



SKYLA DAWN CAMERON

CHILDREN OF THE APOCALYPSE - PART TWO

The Immortal

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PASSION. VENGEANCE. REDEMPTION. SACRIFICE. DESTINY.

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An Indigo Chick Press Production

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Cover Art © Skyla Dawn Cameron

Book Design and Production by Skyla Dawn Cameron

Copy Edit by Judy Bagshaw

Produced by Indigo Chick Press

Printed by Lulu.com

Dedication

To all the *Children of the Apocalypse* readers, specifically the awesome people at my forum: Cathie, Clare, Damita, Elaine, Jess, and Judy, and to my mum, who enjoyed the first book. Very special thanks to our resident fanartist, Jeroen, whom I totally adore. <3

And of course to Hanna.

Foreword

Part One of *Children of the Apocalypse* was posted, chapter by chapter, from January 2006 through October 2006...and I hated nearly every minute of writing it.

Thankfully, Part Two—which you now hold in your hands—went a whole lot better. I'd already introduced the main characters and the premise, so the hard work was done. This book expands on what came before it and really gets into the story I want to tell. It's flawed, sure, though I'm still learning as I go. But I sincerely hope Part Three will be just as fun to write, and even better to read.

In the following pages, you'll find Part Two in its entirety, the chapter commentaries, a short story chosen by readers, and the first chapter of Part Three.

And of course, if you haven't read the first book yet...you should probably get it, natch.

Enjoy.



Stephan Cameron

One

Genevieve Weist sent a scowl down at her English test. Fifty-seven percent? That was absurd. Sure, she only skimmed through the five hundred page book the night before the test last week, and she'd barely answered half the questions...but her non-studying ways usually got her better grades than that.

She slumped back in her seat. What a way to start a Monday.

"How'd you do?" Merri whispered from behind her.

Gen held up the test over her shoulder in answer. "You?"

Merri handed her the test. Ninety-six? Goddamn!

Probably just 'cause she's psychic, Gen thought with disgust. There should be a rule against people taking tests when they magically already know all the answers. So what if Merri's seeing abilities didn't necessarily extend that far—it still wasn't fair. Of course, the fact that she'd actually *read* the book probably helped with passing the reading test...

But ninety-six in one of Kern's classes was just plain wrong.

"How about you, Lev?" Gen asked, turning to her best friend. Before he could answer—or cover the paper from her prying eyes—she saw the red mark at the top. "Eighty-two? Don't you dare tell my mom or she's going to kill me."

"Books gathered up, folks," Kern said. "It's your first work session for your presentations."

"We're having presentations?" Gen whispered to Levi.

"Yeah. We picked groups last week, remember?"

Gen vaguely remembered something like that. "Do we have a topic?"

"Psychology in *What's Bred in the Bone*," Merri informed her.

"Ah. Glad you two are on top of things." She had just gotten her notebooks packed in her messenger bag when her gaze caught a figure hanging in the classroom doorway.

"Who's she?" Levi asked before Gen could.

"Dunno, but I just kind of hope she's staying," Gen replied with a grin. Average height and build, the stranger's features were cute and girlish. Long, curly dark hair was pulled up into pigtails...and Genevieve just loved pigtails; at least when they were the cute/playful kind instead of the Lolita/whore type.

"You just sighed."

"Huh?" Gen tore her eyes from the new girl to see what the hell Levi was talking about.

"You sighed. It was all dreamy-like."

"No I didn't!"

"Yeah, you did," Merri said.

Oh well. Maybe she had. But since when were cute girls not sigh-worthy?

Kern went to the door to speak to the girl, and then gestured for her to enter the classroom.

"Find a group," Kern told her. "We'll be heading to the library soon."

The girl stepped inside, glancing around the room, no doubt looking for an available seat—

And then she promptly tripped over someone's knapsack and nearly fell headfirst into a desk before she corrected herself.

As a few people snickered, the new girl plopped down at the empty desk in front of Gen.

"Hi," she said, turning her dark eyes Gen's way. "My name is Peyton Rice and I'm a klutz."

"I'm Genevieve Weist and I'm a recovering klutz," Gen replied with a grin. She caught Levi's gaze and corrected herself. "Well, that is to say I have the occasional relapse."

Gen gave Levi a meaningful look. He rolled his eyes and nodded his okay to her unasked question.

"Would you like to join our group?" Gen said.

Peyton's brightened at the offer. "Absolutely...as long as you're not worried I'm going to break something. One question though...what are we doing in groups?"

Genevieve decided to have Meredith field that question. The Seer and Peyton took the lead as the class left the room for the library.

"She's hot," Levi whispered when he and Gen were out of earshot of Peyton.

"She is," Gen agreed.

"Yeah, well, don't get any ideas," Levi warned with a snort. "Statistically, it's more likely she's straight, and I don't want you to be all disappointed when she's out with me."

"Actually, I've read that all women are at least a little bisexual."

"Hmm." Levi gave that possibility some thought. "Okay then, threesome?"

"Right," Gen replied with a roll of her eyes.

"Fine. Can I at least watch?"

"We'll see."

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Of course, she did know he was right. The fact that she already knew two lesbians—who were both her age and out—suggested she wouldn't be meeting any others any time soon. A sure way of telling, however, would be how much Levi decided he liked the new girl. If she was his new obsessive crush...well, odds dictated she was either seriously involved with someone of the opposite sex, or preferred the attention of someone of the same sex.

Levi and his unattainable crushes... Immediately, Gen's thoughts fell to Sage. No one had seen her since Hayden's funeral, at least as far as she knew, and that had been over three weeks ago. Levi wouldn't breathe her name, so Gen had no idea if he was still mad at Sage or not.

He should be mad at me too. She sent a guilty glance at her friend. He blamed Sage for Hayden's attack, and probably for his subsequent death, all because she was involved in "something" and that something had trickled into the lives of those around her. But it was Gen's something as well, and it ate at her insides to not be able to tell him the truth.

Though Gen had tried calling the Bethanys' a few times, Diana had said Sage was out, and that she'd pass on the message. Sage never called back.

Whether or not Michael or Merri had seen her, Gen couldn't tell. Without Sage harping at her to go there all the time—and with the threat to their lives apparently dormant for the time being—Genevieve avoided Michael's place as much as possible, which translated to visiting once every four days or so. She never saw Sage there, and Merri had never said a word about it either.

Once the class reached the library, Meredith—ever the studious one—immediately went to look for books, while Gen had already forgotten what it was they were supposed to be researching.

"So you just moved here?" Gen asked Peyton as the remaining group members pulled chairs up to a round table.

"Yeah," Peyton said quickly, then rethought it and shook her head. "Well, like, no, I haven't moved here yet, 'cause stuff got delayed where my dad works, so we had to wait another month, and then they—my parents—decided to send me to stay with my aunt so I didn't miss any more school, though over a month is still a lot, 'cause I've already missed stuff—didn't even read this book yet." She sucked in a deep breath and blushed a little. "Okay, sorry, I talk, like, *a lot*." Her face was animated and expressive, and she seemed oblivious to her hands flying around excitedly when she spoke. No wonder she was worried about knocking things over, but Gen found it more cute than anything.

"So anyway," Peyton continued. "I ended up coming here, though Mom was all worried and talked about sending me to the Catholic school—which I'm Pentecostal so why would I go there?—because she thought it was violent because of that guy who got stabbed and died—"

The energy around the table noticeably dropped. Levi cast his gaze down towards his books and Peyton immediately realized something was wrong.

"I'm sorry—was the guy a friend? Did you know him?"

"Levi's brother," Gen said gently.

Peyton's eyes grew huge and she clasped her hand to her mouth. "I am *so* sorry, I had no idea..."

Levi shook his head. "It's okay, I know you didn't."

"So did they catch the guy who did it?"

Again, Levi shook his head, and Gen involuntarily winced. *I wish I could tell him...*

Hell, I wish we could have at least found the guy who attacked him. They'd killed his lackeys, sure, but the head guy? Not yet; Michael still didn't know who it was. She was sure he'd tell Merri if he knew, and Merri promised to keep Gen informed.

"I'm sorry, Levi, I didn't know—I should probably start thinking before I open my big mouth."

"Naw, it's okay." Levi offered her a weak smile. He was dealing, Gen knew. Counselling at the school twice a week. Counselling with his parents once a week. Counselling *without* his parents two more times a week. He'd be a therapist himself in no time, but Felix and Jackie Greene insisted, and Levi wasn't arguing.

Genevieve was about to speak when an announcement came in over the P.A. system.

"Ms. Kern, do you have Grade Eleven Advanced English there?" the secretary asked.

Kern acknowledged she did.

"Is a Genevieve Weist in class today?"

Gen started at the sound of her name. What the hell had she done now? She never "did" anything. Doing stuff would get her noticed and coasting was much more fun.

"She is." Kern sent a glance Gen's way.

"She's to come down to the office now, and bring her things with her."

Oh, shit. Bring her books? That could only mean she wasn't coming back to class...

"She'll be right down," Kern informed the secretary.

Gen gathered her bag, which at least she hadn't unpacked yet, gave the others an apologetic wave goodbye, and reluctantly wandered down to the office, dragging her feet as she went.

"Genevieve Weist," Gen said when the secretary finally acknowledged her in the office. You called me down here."

"Your father called," the woman said, handing Gen a slip of paper. "Said he got you an appointment and he'd be here to pick you up right now."

Gen looked over the piece of paper with the woman's messy writing. Nothing more there than what she had said.

"Did he say what the appointment was for?"

"None of my business, dear." The woman looked at her computer screen and began to type, making it clear the conversation was over.

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Under any other circumstances, she would have been glad to be out of English class, but appointments usually signalled bad things, like dentists and fillings... Genevieve wandered out of the office, still pondering the note.

Outside the school, Gen stopped a few metres from the driveway. She didn't see any cars, and figured her dad wasn't there yet.

"Gen!"

She turned to see Stephie hop up from the grassy knoll where she sat with a handful of other stoners and run towards her.

"Hey Steph—"

"Okay, quick." Stephie grabbed her by the shoulders, voice urgent. "I have an appointment with the guidance counsellor in like ten minutes—does my breath smell like Jack Daniels?" Without warning she breathed heavily into Genevieve's face.

Gen scrunched up her nose. "No, but you smell like weed."

"Oh, 'kay, that's a relief."

"It is?"

Stephie shrugged. "I'm pretty sure he puts hash oil in his cigarettes, so he'd better not say anything." Her gaze drifted over Gen's shoulder, then her eyes lit up. "Ooh, hot!"

Gen followed the direction her friend stared in and sighed as she recognized the new black convertible with the roof drawn down...and worst of all, the figure driving it.

"Great," she muttered.

"You know him?" Stephie said immediately. "Who is that?"

Someone who isn't my father.

"I'll talk to you later."

"Seriously, who is—"

"Just, uh...art school guy. He can get supplies real cheap from this warehouse so we're going to pick some up." At least that sounded semi-believable. If he'd just kept the old four-door car, the roof would be hiding him and she wouldn't have to explain to Stephie who he was.

"Can I come?"

"Bye, Steph."

Gen trudged toward the car, leaving Stephie—and probably a gazillion questions—in her wake.

"Why, you're not my dad!" Gen feigned astonishment as she stopped next to the passenger side of Michael's car.

He barely glanced at her in acknowledgement. "Get in."

"I don't get in cars with strangers."

"Now."

Grumbling under her breath, Gen complied. She threw her bag into the back, then slammed the door shut and crossed her arms over her chest.

"You know, you interrupted a really great class," she pouted as he swung the car out of the driveway and onto the road.

"Really?" he said skeptically, still not looking at her.

Sure, she'd bitched enough times about school when she was supposed to be putting out candles with her mind or whatever, but that certainly didn't give him permission to kidnap her from English.

"Yes. I was talking to a very cute girl, and I really don't appreciate the conversation being interrupted. What am I going to do if Levi starts dating her before I can convince her she likes girls? Hmm? Did you ever think of that?"

He didn't reply, so she slumped back and sulked a while longer.

"So where are we going?"

"We're going to see a woman about a book."

"Is *she* cute?"

"Haven't met her."

"What kind of book?"

He gave her one of his, "Could you be any more stupid?" looks, and she understood. It must be a spell book.

"And why do I have to come?" she asked, reminding him he hadn't filled her in on that part of the plan.

"She'll only sell it to a witch."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard—why?"

He shrugged. "Some don't like to sell to collectors—they'll only part with a book if they know it'll be used. The potential seller said she'd only like another witch to have it."

"Wait, so she's..." Even though they were in a car driving fast enough that no one could possibly hear them, Gen dropped her voice nonetheless. "A witch?"

Another glance, telling her she was stupid for asking, followed in answer.

"So there are other witches?" she asked.

"Of course there are," he said.

"Well then, why haven't you been bugging them instead of me? Jesus Christ, there's all these other goddamn witches running around selling spell books, and you still insist *I'm* the special one?"

"Unfortunately."

"Are there love spells in the spell book? Something that'll work on the cute girl I had to leave so I could go with you to get this stupid book?"

"It's doubtful."

"Why do I need the book again?"

"It has highly advanced spells."

"Like fireballs?"

"No."

"That's not very advanced."

Gen wasn't sure where they were driving, but at least they seemed to be staying in town. Michael drove them to a block of newer apartment buildings and condos, and as Gen gazed around, she realized she vaguely recognized the area.

"Hey, doesn't Mer live around here somewhere? Sage and I walked her home one night, and I think it was to one of these buildings."

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"I believe so," he said as he pulled the car into the parking lot beneath one building. He seemed to know where they were going, so Gen just grabbed her bag as she got out of the convertible and followed him.

Michael led her out of the dark parking lot to the main entrance. A wall of pristine glass panels gave Gen a glimpse into the foyer. It was definitely a nice apartment building. She spent a lot of time at Stephie's building, where there were fingerprints all over the glass, the buzzers didn't work, and a few of the mailboxes didn't lock properly. But this place was pure class. Either the superintendent spent his or her time constantly cleaning, or the landlord hired outside help, because there wasn't a speck of dirt anywhere.

Michael buzzed one of the apartments and a minute later a woman's voice sounded over the intercom.

"Yes?"

"This is Michael Parris."

"Your last name is Parris?" Gen whispered.

"That *is* what I said," he snapped back.

It was strange to realize she'd known the guy for over a month and yet never knew his full name before. At least it seemed Sage was wrong and he wasn't related to Merri, though.

"I'm here to see Krysta about a book," he continued, shooting Genevieve a "keep your mouth shut" look. Gen found it equally strange that, for a guy who showed nothing but displeasure with every task she'd ever seen him have to perform, he managed to have very distinct, readable expressions.

The security door unlocked and Michael tugged it open.

Inside the foyer, across from the mailboxes, was an elevator, and beyond that a stairwell. From outside, Gen counted at least a dozen floors, so she was relieved when Michael went straight to the elevator.

He didn't say a word to her on the way up. Gen was grateful for that, though; when he did speak to her, she rarely liked what he had to say.

The elevator halted at the seventh floor and the doors powered open. Michael seemed to know where he was going—he didn't pause to check the numbers on the doors or cease his step for a moment. Instead, he walked confidently down the hallway to the number 7-F, the final door at the end of the corridor.

Gen held behind him a little as he knocked, having no idea what to expect. Creepy old lady who cackled? Ditzzy twenty-something claiming to be a "white witch?" A crazy person with fifteen cats and pentagrams all over the walls?

The door opened...and none of the above waited for them.

A stunningly beautiful woman slid her hand up the doorframe lazily and gazed at them with eyes like liquid chocolate. A magenta silk kimono casually hugged her body, complimenting both her medium brown skin and shapely figure.

At least this Krysta woman is cute, Gen thought, though there was something predatory in the woman's eyes. Beautiful, but unsettling...

Okay, I wanna go back and see Peyton now.

Krysta's stare bore into Michael for a moment, then slid to Genevieve, and she cocked a dark brow.

"Is this a joke?" she asked Michael, a half smile turning the corners of her full lips upward.

"We're here for the book," he said.

"And I told you I would only sell to a witch."

Michael gestured behind him to Genevieve. "That's her."

Krysta looked at Gen with clear skepticism. "Look, Michael, I don't care about how much you want the book—bringing your little jailbait girlfriend here to get it isn't going to work."

"Eww, I'm not—" Gen was silenced by a glare from Michael.

"I told you on the phone she was young. But she's got potential and I want the book."

I've got potential? That was definitely the nicest thing he'd ever said about her, though she hadn't ruled out the possibility he was just lying so he could buy the spell book he wanted.

Krysta regarded them in silence for a moment, then stepped back from the doorway and let the door swing open. "Come in and sit down."

Gen followed closely behind Michael as they stepped into the apartment. Sure, he almost let her die a couple of weeks ago, but Krysta still creeped her out even more.

