.”

“And what about the punishment for your crime?” Alana Catherine demanded, not backing down. “If it hadn’t been for Gram, my mom and me, the dead would have been reduced to dust. That’s in the law book as well. You would have been looking at

a double death sentence.”

“You,” the Higher Power hissed, looking at my daughter. “You should not exist.”

“Why?” I demanded. “Why should my child not exist?”

It refused to answer, but It still had something to say. Assholes loved to hear themselves talk. It was the OG of assholes. “Unnatural things should be destroyed. Abominations should not exist. EVER.”

Are you fucking kidding me?” I shouted back, infuriated that the disgusting waste of space had just called my daughter an abomination. “None of us are natural. We’re Immortal. That’s not natural. My daughter is a miracle. She will be anything she wants to be, and I will support her.”

“Put that in your pipe and smoke it, turdknocker!” Gram yelled. “Along with all the crack you’ve obviously been chewing on.”

“Umm... I think people smoke crack,” I told her.

“Whatever,” Gram said. “That loser got the meanin’.”

And apparently Alana Catherine did as well...

“Oh my gosh,” she cried out. “I know. I know why you want me so badly. You want?—”

“NO,” It shrieked, completely losing Its shit. “Whatever you think is wrong. LEAVE MY PLANE!”

The explosions were violent. They rocked the plane and set the field aflame. I

grabbed Gram and sprinted for my daughter. Without missing a beat, Alana Catherine extended her arms to the furry creatures, and they dove back into her. That solved the problem of how to get them home. The next issue on the list was whether pulling a Dorothy to get the hell out of Oz was going to work. The flames were searing hot and coming at us fast. Wrapping my arms around Gram and Alana Catherine, I clicked my heels together three times.

“There’s no place like home,” I shouted.

Nothing. We were still in the middle of the inferno.

“There’s no place like home,” I shouted again.

Nothing .

Alana Catherine looked at me like I’d lost my mind. She wasn’t far off.

“I’ve got this, Mom,” she said with a smile. “Hang on. We’re going home.”

The great room in my home looked exactly the same as when we left it. What wasn’t the same was me. I would never be the same again after that trip. I was so grateful to be back home surrounded by the people I loved and who loved me back. It felt as if we’d been gone for years.

It had only been a day.

Gram was a ghost again, and my beautiful daughter was a baby. Explaining what had happened was going to take a hot minute, and I was exhausted. Alana Catherine slept soundly in my arms. Part of me would miss the badass version of my daughter. But she’d get there again in twenty years. I was going to enjoy every second of her precious life until then.

Gideon looked as if he'd aged a few centuries, but since he was older than dirt, he was still beautiful to me, even with his bloodshot eyes and drained expression.

"Here's the fuckin' deal," Candy Vargo said, taking over.

I'd really missed her. I couldn't wait until she heard about Gram's new and horrifying vocabulary. They both were going to need some bathroom and soap time together.

"Daisy needs to sleep," Candy went on. "None of us are goin' nowhere. Mail boy, get the rest of the fuckers back here. We'll debrief everybody at the same time."

"On it," Tim said, pulling out his cellphone.

"You're okay? Really okay?" Gideon questioned. He hadn't stopped touching Alana Catherine and me since we'd arrived home.

The shocker was that our bodies had left the earthly plane when we went to the Higher Power's realm. No one had expected that. When I dove into the minds of the dead, my body always stayed put. Gideon had lost his mind. He'd even called Cecily to suss out if that had happened with her. It had.

"I'm fine," I promised. It wasn't a lie. Being with my husband and my child was the only place I wanted to be.

"Umm... Daisy," Tim said, pointing at my sleeping baby. "You might want to check that."

I looked down and gasped. Alana Catherine's eyes were still closed, but there was an angelic smile on her pink lips. She was glowing gold. Her small body grew warm, and she giggled in her sleep. One by one, the ghosts left their safe haven in the body of the future Soul Keeper. Sam, Birdie, John, Agnes, Sister Catherine and Steve

hovered in the air above my miracle child. If I had a feather, I could have knocked Gideon over. He looked like he'd been hit by a truck. I'd explain later. I wasn't about to miss the magic of what was about to go down.

Each of the dead kissed my daughter. After, they took turns kissing me. It felt so right. En masse, they floated toward the golden light that had appeared in the doorway. Silently and with smiles on their faces each went into the Light and faded away. Everyone was gone but one lone ghost. Steve. It didn't surprise me. I secretly wished he'd stick around for a bit, but I knew he had to go. Steve wrapped his ghostly arms around me, Gideon and Alana Catherine.

"Love each other well," he whispered. "I'll love all three of you from afar. Thank you, Daisy, for saving me in so many ways. Thank you, Gideon, for saving Daisy. And you, little one," he said, caressing Alana Catherine's cheek. Her smile grew wider as she slept. "You are so special. You will always be loved... from here and from the Light. Be the badass, little girl. We need you."

With one last smile that warmed my heart, he floated into the Light. It was the second time I watched him leave me. The first time was hard. This time, it was glorious.

My baby slept through the entire scene. I wondered when all the skunks decided to come out how Gideon would react. We'd have to wait and see...

Glancing up, I winced. Jennifer, Mr. Jackson, Lura Belle, Dimple and Jolly Sue were watching the Game Show Channel. I was pretty sure I never wanted to see a freaking game show again for the rest of my years. Even Gram avoided the television. I hated that the High Power had soured her love for Bob Barker. Another reason to hate the petty Bitch with a capital B.

The TV went fuzzy and made a few popping sounds. Candy Vargo was instantly armed to the teeth. Charlie and Tim began glowing and ushered everyone away from

the TV. Gideon's eyes burned red, and he stood protectively in front of Alana Catherine and me.

The picture on the screen slowly came into focus. It took a minute to realize what we were looking at. Gram gasped and spewed out a litany of cuss words that made Candy Vargo almost pass out. It was so unexpected that Jennifer grabbed a bottle of wine and chugged it.

The faces of Bob Barker and Monty Hall filled the screen. It was an extreme close up and you could see every pore on their faces. It was grotesque.

"That ain't Bob and Monty," Gram hissed. "It's Fake Bob and Fake Monty."

"What the hell did you just say, Gram?" Candy Vargo asked, clearly concerned for Gram's mental state.

"My fuckin' bad," Gram said, smacking herself in the forehead. Candy Vargo's mouth hung open like a fish out of water. "It's the Higher Power. Both of 'em are."

Everyone in the room thought Gram had gone and lost her mind. She had not.

"She's correct," I said flatly. "Turn it up. Let's hear what the Asshole has to say."

Tim did, and we waited.

The two talking heads spoke at the same time and in unison. It was eerie and wrong. "The abomination shall be destroyed. Don't try to fight it. If you do, It will bring on the end."

The screen faded to black.

“What the actual fuck?” Candy Vargo shouted, glowing bright orange. “Somebody wanna explain that?”

Between Gram and me, it took us two hours to get everyone up to speed. Heather, Missy, Tory, my Angel siblings, Zander and Catriona, along with our human buddies, June and Amelia, arrived about halfway through and got the gist of it.

“And so,” I concluded, “the Higher Power was ready to do some dastardly crap, but then Alana Catherine said she knew what It wanted, and without warning It tried to burn us alive.”

“Okay,” Candy Vargo said, chewing on ten toothpicks. “The answer to this is to figure out what Alana Catherine was going to say. It sounds like the Higher Fucker wants her... or is afraid of her for some reason. A reason that your daughter, for some reason, knows.”

“Problem is she can’t speak,” I pointed out, as my body filled with dread.

“There might be a way,” Gideon said, but he didn’t look confident.

“I’ll take any suggestions at this point,” I told him .

His jaw clenched. “For too long, the Immortals have ignored the unethical ways of the Higher Power, giving It a wide berth out of fear that It could truly bring the end of us, but I think it’s high time our kind joined forces to stop the creator before It does any more damage.”

“I’m fuckin’ with you,” Candy Vargo said. “Besides, I’ve been around a long time. Getting turned to dust won’t be the worst thing to happen to me.”

“No one’s turning to dust,” I stated, my voice higher than usual. “It won’t come to

that.” At least, I hoped it wouldn’t. I just had to believe, right?

The one thing I knew for sure... the Higher Power was after our baby. Even if we wanted to avoid the fight, we couldn’t. We had no choice. Teaming up to face the ultimate being was a means to an end. Possibly the end of the Higher Power. Possibly the end of us and the universe as we knew it. Either way, we were about to find out. If the creator was after my daughter, I would go after It and make It pay.

“We’ll make It pay,” Gideon said, reading my mind. “And we’ll create a new world if that’s what it takes to keep our baby safe.”

“May the strongest win,” Gram said.

“The strongest will win,” I assured her.

There was no other option. For my baby girl, I would keep the faith. I would remind myself that anything was possible as long as I believed.

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CHAPTER TWO

After a quick shower and long nap with my baby securely wrapped in my arms while being spooned by my husband, I felt like a new person. Gideon never strayed from my side while I slept for hours. In the chaos that had become my life, I felt bizarrely secure with my small family close.

The colors in the master suite were calming—celery green and peach mixed with sage and navy. The furniture was overstuffed and comfortable. Gideon and I had decorated it together. The addition of the bassinette in the corner only made it more beautiful. If only my life could be as serene as our bedroom.

“Gideon?” I whispered, trying not to wake up our daughter.

“Daisy,” he replied, gently twisting my curls in his fingers. The man had my number big time. Having my hair played with was my favorite.

“When you said there might be a way to get Alana Catherine to speak, what did you mean?”

He scrubbed his hand over his jaw and sighed. He rolled off the bed and paced the room. Twice he opened his mouth to speak. Twice no words left his lips. My body tensed as our baby opened her eyes and yawned. Gideon, while being occasionally cryptic, like all the Immortals, wasn’t usually cryptic with me.

Gently scooping Alana Catherine up and placing her on the changing table, I busied myself with changing her diaper and dressing her in a pink onesie with tiny purple

teddy bears dotting the fabric. She was chubby and perfect. Her gummy smile literally took my breath away and her scent was intoxicating. Keeping my hands busy and my brain focused on her well-being was the only thing keeping me from losing my shit.

I'd just gotten back from something I never wanted to experience again. The cracks of my sanity were starting to show and it was all I could do not to curl up into a ball on the floor and scream. Right now, it was my little girl's safety that kept me going. Catching a break didn't seem to be in the near future. The peace I'd felt from napping vanished.

I paused as my daughter looked up at me with adoration in her eyes. Her trust in me was clear. What wasn't clear was how to prove that her trust wasn't unwarranted. Yep, I knew that getting straight answers from people who were older than dirt was a challenge. However, that was no longer working for me. Alana Catherine's life was still on the line, and I wasn't going to play the game.

"Here's the deal," I said to Gideon. "If you know something that will help our child, I'd suggest you spit it out. I love you. I love you more than I thought possible, but you can take care of yourself. I love Alana Catherine more than I love my own life." I turned and met his pained gaze. "She cannot take care of herself. She's a baby. If you won't take responsibility, I'll go it alone."

The Grim Reaper's head tilted to the side in confusion, then he crossed the room so fast I didn't even see him move. His tight embrace encompassed both me and Alana Catherine.

"Listen to me," he said with his lips buried in my hair. His voice sounded desperate. "You and our daughter are my reasons for living. Period. Without both of you, there's no point in existence. Know that, Daisy. Protecting you and Alana Catherine is a given. I would sacrifice myself in a heartbeat for both of you."

I relaxed into his arms and let him take the weight of my body. “Then why won’t you answer the question?”

“Several reasons,” he said, turning me around so we faced each other. “I’m unsure if it can be done. And the method I’ve heard whispers about is dangerous—possibly deadly.”

“To who?” I asked with a sinking feeling.

“The one who performs the spell and the one who receives it.”

“Care to be more specific?” I pressed, already knowing that the method was probably a hard no.

Gideon took my hand and led me over to the settee beneath the window. The afternoon sunlight streaming in cast an angelic glow around the Demon. It was right. The Demon was a better person than many of the Angels I’d met thus far.

“I’ve never witnessed it—the spell,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “I’ve only heard tell.” He paused and I waited. If he didn’t explain himself in a timely manner, my knee was awfully close to his junk. “There’s a way to age a person without their consent.”

“More,” I insisted, hoping to the Darkness and back we didn’t have to use this method. However, if the Higher Power was indeed after my baby, the choice might not be ours to make. Discovering what Alana Catherine knew was imperative.

Gideon pressed his temples and looked like he truly wanted to do some property damage. I wasn’t far behind.

“I think it’s a bad plan,” he finally said. “Again, if the stories are true, Candy Vargo

knows how to cast the spell.”

“Okay,” I said, trying to understand what was basically incomprehensible. “Candy Vargo’s still alive and well. If she’s cast this spell before, then she did it correctly.”

“If,” Gideon reminded me. “If she cast the spell, then, yes, it was successful. Doesn’t mean it will be again. Risking both Alana Catherine and Candy would be catastrophic.”

“Got it,” I said, standing up. “Air. I need fresh air and our little one does too.”

Alana Catherine squealed. An honest and very real smile pulled at the corner of my lips.

“I think that’s a good plan,” Gideon said, taking our daughter from my arms and cuddling her close. His demeanor changed on a dime. With a sly smile and a twinkle in his eyes, he winked at me. “There might or might not be a surprise waiting outside for you two.”

“Umm... I’ve kind of had enough surprises lately,” I admitted with a weak laugh, taking in the beauty of the image of a father holding his daughter.

“This is one you’ll love. I promise.”

“Works for me,” I said, grabbing a jacket for Alana Catherine. “Show me the surprise.”

“With pleasure,” Gideon said with a grin that made both me and Alana Catherine giggle.

If only life could be filled with good surprises and giggles. That was my new goal.

Reaching it might be tricky, but I'd never been one to give up.

"Hang on, people," Candy Vargo said as we stepped out of the master suite and into the hallway. "We need to talk."

Apparently, the surprise would have to wait...

Wanting my surprise, I cut right to the chase. "The answer is no to the spell," I told her firmly.

The Keeper of Fate squinted at me in confusion. She scratched her head, then her rear end, and then her head again. "What in tarnation are you talkin' about?"

"The spell you can cast to age Alana Catherine without consent so she can tell us why the Higher Power wants her."

"What in the ever-lovin' corn nuts are you yackity smackin' about?" Candy Vargo grunted as she pushed Gideon, Alana Catherine and me back into the bedroom.

"Wait," Now I was confused. "Aren't you capable of casting a spell that can do that?"

"Heck to the no siree. Who told you that bull malarky?" she demanded.

Her choice of words almost made me forget what I'd just asked. I'd never heard Candy Vargo say bull malarky or corn nuts in my life. She was more of an f-bomb user.

"I did," Gideon cut in, looking at her with a perplexed expression.

I wasn't sure if it was her vernacular or the fact that she couldn't cast the spell.

“Don’t know where you heard that humpermother,” she said with an eye roll.

“My bad,” Gideon said.

“I should say so,” she shot back.

He raised a brow. “I did say so.”

Candy Vargo prepared to flip the Grim Reaper the bird, but then, in a bizarrely shocking turn of events—literally—she electrocuted her own hand before her middle finger fully extended.

“Oh my God, are you okay?” I asked as she slapped out the flames. Candy was strange, but her behavior right now was flat-out abnormal. Flipping the bird was a sign of affection as far as she was concerned.

Candy paled considerably and my gut tightened. “I’m fine,” she mumbled, clearly lying.

“Did another message come in from the Higher Power?” Gideon ground out.

“No. I woulda led with that, idiot,” she told Gideon with another eye roll that beat the first. She stared at both of us like we’d gone and lost it.

Granted, I was close but I still had a few wits about me left.

“Well, you walking in here saying that we had to talk while refraining from even using one f-bomb set my radar off,” I told her. “It’s been kinda crazy lately. You feel me?”

Candy chuckled and popped a few toothpicks into her mouth. “I’ll leave the feelin’

up to Gideon—if you know what I mean. And the chat I wanna have ain't nothin' life threatenin'—at least not right now,” she promised as she offered Gideon and me a pick.

We declined.

The three of us stood in awkward silence and stared at each other. Alana Catherine babbled happily in Gideon's arms. Candy Vargo was rarely at a loss for words—especially four-letter ones. Her hushed behavior was unnerving.

“Umm... Candy,” I said with some trepidation. “Would you like to get to the reason you came up here?” I only wanted good surprises for the rest of the day. I'd had too many terrible ones to count recently.

She groaned as she crossed the room and flopped down onto the armchair next to the bed. The woman was the hottest mess around. Her sweats had seen better days. Her socks were mismatched and her tennis shoes should have been tossed into the garbage in the 1980s. The Keeper of Fate was actually a very pretty woman, but she unconsciously did her very best to disguise it.

“Alrighty,” she said as her chin dropped to her chest. “We got lots goin' on right now. My issue ain't at the top of nobody's list, but I need some help.”

Gideon shot me an alarmed glance. I shot it right back. Candy Vargo was the OG of badasses. Her power and knowledge were unparalleled. Her name alone could strike fear in any Immortal. I was hella glad she was on my team. Her needing help with anything seemed odd. I mean, maybe with fashion, but I was pretty sure that wasn't why she was here.

“Candy,” I said, treading warily. There was no telling what would come out of her mouth. “How can we help you?”

Her spitting the toothpicks out of her mouth and onto the carpet made me wince. When she reached down and picked up the saliva-covered pieces of wood, I was relieved. However, when she put them back into her mouth, it was all I could do not to gag.

“I’m feelin’ real bad,” she finally said. “Like really, really, really bad.”

“You’re sick?” I asked. As far as I knew, Immortals didn’t get ill.

She wrinkled her nose then blessed us with the third massive eye roll of the conversation. “Don’t get sick.”

I was thrown that not one potty word had left her mouth. This wasn’t typical for her. My body felt like a tightly coiled spring about to pop. Candy with a clean vocab was freaking ominous.

“Okay, then what?” I asked.

She blew out a long slow breath while not losing one single toothpick in her mouth. It was impressive. “I’m kinda feelin’ like a ham sandwich somebody left on the dashboard in July. Or like somebody beat my rump with a sack full of nickels. Useless... like the G in lasagna. You know what I mean?”

Shockingly, I did. “I do. But I don’t know why you do.”

“Guilt,” she announced. “Feelin’ guilty as all get out. It’s eatin’ me alive.”

I glanced over at Gideon. He just shrugged and shook his head. This conversation was like pulling teeth. “Why?”

“It’s Gram,” Candy said, sounding despondent. “That mouth on her is like a dang

septic tank that ain't been cleaned in a century." The nutty woman marched around the room, punched herself in the head twice then spanked her own bottom. The kicker was when she stomped over to the bathroom and returned with a half a bar of soap in her mouth then plopped back down into the chair. We watched in horror as she chewed the soap, swallowed and then burped loudly. The only one who thought it was funny was Alana Catherine who tried to imitate Candy with moderate success. I was just relieved she hadn't lost her cookies.

Of course, Candy Vargo was now looking a little green around the gills... and she wasn't done.

"Gram sounds like a wasted sailor who drank all the rum on the ship. Told her she was makin' my rump itch with that kinda pooppy talk. I threatened to jerk her bald and I even told her I was gonna cream her corn. That old bat just laughed like a dang hyena and strung together enough swear words to singe the curly hairs right out of my ears and nose. And it's all MY fault. That old lady is downstairs spewing so much filth that I almost had a heart attack. AND I can't have no heart attack. I think I finally understand why Gram always wants to wash my mouth out with soap." She paused, swallowed, then burped again. "Soap ain't tasty. So, I'm fixin' to shove her head into the toilet and flush it seventy-five times. I can't have that old woman talkin' like that!"

I really wanted to laugh. I didn't. It was unclear if Gram was using reverse psychology on Candy or if she'd lost her ghostly mind after the trip to the Higher Power's plane. If I had to take a guess, I'd say it was a little of both. Gideon couldn't contain himself and did a piss poor job of masking his laugh with an obnoxious coughing fit.

"Go get you a drink of water," Candy Vargo yelled at him. "I can't be pourin' out my heart while you choke to death."

I gave Gideon a little push. “Take Alana Catherine and go downstairs,” I told him as the coughing and laughing continued.

The love of my life gave me a grateful glance and hightailed it out of the room. Candy didn’t need anyone laughing at her. As often as I wanted to headbutt the woman, I wanted to hug her even more often. Now was one of the hugging times. I crossed the room and perched on the edge of the bed next to her. “Talk to me.”

Oh Daisy,” she lamented. The soap had met the saliva, and bubbles floated out of her mouth as she spoke. It was difficult to concentrate on what she was saying, but I was a fairly good multi-tasker. “I’m responsible for Gram’s crap mouth. It’s just killin’ me. I need help. I don’t think she’d like getting’ her head flushed.”

“Pretty sure you’re correct on that,” I told her. Granted, Gram was a ghost and wouldn’t be able to feel it, but in this case, it would be the thought that counted.

“I’m goin’ cold turkey on the fucks,” she announced, looking horrified at her own words. “I’m thinkin’ to lead by example and get Gram off the cussin’.”

I nodded, afraid if I spoke, I would shriek with laughter.

“Yep,” she said, hopping to her feet and leaving a trail of bubbles in her wake. “I need you to give me a cuss word and I’m gonna come up with the replacement.”

This wasn’t what I was expecting at all. But Candy Vargo was unpredictable.

“Wait. What?” I asked. “You want a list?”

“Roger that,” she said, brightening up considerably. “That’s what I need. A list!”

Pressing my lips together, I decided to just go with it. I didn’t need an upset and

distracted Keeper of Fate. Our immediate future was bleak, and I needed my trusted people on their toes. A list was a small ask to make her happy. “Well... let’s start with the word fuck.”

“One of my favorites,” Candy said, shaking her head in sorrow. “Maybe I can substitute it with shart or fudge.”

“Interesting,” I said. Again, doing my best not to crack a smile. The gal was serious. “I think fudge might be better than shart.” Never did I think I would speak those words in that order in my life.

“I can see that,” she said, offering me a toothpick.

This time I took it.

“I’ll keep shart as a backup for fudge,” she informed me. “I think mothersharter might be stronger than motherfudger. Right?”

“Absolutely,” I assured her. “Next, how about a replacement word for shit?”

“I’m thinkin’ either shucks or balls,” she said, holding her hand up. “Also, I’d like to get your take on using anatomically correct terms for body parts instead of curse words. ”

I didn’t want to ask, but I had to. “Like?”

“You know,” she said. “Like vagina, buttocks, penis, testicles, balls, bosom... stuff like that. They ain’t bad words—just body parts. Ain’t nothin’ wrong with body parts. Also, I’d like to point out that an ass is a donkey and a bitch is a female dog.”

I wished I hadn’t asked. “More interesting observations.” Staying as neutral as

possible was the way to go. Just the thought of her shouting vagina as much as she shouted the word fuck was not a good look. “Maybe leave the body parts as a last resort—like when you’re really pissed.”

“Sounds like plan,” she agreed. The woman looked rabid now as the soap had lathered up and was leaking out of her mouth. “Keep goin’ with the list.”

“Okay, ass as in asshole. That’s one you use often.”

“True that,” she said with a frothy grin. “How about bahookey? Bahookeyhole has a nice ring to it.”

“Sure,” I replied. Unable to stop myself, I picked up a burp cloth and wiped her mouth. She barely noticed. “Umm... how about bullshit and umm... dick?”

“I’m thinkin’ bullspit for bullshit and either corn nuts or Merlin’s magic nards for dick.”

I grinned. It couldn’t be helped. Merlin’s magic nards was simply too much. “I’m good with all of that.”

“Excellent,” she said, standing up and giving me a hug. “I don’t want to sound like a shart or nothin’, but I gotta teach Gram some motherfudgin’ manners. That old broad has gone off the fartin’ deep end.” She paused in thought. “I think that fart, which is a natural bodily function, is a fine replacement for damn.”

“You know,” I said, swallowing back a scream. “I think damn is pretty neutral. Not sure you need to exchange it for fart.”

“Daisy,” Candy said, shaking her head. “If I’m gonna do it, I’m doin’ it all the way. I’d also like to say it’s gonna be real vagina hard to keep all this corn nut penis

straight. Might mess up a little here and there.”

“Not a problem,” I said, taking her hand in mine and giving her foaming mouth one last swipe with the burp cloth. “I’d expect nothing less. You ready to go back downstairs as the new and improved cussless Candy Vargo?”

“Hades to the yes, I am,” she said with a grin. “And I ain’t one to be mushy and all that corn nuts bosoms, but I got a real soft spot for you, Daisy.”

“Right back at you, Candy,” I told her.

If only all my problems could be this easy to solve...

CHAPTER THREE

The living room was slightly less populated than it was before my nap. My Angel siblings—Prue, Rafe, Gabe and Abby—were patrolling the property along with the ghosts, Dimple, Jolly Sue and Lura Belle. Zander and Catriona were with them as well. They were searching for anything even remotely suspicious. That sat right with me. All of them were as smart as they were deadly. Most of the ghosts had joined them save a few. Heather and Missy were on the couch hunched over an ancient looking book—the same book that had appeared when Alana Catherine had summoned it on the Higher Power’s plane. It was the Immortal Book of Law. Gram’s guess that my child was the future Arbitrator Between the Darkness and the Light along with being the future Death Counselor and the future Soul Keeper gnawed at my insides. How many things could one person be?

Gideon sat across from the gals, feeding Alana Catherine a bottle of breast milk. I thanked my lucky stars that I’d pumped enough for a long while. I hadn’t breastfed my child lately due to the deadly chaos that had become our reality. My dogs, Donna and Karen, were happily curled up at Gideon’s feet. Donna aka Donna the Destroyer, due to her couch-eating days, wasn’t a dog at all. She was a Hell Hound, and I adored every hair on her body. Karen aka Karen the Chair Eater, was my black lab. She was as dumb as a box of hair and more loving than any animal I’d ever had the pleasure of knowing. Both of my fur girls were in love with my baby and always stayed close.

“Daisy! Want to join, friend?” Tim asked kindly, seated at the distressed oak table near the fireplace.

He was playing what looked to be poker with Jennifer, June, Amelia and Tory. Gram,

Mr. Jackson and another ghost I didn't recognize floated above the table and played in spirit—pun intended. The grouping was odd but little in my life was what anyone would call mundane.

"Nope," I said. "Cards aren't really my thing. Plus, I need some fresh air." Real meaning—I wanted to see the surprise Gideon had promised.

"Gaaaammmeasssss oof chaaancea!" the unfamiliar male ghost said, nodding spastically. "Baaaaaaada!"

I was worried his head was about to take flight. In all the crazy, I'd been neglecting my job as the Death Counselor. It was a true honor to be the conduit for the dead who had unfinished business on this plane, then to aid them and guide them to the Light. So far, not a single ghost I'd helped had been destined for the Darkness. That was a relief, since I'd grown fond of all who I'd helped.

"I don't think I've met you yet," I said, waving at the man. He was in pretty good shape for a specter. That usually meant he hadn't been dead for too long. However, his outfit wasn't of this century. He wore a long flowing robe tied at the waist with a rope made of flowers. The flowers were rotting and dried out, but then again, so was he. Around his bald and mostly intact head was a crown of leaves. I didn't comment on his attire. That would be rude. I wasn't rude. I was Southern. It was in my DNA to be polite.

The man might be a cosplayer or just have an unusual dress sense... or possibly an obsession with Greek history. Whatever. He was a guest in my home, and if his silly grin was anything to go by, he was a good guy.

"Jimmmeey Geooooorge Carrrrrrrrrootttssssss aaaaat youuuuurah seeeervice," he announced, floating to the floor and bowing to me.

I swallowed back my laugh. “I’m Daisy,” I replied. “It’s lovely to meet you, Jimmy George Carrots. I’m the Death Counselor, and I can help you with any unfinished business you might have.”

“Nooooooooah busssssinessssssss,” he told me. “Heerah tooooooah seeeerve!”

That was odd. I was here to serve him, but sometimes the dead were confused. If he was here, he was here for a reason. If he didn’t know why yet, it would reveal itself at the right time.

“Okay,” I said. “Thank you. You’re welcome to stay as long as you’d like.”

Alana Catherine seconded the decree with a loud burp and an even louder squeal of joy. The sound of her voice calmed my soul. She and Gideon were my everything.

“Thaaaankah youuuuuuuah,” Jimmy George Carrots said as he floated over to Gideon and our daughter. “Baaaaaaabeeeeeey! Soooooo preeettyah. Threeeeeeeeeeee!”

I smiled and corrected the silly ghost. “Actually, she’s not even one yet.”

He shook his head vehemently. “Onnnnnneah offfffffffffff threeeeeeeee!”

His statement was strange. Had Jimmy George Carrots been lurking around for a while? It had taken a trinity to go to the Higher Power’s plane—Gram, Alana Catherine and myself. We were the past, present and future Death Counselors. Maybe that’s what the ghost was referring to. The ghost was definitely befuddled.

Confused, or not, Jimmy George Carrots wasn’t quite done. “Soooooo speecaiiiialah! Soooooo immmmpoooooratanah! Iiiiiii seeeeeeeeeeah! Threeeeeeeeeeee!”

I didn’t disagree at all—except for the three-years-old part. My daughter was pretty,

special and important. Alana Catherine blew our guest a raspberry and then laughed with delight. Jimmy George Carrots giggled back. It sounded like a death rattle, but I was getting used to it. Happy was happy no matter what it sounded like. It a strange way, the dead had taught me more about life than the living...

Most of the dead didn't need my help at all. The life one led determined where a soul went in the end. The deceased only came to me if they needed some kind of closure before they could move on. If a soul's destination was up in the air, the decision was made by the Grim Reaper and the Angel of Mercy... aka Gideon and myself. The irony was that the Grim Reaper was the one who made the call if a person was to go into the Light, and I, the Angel of Mercy, was the one who decided if a soul went to the Darkness. Apparently, it had been set up that way so there would be no conflict of interest. That scenario hadn't occurred yet, and I dreaded the day I would have to make the terrible decision.

"Ah, yes! Jimmy George Carrots is correct about games of chance in my estimation! I never bet money on them," Tim said, pulling out the ever-present notebook from one of the many pockets of his mail uniform. In a not-so-ironic twist, my dear socially awkward buddy was the Immortal Courier between the Darkness and the Light and also a mailman in the human realm. While Candy Vargo was unpredictable, Tim was not. What you saw was what you got—kind, loving and wonderfully weird. "Very risky—a game of chance. While I enjoy a good hand of blackjack, I don't like wagering my hard-earned income. Must save my pennies for retirement!"

Heather looked up from the book and laughed. "Tim, you're several hundred years past retirement age."

"Try several boobin' penis thousand," Candy Vargo muttered, much to the confusion of everyone except me.

Tim giggled. "Oh yes! I'm definitely past my prime. However, for the last two

hundred years or so I've picked humans in great need and quietly supplemented their retirement income with my earnings. And that is why I stay away from games whose outcomes are determined by chance. A good Roth IRA is a far better way to go than a game of chance where the winner is determined by a random competition where there's no skill in choosing the winner."

Every new thing I learned about Tim made me love him even more.

"Don't know about that, nutter butter vagina," Candy mused aloud as everyone in the room stared at her in confusion. She looked around in surprise. She clarified. "I'm talkin' about the fartin' stock market, you Pop Tart testicles. I'd say that a roll with Merlin's magic nards on Wall Street is equally as risky as roulette. Just sayin'."

"I'm sorry," Heather choked out, squinting at Candy Vargo in disbelief. "Did you just say Pop Tart testicles and Merlin's magic nards?"

