



Ace of Wands

*A Torquere Press Arcana
by Morgan Ferdinand*

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Torquere Press

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Chapter One

Stakeouts are the most boring part of a private investigator's job. It's worse when you're a paranormal private investigator, since most of what you're looking for probably doesn't even exist. You wouldn't believe how many people have hired me to look for ghosts or poltergeists, and then been disappointed when I told them it was just air in their plumbing making those clanking and moaning sounds, or it was their very alive, very corporeal, teenage son stealing their shit.

Don't misunderstand me. Ghosts and poltergeists *are* real. Demons are real. They're just not as common as some people want to believe. Out of the twenty hauntings I've investigated in the past year, only three have been anything supernatural.

Vampires are also real. Forget what the movies tell you, though. They're not all suave and sexy and continental. Take my partner (*please!*), Alex Finch. Alex is best described as "lanky." He's a little too tall to be "scrawny." He's also loud, clumsy, and has terrible fashion sense.

Not that mine is exactly G.Q., but that just means I know what I'm talking about.

Anyhow. Vampires. Real.

Werewolves are also real. My name is Nicholas Pardoner, and I'm a Were. I'm also a private investigator who deals with the paranormal. It's a sideline to my actual job as an antiques dealer. You wouldn't believe the antiques that you can collect when you tell someone that something is haunted.

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And stakeouts are usually boring.

I just wish they'd *stay* boring. I *hate* when they get interesting.

* * * *

Alex threw himself into the passenger seat with a loud sigh and the audible crumpling of a paper bag from the near-by fast food restaurant. "Ace of Wands," he said as he handed me a cheeseburger and dumped the fries in the bag for us to share.

The Ace of Wands started out as just another touchy-feely, New Age-y, crystals and herbal treatment storefront in a depressed strip mall. The window was decorated to the point of twee with prisms and fairies and gnomes and pewter wizards in snow globes filled with sparkly shit.

It *started out* that way. Sure, the front window still looks like a twelve-year-old girl's bedroom, but my sensitive nose sniffed out something sinister going on during their tea-room tarot sessions.

First of all, business was booming. That might not sound like a big deal, but for a neighborhood where even the Salvation Army store couldn't afford to stay open, something was up. This wasn't a job for pay (a fact that Alex kept bringing up); this was what I considered "community service". In Alex's words, I'm "too fucking noble". Mostly, I can't stand bad magic and stray demons getting their filth all over my city. We've got enough problems here without the paranormal fucking things up.

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Alex and I had been parked in the lot for three hours. There had been a fairly steady flow of customers for the first two. College kids—girls mostly—and housewives. Holdover hippies of both genders. Then at the start of the third hour, the store was empty, ten women of various descriptions went in, and one of the shop girls flipped the sign to "Closed" and locked the door.

"Tuesdays, one p.m. to two p.m.. Exploring our past selves," Alex read from the flier I'd picked up earlier. "Ever wonder if you were someone important in a past life, Nick?"

"I was probably a mass murderer and you're my karmic retribution," I growled around a mouthful of cheeseburger.

"Yeah, I love you, too." Alex took my right hand and licked burger juice and ketchup from my wrist. The hairs on the back of my neck started to tingle.

"Alex," I warned and gave him a sideways glance. He sighed and slouched back against his seat, reaching into the bag for a fistful of fries. "It's not that I don't ... It's just that it's not a good time for that. I won't be able to tell what's you and what's coming from there." I nodded toward the store.

"I know. I know. I'm just bored. I can think of a hundred things to do, and somehow sitting in a car with you, watching women shop wasn't anywhere on the list."

"But trying to have sex with me *is* on the list?"

"Spots two through seven, actually." Alex reached for another handful of fries. "Eating is number one."

In Alex's world, eating is *always* number one.

See, there are different kinds of vampires. Some can't eat anything and have to live on blood. Some of the bloodsuckers

have to have human blood from living donors, while others can get by on animal blood, or a supply stolen from blood banks. Alex only needs to feed once in a while, and he can go longer between feedings if he takes it from me. Shifter blood is apparently top shelf.

"Speaking of eating and sex with you," he said, and pointed at my wrist with a fry, "I'm going to need to feed soon."

"Soon isn't now," I said, narrowing my eyes in what I hoped was a threatening look. "Call Doderberg when we get home. I'm sure he's willing to donate a few pints."

"I'm sure he is." Alex let out a dreamy sigh and stared off into space for a few seconds, grinning stupidly. He was trying to make me jealous. It almost worked. Just to be on the safe side, I decided to ignore Alex and fixed my attention on the Ace of Wands again.

There wasn't a sign of life in the store, but the stench of magic was coming off the place like smoke from a fire. Wordlessly, I handed my half-eaten burger to Alex. *Nothing* put a dent in his appetite.

I couldn't pinpoint exactly what was going on. My first impulse was just simple coercion—tricking the women into spending their cash on crystals and chakra maps or herbal remedies—but the feeling was too dark.

"Sex magic," Alex said in response to my unspoken question.

"Think so?"

"I'd put money on it if I were a betting man."

"Congratulations!" I said in my best game show announcer voice. "In a past life you were all concubines! Let's have sex."

Alex stared at the shop for several long minutes. "I wonder if there's room in that class for one more."

At five minutes after two, one of the shop girls turned the sign back to "Open" and unlocked the door. Slowly, the ten women filtered out, talking and laughing. Two of them were carrying shopping bags. They didn't *look* like they'd just taken part in an orgy, but what did I know?

One young woman came out alone. She looked tired. Alex and I exchanged glances; Alex slipped out of the car and walked across the parking lot. He kept looking back over his shoulder and walked right into the woman.

I watched them talk, starting with Alex's apology for running into her. She smiled, but flinched away from him, eying him carefully. I could feel Alex using his Vampiric skills to get her to talk. Despite his charm and ability to put people at ease, her body language stayed tense and focused inward. I wondered if he was getting anywhere at all.

After a few minutes, Alex came back to the car. We watched the woman get into her car and drive away slowly.

"Any point in following her?"