Immediately inside the door was the living room. The fluffy floral-patterned couch and love seat seemed more reminiscent of Gen's mother's taste than that of an attractive thirty-something woman who sold spell books and lounged around in what looked like an expensive robe. Genevieve took a seat on the couch next to Michael. Krysta sat across from them, draping one long leg over the other, and while it wasn't quite Sharon-Stone-in-*Basic-Instinct* revealing or anything, Gen made a point to avert her gaze from the expanse of leggy flesh exposed as the robe slipped a little.

"So what can your girl do?" Krysta asked coolly.

"She's just learning," Michael said.

Krysta shook her head. "I told you the other night, Michael, I will only sell this to a witch. Not I, nor the owner before me, nor the one before him, wish this to belong to anyone who isn't one of us. That was the deal."

"She—"

"*That* was the deal," she repeated.

A strange feeling of pride twisted through Gen. She may not welcome the responsibility Michael thrust upon her, but at this point she could at least be sure she had some sort of power. Power to put out a candle, maybe, but power nonetheless.

Krysta's gaze flickered Gen's way, and Gen felt her face heat up with embarrassment.

Nope, don't look at me—just take this up with Michael...

"You have something to say?" Krysta asked.

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“Well, I...uh...” Gen didn’t bother chancing a look at Michael, instead straightening her back and attempting to put on a brave front. “I’m not just any witch. I’m like *the* Witch. With a capital W and everything.”

“What the hell is she talking about?” Krysta directed to Michael. “What have you been filling the kid’s head with?”

“She doesn’t mean anything.” Michael gave Gen a swift glare, and she slumped back on the couch, crossing her arms in annoyance.

“I don’t think this book is for you,” Krysta said. “There might be something in my collection that interests you—”

“I want that one.”

“Well, you’re not going to get it.”

“Just give him the freakin’ book, lady!” Gen said suddenly. “I’ll be getting more use of it than you!”

Michael turned to her sharply. “Keep your goddamn mouth shut, unless spoken to,” he growled.

“But she—”

“I mean it.”

“You think I haven’t seen this a dozen times before, Michael?” Krysta said. “A collector shows up, ditzzy little plaything in tow, thinking I lied about the conditions put forth, and I’m merely looking for an excuse to sell the book? That isn’t how it works.”

“Where’s your washroom?” Michael said abruptly.

Krysta gestured over her shoulder. “First door on the right, down the hall.”

Michael glanced at Gen. “Go.”

“But I don’t—”

“Yes you do. Go.”

Grumbling under her breath, Gen stood and stomped in the direction Krysta had indicated. Presumably, Michael wanted to have a private conversation with the stupid witch...unless “go to the bathroom” was code for “go look for the book so we can steal it.” That could be possible...though it would have been nice for him to let her in on the plan before they got to the apartment.

In the narrow hallway, Gen saw the first right door open, beyond which was a spacious bathroom of gleaming white tile and a Jacuzzi tub. Past it was a second, more narrow door—possibly a linen closet. At the end of the hall was a closed door that Gen guessed led to the bedroom.

I wonder... Could she sneak in there without anyone noticing? Possibly. It depended on whether or not Michael was keeping Krysta’s attention away from Gen.

Before Genevieve went for the door, she decided to glance over her shoulder and check if they were watching her.

They were. Two pairs of eyes stared at her; Michael’s were annoyed, and Krysta’s looked curious.

“It’s right there beside you,” she said.

Gen's face went red. "Oh, yeah. Right. Okay..." She slipped into the bathroom, switched on the light, and closed the door before she could make more of a fool of herself. She leaned heavily against the door and sighed. Wow, this sucked. She missed English class.

Not having to actually use the facilities, Gen used the time to look around. No sign of any spell book. No sign of much, truth be told. Everything was very clean, very white, and very...cold. Nothing cluttered the sink, everything was in its place...the woman was definitely weird.

Make that fucking creepy, she thought as she cracked open the cabinet under the sink. Still no spell book, but there was a small, lit votive candle—black—and various dried plants arranged around it in a circle. A few stones were scattered about, polished and gleaming in the dim light, and off to the side was a wax human-shaped figure, about the length of her hand, with no discernable details or features.

The whole thing was like a Satanic ritual scene straight out of a lame horror movie, minus a few dead creatures and a victim strapped to an altar. With a little shudder, she closed the cabinet doors and hoped Michael would finish arguing soon so they could get the hell out of there.

Gen sat on the edge of the bathtub, unsure of how long she was supposed to stay there, or even how long she'd already been in exile since she hadn't worn her watch. When sufficient time had passed—and her butt was sore from the tub—she stood and cracked open the door.

Michael and Krysta still sat in the living room, and the witch let out a laugh.

At least they're getting along...

Gen crept back into the hallway towards the couches. Both Michael and Krysta noticed her approach, the latter rising and smoothing out her robe.

"I'll get that wrapped up for you," she said brightly and stepped past Genevieve in the direction of the bedroom.

Gen turned to Michael in shock. "What the—"

"Shut up," he advised.

"But is she really getting the book?"

"Just sit and wait."

Minutes later, Krysta returned with a book-shaped package in brown wrapping paper. Michael stood and accepted it, then handed her an envelope in return. Gen had no idea what he might be paying her, but it was clearly cash, and probably a lot of it.

Relief washed over her as she saw Michael head towards the door, and Gen was quick to follow. The sight of the open door and hallway beyond it—an exit from the unsettling Apartment of Doom—was almost too much, and she rushed through the threshold immediately, pushing past Michael. Only a few steps down the corridor, she realized he hadn't followed.

Glancing behind her, Gen saw Michael had paused just outside the doorway where Krysta faced him, still with that wicked smile to her lips.

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"I may come across some other pieces you might be interested in," she said, putting her hand on his upper arm casually and running her fingers down to his wrist.

What a slut! God, the very sight had Gen shuddering.

"You have my number," he replied.

"That I do."

Seriously grossed out, Gen turned and stalked toward the elevator, hoping to get away from them before they started going at it right out there in the hallway. She mashed the button to call the elevator a few times before Michael joined her, and they both got in without saying a word.

"She was like such a friggin' skank!" Genevieve erupted as soon as the elevator doors closed. She snatched the book from his grasp suddenly and turned it over in her hands. "Jeez, what the hell did you have to agree to do just to get this?" She tried to pry the paper off.

He jerked the package away from her as the elevator came to a halt, and they stepped out into the foyer.

"Seriously, did you have to like whore yourself out to get that book or something? Because I'm willing to bet you'll catch a lot of diseases."

"Would you just shut the hell up already?" he said as he yanked open the car door and threw the book on the backseat. "I had to part with an obscenely large amount of money to get that book, as well as lie through my teeth about the extent of your abilities. Now get in the damn car."

She did as he asked, not saying anything else until the car was on the road once again.

"You know, she really wigged me out," Gen said, casting a wary gaze in Michael's direction, waiting to see if he'd yell at her again. When he kept his eyes on the street and didn't say a word, she tried again. "Didn't she wig you out?"

"No."

"Then I guess you must not have been paying attention. She also had this creepy thing in her bathroom cabinet. I'm pretty sure she's evil."

"I'm pretty sure you're paranoid," he muttered.

"Yeah, well, some healthy paranoia never hurt anyone. There was this wax figure that looked like a person in there. I bet she's got pins and stabs it or whatever they do in voodoo."

"Forget the spell book—I'm buying you a damn encyclopedia of religions so you can actually start knowing what the hell you're talking about."

"Okay, fine, it's not voodoo. It's Satanism. She's a Satanist—if I hadn't been there as a witness, you could have been seduced into being some bondage sex slave for her cult."

"Pity that," he muttered.

Genevieve scrunched up her face. "Ew! Fine, next time we run into a slutty Satanist, I'll just leave you to become a sacrifice to her dark lord or whatever."

"She isn't a Satanist."

"You don't know that."

He rolled his eyes. "I think there'd have to be a Satan for her to worship as a Satanist."

"There isn't?"

"No."

"Oh. Are there demons or monsters or something? 'Cause she might be one of those."

"She isn't."

"Well that just makes her scarier 'cause we don't know what she is." Gen checked the dashboard clock. "I've basically missed English but at least I can make lunch. Maybe they got Peyton to eat with us...you'd better hope so, or I'm turning you into a toad for ruining my day."

Ahead, Gen saw the dark brown brick of her high school come into view, then disappear as they passed it.

"Hey!" She twisted in her seat to see the school grow smaller and smaller, and then swung back around to confront Michael. "What the hell?"

"I'm getting you lunch."

"Uh, I can eat lunch back at school. It's very modern—they have a cafeteria and everything, so if you insist on spending more money on me today, you can just give me the cash to do it myself." He didn't slow the car down however, and instead drove them into the downtown core where various fast food places dotted the main road. He swung the car into a Wendy's drive-thru and proceeded to order without so much as asking her what she wanted. He seemed to be buying enough for at least half a dozen people, however, so she figured she'd have some options.

"Can you just let me take it with me?" she asked once they were on the road again, bags of food sitting on her lap. "I'm gonna miss my next class."

"You're not going to your next class."

Though it was true she was in a moving vehicle, pushing open the door and jumping out still seemed more enjoyable than staying with him any longer. She recognized the road that led to his house, and she felt the desire to leap to her doom rise.

"This is officially kidnapping."

Michael pulled the car to a halt in his driveway, but made no move to get out. Instead, he turned to face her, and Gen shifted her gaze away, not liking the serious look to his expression.

"You haven't been practicing any of the exercises I've told you to." He said it as less of an accusation and more a statement of fact.

"Of course I have—"

"No, you haven't."

Sure, she hadn't even attempted any of the minor spells and meditations he'd told her to...but then she didn't do her algebra homework either. Nothing new there, and certainly not worthy of a lecture.

Though she expected him to go on about that for awhile, he caught her off guard with a sudden change of subject.

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"When was the last time you ate?" he asked.

"Uh, breakfast."

"You're lying."

She rolled her eyes. "God, why do you bother asking me something if you've already decided the answer?"

"When was the last time you ate?" he repeated, more forcefully this time.

Genevieve had to pause and think on it. She just hadn't felt very hungry lately—she hardly saw why he cared so much.

"I don't know...yesterday?"

"You've noticeably lost weight—you've barely eaten in weeks."

"Your concern is really touching, Michael," she snapped as she turned to look at him.

"And you're having nightmares."

She swallowed hard, but didn't say anything.

"This needs to stop."

Her gaze dropped downward and she fidgeted with the strap of her bag. Why couldn't he just leave her alone? So what if she didn't eat? Couldn't sleep? Felt physically sick at the thought of trying anything else from a damn spell book? He was ready to watch her die before—in fact, she wouldn't put it past him to try killing her himself—so why bother her with this?

"You don't understand." She spoke quietly rather than yell at him and chewed nervously at her bottom lip. "You don't know what it's like...the magic, when I do stuff...it's like I'm not completely me. Like there's someone else there. And I hurt those people, and..." Tears filled her eyes, but she pushed them back, forced them away—vowed she wouldn't ever cry in front of him again. "And my friend is dead, and he wouldn't be if all this hadn't happened. So no, I don't much feel like eating or practicing your stupid spells, and yeah, I have a lot of nightmares."

"And this needs to stop. We don't have time for this." He suddenly snatched up the bags of food, grabbed the book from the back, and got out of the car.

What a fucking prick.

She clutched her bag and got out of the car as well, slammed the door behind her, and stalked toward him just as he headed inside. Dammit, he could fucking well go to hell! A couple of moments of *almost* humanity had nearly tricked her, but then she saw his true face again, and she was ready to kill him.

"I don't see why it's any of your goddamn business. You don't care anyway..." Her voice trailed off as she walked inside and saw Sage at the back of the room by the punching bag. Boxing gloves on, she hit and kicked, beating the substitute opponent into submission with sweat dripping off her forehead. Gen almost did a double take—gone were her shoulder-length black braids, and instead her hair was straight and cut quite short. But otherwise she looked the same...

Except for a scarily determined look to her eyes.

Even when Genevieve offered a hello, Sage didn't glance in her direction. Instead, she kept her gaze fixed on her targets.

"Sage, lunch," Michael called, emptying the bags of take-out onto the table, and Sage dropped what she was doing to walk over in silence. Michael thrust a bowl of salad and a baked potato to an empty spot and gestured for Genevieve to sit down.

Gen dropped her bag at the door and took the seat across from Sage, narrowly missing being hit by the pack of plastic utensils Michael threw at her.

"Haven't seen you at school," Genevieve ventured, attempting a casual tone as she poured a packet of dressing on the salad.

"Haven't been there," Sage returned, eyes on her food.

"Taking the semester off?"

Sage shook her head. "Just dropped a couple of classes I didn't need. Mom hired a tutor for a few weeks for the others."

"Don't you need a certain number of hours in the class to get credit for it?"

She shrugged. "They said as long as I pass the exam this semester, they don't care."

Genevieve had what seemed like a million questions for her. How was she doing? Would she ever come back to school? How long had she been coming to Michael's without telling anyone? But Sage had never seemed to want to talk to her before, and she didn't imagine she'd be doing so now. Gen gazed back down at her salad and stabbed the lettuce a few times with her fork. She wasn't hungry, but who knew what else he'd throw at her if she didn't eat, so she forced down a mouthful.

"How's Levi?" Sage asked

Gen glanced at her to see she still hadn't looked up.

"He's okay." Gen tried to hide her surprise when she answered; she'd never heard Sage even breathe his name before, let alone ask after him...

She's probably guilty...God knows I am...

"He goes to a lot of counselling, but he's doing okay."

Sage nodded absently and Gen wasn't sure if she was really listening or not. But she didn't say anything further.

They ate in silence for a few moments, then the front door opened.

"Ooh, good, lunch," Merri said brightly as she strolled into the room, plopped down on the seat next to Gen, and took a bowl of salad.

"Did you know he was going to kidnap me?" Gen asked Merri, noting that the other girl didn't seem the least bit surprised to see her there.

"I knew he wanted to get that book and when Lev told me you left, I figured you came here." Merri's gaze drifted to Sage for a moment, and Gen did detect surprise there; at least she had been truthful when she said she hadn't seen Sage lately.

"Hi Sage," Merri said.

Sage gave a weak, half smile and nodded her hello.

Meredith turned her eyes to Michael. "Did you get it?"

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"Of course."

"The chick he bought it from was a Satanist skank who was hitting on him," Gen informed her. Merri burst out laughing and even Sage cracked a grin.

"She wasn't a Satanist," he corrected her once again, leaning back on the counter and taking a bite from his burger.

"Fine, but she was definitely a skank," Gen countered.

"Oh, Gen, I got you something." Merri reached into her pocket suddenly. She pulled out a folded piece of paper and tossed the scrap onto the table. Gen snatched it up and found a phone number in scrawled letters.

"What's this?"

Merri had a mischievous glint to her eyes. "Peyton's number."

"You got her number?"

"And she has yours. Of course, she also has Levi's, but she asked for yours first. She's going to call us to plan a study date."

"Awesome." It seemed despite Michael's attempts to ruin her life, the powers that be had cut her a break after all.

Gen started as there was a sudden knock at the door, and a quick glance to Sage and Merri told her they didn't know who it would be either. Michael's expression hadn't changed, however, and he left the kitchen to answer the door.

"Did he make a friend?" Gen whispered, but Merri shrugged, seeming just as confused as she was.

Gen strained to make out words when she heard Michael speaking, but all she caught was another male voice answering his. A few moments later Michael returned with another guy following. A bit shorter than their host, a few years younger, and with gentle dark eyes that travelled over each of the girls in turn, Gen was certain she'd never seen him before, and despite the fact he didn't seem remotely threatening, his presence sent a chill through her. At Michael's, she was in a strange little world outside the real one...but with someone new present, everything felt different.

"It's everything I could gather," the guy said, and Gen realized his gaze had locked onto a large, legal-sized folder in Michael's hands, which she didn't remember him having before he went to the door.

As Michael opened the folder and rifled through the papers within, the new guy returned his attention to Genevieve and the others.

"You're them?" he asked.

"Uh..." Gen looked to Merri for help, but she didn't seem to be any clearer on what to say.

"Yes," Michael answered for them without looking up.

"Cool. I'm Thad, by the way."

Gen nodded slowly, unsure if maybe that name was supposed to mean something to her or not. Merri took the initiative and introduced the three of them, and had just finished when Michael suddenly slammed the folder shut and tossed it on the table.

“There’s no address,” he said, anger lacing his words.

Thad shrugged. “That’s everything he could possibly tell you, anyway. He just doesn’t want to get in the middle of this, Michael.”

“I don’t care what he wants—we need to see him.”

“But that’s everything he knows. He hasn’t seen her in years—it’s not like he can magically get in touch with her.”

“Um, can someone maybe tell us what you’re talking about?” Gen cut in, eyes going from Michael to Thad, then back to Michael again.

“It’s this guy,” Thad said. “Shaw. Apparently he used to know the other one of you.”

Silence met his words as Gen shot a quick look to Michael, then Sage and Merri, who seemed equally confused.

“One of us?” Merri ventured when no one else would.

“You didn’t tell them?” Thad said to Michael, brow knitted as he raked his fingers back through his dark hair. “Oh, great.”

What the hell?