Candy rolled her eyes. "Yes, mothersharer, I did. And if all you people, and by people I'm talkin' about GRAM, would pull your heads out of your bahookeyholes and stop bein' clitorises you'd realize that cussin' is not good." She stomped her foot and chomped down so hard on the toothpicks in her mouth they split in half. "And just to be clear on the bullspit, body parts ain't bad words. Captain Crunch's hairy bahookey, I mean it. Also, a bitch is a female dog and an ass is a donkey. So, if any of you penises wanna come at me, let's go. I'll yeet your smelly bahookies into the next century."

Jennifer walked over to Candy Vargo and handed her an open bottle of wine. "Drink this."

"Why?" Candy demanded.

"Cause it's five o'clock somewhere and you seem like you're havin' a bad day,

girlfriend,” Jennifer told her. “A nice little buzz might counteract the concussion you’ve obviously had.”

Candy took a swig and handed the bottle back to my Botox-loving human buddy. “Thank you, corn nut,” she said. “But I’m serious. All you wrinkled testicles need to have better fartin’ manners. I’m done with all the Shitake mushrooms and anal sphincters. You hear me?”

I bit down on my bottom lip so hard, I was surprised I didn’t draw blood. I was beginning to think an f-bomb or five was better than the frightening gibberish she’d just spewed.

Gram floated over to Candy in concern and placed her semi-transparent hand on the Keeper of Fate’s forehead. “Candy girl, what in the fuckin’ hell and tarnation is wrong with you?”

I winced at Gram’s choice of words. Candy Vargo was on to something. Hearing my grandmother’s poop language was beyond disturbing.

“Ain’t nothin’ wrong with me, Gram,” she yelled, wagging her finger in the air at the ghost. “But there sure is somethin’ shartin’ wrong with you! Your mouth needs to be washed out with Tony the tiger’s ball sac.”

I almost sprinted from the room. However, my need to scream in laughter weakened my legs. Squatting down, I dropped my head between my knees and did some deep breathing. I almost passed out, but that was preferable to getting electrocuted by Candy for laughing at her.

June shoved a few of her famous peanut butter cookies into her mouth to keep from losing it. Amelia had both hands plastered over her mouth. Jennifer chugged the rest of the wine to avoid cackling. Tory let her head fall to the card table, but the

trembling of her slim body gave away the fact she was hiding her laugh. Tim's mouth was open in a perfect O. Gideon had simply closed his eyes and shook his head. I was sure the coughing would start shortly. Heather and Missy didn't hide it. They laughed openly. When Candy Vargo went to flip them off, she electrocuted her hand before she could complete the deed.

This was getting out of hand. If Candy Vargo kept setting herself on fire, we could be down a warrior. Not that she could permanently off herself, but healing from a fifth-degree burn could take a while.

Gram chuckled and turned a few flips in the air. The old broad's sunken eyes twinkled, and her smile was smug. In that moment, I knew she'd been a profane drunken sailor on purpose. It reminded me of when I was a teen and had insisted on obscenely short skirts. She didn't forbid me from wearing them. Nope, she began sporting them herself. They were so short, her granny panties showed. When she threatened to pick me up from school wearing the butt-baring garment, I caved. From that day forward, I only wore skirts that didn't show my religion. Gram was a smart cookie. She worked in mysterious ways.

"Well fuck me runnin'," Gram announced as Candy looked like she was about to implode. "Didn't think you'd give a flyin' shit about my new vernacular since you use it, child. Never in my life... or death, did I think I'd see you pitchin' a hissy fit with a tail on it about a few fucks and shits."

"GRAM," Candy Vargo shrieked. "Are you tryin' to kill me?"

Gram giggled and floated down so she was eye to eye with the woman she'd basically adopted as her honorary daughter. "Bothers you, huh, Candy girl?"

Candy Vargo nodded and ground her toothpick between her clenched teeth. "I'm gonna stop cussin' to show you the right way. I'm feelin' as guilty as the Rock's man

boobs about you cussin' your deceased bahookey off."

Gram wrapped the fuming woman in her dead arms. Her arms went right through Candy, but the love was there. "I feel real dang honored that your gonna give up cussin' to help me out. Shows me how much you love me! It's just dills my pickle that we can stop sayin' poop words together. You're gonna have to help me, girlie. Can you do that?"

The relief on Candy's face was almost as comical as her reference to Merlin's magic balls. Gram's reverse psychology was the winner... again. She should teach a parenting master class.

"I can do that, Gram," Candy vowed. She glanced around the room. "And if I hear any one of you jackholes say somethin' improper, I'm gonna whoop your bahookey. I'm swearin' that on Ronald McDonald's boogers."

Everyone was silent. I was too afraid to speak. The shriek of hysterical laughter trapped in my mouth was dying to enter the room. Getting electrocuted wasn't on the agenda .

It was Tim who spoke first. "My dear Candy Vargo, your wish to hear only classy vocabulary from now on shall be granted. Of course, being that you're the one with the most grievous issues in the swearing department, is there any way we can help you?"

Heather piped up immediately. "I'll volunteer to set her on fire if she slips up."

"Harsh," Missy commented, elbowing the love of her life.

"But direct," Heather insisted.

“No can do,” Gram announced. “If my Candy girl slips up... which she will, then I get to start pickin’ her outfits. That gal would look just darlin’ in a nice skirt, matching sweater set, pearls and kitten heels!”

Candy paled to the point she looked like she was going to hurl. Getting gussied up was not on her to-do list. “Really ball-eatin’ harsh.”

“But effective,” Gram countered.

Looking around the room, I realized someone was missing. “Where’s Charlie?”

“He went to find someone,” Tim said, sounding slightly off.

I glanced over at Gideon. It was clear by his expression that he had no clue who Charlie had gone in search of. Tory didn’t look too happy. She was in the know. Heather had gone from grinning to scowling, and Candy Vargo rolled her eyes and shook her head. I didn’t expect June, Jennifer or Amelia to know. They weren’t Immortal.

Pressing the bridge of my nose, I took a deep breath and held it together. “Please tell me Charlie did not go after the Higher Power alone.”

Charlie was the Immortal Enforcer. He ranked up there with Gideon and Candy in the terrifyingly powerful department, but I didn’t take the man for reckless or stupid.

“Hell—which is not a cuss word,” Candy Vargo said, quickly clarifying so she didn’t have to wear a skirt, “to the NO! Charlie ain’t got no death wish. He went to get a backup.”

“A backup?” I questioned. “As in one person?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Tim admitted, wringing his hands.

All of this was unsettling. Tim wasn’t chopped liver when it came to the badass department. In battle, he was insane. The fact that he was wringing his hands didn’t exactly bode well.

“Who?” I demanded. “Who did Charlie go to get? A Demon? An Angel? Who?”

“Neither,” Candy said. “Just a regular old Immortal.

“Okay,” I said tightly. “There is nothing regular about an Immortal. The just Immortals I know are anything but regular.”

Candy Vargo, Tim and Charlie were regular Immortals—not Angels and not Demons. They were some of the most feared in the freaking Immortal world. I’d never asked if there were more. Shame on me, but I’d been a little busy for the past few months, making sure the world didn’t end and I didn’t die.

Gideon handed Alana Catherine off to Heather. He crossed the room and got in Candy Vargo’s face. His eyes spit red sparks and his hands were clenched in fists by his sides.

“No,” he hissed. “Unacceptable.”

I wasn’t sure how Gideon narrowed down the list so quickly since no one had named a name, but maybe there was only one other.

Shit. I didn’t need a bad day to get worse.

Candy Vargo didn’t step back. Most would if the Grim Reaper was in their personal space, but Candy Vargo wasn’t most...

“Shut your penis trap,” she snapped at Gideon. “If the Higher fartin’ Power wants Alana Catherine, we need him. ”

“Bullshit,” Gideon snarled. “Are all of you out of your damned minds?”

“First off, it’s bullspit,” Candy shot back. “And yes, all of us are out of our corn nuttin’ minds. That’s what happens when you live for millions of years.”

Tim quickly stepped between the Grim Reaper and the Keeper of Fate before the house went up in flames. While all of the Immortals would heal from being blown sky high, we had human friends the room. Jennifer, Amelia, Missy and June wouldn’t be as lucky.

“Gideon,” Tim said, placing a calming hand on the Grim Reaper’s shoulder. “We need to know what Alana Catherine knows. He can do that.”

“Over my dead body,” Gideon said in a voice so low and vicious that the hair stood up on my arms.

“It’s highly unlikely that Charlie will find him,” Tim admitted, trying to diffuse Gideon’s fury.

It didn’t work.

While I loved and respected everyone in the room, it was Gideon who I trusted most of all. If he didn’t want this regular Immortal around our daughter, then I didn’t either. However, if the man was possibly on his way here with Charlie, I needed more intel.

“Name?” I demanded.

“Candy Vargo,” Candy answered.

“Oh my God,” I muttered. “There are two of you?”

“Wait. What?” she asked confused.

Tim to the rescue. “Daisy wasn’t asking your name. She wants to know the name of the man Charlie is after.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” she demanded, rolling her eyes at me. “His name is Curse Word Ritchie.”

“Curse Word Ritchie?” I questioned. Who in the hell would be named that? It sounded like a joke.

“It’s actually Shitty Ritchie,” Heather explained with a shudder. “Since Candy isn’t swearing anymore, she changed it up a little.”

“Can anyone get hold of Charlie and tell him to stop searching?” I asked. I had no clue how Shitty Ritchie could get my daughter to talk, but I didn’t want to find out.

The Immortals in the room exchanged glances. No one looked positive. June was as pale as Gram. Charlie was her husband.

“Doubtful,” Tim finally said. “Shitty Ritchie is usually far off the grid. It’s unlikely that we could reach Charlie by conventional methods or magical means.”

“Will Charlie be okay?” June asked. Her voice trembled, and I felt sick to my stomach. I’d been living in this Immortal world for a short time, all things considered, and it was still difficult for me to accept and understand the deadly games that were played. It was impossible for June to comprehend, and we were being awful by

subjecting her to it.

“Charlie is gonna be just fine, June,” Candy assured her. “Ain’t nobody that can take that man down. Nobody.”

June nodded and swiped at a tear. My need for fresh air had increased tenfold. We were in enough trouble without inviting more in.

“Fine. If Shitty Ritchie shows up, he’ll leave... by force if necessary. Period.”

“Good luck with that, nardhole,” Candy muttered.

I ignored her. “There are other ways,” I insisted. “Heather, you were looking at the Immortal Book of Laws. Did you find anything?” It was a reach, but no questions were stupid right now. My motto for life danced in my frontal lobe—nothing is impossible. I just had to believe.

My sister sighed as she handed Alana Catherine back to Gideon. “The Higher Power has broken multiple laws. Laws that It created. However, I’m not sure how we can enforce punishment.”

“The punishment for what It has done is death,” Tim said slowly. “That would destroy everything. The balance would be skewed and the end would come.”

“How in the hell are there no checks and balances system in this shitshow?” I hissed.

“Shartshow,” Candy corrected me.

I almost electrocuted her. Instead, I inhaled and pinched my weenus. Sadly, neither method of relaxation worked. “Fine,” I ground out. “Shartshow. And it is a shartshow. I can’t believe that Armageddon hasn’t already arrived with the egotistical

magical nard we have running the show.”

“Magical nard is a good one,” Candy Vargo said, patting my back.

Again, I wanted to set her on fire. Again, I refrained. That would be stupid and mean. I was neither of those things. However, I was worried. And that I could partially solve. “I think that moving June, Amelia, Missy and Jennifer over to Candy Vargo’s place is a good plan for safety. I’d like to get Alana Catherine out of here, but I’m not letting her out of my sight.”

“Hang on a hot sec,” Jennifer said. “Can I add a thought to this conversation?”

“You can,” I told her. My dear human friend was overloaded with Botox and wine, but she was street smart and generally logical except when it came to all of her ex-husbands.

“Just sue It,” she said. “It did the crime, and now, Its gotta pay the time.”

I sucked my bottom lip into my mouth and considered what she’d just said. It was crazy, but... “Can we do that?” I asked the assembled group. It was clear that offing the Higher Power wasn’t on the table, but making It pay for Its crimes would be insanely satisfying and might keep It from getting out of hand in the future. I was positive I was being na?ve, but no one else seemed to have a solution.

Candy Vargo was perplexed. Heather’s brows shot up, and she stared at Jennifer with an expression I couldn’t decipher. Tim tapped his pursed lips with his pointer finger as he mulled the suggestion. Tory walked over to the Book of Immortal Laws and began to flip through the pages. Only Gideon seemed positive about the potential plan.

“Not sure a conviction would stand,” he said. “However, forcing the Higher Power to

come to us instead of waiting like lame ducks for It to show Its hand puts us at an advantage.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Candy Vargo said. “Still don’t tell us why It wants our baby girl.”

I shrugged. “If we can get a conviction, we can offer a plea deal if It will come clean about Alana Catherine. That way the balance isn’t thrown off by ending the Higher Power and we know why It wants my baby.”

“Devious and ballsy,” Heather said. “I like it.”

“Tribunal,” Tory stated flatly, pointing at a page in the book. She read aloud. “Any Immortal may call a tribunal on another Immortal for cause. I’d say pulling the dead out of the Light in order to steal Alana Catherine is cause.”

“Fine point well made,” Tim said, smiling at Tory. “However, I’m unclear how we can prove it. Technically, it’s hearsay from Daisy and Gram. ”

“Gram’s testimony won’t hold up,” Heather said. “One, she’s dead. Two, she’s not Immortal. Umm... which is a given since she’s... you know... dead.”

Candy Vargo gave Heather the eyeball. “You call yourself a lawyer? Do you want me to punch you in the head or do you wanna punch yourself, dumbballs?”

Both women began to glow. This wasn’t going to end well.

“Ain’t nobody punchin’ nobody,” Gram warned. “I am dead, and I ain’t Immortal. I think we got other ways to handle this mess.”

“Such as?” Gideon asked.

“Well, now, since it’s been established that I’m dead, we could let my great-grandbaby dive into my mind. She’s a Death Counselor. That way we could have us a little chat and I could find out what she was gonna say before Fake Bob Barker/ Fake Monty Hall sent us back to the mortal plane.”

It was the most logical suggestion I’d heard so far and it didn’t involve Shitty Ritchie. But... and there were a lot of buts. “It’s risky. Very risky. Technically, I’m still the Death Counselor. Alana Catherine is the future Death Counselor. It’s unclear if she can mind dive. Gram, you never mind-dived when you were the Death Counselor. I don’t think my mom did either.”

“True that, Daisy girl,” Gram admitted.

“Plus,” Gideon added, uncomfortable with the idea. “Even if Alana Catherine entered Gram’s mind, there’s no guarantee that she could get out.”

Heather chimed in. “I think there are too many unknowns with this strategy. Since our little gal hasn’t done a mind dive, there’s a chance she could be out for weeks... or months... or...”

She didn’t need to finish. I knew where she was going. The plan was off the table. When my baby had been in utero, I was able to talk to her. Maybe, I could do it again. Probably not. I’d tried multiple times since she’d been born. She’d even told me that when she arrived, she wouldn’t be able to talk to me again. She’d be a baby and have a normal baby life. Granted, her life hadn’t been normal so far, but she was definitely a baby.

Crap. Crap. Crap.

“What can be done that’s proactive?” I asked. Being lame ducks, as Gideon had put it, didn’t sound smart.

“I got another idea,” Jennifer said.

She’d had the best idea so far. I was all in to hear another. “Shoot.”

She popped open a new bottle of wine and poured everyone a glass... and a double for herself. “My therapist, Myrna, says that when I’m stressed out, I need to find a way to laugh that doesn’t include alcohol or gettin’ married again. Laughter’s an excellent stress relief. In my estimation, I’d say we’re all a big powder keg ready to blow.”

No one was rude enough to point out that she’d just poured herself two glasses of wine.

“Word, mothersharer,” Candy agreed.

“So,” Jennifer said with a grin and a wink to Tim. “I’ll start. Speaking of lawsuits...”

“Are we tellin’ jokes?” Candy asked, confused.

“Nope,” Jennifer said with a chuckle. “This crap is true. There was an idiot who went to a girlie bar. The dummy sued the strip club claiming the dancer’s bouncing bosom had given the jackass whiplash! Said it caused him mental and physical anguish, if you can believe that junk. Wanted fifteen thousand dollars for his distress. Of course, he was denied in court and shocked as all get out that he was banned from the Big Sean’s Booby Barn for life. ”

I smiled. I couldn’t help it.

“Oh yes!” Tim said, rubbing his hands together with glee. He and Jennifer were our go-to people for gross or bizarre facts. Their font of unnecessary knowledge was mind-boggling. “I do believe there is a record of a gentleman who desired to swim

with killer whales at Sea Universe. He, in all his glorious wisdom, snuck into the park after closing time and made all his dreams come true. However, there was a caveat... the killer whale lived up to its moniker and our gentleman friend ended up sleeping with the fishes—pun absolutely intended. His devastated family sued Sea Universe, claiming that the stuffed whales sold in the gift shop made the killer—and I repeat, killer—whales seem gentle and friendly. Suffice it to say, they lost.”

“Oh my God,” I said with a wince.

“And then some,” Jennifer agreed, now well into her second glass of wine. “Moving on to laws. Did you know that in Arizona, it’s illegal to allow donkeys to sleep in bathtubs?”

Who in the world had a bathtub big enough for a donkey to sleep in?

Nonplussed about bathing donkeys, Candy Vargo jumped in. “A donkey is also called an ass,” she reminded everyone, clearly delighted to still be able to use the word ass.

Tim, not to be outdone by his bestie Jennifer, chimed in. “And in Connecticut, a pickle is considered inedible unless it bounces.”

“Pickle is another word for penis,” Candy Vargo announced.

“Thank you for that,” Jennifer told her with a chuckle. “Another law to keep in mind is that Idaho is the only state where cannibalism is illegal.”

Heather cackled. “Good thing Candy doesn’t live in Idaho.”

“Screw you,” Candy groused.

I tried not to laugh. I failed. As the story went, Candy Vargo had literally eaten Gabe,

Abby, Rafe and Prue several thousand years ago. There was a vicious battle that had left Candy armless and legless. Without going into specifics, she decided that eating them was the only way out. Shockingly, they were alive and whole now. The logistics of that exchange were something I never wanted to learn. The Angels had a wary truce with the Keeper of Fate and enjoyed bringing it up from time to time. Candy Vargo did not enjoy rehashing the good old days.

“Enough,” Gideon said. “I’d prefer not to spend an hour gripping the porcelain God while thinking about that. Daisy?”

“Yes?”

“It’s time for some fresh air. We’ll deal with everything as it comes.”

“Gideon and Daisy?” June said with her hands clasped in front of her. “I’d like to stay and wait for Charlie here, please.”

Her expression was yearning, and her smile was filled with pain. She’d only recently learned the man who she’d loved for decades with every fiber of her being wasn’t human. Reconciling that couldn’t be easy.

I looked at Gideon, who nodded curtly. “Everyone can stay. However, if Charlie returns with Shitty Ritchie, that plan changes immediately.”

Amelia stood up. “I’ll go to Candy’s. The foster kids are there and the babysitter will need to leave soon.”

“Good thinkin’,” Candy said, hugging Amelia.

“I’ll go too,” Missy said, kissing Heather’s cheek.

Heather looked relieved. Having Missy in any kind of danger was Heather's worst nightmare .

Tory sighed dramatically. "If they go, I'm accompanying them. If shart goes south, they need protection."

"Good use of the word shart," Candy said, congratulating Tory. "Tim, Heather and I are gonna figure out how to sue the Higher Power. That Fruit Loop labia ain't gonna know what hit It."

"Sounds like a plan," I said, putting the jacket on my baby while wincing at the term Fruit Loop labia.

It was a plan... kind of. Without having any clue as to what was really happening, it was as good as we were going to get right now.

CHAPTER FOUR

The late afternoon sun hung low in the sky and illuminated the front yard in a golden glow. The blades of grass blew in the light breeze. The sweet smell was familiar and brought back far simpler times. I wouldn't go back, but I was seriously jonesing for a year or five without looking over my shoulder and fighting for my life and the lives of those I loved. If this was the trade-off to have Gideon and Alana Catherine, I'd take it. But one could always hope it would get a little less deadly.

We'd gotten married in this yard less than a week ago. It seemed as if a lifetime had passed since that beautiful day. My goal had been to have a honeymoon. Now? That was at the bottom of a long list. Didn't matter. We lived forever. We'd get to it eventually.

As I looked up, I spotted the faint shadow of the moon. The visual always made me happy. I wasn't sure why. Maybe it was that opposites could attract or that the light and the dark could be friends. Or maybe I was weird. Gram would say I was creative. Candy Vargo would suggest I was smoking Merlin's magical nards. I'd stick with weird.

Glancing around, I looked for the surprise. I didn't see it. However, Gideon's ridiculously large grin made me feel like I was missing something big.

"Umm... not sure what I'm looking for," I told him as he did a little jig with our baby.

The sight was so charmingly absurd I laughed. If the surprise was a dance party with

him and Alana Catherine, I was all in. Our daughter squealed with happiness, grabbed his hair and pulled with all her might. Gideon just laughed as well and let her.

When I first met him, I would have never guessed the depth of joy he had buried deep inside. I knew I was responsible for some of that, and it filled me up in ways that words could not do justice.

“You want to see the surprise?” he asked, waggling his brows.

“Thought I was looking at it,” I replied.

“Nope. Follow me,” he insisted as he began to walk around our home to the backyard.

I was on his heels. Right now, life felt good. I wasn’t going to waste the feeling. Lately, I felt like I’d been dancing between the raindrops, waiting for the huge storm to wash me away. It was a sickening way to exist.

As we rounded the house, I gasped and then laughed. Hard. Gideon was beaming. In the backyard was what I could only describe as a massive jungle gym. It was mostly hot pink and way over the top. There were three slides, swings for adults, swings for babies and toddlers, a sandbox, a fort and bright purple climbing ropes. The gorgeously garish playset was surrounded by sunflowers and daisies. Enormous orange and green stuffed teddy bears sat on the swings and at the top of the slides. And of course, two were in the sandbox holding bright yellow plastic shovels and pails. Surrounding the entire epic play area was a baby pink and powder blue picket fence that had been child-proofed... of course.

“I don’t even know what to say,” I said while giggling at the scene in front of me and the unabashed delight of the man who’d created it. “When did you do this?”

“It’s great. Right?” he said. “I needed to blow off steam when you were on the Higher Power’s plane. Instead of decimating our house, I built this. I mean, I could have rebuilt the house, but this was more fun.”

“You physically built it?” I asked, examining the swings and the fort. “No magic?”

“By hand,” he said with pride. “Used a little magic for the color scheme, but the rest was all sweat equity.”

Note to self, don’t let Gideon do any decorating in the house. “I love it! Can we use it?” I asked.

The squeal from our daughter was the answer. I was so happy it was nuts, but I was still aware that danger lurked around the corner. I was glad my siblings, along with Zander and Catriona, were patrolling the grounds. It often felt like I was living in a barely tolerable state of permanent dread juxtaposed with perfect moments. This was one of the perfect moments.

Gideon gently strapped Alana Catherine into the baby swing while letting her pull his hair the entire time. She babbled a mile a minute as he got her settled.

“I love you,” I told him as I sat down on the swing next to our baby.

“Love you more,” he replied, kissing the top of my head.

“Not possible,” he retorted.

“Should we call it even so we stop having this little contest?” I asked with a grin.

“Nope. I like it.” He moved in back of us. The Grim Reaper gave Alana Catherine’s swing a light push. But mine? He pushed me so high, it felt like I was flying. Not

only did he push, but he pushed so hard he ran under the swing each time. My tummy tickled, and I was slightly worried the swing would break, but I'd heal if I fell. It was worth every terrifying and exhilarating second. My shrieks of joy as the wind rushed through my hair were only outdone by the joyous shouts of my husband and daughter. I wanted it to last forever.

"Dadadadadada!" Alana Catherine screamed.

Gideon froze. My swing slowed, and I hopped off. My heart pounded in my chest so hard I was sure they could hear it.

Our daughter continued. She pointed a chubby little finger at Gideon and let it rip. "Dadadadadadadadada!"

"Oh my God," Gideon said, flabbergasted. "Did she say my name? And know what she was saying?"

The tears came unbidden. They were happy tears. "Yep," I said, smiling so hard it hurt.

Alana Catherine wasn't done. "Mamamamamamamamama!" she bellowed pointing at me.

There was no way in hell she was old enough to be talking. Babies didn't talk until much later, but she wasn't all baby. I'd just spent time with her as a twenty-year-old woman. Was it possible that she could say more than mama and dada? Could she tell us what she'd tried to say on the Higher Power's plane? Was I absolutely nuts?

Yes. Yes, I was.

"Mamamamamamama! Dadadadadada!" she insisted .

“My baby,” I said, lifting her out of the swing and holding her high. “So smart. Such a smart little girl.”

“Brilliant,” Gideon added, still shaken that she’d called him dada. “Maybe... she could tell us more.”

“Are you reading my mind?” I asked, squinting at him.

“No, but great minds think alike,” he replied, cupping Alana Catherine’s cheek in his strong hand. “Baby girl,” he whispered. “Can you tell mama and dada why the Higher Power wants you?”

Alana Catherine studied our serious expressions for a long moment. “Mama. Dada. Babeeeeeeeeee! Nard!” she finished her sentence with a giggle and a toot.

I closed my eyes and laughed. “Umm... I’m going to go with a no on that one. However, Candy Vargo has clearly been rubbing off on her. I swear I’ll lose my mind if her next words are Merlin’s magical nards.”

“Or an anatomically correct body part that isn’t technically a curse word,” Gideon added. He paused and booped Alana Catherine’s nose. “Is this normal?”

“Define normal.”

“Her speaking and generally knowing what she’s saying at this age.”

I shrugged. “No, but then again, she’s not a typical baby.”

“There might be a possibility that this is only the beginning,” he told me.

“Of what?”

He shook his head. “Of her speaking... possibly full sentences... soon.”

“From your mouth,” I whispered, wondering if he was correct. It would solve a whole heck of a lot of problems if that was the case. But a small part of me wanted her to go through all the stages at the right time... like a normal little girl.

This had been a memorable and humbling moment. But all good things had to end.

The shouts from the house chilled my blood. From the lack of explosions, I gathered no one was dying, but the argument sounded intense. Gideon’s downy black wings burst from his back and my fingers began to spit flames. My guess was that Shitty Ritchie had arrived.

Gideon snapped his fingers and produced a baby backpack. He slipped it on with the body pack on his chest. He quickly secured Alana Catherine into it. The look was insane. A demonic fallen Angel with a baby strapped to his chest and his wings on full display wasn’t an everyday occurrence. “Can you drop a small protection shield around her? Don’t include me, just Alana Catherine.”

“On it,” I said, carefully and meticulously creating a ward around the most precious person in our lives. “Done.”

“You ready?” he asked.

“Wanna tell me what I should be ready for?”

He shook his head. “Hard to explain. You have to see it to believe it.”

Shitty Ritchie was small. Not as in little-person small or a guy who was short. The Immortal was tiny—more like a doll with a shock of silvery-gray hair that stood straight up on his head and piercing blue eyes. He wore a royal blue sweatsuit that he

had to have gotten off a doll clothes website, and his itty-bitty feet were bare. He stood on the coffee table and eyed the gathering with ire. The sneer on his minute face was impressive. He couldn't be more than eight inches tall... if that. Though, even pocket-sized, it was clear he was magical and mean.

I'd been expecting an enormous, terrifying hulk of a man. A heads-up on his size might have been helpful. I was so shocked, I almost tripped over my own feet when I spotted him. All of my people, including Charlie, were standing together on the far side of the room. I did a quick accounting of everyone and was grateful that Missy, Amelia, June and Jennifer were gone. Tory was also absent, which meant she was protecting them. There was no telling what Shitty Ritchie could or would do. The other Immortals in the room would survive it. The humans? Most likely not.

My dogs sat by the front door. Donna looked like she wanted a go at Shitty Ritchie and Karen was oblivious to the tension. Ahh... to be a black lab. I snapped my fingers and motioned for them to go outside. Having no clue what was about to go down, I didn't want them getting harmed. I would skin Shitty Ritchie alive if he hurt my fur babies. Donna understood my message. She nudged Karen through the dog door then followed her out. I heaved a sigh of relief. My dogs were safe and my baby was surrounded by a protection ward. The rest of us? We could take care of ourselves. I hoped.

So far, so good... ish.

Rafe, Gabe, Abby and Prue were back. Zander, Catriona, Lura Belle, Dimple and Jolly Sue were missing, but I assumed they went to Candy's with the others. The only ghosts in the room were Gram, her beau Mr. Jackson and Jimmy George Carrots. Everyone was on edge except for Jimmy George Carrots. I had no clue as to why, but didn't have time to address it. Jimmy George Carrots had some screws loose.

I waited for someone to say something.

No one said anything.

The stare down was getting ridiculous. Shitty Ritchie was grumbling under his breath. I was pretty sure he'd called all of us a plethora of obscene names. He also had seriously sharp teeth that he enjoyed gnashing. If Shitty Ritchie was a cannibal, I was going to kick Charlie's ass for bringing him here. Getting eaten was not on my top ten list of things to do. Ever. The reasons for no one wanting him here were becoming more evident with each passing second.

I considered my options. If Shitty Ritchie came at me, I could step on him and do some damage. I was fast. At top speed, I was invisible. My combat boots would probably save my foot from getting bitten off. The fact that I had to even consider that was freaking unbelievable. Whatever. It was what it was. I was also surrounded by some of the most powerful Immortals in existence. Knowledge of Shitty Ritchie's strengths and weaknesses would have been helpful, but maybe ignorance would be bliss.

Fingers were crossed hard.

"Hello, Shitty Ritchie," I said, keeping a fair amount of distance between us and my tone friendly. "I'm Daisy. Thank you for coming and welcome to my home. It's a ahhh... pleasure to meet you."

"Fuck you," Shitty Ritchie snarled. His voice was high and squeaky.

The man had one heck of a bad attitude. How much damage could a teensy-weensy dude do? I knew from experience that appearances could be very deceiving. I'd stay with the polite Daisy for the time being. "We're happy to have you here," I lied through my teeth. I thought I heard Candy Vargo groan. Screw Candy Vargo. I didn't see her up here trying to make nice with the miniscule freak .

Shitty Ritchie growled like a cornered animal. “Fuck you, fuck you and fuck you.”

“Well, fuck you too,” I shot back. The little jerk had no manners.

The scream that came from Shitty Ritchie had to have ruptured my ear drums. All of the glass in the living room shattered. The crystal chandelier dropped from the ceiling and shattered into thousands of sparkling shards. It was too bad it hadn’t taken his head off. Reaching up to make sure blood wasn’t dripping from my ears, I narrowed my eyes at the tiny menace.

Before another word could leave my mouth, Shitty Ritchie began to spin in circles on the coffee table. It started slow and then increased to a speed where it was difficult to see him. The funnel that formed around him did not look good.

“Go, go, go!” Charlie yelled as he began ushering people out of the house. “Get out. It’s about to blow.”

He didn’t have to ask twice. Gideon grabbed my hand and literally yanked me out of the house. Everyone else was only a breath behind. My dogs led the way. We’d made it about eight hundred feet from the house when it detonated like a massive bomb had exploded. Furniture, walls, chandeliers, glass, stone, appliances and wood flew everywhere. Gideon shielded Alana Catherine and me with his body. Candy Vargo quickly dropped a ward around us, and I watched as my beautiful home was reduced to rubble. It was very good we were in the middle of nowhere. It would be terrible if the human police and fire department showed up.

When I saw my wedding dress in flames and my daughter’s mangled crib hurtle through the air, I lost it.

“What in the actual Pop Tart vagina was that?” I shouted, staring at the spot where I used to feel safe. “That little nard ass is going to pay.”