"Nah." Alex shook his head. "She doesn't remember anything that happened. Apparently the guy puts them in what he calls a meditative trance and 'guides them into their past'. They're supposed to come out of it feeling pretty good."

"She didn't look like she felt pretty good." I started the car. Alex didn't look like he felt pretty good, either. He'd

understated his need to feed; that small amount of exertion to get the woman to talk had clearly taken a lot out of him.

"I don't think she knows what happened. I got the smell of sex from her, though."

Shit. "We're going to have to get into one of these sessions."

"I was afraid you'd say that." Alex said without the slightest tone of regret in his voice.

* * * *

Alex put in a call to Doderberg as soon as we walked in. John Doderberg is a cop and a friend. He's also Alex's frequent donor and occasional fling. Not that I care. I mean, what's it to me what they get up to in the course of a feeding?

While Alex was on the phone, I collected the dirty laundry. I figured I'd make good use of my time while they took over the apartment. Anyhow, we were almost out of clean things. Alex was wearing one of my shirts and I had on one of his socks (the other was mine).

"No, I understand," Alex said. "There's nothing you can do about it. I'll just see if Nicky's up for a pint." He was grinning at me when he hung up.

"Hate it when you call me that," I muttered as I walked past. "And no. What's wrong with John?"

"Bunch of people are out sick, so he's gotta go in. Mind if I tap you?"

I glared.

"Come oooon," he wheedled. "A little from you will last me longer than a lot from John. The less I have to feed, the less I'll bug you."

I sighed and rolled up my sleeve. "I would so love to believe that."

Alex kissed my cheek and stroked the inside of my arm. Feather-light touches in the bend of my elbow made me shiver. "You love it when I bug you." His thumb caressed the veins. "The vein in the groin is better, you know."

"I don't care if it drips liquid gold. You get the arm or nothing."

"Not even the ones in your neck?" His breath and lips ghosted across my throat.

I closed my eyes and swallowed hard. "Maybe."

Alex took a step back. I opened my eyes and caught him staring skeptically at me. "You don't mean that."

"No, I don't." I lied. I *did* mean it. Well, I'd meant it while he was that close to me, but once his concentration was broken, his coercion wore off quickly.

At least I *think* he was coercing me.

I sat on the sofa and he sat down next to me, curling up so his head was in my lap. He looked up, leering. "Sure you don't want to go for the groin?"

"Alex, I am going to go for *your* groin if you don't knock it off."

"Fine," he said with a huff. He pressed his mouth to the crook of my elbow, exhaling warmth and exuding an aura of pleasure and calm. I leaned my head against the back of the

sofa and sighed. Alex's fangs breaking the skin barely made me flinch.

I dozed while he fed.

Ten minutes later, Alex cuddled against my stomach and yawned. I smiled sleepily at him and played with his hair. "We need a plan," I said.

"I thought I could make dinner, maybe we'd watch a movie. I'd get you drunk and try to get you into bed..."

Alex hit the floor with a satisfying thump.

"I meant about the shop!"

"Oh, right." He stood up and rubbed his ass indignantly. As if I'd actually hurt him. "I think we should send John in first and see what happens."

"You don't think they'll take one look at him and know he's a cop?"

"You don't think they'll take one look at you and know you're a werewolf? Or that I'm a vampire?"

"Am I going in there furry or something? People don't look at either one of us and think 'oh, there's an undead creature of the night'! But people *do* look at Doderberg and think 'that guy's a cop'."

"It's the haircut, isn't it? I keep telling him to let it grow out. Do something different with it..." Alex talked with his hands, gesturing to his own (recently trimmed and tidy) hair. "But no, he says the buzz cut is just more efficient. Less time in the shower if he doesn't have to fuss with it."

Alex was babbling. I tipped my head back, stared at the ceiling, and let him work off some of the excess energy he

was getting from my blood. "Yeah, it's the haircut," I said when I sensed he'd stopped talking.

"You weren't listening to me."

I lowered my eyes to meet his. "Do I ever?"

"What I *said* was that maybe you and he could go in together. He could be the distraction and you could look around for anything, you know." Alex made another vague gesture. This one meant "strange supernatural things that I'm too stupid to see." Alex raised his eyebrows and looked hopeful. "If they're busy thinking 'oh, shit! A cop!' they might not even notice a shifter poking around."

I had to admit it was a pretty good plan. And if the shop owner *was* actually skilled in any sort of magic, the place might be protected against anything unnatural coming in. Me, though, I was born this way. You can hardly call *that* unnatural, now can you?

I praised Alex for the idea. He beamed and primped. I stood up and grabbed his face in both my hands. Before he could blink, I pulled him to me and kissed him. The little squeak he gave was satisfying. So was the feeling of his tongue against my lips—prickly soft, like Velcro or fine-grain sandpaper, like a cat's tongue nudging against my own. My hands settled on his biceps and I swear he purred a little.

I was almost sorry to end the kiss, but I couldn't have Alex thinking that I actually *like* him or anything. We'd never get any work done.

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Chapter Two

Doderberg sat on the sofa with a mug of coffee in one hand and a book about tarot in the other. He frowned at the page. Then he turned the book sideways. "That's ... really kinda phallic, don't you think?"

"All the better to perform sex magic with, my dear." Alex sat next to Doderberg, clutching his own mug of coffee. He yawned and stretched, his T-shirt riding up with the action, exposing his stomach. I noticed that Doderberg noticed Alex's stomach and smiled appreciatively. My eye roll went *unnoticed*.

It was four in the morning. Doderberg had come over immediately after his shift ended and woken us from our sleep. Yeah, I know. What are a vampire and a werewolf doing sleeping at night? We don't have a lot of choice. To make money, you've got to put up with the daytime world. See, the whole "vampires can't go out in sunlight" thing depends on the *type* of vampire. Alex's sire was of the line that isn't bothered.

Anyhow, we can both go out during the day, and most of the time we have to. And I *like* sleeping.

I stifled a yawn and outlined the plan. "Tomorrow, you and I will go in there and just look around. You'll ask questions about things. I'll poke around and see if I can sniff out anything."