Two

Meredith's gaze slowly travelled to Michael. He had pulled a stack of paper from the folder again and was leafing through the pages casually, as if he didn't realize everyone else stared at him in shock.

I'm not going to jump to conclusions, she reminded herself, and attempted to bite back some of her immediate anger.

"Michael?" she said, irritation rising in her. "What the hell is he talking about?"

Without a word, Michael dropped the papers back onto the folder and stalked past the kitchen towards the main room.

"You really don't know what's going on, Mer?" Gen whispered, concern but also relief touching her eyes. Of course to her, the only thing worse than Michael lying to them would be Merri lying to them as well... But at least in this case—lucky for Genevieve—Meredith didn't have a clue what was going on.

Merri shook her head. "No."

But he's damn well going to tell me.

Her chair scraped against the hardwood as she stood suddenly, intent on following Michael to the living area, but found he was already on his way back. Behind him, the door to the weapons cabinet lay open, still swinging slightly.

He stopped next to Merri, set a handful of knives on the tabletop, and then spread them out.

The knives the men had... She recognized the smooth silver blades and detailed handles, and a chill rolled over her. Unbidden, memories emerged in her mind—feelings that weren't her own, images she wished to forget... She absently wrapped her arms around her torso and shivered despite her attempts to remain calm. A few deep breaths and she straightened up, distancing herself from the knives, from the people who used to possess them, and waited for Michael to explain.

"One for each of your throats," he reminded them, pointing to each knife in turn. "The Witch, The Warrior, The Seer...and The Immortal."

Meredith stared down at the knives, and though she didn't chance a look at Sage or Genevieve, she guessed they did the same.

"The Immortal," Merri repeated. She glanced at Michael, but his expression hadn't changed. "Does that—"

"She's difficult to track down," he interrupted. "And, obviously—though a knife was forged to slit her throat—she can't be killed, which is why the others never went after her. Hence, I haven't found her yet."

"Were you planning to tell us this at any point, Michael?" Merri said coldly.

He had lied to her. For months now. She never pressed him for any information—not about himself, or what he was doing helping them, or...or certain things she found "off" about him. In return, she at least expected some measure of honesty from him on anything that related to her or the others.

"I was going to tell you when I actually *had* something to tell you," he replied.

"And you didn't think the fact that there's another one of us counts as something?" Sage shot back. "You said *three*. You've been saying three for over a month!"

"Well now you know there's four," he said simply.

"Jesus Christ, what the hell!" Gen shouted. "Are you sure there's not maybe five now? Or six? How about a dozen?"

"Just four."

"Michael," Merri said, keeping her tone steady, calm. While the others were freaking out, if she seemed at least a little forgiving and reasonable, he wouldn't be so quick to get pissed off and lie further. "Michael, that's really it? Just a fourth?"

"That's it."

Her gaze flickered to the new guy, Thad, for confirmation. "That's all you know about too?"

His dark eyes were wide, darting back and forth between her and Michael. "Uh, yeah. Far as I've heard from him and Shaw."

"But if there's another one, wouldn't she come here, to Newhaven?" Gen asked. "You said that we all magically gathered here or something."

"Except that she hasn't," he said. "Or at least as far as I know. So I've been trying to find her."

"Who's this 'Shaw' person, then?" Merri asked.

Surprisingly, Michael looked at Thad. "You know him so well—perhaps you'd like to explain."

Thad found everyone staring at him suddenly, and his eyes widened more. "Well...I guess..."

Meredith sat back down on the chair she had before and nodded to the one next to her for him to do the same. He hesitated a moment, glancing at each of them in turn. Michael made no move to release him from the task, so he sat down with a sigh.

"I know this guy," he explained. "David Shaw. He knew The Immortal about thirty-five years ago. She went by Natalya then. Shaw spent a few years

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with her, then she disappeared. He said he hasn't seen her since," he paused, looked pointedly at Michael, then added, "*and* that he definitely can't help you find her, Michael."

"Why don't you tell them *why* she spent a few years with Shaw," Michael replied, leaning back on the counter and crossing his arms over his chest.

Thad sighed, almost as if he was bored with recounting the tale for them and prepared to rush through the rest. "She seeks him out every time he's reborn. It's like an obsessive thing with her. Then she spends a few years with him, and leaves before they can grow old together because, obviously, she isn't gonna grow old."

"Reborn?" Gen said.

"Yeah," Thad replied with a shrug. "Like reincarnation. So she tracks him down when he's reborn, no matter where he is in the world, and somehow he's drawn to her too. Then she leaves again, like she did thirty-five years ago, and he goes the rest of his life without seeing her again."

Gen made a face. "That's really depressing."

"That's love, at least to them."

"But that makes sense then, doesn't it?" Merri said. "That Michael thinks David Shaw can help? If he's drawn to her, then he should be able to find her for us."

"Drawn to her if he sees her," Thad said. "He can't just get on a plane and somehow end up wherever she is. She always initiates their meetings, apparently."

"There aren't even any photos," Michael said coolly, but Thad put up his hands in defence.

"He says he doesn't have any. But he wrote up a description."

"Yes, I read that..." Michael thrust a sheet of paper toward him, and Merri caught sight of a few lines of writing. "Dark hair, pretty, average height and build. Not exactly helpful."

"Hey, he doesn't want to get into this. He knows what's going on—he knows what could happen to him if the wrong people find out who he is. This is it—the end. Lines are being drawn and Shaw doesn't want any part of it."

"This isn't over," Michael said. "I *will* speak to him at some point."

"Yeah, didn't think it'd be this easy."

Michael gathered up the folder and its contents once more, and then stalked from the kitchen, back out through the main room and up the stairs to his loft. Sage rose only moments later, tossing the empty containers from her food in the garbage, then returning to the punching bag to lace up her boxing gloves once more.

"So I guess she's the one who does the fighting?" Thad guessed, studying Sage for a second before returning his attention to Merri.

"And who are you again?" Gen cut in before Meredith could reply.

"Thaddeus Alvin Kincaid," Thad said.

"Yeah, but who the hell are you? Why do you know us?"

Thad shrugged. "Grow up around the right people, and you learn a lot. And I know Shaw from school—he was my philosophy professor."

"So you know where he lives? You *could* tell Michael?" Merri asked, studying his expression as it changed to one of horror.

"Oh, no way. He'd kill me. Well, probably not, but I'm not taking any chances. Shaw is wicked paranoid now, with everything going on. Doesn't teach anymore, wouldn't even send this stuff for Michael through email—had to be delivered in person."

Though Merri considered pointing out Michael was far more likely to kill him for *not* revealing everything, she abstained from bringing up that fact.

"So what do you do, Genevieve?" Thad asked.

"I put out candles," she said with a bitter smile as she stabbed at her salad a few more times.

"Then I guess you would be 'The Seer.'" Thad's gaze shifted to Merri and he grinned. His smile was a little lopsided—goofy almost—but endearing at the same time. He raised a dark brow in challenge. "See anything good?"

Jesus Christ, the guy was flirting with her! She went out of her way to not be noticed; her clothes were shapeless and forgettable, and she didn't so much as wear lip-gloss.

"Haven't decided yet," she countered, despite her better judgment.

In her peripheral vision, she caught sight of Genevieve making a face at them, but she ignored her.

"Damn," Thad said with exaggerated disappointment. "Will you at least let me know when you do decide?"

"Possibly."

"Get out of here, Kincaid," Michael bellowed from the loft.

Thad sighed and shook his head. "He's pissed. I don't suppose he doesn't really mean it?"

"He usually carries weapons," Gen replied. "I'd leave if I were you."

"Alrighty then. Definitely my cue to go. Later, Genevieve," his gaze settled on Meredith and he smiled again, "later, Merri."

As Thad let himself out, Merri returned her attention to her stone-cold french fries and avoided Gen's raised brow and pointed look.

"Merri's got a boyfriend, Merri's got a boyfriend," Gen began in a sing-song voice.

"Hardly," Meredith replied dryly. "You're the one who got a phone number today."

"I did, didn't I? Well, okay, *you* did, but it was for me." Gen picked up the paper with Peyton's number on it again and looked it over. "Did she say anything else? Like obviously not a sudden declaration of love or anything, but...something? Any kind of inkling she might go for chicks?" Bright blue eyes wide and hopeful, Genevieve waited, ready to latch onto anything Merri said.

"Not...really," Meredith confessed, wishing there was something more she could say as Genevieve's expression fell. "But she didn't seem very interested in

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Levi, so there's still hope there. Next time I'll definitely be on the look out for any ass-checking out or anything."

"Good. And I'll be sure to get you Thad's phone number when next we meet."

"That's okay."

"C'mon, I am just as capable of telling if a boy is cute as you are a girl is pretty. And he was cute. And there was definitely some flirtation going on."

"Again, that's okay, Gen. I'm not dating right now." *Or, like maybe EVER.*

"Michael," Gen called as he returned from the loft, a few books in hand. "Can I have Thad's phone number?" She shot Merri a wink, which Meredith pretended not to notice.

"No."

"Please?"

He dropped the heavy books on the table with a thud. "No."

"More spells—" Gen reached for one of the books, but he smacked her hand away and gave the top one to Meredith instead.

Aside from a journal to keep track of her visions, he hadn't given her any books before, and she was puzzled by the gift. Anything that required reading seemed to be for Gen—what did this possibly have to do with her?

"And this would be...?" Merri said, turning the thick, spiral bound book over in her hands.

"A collection of accounts about The Seer in history," he replied.

"What do you mean?" Gen asked. "Throughout history...?"

"Other lives," Merri murmured, flipping through the book. *Something else he never told me about*, she thought, and much like the existence of The Immortal, this too seemed like something pretty important to not mention.

"Other...like, lives *we* used to have? More reincarnation?"

Michael gave her another glare, but before he could snap something about her stupidity, Merri cut in.

"Yeah, like that. Everyone gets reborn again and again, and we're no exception."

Gen pondered this for a moment, then nodded slowly. "I get it." She looked up at Michael. "Ten bucks says you're coming back as a worm next time, you know."

Merri stifled a laugh, and returned her attention to the book. Turning the pages, her hazel eyes scanned the text and photographs inside. It was almost a scrapbook of sorts, with photocopied pages from ancient texts, drawings, and scraps here and there.

Michael took the next book from the pile and tossed it to an empty spot at the table.

"A book is here for you to pick up later," he called to Sage.

"Don't want it." The punching bag snapped as her fist struck it, taking quite the beating under her strength.

"Consider it required reading material," was his sharp reply.

Meredith turned her gaze toward Sage, watching her scary resolve. Pain wrapped around her like a cloak, covering her, clinging to her, and she hugged it back as if it was the only thing in the world. And still she fought, punched, kicked, mind empty, expression stony, all to keep from breaking. Though Merri suspected Sage had been coming to Michael's a lot over the past few weeks while the others weren't present, it was the first time she'd seen her there since before Hayden's death. Clearly Sage didn't want to talk to or be around anyone, but for Michael, oddly. After everything, she seemed to trust him now too. Merri wasn't surprised really—he was easily the only one around them that wouldn't force her to talk, to confront Hayden's death and deal with it. He let her be, asking only what was necessary and nothing more. Perhaps it was simply because he didn't care, but it was lack of expectation from him that seemed to put Sage at ease, and was the reason Merri trusted him as well.

Genevieve was another story entirely, however. Though Merri couldn't say for certain if Michael particularly liked anyone or not, he *really* didn't like Gen. He would never tell her why though, and months ago, when they first met, they seemed to have made a deal not to press for details where the other was concerned.

Still, she couldn't help but be curious.

"Don't I get one?" Gen sulked, interrupting Merri's silent musings while Sage dropped what she was doing to retrieve the book.

Michael handed her the final tome. "There isn't much there," he said. "Needless to say, most accounts of witches in history haven't been favourable, and many didn't survive the centuries."

Gen frowned a little, staring at the book without opening it. Merri immediately got the sense that something was wrong, not just in her body language and expression, but in a strange haze that surrounded her suddenly.

"Are you okay?" Merri asked with concern.

"Yeah...no...I don't know." Gen shook her head. "But this," she tapped the cover of the book, "looks really familiar to me. I think I'm *deja vu-ing* or something."

"Take them home and read them, but I will need them back," he said.

"But if it's about me, I want to keep it," Gen immediately objected, until Michael fixed her with an angry look, and she dropped her gaze quickly.

"I don't trust you not to lose it."

"He sounds like my mom, you know," Gen whispered as Michael walked away.

"You probably *would* lose it," Sage pointed out.

"Whatever."

Self-conscious suddenly, Merri closed her book, deciding to wait until later to view its contents. It seemed, to her, to be very personal things, these books and talks of past lives. Gen saw the situation differently, however, and openly went through hers, looking at the pages with cautious interest.

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Sage stared at her book with distance in her eyes—detached almost—as if the book meant nothing. Maybe it did—maybe she only looked at it because Michael told her to.

“Why was I always a chick?” Gen said suddenly. Both Merri and Sage looked at her.

“What are you talking about?” Sage asked.

Gen pointed at her book. “I was always a chick. In like all my lives here. That’s weird, isn’t it? I always figured people got reincarnated as both.”

Sage’s brows pulled into a frown. “Me too.”

“Mer?”

Merri found the other two looking at her then, and so she opened her book again. Sure enough, from what she saw, all records referred to her as being a woman. Though Meredith immediately thought to ask Michael about it later—after the others had gone—Genevieve beat her to it.

“Michael!” she shouted. “Why are we all girls?”

“There are these things called ‘x chromosomes,’” he said as he returned to the kitchen. “Maybe you should retake science.”

“No, I mean it says in all our other lives we were girls,” Gen said with a glare, as if he should know what she spoke about. “Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Isn’t that weird?”

“Probably.”

“But what about other people? Do they always get to be reincarnated as the same gender?”

“No.”

“Why us?”

“I don’t know,” he repeated, annoyed.

“What about The Immortal? Was she always a she?”

“Since she’s *immortal*, I’d have to venture yes.”

“Good point.”

Merri studied him in silence for a moment. She couldn’t determine if he was telling the truth or not. She could never tell with him. Strangely, the thing about Michael was that he required a certain level of blind trust; either you believed him or you didn’t, and nothing in his expression or actions would help make that decision for you.

And right now, she wasn’t sure she believed him, but he was unlikely to say more with the others around, so Merri kept her mouth shut on the matter.

A cell phone rang from within Genevieve’s messenger bag, playing a vaguely familiar midi, and Gen bolted to get it.

“Hello?” she said as she answered. Merri watched her friend’s face light up. “Hi!” She met Meredith’s eyes and mouthed the name “Peyton.”

Now that’s something I didn’t see...

“No, it’s okay, I can talk...” Gen sent a quick glance to Michael, perhaps wondering if he’d disagree. Surprisingly, he didn’t say anything, and she quickly slipped off toward the back of the house, chatting away.

"Can I go now?" Sage asked, slamming the book shut.

Michael nodded, and Sage went straight for her boxing gloves once more.

Merri's gaze strayed to the package resting in Gen's spot. "I can't believe you got that book."

Michael sat across from her and grabbed the package, sliding it along the table until it was in front of him. He tore through the brown paper and twine to pull out the hardcover book.

"I'm a little surprised myself."

"She *did* give you a hard time then?"

"A bit." He opened the cover and scanned the pages within, not meeting her gaze. Generally, Merri wouldn't think much of it, but this time a warning seemed to prickle the hairs on the back of her neck, and she felt the need to press for more.

"Michael?"

"Hmm?"

"How did you get that book?" Moments passed between them with nothing said, and no sounds in the room but that of Sage striking the punching bag and Gen still speaking on the phone.

Michael closed the book at last, meeting her gaze. "I told her what Genevieve did."

"What Gen did?"

"That day at the farmhouse. When she...removed your attackers."

Jesus Christ...that was the last thing she expected him to do. No one was supposed to know about that—he'd made that very clear, to her at least. Now he was breaking his own rules? For some book? When he hadn't even told Gen herself what it was she did?

"You're serious?" Merri whispered. "Do you really think that was wise?"

"I didn't have a choice—"

"You could have lied—"

"That wasn't working," he interrupted firmly, gaze boring into hers. "I tried."

"Then I doubt you were trying hard enough. We both know you're damn good at lying." She raised a brow, daring him to contradict her.

"There's a difference between lying and not explaining all the facts."

What an ass. "Yes, I'm aware you seem to think those aren't the same thing."

"They're not, and if this is about The Immortal—"

"I'm still pissed at that, but it's not what I'm referring to."

"Look," he said in a low voice, leaning forward, keeping his eyes locked with hers. "I didn't want to tell her, but I ran out of options. Anyone in the area with the slightest bit of power felt what happened that day—Krysta among them. She didn't believe Genevieve to be a witch, and I didn't have any other way to convince her."

"You couldn't have had her do a spell right there or anything?"

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Michael rolled his eyes. "Right, that would have made me look like an even bigger liar. The stupid girl can barely put out a candle most of the time."

"But this witch believed she was capable of ripping holes in dimensions?"