With a flick of my fingers, I dissolved the ward and sprinted towards the house. I could hear the frantic yelling behind me. I ignored it. My life might be a hot shartshow, but my home was my haven— was being the operative word. No little doll-sized, smack-talking, asshole was going to get away with destroying it. Maybe, it was all the pressure I was under that made me go off. Maybe, it was seeing the photos of my parents burning to ash on the ground. Maybe, it was the flaming scraps and hunks of the hot pink jungle gym whipping through the air that was the straw that broke the camel's back. I didn't care. I was over being messed with. None of us had done anything to Shitty Ritchie. Well, I wasn't sure about that, but I was sure I hadn't done anything to the little nard except say hello. Blowing up my house for that was unacceptable. With any luck, a beam would have decapitated Shitty Ritchie. If that wasn't the case, I would finish the job.

“You little piece of Merlin's magical balls,” I hissed when I saw the tiny jackhole standing to the left of the smoldering rubble pile laughing like he'd just pulled a hilarious prank.

I didn't like pranks. They were stupid and mean. And I really didn't like people who pulled them—especially one as destructive as this. My mind was a jumbled mess as I tried to pull a plan of attack together. Electrocuting him could backfire. Ripping his head off might be over the top. He hadn't technically tried to decapitate any of us... yet. I offed people defensively, not because they were nards. Reminding myself that I was the Angel of Mercy, I kept sprinting toward the miniature monster.

The Angel of Mercy would not kill randomly.

However, she could give the unwanted douche canoe a swift kick in the ass. I was about to yeet that corn nut into next year.

The speed at which I ran rendered me invisible. Win-win. The little son of a Nutter Butter bunghole didn't see me coming. The feeling when my combat boot-clad foot

connected with his tiny bahookey was glorious. I punted Shitty Ritchie the length of a football field. His screams of terror were music to my ears.

I wasn't done. In less time than it took to inhale and exhale, I was on him. Pinning him down with my foot on his neck, I smiled. With a clap of my hands, I produced a gnarly-looking, razor-sharp sword. I laid the cold blade against his cheek. It would only take a flick of my wrist to remove his head. The choice to live or die would be his. I wasn't a total monster. "One move and I'll snap your neck. After that, I'll remove it from your body with my bare hands. If that proves problematic, I'll whack it off with the sword. You understand me?" I ground out.

I was very aware I was glowing and that my eyes had turned a blinding gold. The entire scene in front of me was bathed in a golden glow. Shitty Ritchie had the wherewithal to look extremely uncomfortable.

"Fuck you," he hissed.

"I'd rather not," I shot back. For a hot sec, I thought the tiny jerk chuckled. That had to be wrong. "Here's how this is going to go, Shitty Ritchie . When I remove my foot, you're going to leave. I don't ever want to see your ugly face again. You're a disgusting little pig of a man and an asshole to boot. I don't know why Charlie thought you could help. And if you destroy one more thing or person on my property, you will rue the day you were hatched."

I felt my people behind me. I also felt their fear. Why? Not sure. I didn't fear the icky little man under my boot. I hated him. And yes, hate was a strong word, but he'd destroyed what was sacred to me. It could all be replaced, but it would never be the same.

"Uhhhh... Daisy," Candy Vargo said. "You wanna back off a little bit?"

I didn't spare her a glance. It was too risky to look away from the Immortal tornado. "Nope. I'm good. Shitty Ritchie will be leaving. Soon. I don't care what the stupid nardhole can do or how he might be able to help. As far as I'm concerned, he's a violent waste of space and doesn't deserve the oxygen he breathes."

And then the unthinkable happened. Shitty Ritchie began to cry. It started small but quickly devolved into choking sobs—snot included. I didn't buy it. I pressed my foot deeper into his neck. "Stop that. You just blew up my house. You see me crying, shart stain?"

"Nobody likes me," he wailed.

It was a little difficult to understand him with my foot on his larynx, but I wasn't letting up. If he turned into a freaking tornado funnel again, that would be on me. Fool me once, shame on me. Fool me twice? That was not going to happen today.

"Duh. Why should anyone like you?" I demanded. "You got here, said fuck you, then imploded my house. Not sure that's a great way to make friends."

"Sorry," he said through his tears. "I thought I was here to face the music. I needed to show that I meant business."

"Define face the music," I snapped, ready to yeet him all the way home... wherever that might be.

"Pay for my crimes," he sniffled.

My eyes narrowed to slits. "What crimes? "

I watched as the little freak considered his next words carefully. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I rolled my eyes. “You brought it up, not me, Shitty Ritchie. So, spit it out. I’m getting bored.”

“Bored?” he screamed, shocked. “Shitty Ritchie is not boring.”

“Totally boring,” I shot back. “Rude, violent, ugly and boring.”

He was wildly insulted. “Rude? Yes. Violent? Absolutely. Ugly? NOT. Boring? NEVER!”

I blew out a puff of air. How was this my life right now? I was arguing with a tiny, deadly idiot. I had far more important things to deal with.

“Leave,” I said. “You will leave.”

Shitty Ritchie smiled at me. At least I thought it was a smile. Maybe he grimaced. Whatever it was, it was disturbing. “Do I have to?”

“Are you serious?” I shouted. “Yes, you have to leave. I can’t stand you, and you blew my house up for no reason.”

“Too many,” he muttered, flapping his little hands wildly. “Too many of you here. I needed to show you that I am powerful.”

“By being a dick?” I hissed.

“Dick is fine,” Candy Vargo chimed in. “It’s a body part. Penis would be better, but dick will work too.”

When I was done yeeting Shitty Ritchie, I was going to yeet Candy Vargo as well.

“I said I was sorry,” Shitty Ritchie whined. “I mean I came here, didn’t I? That should count for something.”

“Guys,” I said, still keeping my gaze on the miniature enemy on the ground. “Can you all get where I can see you, please?”

“Yes,” Gideon said as he moved into my sightline along with the others.

“Is the ward still holding around Alana Catherine?” I asked.

Gideon nodded and I sighed with relief.

“Charlie,” I said. “Did Shitty Ritchie come willingly?”

“For the most part,” Charlie said. “I do believe he can help. I wouldn’t have gone after him if I didn’t believe that to be true.”

I internally groaned but stayed outwardly badass. I trusted Charlie. Gideon trusted Charlie. Hell, everyone trusted him. “Someone needs to explain to me now how this little piece of excrement can help us. If no one can, his ass is out of here.”

“Ass is a donkey,” Candy announced. “Perfectly acceptable. And throwing in excrement was outstanding.”

“An ass is also the buttocks,” Shitty Ritchie volunteered.

I rolled my eyes. Everyone here was crazy... including me. “Speak or I’ll drop kick this loser to Mars.”

Charlie stepped forward. “Shitty Ritchie’s largest asset is his hatred of the Higher Power.”

This time my eye roll should have made my eyes get stuck in the back of my head. “Umm... pretty sure we have that covered here without the destructive turdknocker.”

“Possibly,” Charlie conceded. “However, the Higher Power fears Shitty Ritchie for some unknown reason.”

That was interesting. “Why?” I demanded of the idiot beneath my boot. “Tell me why the Higher Power fears you.”

“I shall give you three guesses,” he squeaked.

I moved my sword closer to his bobbing Adam’s apple. “Your name is Shitty Ritchie, not Rumpelstiltskin. I’m not playing games with a tiny Pop Tart testicle who blows up houses. You tell me or you’re leaving.”

“I can’t leave,” he screeched. “I’ll be killed!”

“By who?” I ground out .

He paused as the two brain cells in his head tried to come up with an answer. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh my God,” I muttered. I was tempted to turn my sword on myself so I didn’t have to deal with Shitty Ritchie. “Gideon, do you know why the Higher Power fears Shitty Ritchie?”

“I do not,” he replied.

“Candy Vargo?”

“Nada.”

“Tim?”

“I’ve researched this for many years, but alas, I do not know, friend,” he told me.

“Heather?”

“Sorry, no,” she replied.

I was running out of Immortals to question.

“Rafe, Abby, Prue or Gabe? Any clue?”

Gabe answered as the other nodded in agreement with him. “Sorry, Daisy. We don’t know.”

“Charlie?”

He sighed. “Here’s what I know. Shitty Ritchie possesses a multitude of powers—not that I’ve witnessed much other than mass destruction. From whispers over the centuries, he fluently speaks every language ever spoken. It’s odd since the cretin has broken every law we have, but the man supposedly has the ability to recite the Immortal Book of Laws by heart. He can fly without wings.”

“I have seen that,” Tim volunteered.

“And legend has it he can harbor the dead from within,” Charlie continued.

A chill skittered up my spine. Shitty Ritchie was a Soul Keeper? Was he also an Arbitrator between the Darkness and the Light like Heather?

“He says he can touch the dead,” Charlie continued.

We could test that one out. But... did that mean the little shit was a Death Counselor as well? No. Tory could touch the dead and wasn't a Death Counselor.

Back to the pint-sized object of our conversation. "Is all of that true, Shitty Ritchie?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, rehashing his favorite line.

Gram floated up behind me and whispered in my ear. "That little muppet-lookin' thing is as useless as gum on a boot heel, and he's makin' my rump itch, but I think Charlie might be right."

I spared Gram a quick glance. "Explain, old lady."

"If Shitty Ritchie really has all them powers and a bag of chips, he's like Alana Catherine," she said so softly that I had to lean in. "I think he's come into our lives for a reason," she continued. "Ain't much in our world that happens with no reason."

"A reason other than blowing up my house?" I whispered back.

"Well, now," she said, scratching her sparsely haired head. "That made me wanna jerk his tail in a knot, but you puntin' that little sucker like a football was dang satisfyin', Daisy girl. My gut tells me we need to give that there little nard a chance."

I glanced over at Gideon. Gram might have whispered, but Immortals had excellent hearing.

He nodded curtly and then approached Shitty Ritchie. From the expression on the minuscule sharthead's face, he was reconsidering his request to stay. The Grim Reaper did not corn nut around.

Shart... was about to get real.

CHAPTER FIVE

The moon had risen. During the day, the sun bathed the grounds in a magical golden glow, but at night, the moon would cast an incandescent and beautiful haze over our property. Most of the time, it felt ethereal and romantic. Tonight, with everything going on, the haze was eerie, almost foreboding. Gideon didn't speak as he stared down the troll-looking monstrosity. He didn't have to. His ebony black wings were expanded, his eyes were blood red and his entire body glowed with a promise of pain and agony. Shitty Ritchie gulped repeatedly and loudly. I didn't feel sorry for him. As far as I was concerned, he was a huge liability.

Gideon had handed Alana Catherine off to Charlie. I quickly reinforced the ward around my daughter. Charlie one-upped me and doubled its strength. That was more than fine with me. If I lost an arm or a leg in the next few minutes, I could deal with it. It would grow back—bizarre but true. I wouldn't be thrilled, but if my baby suffered even a scratch from Shitty Ritchie, he was going down. Violently and permanently .

The Grim Reaper slashed his hand through the air. Shitty Ritchie was now residing in a square glass box—ten inches by ten inches. He had room to stand up and sit down, but it was kind of tight for walking around. The enchanted glass shimmered and jiggled as if it were alive. I was tempted to reach out and touch it, though I didn't dare. I didn't want to accidentally break Gideon's magical prison.

“It will hold the bastard,” Gideon ground out, eyeing his work. “Magic is impossible from within.”

“I don’t like this,” Shitty Ritchie screeched, banging on the undulating walls.

“Dude. Cake hole, shut it,” I snapped. “It’s for our safety as well as yours.”

He sat down on his tiny bottom and pouted like the deadly baby that he was. However, the little nard bared his teeth at me in fury. I was tempted to do one of two things—zap him or flip him off. The zap could ricochet and backfire. If magic couldn’t get out of the box, it stood to reason that it couldn’t get in either. Electrocuting myself by accident would suck. Flipping him off could get me set on fire by Candy Vargo. I’d already seen her do it to herself twice. I liked my middle finger with feeling in it, so I wasn’t going to risk it.

“Nifty,” Candy said, examining the see-through prison. “I ain’t never seen nothin’ like that before.”

Gideon glanced over at her. “That’s because it will only work on something small. The larger the box, the weaker it is.”

“So interesting!” Tim said, clapping his hands. He adored new discoveries. “Shall we retire? It’s getting quite late and dark.”

It took all I had not to scream. My best bet was a sarcastic laugh. I let it rip. “Well...” I said, staring daggers at Shitty Ritchie. “I’d say that everyone could stay at the house, but Gideon and I don’t seem to have a house at the moment.”

Shitty Ritchie stared at his feet. His little shoulders were slumped, and it appeared that the waterworks and snot were about to start again. The imbecile was like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide—violent one minute and nice-ish...ish the next.

“Do you wish for me to fix it?” he questioned, sounding sheepish.

I rolled my eyes. Like I was going to let him use any kind of magic after what I'd already witnessed. He'd already proven to be a nightmare.

"No," I said flatly. "I don't wish for you to have anything to do with my house—or lack thereof."

"What do you wish for?" he asked, giving me the side eye.

The little dude was wacked, but his stress on the word wish was odd. Did he fancy himself a genie? I was shocked that he still had a crappy 'tude going on considering he was in a see-through prison. "What do you wish for?" I shot back, playing the game. There wasn't much he could do. If Gideon had said the box would keep the shart stain from using magic, then that was correct.

"I wish that toes had eyes so I wouldn't keep stubbing mine all the time," he answered, pointing at his bare feet.

His answer left me speechless. It also made me want to laugh. Little guy had some game. However, he was batshit nuts.

"I hate to be Captain Obvious, but that's not how anatomy works," I told him.

Shitty Ritchie giggled.

I was appalled that I found the sound cute.

"I'm not an idiot," he insisted.

"Could have fooled me," I replied, rubbing my temples and wondering what to do about sleeping arrangements.

He pressed his face against the glass. It was not a good look. “I know that I am not an idiot, therefore, I do not have to prove to you that I’m not an idiot... because I’m not... an idiot.”

“You are,” I said, wanting to yeet myself for falling into the trap more suited to elementary school kids, but it was impossible not to engage.

“Am not,” he shouted.

“Are.”

“NOT.”

“Umm... Daisy,” Gideon said, squinting at me with a slight wince.

“Right,” I said, quickly. Shitty Ritchie brought the fourth-grade boy mentality out in me. “Sorry.”

“Not to worry,” Candy Vargo said with a chuckle. “I’m just proud that you didn’t call him a motherfucker... cause I sure wanted to.” She blanched then electrocuted herself for the poop word.

I was pretty sure tonight couldn’t get any weirder.

But wait... things could always get weirder.

I searched my brain for solutions. I knew we could go back to my old farmhouse that I’d gifted to my Angel siblings, but that would be a tight squeeze. Splitting up was a bad plan. If the Higher Power decided to show Its bahookey, we needed protection around Alana Catherine. I wasn’t risking her life. Period.

“Over here,” Tim said, instructing the group with a wave about twenty feet from Shitty Ritchie.

We gathered in a circle and whispered.

“I say we shake the turd down then let the little tater tot twat fix the house,” Candy Vargo said.

“Twat is pushin’ it,” Gram warned her. “That ain’t no atomically correct term.”

“Whoops,” Candy said, punching herself in the head. “My bad. How about Velveeta va-jay-jay?”

“Not much better,” Gram said, shaking her head. “But I’ll give it a pass, girly.”

I was just happy Candy didn’t light herself on fire again. Our circle was tight, and I didn’t want to get burned. It was the little things I was grateful for right now. The big picture was a hot mess, so it was necessary for my sanity that I found small wins.

Charlie glanced back at the box holding Shitty Ritchie. “I think Candy Vargo has a point.”

“About fixing the house?” I asked. Surely, Charlie didn’t like that plan. I hated it.

“Absolutely not,” he assured me.

“Bout the twat?” Candy inquired.

She was roundly ignored by everyone.

Charlie closed his eyes for a moment. It was obvious that ignoring Candy’s

butchering of the English language was taking a toll. “About shaking him down... for information.”

I kind of wanted to shake Charlie down for bringing the destructive Immortal to my home, but getting mad would get me nowhere. Charlie rarely did anything without reason.

Tim leaned forward. His pad was filled with notes on the rippling prison. “If, and I repeat if... Shitty Ritchie wants to stay here to avoid certain death, the chaos goblin must prove himself. I agree with Charlie that we question him. If he plays dirty, we shall move him to a remote island and put out the word of his location.”

Shitty Ritchie shrieked and threw an impressive tantrum. The tiny jerk practically twisted himself into a pretzel. The just regular Immortal clearly had outstanding aural talents. He didn’t like that plan. His piercing blue eyes were filled with panic. However, he was not in charge. He was a menace with a penchant for violence. That description could also apply to Candy Vargo, but she was one of the good guys.

Tim motioned us further away. I wasn’t sure that was going to keep Shitty Ritchie from hearing us, but complied. Tim scribbled furiously on his pad then held it out for us to read.

It said— we are captives of our own identities. Living in prisons of our own creation.

“Wait,” I said, shaking my head. “That sounds familiar. Who said it?”

Heather chuckled. “It’s from the TV show Prison Break .”

I groaned. We were now getting our inspiration from fictitious TV shows? Whatever. I’d learned quickly to go with the flow. Tim, like Charlie, was a reasonable and smart person. “How does this apply?”

“Whoever wants him dead has reasons,” Tim stated.

“I would guess that would be everyone who has ever met him,” I muttered.

“I DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU’RE TALKING ABOUT. I’M FABULOUS,” Shitty Ritchie screamed.

I waved my hand and created a protection bubble around us. There was no way in hell to have any kind of productive conversation with Shitty Ritchie within hearing distance. We now had privacy.

Tim gave me a smile. “Thank you, friend. But my point is that the little Immortal is clearly trapped by who he is. I believe that’s why he is being hunted.

I screwed up my face. “Umm... he’s a dick. That could be why he’s being hunted. That is, if he’s even telling the truth.”

“That nard is tellin’ the truth,” Candy Vargo said. “I can smell me a liar any time.”

“What?” I asked, surprised. “You can literally smell a lie? ”

“You bet your Little Debbie vagina I can. That tiny bunghole is on the run. He ain’t lyin’.” she informed me. “Lies smell like flambéed ass cooked with chocolate chips and sauerkraut.”

I didn’t know what the hell to say to that. Neither did anyone else.

“And more to your point, ain’t nobody in our world ever been offed for bein’ a dick,” she said. “Heck and testicles, I’d be dead a million times over if that was the case.”

“Amen to that,” Gabe said with a grin.

“Zip it, Angel,” Candy Vargo shot back with a chuckle. “Ate ya once, I can do it again.”

All four of my Angel siblings—Gabe, Abby, Rafe and Prue—paled considerably. The rest of us were running a very close second.

“Oh my freaking god,” I said with a gag. First, flambéed ass, chocolate chips and sauerkraut, and now, cannibalism.

Gram was about done. “Candy Vargo, I’m fixin’ to tear you a new rump that you ain’t gonna be able to sit on for a decade. Ain’t nobody gonna be eatin’ nobody. You hear me, girlie?”

“I’m jokin’,” Candy Vargo announced, throwing her hands up in surrender. “Can’t a gal make a joke?”

“The answer to that... is hell to the no,” Heather said right after expelling a huge breath. “Not unless you live in Idaho where it’s illegal.”

Candy nodded. “I see what you mean. My bad.”

“Moving on,” I said quickly. It was getting late. We had a whole lot of people and no place to sleep. Plus, if Candy Vargo kept talking, I’d puke.

Tim took over. “Shitty Ritchie is very obviously in trouble. The only leverage we might have is to offer help in return for help. I say we bargain.”

“We don’t even know what we want from him. I don’t want him near my child. He’s untrustworthy and violent,” I said, feeling a little hysterical. “What the heck are we bargaining for?”

“Don’t matter,” Candy Vargo said. “We start somewhere, meander for a while and then we get there. Happens all the corn nuttin’ time.”

Everyone nodded... except for me.

I ran my hands through my hair in frustration. “Is everyone crazy here?” I hissed. “I suppose that might be a rhetorical question, but letting Crappy Pappy lead the way seems like a recipe for a bigger disaster than we’re already in.”

Tim smiled and patted my back. “Ahh, yes, friend. But... we haven’t put the rules in place yet. All good plans of mice and men often go awry... unless there are consequences and parameters. We’ll keep that in mind. As we proceed, we shall discover the process that will work with the least amount of property damage.” Tim looked at the pile of rubble that used to be my house. “I do so wish Shitty Ritchie hadn’t blown up the house. So unnecessary.”

A thought hit me like a brick thrown at close range. “Wishes.”

“What?” Gideon asked.

“Wishes” I repeated, feeling the calmest I’d felt in a while. “We’ll trade wishes. Shitty Ritchie already mentioned wishes twice.”

“Threeeeeeeeeeeeeee!” Jimmy George Carrots insisted.

I tilted my head in confusion. What did he know that I didn’t. “Three wishes?”

“Nooooooooooah,” he said, sounding a little frantic. “Twoooooooooah. Nuuummmbeeeeer twoooooooooah.”

I glanced around the circle of my nearest and dearest. No one had any clue that the

ghost was trying to tell us. I was tempted to hug him and do a mind dive so we could truly communicate, but I was pressed for time at the moment. Because I was a good southern gal, I nodded at Jimmy George Carrots and smiled.

He seemed satisfied.

Charlie scratched his head. “I think wishes are an excellent way to go at this.” His gaze landed on Candy. “Can you repair the house enough so we have shelter to sleep?”

“Can do,” she replied with a thumbs up. “I will say that crazy titty nard really did a number on it. But I got me some ideas how to improve it!”

That made me gulp. Candy Vargo’s sense of aesthetics was kind of lacking.

“HEY,” Shitty Ritchie whined from right outside the protection ward I’d dropped.

Everyone jumped. Candy Vargo actually screamed.

“Oh my god,” I shouted as my heart raced like a jackhammer in my chest. “How did he get out?”

Gideon growled and immediately stepped in front of Charlie, who still held Alana Catherine. Clapping my hands, I dissolved the ward around us. If Shitty Ritchie was about to go tornado on us again, we needed to get the hell out of here.

“Run!” Heather commanded.

She didn’t have to ask twice. We took off like bats out of hell.

“Where we goin’?” Candy Vargo yelled.

“As far as we can get from the freak,” Heather yelled back.

We didn’t get too far. Shitty Ritchie was running right alongside us.

“WAIT,” the miniature menace shrieked. “I will play nice.”

“Don’t believe him,” Gideon ground out as he scooped Alana Catherine out of Charlie’s hands while we were running at least sixty miles an hour. “Keep moving.”

“Nonononononono!” Alana Catherine babbled as she levitated out of Gideon’s arms. “NOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Gideon’s wings flapped as he darted into the night sky to grab her. The Grim Reaper was fast. Our daughter was faster.

My child waved her chubby little hands in a circular motion. Our forward trajectory was immediately halted. It was as if we’d hit a wall. Everyone went flying backwards. We landed in a heap on the ground with Alana Catherine floating in the air above us. Her giggle calmed my soul, but the fact that she was hanging by nothing in the air about twenty feet up, almost made me pass out.

“Itty Ritty stay!” she sang, doing flips.

Gram, Mr. Jackson and Jimmy George Carrots darted up to her and created a ghostly hand basket to catch her if she fell. I was sure that wasn’t going to work, but the thought was lovely. Charlie, Gabe, Rafe, Tory and Prue were the first to disentangle themselves from the pile. Gabe’s downy white wings exploded from his back, and he flew to his niece. Gideon was with him.

Alana Catherine again held out her chubby, little hands. “Itty Ritty stay,” she insisted.

I closed my eyes and a weak laugh escaped my lips. Her first word was dada, her second was mama, and her third was Shitty Ritchie.

“Who has their hand up my ass,” Candy Vargo yelled from underneath me in the pile.

“I think it’s my foot,” Tim grunted. “I apologize for where it may have landed. I shall endeavor to remove it posthaste.”

“CAN’T brEATHE,” Shitty Ritchie squeaked from the very bottom of the stockpile of Immortals .

“Everyone, up. Now,” I insisted. “Nard ass has fangs.”

I didn’t have to say another word. The pile dispersed so fast there was a sharp wind.

As soon as we were all on our feet, Alana Catherine floated down and settled herself in my arms. Gideon was next to me so fast I didn’t see him move.

I eyed Shitty Ritchie warily. He eyed me right back. “How did you get out of the box?”

“I have no idea,” he announced, brushing dirt and twigs off his sweatsuit.

“Leave this place,” I snapped. “I’m not playing your games.”

“Itty Ritty stay,” Alana Catherine insisted, pointing at him. “Stay.”

I inhaled deeply and blew it out loudly. I exchanged a cryptic look with Gideon. His eyes still shone blood red, but he was no longer glowing with rage. He gave me a curt nod. Following orders from a baby that could end in a literal shit storm was a first for me. My gut was clenched, and I was second-guessing my entire life. “You have one

more chance,” I said to the tiny idiot flatly. “How did you get out of the box?”

Shitty Ritchie rolled his eyes at least twenty times in quick succession. It looked like the turd was having a seizure. However, his raised middle finger let me know he was fine.

“Nothing can hold me,” he finally replied as he wobbled unsteadily on his feet from rolling his eyes so many times.

I glanced around at my friends and family. No one said a word. They just stared at Shitty Ritchie in shock.

“Ground rules,” Tim reminded me.

I nodded. My tongue felt thick in my mouth. I couldn’t believe the words that were about to come out of it. But what I really couldn’t believe was what my baby had just done. It was beyond insane. However, she wanted Itty Ritty to stay. I was choosing to believe her. Anything was possible... I just had to believe. Shitty Ritchie was here. Alana Catherine believed he was here for a reason. I freaking hoped I didn’t regret what I was about to say. “You can stay. We’ll protect you from whoever is hunting you in exchange for information. However, if you harm a single hair on anyone’s head or destroy any more property, all bets are off, and you’ll be on your own. Deal?”

Shitty Ritchie smiled. It was slightly terrifying, but it made my baby giggle. “Deal.”

Wishes. I’d stick to bargaining with wishes. Although, the old proverb came roaring to the forefront of my mind—if wishes were horses, then beggars would ride. Point being that if wishes actually came true even the most destitute person would have all they desired. That wasn’t the way the world worked.

It was a risk, but at this point we had nothing... and everything to lose.

CHAPTER SIX

Candy Vargo didn't mess around. She worked quickly. My new house didn't look like my old house at all. I didn't complain. At least there would be a roof over our heads. Unsurprisingly, Candy had crappy taste. The main house she'd conjured up was a single-story tract home and was painted an unfortunate shade of teal. There were a dozen double-wide trailers surrounding the new and unsightly abode. Each trailer had a number plastered on it—one through twelve. Gideon groaned. Abby and Prue almost choked on their spit. I was with them. It was an eyesore, but everyone was exhausted, and my baby needed to sleep.

“Ta-freakin’da, corn nuts!” Candy yelled, taking a bow.

“Ya done good, girlye,” Gram told her as she, Mr. Jackson and Jimmy George Carrots zipped around the new and temporary neighborhood.

Other than the ghosts, only Tim and Shitty Ritchie seemed enchanted with the strange layout. Tim snapped photos with his phone and Shitty Ritchie oohed and ahed over every detail. For a hot sec, I wondered where Charlie had found the tiny dude and what his living situation had been. Not important. I wouldn't use up a wish to find out that information.

En masse we toured the tract home with Candy leading the way and Tim on her heels. Gideon walked with me and held our baby. Behind us, Charlie and Heather walked on either side of Shitty Ritchie, sandwiching him in. Prue, Abby, Rafe and Gabe brought up the rear. If the tiny weirdo tried anything, ten insanely powerful Immortals would be all over him in less time than it took to blink. Shockingly,

because of Alana Catherine's decree that turd-man should stay, I wasn't overly worried about another tornado this evening. However, I was alert and ready to step on him again if he posed any sort of threat.

The main house had two bedrooms—a master and a nursery. All of the furniture was serviceable and bland except for the kitchen. It was gold and bright orange with accents of olive green. It looked like something the 1970s had puked up. The orange Formica countertops and mustard yellow linoleum floors were perfectly awful. The appliances were olive green and matched the table and chairs. It was too heinous to be called kitschy. Ugly was ugly. Didn't matter. Gideon and I could rebuild at a later date.

“Let's divide up and hit the hay,” Candy Vargo announced, looking damn proud of herself for the lodgings. “Prue and Abby can take McMansion number one. Rafe and Gabe, number two.” She chuckled like an elementary school kid. “Put you in number two on purpose. Figured a good poop might help your shitty personalities. Pun motherhumpin' intended!”

“Pretty sure shitty ain't on the approved list,” Gram told Candy.

“Dangit!” Candy bellowed, bending over and spanking the daylights out of her own bottom. It was a little much, but was preferable to her going up in flames. “My bad! Lemme try that again.”

“Please don't,” Heather pleaded.

Candy Vargo did not listen. She turned to Rafe and Gabe. “I put y'all in number two because I figured a good poop might help your potato chip penis personalities.”

“Lordy,” I said, choking back a laugh. “That might have been worse.”

The Keeper of Fate shrugged and popped a toothpick into her mouth. “Possibly, but it was legal.”

Rafe shook his head. Gabe closed his eyes. However, both of my brothers were grinning. It was too absurd and dumb not to laugh.

“Alrighty then,” Candy continued. “Charlie and Tim can take number three. Heather and I will take number four.”

“Nope,” Heather said quickly and forcefully. “You snore. You take four and I’ll take five.”

“Suit yourself,” Candy said. “But I’m just sayin’, I tell one heck of a bedtime story.”

“I can attest to that,” Tim said with a smile. “Very graphic, but quite amusing.”

“I can definitely live without that,” Heather replied dryly.

“Gram, Mr. Jackson and Jimmy George Carrots can bunk with me so I ain’t alone,” Candy said, giving Gram a hopeful look.

“That sounds right nice, girlie,” Gram announced as Mr. Jackson and Jimmy George Carrots turned flips of agreement in the air. “We don’t sleep cause we’re dead and all, so the snorin’ won’t bother us a bit!”

Candy grinned and Gram gave her a thumbs up. “Daisy, Gideon and Alana Catherine get the house. Capiche?”

Shitty Ritchie let loose with a piercing cry then dropped to the ground and began to wail—tears, snot and ground kicking included. “What about Shitty Ritchie?” he screamed. “Doesn’t Shitty Ritchie get a luxury home? A McMansion?”

Again, I wondered where the guy had been living if he thought a double-wide was a luxury home.

“Itty Ritty!” Alana Catherine called out with tears running down her cheeks. “Ohhhhhhhh, Itty Ritty.”

“Crap,” I muttered. “First, she wanted the skunks for pets... now Itty Ritty. We’re doomed.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Gideon questioned warily.

“Umm...” I began with a wince as Itty Ritty continued to sob in the background. I decided to just rip the bandaid off. There was no sugarcoating it. It was going to be bad no matter how gently I revealed the story. “There’s one minor detail I forgot to tell you about from our trip to the Higher Power’s plane... Our daughter is housing forty dead, machine-wielding skunks inside of her. She wants to keep them as pets.”

Gideon looked back and forth between Alana Catherine and me. The expression on his handsome face was one of utter disbelief. “That’s a joke. Right?”

“Heck to the no!” Gram said as she swooped down into the conversation with a cackle. “Them little stinkers love our gal and she loves them. And I know, I really do, that forty pole cats might seem like a lot, but they’re dead. Therefore, they ain’t gonna eat nothin’ and I’m gonna go out on a limb and say that their anal rumpus blasters don’t work no more.”

Gideon was at a total loss for words. I didn’t blame him. It was a lot. Alana Catherine giggled, grabbed a fistful of his hair and pulled. Our little gal then proceeded to cover his face in wet baby kisses.

The Grim Reaper was instantly charmed. His daughter had him wrapped around her

little finger. I was pretty sure she could ask for an entire zoo and Gideon would get it for her.

“Dadadadadada!” she squealed. “Skoonsk!”