Doderberg raised an eyebrow. "Questions about *things*? Like what?"

"I don't know. Chat up the girls working there. Ask about love potions. Tell them you think your girlfriend's cheating on you or something. Ask to get your aura read or your chakras dusted."

"Or your nob polished," Alex interjected with a leer and a nip to Doderberg's neck.

I growled. "Can we focus, please?"

"*I'm* focused," Doderberg insisted as he shoved Alex to the side. "I'm going to make small talk with the girls and you're going to browse and see what you find. Easy enough."

"What am I doing?"

I looked at Alex. I don't know *why* I expected him to know what was going on. I mean, it was *his* idea. "You're going to wait in the car and we'll contact you if we need you."

"Brilliant plan. I heartily approve. Can we go back to bed now?" Alex stood up and headed out of the room without waiting for an answer.

Doderberg stood and looked at me questioningly.

I gave a noncommittal shrug. "D'you want the sofa, or a bed?"

"Bed. I won't be able to move in the morning if I sleep on that thing." He followed me into the bedroom.

Alex was sprawled face-down on his bed, but looked up when we came in. "Sharesies?"

I stopped. "Did you honestly just say 'sharesies'?"

Doderberg tried not to laugh. He shoved Alex over and climbed onto his narrow bed. Alex threw his arm across Doderberg's stomach and fell asleep almost immediately. Doderberg didn't last much longer.

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Me, I lay there for a while, in my own bed, staring at the ceiling.

* * * *

The next day, just after eleven in the morning, Doderberg and I showed up at the Ace of Wands. We came in, laughing and shoving each other, whispering things like "this is silly" and "just go talk to her." Finally, Doderberg stepped up to the counter and cleared his throat. His ears were bright red.

"Hi, uh, I'm looking for, uh..." he started, and then dropped his voice. The nervous glances he kept throwing in my direction worried me a little until I realized that he was faking it—pretending to look to me for encouragement, and not to keep an eye on me. I poked around and kept giving him "hurry up already" gestures.

His conversation with the girls faded into the background, turning into a buzz punctuated by the giggles of the shop girls. I couldn't hear them over the loud, insistent humming of dark magic. The closer I got to the back room, the louder it got. The stench was also incredible—it was like burning tar. How it wasn't obvious to everyone was beyond me.

There wasn't a class scheduled. We hadn't seen anyone come in and not leave. I figured the classroom would be empty. I glanced over at Doderberg and made sure he had the clerks' attention and turned the knob. The door was unlocked and I pushed it open slowly, hoping it wasn't the sort that creaked.

The door wasn't even open an inch when I heard it. The deep, intense noise like a generator powering up. The smell of

ozone. And then the painful feeling of an electrical discharge. I blacked out.

When I woke up, we were at home. I was in my bed with Alex clinging to me, almost protectively. Doderberg was asleep in Alex's bed. He had the start of a black eye and a nasty looking cut along his forehead.

"One of the girls was wearing a ring that took a nice chunk out of him," Alex murmured. His voice was thick with sleep and his breath was 80-proof. "I was worried."

I grunted. It figured he'd be worried about Doderberg.

"I meant you, asshole." Alex pressed his face against the crook of my neck and inhaled deeply. I could feel his tongue tracing the veins. I shivered and my heart beat just a little faster. Unfortunately, this made my head pound and I made a small, whimpering noise.

Alex laughed, low and growly, and carded his fingers through my hair, tugging a little. "I can take the pain away," he offered. I was aware of his erection. I was also embarrassingly aware of my own. I hated that he had the ability to turn me on. I hated the realization that I was teasing him less and meaning it more. I didn't *want* to like him. I didn't want to *want* him.

But...

But while his nails scratched my scalp and his teeth grazed my throat and his erection practically burned against my thigh, I couldn't deny that I *did* want him. Alex seemed to sense this and rolled me over and pinned me on my back.

His mouth was warm and metallic. *Doderberg's blood?* I wondered. *Or some stranger's?* The wolf stirred inside me,

disturbingly possessive. I ignored the feeling; Alex wasn't mine and I certainly wasn't his.

Alex was laughing into the kiss, snorting through his nose. "What's so funny?" I couldn't make eye contact with him. I knew he was laughing at my fumbling attempt to give him a hand job. I couldn't get the angle right or figure out how to stroke him. I was impressed that I even managed to get my hand inside his pants. My wrist and elbow conspired against me and refused to move in the right direction to do anything.

"Nick, will you just *hold still*?" Alex arched his back, positioned my hand, and stared down at me, grinning. Then he began thrusting in slow strokes. I couldn't do anything but stare, watching his cock moving like a piston through my fist.

Alex was quiet when he came. Just a gasp that was almost nothing more than a hiccup. He leaned forward and brushed his nose against mine. "Feel any better?"

"No."

"Really? I feel fantastic." He flashed a grin that had too many teeth and then winked. "Can I..." he drawled and ran his index finger down my throat. "Can I blow you?"

"No," I snapped, and started to move him off me.

"You know, I know what you're scared of." Alex repositioned himself slightly and kept me from moving even a little bit. "See? I can control you if you start to get shifty." He was practically purring in my ear now. I stole a glance at Doderberg. He was still deep asleep and snoring softly.

Alex inclined his head toward Doderberg. "He's under sedation. One of the girls downstairs had some Percocet."

I squirmed under Alex in an attempt to get free. "Great. A cop getting a controlled substance from a stripper. *After...*" I paused and stared up at Alex. "What *did* happen at the store?"

Alex hung his head and let out a sigh. "If I tell you, will you let me get you off?"

"Sure," I said, nodding. "Sure I will. I just won't be able to enjoy it until I know what happened."

Alex fixed me with a look that said he knew I was lying, but he rolled over next to me and propped his head up. "You opened a door. It triggered an alarm. Doderberg charged for you. One of the girls took a swing at him and tore him up pretty good. The owner came out of nowhere, ranting and cursing—and I mean literally cursing—in Etruscan. Something about demanding you have an unlucky day and that he hoped you'd get fleas. Which sounds pretty tame, but if you know anything about Etruscans, it's pretty bad."