"Apparently—I got the book, didn't I?"

Merri sighed and leaned back in her chair, folding her arms over her chest. "That seems too easy."

"I agree, but I wasn't going to argue with her when she then offered to sell the book for double the price, in case she changed her mind. And if it turns out she didn't really believe me, no harm done."

"What do you know about her?"

"Exactly what I told you before."

Now that she didn't believe, Michael never would have told anyone about what Gen did at the farmhouse based on the little information he had on Krysta...

But though she studied him, she couldn't pick up anything on him that suggested he was lying. Much like a traditional lie detector test, she could only really tell a liar if somehow the person she studied had some sort of emotional response to the lie. Michael might as well have been a sociopath—she couldn't get anything from him.

"Are you done?" he asked with a half smile, no doubt able to guess she had been trying to read him.

She knew there was no sense in hiding it. "It's not doing me any good. Now, if you could get that woman here, maybe I can see if she's lying about something and put everyone's mind at ease."

"I'm sure she's harmless."

"Really?" she said with skepticism to her voice. "Gen didn't seem to think so."

"Gen's an idiot."

"No, she's not. You should trust her instincts."

He shook his head. "You, I would trust. Her, of course not. She saw a lit candle in Krysta's bathroom and decided she was a Satanist—I'm surprised she's able to leave the house without being made to wear a helmet."

"Fine, but *I* trust Gen. So listen to *me* right now when I say don't trust Krysta. Michael..."

Footsteps skipping on the hardwood interrupted her, and she turned to see Gen approaching.

"Whoa, you guys look pretty conspiratorial," she said as she flopped back down on her seat. "Whatcha talking about?"

"Nothing," Michael said, giving Meredith a pointed look. She tried to warn him with a glare that the conversation was far from over, but he waved her off and stood. "I've got work to do."

"Seriously," Gen whispered as Michael left for the loft. "What was that all about?"

"Trying to get Thad's phone number," Merri quickly lied, feeling a moment of relief wash over her as Gen accepted the explanation with a grin.

“Cool. Let me know how that works out for you.”
“Will do.”

“You know, I’m glad he’s suddenly so *not* concerned about people being out to get us and all, and that he’s comfortable with us walking home at night,” Gen complained, shivering a little as she glanced around nervously.

“You just wanted a ride home ‘cause you’re lazy,” Sage replied.

“A little, but that’s not the point.”

The three girls had left Michael’s around nine-thirty. To Merri’s surprise, Sage had stayed with them, walking their old route which saw Meredith home first. Whether or not anyone was still out there after them was irrelevant—the fact remained that they all felt safer together.

“So I was thinking we should do something nice for Peyton or something,” Gen suggested, trying to be casual about it. “You know, ‘cause she’s new and all. It’s probably weird for her and stuff.”

“Who the hell is Peyton?” Sage asked.

“New girl at school,” Merri said.

“*Cute* new girl at school,” Gen clarified. “Maybe we could go out to a club or something? Or have a little ‘Welcome to Newhaven’ party?”

“I’ll leave the planning to you,” Merri said. They rounded a corner and several familiar buildings came into view. “This is me.”

“You sure you don’t need us to go up to the door with you?” Gen offered. “That skanky witch lives right over there—she might try to kill you or sex you up or something.”

“I’m fine,” Merri assured her with a grin. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” She walked toward the towering apartment complex to her right, moving at a slightly slower speed, listening and waiting for Gen and Sage’s conversation to resume and their footsteps to sound on the pavement.

She neared the building and glanced over her shoulder to see her two friends fading from view. Satisfied they weren’t looking back, Merri picked up the pace and slipped around the side of the apartment building, then down the next street.

As she travelled the next several blocks, the buildings got progressively uglier and older. Worn and forgotten. Fewer streetlamps worked, more garbage and broken glass littered the sidewalk that crunched under her feet. Yet strangely, she felt herself relax. She dropped her guard just a little, fished some cigarettes from her bag and lit one, taking a nice, deep drag. She was at home here—she blended in. No one gave her any notice, thankfully.

Cigarette held lightly between her lips, she slid her keys from her back pocket and approached the door to her building. She hardly saw a point in the landlord having a security door to enter the building; a guy put his foot through the bottom glass a month ago, and though some boards were nailed over the hole, someone usually broke those once or twice a week. Still, she wasn’t strong

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enough to break the wood herself, so she slid the key in the lock, turned it a few times until the latch finally gave, and opened the door.

Upstairs, the neighbours shouted at one another again, and stomped back and forth. The light above Merri flickered a few times and she glanced up, wondering if it would finally give out. The bulb held on, however, so she went to the mailbox to see about her mail.

The unit of mailboxes was nearly out of the wall, held in place by several pieces of electrical tape. Of course, much like the security door, no one bothered to fix that either. She didn't even want to think about where her rent money went.

She opened the beat up mailbox door to find nothing waited for her inside—not even junk mail. Empty.

Strange... Something was up. Not that she received a lot of mail, usually...but this time she was expecting something. Something important.

But then mail was frequently delivered to the wrong apartments, as if the postal worker couldn't wait to be out of the building, and merely dispensed letters and bills indiscriminately. And if that was the case this time...

Heidi.

That goddamn bitch. There were few people she trusted less than that cunt of a superintendent and her husband, Stu. If mail was "mysteriously" misdelivered, she'd know...or possibly be responsible for the disappearance herself.

Merri strode down the hall, past most of the first floor apartments and to the ninth door, near the stairwell. She hammered her fist on the door several times and waited. Within the apartment, she heard Heidi's small grandson crying, his crack whore mother probably having left him there while she was partying. Sad to say, the baby would probably be better off in an alley than with Heidi.

She pounded on the door again, even past the point when she heard Heidi on the other side, cursing and shouting, "I'll be there in a damn second!" Only when the door opened did Merri stop knocking. She leaned in the doorway when confronted by Heidi.

Middle-aged, middle height, and below middle intelligence, Heidi Harper planted her hands on her tiny hips and scrunched up her face of wrinkles that made her look ten years older than she actually was.

"What?"

Merri took a long drag from her cigarette, and then blew the smoke out, blasting Heidi's face. "I think you have something of mine."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Heidi barked, but a flicker of her eyes to the side told a different story. She was lying, and after spending the day with someone like Michael, Meredith found it a relief to see her abilities were indeed still in working order.

"I was expecting a letter today. You got it by mistake."

"I didn't get anything of yours!" Heidi moved to close the door, but Merri caught the door and pushed it back.

"I think you should check." She levelled Heidi with a cool gaze.

"I think you should back off!"

"Who's at the door?" called a man from within. Merri shuddered a little inside—Stu was home too. He'd taken a liking to her back when she first moved in, and though the suggestive stare of a man in his forties was creepy, it was far from the worst of her problems. And in this instance, his disturbing affection for her could be used to her advantage, if need be.

"No one," Heidi shot back, giving Merri a glare. She already had it in her head that her husband was having an affair with the young tenant, as well as half of everyone else on the block.

"Go and check," Meredith warned in a low voice.

"I don't have it!"

Merri took what was left of her cigarette and slowly put it out on the Harpers' front door, twisting the butt into the wood, all the while keeping her eyes locked on Heidi's.

"Hey Stu," Merri called in a bright voice. "Can you help me with something?"

Heidi swore under her breath, but Merri only smiled as Stuart Harper jumped to his feet and ran to the door.

"What seems to be the problem?" he asked, flashing a grin of crooked yellow teeth and blatantly looking her up and down like only a man unaware of his own repulsiveness can.

"I was expecting a letter, and I think it got delivered in with your stuff by mistake...do you think you can check for me?"

"Of course, sweetie." He returned to the living room. Heidi stood frozen in place, glowering at Meredith, body rigid as she waited for her husband's return.

"Yep, yep, here it is," Stu called, returning a few moments later with a beat up envelope. He held it out for her, and noticeably took a moment to touch her fingertips.

Merri did what she could to avoid cringing and offered another smile. "Thanks Stu. Later, Heidi."

Glad to be away from the pair of them, Merri quickly turned and bolted for the stairs, hearing the couple close their door and immediately begin arguing. Had she cared to, she probably could have heard the conversation easily, but Merri stopped her ears to it and continued to her apartment.

Two flights of stairs later, and she was at the door to her place. Again, she wasn't sure a lock on the door was all that useful, but then she didn't really have anything to steal. A single look around her one room apartment and sparse furnishings, and any potential robbers would move on to the next place.

She dropped her backpack inside the door, flipped on the light, then went straight for the couch, letter in hand. Sitting down, she looked the envelope over for a moment. Merri recognized the writing on the front, with a fake name and address in Montreal listed. Beside it was a yellow sticker from Canada Post, forwarding the letter to her. Best way to cover her tracks, or so she thought.

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She tore through the side and slid out the folded paper and stack of twenties. At least Heidi hadn't had a chance to open the letter yet, or November's rent money would have been long gone. Putting the cash aside, she looked over the brief letter.

B.

Kind of short this month. Jay got fired from Burger King but he gave a bit. I covered the rest so I own his ass now, lol. Hope you're well.

Miss you.

Lexie

Merri read the letter once more, then tucked it back in the envelope. Stowing the cash in her back pocket temporarily, Merri stood and slipped Lexie's letter with the stack of others she kept in a kitchen cupboard drawer. They rarely said anything different—little updates about her, Jay, and sometimes Danni. Always mentioning how they miss her. Never asking if she'd ever be home, though.

They knew better.

With a sigh, Meredith curled up on the couch and flipped on the old seventeen-inch TV that sat on the floor, staring at it without really watching.

Miss you too, Lex.

Three

Genevieve yawned, but refused to go to sleep yet. Stretched out on her bed with her head propped up on her hands, she went through the book from Michael page by page. She read what little was there, studying the pictures and wishing she spoke about six other languages so at least she could understand it all. Whoever compiled its contents clearly put a lot of time into it—one would think he'd have the sense to add some translations.

Beside her, Penny lay on her side, eyes sleepy but open, watching as Gen turned the pages. Presumably afraid she was going to miss something of dire importance, the dog fought off sleep and waited for Genevieve to announce it was finally time for bed.

"A few more minutes, girl," Gen replied to her dog's unasked question, yawning again in spite of her resolve not to. Michael had been right about the nightmares—very right. No matter how exhausted she got, some nights she was afraid to sleep. The nightmares didn't stop come morning either. No, they haunted her all day long, and filled her with dread, made her start at every little noise. As a result, she ended up lying in bed until dawn rolled around nearly every night, only finally sleeping when she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer. And so she did what she could to occupy her brain while she was awake.

What she hadn't told anyone was how difficult it was finding something to do during the long nights when even her art wasn't interesting her anymore. Before, that was all she had—all she really cared about. Losing herself in a sketch or painting had calmed her mind when she was worried, occupied her brain when she was bored, given her reason to procrastinate doing actual school work. But now the muse was gone. She took no pleasure in it, found no comfort...

There was a quiet, slow knock at her door.

"Yeah?" Gen looked up to see her father open the door, standing in his pyjamas and rubbing at his eyes.

"It's late—why are you still up, Genny?"

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She glanced at the clock to see it was just after two in the morning and shrugged. "Can't sleep."

"Have you even tried?"

She realized then that she hadn't even changed into her nightshirt and still wore the clothes she had on when leaving for school in the morning.

She closed the book. "You know I don't sleep much."

"Now that's an outright lie—you sleep all the time." He stepped in the room and closed the door softly behind him, probably to keep from waking her mom, then took a seat in the rattan chair across from Gen's bed. "Your mother used to get up an extra hour early every morning just to try to get you up for daycare."

"But I'm not in daycare anymore." She pulled herself into a sitting position and crossed her legs. "Things change."

"Some things don't, such as your mother being furious you didn't get home until eleven tonight."

"Shit, I thought you guys were asleep!"

Leo Weist looked vaguely amused at this. "I was until your mother woke me up to tell me you just got home and that I should go and ground you for it."

"So I'm grounded?" *So much for Peyton's welcome party.*

"That depends on where you were."

"I...I was hanging out with Sage," she said, which was at least a partial truth.

"She was Hayden's girlfriend, right?"

Gen nodded.

"And how's she doing?"

"I don't think she's good, Dad," she said honestly. "But she doesn't really talk to us, so it's hard to know."

"She probably just needs some time to heal. And it's important that you be there for her, just in case she decides she needs you."

"But is that really true?" Gen frowned. "Hayden was my friend so I can deal, but he was her *boyfriend*. She really loved him and now he's gone...can anything actually help that?"

Her father sighed, and she knew she probably wouldn't like what he was about to tell her. Clearly, he knew it too—his tone was laboured, as if trying to be delicate, but not sure how. It was rare they had a serious discussion about anything, and Gen imagined it was taking all his parenting instincts to get him through this one.

"Genny, you're young...and I know you won't believe this now... But when you're in high school, everything seems very serious. Very real. But you find, when you're older, that things are different. It's easier to move on."

"You're saying Sage and Hayden weren't really in love?" she accused.

He shifted his gaze and grinned slightly. "You know, you look exactly like your mother when you're ready to jump down my throat about something."

"Don't change the subject." She realized that too made her sound like her mother, but didn't really care at that moment. "You don't think they really loved each other?"

"I never said that," he corrected her. "I said people change. Maybe they would have gone off to college, but still stayed together. Maybe not. But she's only sixteen. It will take time to heal, but eventually there will be other boys, and other people to love."

"You're only forty-three—if Mom died, would you remarry?"

"That's not the same thing, Genny. I've been married to your mom for nearly twenty years—"

"So? Would you remarry or not?"

"Honestly?"

She gave him a look that clearly said, "Duh."

"Possibly. Your mom and I have discussed it before, and we decided we both want one another to be happy—"

"Whatever—I don't believe that. I'd want my girlfriend to be miserable without me."

"Ah, what a happy woman you will someday make someone."

"It's just that..." *Now how to phrase this in a way that doesn't make me sound crazy...* "There was a story I heard today."

"Story?"

"Yeah, in English class," she said quickly. "Can't remember the author. But it was about a woman who was immortal and she fell in love with this guy who she then looked for every time he was reincarnated. And they only ever see each other for a few years, but they're like soul mates or something."

"I think that was actually a Paula Cole music video, dear. Your mother liked her."

Gen made a face. "Who? God, you're old. Anyway, the point of the story is that they're so in love that they keep meeting again and again."

"Well, like you said, it's a story. I don't think things work like that."

"But it's not...I mean, it's a very *real* story. Like it could have happened. Don't you think that's possible?"

"That some woman out there is immortal?"

"No—that it's possible to love someone all that time."

"I think you and your future wife will be just like that, Genny," her father said, smiling kindly if not slightly patronising. "Now this is about as philosophical as I get after midnight, but anything else before I urge you to retire for the night?"

"No."

"And are you going to sleep now?"

"Yeah, yeah," she muttered.

"Goodnight, Genny."

"Night Dad."

Her father left, closing the door behind him. Gen stretched out on her stomach again and pulled out the book once more.

The stories of her other selves were few. Sage's book had been far fuller, but then apparently people didn't think to kill—and obliterate any record of—warrior women as often as they did witches. Regardless, the lack of contents of

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the book had actually made an excellent case for not telling anyone about what she was. Not that she assumed the O.P.P.—or even R.C.M.P.—would permit her to be burned at the stake or whatever, but she'd prefer not to take any chances.

A section of the book had nothing but sketches on pages so old she thought they might disintegrate should she touch them, kept in sealed plastic bags that were then pasted to the pages. Towards the end, she even found a black and white photograph, scratched and a tad overexposed. None of the girls were ever over twenty-five, though. Part of her tried to come up with logical explanations as to why none of them was any older, but she knew the truth...

They didn't actually *live* any longer.

Some girls couldn't have been more than fourteen... Already, she had outlived some of her former selves, and the very thought chilled her through and through. Perhaps it would have been better if Michael hadn't shared these books with them after all.

She closed the book, deciding whether she was tired or not, she couldn't look at the pictures any more. She set it aside on her nightstand, swiftly changed into a tank top and pajama bottoms, and then settled in bed. Penny stood and walked in a few circles until she apparently found the place she wanted, then flopped back down at the bottom of the bed and promptly passed out. Gen reached over and flipped out the light.

Eyes wide open, she stared up at the ceiling for a long time. Sleep came for her, tried to pull her along, but gave up and went for someone else, and once again, Gen was left alone.

She turned onto her side with a sigh, hoping maybe the change of scenery might help her drift off. Instead, her gaze settled on the book Michael had given her. It might not have had a face, but still it seemed to be staring back at her, threatening her with tales of the dead girls she once lived as.

Gen grabbed the book, dropped it on the floor, and then took the pile of clothes she had been wearing the day before and cast them over top.

Satisfied that "out of sight, out of mind" might actually work in this instance, Genevieve closed her eyes and hoped that sleep would drop by for her again soon.

God, it was cold. She sucked in a deep breath of icy air and nearly choked.

"You're not strong enough," said a woman's voice.

Genevieve looked around, but didn't see anyone... Nothing but snow all around her—she was alone.