Before anyone could comment on the fact that she’d just said the word skunk... well, kind of, she pumped her free arm in the air and began to glow in every color of the rainbow. One by one, the army of black and white ghostly stinkers floated out of her small frame and gathered at Gideon’s feet. They stared up at Alana Catherine with reverence and unconditional love in their beady little eyes.

“Holy heck on a bosom stick,” Candy Vargo cried out. “In all my gadzillions of years, I ain’t never seen nothin’ like that!”

“Fascinating,” Tim said, waving at the gathering. “Welcome, friends!”

“This is real?” Gideon whispered, still in a semi-state of shock.

I blew out a raspberry and laughed. “One hundred percent.”

“Welp,” Candy said, getting back to business as the skunks wandered around the area. My dog Karen couldn’t see the dead, but Donna could and seemed delighted that we were expanding the furry part of our family. “We can put the dead stinkies in McMansion number six.”

At the news, Shitty Ritchie lost his tiny and debatably sane mind. He beat the ground with his itty-bitty fists and stubbed every single one of his bare toes on the hard ground. “WHAT ABOUT ME? Where does Shitty Ritchie sleep?”

“Seven. McMansion number seven,” I said in my outdoor voice so I could be heard over his sobs. I wasn’t sure if his tantrum was about to devolve into something worse.

We'd already seen worse. Having a repeat would piss me off.

"Really?" he asked, peeking up at me. The crying ended as abruptly as it had started. The tiny freak smiled. It was slightly horrifying with the sharp fangs, but it pulled hard at my heart for some reason. My compassion was probably going to get me killed one of these days. "Seven? For me?"

"Umm... yes, seven," I repeated. "Will that work?"

Shitty Ritchie got to his feet and did a few jazz squares as he shrieked in excitement. His happy screams were as ear-piercing as his desolate ones. Most of our group had slapped their hands over their ears. The dead skunks sprinted away and hid. It was wonderful that the tantrum had ended, but I still didn't trust him. I was ready to step on Shitty Ritchie if the jazz squares led to a natural disaster like the tornado earlier. Thankfully, it looked like jazz squares only meant the strange little man was in a good mood.

The learning curve with Shitty Ritchie was steep.

"Yes! So fine," he said. "The number seven is very important in many cultures! It represents completion, perfection, rest and spiritual wholeness. Very much like Shitty Ritchie."

"Oh my!" Tim said, walking over to Shitty Ritchie. He squatted down and shook his hand. "Excellent! Seven is also a prime number, can represent luck, and is notable for the Seven Wonders of the World, the seven colors of the rainbow and the seven days of the week."

Shitty Ritchie blushed under Tim's praise. The oxymoron of who he was when he got here and who he was now was difficult to reconcile. However, I'd take this Shitty Ritchie over the other one any time.

Charlie cleared his throat. “As lovely as this is,” he said, eyeing the skunks with amusement and Shitty Ritchie with some trepidation. “We should get some rest.” Charlie walked over to Gideon and me and lowered his voice. “We need to put a guard rotation on Shitty Ritchie. It would be unwise to accept without question the new version we’re seeing at the moment. We also don’t want him getting away.”

Thankfully, the little nard didn’t hear Charlie. He was too busy trading seven trivia with Tim.

“I agree with having guards on Shitty Ritchie. Although, I don’t think the violent dummy is going anywhere fast,” I said quietly. “I’ll be up first with Tim. Should I question him about the Higher Power? Or Alana Catherine?”

“No,” Charlie said firmly. “There’s a fine chance he’ll go off again during that conversation. Wait until we’re all together tomorrow—heavily armed and preferably in an open field.”

“Good thinking,” I told Charlie. “I’ll handle this.” I smiled as I walked over to Tim and Shitty Ritchie. Potentially explosive news always went better with a pleasant expression—or that was what I was going with. However, it was all in the phrasing. “Shitty Ritchie, since you’re new to our... umm... friend group, I thought it might be nice for you to get to know everyone. Tonight.”

He squinted at me. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Mmmkay, great,” I replied to his favorite line while keeping my smile bright. “Tim and I are going to spend a few hours with you and get you tucked in.”

“Wonderful,” Tim said, catching on immediately. “We can discuss the number seven in a deeper and more meaningful way.”

Shitty Ritchie looked doubtful but nodded his agreement. Apparently trading essentials of the number seven was too tempting for him to turn down.

“And after you get to know Daisy and Tim, I’ll come on over and tell you a ball eatin’ bedtime story with Heather,” Candy Vargo volunteered.

“And if you’re still awake, Gabe, Prue, Abby and I will join you for a bit and chat about the weather,” Rafe told the little Immortal.

“I quite enjoy discussing the weather,” Shitty Ritchie said with a nod of approval. “Of course, I do realize that none of you trust Shitty Ritchie yet, but that’s fine. I am aware that blowing up your house upon my arrival might make it seem like I’m a terrible houseguest, but I shall prove you wrong! Shitty Ritchie is a WONDERUL houseguest. STUPENDOUS!”

“Remains to be seen,” Candy Vargo muttered as she meandered over to her trailer. “But I sure as fuck hope so.”

Everyone froze and no one said a word. Even Gram kept her trap shut. I crossed my fingers hard that Candy wouldn’t realize she’d just broken her own rules again. It was getting old watching her light herself on fire and violently smack her rear end. Thankfully, she missed her f-bomb.

Again, it was the little things that kept me sane.

“Shall we call it a night?” Charlie inquired. “Tomorrow is a new day and we’ll get to work at seven AM sharp.”

“Yes,” Gabe said. “Good night, all.”

Pleasant rounds of “sweet dreams” were exchanged. I kissed my husband and my

baby. The next four hours or so would be challenging.

Or... maybe not.

One could always hope.

After an hour discussing the merits of the number seven, the boys had moved on to the weather. It was getting difficult to keep my eyes open.

“Did you know that mild autumn weather means that bigger spiders will invade your home?” Shitty Ritchie announced as we all sat on the wooden slatted stoop in front of McMansion number seven.

Warily, I glanced around for spiders. The coast was clear.

The stars hung lazy and low in the sky, and the creepy haze from the moon was gone. Glancing up, I felt a momentary peace. Nature’s beauty could be as calming as my baby’s smile. I knew it wouldn’t last long, but I took peace where I could get it. Shitty Ritchie’s trailer was pretty dang homey. But since the evening was warm and lovely, we’d opted to sit outside.

I was thrown that the McMansion was much nicer than the house—at least as far as the color scheme went. Instead of orange, gold and olive green it was a palatable celery green, peach and cream. I’d have a word with Candy Vargo about that tomorrow.

“Oh yes!” Tim exclaimed, pulling his notebook from his pocket. “I did know that about the arachnid species. And I’d like to add that one can tell the temperature by counting cricket chirps.”

“You don’t say,” Shitty Ritchie replied, clearly impressed with Tim’s knowledge.

“Here’s one that might surprise you... did you know that a hurricane in Florida resulted in nine hundred pythons escaping their cages?”

“No! That’s dreadful,” Tim said, shocked as he scribbled the information down. “I must tell Jennifer. She has plans to buy a vacation home in Florida with some of her settlement money from her fourth divorce!”

“I thought all her money went into Botox and boobs,” I said, yawning. Listening to weather facts was not invigorating. I was tempted to remind Shitty Ritchie and Tim that the weather discussion was supposed to happen with Rafe, Gabe, Abby and Pure, but decided against it. A peaceful conversation was preferable to Shitty Ritchie losing his mind over something.

Tim chuckled. He and Jennifer were our go-to folks for bizarre and usually unappetizing facts. I was beginning to think that Shitty Ritchie might be their perfect third.

“Speaking of Florida,” Shitty Ritchie announced, clasping his tiny hands together with glee. “Did you know that you are technically required to pay for parking if you tie your elephant to the meter?”

Tim actually squealed with the new news. I groaned. Shitty Ritchie was on a roll.

“Oh yes! Back in the day, I was once given a parking ticket for my elephant, Frank. It was ridiculous. I had simply hopped off to scoop his poop. I wasn’t parked at all.”

The mental image of an eight-inch-tall man scooping elephant poop was almost too much to handle.

“My goodness,” Tim said. “Whatever did you do?”

“I ate the parking meter attendant,” Shitty Ritchie shared.

Welp, that caused a pained pause in the conversation.

The tiny cannibal kept going, not realizing that Tim and I were turning green. “It’s also illegal in Florida to sing in public while wearing a bathing suit. I know this because I received a citation for the issue.”

I couldn’t stop the words. I wanted to, but I couldn’t. “Please tell me you didn’t eat the officer.”

“Okay,” Shitty Ritchie said with a giggle. “I won’t tell you.”

Tim gagged then covered it with a coughing fit.

Pressing the bridge of my nose, I debated on how to handle this new and terrible info about our guest. I was mentally kicking myself in the bahookey that I hadn’t made him leave earlier. Hosting a miniature tornado who ate police officers, and God only knew who else, was not good .

The conundrum was that Charlie was sure he could help us. There was always a chance that Charlie was wrong. Highly unlikely, but possible. It made me sick to my stomach and infuriated me that Shitty Ritchie talked so casually about eating innocent humans. It was beyond unacceptable. Candy Vargo had the wherewithal to be mortified that she’d eaten my siblings. The other difference in the scenarios was that my brothers and sisters were Immortal and somehow survived. The logistics of that made me want to hurl, but Shitty Ritchie’s offenses were far worse.

The tiny turd was oblivious to Tim’s and my discomfort and kept regaling us with farked up Florida laws.

“Unmarried women are forbidden from parachuting on Sundays,” he informed us.

I was pretty sure that law gave him no reason to eat anyone. He wasn't female and I was positive he was single. Sadly, I was incorrect.

“Yes, yes,” he lamented in his high-pitched and squeaky voice. “I had a friend once. Myra. Lovely human. Made a tasty meatloaf. She received a citation for parachuting on a Sunday by a rotund officer of the law named Stew. It was awful, considering that poor Myra's parachute never opened and she died on impact. Very messy business. I was obviously furious that Officer Stew could be so callous, so I avenged the tragic death of Myra by ingesting Officer Stew.” He paused in deep thought. “It was unfortunate he didn't actually taste like stew.”

“DUDE,” I yelled, completely over it. If Shitty Ritchie got his panties in a knot and tried to eat me, he was going down. Permanently. “You can't go around eating freaking humans because they pissed you off. It's wrong.”

Shitty Ritchie was wildly confused. “Why?”

I stood up and threw my hands in the air. “Because they were just doing their jobs. They might have had families and children. Eating people is against every law on the books in Florida and the rest of the world.”

Tim raised his hand. I squinted at him. Whatever he was about to say I was sure I didn't want to hear it.

“I believe that cannibalism is only technically illegal in Idaho,” he reminded me.

I'd been correct. I didn't want to hear it.

“You cannot eat people. Period,” I snapped, glaring at Shitty Ritchie. “That's

common knowledge and common decency. Where in the hell do you even live? In a cave? How can you not know right from wrong?"

Shitty Ritchie's eyes filled with tears. "I do live in a cave," he whispered. "I'm so sorry. I haven't eaten anyone in decades. I didn't know. I don't know what you're talking about."

The waterworks were on full display. His on-demand excuse for everything he didn't want to deal with wasn't cutting it.

"Save it," I ground out. "Crying isn't going to move me. Do you have any friends?"

"No," he replied, sniffing.

While that wasn't surprising, it was sad. However, friendless people didn't have the right to eat humans. As always, I was shocked that I was even having these thoughts. A year ago, if I'd been told I'd be sitting under the stars with an eight-inch magical cannibal, I would have laughed.

I wasn't laughing now.

"Do you have any family?" I demanded.

"No."

"Education?" Most of the Immortals I knew were over-educated. Gideon had so many degrees that I couldn't even count them. When a person lived forever, they had a lot of time on their hands. Some used it wisely, and some ate people.

"No."

“How old are you, Shitty Ritchie?”

“I am the oldest one of them all.”

I squinted at him. That wasn't possible, or I didn't think it was. From what I'd been told the Higher Power came first. Literally. Granted, the little man had been living in a cave for a while, and might have lost his grasp on reality. I hesitated before my next question, but went for it. “Children?” I seriously hoped the answer was no. It would be terrifying to think there was more than one of him.

“No,” he said with a whimper. “I've never even had sex. I thought Myra and I might do the deed, but she perished in the parachute accident before I was able to seduce her properly. I have never known the joy of making the beast with two backs. I will never have the privilege of spreading my seed.”

I was speechless and grossed out. The thought of Shitty Ritchie doing the deed or seducing anyone was repulsive. This had to be the strangest conversation I'd ever been part of. Tim, thankfully took over.

“Oh my goodness... umm... friend,” Tim said, carefully patting the idiot's back while making sure his hand stayed as far away from Shitty Ritchie's sharp teeth as possible. “I too, have never participated in the beast with two backs. I'm more of an asexual kind of being. However, I have donated sperm in hopes to see a little Tim or Timina running around one day.”

This was entirely too much information to absorb. It was well known in our circle of friends that Tim had offered to be a sperm donor for Heather and Missy. It was unclear if they were going to take him up on the offer.

“Wait,” I said, holding up my hand. “You donated sperm?”

Tim nodded enthusiastically. “I did. Around sixty some odd years ago... possibly closer to seventy. I’d have to check my records to be sure.”

“Umm... okay. Where?” I asked.

“Right here in our lovely little town,” he explained.

“And was it ever... you know... used by anyone?” I questioned.

“As far as I know it was not,” Tim said sadly. “I put my information on the DNA sites in the last decade but alas, not one Tim or Timina has ever reached out.”

“Hang on,” I said, a little freaked out that he’d given a human company his Immortal DNA, but even more freaked that he’d randomly donated sperm in the first place. “Your DNA isn’t exactly normal. Can’t that set off alarm bells? We live hidden in plain sight.”

Tim patted my hand. “Not to worry, friend. Charlie helped me with all of that. He’s a wonderful doctor and scientist, as you know. Nothing that would throw up any red flags was revealed.”

I heaved a relieved sigh. The thought of Tim being abducted and experimented on was horrifying.

“Plus,” he added. “What I didn’t know sixtyish years back was that it’s nearly impossible for an Immortal to impregnate a human. I learned that when Charlie and June tried to have children naturally. And that’s why I have offered my reproductive services via a turkey baster to my Immortal friends!”

“Can I donate sperm too?” Shitty Ritchie asked, intrigued with the idea. “Maybe at the same place you did?”

Either Shitty Ritchie wasn't listening or he didn't take in that Immortals and humans don't exactly mix in the baby department.

"Sadly, no," Tim told him. "The clinic burned down decades ago. Broke my heart. All the records were singed to ash and I'll never know if a little Tim or Timina exists even though the chances of that are very slim. So, that's why I have chosen to only donate sperm to Immortal lesbian friends now. I would love to be a fun uncle to little Tim or Timina."

"Do you have Immortal lesbian friends?" Shitty Ritchie asked, perking up considerably.

I knew where this was going and I was really glad that Heather wasn't on the first watch. She'd crap her pants.

"I do!" Tim said. "Heather, who you've met, is a fabulous lesbian and her partner is Missy. Now, Missy isn't technically Immortal, but she is a Soul Keeper, so it could possibly work with her since she has magic." Tim clasped his hands together dreamily. "Won't know until the turkey baster has been emptied into the cavity. I have suggested at least..." He quickly checked his notebook. "Twenty-nine times. I have offered my sperm twenty-nine times to my dear friends. I think thirty-three might be the magic number."

"Okay." I really tried to find a diplomatic way to express myself. There wasn't one. "Tim, calling a vagina a cavity isn't going to earn you any points. Also, the turkey baster method is not gonna fly. How about we rest this subject and you just wait for the gals to let you know if they're game."

"I'd say try thirty-seven," Shitty Ritchie told him, ignoring my last statement. The little dude had very selective hearing. "Seven is a very magical number."

“Ah! Excellent thinking,” Tim replied, scribbling it down on his pad.

I made a mental note to set up hearing appointments for both of the dummies. A change of subject was in order. I reached deep for something that might distract them. I went for the only weather fact I knew. “Hey! Did you guys know that cyclone in North America is called a hurricane and in Japan it’s called a typhoon?”

No one took the bait.

Shitty Ritchie grew weirdly agitated and fidgeted for a full five minutes as we watched. It looked like he needed the bathroom, but I knew that wasn’t the reason. I held my breath and waited.

I didn’t have to wait long.

“Do you think Heather and Missy might be interested in my sperm?” Shitty Ritchie asked with his blue eyes filled with hope.

I wanted to laugh. I didn’t. I wanted to scream NO. I didn’t. I considered dropkicking him again. I didn’t. Instead... I used my words. Hard but doable.

“Alrighty, Shitty Ritchie,” I said in the most neutral tone I could muster up considering the circumstances. “I don’t think that’s a good ask right now considering when you got here you yelled the word fuck multiple times and then blew up my house—not a great first impression. Also, it’s not a given that Heather and Missy want kids, so both of you need to be prepared for that outcome. But... if, and I seriously stress the word if you want to ask, you need to shape up your act.”

“Could you define that?” Shitty Ritchie inquired.

“Sure. No eating people. Ever. No blowing up houses. No turning into a tornado. And

if there are other storms you can turn into, those are off the table as well.”

“Is that all?” he asked.

I racked my brain for a few more rules that might make his visit less dangerous and more tolerable. “Tantrums are out.”

“That might be difficult,” he admitted.

“Try,” I said flatly. I’d told Charlie I wouldn’t talk about the Higher Power or Alana Catherine until we were all together, but I could pave the way just a little bit. “If you want to stay here and have our protection, then you’re going to have to help us in return.”

Shitty Ritchie stared at me. I stared right back at him. He was very aware that my last statement was loaded. He might be eight inches tall with a penchant for eating people who wronged him, but he wasn’t stupid. He was still alive. That couldn’t have been an easy feat if there were people after him. A lot of Immortals resorted to brutality first and asked questions second.

The stare down lasted about fifteen minutes. I wasn’t going to look away first. I’d fought Zadkiel. I’d fought Clarissa. I’d fought Demons and evil Angels. I’d won every time. There was no way I would let a tiny cannibal best me.

Shitty Ritchie caved first. He walked over to me and stuck out his doll-like hand. My instinct was to run without looking back. I quashed that inclination and extended my hand.

“Deal?” I asked.

“Deal,” he replied, then did three jazz squares.

I answered his move with jazz hands and a mostly graceful chassé.

So far, so good. The little turd was growing on me. That might be a mistake on my part, but my gut was all I had to go on. Shitty Ritchie was innocent until proven guilty, or until he ate someone.

We could solve all of this. Together we could keep both my baby and Shitty Ritchie safe. The alternative was unacceptable.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The morning had dawned gray and cloudy. It matched the mood of the past few days. Didn't matter. We were all alive, and my baby was safe. My gut told me we were on a high-stakes collision course, but I'd navigate it with open eyes, along with my friends and family by my side. It was still unclear if we needed Shitty Ritchie, but as long as he behaved... and didn't attempt to ingest anyone, it was irrelevant.

I'd only gotten about two hours of sleep. It was shocking I didn't have nightmares after my several hours of time spent with Shitty Ritchie and Tim. I had no clue how Candy Vargo and Heather's watch went. Candy had shown up and told us Heather was on her way. I'd wanted to warn her about the sperm chat, but she dove right into the promised bedtime story. It was about a hooker named Velma with a heart of gold who started an orphanage. The hooker had covertly recorded her liaisons with her wealthy and married clients then blackmailed them with the footage so the orphans could live in style—lots of violence, lots of sex and a smattering of wholesome playground antics. Shitty Ritchie was mesmerized .

I was not. I was exhausted and got out of there as fast as I could.

Thankfully, being Immortal, I didn't need all that much sleep—two hours would have to suffice. However, sleeping was one of my favorite hobbies. Curled up in bed with Gideon and Alana Catherine was as close to perfection as I could get. Even though the house wasn't attractive, Candy Vargo hadn't skimped on the bed. It was so comfortable I had a difficult time getting out of it. After nursing my daughter, I finally forced myself into the shower and took Alana Catherine with me. Breast milk spit-up wasn't the best perfume for either of us.

“Gideon?” I called out, searching the small house. Using a little magic, I’d conjured up some clean clothes for myself and Alana Catherine. Candy, in a thoughtful move, had stocked the house with food, diapers and toiletries. She’d forgotten about clothes. That was fine by me. Her taste was iffy on a good day and frightening on every other day.

“Gideon?” I called out again.

No answer.

“Dadadadadadadadada!” Alana Catherine squealed, pointing to the front door.

I kissed the top of her head and hoisted her up on my hip. She’d gotten bigger. Even though she was technically only a few months old, she was the size of an eight-month-old. The thought made me happy and sad. Hell, she could be five in a month at the rate she was growing.

Gently, placing my fingers under her chin, I raised her gaze to mine. My heart melted a little at her innocence and beauty. If she grew up fast, so be it. I would enjoy every second of each phase. Staring at her with adoration, I decided to try something. There was nothing to lose and possibly everything to gain.

“Hey baby,” I said, booping her nose with mine. “Can you tell mommy what you were going to say on the Higher Power’s plane?”

She giggled like I’d just told the funniest joke in existence. I couldn’t help but grin. Her joy was contagious.

“Meeeee! Itty Ritty! Yay!”

I tried again. It would be nuts if she was trying to tell me that Shitty Ritchie knew the

answer, but nuts was our normal. “You were about to tell me and Gram why the Higher Power wanted you. Do you remember, sweetie?”

“Meeeee! Itty Ritty! Yay!” she repeated, grabbing my nose with her chubby hand.

“Does Itty Ritty know the answer?” I asked, feeling like I was getting nowhere fast, but trying anyway.

My baby was done with our chat. My nose was entirely too interesting. It was a long shot, but I was going to grill Itty Ritty. With barely anything to go on, it was someplace to start.

Anything was possible. I just had to believe.

A commotion outside my bedroom window woke me. I jumped from my bed and whipped back the curtain. The full brightness of the morning sun hit me square in the face, but as my vision recovered, I saw a crowd of my closest friends and family had gathered on the lawn, and they looked shaken to the core. The chaos was unexpected and unsettling.

With a quick flick of my hand, I placed a protection ward around my baby, threw on my clothes, then grabbed Alana Catherine from her crib and headed downstairs to make sense of the madness. When I walked out into the impromptu neighborhood block party, everyone was running around while talking and shouting over each other.

Grabbing Candy Vargo as she sprinted by, armed to the teeth, I yanked her to a stop. “Talk. Now,” I insisted.

“Jennifer, Missy, Amelia and June are back with my foster kids. Tory and everyone else too,” she hissed as she ran her hands through her hair. She was holding a razor-sharp dagger and almost cut her ear off.

“The Higher Power?” I asked, glancing around wildly in alarm.

“No,” she said, trying to pull away.

I wasn’t done. “Did Shitty Ritchie do something?”

“No, lemme go, corn nut,” she snapped. “I’m tryin’ to work this shart out.”

I let go, and she sprinted over to her foster kids. Scanning the area, I saw Tim moving with purpose towards a shaken and pale Jennifer. Lura Belle, Dimple and Jolly Sue hovered over Jennifer as well. Shitty Ritchie was perched on Tim’s shoulder, freaking the hell out. That didn’t bode well, but Candy had said Shitty Ritchie wasn’t the problem. I chose to believe Candy. However, if a tornado started to blow, Shitty Ritchie was a goner.

Heather was with Missy, holding her tight. Charlie’s arms were wrapped around a trembling June. My stomach felt like a lead ball had dropped into it and exploded. What the hell was going on?

With wild eyes, I assessed what was happening in front of me and took a head count of my friends and family. Amelia was with Rafe. Tory was with Gabe. Zander and Catriona had returned, too. Both Zander and Catriona looked worse for wear. They were huddled with Prue and Abby. Catriona was a bloody mess, and Zander looked like he’d come close to death. Prue and Abby were tending to them with their Angelic healing gifts. An intense golden glow surrounded the group.

Gram, Mr. Jackson and Jimmy George Carrots were darting around like hummingbirds on crack. As they zipped by in a frenzy, I ducked. Having a ghost fly clean through you was like getting stabbed with icy knives. There was no time for that. Jimmy George Carrots looked terrible. The ghost was withering fast. One of his legs was gone, along with one of his arms. He was also far more transparent than he

was yesterday. That was worrisome. Snapping my fingers, I conjured up superglue. If I could find his body parts, I could glue them back on. It had to suck falling apart. Right now, there weren't enough hours in the day to do all the jobs I had to do.

Seeing Gideon striding over to me was the first tiny bit of relief I felt. Everyone was accounted for, but I still had no clue what was going on.

"Talk to me, please," I insisted tightly. Not knowing was terrifying. My mind was all over the place. Like Jimmy George Carrots, I was falling apart... and it did suck.

Gideon pulled Alana Catherine and me into a hug and rested his chin on my head. I could feel his heart pounding in his chest. "Unknown Immortals came for the old human-ish woman at Candy Vargo's home."

I pulled back and stared at him. "What? That makes no sense at all. What the hell does human-ish even mean?"

He scrubbed his hand over his jaw. "Not a clue. They threatened to kill everyone there unless the human-ish went with them willingly."

"Sense. You need to make sense," I insisted.

"Can't," he replied. "I don't understand it myself."

"How is everyone okay then?" I asked. Comprehending why Immortals wanted a human-ish woman—whatever that meant—clearly wasn't going to be solved yet. However, there were other questions that had to have answers.

"Zander and Catriona are the reason everyone is alive," he said, glancing back at them. "Tory protected the humans and Zander and Catriona went after the intruders."

“How many?”

“Three,” he confirmed.

“Did they get away?”

Gideon’s eyes blazed red. He smiled. It was scary. Call me crazy, but I found it hot.

“No, they did not.”

“Can we question them?” I couldn’t help but feel this was all connected. Was it the work of the Higher Power? Did It think we’d make a trade for Alana Catherine? Shit, shit, shit. Wait. Was it the people who were after Shitty Ritchie? Again, that didn’t make a lick of sense. Shitty Ritchie wasn’t connected to any of the humans here in any way. No wonder everyone was freaked out.

“No,” Gideon said emotionlessly. “Bodies turned to ash cannot be questioned. The infiltrators fucked around and Zander and Catriona made sure they found out. The three are gone. Permanently.”

My mind jerked to the words of Jimmy George Carrots. Onnnnnneah offfffffffff threeeeeeeee. He’d spoken of three multiple times. Had he meant the three Immortals who’d tried to take a human-ish woman? How was that possible? It wasn’t. But... was the number three important? Was Jimmy George Carrots here to serve me like he’d said? Maybe, he wasn’t the confused one. It was possible I was...

His statement had struck me as strange at the time. Now? Not as much. I was beginning to think he might be part of the impossible puzzle .

The crazy in my yard was accomplishing nothing. The time to focus was now. Reaching up towards the sky, I slashed my arms down to my sides. Normally, that caused a massive explosion or an Olympic pool-sized crater in my yard. Today, it

was the opposite of destructive. I sent out a wave of tranquility. Word by word, the yelling and shouting stopped. Slowly and surely, all of the people I loved calmly gathered around me in a large circle. Charlie nodded in gratitude. Candy Vargo offered me a box of toothpicks. I took them. Heather and Tim smiled. My siblings, along with the quickly healing Zander and Catriona, bowed to me. I hated that formal crap, but they were all about pomp and circumstance. Tory held Gabe's hand and nodded her head in respect. Gram and the rest of the ghosts settled down. Poor Jimmy George Carrots had lost another leg, but still seemed happy to be with us. My biggest worry at the moment was for Candy's kids and our human adult friends. They shouldn't be involved in any of this. It was not their monkey and definitely not their circus.

I calculated the risks and the odds of who to send away with the kids, Jennifer, June, Amelia and Missy. They needed to be in a safe place until all of this blew over. I'd been told the Immortals had been after a human-ish woman. That made no sense. It stood to reason that any one of the people there had been in danger of being abducted. We had to eliminate the possibility of danger for those who couldn't defend themselves.

This wasn't a dictatorship. I worked well with input from those who had far more experience than I did. "We need to get the kids and anyone not Immortal out of here."

"Agreed," Gideon said. "I have safe houses all over the world. I'd suggest relocating the children, June, Amelia, Missy and Jennifer immediately."

"It's prudent," Charlie stated. He hadn't let go of his wife. June didn't mind a bit. Their love was sure and solid. "Gabe, can you take charge?"

Gabe nodded to Charlie. My brother was the Archangel Gabriel. He was a badass, smart and one of the kindest people I knew. "Of course. I'd like to take Tory, Rafe, Abby and Prue with me to protect the humans."

“As you wish,” Charlie said.

Zander stepped forward. “Catriona and I will go as well, if we can be spared. We need healing time and can transport back if needed.”

The request was smart. If we had Charlie, Heather, Tim, Candy Vargo, Gideon and me, we were covered for a battle royale. Hell, Shitty Ritchie might even come in handy with a tornado or two.

“Tory, Zander and Catriona, what can you tell us about the attack?” I asked.

Tory shook her head. Her normally pale skin was even paler. The woman was still stunning. “There were three. I didn’t recognize any of them. They demanded the human-ish woman but weren’t clear on which one.”

“I’d have to surmise that they were neither Angel nor Demon,” Zander added. “Their eyes were soulless and the speech was formal—monotone and flat.”

Catriona stepped forward. “Robotic,” she clarified. “Unlike anything or anyone I’ve come across.”

“SHIT,” Shitty Ritchie screeched, hopping off of Tim’s shoulder and running to the center of the circle. “Eyes. Color?”

“White,” Tory said. “The entire eye including the iris was milky white.”

“Shit motherfucker shitass,” Shitty Ritchie shrieked in a pitch so high I was sure all the glass in Georgia just shattered. “Bald?”

Tory’s expression showed surprise. “Yes.”

“Thin lips, no teeth?” he questioned.

Zander nodded slowly. He began to glow menacingly and didn't look happy. He might not be healed, but he was still a dangerous man. Shitty Ritchie hadn't come here with a great reputation and he wasn't helping himself currently. “Yes. Do you know them?”

“Son of a bitch, cock sucker, balls,” the tiny nard screamed. “One of you brought them here.” He pointed wildly at all those who had been at Candy Vargo's home. “Bad, bad, bad. Now I have to go back to my cave.” He stomped his foot in fury. “This is dreadful. I was making friends and getting the nerve up to offer my sperm to the Immortal lesbians.”

“I'm sorry, what?” Heather asked, horrified. “Repeat that.”

Missy's mouth hung open in shock. If the situation we were in wasn't so awful, I would have laughed.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Shitty Ritchie grunted, crossing his little arms over his chest and pouting.

Ignoring the ringing in my ears, I handed Alana Catherine to Gideon and cautiously approached the little guy who obviously knew more about the mysterious Immortal kidnappers than we did. “Talk.”

Shitty Ritchie flipped me off. “I've said enough. I can say no more.”

If I pressed, he might blow. First, I'd get our human friends to safety. Then, I'd deal with the asshole.

“I think that...” I said, then froze. June. June might not be fully human anymore.

Clarissa had removed her heart to screw with me. I'd put it back into her. Granted, she came back to life about thirty years younger than she'd been when she died, but she'd survived. Charlie and June had grown adopted kids and grandkids. Explaining that she'd regressed a few decades was tricky. Thankfully, Tim could perform a little voodoo that would temporarily age June. She could see her kids and grandkids for short periods of time. Immortals could choose their age. When June looked young, Charlie matched her and when old, he did the same.

Walking over to June and Charlie, I reached out and took June's hand in mine. I tried to keep my expression neutral, but my face was pretty readable. My dear friend was the nicest person I'd ever known and I had happy dreams about her peanut butter cookies. Right now, I wasn't happy.

"What?" Charlie asked, warily.

"I think the unknown Immortals were looking for June," I told him. "She's the only one who could be considered human-ish."