I stared at him.

"Xyj'Ru worked mostly in Etruscan," he said.

I stared at him some more. "How do you know what he said?" I couldn't imagine Doderberg remembering an Etruscan curse and being able to repeat it to Alex. Especially not something shouted in the middle of confusion and after a pretty nasty blow to the head. "I mean, how did you hear it?"

"I felt the alarm go off. It was this huge discharge of magic. So I started running for the building. I heard him shouting it while John was trying to drag you out of there."

"So they've seen you?"

"I don't know. The girls were screaming and the guy was ranting so I don't know if they really got a good look at me. Not with all the crap stuck to their window, anyhow. I don't think it'd be a good idea for you or John to try to get in there again, though."

"Not during the day, no. Hey, should he be sleeping if he got punched in the head? What if he has a concussion?"

Alex was already distracted by my clothes. "Hmm? Oh, he should be fine. I shared a little blood with him, so he's going to heal up pretty fast. Damn it. I should've gotten you undressed when you were passed out. Are you really going to let me do this?"

"Is that safe?"

"Sucking you off? Well I'm a vampire and you're a virgin, so I think we're in the clear there."

"I meant..." He was already under the covers and nuzzling against my stomach, making it hard—I mean difficult—for me to think. "I meant you giving him your blood. Isn't that how it gets passed on?"

"Yeah, but it's more complicated than just a few sips. The whole feeding nearly to death and then the reviving thing has to happen. The worst that can happen is he turns into a Renfield. But considering he's only had my blood this one time and I won't let him blow me, I don't think we need to worry."

Alex's hands were surprisingly gentle and they completely derailed my train of thought. The slow, steady movement was strangely relaxing. I was having trouble keeping my eyes

open. It got worse when the thumb swiping across the head of my dick was replaced by his tongue.

That catlike, sandpapery tongue.

Drugged or not, I didn't want to risk Doderberg waking up during this. I pressed the heel of my hand against my mouth to keep from making any noise. I wanted to laugh. Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined this. Although I'm sure it'd been wank fodder for Alex for months.

Alex was laughing. Little puffs of breath through his nose. I would have been offended if I hadn't been on the verge myself. The laugh vibrated against my skin. Alex followed it with a quick swipe of his rough tongue and I groaned softly.

Alex made a quiet moan in response. My stomach clenched and my balls drew up tight. I wanted to make him make that noise again, so I hesitantly reached for him and played with his hair. He made another small noise and I couldn't stop myself. I tried to push him away, tried to get him to back off, but he put his hands on my hips to steady me and stop me from pushing into his mouth. For once I wasn't going to argue with him. He could have complete control. At least as far as *this* was concerned.

When I'd come, he crept up and balanced over me, holding his face very near to mine. His eyes were heavy with sleep but bright with ... victory? Glee? Something. He was getting some sort of high from my come, that much was apparent.

"Wanna taste yourself?" He purred, his lips hovering just over mine.

I pushed him over and turned my back to him. Chuckling, he cuddled up behind me, pressing his mouth against the nape of my neck and wrapping one arm around my stomach.

"Hey, Nicky?"

"What?" I grumbled. I didn't even bother correcting him. I know he knows how much I hate being called Nicky.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

Alex hesitated. "For being okay," he said after a few seconds. I think he was trying to thank me for letting him blow me—for letting him get that close to me—but neither of us was going to acknowledge that.

"Hey, no problem. I try my best to not die, and so far it's worked."

"Immortal until proven dead," he said and yawned.

"Shut up and go to sleep, Alex."

"Aye-aye, Cap'n!" He grabbed my arm and made me salute for him.

Jerk.

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Chapter Three

I woke up because I was cold and being shoved. Alex had apparently stolen all the blankets and decided to kick me between the shoulders. "What are you doing, you jerk? You don't get cold."

Only it wasn't Alex. There was a mummy in the room instead. Blue eyes and a hint of blond hair looked out from the folds of my quilt.

"Doderberg?"

"They got Alex," he said.

"Why did you let me sleep?" I demanded. I climbed out of bed, stripped off my clothes, and fished around for something cleaner to wear.

"I *didn't*. I woke you up as soon as I woke up. I saw the broken window, realized he wasn't here, and then I started shaking you." His face was still red, but I was pretty sure it was anger now and not the beating he'd taken earlier.

"How long?"

"How long?" he echoed.

"How long was I *out*? Christ, you're getting to be as dense as Alex."

"I don't know," he said sullenly and pointed to his bruised face. "I was out longer than you, remember?"

"You know he might be dead already."

John shook his head. "I'd know if he was." But he looked a little sick at the idea, anyhow.

I'd always known there was more to their relationship than just vampire and donor. Not that I cared. Alex was generally a thorn in my side, so I really didn't care what he did with whom. Not even after...

I wasn't even going to think about that. Instead, I sat down on the floor and fished under the bed for my hunting gear.

John sat in the middle of my bed, still wrapped up. I looked up at him. "I need you to do three things. Cover that window with plastic before we die from exposure. Call my landlord and tell him the window's busted. And then you can write stuff down for me."

* * * *

Alex Finch was not surprised to find himself crucified. He was surprised to note that he was only tied in place, his feet were actually touching the ground, and overall it was a fairly pleasant experience.

He couldn't say the same for his captors. All three of them looked like mud in a roughly human shape. They squished when they moved, dripped water and ooze constantly, and they stunk like a sewer.

"Our master will be pleased to know we've captured the vampire," one gurgled. Another nodded emphatically, spraying algae and seawater everywhere.

"You know the sun is coming up, right?" Alex asked as he struggled against the ropes. Sure, it was only rope, but it was wet rope and it was pulling tighter as it dried in the pre-dawn wind.

The talkative one laughed. Or belched. Alex gagged at the sulfur smell and struggled harder.

"We know it's coming up. That's why you're here. We're going to watch you burn."

"Ah," Alex said. "So the first gentle rays of morning sun will touch my fair skin and make me explode into a fireball that will quickly turn into ash, which will then be scattered on the breeze."