"And you never will be until you start listening to me."

That voice...it was so near...

"Who are you?" she whispered, gaze darting around for any sign of life beyond her own.

"Who do you think?"

As the words left her mouth, Gen realized all this time she'd been speaking—speaking to herself in a voice that sounded far different from her own.

Somewhere behind her, Gen heard snow crunch under foot. Someone drew near, and though she wanted to look, instinct warned her not to.

“What do I do?” she whispered. The wind grew colder and colder, bitterly blasting her face and taking her breath away. She squeezed her eyes closed as the footsteps drew closer...

“Do you trust me?” said the other voice from her lips.

The footsteps stopped just behind her. She heard heavy breathing now—he was so close. Her own breathing had ceased completely, her thoughts drowned out by her pounding heart.

“Yes,” she whispered.

Long seconds seemed to pass without anything happening. And then the snow crunched again, as if whoever was behind her had shifted his weight, preparing for something...

The wind went still. “Move,” said the woman’s voice.

Genevieve felt a force push her forward, and then her legs were moving, one after the other, trudging through the snow.

“Where do I go?” She looked around as she ran, seeing nothing but rolling hills of snow in every direction.

“Keep going,” was her answer, and so Gen did. She ran through snow that reached mid-calf, all to get away from an assailant she didn’t see. She slipped now and then, her foot catching in a snow drift or twisting on the rough terrain, but terror lent her speed. She pushed on, farther and farther, into the white nothingness, until she could run no more.

Gen crumpled into a heap in the snow, gasping from lack of breath, shivering as the sweat she’d built up running turned to ice suddenly. She swung her head around, gaze travelling across the snow. No one followed—she was alone...

Except for a single figure that seemed to come out of nowhere and move toward her.

She was dressed as Gen had seen her before, as though she’d stepped out of another time. The wind picked up, rustling her long dress and yellow hair, but the bitter cold didn’t seem to bother her in the least. She stopped next to Genevieve and dropped onto her knees in the snow in front of her.

“Who are you?” Gen repeated, still unable to wrap her brain around the fact she was staring at herself.

“I think you know by now,” the other her said.

“Why are you here?”

“Because you’re weak and you need me.”

She spoke coldly—matter of factly—and nowhere near as nice as Gen would have expected herself to be.

“Who was after me?” she asked, but her doppelganger only smiled. “Who’s trying to kill me?”

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"I think a better question would be who *isn't* trying to kill you. The enemy comes from all sides, and it's not only The Brethren you have to worry about."

"But that man—"

"*He* can only hurt you when you fail to remember who you are."

"Who am I?"

The other Genevieve leaned in close to whisper. "You'll find out."

Gen blinked. The other her was gone. Not only that, but she no longer knelt in the snow—instead she stood once more on that same hilltop, overlooking a village in the distance.

The snow crunched beneath heavy boots behind her. He was there, and there was nothing she could do about it.

He can only hurt you when you fail to remember who you are.

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to remember, to know what the other woman had been talking about, but no memory came to her.

A hand went to her waist. She bit down on her lip until the point she tasted blood, knowing what would happen next but unable to force her legs to move.

Long seconds passed, and for a moment she thought she might be wrong—that he might not hurt her after all...

And then she felt the knife plunge in her side.

~~*

A cool autumn wind stirred her hair and nipped at her skin, but Genevieve failed to notice. Dark-rimmed eyes stared blankly at the open textbook in front of her, skimming the same sentence again and again without reading it.

She sat on a bench outside the school alone, having decided that, after sleeping in and missing her first few classes, she didn't much care about attending the rest of them.

"Gen?"

She looked up slowly, the familiar voice taking a few seconds to reach her mind.

"Mer."

Meredith stood just a few feet away holding her jacket in her arms and with a knapsack slung over one shoulder. She offered a half smile, then stepped forward with care. "I was on my way to Bio and saw you through the window. Missed you in class today."

Gen's eyes dropped to the book once more. She snapped the cover closed and sighed. "Slept in."

"Have a spare right now?"

Gen knew full well Merri had seen her schedule and was aware she didn't have any spare periods, but couldn't find it in her to be annoyed at the pointed question.

"Got here, but...I don't know; I just didn't feel like going."

Meredith sat down beside her, slipping on her thin fall coat and shivering as the wind blew. “You remember we’ve got Peyton’s ‘Welcome to Newhaven’ party tonight, right?”

“Shit,” Gen muttered, momentarily forgetting her troubles to recall it was in fact Friday, and they had all planned to go out that night. Unless one was willing to trek to Toronto, there wasn’t anywhere to go but a club outside of town called *On The Map*. Peyton immediately agreed to go when they had proposed the idea, and the upcoming group “date” had been about the only thing Gen had looked forward to in weeks. “Everything still on?”

“Yeah...more or less.”

“Great—what’s the problem?”

“Well, Peyton asked like a dozen times today if you would still be there tonight.” Meredith gave her a little grin.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. So you’d better be there. And it’s still me, and Levi said Stephie would probably go. But now there are a couple of guys from the Phoenixes who wanted to come, and then someone in class overheard, and these two girls were all over Levi, insisting they wanted to go too.”

Gen rolled her eyes at the thought. As terrible as the Newhaven Phoenixes were, they still had a following, as did each of the players. And since Hayden’s death...well, it was clear there were plenty of girls ready to give Levi a shoulder to cry on—or anything else, if need be.

“So there’ll be a few more people there than we thought. Sound okay?”

“Sure.” It didn’t seem to matter much if it *didn’t* seem okay since plans had already been set, but she wasn’t about to complain. The night out would be good...

“Now are you going to tell me what’s wrong?”

Gen looked up to catch Merri’s steady gaze, then shifted nervously and shrugged. She didn’t even see the point in the conversation—the damn woman was basically psychic anyway. She probably already knew the answer.

“Just don’t sleep much. I’m sure Michael told you.”

Merri sighed heavily. “He doesn’t tell me everything, Gen.”

“He tells you more than he tells us.”

“Which I might point out still isn’t much. The guy is...” She shook her head. “He’s just impossible to read. Every time he speaks, I don’t know if it’s the truth or complete bullshit. He’ll tell me enough to keep me thinking he’s being honest, but that’s as far as it goes. I swear.”

Genevieve met her friend’s eyes then, and was pretty sure she was telling the truth. Of course, one could never tell with Merri, and she found it particularly ironic on this occasion when she was lamenting the dishonesty of Michael. But she had to trust someone, and that person might as well be Meredith.

At least Merri didn’t almost leave me to die...

“Mer...I wanna tell you something.”

Merri offered another smile. “Anything.”

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“Do you...I don’t know, ever have weird dreams?”

“Constantly.”

“Ones that...” God, she was going to sound insane if she ever actually forced the words out. “Ones that are different, though? Dreams that aren’t normal...kind of like visions?”

Merri grinned at that, as if relaxed, but Gen didn’t find it comforting. “I’m a Seer—I have dreams that are visions of the future all the time—”

“No...not the future. Visions of the past.”

A slight frown crossed Merri’s face, but she didn’t comment. “Like memories?”

“If they’re memories, they’re not recent ones. I...” *Deep breath, Gen...* Even if Merri couldn’t help her, maybe she’d feel better just saying it out loud... “I had a dream last night. I’ve had it before—once Monday night too.” She tried not to let the memories come back to her in full, but terror rushed over her once more. Shivering, Gen cast a quick glance over her shoulder, certain someone would be standing there behind her, ready to stab her again. Though her rational mind found it unsurprising that they remained alone, the rest of her couldn’t shake the feelings from her dream.

“Gen, you don’t need to tell me if—” Merri started, but Genevieve shook her head.

“It’s okay. In the dream...I’m standing on a hill. It’s really snowy and I can see this tiny town in the distance. But everything else is snow. I’m just standing there...and I’m not alone. Someone is there behind me...a man...”

“And I know him. That’s the thing that gets me—somehow, I know who he is, and though I don’t remember now, in the dream I know why he’s there.”

She swallowed hard as a lump formed in her throat and stared at the empty space in front of her. “And then he kills me. Just like that. Stabs me in the side, and when I fall down, he slashes my throat.”

“That’s...creepy,” Merri said, her frown deepening.

“Michael gave us those books on Monday, and I got thinking... Now that I know I’ve lived other lives, I think maybe it really happened. And if it did...Mer, what if he’s still out there? Somehow...I mean, it’s possible. And I’m scared he’s going to try to kill me...again. I looked through that book and these girls...these girls were all so young—there aren’t any stories of them when they’re older. I think they all...I mean *I* died. Really young.”

“So did some of the girls in my book,” Meredith said quickly. “But people were afraid of others that could do what we can, especially women—”

“Except no one’s been burned at the stake or whatever terribly lately. There was a photograph in my book, under a hundred years old. Why didn’t she live to be really old? What if the guy from my dream killed her?”

Silence grew between them. Merri’s gaze drifted off, as she seemed to be concentrating on something, meanwhile Gen didn’t feel the slightest bit better after finally speaking her thoughts aloud.

“Is there anything else in the dream?” Merri asked suddenly.

"Well...the three times I remember having it, there's this other girl there. She looks like me, but she's not. She's...stronger, I guess. Confident. I think she's me in one of my other lives. She says I have to remember who I am."

"Have you had any problems with spells?"

"If by 'problems' you mean 'not tried any'..."

"Gen—"

"You don't understand!" Genevieve interrupted, her voice breaking. "And neither does Michael. I don't even know what I did to those guys that day—and I know they were going to kill us and all, but... What if I do something and I can't control it? Fuck—three weeks ago I was scared this stuff wasn't even gonna work, and now—"

"You just need to practice," Merri said, her calm voice smoothing some of Gen's rising nerves. "Keep working with the small stuff, let Michael guide you—"

"Yeah, 'cause Michael's been a really great mentor thus far. He's totally my Yoda." She rolled her eyes for effect, and Merri chuckled.

"Okay, forget Michael then. I'll help you—I'll be your old, wrinkly green guy. While Sage and Michael work together, you and me can meditate and work on some simple spells. I can't do any of them, obviously, but I can help you with focusing."

"Really?"

"Of course. No more mysterious spells that Michael hasn't explained to you ahead of time, nothing dangerous. Just simple stuff. I'm sure he won't mind."

Gen gave her a look.

"Much," Merri added with a grin. "Wanna hit your last class or head over to Michael's now?"

"Uh, neither?"

"Sit out here then?"

"No...Michael's, I guess." The two stood and began the familiar walk away from the school property towards Michael's.

"Mer...can I ask you something else?"

"Sure."

"Have..." Gen thought about her dream for a moment. "Have you ever heard of 'The Brethren'?" Like has Michael ever said anything about them?"

"No, what is it?"

"I don't know...but the girl that looked like me in the dream mentioned them. She said they weren't the only ones I should worry about."

"Maybe they were the guys who came after us before?"

"Maybe... Do you think you can find out? From Michael, I mean?"

Meredith didn't say anything for several long moments. "I don't know, Gen. He isn't always very...forthcoming. Maybe we can look into it ourselves first?"

"Like Nancy Drew?"

"I was thinking a little more attitude."

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“Veronica Mars it is, then. Should we make some calls to people while using fake accents and start bugging phones?”

“Would you even know who to call?”

This sneaking around idea was going to be difficult if Meredith couldn’t get in the spirit of things. “Well, no,” Gen admitted. “So why don’t we skip Michael’s and head to my place? Check the internet? I’m sure there’s something on there...”

Apparently, merely Googling “brethren” wasn’t as helpful as Genevieve thought it might be.

She hadn’t completely eliminated the possibility that the name referred to one of the thousands of church groups that came up, but she and Merri couldn’t be certain. And since the thought of visiting those thousands of pages destroyed any desire she had to know who exactly the Brethren were, the girls decided that perhaps they could first think of some better ways to investigate before actually investigating. Of course, three hours of going through different search engines could wipe out anyone’s enthusiasm.

Adding to their difficulty in getting anything accomplished was Genevieve running to the phone every time it rang—in case it was the school informing her mother of her absence—and then keeping her father from randomly walking into her bedroom to check up on them and tell Meredith lame jokes, as he was fond of doing when she had friends over. If they did any more snooping into the Brethren, they’d have to go to Merri’s for some peace and quiet.

“Levi’s still going to pick us up in an hour, right?” Gen asked, glancing at the clock on the bottom of her computer screen’s desktop.

“Far as I know,” Merri replied as she closed the notebook she’d been writing their search results in. “Know what you’re wearing?”

Gen sighed as her gaze trailed to the closet. “No. I figured I’d just blindly reach towards the back where my cuter outfits rest—still with the tags, in most instances—and hope I come up with something. How about you?” Only then did it occur to her that she’d never seen Merri in anything but jeans and faded T-shirts, always in muted tones. She frowned at the thought. “Will you have time to go to your place and change? You can borrow something of mine, but I’m like a foot taller than you...”

Meredith held up her backpack, which in retrospect, Gen mused, seemed quite a bit more full than usual. “I figured we’d head to Michael’s after school or something, so I came prepared. Mind if I get changed in the bathroom?”

“Be my guest.”

While Merri went to change, Genevieve herself did exactly as she said she would: she reached into the back of the closet and fished out a few articles of clothing that still had their tags. Changed and just pinning her long blonde hair into a rough ponytail, she heard a knock at her bedroom door.

“Yeah?”

Skyla Dawn Cameron

The door creaked open and she took a moment to finally get the last bobby pin in her hair before turning around.

“Holy Christ, you look hot!” she managed to sputter under the shock of seeing Merri. Twenty minutes in the bathroom had let her replace her jeans with a short skirt, T-shirt with a form-hugging lace top, and legs clad in black stockings and a pair of bulky black boots. Dark, dramatic make-up, hair piled on her head in a messy-but-stylish ‘do...the woman was all curves and sin incarnate as far as Genevieve was concerned.

“So this is okay?” Merri asked with a half smile.

“Okay? If you ever decide you go for chicks, I’d better be the first to know.”

Four

Michael took a long sip of his bourbon on the rocks. The alcohol burned his throat, his stomach, and eventually tore through his bloodstream, giving his brain a nice haze and dulling the constant noise around him. It took one hell of a fight with Sage to convince her to take a night off so he didn't have to be home, but now he was seriously wondering what he was thinking—he hated people. Hated crowds, hated noise, hated loud obnoxious music... He originally planned to just hit a bar in downtown Newhaven, but one glance inside the most decent looking pub he could find still left much to be desired, as did its patrons, who were little more than country hicks. On the highway to Toronto, he encountered a large building with signs proclaiming it to be a bar and dance club. Though he had no interest in the latter, the place looked busy, and with any luck more pleasing company than what was in town could be found.

Inside, he discovered—thankfully—that the bar area and dance area were quite separate: the lower level permitted patrons of all ages, and had hundreds of people crowding the dance floor and few tables. A wide gallery surrounded the room, and it was on this second floor where alcohol was served—and where Michael chose to sit—overlooking the room. Thus far, he decided it wasn't his favourite place to spend some downtime, but it would have to do for now...

And then his gaze settled on some horribly familiar faces.

Goddamn it. Merri told him she and some others were going out that night, but she'd never specified where. And now, just as he had settled with a drink, he looked down to see Genevieve among a group of other kids. It was impossible to escape these stupid people.

Should have just driven to Toronto...

A closer scan of their faces revealed Merri was indeed among them, though he hadn't seen her dressed like that since the first day they met. For someone

who usually went out of her way to remain unnoticed, she certainly could stand out in a crowd if she wanted to.

As if somehow aware he had just noticed them—which might actually be accurate considering what she was—Merri looked up suddenly and met his gaze. She grinned, and then leaned over to whisper something to Genevieve.

Just as he worried the lot of them would be heading up to the bar next, Merri seemed to be excusing herself from the group, and moments later saw her heading up the crowded staircase towards the second floor gallery.

“Are you stalking us?” she said with a smirk as she slid into the seat across from him.

“I think I’m actually on my way out.”

“It’s okay—they didn’t notice you here.”

He took another sip of icy bourbon, meeting her gaze over the rim of the glass. She grinned again, as if she found something highly amusing, but made no effort to explain what that funny thing was.

“What?” he asked, putting the glass down. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Are you here trying to pick up girls?”

He glanced at a pair of twenty-something women standing near the bar only a few yards away who had been watching him for the past ten minutes. Merri followed his gaze and laughed.

“Guess you don’t really need to try.”

“Not usually.”

“So *are* you here to pick up a few girls?”

“Just one will do, actually. Are you high?”

“Uh...” Her eyes rolled upward as she considered the question for a ridiculously long time. “Kind of. So let me ask you something...a proposition, sorta.”

“I’m not buying you and your friends any beer.”

She rolled her eyes. “Please, I’ve got my own fake ID for that. No, see, I was talking to Gen today, and since she’s having trouble with magic and that, I thought I could help her. Maybe while you’re working with Sage, me and her can practice meditating?”

“I don’t fucking care.”