We didn't know if June was Immortal. All Immortals had a footprint, so to speak. Each person who lived forever had their own unique color. So far, June didn't have a footprint, but that didn't mean it wouldn't show up eventually. I knew that Charlie tested his wife for footprints regularly. It was obvious to all that he had hopes that the love of his life would live forever.

"Oh my," June said, fanning her face with her hand. "I think you're right! Am I illegal or something? Is a human-ish person against the law?"

"No laws on the fucking books about that," Shitty Ritchie volunteered.

Candy Vargo couldn't take it anymore. "Hey, Shitty Ritchie. I'm this close to removin' your spleen. Cussin' ain't allowed round here no more. Gram had a

problem and we're all supportin' her." That line elicited choked laughter from the group. Gram just rolled her eyes. Candy ignored it and kept going. "You hear me, you little wrinkled testicle? You need to pick some shartin' replacement words or I'm gonna shove your head up your stinky bahookey. Body parts are fine. Ass and bitch are fine since they mean donkey and female dog. But if I hear you say fuck one more time, I'm gonna lose my corn nuts." Candy groaned as she realized she'd dropped an f-bomb. Without missing a beat, she electrocuted the living daylights out of herself.

Shitty Ritchie wasn't sure what to make of Candy Vargo lighting herself on fire, but gave the flaming woman an enthusiastic thumbs up.

"June stays then," Charlie announced firmly as his eyes turned icy blue and his power became evident. Even though we were outside, it was a little difficult to breathe with his magic permeating the air. Charlie was the Immortal Enforcer. His title wasn't an understatement. "June will be far safer with me. Not to mention, if it is June they were after, then she becomes a liability to the safety of the kids, Amelia, Missy and Jennifer."

"Hang on a hot sec," Jennifer said, walking over to where we stood. "I know I ain't Immortal and I don't sparkle like Edward in Twilight—which is a dang shame, but I can see the ghosts now. Might mean I'm human-ish. Plus, those freak-a-deeks said they wanted the old human-ish woman. June looks like she's in her twenties. I, on the other hand, look like very well preserved fifty-year-old who may or may not be sixty-five."

Jennifer was correct. She didn't glow like Edward in Twilight and I couldn't recall if it was Lura Belle, Dimple or Jolly Sue who had entered her body through her feet to test out if it would be painful for Gram to enter my body to go to the Higher Power's plane, but after the deed had been done Jennifer could see the ghosts. She was also the oldest out of Missy, Amelia and June. However, the Immortal intruders might have been able to recognize June's true age. I was still mostly convinced it was June

they were after, but Jennifer's points gave me pause.

Shit, shit, shit.

"I'm just sayin'," Jennifer told us as she reached into her purse and pulled out a bottle of wine. "If June's stayin', I'm stayin'."

Pressing the bridge of my nose, I sighed. I didn't know what the right call was. Either of the women could be a safety liability here or at the safe house. All of the other Immortals present didn't seem to know the answer either. On top of that, it dawned on me that Missy wasn't unscathed by magic. She was the Soul Keeper, after all.

I glanced her way, but Heather shook her head. "Missy is all human," she said, her expression determined as she took her love's hand. "Believe me."

"Besides," Charlie said. "Missy's been the Soul Keeper her entire life. I don't believe she's the human-ish woman they were searching for."

Heather gave her girlfriend a reassuring nod. "And if for some reason anymore of those white-eyed freaks come for her, I will do worse than turn them to ash."

Before I could make up my mind, my daughter piped up.

"J J J J J," Alana Catherine babbled with a giggle. "J stay!"

I glanced over at Gideon who was holding the chatterbox. He just raised a brow and shrugged. Both Jennifer and June had names that started with the letter J. Was this her way of saying it was one of them?

"Listen to her," Shitty Ritchie said cryptically. The little dude knew more than he was letting on. I was sure of it. We'd address that shortly.

“Okay,” I said, kind of in disbelief that I was again about to follow the orders of a baby who was backed by a miniature cannibal, but when in Crazy Town it was standard to buy property and stay. “Both June and Jennifer will stay.”

I hoped I’d just made the correct call.

Only time would tell.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The transport to the safehouse of Candy's kids, along with Amelia and Missy and the Immortals, had gone smoothly. Gideon had sent them to France. His property there was magically warded and hidden well. Before they departed, Tim did a quick spell to erase the grotesque and frightening battle the children had witnessed. Amelia, June, Jennifer and Missy were well aware of the Immortal world that lived right under the unsuspecting noses of humankind. But the kids? Not so much, and it needed to stay that way.

Lura Belle, Dimple and Jolly Sue had opted to go as well. Even though the kids couldn't see the ghosts, they believed their presence was necessary. I wasn't as sure, but it meant there were three less people to worry about. I had no idea how long the trio could stay on this plane. If it were up to me, they'd stay as long as they wanted. It wasn't up to me. We'd thought their souls had been obliterated when they'd been killed defending me. It has been glorious when they'd reappeared at my and Gideon's wedding. However, they'd been sent to deliver a message from the Higher Power. With the Higher Power after Alana Catherine, it felt right not to have the gals anywhere near the vicious entity.

It was time to interrogate Shitty Ritchie. Did I think it would go well? No. Was it necessary? Yes.

"Shitty Ritchie," I said, glancing up at the gathering storm clouds. "We need to chat."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he huffed rudely.

“Itty Ritty,” Alana Catherine grumbled at him. “Beee good!”

The tiny menace had the wherewithal to look embarrassed. My baby had some serious sway.

“You heard that baby girl,” Jennifer admonished him. “Can’t believe she can talk at her age. That’s some crazy sauce, but you best listen, little man. I don’t know what it is about you, but you make me wanna take you over my knee and spank that bottom raw. All these people here have been nothing but nice to you, and you’re backtalking like a little bitch. Not a good look. I divorced husband number two for far less offenses than that.”

“I like getting spanked,” Shitty Ritchie announced, pointing to his itty-bitty bahookey.

That admission dropped a huge and uncomfortable pause into the conversation. Jennifer just laughed and opened a fresh bottle of wine. As she always said, it was five o’clock somewhere. It was morning here, but I was tempted to join her.

Candy Vargo noticed the darkening clouds and went to flip them off. She stopped herself. That was outstanding. I wasn’t sure how much more self-flagellation she could take. It wasn’t fun to watch. “Hang on a ball wankin’ sec,” she commanded. “Everybody, stand back.” Her order was followed quickly and without argument .

She walked over the one-story tract house and demolished it with a flick of her pinky finger. Before I could yell at her, she clapped her hands and restored the house to its original glory. The sound of grinding stone and cracking wood was strange, but the results were welcome. I was tempted to ask her why she hadn’t done that yesterday, but didn’t. It didn’t matter. I was fast beginning to realize that stuff was just stuff. Material things would come and go. It was lives that were precious and irreplaceable.

As if on cue, the sky opened up and the rain came pouring down in sheets. Everyone hightailed it into the house, including my dogs, who had apparently spent the night in Gram's trailer.

Gideon grabbed towels for everyone to dry off and set a roaring fire in the stone fireplace. While the house had been restored, the furniture was vintage Candy Vargo—slightly ratty but comfortable. Again, stuff was just stuff. We were dry and ready to get down to business. Tim had scurried to the kitchen to whip up some breakfast. That was terrifying but sweet. His cooking skills were worse than Candy Vargo's taste in décor, but a good deed was a good deed. Granted, we'd be punished for eating a casserole consisting of hot dogs, cottage cheese and whatever else Tim could drum up in the kitchen, but it was the least of our worries.

"Threeeeeeeeeee," Jimmy George Carrots squealed as he, Gram and Mr. Jackson hovered by the fire. "Threeeeeeeeeee! Sooooah exciiiiitingg."

There it was. Again. The number three. It was time to dive in.

"Jimmy George Carrots," I said with a warm smile. "Can you tell me more about the number three, please?"

His words came fast and furious, but what left his mouth next was so garbled, I couldn't make sense of it. I looked to Gram to see if she'd understood.

"Slow down there, boy!" Gram said, patting the one-armed and legless ghost on the head. "You got all of us as confused as farts in a fan factory."

Jimmy George Carrots laughed and turned a few flips. I wished I knew where his appendages had landed. It would be an honor to put the silly man back together. Maybe, he'd lost them during the night. I'd have to check his trailer later.

“Jimmy George Carrots,” I said, gently pulling him out of the air and placing him on the couch. “Can you try that again?”

“Yessssssah,” he told me.

The second time was as convoluted as the first. The third attempt wasn’t the charm. Although, Alana Catherine giggled and chattered right back at the ghost. Did she understand him? Sadly, that would remain a mystery. I knew that if I did a mind dive, I could talk to him, but that would take time I wasn’t sure we had. Time ran differently when I was in the minds of the dead. What felt like five minutes could be a week on the earthly plane.

Tim had come back into the great room with a steaming hot casserole that smelled like the inside of my track shoes from high school. I covertly gagged when I recognized sardines and peanut butter as two of the ingredients. Candy Vargo and Shitty Ritchie were the only ones who dug in and enjoyed it. The rest of us politely refused.

“Not to worry, dear Mr. Carrots,” Tim told the ghost when he looked upset that we couldn’t understand him. “I do believe that I have some information about the number three in my handy dandy notebook.”

Candy Vargo groaned. She’d been listening to Tim’s facts for thousands of years. Jennifer plopped herself down next to Tim and was ready to go. They were a nutty team that seemed to have been separated at birth. That wasn’t possible. Jennifer was sixty-five and Tim was... I didn’t even know how old Tim was. It had to be in the millions.

“Let me see,” Tim said, flipping through the pages. “Here’s a joke! What happened when the three blind mice went to see a play?”

“You got me,” Jennifer said, scratching her head.

“They couldn’t find their seats!”

Jennifer, Mr. Jackson and Jimmy George Carrots were the only ones who laughed.

“I got one,” Jennifer said. “The other day I pulled into my driveway and someone had painted a big number three on my garage door. Do you wanna know what I said?”

Shitty Ritchie was also game to play. “What did you say, oh, one, who enjoys swatting bahookeys?”

Jennifer winced, took a swig of wine then answered. “I said, that’s odd. Get it? Number three is odd!”

Good one, friend,” Tim said, giving her a thumbs up.

Shitty Ritchie laughed so hard, I thought he might choke. If he did, it was on him. I was pretty sure no one here wanted to give the turd mouth to mouth—especially with his past...

“Umm... not the kind of facts about the number three we’re looking for,” I pointed out.

“Of course,” Tim said, flipping a few more pages. “My apologies. Here we go. In numerology, the number three is very often associated with communication, optimism and creativity.”

Heather leaned forward. “Well, if we’re going this route, the number three has a lot of religious symbolism. The Holy Trinity from the Christian human bible teaches that the trinity consists of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.”

Gram chuckled. “Kinda like you, me and Alana Catherine when we visited Fake Bob Barker and Fake Monty Hall.”

Her comparison wasn’t lost on me. I’d thought the same thing. In order to get to the Higher Power, we had needed all three of us. The past Death Counselor—Gram, the present Death Counselor—me, and the future Death Counselor—Alana Catherine.

“Or the three branches of the human government, set in place for checks and balances,” Gideon said.

My smile was rueful. The irony was so obvious. The Immortal world could definitely use some checks and balances. The Higher Power was abusing Its authority in a big way with no one to stop It.

“Does the number three hold power in the Immortal world?” I asked.

Charlie appeared thoughtful. “Not per se,” he said. “However, there are many rules of three in all cultures. In plenty of art forms the rule of three is pertinent—story telling, comedy and magic. It’s said that the rule of three makes life complete.”

All of this was interesting, but I didn’t see the throughline. How in the heck did this pertain to whatever Jimmy George Carrots was trying to tell us? I glanced over at him. He didn’t seem upset by the conversation, but he wasn’t real involved either.

“Fairy tales and TV shows often have the number three in the title,” June offered. “Three Little Pigs, the Three Bears, Three’s Company .”

“Loved that show,” Shitty Ritchie exclaimed, then proceeded to sing the song that opened the show while doing jazz squares. Alana Catherine giggled, and Jennifer joined the little freak.

It was a silly break in between the convoluted mess we were trying to wade through.

“None of this explains why the unknown and very dead Immortals wanted June,” Gideon reminded everyone.

The silly time was over.

“Or me,” Jennifer said.

“And it sure as fartin’ testicle boobin’ hell don’t tell us why the Higher Power wants Alana Catherine.”

“I HATE THE HIGHER POWER,” Shitty Ritchie screamed as he continued to do jazz squares, but with much more force. “That’s why I live in a cave in the middle of nowhere. I don’t have any friends. I have never been able to fornicate or do the bongo bunny or get frogged or have horizontal refreshment or make any whoopie or...”

Candy Vargo couldn’t take it. She electrocuted Shitty Ritchie right in the bahookey. It shut the little freak up immediately. However, since no one was sure how he would retaliate, we all stood up and sprinted for the front door. I didn’t care that it was raining buckets outside. It was preferable to getting caught up in a tornado or having the house come down on our heads.

Before we could get a foot out of the front door, Shitty Ritchie screamed, “AGAIN. Do it again!”

Every single person froze and looked back. The tiny man’s butt was on fire and he was grinning from ear to ear. It was the weirdest thing I’d seen to date.

“Love it! Do it again, Candy Vargo!”

“What in the actual...” Candy muttered.

“I think he’s got a butt thing goin’ on,” Jennifer whispered. “Go on, Candy. Zap that ass again. It’s the first time I’ve seen that tiny booger happy.”

“Whatever,” Candy Vargo grumbled as she shot a second bolt of electricity at Shitty Ritchie’s rear end.

We stood in shocked silence and watched as he performed jazz squares along with a few leaps until the fire on his backside was extinguished.

“I’m old—like really old,” Gideon stated flatly. “Never in my years have I witnessed anything as disturbing as that.”

“Word,” Heather agreed.

“Invigorating,” Shitty Ritchie shouted as he swatted out any smoldering embers left on his blue sweatpants.

Miraculously, there wasn’t a big hole in the back of his pants. Seeing his bare bahookey wasn’t on my list of things to do today or ever. However, since the man was in good spirits, I decided to go for it.

“So,” I said casually as I walked back into the great room. “I wish that you would share why you hate the Higher Power.”

“You wish ?” he inquired, raising a tiny brow that was definitely in need of some grooming.

“I do,” I replied. “I wish .”

He sighed dramatically and plopped down on the floor. “You only get seven hundred and seventy-seven,” he informed me.

“Seven hundred and seventy-seven what?” I asked.

“Wishes,” he grunted. “After that you must pay.”

“Works for me,” I told the little guy and sat down on the floor in front of him.

“I’ll keep track,” Tim assured me, holding up his notebook. “Oh, Shitty Ritchie, what is the price if Daisy happens to go over the magic number?”

Shitty Ritchie shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe a spanking. ”

I swallowed my horrified laugh with effort. Candy Vargo did not.

“That there little turd knocker has some titanic testies and an industrial strength bahookey,” she said.

“Thank you,” Shitty Ritchie replied.

“Welcome,” Candy shot back.

The conversation had gone slightly off the rails, but no one had died. I considered that a win.

“Can you grant my wish?” I asked him. “And don’t resort to your catch phrase, please. We’ve been very kind so far. I mean, we don’t usually set people’s asses on fire... multiple times.”

Shitty Ritchie took in my words and considered them carefully. “Is that because I’m

your friend now?”

I looked around for help. I wasn't getting any. “Umm... yes. Sure.” I shrugged. “Although I'd have to say, conditional friend... for now.”

His blue eyes narrowed. “Define conditional.”

I leveled him with a hard gaze. “You can't blow stuff up or we won't be friends. You can't harm any of us, and for the love of everything disgusting, you can't eat humans anymore.”

“What in the actual fuck did you just say?” Candy Vargo shouted. “That little shit stain eats humans?”

“I used to,” Shitty Ritchie squeaked in a pitch that it made my brain hurt. “AND I didn't know it was wrong! Living in a cave for seventy million or so years can do that to a fella.”

Candy Vargo drummed her fingers over her lips. “Did I just say fuck and shit stain?”

“You did, friend,” Tim told her.

“Be right back,” she said, marching out of the house and into the rain.

The explosion that came next rocked the house. When the silence that followed lingered, I worried Candy Vargo hadn't survived the blast. It wasn't until she walked back into the house completely bald, naked and smoldering that I let out the breath I'd been holding.

With his eyes firmly shut, Gideon waved his hand and dressed Candy Vargo. He'd stayed true to her fashion sense and clothed her in a sweatsuit with mismatched socks

and tennis shoes that had seen better days. She was still bald, but she was dressed.

“Thanks, corn nut,” she told Gideon. “Them flames got me this time.”

“Candy Vargo,” Gram said, flying over with a horrified expression. “You gotta stop that crap NOW! You got me so worried that I’m losin’ years off my life, which is pretty dang hard to do since I’m dead. Blowin’ yourself up over some potty words makes me think that you could throw yourself to the ground and miss. From here on out, when you mess up, you just say you’re sorry. You hear me? I don’t wanna have to go and cancel your dang birth certificate. Just chaps my bahookey that you’re so mean to yourself.”

Candy Vargo hung her head. No one could get through to her like Gram. That’s what love did to a person. Candy loved Gram something fierce, and Gram loved her right back. I wasn’t sure if Candy ever had a mother. I’d never asked, and she’d never volunteered the information. However, she had a mom now.

“I don’t wanna wear a cute sweater set, pearls and kitten heels,” Candy admitted morosely. “Decided that maimin’ myself would get me out of that.”

“That’s what this is all about?” Gram asked, throwing her hands in the air. “No worries, child. The threat of proper clothes is off the table. You’re doin’ real good with getting’ off the poop words. I’m right proud of you. ”

“You are?” Candy asked, peering up at Gram with delight.

“Yeppers! Just keep workin’ on it and quit settin’ yourself on fire. I’m dang tired of that.”

“Will do, Gram,” she promised. “I’ gettin’ kind of tired of it too.”

“We all good here?” I asked the two women.

“We are,” Candy said.

“Great.” I turned my attention back to Shitty Ritchie. “Grant my wish.”

Shitty Ritchie fluffed the shock of gray hair that stood straight up on his head for a minute or two while he decided how he wanted to answer me.

“Truth or lies?” he inquired.

I rolled my eyes. “Friends don’t lie to friends.”

He was doubtful about this new information, but seemed to accept it. “It wants me dead.”

“Why?”

Shitty Ritchie stared at me in silence.

Tim chimed in. “Daisy, I believe you need to frame each question as a wish.”

“Right,” I said, twisting my curls in my fingers. Immortal rules and quirks were hard to keep straight. “I wish to know why the Higher Power wants you dead.”

“You have to ask It,” Shitty Ritchie ground out. “I have no tooting, farting, constipated diarrhea idea why that sharty, bad breathed miscreant wants me offed. I’m a great guy.”

“Debatable,” Jennifer mumbled.

While I agreed with her, I was thrilled that Shitty Ritchie hadn't overheard. If the tiny man didn't know why he was being hunted, we'd come to a standstill. I wasn't sure where to go now.

"Geeetah toooooooooo knooooowah eeeeeeach ooooootherah," Jimmy George Carrots insisted.

"Yay!" Alana Catherine shrieked and bounced in Gideon's arms. "Yessssssss!"

I looked at Gideon. He looked at me and gave me a lopsided grin.

Welp, it looked like we were all going to get to know each other. It felt like a waste of precious time, but with nowhere else to go... we were going there.

CHAPTER NINE

Considering that most of the people in the room were millions of years old, this could take a while. However, after a brief discussion, we decided that Tim would be the moderator. We'd all answer the same questions in our 'get to know you' game.

"Alrighty-roo!" Tim said, looking around at the assembled group with excitement. "This will be fun."

I wasn't sure I agreed, but I was game to go.

"First off, we'll start with how old we are," he announced.

Shitty Ritchie raised his hand. "What if we're not sure?"

Tim paused in thought. "Fine point, well made, little friend. Age is but a number and not important. Let's go with favorite color."

"Daisy's golden eyes," Gideon chimed in. "And Alana Catherine's."

I grinned at him. I'd thought he'd say black. "Mine's blue gray like Gideon's eyes."

He fluttered his lashes in an exaggerated way and laughed. "I'm flattered, Counselor."
"

"As am I, Reaper," I shot back.

“Get a room,” Candy Vargo groused with a chuckle. “Anyhoo, my favorite color is Orange.”

Not a surprise. Her magic was usually a sparkling orange color. The rest of the favorites hit all the primary colors except for Shitty Ritchie who cheated and said rainbows. Alana Catherine, who could clearly comprehend what was being said even though she couldn’t participate, gifted Shitty Ritchie and the rest of us with her magic. She began to glow in every color of the rainbow. Our new little friend—and I used the word cautiously—was flabbergasted. He pointed at her with his mouth open and proceeded to copy my daughter. The tiny dude’s magic was the same colors.

Candy Vargo, Charlie, Tim and Heather gasped. June and Jennifer clapped. I exchanged a concerned look with Gideon. From what Charlie had shared about Shitty Ritchie, it seemed as if his many gifts, aside from violence and cannibalism, mirrored the gifts of Heather, Missy and possibly me. Alana Catherine had exhibited some of the same characteristics. Oh my hell, was she like Shitty Ritchie? Would she grow up with a penchant for eating people? The thought was stomach-churning. I pushed it away. Gideon and I would not let that happen. She wasn’t going to live in a cave for millions of years. She was being raised by people who loved her and knew right from wrong.

Speaking of being raised... “Shitty Ritchie do you have parents?”

He shook his head. “No. I was created.”

“Same,” Candy Vargo stated.

“Me too,” Tim shared.

“I was created as well,” Charlie said .

“I was created along with my sister, the former Goddess of the Darkness,” Gideon added.

“I was born from an experiment,” Heather volunteered.

It was a fact I was already aware of. Our father had been forced to donate sperm for a sadistic Angelic experiment. That was how I was related to Heather, Rafe, Gabe, Abby and Prue. We hadn’t grown up together, but we’d grown to be tight as siblings could be. Even with the bizarre beginnings, I was thankful every day that they were in my life.

“I had both a mom and a dad, God rest their souls,” June explained as Charlie kissed the top of her head. He was very protective of his wife. Her sadness was his as well as her happiness. It was lovely to see.

“I was raised by a single mother,” Jennifer said, jumping into the conversation.

“Did you know your father?” June asked, surprised.

June, Heather, Jennifer and I had been friends for years. I was surprised by the new details, as well.

“Nope,” she said with a dismissive shrug. “Momma would never tell me no matter how much I begged. I wanted to be like all the other kids in school who had mommas and daddies. Only thing she’d say was that men were crap, and we didn’t need them. When I was naughty, that old bat would remind me how much I’d cost her—her pocketbook and her waistline. Even on her deathbed, she swore up and down she’d never met the guy. My momma was a lyin’ piece of work.” Jennifer laughed, but it was forced and held no humor.

“I’m so sorry,” June said, moving to Jennifer and hugging her. “That’s not right.”

“Nothin’ to be sorry about,” Jennifer assured June with a wistful smile. “Momma was okay as far as mommas go for the most part. Fed me and kept a roof over my head, but I sure do wish I’d had a chance to know my pappy. Even if he was crap, it might have been nice for closure.”

Jennifer’s multiple ex-husbands had all been substantially older than her. It made sense. My dear friend had daddy issues. Her new beau was Sherriff Dip Doody. The man was her age and pure gold. Dip treated her like the queen she was. She refused to get married because she loved him so much.

“Have you considered doing a DNA test on one of those websites that can tell you who you’re related to?” June asked.

Jennifer looked intrigued. “I haven’t thought about that, but it’s not a bad plan. I’ve read all those crazy reunion stories on the internet.” She laughed. “Maybe my pappy is somebody famous like Elvis or Clark Gable! Wouldn’t that be a kick?”

“Sure would,” Gram said with a giggle. “Or maybe it was Bob Barker! That would be a hoot.”

“I’d just like to say, father or no father, that you turned out wonderfully, best friend,” Tim gushed, joining the group hug. “You’re smart, funny, beautiful and one of the best people I know!”

“Back at ya,” Jennifer told Tim. “I might not have much of a biological family to speak of, but my chosen family kicks bahookey.” She glanced around. “I just wish y’all sparkled like Edward in Twilight.”

I laughed. The mold had been broken when Jennifer was born. I was a lucky person that I’d been chosen by her. We all were.

Candy Vargo covertly swiped a tear from her eye. The woman wanted everyone to believe that she was a cold, hard badass, but the truth was that she was as sentimental as all get out. Her taking in a gaggle of foster kids was only part of the proof that the woman had love to give and love to spare. “Enough about that sparkly shirt,” she grunted as she waved her hands in the air and chanted a few words I didn’t understand.

I wasn’t sure what she’d done until Jennifer whooped and hollered with joy. “Now that’s what I’m talking about!”

I glanced around and realized every single person in the room was sparkling... just like Edward in Twilight. Even Gram, Mr. Jackson and Jimmy George Carrots were glistening. It was strangely beautiful and very fitting. Jennifer had lost the pained wistful expression and was back to her fabulous self. Candy Vargo for the win.

“Oh my God,” I said with a laugh, looking at my glittery hands and arms. “How long will this last?”

“An hour or two,” Candy said with a pleased grin.

Shitty Ritchie decided it was time to make his move. “Speaking of sperm donation.”

“Umm... we weren’t speaking of sperm donation. Definitely not speaking about sperm donation,” I said, squinting warily at him.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he replied then kept going. He skipped across the room to, twinkling like a shooting star on a collision course with death. “Dearest Immortal lesbian!” The tiny idiot bowed to her. “I have an exciting offer to make!”

She was appalled. She knew where this was going. All of us did. But there was no

stopping Shitty Ritchie when he was on a roll.

“I would like to offer you a rare and splendid gift,” he told her with a few jazz squares thrown in to show he meant business. “While I don’t want to usurp Tim’s offer of his turkey baster filled with little swimmers, I would like to offer my jizz to you and Missy for perhaps a second child. It’s my fondest dream, along with sticking it to the Higher Power, to have a little Ritchie or Ritchina running around. I’m excellent father material and find both you and Missy very attractive. If you’d like to do it the old-fashioned way, I would not be opposed. Granted, I have never put my peepee into the love cavity before, but how hard can it be?”

I wanted to shout PUN, but I sucked that shit back fast.

Heather was speechless. I was, too. No one in the room could speak. The use of the word jizz in a sentence along with the words, turkey baster, little swimmers, peepee and love cavity was one that would live rent free in my head for a long time.

Heather closed her eyes for a long moment. It was clear she was searching for something to say that wouldn’t send Shitty Ritchie into a tornado fit.

“Well,” she said, gulping loudly. “While the rare and splendid offer is... umm... shockingly unexpected and makes me want to... umm... spew all kinds of words... I have to be upfront and say that the natural way is not an option.”

Shitty Ritchie smacked his tiny forehead. “Right! My apologies. I’d quite forgotten you and Missy are fabulous Immortal lesbians. No offense meant. The peepee shall not go near the love cavity. I will borrow a turkey baster from Tim.”

Heather pressed her temples and gave the insane dude what she probably hoped was a smile. It wasn’t. It was a pained grimace. Shitty Ritchie, not one to understand social cues or much of anything else about polite society, didn’t notice.

“That is... well, I’m not sure what that is,” Heather admitted. “But right now, Missy and I aren’t ready to have children. However, I’ll keep the offer in mind if the day ever comes... which it probably won’t. Ever. Never. Ever.”

“Should we alert Missy about the future plans?” Shitty Ritchie asked .

The man truly had selective hearing. I was pretty sure he was too old to change that.

“No,” Heather told him flatly. “I’ll handle it.”

“Excellent!” he replied and then jazz squared across the room back to his spot on the floor. “Next question?”

Tim seemed at a loss. That was no mystery since we were all still digesting what had just gone down. We needed to get back on a track that had nothing to do with sperm.

Charlie jumped in. He was still a little off kilter from Shitty Ritchie’s peepee monologue, but pulled himself together. With a pointed glance at me and then Gideon, he led us onto a new path. “I’d suggest we discuss Alana Catherine’s gifts that have emerged thus far.”

Charlie obviously had the same thoughts about the similarities between our baby and Shitty Ritchie. Crap.

“Alana Catherine is half Angel and half Demon as Daisy and I are her parents,” Gideon said, holding the gal in question close. She reached up and grabbed a fistful of his hair while popping her thumb into her mouth. Her eyes grew heavy as Gideon continued to speak. “She’s the future Death Counselor, and it looks likely that she’s a Soul Keeper as well.”

As if on cue, four ghostly skunks wandered into the room and crawled into the dog

bed with Donna and Karen. The visual was odd, but at the same time, it was adorable and right.

“Here’s another thing,” Gram shared. “She was able to conjure up the Immortal Book of Law when we was on the Higher Power’s plane. Knew it backwards and forwards. Makes me think she might just be the future Arbitrator between the Darkness and the Light.”

Shitty Ritchie listened intently.

“If she’s lucky,” Gideon said, glancing down at the gorgeous little girl nestled in his arms. “She won’t be saddled with becoming the future Grim Reaper. I do not wish that on anyone.”

I was startled. That thought had never occurred to me. “I wish to hear what Shitty Ritchie has to say about this,” I said.

Tim quickly jotted down that I’d used up another wish. Shitty Ritchie looked annoyed. I knew he would love to tell me he had no idea what I was talking about, but it was becoming evident that he wanted friends more than he wanted to hide his thoughts and opinions.

“She is like me. Too many gifts that should only belong to one,” he stated tonelessly. “I am very sorry for that. I’m sorry for her.”

“Why? Why are you sorry?” I demanded, feeling unsettled and on the verge of a panic attack. I knew we were getting close to something. I was just terrified that when we got there, I wasn’t going to be able to handle it.

Shitty Ritchie sighed. “Pose it as a wish.”

“I wish to know why you are sorry for Alana Catherine.”

“The Higher Power doesn’t like it when an Immortal is imbued with multiple gifts.”

I had the system down now. “I wish to know why that’s a problem for the Higher Power?”

The little man shrugged. “I suppose It is threatened that there might be those who exist who are more powerful.”

“I wish to know if you believe that’s why the Higher Power has hunted you and wanted Alana Catherine to stay on Its plane,” I said.

“I do,” he replied. “Shitty Ritchie has spent millions of years outsmarting the vile being. I fear that your child will have to do the same.”

That didn’t sound good. At all. Shitty Ritchie had lied earlier. He knew exactly why the Higher Power had it out for him. Berating him for being dishonest wasn’t going to help. I’d just make sure I left no stone unturned when questioning the little man going forward. I knew that million-year-old habits were hard to break and the turd was trying to protect himself, but the time for the truth was now. Gideon’s eyes had turned from gray-blue to blood red. He was as furious at Shitty Ritchie and at our baby’s potential future as I was.

The time to set the ground rules was now.

“Dude,” I said to Shitty Ritchie in a brook no bullshit tone. “From here on out, you will tell the truth and nothing but. If you don’t, your burgeoning friendships are dead in the water. Period. Give me your word. And so help me, if you lie, you’ll wish the Higher Power had gotten ahold of you.”

Shitty Ritchie got down on his knobby little knees and prostrated himself before me. The tiny man trembled and whimpered. “You have my word,” he swore. “For the first time in my life, I fit in somewhere. In the billions of years I’ve been alive, I have never had this feeling. It’s glorious. In honor of friendship, you have my word.”

I glanced over at Candy Vargo. She gave me a curt nod and a toothpick. She could smell liars. Her nod gave me the courage to believe Shitty Ritchie. It really did take a freaking village. No man or woman was an island. Shitty Ritchie had been an island his entire existence. I knew it was still risky to believe him completely, but the words had been spoken and, with the backup of Candy’s approval, I chose to believe them.