The three lumps looked at each other. At least they would have, if they had had eyes.

"No, Mister Bond, I expect you to die," Alex said to himself and sighed. He wasn't going to tell them that it wouldn't do any good. If they knew the sunlight wouldn't kill him, they'd have to find another way and might actually find one that worked. And, Alex thought grimly, they'd have to touch him again. He was already wondering if the stains in his clothes would ever wash out

* * * *

Once I was fully awake, I couldn't miss the stink of magic. No wonder we'd slept through the whole thing. No wonder no one in the neighborhood noticed the window being smashed and people-or-something going in and out of the third floor.

The bedroom was freezing, but at least the wind was getting some of the smell out of the place. I envied Doderberg and his completely normal nose.

We set up camp in the living room. I took samples and scrapings from the window sill and the floor of the bedroom.

John dialed the landlord who wasn't pleased at being woken before dawn.

Before dawn.

Shit.

They knew what Alex was.

"The guy from Ace of Wands made us," I said.

Doderberg frowned. "He did this?"

"He called up something that grabbed Alex," I said and indicated the residue I'd found on the floor. "He knows Alex is a vampire and thinks he's going to kill him with sunlight."

Doderberg relaxed. "Then we've got plenty of time to find him."

"What do you think is going to happen when Alex doesn't burst into flames?"

Doderberg checked the time. "Then we've got about fifteen minutes to find him."

To find Alex before the sun rose, I only had one option. I didn't want to do it, but I couldn't see an alternative. I made Doderberg lock himself in the bedroom and told him to wait until it was quiet before he opened the door.

I stripped off my clothes and stood naked in the living room, cautiously nudging the wolf into wakefulness.

Pain. So much pain. I had an idea that being torn apart by wild animals would probably hurt a lot less. Which is really a bad analogy, since I was essentially being torn apart by a wild animal. Only this one was coming out from inside.

Doderberg had to half-carry me down the stairs. Once we were outside, I wanted to go right back in. The scents coming off the street were overwhelming—bitter, acid, dirty, decay-

sweet—and something like the smell of raw sewage mixed with the scent of Alex. I whined, and Doderberg scratched me behind the ears. Calming, yes, but offensive to my dignity all the same.

I followed him to his car and whined until he put the window down enough for me to get my nose out. I could smell how nervous he was, but couldn't tell if it was worry for Alex or if he was worried about sitting in a car with an agitated wolf.

"We need signals," he said. "So I know when to turn left and right and stuff."

I smacked the dashboard with my left paw, then my right.

Doderberg grinned. "What about straight ahead?"

I looked forward and nodded, whining softly.

"Turn around?"

I looked back over my left side and gave a short, shrill bark that was too loud for the car. I tried to convey a look of apology.

"Great. All set!" Doderberg started the car and pulled out onto the street.

The system worked. I guided Doderberg into the heart of Downtown, where the scent got mixed with too many other things. It wasn't following a clear path. Not one we could drive, anyhow. Not unless John's car could drive straight across the harbor.

The sun was rising and reflecting bright orange in the rear-view mirror. From the car, we could see the light starting to shimmer off the church by Federal Hill.

I barked and shoved Doderberg's shoulder, pointing with my nose. *There! Goddamn it! Over there!* I couldn't shift back here, so I could only hope he understood me.

Doderberg gave an excited "yee-haw" and made a hard turn onto Light Street. We would be there in minutes. Hopefully before Alex's captors realized the sun wasn't going to hurt him.

* * * *

From his position on the top of Federal Hill, Alex could see the first pink light of dawn on the horizon. He struggled harder against the ropes and shouted. One of the blobs flicked a hand at him, spattering Alex's face with mud. Alex retched.

The sun rose higher.

Alex continued his struggle. He was pretty sure he could outrun the lumps, but he had to be able to run first.

Alex writhed and screamed, although no sound was coming out. He wanted to put on a good show, but didn't really want to end up with another mouthful of sewage. The three beings squelched and squished and gave the impression that they were watching him carefully, looking for any sign of smoke or fire.

They moved closer, apparently wanting a better look. Alex squeezed his eyes shut so tight tears leaked out and rolled down his face.

"He's in pain, but not on fire," one of them said.

He was panting, struggling, and somehow managing not to gag from the foul air. Then he went completely still. The trio pressed even closer.

Alex opened his eyes. "Eiquachud," he said, naming the creatures. "You're done now. Go back to the sewers."

The monsters exploded, covering the hilltop (and Alex) with sludge.

Alex whooped and laughed. Now he could just go home, have a shower, maybe make a sandwich.... Except he was still tied there and all his struggling hadn't done a thing to loosen the ropes.

"Shit," he muttered, and then started shouting for help.

* * * *

We could hear Alex shouting as we ran up the steps to the top of the hill. At least he was bellowing in irritation and not shrieking in pain. The deep, wet, rank smell of sewage was stronger than ever and I knew that it was related to the things that took Alex. Based on the intensity of the stink, I was afraid there would be hundreds of them.

There were hundreds of seagulls instead. They wheeled around, low to the ground, landing, hopping, sparring, and squawking as they fought over piles of algae and refuse. Alex was near one edge of the hill, tied to a hastily-assembled cross. He was filthy, but I couldn't smell his blood. I would have been able to smell if he'd been hurt, even through the stink of whatever that was.

The smell got worse as we got closer to Alex. Doderberg choked and spat, looking desperate to keep from puking. He

managed to cut through the stiff ropes holding Alex. Alex fell to his knees, arms hanging limply at his sides.

"Son of a motherfucking *bitch*," Alex shouted, writhing in sudden pain. John and I both moved toward him while his arms flailed.

"Alex!" John grabbed for Alex's shoulders.

"Pins and needles," Alex hissed through clenched teeth. "God fucking damn."

Doderberg sat down on the wet ground and pressed his forehead against Alex's, not caring about the slime. "You scared the shit out of me."

I gave a barking cough before they could start with the eye-gazing and hand-holding. The stench was getting unbearable and I really wanted to go home and be human again. Doderberg at least had the decency to look embarrassed.