“Don’t say that—this is important.” Her gaze narrowed on him, eyes growing more focused, and he figured whatever substances she might have consumed had loosened her tongue a bit, but she was still sober enough to get serious in a hurry. “She’s really freaked out and we need to help her.”

He glanced down at Genevieve to find her standing with a dark haired girl, laughing.

“Oh yeah, she looks terrified.” He drained the rest of the bourbon from his glass.

“I mean it. Between the magic and her dreams, she’s really upset. You should probably talk to her sometime.”

“I’d rather not.”

Children of the Apocalypse

“Why the hell do you hate her so much?”

She must have been feeling particularly uninhibited to ask him that; he could tell she often wondered, but never had she come out and actually inquired.

Fuck...if he'd just let that stupid bitch get her throat cut back in the farmhouse a few weeks ago, this would all be a moot point. For a second he was back in the moment again, watching that guy pin Genevieve to the wall, ready to spill her blood and end her life, and Michael felt a twinge of regret that he hadn't let it happen. It would have been easier. Much easier. One of them dies, and so goes all hope. This wasn't his responsibility—wasn't his concern. And even now, he couldn't say what compelled him to finally help her. It wasn't pity and it certainly wasn't empathy. But he had met her eyes for seconds that seemed to stretch on forever, and he saw understanding in their blue depths. She knew he didn't want to help her, and like Michael himself, she didn't understand yet why he did.

If he could do it all again? Christ yes, he'd probably let her die...or just finish the damn job himself.

“Michael,” Merri prompted again, shaking him from his memories. “Why do you hate her?”

“It doesn't matter.” He dragged his gaze from Genevieve to stare at the slowly melting ice in his glass.

“But I don't understand...” Her voice trailed off and Michael didn't need to look up to know her eyes grew wide and her jaw dropped. He didn't meet her gaze, instead continuing to stare at the ice, turning the glass around in his hand.

The biggest problem in keeping company with a Seer was that she inevitably figured out things he wasn't interested in having her know.

“Oh my god...”

He didn't respond.

“She's the one...the one who did it, isn't she? Michael—”

“We're not having this conversation,” he interrupted.

“But—”

He met her eyes. “We're *not* having this conversation.”

“You have to tell her.”

“That isn't necessary.”

“Jesus, she's going to find out sooner or later—”

“It isn't important, Meredith,” he replied coldly. “She doesn't need to know and you will *not* tell her.”

She slumped in her chair and shook her head. “This isn't going to end well.”

“It never does,” he said quietly. “You should probably go back to your friends now.”

“Actually...I kinda came up to ask you a favour. Another one.” She studied his expression, no doubt waiting to see what she could get away with.

“And that favour would be...?”

“I lied about having a fake ID—can you get us a couple of beers?”

“Can you pay?”

She produced a stack of bills. “Took up a collection. Get us maybe half a dozen?”

Michael figured it was time for a refill anyway, so he accepted the money and took his glass back toward the busy bar.

“Oh, and uh...”

He glanced back at Merri to see what else she might want.

“Can I borrow your cell phone for half a sec?”

Michael sighed and fished the phone from his pocket. Merri’s smile brightened as he tossed the item to her and she caught it.

“I just need it for a minute,” she said.

“Take your time.” He continued to the bar, knowing she could have all the time she wanted but she wouldn’t find what she was looking for.

Though the bartenders checked ID, the place was crowded and no one bothered to care who the drinks were for. Before returning to his table, he snatched a white napkin from the counter, pulled a pen from his jacket pocket, and scribbled down a few numbers.

Turning away from the bar, drinks in hand, he watched Merri for a moment as she cycled through the numbers on his phone. She didn’t gaze up as he approached, and it was only when he set the bottles of beer on the table with a faint grin that her eyes darted up to him.

“Thanks, I just needed to give someone a quick call,” she said as she handed the phone back.

“His number isn’t on there,” Michael replied.

For once in her life, Merri actually looked genuinely startled. “I wasn’t—”

Michael dropped the napkin with Thad’s phone number on the table in front of her. “David Shaw would never speak to me directly, so I spent a lot of time calling Thad and quickly memorized the phone number. There it is.”

“But I wasn’t...” She glanced down at the phone number and flashed sudden grin. “Thanks.” She scooped up the beers and phone number as Michael sat down again.

“Be careful, Mer.”

Merri glanced down at his cell phone once more and frowned. “You too.” Without explaining her cryptic comment, she turned from him and went back down the stairs, discreetly slipping beers to her friends once she reached them.

Though he honestly thought she should be careful, he did hope she’d call Thad anyway. Kincaid was the only person Michael knew that could get a hold of David Shaw, and perhaps if he grew fond of Merri, she could eventually wrest the contact information from him.

Michael’s cell phone rang suddenly. A quick glance at the number revealed it was local, but he didn’t immediately recognize it.

“What?” he said as he answered. Silence followed, and he leaned his ear heavily against the receiver, the noise of the club making it difficult to hear.

“Michael?” A feminine, velvety voice spoke his name. “This is Krysta Guerin.”

Children of the Apocalypse

“What can I do for you?”

“I came across a book earlier today...one that you and your little friend might be interested in. Do you have time to drop by and take a look?”

He glanced at his watch—it wasn’t even nine o’clock yet. He didn’t tend to sleep much anyway, so a short trip to her apartment wouldn’t kill his entire night.

...listen to me right now when I say don’t trust Krysta, Michael...

“I can be by in about twenty minutes.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

Only fifteen minutes later, Michael’s car waited in the guest parking lot, and he approached Krysta’s building. When he buzzed her apartment, she didn’t bother requesting confirmation of his identity over the intercom, but instead let him straight inside.

He knocked as he reached her door on the seventh floor, and moments later heard her call, “Come in.”

Michael pushed the heavy door open. Just inside to his right was the kitchen, where Krysta sat on an island barstool, sipping from a cocktail of some sort. She wore another silk robe, teal this time, leaving him to wonder if the woman owned any actual clothes.

She smiled, somewhat coolly, and slid a book across the island toward him.

“It’s a second edition,” she said as he picked up the book. “You can find newer printings in just about any occult shop, but not that old.”

He glanced it over, then met her steady gaze. “That’s great, but I told you I’m not a collector.”

“At the very least, you should be able to appreciate its value.”

“I’m more concerned with practical use. The newer paperbacks have multiple translations and more modern prefaces that I prefer.”

“Still, there’s something that can be said for a nice ambience.”

“Not if it doesn’t have a use.”

“Well, I can see we aren’t going to agree on this.”

“Probably not.”

Krysta stood suddenly, turned her back to him, and started toward the bedroom hallway at the far end of the room. “I can think of another piece you might want—and it does have practical use.”

She paused just before she turned the corner to her room, and the teal robe slipped from her shoulders into a pool on the floor leaving her perfectly sculpted, naked body in its wake.

Krysta cast her dark gaze over her shoulder for a moment, smiled suggestively, then continued on into the bedroom.

Without a word, Michael followed.

~~*

Merri stood back away from the dance floor, sipping her beer and watching the crowd. Gen and Peyton seemed to be getting along; neither girl had left the other for most of the night. They spent a lot of time talking and dancing—always at least a foot apart—but Gen was absolutely glowing and there was little doubt in Merri's mind that her friend felt things were progressing well. Whether or not Peyton felt the same way, however, was definitely up for debate. She appeared to be having fun, but something seemed a little off about her—a nervousness, perhaps? Was she just cautious, or particularly on guard? There were moments when Merri caught a certain look in Peyton's eyes—something she couldn't quite place—but seconds later it was gone and she seemed back to her normal self. Maybe she had a genuine interest in Gen being more than a friend. Maybe not. But as long as Gen didn't get hurt, Merri was happy to watch it play out.

Gen's friend Stephanie had taken off at some point early on, and Merri hadn't seen her since. The rest of the group—whose names Merri had already forgotten—were split between dancing and sitting at a round table chatting.

She glanced up to the surrounding gallery again, but didn't see Michael anywhere. Krysta must have indeed called him, just as Meredith thought she would, and he no doubt went to meet her. Though she hadn't actually even seen the woman before, intuition told her to be wary. Michael had it in his head he was smarter than everyone else and if he didn't see cause for alarm, then everything must be fine...and normally, Merri could accept that. But he seemed far too nonchalant about Krysta. Either he knew more about her than he said he did, or something had completely blinded him to the caution he should be taking.

"We should totally go out more often," Gen said as she suddenly popped up at Merri's side, eyes wide and a huge grin splitting her face.

Meredith glanced around. "Where's Peyton?"

"Washroom," Gen said with the nod of her head. She took a long drink of her beer. "Seriously, isn't this awesome?"

It could be better, Merri thought. "Levi looks like he's doing well," she said instead, gaze shifting to where Levi sat with an unfamiliar strawberry blonde.

Genevieve rolled her eyes. "With the skank of the century. That's Kourtnee—with two E's, by the way. Talk about parents setting their kids up to do porno or something, eh?"

Meredith took a closer look at the girl. She didn't appear to be particularly skanky, but she did seem *very* interested in whatever Levi was saying. Leaning across the table, eyes locked with his, laughing as if on cue... And Levi looked relaxed with her, which seemed a good thing.

"She doesn't seem that bad," Merri said.

"Yeah, 'skank' is probably overdoing it. She's in the drama club—always the lead in school plays—and she just always seems really fake to me. He doesn't seem to notice, though. He's been talking to her all night."

"So should we rescue him?"

Children of the Apocalypse

Gen shrugged. "I think I liked him better when he was pining after Sage, but maybe the attention will be good for him. Now..." Her eyes traveled over the faces of the room. "...we just need to find you a hot boy."

Thankfully, Merri caught sight of Peyton returning. "Peyton's back," she said quickly, relieved as Gen's attention was easily diverted.

"Ooh! Well, maybe she can help us look for a guy..."

Merri quelled that suggestion by grabbing Gen by the shoulders and thrusting her toward Peyton. "Go, have fun, and don't worry about me."

"But—"

"If you want to do something for me, lend me your cell for a few minutes."

Gen gladly handed over her phone before heading off to meet Peyton.

Before even thinking of calling anyone, Meredith polished off her beer. A shot of something stronger might have made her feel a bit more relaxed, but a cold draught was better than nothing. At last she powered on the cell phone and punched in the number Michael gave her.

Four rings in and knots formed in her stomach—what if Michael was being a prick and had given her the wrong number? She wouldn't put it past him, and he made it pretty clear he didn't want the guy around...

"Hello?"

Startled at the sudden answer, she paused for a moment. "Um...hi." *Oh, smooth*, she thought with a wince.

"Hi," a male voice said again. "So...what are you up to tonight?"

Nervousness dissipated and she grinned. There was no mistaking that tone—it was definitely him. "You have no idea who this is and you're ready to carry on a conversation with me?"

"Well...yeah. So what are you up to?"

"I'm at a club with some friends and I'm having a very dull time."

"Ah," he said. "And you decided I could liven things up?"

"Or revel in the dullness along with me."

"Hmm. Tempting. And where is this dullness occurring?"

"It's this place called *On the Map*. It's just off—"

"The 401—I know it. I guess I can come by."

"You're not even going to ask who this is?"

"No," Thad replied nonchalantly.

"But I could be an axe-wielding maniac."

"Naw—if you were an axe-wielding maniac in a dance club, you probably wouldn't tell me you were having a dull time. You'd be killing people."

"And killing people is fun?"

"It is if you're an axe-wielding maniac, or so I'm told."

"Know a lot of them, do you?"

"Just one... Maybe two."

"Alotta people are here—how are you going to know which one is me?"

"Well, what are you wearing?"

Merri glanced down. "Purple shirt with a bit of black lace. Black skirt. Black boots."

“Wow, you sound hot.”

Merri stifled a laugh. “If I was hot, I wouldn’t have to call strange guys when already standing in a room full of them, would I?”

“Maybe. So do I actually know who you are?”

“Kind of.”

“I’ve seen you before?”

“Uh...” She looked down at her outfit again and sighed. “Not looking like this.”

“And the plot thickens. Okay, don’t go anywhere—I’ll see you in a bit.”

Merri hung up the phone, her brain still not accepting what she had just done. It was stupid. Pure idiocy. She didn’t know him, couldn’t trust him...

But she was restless. Bored. Fucking sick of hiding all the time. Against her better judgment, she decided to return to a more comfortable skin that night; to be a little bit more like herself. And along with that self came a desire for fun and to take a few risks.

And phoning a complete stranger she’d spoken to for just a few minutes several days ago definitely qualified as a risk.

Over forty minutes later and no sign of Thad, however, had left Meredith feeling relieved, if not slightly disappointed. Perhaps the fates had overlooked her momentary lapse in judgment and any potential disasters would be averted...or perhaps her brain was just way too sober and at last thinking clearly again. Whatever the reason, he didn’t show and she might as well be glad of it.

From the corner of her eye, she caught sight of a person and glanced to her right to see one of Levi’s friends watching her. She couldn’t remember his name, and didn’t recall having spoken to him at all that night—why the hell was he staring at her like that?

As if realizing she had noticed him there, he moved towards her. Merri felt her skin prickle just a bit—whatever he wanted, she probably had no interest in it.

“Hi,” he said, flashing his teeth in a grin.

Why didn’t I just leave instead of waiting for Thad to show up?

She gave him a half-hearted smile of greeting, and then made a point of looking elsewhere. Just in case that wasn’t enough to make him get lost, she crossed her arms over her chest. Drunk or not, he had to get the hint.

“Levi said you got us a couple of drinks earlier.”

Apparently her body language had been completely lost to him.

“Ran into a friend who offered to get it for us,” she said with a shrug.

“Yeah, well, thanks. I’m Warren, by the way.”

“Oh.”

She knew he waited for her to introduce herself, but an exchange of words even greater than what had already passed would only serve to encourage him.

“You’re Merri?” he said at last.

Children of the Apocalypse

"And also not interested," was her curt reply.

"Ah, I see."

Then fuck off, already.

"Just thought I'd give a couple of you a thank you gift—you and the other new girl."

Her back stiffened and her gaze moved to him slowly. "Gift?"

Warren held up a tiny plastic bag with a couple of pills inside. Merri guessed it was Ecstasy. How...quaint.

"Very considerate of you," she said as he cracked open the bag. He pulled out a tablet and reached for her, intending to put it in her mouth himself. She'd dealt with worse before—best not to make a scene. Merri stuck out her tongue and accepted the hit, tossing it in her mouth but wedging it between her gums and cheek. She pretended to swallow and Warren didn't seem to think much of it.

"Guess I'll be on my way," he said, gaze going to where Genevieve and Peyton sat.

"Maybe you could stay a little longer," she said quickly, moving to step in front of him. Warren smiled and she tried to mimic the way he looked at her so he wouldn't leave so quickly.

"Actually, I was thinking of getting out of here..." He raised a brow in suggestion. "Want to come with?"

This was definitely the last time she intended to wear such a short skirt—it brought nothing but trouble.

She opened her mouth to object, but thought the better of it. "Sure," she said instead, stepping a bit closer to him. She casually put her hand on his arm and looked up into his eyes, smiling. "Let's head around back?"

"I was kind of thinking we could drive somewhere..."

"I don't know, something about being out in the open like that, where anyone could walk by...I think it would be more fun than a car." Her hand slid down his arm, coming to rest on the little bag of XTC. She slid it from his hands and slipped it discreetly into her pocket. "Meet you out there in a few minutes? I'll pass on your 'thank you' to the girls...maybe one of them will join us."

The stupid guy must have been tripping balls because he bought every word of it—his eyes even widened in excitement.

"Great—I'll see you out there."

"Be sure to wait for me," she replied with a seductive grin.

He nearly tripped over his own feet in his rush to make it to the club's exit.

Once Warren was out of sight, Merri spit the pill out and dropped it on the floor. Moron. At least she stopped him from trying to pass on any drugs to Gen and the others. Some of Stephie's home grown weed on occasion? No big deal. Fucking Ecstasy? No way Genevieve needed to be on that. There were probably a couple of people in her apartment building Merri could sell the rest of the pills to, so at least her encounter with Warren wouldn't be a total waste. For a

moment, she almost felt bad for the guy—he'd be pissed when he realized she wasn't showing up. Perhaps he wouldn't even remember, though.

Depressed that the closest she'd gotten to some fun was some guy giving her XTC and propositioning her for sex—and a little tired—she made her way to where Genevieve and Peyton sat.

"Hey," she said, leaning over the table as the two other girls looked up. "I'm beat—I think I'm gonna catch a cab home."

"Are you sure?" Gen said with a sudden frown.

"Yeah, I'm heading out."

"Maybe we can all go?" Peyton suggested with a bright smile. "Stop and get a coffee, then head home?"

Genevieve looked over to where Levi sat. "Let me just grab Lev and we can go—"

"It's still early—you should stay." Merri snuck a meaningful glance at Peyton, then gave Gen a quick smile. "And I don't think Levi wants to go anywhere either."

"I'll call you tomorrow?" Gen offered.

"Hmm, we should probably meet with Sage and...get some 'studying' in."

Genevieve made a face but didn't complain. "I guess. Meet you around noon?"