I had a sinking feeling that everything was connected. Shitty Ritchie, the tiny and hopefully former liar, being here was kismet. Jimmy George Carrots going on and on about how the number three was important. I still wasn’t sure why, but we needed to dig deeper on that matter. What made no sense was the unknown Immortals going after June... or maybe Jennifer. It was possible that wasn’t connected, but ignoring it could be a deadly mistake.

“The unknown Immortals,” I said to Shitty Ritchie. “You recognized the description. I wish to know what you know about them.”

He got to his feet and did a full five minutes of jazz squares before he spoke. The smile on his face was wide and bizarre. Maybe he felt freer knowing that the lies were over, or maybe he was just insane. “They are the minions of the Higher Power. Your comrade Zander was correct. They are neither Angel nor Demon. They are not regular Immortals like myself either.”

“What the heck is left?” Candy Vargo asked, chomping on her toothpick in confusion.

Shitty Ritchie clamed up again. That wasn’t working for me.

“I wish to know the origin of the minions,” I told him.

I watched him war with himself, then finally give in.

“You’re using up many of your wishes, Angel of Mercy,” he pointed out. “That’s a very spermy thing to do.”

“That’s not a word and doesn’t make any sense.” I rolled my eyes then did a jazz square to challenge the dude with the crappy attitude. It was possible by changing up the game I’d get what I wanted, or I’d just look like an ass. It was fifty-fifty odds.

He took it as a dare. Bingo. The gauntlet had been thrown down. There was no going back now. I refused to make eye contact with anyone in the room. If I did, I would laugh and that would undermine my focus. I’d been in many deadly battles with Immortals. Never had I participated in a dance battle until today. I seriously hoped this would be a one and done. I’d much rather lop the head off my enemy than chassé for my life. But when in Rome, or rather my badly furnished living room...

Shitty Ritchie countered with a jazz square and a hitch kick. I knew I could win this battle. The knowledge that it would be bloodless was a bonus. Gram had made me take dance lessons as a kid—ballet, jazz and tap. I hated it back then, but was grateful for it now. I returned his volley with a grapevine and a fan kick. I was sure I pulled my hamstring, but didn’t let the fact that there was a zingy, white-hot fire shooting down the back of my upper thigh slow me down. Weakness would not be tolerated in a dance-off for intel.

“You go, gurl,” Jennifer yelled, toasting my stupidity with a bottle of red.

“Watch this,” Shitty Ritchie snarled.

He attempted to one-up me with an arabesque into a barrel turn. It was sloppy but

impressive. Didn't matter. I had an ace up my sleeve.

"Is that all you got, dingleberry?" I asked.

"You can do better than Shitty Ritchie?" he demanded.

"You bet your flaming bahookey I can. Back up," I warned the crowd.

I started with a single time step. I did it on the left side and the right. I was sure I heard Gideon chuckle. I ignored it. He would pay later. Shitty Ritchie couldn't believe his eyes. I wasn't done. I advanced to a double time step—left and right. The little turd's mouth fell open in envious shock. However, I still had more. The pièce de resistance? The triple time step. I might have missed a few sounds, but the overall execution was outstanding.

"Top that, shart stain," I yelled.

Shitty Ritchie bowed his head in submission. "You win," he admitted morosely. "Your time step was sublime." He eyed me for about a minute too long. I was worried he was about to offer me his sperm. "Would you be willing to teach me the time step?"

That wasn't what I was expecting. Shitty Ritchie was crazily unpredictable—with a stress on the crazy part.

"What will I get in return?" I shot back. Nothing in the Immortal world was free.

He tucked his sweatshirt into his sweatpants, licked his hand and slicked his hair back. Of course, it sprang right back up immediately. Little dude was every kind of weird. "I will increase the number of wishes to seven thousand and seventy-seven in exchange for you teaching Shitty Ritchie the time step—all three, single, double, and

triple.”

“Dang good deal if you ask me, nard hole,” Candy Vargo let me know.

I agreed. “Deal,” I told Shitty Ritchie. “So, grant my wish. I wish to know the origin of the minions,” I repeated.

“Wish granted,” he replied. “As I said, they are not Angels or Demons. Nor are they regular Immortals. They are the risen dead that the Higher Power steals from graves. It molds them and creates them into killing machines that do Its bidding. Since their souls have already left their bodies, their flesh is easily manipulated.”

“Whoa Nelly,” I said. “You’re telling me that the Higher Power is creating an army of zombies to hunt people?”

Candy Vargo dropped an f-bomb. Gideon growled. Charlie was furious, and his power started leaking out. June had to quietly remind her husband to tamp it back. Breathing was necessary. Heather’s tattoos began to dance up her arms, creating a macabre picture. Tim frantically took notes.

“Rephrase,” the little jerk snapped .

“Oh my God,” I muttered. The wish thing was getting old fast. “How about we dump the wish crap and I’ll add on a cramp roll, a Buffalo and a Maxie Ford to the dance lesson?”

Shitty Ritchie took the bribe under consideration. But of course, he had extra terms.

“Include a shuffle ball change and an Irish and you have yourself a deal.”

“Done,” I said. “So, is It or isn’t It creating a zombie army?”

“It is,” he replied.

Heather was on her feet in an instant. She grabbed the Book of Immortal Law and rifled through the thousands of pages.

Shitty Ritchie watched Heather. He shook his head as she frantically searched the book. “Page five hundred and two,” he said.

She looked up at him confused. “What?”

He rolled his eyes. “Turn to page five hundred and two. You will find what you’re looking for.”

Heather followed the instructions. Her eyes quickly scanned the page. The Arbitrator between the Darkness and the Light paused and looked up at Shitty Ritchie. Her smile was wide. “Outstanding.”

Shitty Ritchie preened. “Is it outstanding enough for you to give birth to little Ritchie or Ritchina? I’m quite sure I could have a turkey baster of my jizz ready in a few weeks.”

“Dude,” Heather ground out, holding onto her composure by a thread. “Learn this now. Your jizz is not a bargaining chip. Blackmailing me into having your kid is crappy and won’t make you any friends. If you bring it up again, it will never happen.”

Shitty Ritchie, oblivious to the fact that Heather was about to electrocute him, gave her a delighted thumbs up. “So, what you’re saying is that if I don’t bring it up, it will happen?”

“Oh. My. God,” Heather muttered as her chin dropped to her chest. “You’re a

relentless little jackass.”

“Thank you!” he replied.

“Wasn’t a compliment,” she shot back. “Table the jizz discussion. We’ll revisit in a century.”

“Will do,” Shitty Ritchie squealed with delight.

He was for sure missing some brain cells. My guess was that he had two and they weren’t connected.

“The real question here is why in the hell it would take Shitty Ritchie weeks to fill up a turkey baster with jizz,” Candy Vargo announced much to the horror of everyone.

“Moving on,” I said in my outdoor voice. If I heard the word jizz one more time, someone was going to lose an appendage. “Heather, what’s on page five hundred and two?”

My sister gave me a grateful smile. “The punishment for reanimating the dead is death,” she explained. “So far, the Higher Power has perpetrated several crimes that end in death—pulling souls out of the Light and creating zombies. My educated guess is that it’s the tip of the iceberg of crimes the Higher Power has committed. It wrote the laws. It set the punishments. The question is, what are we going to do about It?”

“My old theory is trash now,” I said, running my hands through my hair in frustration. “Convicting the Higher Power in a court of Immortal law then reducing the sentence in return for finding out why It wanted Alana Catherine is moot. We know why It wants my baby.”

“Ending the Higher Power is the way to go,” Shitty Ritchie said with venom dripping

off of every word. “Destroy It. ”

“Impossible,” Charlie snapped. “The balance would be destroyed and the end will come.”

Shitty Ritchie wasn't having it. “Is that such a bad thing?” he demanded. “Shitty Ritchie is tired. Tired of running. Tired of living in a cave. Tired of existing. Tired of looking over my shoulder every minute of every day.”

He wasn't the only one who'd had it. It took everything I had not to rip his tiny head off of his shoulders and yeet it into space. Yes, I was a compassionate person. And no, I wasn't feeling it right now. I leveled the tiny asshole with a stare that made him blanch and back away quickly. My entire body glowed. My hands sparked, and I felt my eyes turn a blinding gold. “You are a selfish piece of shit. If you're that tired, then end yourself,” I ground out. “You have no right to make that call for the entire world. It's not just you who would be obliterated if the end came. It's every Immortal, every human being, every animal... all of nature. What in the hell gives you the right to make that decision? Tell me,” I shouted. “Who are you to end every living thing?”

“I'm sorry,” he whispered brokenly as tears filled his eyes. “I'm so sorry.”

Sorry wasn't going to cut it this time. I turned my back on Shitty Ritchie. Looking at him would simply infuriate me more. Killing him wasn't the answer. It might feel good for a moment, but in the long game, it would make me sick. I ended people in defense, not because of selfish stupidity.

I needed to believe the solution to the problem was within our reach. We just needed to find it. Everything is possible... I just had to believe.

“Threeeeeeeee,” Jimmy George Carrots whispered in my ear.

The ghost was fading fast. I glanced around to see if the golden light had arrived to take him away. I heaved a sigh of relief that there was no sign of it. However, his washed-out appearance and quick decline was disturbing. I had nothing to go on but my gut. I just wasn't sure what my gut was trying to say.

Charlie stood up and paced the room. I knew his mind was working a mile a minute. His eyes were icy blue and his skin glowed. Thankfully, he was maintaining control on his power. Suffocating all of us would be a bad plan. Gideon held Alana Catherine even closer. His eyes sparked red and he was barely able to contain his fury. Candy Vargo had ten toothpicks in her mouth and she stood as still as a statue. The expression on her face was murderous. Heather kept reading more in the Immortal Book of Law. Her enchanted tattoos moved at warp speed. It made me dizzy to look at her. As usual, Tim took notes. However, he'd snapped two pencils thus far in his frenzied writing. Gram wrung her hands, and Mr. Jackson tried to comfort her to little avail. June sat quietly with a worried expression marring her pretty face. Jennifer had three open bottles of wine and was taste testing all of them.

Only Jimmy George Carrots was calm.

"Go with my gut," I said aloud. "We need to find Jimmy George Carrots' body parts."

"What?" Gideon asked, looking at me like I'd lost my mind.

He wasn't all wrong. However, we were at such a low there was nowhere to go but up. For some reason, I believed that putting Jimmy George Carrots back together was part of the bigger plan. Why? I had no clue. I was working on adrenaline and fear at this point.

Shitty Ritchie was in the Gideon camp. "Why do you think that putting the seer back together will help?" His voice was higher than normal, which was painful, and his

words were drenched in sarcasm.

But to me, his words felt like a gut punch—a good one. Maybe... “Say that again.”

“Why?” Shitty Ritchie asked, diving under the couch. “Are you going to decapitate me?”

“I’d love to,” I admitted honestly. “However, not just yet. Repeat what you said. Now.”

The tiny turd stayed under the couch as he spoke. “Shitty Ritchie asked why you think putting the seer back together will help?”

“Jimmy George Carrots is a seer?” I questioned.

Shitty Ritchie rolled his eyes and nodded. “Of course, he’s a seer. Anyone can see that.”

I looked around at everyone else. They were as surprised as I was. The only one who wasn’t surprised was Jimmy George Carrots himself. He smiled serenely and nodded.

“Tim,” I instructed as my insides tingled. “Define seer for me, please.”

“On it,” Tim said, grabbing his phone and looking it up. “I do know what a seer is, but let’s go to the technical definition.” It only took him thirty seconds to find what I’d requested. “A seer is a person who is able to see what the future holds through supernatural insight—an expert so to speak on what is to come.”

“BINGO,” I shouted, making everyone in the room jump. “We need to put Jimmy George Carrots, our resident seer, back together and then... I’m doing a mind dive. Part one of the mission, find his legs and his arm.” I held up the tube of superglue that

I'd shoved into my pocket. "It's time for some de ceased surgery."

"Have you lost your ball-eatin' marbles?" Candy Vargo asked.

"Absolutely," I confirmed. "Let's do this."

Without another word, we split up to search for Jimmy George Carrots' appendages.

We were moving forward. I hoped...

CHAPTER TEN

It took less than an hour to find the appendages. Shitty Ritchie had been the hero, much to his delight. He'd found Jimmy George Carrots' arm in the trailer and his legs in the half-bath off the kitchen. I had no idea why Jimmy George Carrots had been in the bathroom since the dead didn't have bodily functions, but was too polite to ask.

My assumption that Shitty Ritchie might have the gift of a Death Counselor was further confirmed when he was able to touch and carry the arm and legs without them going through his hands. The legs were three times his size, but the dead didn't weigh much. The tiny turd handled it like a pro.

"Alrighty then, doc Daisy," Candy Vargo said, staring at the body parts on the coffee table. "Put that boy back together."

"On it," I replied.

Reattaching the arm was a piece of cake. His legs were a little trickier. The seer apparently didn't believe in underpants, and avoiding his dangling ghostly junk while gluing his legs back on was awkwardly problematic. A deceased person, from my experience, tended to come back as a ghost in what they were wearing when they died. Jimmy George Carrots had not been sporting undies when he'd passed. Repeatedly reminding myself that body parts were natural and beautiful got me through it without laughing. Embarrassing the sweet ghost wasn't going to happen. Even Gideon was amused that I was trying hard to be respectful to the specter's privates.

“We’re done,” I told the ghost. My relief that I hadn’t touched his junk was palpable.

“Thaaaaaankah youuuuuuah, Daaaiissssssyah” Jimmy George Carrots said. He tried out his legs and arm. They were in perfect working order.

“You’re most welcome,” I replied with a smile. The man was lovely and so polite.

I was still amazed that all the tendons worked on the dead after I’d glued their parts back on. Delving too deep into that made me feel nuttier than I already was. Accepting the unbelievable had become part of my everyday life. I was just happy he was pleased. He took off and flew around the great room like he’d just ingested a twelve-pack of caffeinated soda and some speed.

“Jimmy George Carrots,” I said, gently grabbing him as he darted by. Pulling him out of the air without undoing my handywork was risky, but I had more superglue if necessary. I’d purposely grabbed his arm on the off chance it detached again. His legs were off limits. I’d had enough of his bare nether regions. “I’d like your permission to visit you in your mind so we can talk. Does that work for you?”

“Yeeeeeessssssah, Daaaiissssssyah,” he replied warmly.

“Yay!” Alana Catherine chirped from Gideon’s arms. “Yesssssss!”

“Stamp of approval from our miracle,” Gideon said, kissing her chubby cheek .

It was interesting what our daughter chose to chime in on. It felt as if it was only when we were trying to decode the puzzle. If that was the case, she was even more gifted than we already believed. Grain of salt since I was her mother, but I thought she was the most brilliant baby in the Universe.

“How long do you think you’ll be out, friend,” Tim asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Hopefully, no more than a day.”

It was crazy how time didn’t line up on the different planes, but magic wasn’t linear. Hell, nothing about the Immortal world followed a straight path. I was getting more used to it, but I’d probably need a few centuries under my belt to find it normal.

“Not to worry, Daisy,” Jennifer assured me. “All us sparkly people have it covered. And while you’re gone, I might register with that DNA thingie to find who my pappy was. I’m thinkin’ it might be Marlon Brando. That would just tickle me pink... and sparkly!”

I laughed at her guess then realized that the Edward from Twilight effect hadn’t worn off yet. Two hours had passed and we all still looked like glittery freaks. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, who happened to be drag queens, would be proud.

“Umm... Candy, would you like to explain why we all still look like Christmas ornaments?” I asked.

“Sure, nard hole. When I said two hours, I might have underestimated a testicle or three,” she informed the unhappily surprised crowd—well, everyone but Jennifer was alarmed with the news. She was thrilled.

“I have three testicles,” Shitty Ritchie announced.

He was ignored—studiously ignored.

“So,” Candy Vargo continued. “As I was sayin’ before I almost puked at the farked up admission from Shitty Ritchie about his nuts, the sparkle might last longer.”

“Define longer,” Gideon said, displeased.

She shrugged and chuckled. “Welp, seein’ as how I ain’t never done the spell before I don’t have an exact answer, corn nut. If I had to take a guess... I’d say a week... maybe five.”

I winced. We all lived as humans in our sleepy little Georgia town. I’d grown up here and knew practically everyone. It would be impossible to explain sparkling skin at the Piggly Wiggly.

“Dude,” Heather said, shaking her head in annoyance. “You’re a menace. I have to be in court to try a case next week.”

“My bad. Sorry, shart face,” Candy Vargo said. Her lips quirked up at the corners, making her apology a bald-faced lie.

Whatever. We could potentially cover Heather in body makeup for her court date and the rest of us could hide out until the glitter wore off. Of course, if the Higher Power showed Its ass and destroyed us it wouldn’t matter.

Speaking of... “Do you think we should call back Zander and Catriona while I’m in Jimmy George Carrots’ mind? If the zombies show up again, they’ve already defeated them once.” Turning to the three-balled little guy, I posed another question. “Do you know how big the Higher Power’s zombie army is?”

“Endless,” he replied. “There are millions of dead bodies available and It takes as needed.”

Not the answer I’d been hoping for.

“That is, pardon my poop words, but that shit is fucked,” Candy Vargo grouched.

Gram didn’t admonish her. It was profanely accurate.

“I’ll alert Zander and Catriona to return,” Gideon said, all business. “Explaining the sparkle will be interesting, but the backup is prudent.”

I smiled and nodded. I was tempted to let him know that I thought he was sexy all glittered up, but thought that was TMI considering the company. “Questions for Jimmy George Carrots?” I inquired, canvassing the hive mind.

“Obviously, the relevance of the number three,” Charlie said. “And I’m curious at how old the seer is.”

“Got it,” I replied. “Anything else?”

“Ask him if there is a little Ritchie or little Ritchina in my future,” Shitty Ritchie suggested, wagging his brows at my sister.

Heather rolled her eyes hard. I was sure she could answer that query without the aid of Jimmy George Carrots.

“Okay, nope. Anything else that’s actually pertinent?”

Gideon walked over to me. My hands immediately went to both him and our child. The feeling was centering and necessary. “Ask Jimmy George Carrots about our girl—not about her fate. She will make her own fate. Just inquire about her gifts and how we can help her.”

I nodded and leaned into his warmth. I wasn’t sure when or even if we were going to catch a break, but we needed it. He gently pressed his lips to mine and kissed me. I felt the love. I felt the desire, and I felt the fear.

Gideon didn’t love it when I mind-dived. It took a lot out of me and there was no way to know how long I’d be gone. Gone was the wrong word. My body stayed here, but

everything else about me left the building. However, he would never ask me to stop. It was my job and my gift. We lived in a dangerous world and mind diving was the tamest thing I did. Getting there was painful, but the rest was beautiful and humbling.

“Oh! Ask that free -ballin’ cutie if it was me or June that those weridos were after,” Jennifer added.

That was already on the list, but being reminded was fine.

“Yep,” Heather agreed. “And if you have time at the end since this isn’t exactly important, ask him when the damned sparkle’s going to wear off.”

I laughed. So did my sister.

“Will do,” I promised. I turned my attention to the ghost on the couch. Walking over, I sat down next to him. “This is how it works. I’ll hug you and then we’ll be able to chat.”

“Ohhhhhhhah fuuuuuunah!” he replied, holding his arms out.

“Here we go,” I whispered as I gathered the man in my arms.

The ride had begun. I hoped by the end of it we would know which ride to get on next.

The cold. The cold went all the way to my bones and tore through my body like sharp, frozen daggers made of ice. Trying to catch my breath, I gasped for air. I knew it would end soon, but the need to get air into my lungs was real and my body was acting of its own accord.

The only sound that left my lips came from so far away I could barely hear it.

My head pounded violently, and every single cell in my body screamed for oxygen. My mind went numb, and I couldn't feel my limbs anymore. I vaguely wondered if they had fallen off. I wondered that each and every time I took a dive. So far, I'd stayed intact. However, there was a first time for everything...

We landed with an ungraceful thud. That was new and unwelcome. Slowly, I got to my feet and helped a whole and very adorable Jimmy George Carrots to his. The seer looked to be in his late seventies or early eighties. He wore the same flowing robe he'd been wearing only minutes ago on the earthly plane, but now it was pristine white instead of a dull, lifeless gray. It was tied at the waist with flowers. The purple and red blossoms were no longer rotting and dried out, but then again, neither was he. His head was still bald, and the crown of leaves he wore was a deep green and very much alive.

What I hadn't been able to see when he was dead was his enchanting smile. Even though we'd landed in a tangled heap, Jimmy George Carrots was happy to see me. I stayed silent while my friend took in the surroundings.

There was no floor or walls to speak of. The area was entirely a murky gray. We stood facing each other as if we were suspended in the air. Jimmy George Carrots took a tentative step forward then gasped with surprise and delight that what looked invisible was indeed solid.

"Where are we, Daisy?" he asked, taking my hands in his. "Is this what the interior of my mind looks like?"

I smiled. No one had asked that question before. But I'd never traveled with a seer until now. "We're in the Darkness," I explained. "The only rule is that we can't walk into the Light or the Dark. We stay here. I kind of think of it as a waiting room of sorts."

He chuckled and cupped my cheek in his hand. “We should probably get to it, dear. Tell me how it works.”

I shrugged. This felt like new territory. “Normally, I close my eyes and I can see the past of the person I’m with. I see a TV screen with lots of static that goes in and out. I watch the stories of the person, and then I learn what needs to be done to help them move on. But I’m not searching for your past.”

He nodded. “You’re looking for your future.” He paused and stared intently. “For a long time, I’ve wondered why I stayed caught on the earthly plane. Now, I know.”

“I can help you move into the Light,” I told him. “When we go back, it would be my honor, Jimmy George Carrots.”

Jimmy George Carrots smiled. “That would be lovely, and... sadly, my real name is Ted.”

“Wait. What?” I asked with a laugh. “You told me your name was Jimmy George Carrots.”

The robed and underpants-free man giggled. He had a naughty twinkle in his eyes, and I couldn’t help but grin.

“Were you playing us, Ted?” I inquired with a raised brow and an amused quirk I couldn’t hide on my lips.

“Indeed, I was,” he shared, quite pleased with his silly deception. “Ted is such a dull name, and I figured in death I could be who I wanted to be. I think Jimmy George Carrots fits me much better.”

“I do too. Jimmy George Carrots it is.”

“Ask me questions, child,” he encouraged. “I have seen many visions regarding the future for you, your family and friends, but know this, just because I see it doesn’t mean it’s locked in stone. It could be a representation of what’s to come, but not the exact scenario.”

“Is that how it always works with a seer?” I asked, truly curious.

“No, every seer is different. Every gift is unique to the person who possesses it. I will apologize in advance if my answers to what you search for sound cryptic. It’s the way my gift works. If you don’t receive the answer you desire, ask me in another way.”

I nodded. Cryptic was something I was getting used to. The Immortals were cryptic—very cryptic. I didn’t love it, but I was learning to deal with it. I’d hoped for an accurate play-by-play of what was to come from Jimmy George Carrots, but I’d settle for whatever I could get.

“The number three,” I said. “Why do you keep bringing it up? ”

“Three are the checks and balances that would make all in this world right,” he replied.

That was definitely cryptic.

“Three what?”

“Three destined to represent the checks and balances,” he replied. “Three that will work as one.”

“People? Immortals? Angels? Demons?” I pressed. Was he saying that three of something would become a single entity? That was weird.

“Yes and no,” he said.

Shit shit shit. Complex questions were not the way to go. “Help me.”

Jimmy George Carrots scratched his bald head. “Recall the words exchanged about the number three—when you were discussing it with your people.”

I could do that. “Gideon talked about the three branches of the human government—legislative, judicial and executive.” I laughed. It was humorless. “I find it ironic that humans who’ve been around a much shorter time than Immortals got that right, but those who live forever seemed to have whiffed it. Big time.”

“How so?” Jimmy George Carrots inquired.

I narrowed my eyes slightly. He smiled. His question was leading me somewhere. Somewhere I needed to go. I was all in. “Immortals live in a system of dictatorship,” I explained. “Run by one entity that made the laws and the punishments for breaking the laws. Problem is that the entity is now breaking the laws It wrote, and nothing is in place to make It stop.”

“Interesting,” he said, plucking a flower from his belt and handing it to me.

I took it and tucked the purple blossom behind my ear. I had no clue what the flower was, but it smelled awesome. “Thank you,” I told him.

“You are most welcome,” he replied. “Tell me what it is that you believe is a dictator’s greatest fear.”

“I’m not a dictator, so I’m not speaking from experience, but if I had to guess, I’d say loss of control. Or possibly an uprising, or even assassination.”

“And?” he questioned.

Again, I knew the questions were as important as any of the answers. “Umm... protests. Getting voted out. Although that’s for a democracy... which the Immortals don’t practice.”

“Such a shame, but probably for the best,” he said. “In your world, there are people who were born for a reason—very specific reasons. They were born to become who they are supposed to be.”

“You mean like me being the Death Counselor?”

“And the Angel of Mercy,” he added.

I shook my head. “No, that one kind of happened by default. I was being tested by a psycho and he rooted for me to fail.”

“But you did not,” Jimmy George Carrots pointed out.

“Correct. I didn’t fail.”

The robed man crossed his arms over his chest. “I see that as destiny. You can alter fate by making different choices, but destiny is set in stone. Who you are and who you are meant to be is gifted to you long before you come into this world.”

That was a shitload to swallow. However, dwelling in it was a waste of precious time. “Okay, got it.”

“Do you?” he inquired.

“Well, no, but I think I get the gist of it.”

Jimmy George Carrots smiled. “You will understand when you need to. Shall we get back to the number three?”

Cryptic. So freaking cryptic. “Sure. Tim said that in numerology the number three is associated with communication, optimism and creativity. ”

“And what did Heather say?” he asked, trying sounding casual but failing.

Of course, that was probably on purpose. Alrighty then, Heather’s part of the conversation was important. “Heather spoke of the Holy Trinity. The trinity that consists of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.”

“Hmmm...” he said, drumming his lips with his fingers. “And how might that fit into your world?”

I was getting confused. My mind was jumbled.

“Stop thinking, Daisy,” Jimmy George Carrots encouraged. “When I ask a question, don’t think about it. Go with the first thing that comes to mind. Often the answer is there.”

“Ask me again,” I said. “Clearing out my overactive brain right now.”

He chuckled. “Talk to me about how the Immortals could use the concept of the Holy Trinity.”

“We replace the wretched piece of shit in charge with three beings who can work together while keeping each other honest with checks and balances. The three people who were destined to have the job. That’s how it’s similar to the Holy Trinity.”

“Precisely. Three.”

My gut clenched and I lurched forward in pain as part of the puzzle clicked together. Jimmy George Carrots' words blasted through my frontal lobe. I saw it in front of me as if it were happening now—Baaaaaaabeeeeey! Soooooo preeettyah. Threeeeeeeeeee!" he'd said.

I had smiled and corrected the silly ghost. I'd thought he'd been talking about her age. I'd been wrong "Actually, she's not even one yet," I had told the ghost.

He had shaken his head vehemently. "Onnnnnneah offfffffffffff threeeeeeeee!"

His statement had hit me as strange at the time. Now it made me want to scream with the injustice of it.

Letting go of my anger and fear, I stared at the man who I'd travelled to the Darkness with. He'd been telling me all along. I hadn't understood then and I didn't want to understand now.

But there was no choice. Destiny was set. We all were who we were meant to be.

"I believe that I know who two of the three are," I whispered. "That's what you've been trying to tell me."

"It is," he said.

I began to pace in a tight circle. It was insane, but it made sense. The Higher Power had been trying to end Shitty Ritchie since the beginning. And now... and now there was a second like him—one with multiple powers that mimicked the power that usually was assigned to only one—and it was my daughter. Two of the three of the trinity had been revealed. The Higher Power saw the writing on the wall and wanted to erase it before any could read it. There were so many problems, though. "Alana Catherine is a baby," I cried out. "Shitty Ritchie is a freaking cannibal. That isn't a

great combo. And who in the heck is the third? June? Jennifer? They're human. That doesn't compute." My voice sounded hysterical to my own ears. That was about right since I was considering peeling my own skin off my body right now.

"Daisy," Jimmy George Carrots said, putting his hands on my shoulders to calm me down. "You were a fully human Death Counselor until you dove into the minds of the dead. You changed your DNA. You're Immortal now."

"Holy hell. So, I just start dragging June or Jennifer into the minds of the dead?" I choked out. "Not sure how well that's gonna work. I might end up killing them. I already shoved June's heart back into her chest once. I really don't want to do that again. Ever. June has grandkids. Being the Higher Power isn't going to jive with that. She also makes cookies. I can't live without her cookies." I knew I was freaking the fuck out, but he'd suggested I say the first thing that came to mind. I'd gone there and then some. "And Jennifer? She's a fabulous high-functioning alcoholic with a ton of Botox and filler. She couldn't even move her face for a couple of months because she got a double dose. She's had a ghost go through her, but taking her on a field trip into someone's mind doesn't sound like it's going to end well."

The expression on Jimmy George Carrots' face was one of complete confusion. If I hadn't been about to drop to my knees and sob, I would have laughed.

"Daisy, you are not in charge of making anyone who they already are. Don't forget destiny has already been set. The third will step forward when the time is right," he promised.

"God," I said, wildly embarrassed. "I just sounded like I had a major God complex."

"Happens to the best of us," Jimmy George Carrots said, wrapping me in a comforting hug.

“Tell me this... if you can,” I said, hugging him back. “Is our job to keep Shitty Ritchie and Alana Catherine safe until the time comes? You know, when the third of the trinity is revealed?”

“I believe so,” he said, stepping back and smiling. “I have not seen more than that.”

“Will I know it when the third arrives?”

He nodded. “You will.”

“How can Gideon and I help Alana Catherine?”

“Love her,” Jimmy George Carrots said. “Love her with all of your heart.”

That we could do.

“Oh, do you happen to know how long the sparkly skin is going to last?”

Jimmy George Carrots laughed. “One week.”

“Okay,” I said, slightly calmer. One sparkly week was doable. And we could have centuries before the third of the Trinity showed up. We’d just have to get good at ending the zombies and keeping my baby and the tiny turd safe. Gideon had multiple safe houses all over the world. I’d miss home, but keeping my child from harm was far more important. Living with Shitty Ritchie would be a challenge, but it was what it was. However, if he had the nards to ever offer me his sperm, he would lose his little willie. “I have one more question, Jimmy George Carrots. When the time comes, how do we get rid of the dictator?”

“How does anyone get rid of a dictator?” he countered. “Think back through history, child.”

Well, shit. All of the dictators I could think of had been assassinated. That could bring on the end in the Immortal world... unless the Trinity was ready to go.

That was my new goal. Keep two-thirds of the Trinity safe until the third is revealed, then offing the maniacal present Higher Power, while seamlessly putting the new Higher Powers in place.

Piece of cake. Not.

I sighed, groaned and sighed again. "You ready to go back?" I asked.

Jimmy George Carrots gifted me with his lovely smile. "I am. I wish you love, luck and millions of years of happiness."

I smiled back and wrapped my friend in a hug. It was time to go home.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“How long was I out? And what time is it?” I asked as I came to with a start on the couch, surrounded by my family and friends. Shitty Ritchie, who was a friend on thin ice, stood on the coffee table. His blue sweatsuit had been replaced with a Kelly-green one. His crazy hair looked like he’d stuck his finger in a socket and electrocuted himself to get it to stand up like a mad scientist. The tiny guy was still barefoot and strange, evidenced by the spastic jazz squares he was doing on the table.

I looked away from the dance exhibition on the table. My impulse was to slap the little nard. That would be mean. I wasn’t mean. I was confused. Was I mad at Shitty Ritchie? I didn’t think so, but why did I want to smack the miniature dude? Granted, he was very slapable, but he hadn’t done anything. Or, had he? I was sure I had something to say to him, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t find it.