"I don't think we would've found you if he hadn't shifted," he said. "He sniffed you out."

Alex threw his arms around me, pressed his face against the scruff of my neck, and spoke so quietly I knew John couldn't hear him. "You shifted for me? I knew you loved me."

I shook until he let go, laughing. "Never show Nicky affection. It makes him grumpy."

I bared my fangs. Doderberg reminded him that being called Nicky also makes me grumpy.

John left us on top of the hill. He needed to go home, shower, change, and get to work. Or so he said. I think he just didn't want Alex leaving demon slime all over the car. Alex nattered on about something as we walked home. Some

of it I didn't understand because the wolf part of my brain wouldn't process it. The rest I just chose to ignore. Alex didn't seem to mind.

Alex stashed his ruined clothes in a plastic bag to be dealt with later, then headed for the bathroom. I took the opportunity to shift back, then wiped off as much muck as I could until it was my turn to shower. Do I need to point out that standing naked in my kitchen was enough to make me incredibly uncomfortable? Because it was. I could only hope Alex would be quick.

Ten minutes later Alex was still in there, so I pounded on the door. "You're going to use up all the hot water!"

"Get in here then."

"Fuck off."

Alex opened the door and leered. He was naked, of course, with water clinging to his skin and dripping from his dark hair. Steam billowed from around the shower curtain. "That an offer?" He leered and then shook his head. "Seriously, come in. I'll behave, I swear."

I eyed him suspiciously and tried not to think about what had happened earlier, which only made me think about it. My cock twitched. Alex's eyes flicked down and then back up again. He grinned crookedly and raised one eyebrow.

I pushed past him and made an attempt to shut the door between us, but Alex was faster. He leaned against the door and rolled his eyes. "I *said* I would behave. Just trust me. Get in the tub."

I stepped in and stood under the water. My whole body ached from shifting. Alex stood behind me. I tensed briefly

when I felt his hands on me, but I relaxed as he started to massage my neck and shoulders.

"What happened?" I asked and leaned back into his hands, encouraging him to press harder. A knot under my left shoulder blade crunched audibly.

"The guy from the store summoned up three demons. They knocked us out, took me, and thought they were going to toast me when the sun came up. Of course I didn't burn, so they kept creeping toward me to see what was going on. Eventually they got close enough to me that I could hear their name. Then I just had to speak it, get control over them, and send them home. Okay, I *thought* it would send them home, but they exploded all over me."

I looked over my shoulder and glared. "You knew their name?"

"Not at first. Like I said, they had to get close enough to me that I could hear it."

"How long have you been able to do that?"

"I learned it from Xyj-ru."

"And you never thought to mention it?"

Alex shrugged and moved further down my spine. "It never came up."

I turned around and caught his wrists to keep him from putting his hands anywhere else. "We spend months tracking down and *capturing* demons, and you can just name them and command them?"

"It doesn't work on *all* demons, Nick. Just the ones summoned for a cause. If it's free-range or attached to something, then your way is the only way. These guys were

hired thugs. I just took over their contract." He stared at me and grinned broadly, showing too many teeth. He rotated his wrists and clasped my hands. "You shifted to save me." Alex was beyond pleased. He kissed me.

I didn't stop him. I wrapped one arm around his shoulders and put the other hand flat against the wall to hold myself up. The tub was slippery, my whole body ached, and Alex's hands were taking a quick survey of my skin. This wasn't going to work. One of us was going down, and *not* like earlier.

Turns out it was me. Alex's groping led him to my cock and after several minutes my knees gave out. Alex flailed wildly to try to catch me and ended up head butting me in the nose. I sat down hard and let the shower wash the blood off my face.

"I'm starting to think the gods are conspiring against us," he said with a laugh. He perched on the edge of the tub and wriggled his toes in the pooling water.

I pressed the back of my hand against my nose and sighed. "Let's just go to bed. Get some sleep and then figure out how to get into this guy's house and figure out a way to stop him."

The fact that I meant "we'll both sleep in my bed" was understood. Alex took his favorite spot between me and the wall and pressed his back against mine.

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Chapter Four

Ace's real name was Terry Lee Burkart and according to the Department of Motor Vehicles, he was forty-eight. He lived in a single-level house on the shore of a river that smelled faintly like sewage. I suppose that's where his demon troops had originally come from. The road was wide enough for two cars but there were no lane markings. Alex and I watched several cars nearly engage in a battle of chicken until the drivers realized they could actually pass each other with room to spare. Once we were sure the coast was clear, we let ourselves into the house.

The house was small to begin with and made smaller by the books and DVD cases that were stacked everywhere. Most of the DVDs were porn. Some of them were horror movies. The books were almost entirely cheap horror.

"Be careful not to make it look like we tossed the place," I said to Alex as we sifted through Ace's things. Alex gave a snorting laugh and pointed out that the only way Ace would know someone had been in his house was if we cleaned things up.

The kitchen was full of fast food and delivery trash: pizza boxes, Chinese containers, crumpled bags with smears of ketchup on them. Flies buzzed around an overstuffed trash can. There was a stack of blue plastic bags filled with beer and soda cans. At least he recycled. Sort of.

There were more books, more carryout trash, and more porn in the bedroom. Blonde women with obviously fake

breasts stared vacantly from the covers of magazines and DVDs. The books in here, however, were allegedly books of magic. Most of them were from Beagmhaitheasach Press, a line his store carried. Alex and I exchanged a look and a grin. "Beagmhaitheasach" means "worthless," and after flipping through three of the books, I could say that they certainly were that.

Under the mattress was the real find. There was several thousand in cash (Alex later informed me it was five thousand, three hundred twelve dollars), and a small book bound in brown leather. It was smooth and warm to the touch and smelled a little meaty. Startled, I dropped it onto the bed and stared at it for a few seconds before picking it up again.

Alex raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"It's made of human skin."

"Ew," he said, and returned to skimming through the collection of porno magazines.