"Sure."

It really sucked that she was leaving alone, but standing around feeling awkward among the others wasn't much better. Merri spotted her jacket slung over the back of a chair and moved to get it.

"You're leaving?" a voice said behind her just as she slipped her dark coat on.

Meredith turned and a small grin played on her lips. "Well, see, this guy was supposed to meet me here, but he never showed, so I thought I'd call it a night."

"Well..." Thad began, leaning against one of the thick industrial pillars that supported the gallery. "Maybe the guy had to shower first so he didn't smell like week old Kraft Dinner as the rest of his roommates and apartment do, and then maybe that guy had to drive from the city. So maybe the guy should be cut some slack?"

"Maybe," Merri mused, looking him up and down. He certainly didn't look as though he'd just fallen out of bed and shown up: dark hair gelled into spikes, crisp navy shirt straight off a hanger, and black jeans that had to be new. He'd definitely taken time to clean up first, and was looking drop dead gorgeous at that. Though willing to forgive his lateness, appearances were everything, and she wasn't ready to stop playing just yet. "But it depends on how long you've been here scoping out the place before coming over." She nodded to the beer clutched in his hand and noted his jacket was casually slung over his arm, as if he'd been there awhile.

"About five minutes—I figured I'd be better able to find the mysterious hot girl in the purple shirt from the second floor."

"And it would be easier to slip out if you didn't like who you found?"

Children of the Apocalypse

"Now that would be rude of me—I'd at least come over to say hi. After all, I did go to the trouble of showering."

"So is this just a 'hi?'"

"If it was, I'd feel pretty stupid for buying you a drink." He pulled a bottle of berry-flavoured cooler from within the folds of his jacket and handed it to her. "And to be honest, I was hoping it would be you."

"Right," she said, opening the bottle. "Bet you say that to all the girls you receive mysterious calls from and go to meet in the middle of the night."

"Just the cute ones with magical abilities, actually...of which there are about three dozen, I should warn you."

"That many?"

"That I've met with this week, at least."

"Hi Thad!" a familiar voice shouted to Merri's right, and she and Thad glanced over to see Genevieve grinning and waving manically. When Thad waved back, she leaned over to whisper something to Peyton and the two girls burst out laughing.

"Just ignore her—she's probably still stoned," Merri said.

"Now I'm starting to worry...is this a set up where Michael is going to jump out at any second and kidnap me to extract information?"

"I have a feeling he's a little preoccupied elsewhere at the moment—no business here, just pleasure." Merri slid her jacket off again, took Thad's from over his arm, and then tossed them on the chair behind her. "Dance?"

"I'm terrible," he warned.

"I'll forgive you." She took his hand in hers and led him away from the sitting area.

She pulled him into the thick of the dance floor among bodies moving to the music and slid her arms over his shoulders. Hips swaying, she closed her eyes for a moment, reveling in that feeling of letting go, of not giving a fuck about anything, of...*surrender*. Christ, it felt good to be herself again.

She felt hands travel down her body, coming to rest at her hips, and the feeling of the cold, wet bottle of beer—that Thad still clasped in his right hand—just barely touching the flesh between the top of her skirt and the hem of her shirt. She shivered, the feeling delicious to her rather than unwelcome. Merri opened her eyes again to catch his gaze on her, and she smiled and inched closer, pulling her arm from him to take a long sip of her cooler.

"This is a little weird," he said suddenly with a half grin.

"Oh?"

"If you told me last week that I'd get a strange phone call and would end up at a club dancing with the Seer of all people, I would have thought you were an unconvincing liar."

"Bit of a celebrity, am I?"

"In certain circles."

"Well, if *this* part of our evening was so unbelievable, I guess I shouldn't tell you about what we'll be doing when we leave here..."

He raised a brow in question, and she sensed he didn't quite believe what she might be suggesting. "Is that so?"

"Yeah...so I'll probably just spring it on you as a surprise later." With that, she rose on her toes suddenly and kissed him deeply. His lips parted effortlessly against hers, and, whether he was surprised or not, he adapted to the situation with equal ease. As her arms tightened around his neck, Thad pulled her into a close embrace. Neither was dancing anymore when he pulled back to gaze down at her with a faint smile.

"So..." she began innocently. "Wanna get some air?"

Merri sighed heavily. Though exhausted and spent, her body was still too euphoric to realize it yet. She climbed back into the passenger seat of Thad's Nissan Versa and her head slumped back on the headrest.

"These cars really are roomy." She glanced over at Thad, but found his eyes closed. "Don't tell me you're asleep now..."

He cracked open an eye to look at her and grin. "Haven't figured that out yet. *Might* be dreaming."

"That seems like a horrible waste of three perfectly nice minutes."

He looked at her fully then, eyes shooting wide open and jaw dropping. "Hey, that wasn't—"

She laughed. Enough songs on the radio had played along to their activities—far more than three minutes worth.

With mocking displeasure, he leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes again.

"Going to sit there and sulk?"

"Nope—already forgotten. Currently, I'm wondering what wonderful things I possibly did in a past life to elicit such a reward in this one."

"Well, you do that while I try to figure out what happened to my underwear."

"Sitting on the backseat."

She glanced back, and sure enough her pair of black cotton bikini briefs were strewn on the backseat. "Funny, I thought I was supposed to be the Seer?"

"I'm very observant when it comes to women's panties, and now that I hear myself say that, it sounds kinda creepy, and I apologize. I actually just saw them when I glanced in the rearview mirror."

"Cheater." She angled herself between the two front seats to reach the back to snatch up her underwear, then slid them on once more while he disposed of the condom.

"Mind if I smoke?" she asked as she reached for the pack of cigarettes in her jacket pocket.

"Um...actually yeah. Sorry. Mind if I kiss you?"

She shoved the pack of smokes back in her coat and pretended to think it over. "I suppose not."

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He leaned over to press his lips to hers. One hand went to the back of her neck to pull her closer, the other swept strands of sweat-soaked hair back from her forehead. He pulled back a moment to gaze at her, then gave her mouth another peck before returning to his seat.

"I realize I haven't even asked how old you are, and now I probably seem like such a perv," he said, with what appeared to be genuine concern. "I have a horrible feeling the answer lies somewhere around 'jailbait.'"

"Pretty much. Eleventh grade."

He winced. "Okay, that's bad. So what is it? Sixteen? Please don't say any younger than that."

"Seventeen, actually. Failed second grade so I was held back a year. And how old are you?"

"Nineteen-ish."

He was definitely lying on that count, and after staring in her eyes for a moment, he seemed to realize he wasn't going to get away with it.

"All right, all right...twenty...and a half...four months ago."

"So almost twenty-one?"

"Sure, you could put it that way if you want to make me sound like a perv."

"Twenty-one and seventeen isn't perv-ish," she assured him.

"I don't think you know many twenty-one-year-olds—they're all pretty perv-ish. Hey, can I ask you something?"

"I don't imagine I could stop you."

"How did you get my number?"

"Swiped it from Michael's phone," she said. A slight lie, but Thad didn't need to know that Michael had willingly parted with it.

"And why did you call me tonight?"

He was serious suddenly, intensely staring at her, and she paused before replying. Thad clearly had something in mind, and she couldn't say for certain she would like where this conversation was heading.

Why had she called him? He'd seemed interested in her when she saw him on Monday, and she'd been thinking about him quite a bit ever since. And no one ever noticed her now—she could walk around invisibly, never getting a second glance from anyone. But somehow, the other day, Thad *saw* her. And that meant something. The group outing that night—coupled with the fact she ran into Michael, who knew a way to contact him—inspired her to try getting in touch. And...well...she liked him. There was an instantaneous attraction there, and by all accounts he seemed like a *good* guy. She'd had far too much experience with the wrong types, and Thad seemed like a welcome change.

Of course, she saw no reason to tell him any of that. While she had a big problem with anyone who lied to her, honesty about her own feelings really wasn't her strong point.

"What does it matter?" she said instead, somewhat coldly. The heat they generated in the car a short while ago seemed to dissipate in a hurry as tension grew.

"It matters because I want to know. Did Michael know you found my number?"

"What does Michael have to do with this?"

"He's manipulative. Shaw knows it—that's one of the reasons why he doesn't want anything to do with him. But Michael wants to talk to him, and I think we both know he'll do what he has to if it means getting what he wants."

"Like send me to screw you in the hopes you'll lead me to Shaw?" she snapped. Fuming, she unfolded her jacket and violently thrust her arms into the sleeves. What the hell had she been thinking?

"I just meant I wouldn't put it past him to be pulling the strings somehow—"

She reached for the car door, but he caught her arm and tried to draw her back.

"Merri—"

"He may be a liar and an asshole, but at least he's never accused me of being a fucking whore," she interrupted, and wrenched out of his grasp. Without even bothering a final glare in his direction, she swung open the car door and stalked back toward the club. Thankfully, he didn't follow.

She found Gen still sitting inside with a yawning Peyton. Both girls looked up as Merri slumped down onto a chair.

"You okay?" Gen asked, but Meredith didn't feel like answering her. She managed a shrug, then occupied her time staring at the drink smudges on the table. Fuck, she felt like such an idiot. Perhaps he didn't mean anything by it...but maybe he did. Maybe he really thought that she only called him because Michael asked her to, and after seeing he could get a little action, didn't bring up that fact until much later.

"Where's Thad?" Gen said.

"Went home," Merri replied without looking up.

"He didn't drive you?"

"Not going our way." Christ, why the hell was she asking so many questions?

"Levi was talking about going soon—I think he wants to drive Kourtnee home, so it'll be a tight squeeze in the car. You okay?"

Merri realized she had been sitting there sulking for a few minutes—there was no reason to let people see this. She flashed a quick smile, putting on her mask and assuring them everything was all right.

"Fine. Still tired, is all."

"Me too." Peyton yawned again. "Maybe if we all crowd around Levi and start snoring, he'll get the point?" While she and Gen conspired to not-so-subtly let Levi know they were all ready to go, Merri let her mind drift off again. She'd been itching to get out and have some fun, so what was there to whine about? She got what she wanted. No complaints to be had. Maybe he really was a scumbag. Or maybe he was genuinely concerned she was using him, and then she just flipped out on him for no reason.

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Whatever happened, she wouldn't be seeing him again, so it hardly seemed to matter.

~~*

In back of *On the Map*, Warren Humber sat alone on the pavement in the dark. He'd been standing out there for awhile, but then dizziness struck, and it just seemed like a better idea to be sitting. Where was that girl? He was pretty sure someone was supposed to meet him out there...ah, who the fuck cared? He leaned his head back, resting it on the brick wall of the club, and gazed up at the stars. The wind chilled him, but he didn't mind—it all felt wonderful.

A sound broke through the euphoric haze surrounding his head. What was that, footsteps? He glanced around. The air seemed heavy, thick...almost *wet* in the way it clung to him...

Glittering stars and a half moon lit the pavement behind the club, but for some reason the figure moving toward him was cast in darkness. He made out no face, no features, nothing at all...

"Come with me," said the most beautiful voice he'd ever heard. Lyrical, soft—never had he encountered such a sound in his life. It compelled him to rise on shaky legs and move forward, ready to go anywhere—do anything—just to reach the person that had such a voice. The figure moved toward the field and Warren chased after it.

Five

Genevieve threw down her sketchbook in frustration.

"This isn't working," she insisted.

Merri sighed, scooped up the book, and placed it in her friend's hands once more. "The point is to relax. Just take a deep breath and—"

Gen gestured over her shoulder to where Michael and Sage were sparring on the other side of the room. "The amount of noise they're making is not exactly inspiring a sense of 'relaxation.'"

"That's a good thing," Merri countered. "Being calm and able to focus in the face of distraction—"

"Goddamn!" Sage swore loudly, pounding the floor with her fist in annoyance when Michael won their match.

Meredith met Gen's look of, "see, I told you so."

"No excuses," Merri continued. "Focus on your work and let everything else slip away." She watched Gen scowl down at the paper and lean over her sketchpad to try drawing again.

After complaining about not just being scared but having difficulty focusing as well, Meredith had decided earlier that Saturday afternoon that the best way to help Gen was to not even start with magic. The spells frightened her, therefore it made sense to find ways to build up any necessary skills without the use of anything supernatural. Her art seemed the way to go.

Michael had overheard them discussing this tactic, but didn't object. He seemed too busy with Sage anyhow. Meredith couldn't say whether or not he actually cared in the least bit that the two of them were huddled in the corner with Gen trying to draw rather than play with putting out candles, though she imagined she'd definitely hear about it later if he *did* have a problem with it.

"This really sucks," Gen complained, glaring at her drawing thus far.

"That's not the point," Merri reminded her.

"Fine, fine...just stop moving."

"No, you're right, it's terrible."

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They looked up to see Michael standing over them. Beyond him, Sage sat at the kitchen table for her break, gulping down a large glass of water.

"I don't think we asked you to be in on this conversation," Gen snapped. "And it's not terrible!"

"Ten seconds ago it *was*, and I tell you that you're right and you suddenly disagree?"

Here they go. Merri leaned against the wall waiting to see if she should jump in or not.

"Yeah, 'cause you don't know what you're talking about!" Gen insisted.

Meredith figured that was easily the worse thing she could say; no matter the subject, Michael certainly didn't like to be told that he was ignorant of it.

He crouched next to Genevieve, leaned over her shoulder, and snatched the pencil from her grasp. "*You* don't have the slightest clue what the hell you're doing. Are you even looking at her, or just guessing based on your flawed memory of what Merri looks like?"

"She keeps moving—"

"That doesn't matter. She can move all she wants—her features should stay the same." He slid the tip of the pencil around the page, and though Merri couldn't see what changes he suggested, the frown on Gen's face suggested she realized he was right. "Honestly, do you have even the slightest concept of negative space?"

Meredith tuned out their bickering after that. She didn't need to listen to guess what was being said: Michael would call Gen stupid and then point out something obvious, and follow it up with another insult. Gen would insist he was wrong, perhaps make some vague or idle threat about murdering him in his sleep, then when he didn't throw something at her, she'd get brave and say something about him being a prick and possibly an idiot. They were like an old married couple, if one half of the couple was a teenage lesbian who was terrified of the much older other half, and rightfully so because he loathed her and possibly plotted to kill her on occasion.

And yet, Merri suspected that he was afraid of Gen, even though he professed her to be so useless. Every so often, Merri caught his gaze straying to the witch, watching her warily. Definitely fear. That had to be the real reason why he didn't tell Gen what she did to the assassins at the farmhouse that day, and why he seemed so unconcerned about her lack of confidence in her abilities; ultimately, he wanted her kept in the dark, wanted her unsure of herself. Because as soon as she accepted her power and grew stronger...well, precisely *what* would happen, Merri couldn't say, except that she was certain Michael loathed the thought of that day ever arriving. And she hadn't lied the night before when she warned him that things wouldn't end well. He *needed* to tell Gen the truth. It was all bound to come to a head at some point, and Merri just sure as hell hoped she wasn't in the general vicinity when it did.

"Would you just go away?" Gen snapped finally, snatching her pencil back and tearing the book from his view. "Look: Sage isn't doing anything. I think she needs you to go order *her* around some more."

Michael did stand to go, but it came as little surprise that he wasn't finished speaking yet. "If you can't just pause and actually *focus* on something as simple as this, you're not touching another spell book. Ever."

"Promise?" Gen gave him a mockingly sweet smile.

Ignoring her, he met Merri's gaze instead. "This had better be going somewhere."

"Promise," she replied with a grin.

"Oh, and we're totally busy again next Friday," Gen called after Michael as he walked away from her. "So you'll have to criticize someone else's art work for awhile."

"Uh, what are we doing on Friday?" Merri asked, not realizing she had any plans. Going out the night before to *On the Map* was about the only extra-curricular outing she'd been a part of since moving to Newhaven, and this sudden surge in activities was a little strange.

"Halloween dance at school—we go every year," Gen said, almost as if Meredith should already know. "It's like a really crappy masquerade. You *have* to come."

Christ, that sounded as though it would be even lamer than the dance club had been.

"But that'll require a costume, which I don't have and I'm sure it's impossible to find any in the stores this week—"

"Don't worry about it, we'll find something. But you gotta go. And Sage—" she called suddenly, looking to where Sage sat, "—you should come too."

"Excuse me?"

Merri had no idea what planet Gen resided on, but Sage seemed highly unlikely to attend something as frivolous as a school costume party.

"You should come to the dance at the high school," Gen continued. "They're doing this...thing..."

A touch of sadness seemed to come over Genevieve all at once, and suddenly Merri understood.

"They're using the dance as a fundraiser thing," Gen continued, despite the noticeable clouding of her eyes. "Half the money is going to the Greenes to help pay for...for the tombstone, and the other half is for *Crimstoppers* 'cause apparently everyone still thinks it was due to gang violence or something. You should be there."

"No thanks."

"You're not coming here," Michael said, to everyone's surprise.

"What?" Sage said, doubly confused.

"I have plans."

"But—"

"You should go with them."