My brain felt fuzzy and unfocused. I’d just dived into the mind of... the mind of... Whose mind had I gone into? I swallowed my scream. I didn’t want to alarm anyone. I was alarmed enough for everybody. Rubbing my forehead with my fingertips, I inhaled deeply, trying to calm my racing heart.

“Four days. You were out for four days. And it’s nine in the morning,” Gideon said, sounding stressed. He watched me like a hawk.

I couldn’t hide from Gideon if I tried. He knew me like I knew him—inside and out. While I was fairly sure I was fooling the others, I wasn’t pulling anything over on Gideon. He could sense my impending freakout.

With effort, I sat up, looked around, and then immediately reached for Alana Catherine. Gideon deposited her into my arms, and everything was right in my world... at least in this moment. Little by little, the fog in my head began to dissipate.

“You okay, corn nut?” Candy Vargo asked with her head tilted to the side. “You look kinda funny.”

“Fine,” I lied. “I’m cool... good... peachy.”

Candy raised a brow but didn’t say anything else. I took that as an excellent sign. I’d just deal with what was in front of me. The rest would come. It had to.

“Zander and Catriona are back,” Gideon told me, still eyeing me with concern.

“And they’re up to speed on the zombie situation,” Heather assured me.

“Great,” I said with a curt nod. I remembered the zombies. I remembered that Zander and Catriona had taken them out. The zombies had wanted June, or was it Jennifer? Crap.

I continued to take in the great room while silently begging my brain to catch up. The Grim Reaper had been busy in my absence. The ratty but comfortable furniture that Candy Vargo had conjured up for us was gone. In its place was the lovely décor we’d originally picked.

“How?” I asked, shaking my head in surprise. “It looks exactly the same as it did before the house blew up.” I had long-term memory. Perfect. I knew that the tiny jackass had blown up my house. It was the short term that was screwed.

“Shitty Ritchie is very sorry about that. That was very Merlin’s magic spermy nards of me,” the dummy in question announced. He’d clearly been hanging out with

Candy Vargo. Although, the spermy part was vintage Shitty Ritchie. Dude was gross. “I shall endeavor never to damage your boobing property again. I cannot guarantee that I will not destroy other people’s farting property, but I will refrain from demolishing yours, turd-baller!” He ended his promise with a pirouette that almost sent him flying off the table.

I stared at the idiot for a full minute. I knew in my gut he was a very important part of what I couldn’t recall, but for the life of me, I couldn’t figure it out.

Gideon sat down next to me. He wrapped his strong arms around me and tilted my head so it rested on his chest. “About the furniture, I have a photographic memory,” he stated.

He wasn’t going to push me for answers. It made me love the man more, and I didn’t think that was possible. Alana Catherine reached out until she was touching both of us. I had another moment of calm. The two most important people in the world to me were by my side. Gideon had the right idea. He wasn’t going to push me about what was wrong. I wasn’t going to push either. I would trust that my memory would return. Anything was possible. I simply had to believe.

I looked up at Gideon. “You have photographic memory?”

He chuckled when Heather rolled her eyes and Candy Vargo flipped him off. I held my breath for a hot sec, worried that Candy was about to set her hand on fire, but nothing explosive went down. I guessed that the birdie finger was considered okay again.

“No, I don’t have photographic memory,” he admitted. “Between me, Heather, June and Jennifer, we were able to piece it back together.”

“I helped, sharthole,” Candy Vargo said.

“No,” Heather corrected her. “You actually were a massive pain in the ass.”

“Thank you, corn nugget,” Candy said.

Heather threw her hands in the air in surrender. “I give up,” she muttered.

Tim walked over and sat on the other side of me. “Are you feeling well enough to talk about what was discussed between you and Jimmy George Carrots?” He handed me a glass of water that I gratefully accepted.

“Oh my God,” I choked out, spilling the water all over him. “It was Jimmy George Carrots. I dove into Jimmy George Carrots’ mind.”

Now, everyone was concerned. Hell, I was concerned. Back in the day when I’d first mind-dived, it took me a long time to recover—close to a week. Now? I simply came back tired and was back to myself within minutes. Today? Not so much.

“Where is Jimmy George Carrots?” I asked.

Before anyone could answer, Gram swooped into the room and landed on my lap. She gave Alana Catherine a quick kiss on the cheek, then gave one to me. “Daisy girl, you need to come on outside. It’s time.”

She didn’t have to explain. I knew what she meant. Jimmy George Carrots had accomplished what he’d stuck around to do, and now it was time for him to go. The terrifying part was that I couldn’t recall our conversation. I needed to get to my silly friend and ask him before he disappeared.

I practically levitated off the couch in my hurry to get to Jimmy George Carrots. My panic attack was so close I could taste it. “Gotta go,” I said, carrying my giggling baby like a football and using my other hand to block tackles. I literally knocked

Shitty Ritchie into a planter. Whatever. The dude had blown up my house. I'd apologize later. It was fourth down with three seconds to go, and I needed a Hail Mary to win.

I burst through the front door and then froze. When I saw Jimmy George Carrots in the yard, everything came roaring back in technicolor. If I thought I was about to have a panic attack because I couldn't remember, it was tenfold now that I could. I pressed my back against the wall of the porch as my knees buckled. With my baby safely cradled in my arms, I slowly slid down the wall to the ground.

What I wanted to do—needed to do—was pack and get the hell out of Dodge. I needed to gather Gideon, Alana Catherine and Shitty Ritchie. We had to move to a safe house before the Higher Power sent Its zombies. As I was about to announce our immediate departure at the top of my lungs, my child cupped my face in both of her gorgeous chubby, and slightly sticky hands.

“Mamamamama,” she babbled, pulling my head down so we were eye to eye. “Is okay. Carrots bye, bye, bye. Is okay. Say bye, bye, bye.”

I blinked and then I blinked again. Her words made me think of the NSYNC song—Bye Bye Bye. It was ironically apropos. I felt like a puppet on a string that was being manipulated by the Higher Power. I didn't like it, and neither did the dudes from NSYNC. I was pretty sure they got away from the psycho by the end of the video. I needed to do the same.

“Mamamama,” Alana Catherine insisted. “Lissen. Carrots. Bye, bye, bye.”

Jerking my mind out of boy band land, I focused on what my daughter was trying to tell me. In my heart, I already knew. I was the Death Counselor. This was part of my journey with the dead. In Jimmy George Carrot's case, I hadn't helped him, but he had helped me. He had given me a precious gift that could never be repaid. It was my

duty and my honor to see him off peacefully.

I looked up at the seer and smiled. I got to my feet and walked out into the yard. He was no longer a decaying corpse of a man. An ethereal and blinding golden glow surrounded him. It was no surprise that Jimmy George Carrots aka Ted was destined for the Light. His goodness was clear. I watched as his body was restored to what it had been before he'd passed. He was adorable.

“Daisy,” he said, his lovely smile shining bright. “Remember that I wish you love, luck and millions of years of happiness. You will find all that and more as long as your eyes are wide open and you lead with your heart.”

“Thank you, Jimmy George Carrots. Thank you for everything.”

“The pleasure was all mine, child.”

As he began to fade into the Light, I knew I would never see him again. It was both sad and beautiful. Alana Catherine reached her small hand out, and I walked her closer to the golden glow surrounding our silly friend as he faded away for good.

“Ohhhhhhhhhhh,” Alana Catherine squealed as she touched the Light.

I joined her. It was warm and inviting—felt like silky liquid. My baby waved bye, bye, bye to the ghost and he waved back. Her delighted giggle made the moment even more magical. We waited until Jimmy George Carrots was completely gone before I turned away.

I would be no one's puppet on a string. I am Daisy Leigh Amara Jones. I am the Death Counselor. I am the Angel of Mercy. I'm a mother, a wife, a sister and a friend. I was not going to be the Higher Power's bitch.

Not today.

Not ever.

CHAPTER TWELVE

We gathered in the great room. Everyone was present—Charlie and June, Jennifer, Heather, Tim, Candy Vargo, Zander, Catriona, Gideon, Alana Catherine, Gram and Mr. Jackson, Shitty Ritchie and me. The only person missing was Jimmy George Carrots. I felt his absence keenly, but was comforted by the knowledge that he was finally at rest. He'd done me a solid, and I'd return the favor by making him proud.

The real highlight of the morning was that June had made her famous peanut butter cookies. I'd helped myself to six already and was aiming to make it ten. Candy Vargo was covered in cookie crumbs. She was going at the plate like she hadn't eaten in a decade. I didn't blame her. June's cookies were that damned good.

“Okay people, before I share the conversation that I had with Jimmy George Carrots, I want you to get me up to speed on what happened here in the past four days, please,” I said and then gasped as I watched Alana Catherine get up and start toddling around the coffee table. She was grinning at me like she'd brokered world peace. It was insane. She shouldn't be able to walk at her age... but she was furniture surfing like a champ. Hell, she shouldn't have been able to talk either, but she'd imparted some pretty spot-on wisdom lately.

My eyes watered as she let go of the coffee table and took several steps without any assistance.

“That happened,” Gideon said, pointing at our little miracle and smiling so hard his cheeks had to hurt.

“It happened while I was mind-diving?”

Gideon nodded, then gave me a sympathetic look filled with love and understanding.

“There will be a lot more firsts to see.”

“It’s okay.” I smiled at him. I was only a little upset that I’d missed her first steps but was thrilled that Gideon got to witness it. I had done my job and dove into the silly seer. I might have missed my daughter’s first steps, but I’d discovered the road map of how to keep her safe from the Higher Power for the rest of time. It was a trade I could live with.

“I’m not sure anything can top that,” I said with a laugh. “But tell me what else went on.”

“I got something,” Jennifer said, grinning like a fool.

Oh yes,” June said, clasping her hands together. “Tell Daisy. She’ll love it!”

Jennifer dunked a cookie in her wine and then let it rip. “Tim and Charlie helped me sign up on one of them DNA ancestry sites,” she explained. “I’ve got a real good feelin’ I’m about to find my pappy!”

I smiled outwardly, but winced internally. Jennifer might look fifty, but she was sixty-five. There was a good chance he wasn’t alive anymore. For her sake, I hoped he was.

“We’ve got some bets going,” she added with a cackle as she popped the wine-soaked cookie into her mouth then promptly spit it back out into a napkin. “That combo does not work, kids. Don’t try it at home.”

“Got it,” I said with a grin. “What’s the bet?”

Gram got into the game. “We’re all throwin’ our guesses into a hat about who Jennifer’s pappy might be. I guessed Bob Barker!”

“Of course, you did,” I told her.

“I’m thinking Walter Cronkite,” Jennifer volunteered with a wink. “But I’m hopin’ it’s Elvis. He’s a southern boy. There’s a two percent chance he might have visited Georgia and banged my momma.”

“You never know,” June said with a giggle.

“You got that right, June,” Jennifer said. “I’m gettin’ the results later today!”

“I guessed David Hasselhoff,” Shitty Ritchie bellowed. “The Knight Rider and an excellent crooner.”

“I hate to break it to you, little dude, but David Hasselhoff is only a few years older than Jennifer,” I informed him.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he huffed. “I plan to win!”

“Good luck with that, shart stain,” Candy Vargo told him.

Gideon pressed his temples and closed his eyes. The gals... and Shitty Ritchie were too much for him sometimes.

“Anything else?” I asked.

Zander spoke up. “The foster kids are doing wonderfully along with Missy and Amelia. Rafe and the gang have it well covered.”

“True that,” Catriona agreed with a smile and then sobered up quick. “However, I must say I’m blown away that the Higher Power has been reanimating the dead. That’s screwed up and every kind of illegal.”

“Punishable by death,” Heather reminded everyone.

I held up a hand. “We’ll get to that soon enough.”

The gasps were loud. I didn’t blame them. I’d now confused and probably terrified everyone in the room. I was iffy myself, but since there was no third part of the trinity yet, death for the Higher Power would have to wait... hopefully a very long time.

Shitty Ritchie raised his hand. I considered not calling on him, but decided against it. Honestly, it didn’t matter if I ignored the turd. When he wanted to talk, he talked.

“I’d like to announce that I’m moving to Georgia,” Shitty Ritchie informed the group. “If anyone happens to know of an open cave that I could squat in, I’d be ever so grateful.”

“For the love of everything farkin’ pathetic,” Candy Vargo grunted. “You can live in my guest house. But lemme tell you somethin’ now, nard. If you behave like a spoiled little trash tornado, I’ll tan your ugly bahookey until there’s nothin’ left of it. We clear on that, corn boob?”

“Very!” Shitty Ritchie screamed. “It’s thrilling!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Candy said with an eye roll. “I got kids. I’m a ball-eatin’ mom. And I don’t give a testicle if you like me, but you’re gonna be sweet with my kids. I’m a neurotic, helicopter, Karen parent. If you don’t like it, you can lump it. I’ll be bossin’ your bahookey too.”

“Oh my God!” Shitty Ritchie shouted as he bounced with excitement. “My therapist is going to make so much money off me this year!”

If he was the future of the Immortals, we were in trouble. I didn’t have the heart to tell him he was going to continue to live in hiding and not with Candy Vargo, but I’d get to that shortly. However, if he lived with Gideon and me for a few centuries, we could knock some sense and manners into the tiny dude... or we could try .

“Is everyone ready?” I asked.

“Born that way, mothersharer,” Candy answered.

Tim had his notebook out and he was ready to take notes. I wasn’t quite as ready, but there was no time like the present to freak the fuck out of everyone.

“Okay, here we go...” I said, then proceeded to lay it out.

It took all of an hour to share the entire encounter since there were so many questions. Gideon had gone completely silent when he learned of Alana Catherine’s true calling. He didn’t like it. Neither did I, but it was her destiny.

The people closest to me were silent and contemplative. I’d just unloaded information that would change the order of how the Immortals had existed for millions of years. The smart thing to do would be to alert the Goddesses of the Darkness about what was going to happen, but since we most likely had hundreds of years to get used to the idea, we could wait. If anyone fought us on it, I would destroy them. My daughter was my priority. Period.

“I’m still not satisfied as to why the Higher Power sent zombies after June,” Charlie said. His voice was tight, and he was holding back his magic with effort.

“Or me,” Jennifer reminded us.

I shook my head. “The only guess I can make is that it was leverage for a trade,” I replied.

Charlie nodded. It was jerky and terse. I didn’t blame him. His love for June was absolute, just like my love for Alana Catherine. He stood up and motioned to both of the women in question. “Stand over there,” he instructed, pointing to the archway in the kitchen. “With your backs to me, please walk across the room.”

I knew what he was doing. He was checking for footprints. Only Immortals had footprints, so to speak. If either June or Jennifer had them, the plot would change dramatically.

June and Jennifer did as asked. Charlie examined the ground they walked with scientific precision. I didn’t see anything, but Charlie was far more experienced than me.

“Nothing” he said with a sigh of relief. “Neither June nor Jennifer has a footprint. As much as it disgusts me, and it does disgust me, I believe that Daisy’s assumption that the Higher Power was going to take a hostage was correct.”

“Can’t believe I’m gonna say this considering every shartin’ thing that could go wrong... like the entire corn ballin’ world comin’ to an end, but I do believe it’s time for a change,” Candy Vargo said. “Little concerned that the magical nard is gonna be in charge though.”

“Word,” Heather said, shaking her head. “I’ll take things that will give me nightmares for centuries for two hundred, Alex.”

Shitty Ritchie was positively elated. Although, he was far more into the part about

offing the Higher Power when the third of the trinity revealed itself than the fact that he would become part of the new and improved Higher Power.

Candy Vargo turned to Gram and pre-gamed her apology. “Gram, I’m about to cuss. If I don’t, I’m gonna pull a Shitty Ritchie and knock the house down. We cool?”

“Darlin’, you go right ahead. My knickers are in such a knot right now, I feel like droppin’ a few f-bombs myself.”

Candy walked over to the fireplace, stepped up onto the hearth, and inhaled deeply. She put a few toothpicks into her mouth and was ready to roll. “Motherfucker, shit, damn, son-of-a-bitch, fuckwit, shitstain, twat, shithole, fucker, fucker, fuck, fuck, fuck!” she bellowed.

We waited for more. She didn’t disappoint. The diatribe went on for a good ten minutes. Gram floated over to Alana Catherine and put her ghostly hands over her ears. I wasn’t sure it helped, but the gesture was appreciated.

When Candy was finished, she stepped off the hearth and sat down on the couch. She petted my dogs like nothing had happened.

“You feel better?” Heather asked Candy with a grin.

“Much, corn nut,” Candy Vargo told her. “While I’m gettin’ used to using more socially acceptable language like testicles and bahookey, sometimes a girl has to do what a girl has to do. I figure that a few poop words thrown out into the world is a better option than mass destruction.”

“Few might be exaggerating a bit,” Jennifer said with a laugh. “But I think the world’s a better place with a couple of Candy Vargo f-bombs in it.”

“Thank you, asshole,” Candy said.

“Welcome, asshole,” Jennifer replied.

Gideon stood up. He pinned me with an intense gaze. “It’s time to leave.”

He was right, and that’s when the reality of what we were about to do hit me like a ton of bricks. I felt it physically. I was about to leave behind part of my heart. I had no clue if I’d ever see any of the people sitting in this room again. My siblings weren’t here. I couldn’t even say goodbye to Rafe, Gabe, Abby and Prue. Missy wasn’t here. She’d been my BFF since we were kids. Amelia wasn’t here. She’d become like a sister to me. The need to scream was real.

I didn’t.

My eyes scanned the room. Heather was trying to hold it together. My sister was my rock. The thought of not seeing her was painful. I realized I’d never find out who Jennifer’s pappy was. I’d never eat one of June’s peanut butter cookies again or be graced by her kindness and beautiful giggle. But... we had to go.

The life of my daughter was on the line. I would do what I had to do. Most of the people we were leaving behind were Immortal. Forever was a long time. I would see them again. But June, Jennifer, Missy and Amelia... they would be long gone from this world by the time it was safe for us to come home. My eyes filled with tears, and they rolled down my cheeks. I knew I’d be crying for a long time.

“Umm... okay,” I whispered, trying to hold my shit together for my baby and everyone else. “It’s time to go. Gram, will you and Mr. Jackson come with us?”

“Yes, baby, we will,” she promised. “I ain’t never leavin’ you until it’s my time to move on.”

I nodded jerkily. And that's when I noticed Candy Vargo, the baddest of the badasses begin to cry. I knew she would miss me, Gideon, Alana Catherine and possibly even Shitty Ritchie, but Gram was her world. Gram was the mother she'd never had. It was devastating to watch Candy's heart break.

I started to hug everyone quickly. If I lingered too long, it would be harder to leave. The urgency to get going became very real now that the story had been told.

"I'm ready," I told Gideon as I scooped Alana Catherine into my left arm and Shitty Ritchie into my right. "It's time to go."

The explosion in the front yard rocked the house. The shock on my face and the faces of the people I loved was terrifying. Zander sprinted to the window and swore viciously.

"Change of plans," he ground out. "The zombies are back."

Gideon encircled our baby and me in his arms, and I threw up another protection ward around Alana Catherine, then glanced at Gideon. "Can we transport out of here?"

He shook his head. "I just tried. There's something blocking the magic."

"It's the Higher Power's magic," Shitty Ritchie hissed. "It's got us trapped like rats on a sinking ship!"

I frowned. "We fight, then?"

Gideon nodded. "No choice."

Crap. We'd waited too long to escape danger, and the danger had found us.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We went into motion like a well-oiled machine. The explosions outside continued. At the rate they were going, I was worried the house would cave in. Charlie chanted a few ancient words, and my home was suddenly stable.

“What did you do?” I asked. The blasts were still happening outside, but the house had stopped shaking.

“Reenforced the base and structure,” he replied. “It won’t come down now.”

“Can we get in and out of it?” Heather asked.

“Yes,” Charlie said. “It’s different from a ward.”

Without a word, Candy Vargo waved her hand and everyone was armed to the teeth. The coffee table was loaded down with more weapons if anyone wanted to double it up. Everyone did. Gideon took over and barked out orders.

“Heather and Catriona,” he directed. “Stay inside and protect Alana Catherine, Shitty Ritchie, June and Jennifer. They are not to come out.”

I enhanced the protection by placing a second ward around both my child and Shitty Ritchie .

“Agreed,” Heather said. Her tattoos swirled over her entire body. It was an eerie, scary and beautiful sight.

“Zander and Tim,” Gideon said. “Go out the back door and come around the house. Tim, right. Zander, left. The element of surprise might throw them. Let them think there are less of us until there’s not.”

Zander started to move but paused. “The magic belongs to only one. Only one zombie feeds the rest.”

“Clarify,” Candy Vargo grunted. The woman was carrying more daggers, swords and grenades than I thought possible.

Zander obliged. “When we battled them before, we realized that only one was fueling the others. They can only exist as long as the leader is alive.”

“How do you know which one is the leader?” Tim asked, placing daggers in his boots and guns in his pockets.

Normally, guns were moot. A bullet couldn’t kill an Immortal, but zombies were not Immortals. I took Tim’s lead and grabbed a gun.

“You won’t know which one is the leader. It’s not obvious,” Zander ground out.

Catriona jumped in. “It’s luck of the draw—total chance. We fought all three of them and didn’t make progress. It wasn’t until the right one died that all three went down.”

“Got it,” Candy Vargo said. The woman was glowing so brightly, I had to shield my eyes. “If one of them cocksuckers fights too long and hard, leave ‘em and go on to another. Just make sure you don’t die. I ain’t in the mood for a funeral.”

From her mouth...

“Gram, you and Mr. Jackson will stay back too,” I called out. “I don’t know what a

zombie can do to a ghost, and I don't want to find out. Also, keep the dogs inside. ”

“Roger that, Daisy girl,” Gram said. “Don't you worry about us.”

That wasn't possible. I was worried about everyone right now.

“Do you think the shart booger will show up?” Shitty Ritchie asked, his voice a sharp squeak. He was forbidden to join the battle, but that didn't stop the tiny dude from arming himself. He'd grabbed a dagger and a grenade from the coffee table. They were bigger than he was, but I didn't comment.

“Who in the hell is the shart booger?” Candy Vargo yelled over another round of explosions.

“The Higher Power, corn nut,” Shitty Ritchie yelled back.

The exchange made me freeze. How would we know if the Higher Power was here? It looked like something different to everyone.

“Shitty Ritchie,” I said, putting more knives into my belt. “What did the Higher Power look like to you?” It might not matter, but knowledge was always good. For all I knew, It might appear in another form every time. I was assuming It would look like Bob Barker or Monty Hall, but I wasn't stupid enough to assume anything. I had no time to make an ass out of me or anyone else.

“Dolly Parton,” he told me. “But it wasn't the real Dolly. It was fake Dolly. And another time it was Mark Zuckerberg. And another time it was George Washington.”

“Motherfarker,” Candy Vargo grumbled. “How many times have you seen the Higher Power?”

“Way too many,” Shitty Ritchie said with a shudder.

Getting a solid physical ID on the Higher Power wasn't going to be possible. However, the Higher Power often looked like what a person consciously or unconsciously chose It to look like. “People,” I said. “Pick a douche celebrity.”

“Ain't got time for games right now, corn nut,” Candy Vargo grouched. “Have you lost your dang testies?”

“I have,” I confirmed. “It usually appears as something that we've thought about or discussed. I say we call it now, so if It shows up, we know it's the Higher Power.”

“Brilliant!” Shitty Ritchie screeched. “I vote for...”

“Wait,” Tim said. “We need to pick someone none of us likes. It will be easier to end It if we have to.”

“We can't end It,” Charlie ground out. “The third of the trinity hasn't revealed itself. If we end the Higher Power, we end everything.”

“FUCK,” Candy Vargo bellowed. “He's right. Pick someone nobody wants to off. Someone un-off-able.”

I kind of doubted that the Higher Power would show up on the earthly plane, but at this point anything was possible. I might not want to believe it, but denying it could be catastrophic.

“Tom Hanks,” I said. “Everyone loves Tom Hanks. There's nothing not to love.”

“Bingo, corn hole,” Candy said. “All you shart stains think about Tom Hanks.”

“Loved him in Big !” Shitty Ritchie gushed.

The time for chit chat was over. I scanned the room. Heather held Alana Catherine in her arms. Catriona was at her side with Shitty Ritchie on her lap. Both of the women were armed and very dangerous. That was outstanding. June and Jennifer were with them.

Jennifer had an open laptop in her hands. She was waiting for news on her pappy. Since we weren't leaving just yet, maybe I'd get to find out the name of her mysterious father. I'd make that my goal, along with keeping my loved ones safe and staying alive .

Having goals was good. Reaching them was better.

There were ten. Ten zombies. They didn't look like the zombies from TV or the movies. The only reason that zombie was the correct term to use was because they'd been risen from the dead. All ten looked mostly human.

There were six of us. It wasn't bad odds. We'd faced far worse and came out on top. My entire yard looked like a gutted-out war zone. Again, I was glad we lived in the middle of nowhere, far from the populated town. The chance of the cops showing up was slim.

The craters were deep, and most of the trees had been uprooted. Small fires smoldered and the air was thick with smoke. The scent wafting surrounding us was rancid. The light breeze carried the scent directly to us. It smelled of dead and decaying bodies, which shouldn't have been much of a surprise considering the enemy. The Higher Power was a sick and evil person. Reanimating the dead was atrocious. A small part of me felt sorry for the bodies standing in front of us. They'd had no say in this. They were being used.

I reminded myself that they were no longer human. Ending them wasn't taking a life. They were already dead. For all I knew, their souls had gone into the Light. They might have been wonderful in their human lives. But now? Now, they were not wonderful. They were killing machines created by someone who should not be in charge. Someday, that would change. Today would not be that day. Today, we had to end the madness that wanted to end us.

"Those are some ugly bitches," Candy Vargo whispered as we stood on the front porch and eyed the enemy.

The explosions had stopped, and they weren't advancing. Tim and Zander had not joined us yet. They would wait for the right time. Each Immortal present was well-versed in battle. I stood between Candy Vargo and Gideon. Charlie was to Gideon's right. We were a formidable group, but the zombies showed no fear. They'd probably been programmed that way.

"Agreed," Gideon said. "And we're about to put them out of their and our misery."

"Hell to the yes," Candy grunted.

The zombies stood shoulder to shoulder in my front yard. They looked exactly as described by Zander and Catriona. Their eyes were milky white and soulless. It was disturbing. Each was bald and each was toothless. They didn't resemble cadavers, but they didn't appear to have many human qualities left either. The Higher Power had chosen men—all men. They were large in stature and muscular.

One stepped forward.

"You think that's the leader?" Candy questioned quietly.

"Doubtful," Charlie answered. "The Higher Power is too smart to play that way. It

knows that Zander and Catriona defeated Its minions recently. The jig is up on how they work. We're going to have to end them by process of elimination."

"Why aren't they coming for us?" I asked, tightening my hand on the gun in my pocket. The air was calm but filled with impending menace.

Gideon answered without taking his eyes off the prize. "I surmise it will go as before. They will state their request. We'll say, fuck you and then they die."

My brows shot up. "That was succinct."

"I'm good like that," he replied.

"Give us the child and the tiny one. We know they are in the house," the zombie bellowed. His robotic voice rocked the earth beneath his feet, and several more trees fell. "We don't want to kill you. No violence is necessary. The choice is yours."

"Lemme tell you somethin', fucker," Candy Vargo shouted with two toothpicks hanging out of her mouth. "You shits ain't gettin' nobody. You fucked up the dang yard. Looks like hell. Gonna take me a fuckn' week to get this back in shape and that pisses me the fuck off. I got shit to do and cleanin' up after a bunch of sorry lookin' turd stains ain't on the agenda. I'm gonna suggest to take your dead zombie-assed carcasses back to the shithole you crawled out of and tell the Higher Power to fuck Itself. Choice is yours, dickholes."

That was when everything went to Hell. Fast.

The battle started before I'd had time to digest Candy's profane monologue. Pissing off zombies wasn't for the lighthearted.

"Go, go, go!" Charlie commanded as he dove off the porch and charged the zombies.

He didn't have to ask twice. We were right behind him. Zander and Tim joined the fray and the bloodbath commenced. I fought like my life depended on it... because it did. They were unlike any enemy we'd come up against. The lack of fear they possessed made them practically invincible.

"Shit," I hissed as the razor-sharp blade of a sword sliced a deep wound in my arm. I knew it would heal, and I had another arm. As the blood spurted, I went for my gun with my good hand. I'd tried magic multiple times and had failed. Daggers didn't affect them. Maybe a conventional weapon would do the trick. It was worth a try. I unloaded a full clip on the sword-wielding freak and barely did a lick of damage.

"Motherfucker," Candy growled. She was glowing bright orange and fighting a zombie hand-to-hand. She was winning, but just by a hair.

"Find the leader," Zander shouted as he too was grappling hand-to-hand with another zombie. The zombie had lost an arm and a leg and still fought like a rabid dog.

I left the abomination who didn't go down with the gun and sprinted to another. It was chaotic and the zombies looked identical. I couldn't tell if the one I was fighting was one I'd already attacked. The Higher Power was diabolically brilliant.

Charlie battled like a Tasmanian devil on steroids. His power was out of control as he ripped limb after limb from the zombies who came for him. It didn't stop them, but they couldn't stop Charlie either. I would never want to fight a foe like the Immortal Enforcer. He was one of the deadliest beings alive. But Gideon... Gideon was the OG of deadly badasses.

I spared a glance at the love of my life and almost lost an arm because of it. Gideon was on fire. Literally. His entire body was in flames. It was a terrifying sight and I was glad I'd witnessed it before. If I hadn't, I would have freaked out and gone to his aid. The truth of the matter was that the flames didn't touch his skin, but they could

burn the enemy to a crisp.

However, this enemy didn't burn. This enemy was like no other enemy we'd faced. The longer it went on, the more worried I became. If they tore us apart enough, they might get what they came for. Granted, Heather and Catriona would put up one hell of a fight, but if the six of us couldn't take them out, I wasn't sure they could either.

I fought with renewed strength and resolve. The Higher Power wasn't going to get Its hands on my daughter and Shitty Ritchie.

"Daisy," Tim yelled. "Behind you. "

I turned around, but I had three coming at me from the front. It was a shitshow—a bloody one. Tim launched himself into the air and landed behind me. We were back-to-back fighting for our lives. Immortals were difficult to kill, but decapitation always worked. Keeping my head on my body was the name of the game.

"GOT IT," Tim shouted as all the zombies fell to the ground and instantly turned to ash.

I dropped to my knees, sure I was about to throw up. The silence after the storm was loud. The scent of dead and decaying bodies intensified as the ashes of those who never should have existed blew in the wind.

Gideon was by my side in an instant. He'd fared pretty well. He was cut up but he was in one piece. Tim was severely bruised and bleeding, but other than that, he was riding high that he'd nailed the leader. He was my hero. Heck, he was everyone's hero right now. My socially awkward and mild-mannered buddy was a maniac in battle.

Charlie, who was the only one of us who looked somewhat normal, helped Zander

and Candy Vargo. Zander had lost a leg, but it was quickly regenerating. Candy's missing arm was coming back, too. I hadn't lost an appendage, but I'd been stabbed more times than I could count. However, the wounds were knitting together with speed. It felt itchy, and it burned, but it was better than the alternative.

I laughed. I couldn't help it. We were like a weird science fiction fantasy story come to life. It was nuts.

I saw Heather pop her head out of the door. "Is the coast clear?" she called out.

"Yes," Charlie confirmed, scanning the area for more danger. When he was satisfied that it was over for now, he waved his hand for all to join us.

That was a mistake. We didn't know it yet... but we would very soon. Hindsight was twenty-twenty. Real life was not.