The book explained in detail the steps needed to not only create the mud creatures that had abducted Alex, but also the necessary information to create sex slaves. The handwritten notes stuck in between the pages listed Ace's modifications to the spells: contemporary names to replace the archaic, substitutions that seemed to work well enough (in the absence of the gizzard of an iguana, the bladder of a seagull would suffice), and notes on things that did not work at all.

There was apparently nothing as effective as human blood. I wondered how much of his own blood he'd poured into the incense that was controlling his clientele.

We eventually found the incense and some of the other harder to obtain ingredients. We bagged those up to take with us, as well as the meat book and a notebook Ace had been keeping. The less chance there was for him to reproduce these spells, the better.

Something was bothering me, though. I looked around the room again and rubbed the back of my neck. "I've got a bad feeling."

Alex said, "It's probably just Etruscan fleas."

"No, really. We've got this book. We've got his magic stuff. We've got notes. What's missing?"

"Tongue of wolf?" He leered; apparently the over-abundance of skin mags had given him ideas.

"His room at the store had an alarm on it. Why would he leave the good stuff in his house, completely unprotected?"

Alex's grin faded and his brow furrowed. "You thinking trap?"

"I'm thinking now would be a good time to get out of here and lock this shit up. Then we can start worrying about what we're missing."

* * * *

There's a fireproof safe in our living room. It's lead-lined, cast iron, and watertight. It's got a tablecloth thrown over it and a lamp on top to disguise what it is. It's also got a few spells on it to help keep what goes in from getting out. They also help keep anyone who isn't us from getting in.

Alex locked the stolen objects away and then washed his hands repeatedly at the kitchen sink. The feel of the meat

book was hard to get rid of. "You know," he shouted over the running water, "he knows where we live already. There's no way he won't know it was us who stole his stuff."

"I know. That's what worries me. He left it out practically in the open. Like we were supposed to take it."

"Maybe he's not really in control. Maybe he wants help stopping what he started."

"You're such an optimist, Alex."

We leaned against the counter, our shoulders touching, and shared a cigarette and a beer. Our fingers brushed together as we passed them back and forth. I felt strangely calm, like a lot of the static in my head was being filtered out. All I could think about was Alex: Alex's dick in my hand, mine in his mouth. What it would be like to just give in and fuck him, knowing that he probably was one of the only people who'd be able to control me if things turned wolfy.

Alex gave me a rueful smile that snapped me out of my daydream. "It isn't me," he said. "I'm not making you think about that. It's not you, either. We handled a lot of stuff charged with sexual energy and it's obviously rubbed off on us. In a manner of speaking." He acknowledged the double entendre.

"Then how did you know what I was thinking?"

He cocked an eyebrow and inclined his head. Oh. Right. The raging hard-on. I crossed my legs and leaned away from Alex, trying casually to hide it, but only looking awkward.

"You don't like me like that," he said and lit another cigarette. "I'm fine with that. As long as I don't get on your nerves too much with my flirting, it's cool. I mean, it's

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obvious. Every time I get close to you, you change the subject, find something else that needs to be done, fall down, start a fight, or have a breakthrough."

He squinted at me through a cloud of smoke and passed me the cigarette. "Maybe we *should* go fool around. Might give us the break we need with Ace."

"Maybe I do like you like that. We can talk about it later." I stubbed the cigarette out in the sink. "I think we should go check out the store again."

"Hey, look at that. We only had to *think* about fooling around and you had a breakthrough!"

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Chapter Five

It was nearly midnight when we made it back to Ace of Wands. All the lights were off, including the red glow from the alarm system. The front door was unlocked. We looked at each other. Alex was grinning hopefully, sure this meant everything was fine and we were there to play the heroes.

Yep. Alexander Finch: vampire and hopeless optimist.

I wished for my gun. I hated using it. I didn't even like owning it, but it's saved my ass in the past and I was really feeling like it could save it again tonight. This was all shaping up too easily and I didn't like that at all.

Alex opened the door a crack. He reached in and put his hands over the bells hanging from the top of the frame, then slipped in through the narrow opening. If the alarm system was on he wasn't likely to set it off. If it was a heat sensor, it wouldn't find him. If it was a motion sensor, he could make sure it didn't sense him moving. He was standing next to the panel in a fraction of a second.

"It says 'Disarmed'," he confirmed. "Smell anything?"

"Just potpourri and essential oils. And someone's lunch in the trash can." I grabbed the bells and squeezed in, letting the door close completely before I released the chimes. Gently. If Ace knew we were coming—if he knew we were here—he hadn't made himself known yet. I didn't want to do anything to rush our standoff until I knew exactly what we were getting into.

Slowly, carefully, we made our way around the shop, looking at things, checking idols and incense and packs of Tarot cards. I ran my hand through a bowl of semi-precious stones and put several in my pocket. I also picked up a tiny, brass bell.

"Ooh, tuna fish!" Alex said happily. "Oh. It's got relish on it." I heard the sandwich fall back into the trash can and shook my head. It wasn't even worth commenting on.

"Start toward the classroom," I said. I felt like I was shouting, but I was barely vocalizing. From the corner of my eye I saw Alex move forward. He was just a shadow. I couldn't even hear his feet on the ground.

"Okay," he said. "It's okay."

I moved much slower than Alex and drew up behind him. "He's in there."

Alex gave a tight nod. "I can feel his heart beating. It's too fast."

"He's scared." I sniffed gently. "You might be right."

"He's lost control?"

"He never *had* control. A demon's been riding him." I could smell it on him.

"What now?"

"Name the demon."

"I can't."

I glared. "You can."

"This is different. Ace *summoned* the demon, but the demon's not under his control any more. That means I can't *take* control."

"Fucking loopholes."

"Don't suppose you have any iron pellets on you?"

"No, I don't have any more, I don't think." I patted myself down to be certain and felt something clinking in my pocket. Frowning, I pulled out the stones I'd pocketed and looked at them.

And grinned.

Hematite!

It wasn't *perfect*. Hematite is brittle and would probably break if the demon got a little too aggressive—especially since they weren't hollow—but they would do until we could get home. I made a mental note to find someone who could make me more hollow iron pellets and secured one of the stones in my fist.