Gram and Mr. Jackson were the first out of the door. They zipped around and checked on everyone. June came out with a plate of peanut butter cookies in her hands. Charlie strode to her and wrapped her in his arms. I wasn't sure if June had watched the battle from inside the house, but I hoped not. She was human, or we thought she was, and seeing Immortals battle wasn't something she should witness. Heather came next with Alana Catherine in her arms and Catriona carried Shitty Ritchie. The people and the cookies were a welcome sight.

"Where's Jennifer?" Tim asked as he gave June a hug and helped himself to a cookie.

"Oh!" June said with a smile, leaning on her husband. "The results of her DNA test came back, and she's downloading them now."

"Exciting," Tim said. "I hope it's Elvis. Jennifer would be thrilled."

The fact that we were basically back to normal after the most abnormal fight I'd ever been part of was surreal. But that seemed to be how the Immortals chose to live. Every moment was precious—especially ones with those we loved.

Gideon took Alana Catherine from Heather, and a little family group hug ensued. I got wet, sloppy kisses and returned them with pleasure. Our baby had an iron grip on Gideon's hair. I didn't think there was a single thing in the world he would have loved more. If Alana Catherine kept it up, he'd be sporting a bald spot on the side of his head. My man would wear that bald spot with pride.

"Daisy," Gideon finally said to me. "We still need to leave. It's not safe here."

He was correct. There was no telling when the next army of zombies would show up. We'd gotten lucky this time. We weren't going to stick around for a next time..

"Yep," I agreed. "Let me say bye to Jennifer one more time, and then we're out."

"Be quick," he said, putting Alana Catherine on his shoulders. "I'll grab Shitty Ritchie and we can leave as soon as you're done."

I nodded and made my way back to the house. I was sad that the last memory of my home would be of the zombie battle, but the fact that we'd won would have to suffice.

"What the actual FUCK?" Candy shouted.

I turned around so fast, I got dizzy.

From the ashes of the dead zombies, a body rose. The back of the male figure was facing us, but the shape was very familiar—very, very, very familiar.

I sprinted to Gideon. He had Alana Catherine on his shoulders and Shitty Ritchie in his arms. I grabbed my daughter and hid her behind me. Gideon did the same with Shitty Ritchie.

Glancing down at Shitty Ritchie, I mouthed the word, stay. He nodded and plastered himself to Gideon's leg. I kept my hands on my baby as I settled her behind me. I hoped like hell she would stay put. Her warm, small body behind me was the scariest thing that I'd ever felt. I wanted to toss her back into the house, but the lone figure was turning around. The time to hide was over.

"Tom Fucking Hanks," Candy Vargo barked with disgust as the Higher Power smiled at us. The smile didn't reach fake Tom Hanks' eyes. I didn't expect it to. The Higher Power felt no compassion for anything or anyone. "Imagine that, motherfuckers."

"I've come to this appalling plane to make an offer," Fake Tom Hanks said.

It was beyond surreal to see Tom Hanks standing in my decimated yard, knowing it was definitely not Tom Hanks.

"Maybe Its offering sperm," Shitty Ritchie whispered.

I wanted to whack the back of his head. I did no such thing. I stayed as still as a statue.

"State your offer," Charlie said flatly. "I would imagine I already know our answer, but we'll humor you."

Fake Tom Hanks didn't like that. His eyes flashed a frightening silver and his smile became a sneer. Alana Catherine grew squirmy behind me. My hands began to sweat as I attempted to keep her hidden without looking like I was hiding anything.

“I know what you people are up to,” Fake Tom Hanks snarled. “I’m here to tell you it will not work. In fact, if you continue on this foolish folly, it will cost all of you dearly. And I mean all of you. Anything or anyone you hold dear—Immortal or human—will be slowly and systematically destroyed. Am I making myself clear?”

“As mud, motherfucker,” Candy Vargo shot back.

Fake Tom Hanks went on as if he hadn’t just been insulted by the Keeper of Fate. Alana Catherine’s wiggling intensified. Shit was going south fast.

Gideon noticed and tried to speed it along. “State your terms,” he ground out. “We have places to be and things to do.”

Fake Tom Hank’s brows shot up. “Very bold of you, Grim Reaper. I’d suggest you keep your attitude in check.”

Gideon didn’t back down. It was known to both that he couldn’t kill the Higher Power, and the Higher Power couldn’t kill the Grim Reaper. The balance would be altered, and the world would end. “I’d suggest that you stop reanimating the dead. It’s illegal and the punishment is death—according to laws you created. And I’d also suggest you get to the point of your uninvited visit. We’re busy people.”

Fake Tom Hanks turned a bright red. It looked like he might have a heart attack. However, the Higher Power had no heart, metaphorically speaking. Fake Tom Hanks’ jaw worked furiously. He didn’t like being backtalked. Too bad, so sad. This needed to be over. I wasn’t sure how much longer my baby would stay behind me.

“I will make a trade,” It said.

“Gettin’ bored, shart stain,” Candy Vargo commented. “Loved you in Sleepless in Seattle , but this here performance is kinda stale.”

“I will take Richard Smith,” Fake Tom Hanks ground out. “If you give me Richard Smith, I will leave the girl child alone. I will never go after her again.”

“Who in the actual fuck is Richard Smith?” Candy Vargo demanded.

I was pretty sure she was fully back in the cussing Candy Vargo mode and leaving the poop-word free Candy Vargo behind.

“That’s me,” Shitty Ritchie called out, giving his hiding place up.

The man really had only two brain cells, and they were definitely not connected.

I closed my eyes for a brief moment. I’d told Gideon, the love of my life—my other half, that I would leave him if he didn’t protect Alana Catherine. I was willing to die for her. Was I willing to sacrifice Shitty Ritchie for the safety of my daughter? I knew, and clearly the Higher Power knew, that there needed to be three—a trinity—to remove It from power. If It eliminated one of the three, the transfer would never happen, and It could go on terrorizing the Immortal and human world forever.

Gideon glanced over at me. I looked back at him and shook my head no. I would not let Shitty Ritchie die. That wasn’t mine or anyone else’s call to make.

And then Richard Smith aka Shitty Ritchie chimed in.

“Let fake Tom Hanks take me,” he whispered. “I’m tired. That shart sperm won’t ever stop. I’ll be running until the end of time. I’m a lucky guy that I finally know what it means to have friends. I can die a complete person due to that. I’m sad that I never got to put my peepee in the love cavity, but, alas, some things are not meant to be. Let me die for my friends. It would make me proud. However, you have to promise me if you ever have a son that you’ll name him Shitty Ritchie in my honor.”

I couldn't believe that I could laugh in the face of what was going down, but I could and I did. Shitty Ritchie was a piece of work and he was going nowhere fast.

"No deal," I said. "Richard Smith stays and you will leave. The third of the trinity that you fear will take centuries to arrive. You have nothing to fear."

"Yet," Candy Vargo muttered.

Fake Tom Hanks began to laugh. He laughed so hard he fell to the ground in hysterics. It was unsettling to watch. There was no joy in the laughter—no humor. It sounded unhinged. Crawling back to his feet, he eyed me with furious disdain.

I had to admit, it was off-putting to be sneered at by Tom Hanks, fake or not.

"The third exists, Angel of Mercy," It snarled. "You've hidden her in a safehouse."

Shit. It had to be Tory. Why didn't we think of that? She was at Candy Vargo's when the zombies had paid a visit. She was old. She didn't look it, but that was beside the point. The only piece of the puzzle that didn't fit was the human-ish part. The positive amidst all the horrible was that June and Jennifer were safe.

"Tory," Gideon murmured under his breath.

"Bingo."

"Oh my gosh y'all," Jennifer yelled from the front porch, holding her laptop high. She was smiling, but also seemed shaky and pale. "I found out. I know who my pappy is!"

Fake Tom Hanks' eyes narrowed to slits and he zoned in on Jennifer. I wasn't the only one who noticed. Was the Higher Power about to start making good on the threat

of destroying everything and everyone we loved?

Candy Vargo, made a run for Jennifer to shove her back into the house.

She was too late.

In a screaming fit of rage, Fake Tom Hanks sent a bolt of electricity straight at Jennifer's chest. The expression of shock and then agony on my dear friend's face made me scream.

As she fell to the ground, blood gushed from the wound. "Did Tom Hank's just murder me? That's just awful," she choked out right before she passed out.

Tim's scream sounded inhuman. He was next to Jennifer so fast I didn't see him move. He held his dying friend in his arms and sobbed uncontrollably. Tim was a healer and was sending magic through her body as fast as he could. It wasn't working. Gram and Mr. Jackson hovered above and wailed. Candy held the laptop in her hands as June and Heather attempted to stop the bleeding to no avail. Everyone was crying.

Fake Tom Hanks had a few parting words. "My work here is done," he shouted gleefully. "The third has been destroyed. There will be no trinity now."

I felt like an animal, and Fake Tom Hanks was my prey. I wanted It dead. It was wrong. I knew and I didn't care. I wasn't thinking straight. Maybe if I just beat the living hell out of It, that would work. Quickly reminding myself that murder was off the table, I took off at a sprint that rendered me invisible. That bitch was going down. The Higher Power had just killed a human—an innocent human. My friend. Jennifer wasn't part of the trinity. That wasn't possible. How in the hell was a human part of an Immortal trinity?"

Right as I was about to pounce on my prey, the Higher Power disappeared in a blast of rainbow glitter. I was lying face-down in the dirt where Fake Tom Hanks had stood only seconds ago. I'd failed.

Gideon picked me up and held me tight. I felt another set of arms go around me and a curly-haired head rest on my shoulder. The arms were female. Heather, Catriona and June were across the yard with Jennifer. Who was hugging me?

"Hi, mom," Alana Catherine said when I turned my head to figure the mystery out.

She wasn't a baby. She was the twenty-year-old version, who I'd met on the Higher Power's plane.

"Oh my God," I cried out as I threw myself at her and held her tight. "Why? How?"

"Sorry, I'm a little late," she said, smiling at me. "I kept trying, but wasn't able to age until now."

Gideon was completely shell-shocked. He stared at our daughter in wonder. She glanced over at her dad and smiled.

"Hi, dad," she greeted him.

"Umm... hi," he choked out. "Is this... you know... umm... permanent?"

Alana Catherine shrugged. "Not sure, but I'm here for a reason. We have work to do."
,"

She took each of our hands in hers and led us to where Jennifer lay dying in Tim's arms. The sight was heartbreaking, and my tears wouldn't stop. I immediately dropped to the ground and put my hands on her cold body. With all I had, I let my

magic flow into her.

Shitty Ritchie and the grown version of Alana Catherine stood together side by side. They looked down at Jennifer with pure sadness in their eyes. I wasn't convinced that Jennifer was the third of the trinity, but their expressions gave me pause.

"Her chest isn't moving," June said in a hushed tone.

Charlie touched Jennifer's forehead and closed his eyes. "She's not gone yet."

Heather was still frantically trying to stop the blood seeping out of Jennifer's chest. "How is she still alive? A human can't withstand that kind of blow."

"Welp," Candy Vargo said, staring slack-jawed at the computer screen. "I do believe I can answer that fuckin' question."

We all looked at her.

"Remember when Tim said he donated some little swimmers about sixtyish years back?"

"Yes," I said, feeling weird and wonky.

"Well, it's lookin' like Jennifer's bitch of a momma paid a visit to that there sperm bank to get herself knocked up. Says right here in black and white that Tim's her pappy."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Heather screamed.

"Do I fuckin' look like I'm fuckin' kidding you, assface?" Candy Vargo shot back, pulling a sharp jeweled dagger from her belt and handing it to Heather. "Slit her

open. I'll take care of Tim. You start cuttin' on my word."

Heather nodded and held the dagger poised above Jennifer's already bleeding chest.

Tim was speechless, but ripped off his mail uniform jacket and shirt with haste. "Jennifer's my daughter. Jennifer's my daughter." Tears flowed down his face. He was devastated and thrilled. "Jennifer's my beautiful daughter. I love my daughter."

"Mazel tov, cake hole. Now, shut it, so I can work," Candy Vargo snapped. "And I don't need ya nekkid. I just need your wrists, jackass."

Without hesitation, Tim offered Candy both of his wrists.

I had no clue what was about to happen, but it wasn't going to be pretty. However, I wasn't moving. I might be needed. I'd slit my wrists for Jennifer any day of the week. I didn't think I could gut her, but it was looking like Heather was up for the job.

Shitty Ritchie and Alana Catherine began to glow. They both looked like ethereal rainbows. Tendrils of their magic filled the air and danced on the breeze.

"Keep that up, kids," Candy Vargo instructed. "Okay, Heather, on three... You're gonna slice her from collarbone to belly button. Tim, I'm gonna slit your wrists like they ain't never been slit. With the left hand, you feed Jennifer your blood."

"And the right?" he asked.

"You're gonna punch it right into the hole Heather's about to cut."

Tim nodded. Heather nodded. I almost puked in my mouth.

"Charlie," Candy said. "Get your ass up by Jennifer's head and make sure Tim's

blood goes down her throat.”

“On it,” Charlie said.

“Gideon, light your ass on fire. It’s about to get real fuckin’ cold here and we need to keep Jennifer warm.”

Gideon immediately went up in flames. He got close enough to keep everyone warm but was far enough not to set anyone else on fire.

“Zander and Catriona, need y’all to patrol the grounds and make sure none of them fuckin’ zombies come back.”

They exited immediately.

“What about me?” I asked. “What can I do?”

Candy leveled me with a look. “Hope and pray that this works, Angel of Mercy. Otherwise, Jennifer’s gonna join Gram and the ghosts.” Candy paused for only a moment, then got back to business. “One. Two. Three.”

It all happened so fast, I wasn’t sure I’d even seen it. Heather cut Jennifer from top to bottom with no hesitation. Tim’s hands were barely attached to his body after Candy made her cuts. He immediately shoved one hand into Jennifer’s open body and his other wrist into her mouth. Charlie held Tim’s hand steady so the blood wouldn’t be wasted and gently massaged Jennifer’s throat so it would go down.

Candy had been correct. The temperature dropped dramatically. Gideon stepped a little closer and kept everyone warm. I’d seen some stuff in my time, but nothing as harrowing as this. I prayed hard just like Candy had told me to, but I wasn’t sure who would get the message. I hoped it was the universe and not the Higher Power.

After what felt like a year, but in reality, was only a few minutes, Candy announced we were done. Jennifer still wasn't moving. With a wave of her hands and a few lines of a melodic and ancient chant, Candy Vargo closed the wounds on Jennifer's body. Tim healed up fast and gently pulled Jennifer back into his arms. He kept kissing her hair and whispering to her. It was tragic.

The temperature went back to normal and Gideon joined me along with Alana Catherine and Shitty Ritchie.

"What happens now?" I asked.

Candy shook her head and picked her ear with the toothpick that had been in her mouth. "We wait."

"How long?" I pressed.

"Don't know," she replied. "But if she ain't back after a couple of days, I'm gonna say she's a goner."

Tim's sobs began again, and my heart felt crazy heavy in my chest.

"Do you believe that Jennifer is the third of the trinity?" I asked Candy.

She shrugged. "You need to ask them." She pointed to Shitty Ritchie and Alana Catherine.

Both nodded in unison. One imperative part of the future of the Immortal world might die. This was unacceptable. Beyond unacceptable.

"Shitty Ritchie, Alana Catherine," I said. "Is there anything you can do?"

“I don’t know,” my daughter said. “But we can try.”

They knelt down on the ground next to their missing piece and began to glow again. The colorful magic seeped into Jennifer, and she slowly but surely began to breathe. It wasn’t steady. It wasn’t sure or strong, but it was something.

Jennifer would live. I felt it in my bones and my heart.

And what came next? Well, that was obvious. It was time we took out the Higher Power. For good.

The End... for now

Want the next book in the series??? Go [HERE](#) to read Semi-Charmed Midlife!

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:31 am

“I didn’t leave that bowl in the sink,” I muttered to no one as I stared in confusion at the blue piece of pottery with milk residue in the bottom. “Wait. Did I?”

Slowly backing away, I ran my hands through my hair that hadn’t seen a brush in days—possibly longer—and decided that I wasn’t going to think too hard about it. Thinking led to introspective thought, which led to dealing with reality, and that was a no-no.

Reality wasn’t my thing right now.

Maybe I’d walked in my sleep, eaten a bowl of cereal, then politely put the bowl in the sink. It was possible.

“That has to be it,” I announced, walking out of the kitchen and avoiding all mirrors and any glass where I could catch a glimpse of myself.

It was time to get to work. Sadly, books didn’t write themselves.

“I can do this. I have to do this.” I sat down at my desk and made sure my posture didn’t suck. I was fully aware it would suck in approximately five minutes, but I wanted to start out right. It would be a bad week to throw my back out. “Today, I’ll write ten thousand words. They will be coherent. I will not mistakenly or on purpose make a list of the plethora of ways I would like to kill Darren. He’s my past. Beheading him is illegal. I’m far better than that. On a more positive note, my imaginary muse will show his ponytailed, obnoxious ass up today, and I won’t play Candy Jelly Crush until the words are on the page.”

Two hours later...

Zero words. However, I'd done three loads of laundry—sweatpants, t-shirts and underwear—and played Candy Jelly Crush until I didn't have any more lives. As pathetic as I'd become, I hadn't sunk so low as to purchase new lives. That would mean I'd hit rock bottom. Of course, I was precariously close, evidenced by my cussing out of the Jelly Queen for ten minutes, but I didn't pay for lives. I considered it a win.

I'd planned on folding the laundry but decided to vacuum instead. I'd fold the loads by Friday. It was Tuesday. That was reasonable. If they were too wrinkled, I'd simply wash them again. No biggie. After the vacuuming was done, I rearranged my office for thirty minutes. I wasn't sure how to Feng Shui, but after looking it up on my phone, I gave it a half-assed effort.

Glancing around at my handiwork, I nodded. "Much better. If the surroundings are aligned correctly, the words will flow magically. I hope."

Two hours later...

"Mother humper," I grunted as I pushed my monstrosity of a bed from one side of the bedroom to the other. "This weighs a damn ton."

I'd burned all the bedding seven weeks ago. The bonfire had been cathartic. I'd taken pictures as the five hundred thread count sheets had gone up in flame. I'd kept the comforter. I'd paid a fortune for it. It had been thoroughly saged and washed five times. Even though there was no trace of Darren left in the bedroom, I'd been sleeping in my office.

The house was huge, beautiful... and mine—a gorgeously restored Victorian where I'd spent tons of time as a child. It had an enchanted feel to it that I adored. I didn't need such an enormous abode, but I loved the location—the middle of nowhere. The

internet was iffy, but I solved that by going into town to the local coffee shop if I had something important to download or send.

Darren, with the wandering pecker, thought he would get a piece of the house. He was wrong. I'd inherited it from my whackadoo grandmother and great-aunt Flip. My parents hadn't always been too keen on me spending so much time with Granny and Aunt Flip growing up, but I adored the two old gals so much they'd relented. Since I spent a lot of time in an imaginary dream world, my mom and dad were delighted when I related to actual people—even if they were left of center.

Granny and Flip made sure the house was in my name only—nontransferable and non-sellable. It was stipulated that I had to pass it to a family member or the Historical Society when I died. Basically, I had life rights. It was as if Granny and Aunt Flip had known I would waste two decades of my life married to a jackhole who couldn't keep his salami in his pants and would need someplace to live. God rest Granny's insane soul. Aunt Flip was still kicking, although I hadn't seen her in a few years.

Aunt Flip put the K in kooky. She'd bought a cottage in the hills about an hour away and grew medicinal marijuana—before it was legal. The old gal was the black sheep of the family and preferred her solitude and her pot to company. She hadn't liked Darren a bit. She and Granny both had worn black to my wedding. Everyone had been appalled—even me—but in the end, it made perfect sense. I had to hand it to the old broads. They'd been smarter than me by a long shot. And the house? It had always been my charmed haven in the storm.

Even though there were four spare bedrooms plus the master suite, I chose my office. It felt safe to me.

Thick Stella preferred my office, and I needed to be around something that had a heartbeat. It didn't matter that Thick Stella was bitchy and swiped at me with her deadly kitty claws every time I passed her. I loved her. The feeling didn't seem

mutual, but she hadn't left me for a twenty-three-year-old with silicone breast implants and huge, bright white teeth.

"Thick Stella, do you think Sasha should wear red to her stepmother's funeral?" I asked as I plopped down on my newly Feng Shuied couch and narrowly missed getting gouged by my cat. "Yes or no? Hiss at me if it's a yes. Growl at me if it's a no."

Thick Stella had a go at her privates. She was useless.

"That wasn't an answer." I grabbed my laptop from my desk. Deciding it was too dangerous to sit near my cat, I settled for the love seat. The irony of the piece of furniture I'd chosen didn't escape me.

"I think she should wear red," I told Thick Stella, who didn't give a crap what Sasha wore. "Her stepmother was an asshat, and it would show fabu disrespect."

Typing felt good. Getting lost in a story felt great. I dressed Sasha in a red Prada sheath, then had her behead her ex-husband with a dull butter knife when he and his bimbo showed up unexpectedly to pay their respects at the funeral home. It was a bloodbath. Putting Sasha in red was an excellent move. The blood matched her frock to a T .

Quickly rethinking the necessary murder, I moved the scene of the decapitation to the empty lobby of the funeral home. It would suck if I had to send Sasha to prison. She hadn't banged Damien yet, and everyone was eagerly awaiting the sexy buildup—including me. It was the fourth book in the series, and it was about time they got together. The sexual tension was palpable.

"What in the freaking hell?" I snapped my laptop shut and groaned. "Sasha doesn't have an ex-husband. I can't do this. I've got nothing." Where was my muse hiding? I needed the elusive imaginary idiot if I was going to get any writing done. "Chauncey,

dammit, where are you?”

“My God, you’re loud, Clementine,” a busty, beautiful woman dressed in a deep purple Regency gown said with an eye roll.

She was seated on the couch next to Thick Stella, who barely acknowledged her. My cat attacked strangers and friends. Not today. My fat feline simply glanced over at the intruder and yawned. The cat was a traitor.

Forget the furry betrayer. How in the heck did the woman get into my house—not to mention my office—without me seeing her enter? For a brief moment, I wondered if she’d banged my husband too but pushed the sordid thought out of my head. She looked to be close to thirty—too old for the asshole.

“Who are you?” I demanded, holding my laptop over my head as a weapon.

If I threw it and it shattered, I would be screwed. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d backed it up. If I lost the measly, somewhat disjointed fifty thousand words I’d written so far, I’d have to start over. That wouldn’t fly with my agent or my publisher

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“Don’t be daft,” the woman replied. “It’s rather unbecoming. May I ask a question?”

“No, you may not,” I shot back, trying to place her.

She was clearly a nutjob. The woman was rolling up on thirty but had the vernacular of a seventy-year-old British society matron. She was dressed like she’d walked off the set of a film starring Emma Thompson. Her blonde hair shone to the point of absurdity and was twisted into an elaborate up-do. Wispy tendrils framed her perfectly heart-shaped face. Her sparkling eyes were lavender, enhanced by the over-the-top gown she wore.

Strangely, she was vaguely familiar. I just couldn't remember how I knew her.

"How long has it been since you attended to your hygiene?" she inquired.

Putting my laptop down and picking up a lamp, I eyed her. I didn't care much for the lamp or her question. I had been thinking about Marie Condo-ing my life, and the lamp didn't bring me all that much joy. If it met its demise by use of self-defense, so be it. "I don't see how that's any of your business, lady. What I'd suggest is that you leave. Now. Or else I'll call the police. Breaking and entering is a crime."

She laughed. It sounded like freaking bells. Even though she was either a criminal or certifiable, she was incredibly charming.

"Oh dear," she said, placing her hand delicately on her still heaving, milky-white bosom. "You are so silly. The constable knows quite well that I'm here. He advised me to come."

"The constable?" I asked, wondering how far off her rocker she was.

She nodded coyly. "Most certainly. We're all terribly concerned."

I squinted at her. "About my hygiene?"

"That, amongst other things," she confirmed. "Darling girl, you are not an ace of spades or, heaven forbid, an adventuress. Unless you want to be an ape leader, I'd recommend bathing."

"Are you right in the head?" I asked, wondering where I'd left my damn cell phone. It was probably in the laundry room. I was going to be murdered by a nutjob, and I'd lost my chance to save myself because I'd been playing Candy Jelly Crush. The headline would be horrifying— Homeless-looking, Hygiene-free Paranormal Romance Author Beheaded by Victorian Psycho.

If I lived through the next hour, I was deleting the game for good.

“I think it would do wonders for your spirit if you donned a nice tight corset and a clean chemise,” she suggested, skillfully ignoring my question. “You must pull yourself together. Your behavior is fucked in the nob.”

I sat down and studied her. My about-to-be-murdered radar relaxed a tiny bit, but I kept the lamp clutched tightly in my hand. My gut told me she wasn’t going to strangle me. Of course, I could be mistaken, but Purple Gal didn’t seem violent—just bizarre. Plus, the lamp was heavy. I could knock her ladylike ass out with one good swing.

How in the heck did I know her? College? Grad School? The grocery store? At forty-two, I’d met a lot of people in my life. Was she with the local community theater troop? I was eighty-six percent sure she wasn’t here to off me. However, I’d been wrong about life-altering events before—like not knowing my husband was boffing someone young enough to have been our daughter.

“What language are you speaking?” I spotted a pair of scissors on my desk. If I needed them, it was a quick move to grab them. I’d never actually killed anyone except in fictitious situations, but there was a first time for everything.

Pulling an embroidered lavender hankey from her cleavage, she clutched it and twisted it in her slim fingers. “Clementine, you should know.”

“I’m at a little disadvantage here,” I said, fascinated by the batshit crazy woman who’d broken into my home. “You seem to know my name, but I don’t know yours.”

And that was when the tears started. Hers. Not mine.

“Such claptrap. How very unkind of you, Clementine,” she burst out through her stupidly attractive sobs.

It was ridiculous how good the woman looked while crying. I got all blotchy and red, but not the mystery gal in purple. She grew even more lovely. It wasn't fair. I still had no clue what the hell she was talking about, but on the off chance she might throw a tantrum if I asked more questions, I kept my mouth shut.

And yes, she had a point, but my hygiene was none of her damn business. I couldn't quite put my finger on the last time I'd showered. If I had to guess, it was probably in the last five to twelve days. I was on a deadline for a book. To be more precise, I was late for my deadline on a book. I didn't exactly have time for personal sanitation right now.

And speaking of deadlines...

"How about this?" My tone was excessively polite. I almost laughed. The woman had illegally entered my house, and I was behaving like she was a guest. "I'll take a shower later today after I get through a few pivotal chapters. Right now, you should leave so I can work."

"Yes, of course," she replied, absently stroking Fat Stella, who purred. If I'd done that, I would be minus a finger. "It would be dreadfully sad if you were under the hatches. "

I nodded. "Right. That would, umm... suck."

The woman in purple smiled. It was radiant, and I would have sworn I heard birds happily chirping. I was losing it.

"Excellent," she said, pulling a small periwinkle velvet bag from her cleavage. I wondered what else she had stored in there and hoped there wasn't a weapon. "I shall leave you with two gold coins. While the Grape Nuts were tasty, I would prefer that you purchase some Lucky Charms. I understand they are magically delicious."

“It was you?” I asked, wildly relieved that I hadn’t been sleep eating. I had enough problems at the moment. Gaining weight from midnight dates with cereal wasn’t on the to-do list.

“It was,” she confirmed, getting to her feet and dropping the coins into my hand. “The consistency was quite different from porridge, but I found it tasty—very crunchy.”

“Right... well... thank you for putting the bowl in the sink.” Wait. Why the hell was I thanking her? She’d wandered in and eaten my Grape Nuts.

“You are most welcome, Clementine,” she said with a disarming smile that lit up her unusual eyes. “It was lovely finally meeting you even if your disheveled outward show is entirely astonishing.”

I was reasonably sure I had just been insulted by the cereal lover, but it was presented with excellent manners. However, she did answer a question. We hadn’t met. I wasn’t sure why she seemed familiar. The fact that she knew my name was alarming.

“Are you a stalker?” I asked before I could stop myself.

I’d had a few over the years. Being a New York Times bestselling author was something I was proud of, but it had come with a little baggage here and there. Some people seemed to have difficulty discerning fiction from reality. If I had to guess, I’d say Purple Gal might be one of those people.

I’d only written one Regency novel, and that had been at the beginning of my career, before I’d found my groove in paranormal romance. I was way more comfortable writing about demons and vampires than people dressed in top hats and hoopskirts. Maybe the crazy woman had read my first book. It hadn’t done well, and for good reason. It was over-the-top bad. I’d blocked the entire novel out of my mind. Live and learn. It had been my homage to Elizabeth Hoyt well over a decade ago. It had been

clear to all that I should leave Regency romance to the masters.

“Don’t be a Merry Andrew,” the woman chided me. “Your bone box is addled. We must see to it at once. I shall pay a visit again soon.”

The only part of her gibberish I understood was that she thought she was coming back. Note to self—change all the locks on the doors. Since it wasn’t clear if she was packing heat in her cleavage, I just smiled and nodded.

“Alrighty then...” I was unsure if I should walk her to the door or if she would let herself out. Deciding it would be better to make sure she actually left instead of letting her hide in my pantry to finish off my cereal, I gestured to the door. “Follow me.”

Thick Stella growled at me. I was so tempted to flip her off but thought it might earn another lecture from Purple Gal. It was more than enough to be lambasted for my appearance. I didn’t need my manners picked apart by someone with a tenuous grip on reality.

My own grip was dubious as it was.

“You might want to reconsider breaking into homes,” I said, holding the front door open. “It could end badly—for you.”

Part of me couldn’t believe that I was trying to help the nutty woman out, but I couldn’t seem to stop myself. I kind of liked her.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she replied as she sauntered out of my house into the warm spring afternoon. “Remember, Clementine, there is always sunshine after the rain.”

As she made her way down the long sunlit, tree-lined drive, she didn’t look back. It was disturbingly like watching the end of a period movie where the heroine left her

old life behind and walked proudly toward her new and promising future.

Glancing around for a car, I didn't spot one. Had she left it parked on the road so she could make a clean getaway after she'd bludgeoned me? Had I just politely escorted a murderer out of my house?

Had I lost it for real?

Probably.

As she disappeared from sight, I felt the weight of the gold coins still clutched in my hand. Today couldn't get any stranger.

At least, I hoped not.

Opening my fist to examine the coins, I gasped. "What in the heck?"

There was nothing in my hand.

Had I dropped them? Getting down on all fours, I searched. Thick Stella joined me, kind of—more like watched me as I crawled around and wondered if anything that had just happened had actually happened.

"Purple Gal gave me coins to buy Lucky Charms," I told my cat, my search now growing frantic. "You saw her do it. Right? She sat next to you. And you didn't attack her. Right?"

Thick Stella simply stared at me. What did I expect? If my cat answered me, I'd have to commit myself. That option might still be on the table. Had I just imagined the entire exchange with the strange woman? Should I call the cops?

"And tell them what?" I asked, standing back up and locking the front door securely.

“That a woman in a purple gown broke in and ate my cereal while politely insulting my hygiene? Oh, and she left me two gold coins that disappeared in my hand as soon as she was out of sight? That’s not going to work.”

I’d call the police if she came back, since I wasn’t sure she’d been here at all. She hadn’t threatened to harm me. Purple Gal had been charming and well-mannered the entire time she’d badmouthed my cleanliness habits. And to be quite honest, real or not, she’d made a solid point. I could use a shower.

Maybe four months of wallowing in self-pity and only living inside the fictional worlds I created on paper had taken more of a toll than I was aware of. Getting lost in my stories was one of my favorite things to do. It had saved me more than once over the years. It was possible that I’d let it go too far. Hence, the Purple Gal hallucination.

Shit.

First things first. Delete Candy Jelly Crush. Getting rid of the white noise in my life was the first step to... well, the first step to something.

I’d figure it out later.