Alex kicked in the door and burst through, shouting like he was leading in an entire SWAT team.

Ace was flat on his back in the middle of the room, in the middle of a salt circle. His hands and feet were tied to hooks that had been sunk into the floor. He was naked, sweating, and obviously terrified. He was also out of shape, balding, and scrawny. For his sake, I hoped his dick had shrunk from fear and it wasn't like that all the time.

There were candles everywhere, flickering, casting strange shadows, and raising the temperature to an almost uncomfortable level. I couldn't see anything else in the room, but the smell and the way the hair was rising on the back of my neck was evidence enough. Alex looked like he wanted to sweat. His eyes flicked around the room from corner to corner, never settling on any one thing.

Glyphs in blood and shit covered the walls. A binding spell.

"You have to help me!" Ace sobbed. "He wants my body."
Alex cocked an eyebrow. "Really?"

I smacked the back of his head. "As a host." I looked at the man. "That's it, isn't it? He's been working through you and now he wants to move in permanently. Push your soul out and move himself in."

Ace sobbed harder and thrashed against the ropes holding him in place.

I looked around the room and shouted. "We're not going without a fight, so if you want to pick up your new ride, you might as well show yourself and get us out of your way."

Alex flew backward out of the room and smacked against the hallway wall. He scrabbled to his feet and charged back in. "Habbotep!" He bellowed, jabbing a finger toward the ceiling. "Habbotep! You are commanded to show yourself right now!"

"Habbotep? Seriously?"

Alex gave me a look that said "hey, I don't name them" and shouted to the still-invisible demon. "We're not playing. I name you, and I demand that you appear!"

"I thought you said it wouldn't work."

"I can't control him, but I can challenge him. Get ready to fight."

Habbotep did appear. He was just a mass of sticky black smoke that churned and whirled and stunk. If that was his "corporeal" form it was no wonder he was looking for a human body. Something made a connection in my brain and I realized that the meat book was his body. Habbotep had

sacrificed himself to make the book, and our old pal Ace had, by using the book, released him.

Habbotep's form had extinguished all the candles and filled the room with an impossible darkness. I *knew* Alex was standing next to me. I could feel his arm brush against me when he moved, but I couldn't see him at all. I couldn't see Ace. I couldn't see the three hematite stones in the palm of my hand.

It was like a thunderstorm taking place in a twelve-by-twelve room. The air was thick, charged with electricity and the pressure was making my head throb. I expected it to actually start raining. Alex shouted something I couldn't quite understand and some brightness crept in. Habbotep's form was starting to dissipate. I had to move fast before he disappeared again.

I've used the demon trapping spell so many times I can recite it in my sleep (and probably have). I held the three stones in my cupped palms and felt them grow heavier as I recited the words. Habbotep was being torn apart and stored in all three rocks.

The pressure in my head was letting up. The room was getting brighter. Alex faded back into sight. He was panting and shaking just a little bit, eyes wide, watching the stones draw Habbotep in.

"Ace," he murmured, and took two easy paces further into the room and knelt to untie the poor guy.

I put the three stones into different pockets. I wasn't sure how long they'd hold him, but at least with him divided, it would take a little longer for him to cause trouble.

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Alex helped Ace into a sitting position. I found Ace's clothes heaped up in a corner and handed them to him.

"I don't know how to thank you," he rasped. "You saved my life. I can't ever pay you back for that."

I thought about the money we'd taken. "You already did."

He looked at me. Blond hair lank and stuck to his sweaty forehead, gaunt features and skin almost the same washed out gray as his eyes. There was a flicker of understanding.

"You've been to my place," he said.

"Yep."

"So you got the book?"

"And your notes."

"Thank God."

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Aftermath

After Ace—Terry—had a chance to clean up a little, we took him to a twenty-four-hour restaurant. Two cheeseburgers and a large coffee later, he perked up and was willing to talk.

He'd gotten the book from some anonymous donor. Someone had sent a lot of trinkets and things to the store and included a note that he could use or sell any of it as he wanted. The book was too weird to keep in the store. The shop girls complained about it and customers were afraid of it.

Once he got the book home and started reading it he realized what he had. "It was talking to me when I was asleep," he said, shivering a little. "It told me that if I did what was written on the pages I could have money and power. It was great for a little while. It was great having a store that wasn't failing and being able to pay my bills and pay off some loans. Then the book told me about the women.

"I never had much luck with women." Terry laughed dryly. "Figured if I couldn't get them on my own, why not use a little magic? Only that's when the demon started getting stronger. Started with occasionally having sex with a customer and then it wanted more and more. I was holding those classes, organizing orgies ... anything to keep the demon fed."

He looked miserable. Alex got up to find the waitress. I studied Terry carefully. "And that wasn't enough because he wanted to feel it not just feed off it?"

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"I might have been able to hold him off, but then you came in and I think he knew his days were numbered. He had to take me over before you could stop him."

I grinned. "We're just a little faster."

Alex returned with the waitress who topped off our coffees. Terry raised his in a toast. "Thank God for that."

Terry pulled a Tarot deck out of his coat pocket. He pulled out the ace of wands, turned it so it was facing me, and slid it across the table. "I chose this because I thought it would be good for business. It stands for new projects and innovation and success." He turned it so it was reversed. "But it all ended in tears. Just like the card says." He sighed, picked the card up, and slid it back into the deck.

"You know your business is probably going to drop off now."

"Can't do worse than an antiques store," Alex mumbled into his coffee. I kicked him.

Terry gave a weak smile, looked at the deck, and held it out to Alex. "Pick two. Just two cards from anywhere in the stack."

Skeptically, Alex drew two cards and put them face down on the table and watched as Terry turned over the first.

"Death," said Terry, "isn't a bad thing. It just means change. Transforming from one state into another."

"Yeah," I said and stirred a packet of sugar into my too-bitter coffee. "I think we both know a thing or two about that."

Terry turned over the second card. "The Lovers. Kindred souls. A partnership."

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Under the table, I wrapped my fingers around Alex's. "I think we know a thing or two about that, too."