Gen and Merri exchanged curious glances. Although Genevieve was clearly mystified by this development, Merri knew better. It was Krysta. Had to be—she wasn't sure Michael actually knew anyone else in town. But though she

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understood his desire to get away, it seemed a little odd that he'd actually instruct Sage to hang out with them.

"I don't want to go," Sage said coolly.

"He was your boyfriend," Michael said. "You should be there."

Silence descended on the room. Sage and Michael stared at one another, and neither Merri nor Gen wanted to interrupt them.

"I don't want to," Sage said again, quieter this time.

Michael shrugged, as if he truly couldn't care one way or the other. "Your choice. Now it's time to get back to work."

It wasn't until the two of them were sparring once more that Genevieve dared to speak. "That was kind of spooky. Think she'll go?"

Merri shook her head. "I really don't know. She might show up on her own, but if I were you, I wouldn't bug her about it."

"I guess we'll wait and see. Hey, what are you doing tonight?"

Well, my very empty schedule is certainly filling up in a hurry. "Haven't decided yet. Why?"

"Me, Lev, and Stephe hang out every Saturday night to watch crappy movies and stuff. We haven't for a few weeks, but Levi says he's up for it again starting tonight. And our rules state that whoever is hosting the night can invite one other person to attend. It's at my house so I'm inviting you."

"You have rules for your evening gatherings?"

"Well, just a couple," Gen explained. "Lev and I came up with that one 'cause Stephe would end up inviting like twenty people then we'd have a big party. My mom wouldn't go for that, and neither would Levi's. So do you want to come?"

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather invite Peyton?" Merri asked. The two of them had seemed to get along well the night before, and it seemed odd—at least to Merri—that Gen wouldn't want to invite her if she had the opportunity.

"Can't. It's the other rule."

"You have a rule against inviting Peyton?"

"No—that would be silly. The rule is that we can't invite someone we're dating or have a crush on. Not like I'm ever dating anyone or anything, but that's the rule."

"Seems kinda..." *Bizarre*, she thought, though she avoided saying it aloud. "Arbitrary, I guess."

Genevieve shrugged, as if the rule was the most natural thing in the world. "Bro's before ho's."

Merri laughed at this, and nodded at last. "Okay. Should I bring anything?"

"Nope. Stephe's doing a beer run and Levi's on snack duty. Now hold still—I'd like to get this sketch done and move onto the next one before Mr. Perfect comes back with some more of his expert tips."

Merri did manage to sit fairly still for the next half hour as Genevieve sketched throughout the many distractions in the room. Just as Merri started itching to get up and move around, Gen put down the sketchbook at last to stretch her arms and neck.

“There. It doesn’t completely suck.”

Meredith leaned forward to take a look at the drawing. Though she couldn’t tell which parts were Gen’s original work and which were Michael’s suggestions, it seemed a good likeness.

A sudden knock at the door startled both Merri and Gen. Turning to look at Michael, Merri found his questioning gaze already on her. After someone burst in shooting at them a couple of weeks ago, they couldn’t be too careful, and unless Michael was expecting a guest, he immediately looked to her for guidance. Nothing warned her this time, however—no frightening flashes, no sudden sense of foreboding... She could only shrug her shoulders.

Michael went for the door, and Merri tensed as he opened it, prepared for the worst. Thankfully, no gunshots followed, only speaking in hushed tones. Then she caught a, “Yeah, come in,” and Michael stepped back to let Thad—of all people—into the house. The air seemed to leave her lungs just then and it took most of her concentration to take in another breath.

Oh God, what is he doing here...

She thought at the very least he’d at least chance a glance in her direction, but not once did he even acknowledge he saw her sitting there. Instead, he followed Michael to the kitchen.

“Uh, hi Thad!” Gen called.

“Hello Genevieve.” Thad turned and flashed her a quick grin, but still paid no heed to Merri.

Prick.

“Shut up and get back to work,” Michael barked, and as Thad returned his attention to whatever conversation he and Michael were having, Gen suddenly tugged on Merri’s arm.

“What’s he doing here?” she whispered in Merri’s ear.

Meredith shrugged. She still struggled to listen in on his and Michael’s conversation, but was unable to make out any actual words.

“Did you two have a fight? He looks mad at you.”

She shrugged again, having no desire to actually explain what went on.

Unfortunately, she could easily guess what brought him all the way down to Newhaven. It was all probably to tell Michael face to face not to send his little whore fishing for information. Whatever. Best case scenario, maybe Michael would smack him for it and throw him out of the house. Worst case scenario, he would berate Merri for not getting them any information. She leaned more towards the first scenario, however, since Michael has warned her against contacting Thad in the first place.

Tense moments followed, with Merri unable to tear her gaze from Michael and Thad, until at last the two men parted and Thad left the house again without another word.

“Whatever you did, it worked,” Michael said as the door closed.

Meredith locked eyes with him. “What?”

“He gave us Shaw’s number and address, as well as recommended a way to convince him to see us. Well done.”

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Sickness washed over her suddenly. “Fuck you.” She stood and bolted forward without another word. Ignoring Gen’s curious gaze, Merri threw open the door and slipped outside.

Thad was already several feet from the house, moving toward his car parked at the curb.

“Hey,” Merri said softly, closing the door behind her.

Dark eyes gazed back at hers as Thad paused and turned around. Merri took a few steps forward, and after studying her for a moment, Thad did the same.

She opened her mouth to speak, though couldn’t quite find the words she wanted. Yelling at him the night before had been easy...but she wasn’t so good at apologies. Biting at her bottom lip, she cast her gaze down to the sidewalk in thought.

“He just told me why you came here.” She risked a glance up at him. Thad’s expression was pretty much unreadable, however—even to her. His eyes were guarded, lips set in a straight line, and he seemed to be...waiting. That had to be it: he waited for something. Was it just for her to get to the point? Or was he looking for something else?

When he didn’t acknowledge she had spoken, Merri swallowed a bit of pride and continued on to what she figured he wanted to hear. “I just want you to know...yeah, I got your number from Michael last night, and yeah, he knew about it. But he didn’t ask me to do anything and that’s not why I called you.”

Thad still didn’t say anything—nor did his expression change—and her annoyance grew.

“Look,” she said, a bit of an edge to her voice and glaring up at him now. “You may not believe me, but I didn’t sleep with you just so you’d tell Michael about Shaw.”

Expression softening ever so slightly, Thad cracked a faint grin. “Prove it.”

Uh...what?

He moved forward so only a step or two separated them. “Go out for dinner with me tonight. Like a date.”

“But...”

“I told Michael everything he wanted to know, so the thing with Shaw is out of the way now. If you really are interested, and calling me out of the blue wasn’t just to get some information, then let’s go out.”

She might have said yes if she didn’t remember she promised to go to Genevieve’s house that night. Though she was pretty sure she could get out of it if need be, a twinge of guilt hit her at the very thought of it. That Gen had asked her to take part in a gathering with her friends actually meant a lot to her, and she didn’t want to be the kind of person who blew her friends off for a guy. Especially not considering it was the first time in her life that she’d actually had *girl* friends.

“I can’t. I have plans tonight.”

His smile faltered just a bit, but he took a deep breath and plastered on a grin. “Well, I’m working tomorrow evening and I’ve got an early class on Monday, so that’s out. Maybe Friday?”

Shit. “I’ve...kinda got plans for Friday too.” Wow, it was like the God of Bad Timing was really pissed off at her or something.

Sadly, he didn’t appear surprised, and she found herself scrambling to come up with a solution.

“Next Saturday, maybe?” she suggested. “Or—”

He shook his head. “Forget it.”

“Thad—”

She found herself silenced as he suddenly reached out and ran his fingertips along her cheek. In a perfect, romantic world, perhaps she could interpret the gesture to mean he understood she wasn’t trying to blow him off, but there was no mistaking the disappointment coming off him in waves—disappointment in her. He leaned forward and brushed his lips across her forehead gently.

“Bye,” he said softly into her hair, then left her without another word, walking swiftly to his car before she could react.

So he was indeed a *good* guy.

And what the hell did that make her for just breaking his heart?

~~*

Footsteps thumped on the floor above the living room, about where Gen’s parent’s bedroom lay. Her mother was doing the stomping, and Gen glanced over at where her father sat in his favourite armchair.

“Aren’t you supposed to be getting ready?” she asked impatiently. Merri sat on the couch with her, and Levi and Stephie would be showing up soon. Why the hell couldn’t her parents just leave, like they were supposed to? “She’s only stomping around up there to get your attention.”

Her father shrugged. “Plenty of time.”

Like hell he had time—ten minutes ago her mother yelled that they should have already left. Leo Weist clearly had no desire to attend whatever function his wife sought to drag him to, however, and made no move to leave his chair.

“You know the deal,” Gen warned. “I have friends over. You *can’t* be here ‘cause you’ll be in the way of the orgy.”

“In my day, we still had chaperones for orgies,” he replied.

“That’s ‘cause you’re old—we modern teenage orgy participants are much more independent.”

“I met your mother at an orgy, you know...”

“God, would you please get ready and go out with Mom now!”

The doorbell rang, and seconds later Levi and Stephie walked inside. A quick glance told Gen that, thankfully, Stephie had enough sense to hide the beer bottles in her backpack.

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“C’mon,” Gen whispered, nodding for Merri to follow her toward where the others stood. “And you,” she swung back around to face her dad, “had better be gone by the time we get back from the kitchen!”

“I think I’ll stay home tonight,” he replied. “Keep you kids out of trouble.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered to Merri. “He thinks he’s being clever. Hopefully he’ll be leaving soon.”

“It’s okay, I like your dad,” she replied, though Gen found that idea hard to believe.

Levi handed Genevieve the grocery bag of snack foods and one glance at the contents made her curse his name.

“What?” he asked with an amused grin. “You like nachos and cheese.”

Right—she also liked stuff she didn’t have to prepare. With a sigh—and trailed by Merri—Gen carted the bag to the kitchen to preheat the oven and prepare their snacks. Christ, he even expected her to grate the cheese—what was up with that? Thankfully, Merri took on that task, while Levi and Stephie stared uselessly from the doorway.

“So what movies did you get?” Levi asked, still annoyingly watching them rather than...well, Gen couldn’t think of something for him to do, but he at least should have asked.

“*Re-animator* and *Bride of Re-animator*,” she called over her shoulder as she spread the tortilla chips on a baking pan. “And because I adore you so very, very much—or did before you brought snacks that I actually had to prepare myself—we got *Bloody Murder 2* featuring a topless Tiffany Shepis.” She squealed with surprise as Levi suddenly grabbed her from behind, his arms going over her waist in a hug.

“I do sometimes like it when we have the same taste in girls,” he said, head resting on her shoulder.

“Yeah, well, the old movies were three for five bucks, and we couldn’t find another *Re-animator* one,” she teased, only half meaning it. The fact that he was ready to get together as a group again and try to have some fun was important to her. Did it alleviate any of her guilt over Hayden’s death? Not in the least bit. But seeing Levi genuinely smile the last couple of days was a welcome development...and a topless Tiffany Shepis was bound to make him smile even more.

“Besides,” she continued when he let her go to pull some glasses out of the cupboard. “We all know your real love is for Jeffrey Combs.”

“Um, isn’t your dad supposed to be going with your mom?” Stephie said in a low voice.

“Heard that Steph,” Gen’s father said from the other room. “And I was just noticing your bag strangely looks like it has a large box in it—about the size that would hold a dozen bottles...”

Stephie’s eyes got big. “Just Pepsi.”

When Genevieve and the others returned to the living room to wait for the nachos and cheese to cook, she found her father still sitting in the same spot, and her mother across the room glaring at him. Her hair was done up, she wore

a simple black cocktail dress, and Gen recognized her grandmother's pearl necklace about her neck. Wherever they were going, it was formal, and her mother was going to kill her father if he didn't get up and get dressed.

"Jesus, you haven't even showered—we were supposed to leave fifteen minutes ago!"

"I'll be ready soon," he said, not making any move to go. Gen had seen this way too many times before: rather than just say he didn't want to go, he was going to wait until her mom got fed up and left by herself. That had better not mean he planned to stay home, though...

Her mother stormed around and ranted for another ten minutes, then sure enough, she stomped out of the house, slamming the door behind her, meanwhile her father sat there calmly, gazing at the weather channel. Gen sent an uncomfortable glance to her friends; Levi and Stephie were used to her parents, but it was all new territory to Meredith. None of it seemed to be bothering her, however—she didn't seem weirded out in the least bit.

"Um, dad..." Gen began, but he put up a hand to stop her.

"Give it another...thirty seconds or so. She's waiting in the car for me."

Sure enough, less than a minute later the headlights passed in front of the window as Rebecca Weist pulled out of the driveway. Just as the sound of her car faded, Leo stood and went to the door to put his shoes on.

"You promise you're leaving?" Gen asked.

"Yes Genny—poker game. Don't tell your mother. No smoking in the house, Steph, and be good, kids." He barely finished his sentence before he was out the door. It all seemed a little odd to Gen, though she wasn't about to complain. The house to themselves, Merri offered to serve up the nachos while Gen put on the first movie and Stephie cracked out the beer.

"So you gotta tell me something, Lev," Stephie said casually as the first movie ended. She had been stretched out on the floor in front of the television, and turned over on her back to glance at Levi, who sat on the couch. "I heard you drove Kourtnee home last night?"

"I have to tell you if I drove a girl home?" Levi said, confused. Gen had to agree the question seemed odd—she couldn't see what Steph was getting at.

"Well, I'm asking 'cause I wanted to know if she popped your cherry or not—"

"Steph!"

Gen burst out laughing and Stephie continued grinning like an idiot.

"C'mon," Steph continued. "It's Kourtnee. Legit question."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means she's boned half the Phoenixes, so I was curious if she added you to her list of conquests."

Perhaps it was the beer, but Genevieve found the whole exchange hilarious, and she doubled over in laughter.

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"She's not like that," Levi insisted. "And no, I didn't sleep with her."

Stephie pulled herself onto her knees, an excited grin lighting her face. "You're lying. Look at him, Gen—he's lying."

"Aw, leave him alone..." Gen's sentence trailed off as her gaze fell on Levi. His face was slowing reddening and he avoided her eyes. "Holy shit, you slept with Kourtnee?"

"No!" he said again.

"You totally did something with her, or you wouldn't be looking so freaked," Stephie said. "So what was it? Blowjob in the car?"

"Steph—"

"It's okay; she'll probably screw you properly on the second date—"

"I can't believe you didn't tell me," Gen said, honestly a little hurt. It was Levi...Christ, he told her everything. Not that she was particularly interested in details about that skank giving him any sort of attention, but it still seemed like the sort of development he'd tell her about.

"I already know you guys don't like her," Levi returned. "But you don't know her—she's nice."

"Did you come to that conclusion before or after the blowjob?" Stephie asked.

"Hey—"

"She's a skank, Lev," Gen said.

"She's led an interesting life," he said instead.

"Yeah, with her vagina."

"I'm not discussing this with you anymore." Levi slumped back on the couch and crossed his arms over his chest.

"It's okay, you can make fun of me after I tell you who I slept with last night."

Gen did notice Stephie slipped out of the club early the night before, and she hadn't seen her afterwards. It came as little surprise that she left to apparently go home with someone.

"Who?" Levi asked.

"Uh...Mr. Bielski."

Gen's jaw dropped wide open. "The math teacher? Seriously?" She shook her head in disgust as Stephie nodded. "You are such a slut."

"Yeah, but if I find myself needing another credit to graduate, I'm pretty sure I can get one for Calculus without even showing up."

"Jesus Christ—did everyone get more action than me last night?" Gen looked to Meredith, who had been sitting silently in an armchair across the room for the duration of the conversation. "I suppose that's why you and Thad disappeared too?"

Merri shook her head. "Please, I hardly know the guy. We just went out to talk."

Gen sighed. "Well, I'm depressed now anyway. I'm making more nachos." She gathered up the plates and went for the kitchen, while Stephie continued teasing Levi.

Leaning against the warming oven, Gen crossed her arms and looked at Merri expectantly as she followed with a couple of empty glasses in hand.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Merri asked as she set the dishes in the sink.

"You should call him."

Meredith looked a little startled at the blunt statement.

That's right—you're not the only observant one, Mer.

"Who?" Merri asked, apparently deciding to play dumb.

"Uh, Thad. Who else?"

Mer shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Are you at least going to tell me what went on with you guys? You were more than friendly last night, then today he completely ignored you."

"It was just a misunderstanding," she said quickly, offering a smile that Gen didn't completely believe.

"Quite the misunderstanding considering you ran out after he left. Michael still wouldn't tell us what was going on, even when Sage asked, so—"

"You've seen Sage?"

Both Gen and Merri turned, startled, to see Levi standing in the kitchen doorway. If he looked mad before when Stephie teased him about Kourtnee, he was right pissed now.

"What the hell are you doing around her?" he asked, stepping into the room rapidly, face a dark red.

Oh...fuck.

"Remember a month ago when you told me you thought I should take some self-defense classes?" Gen said quickly. "Well, that's what I did. And so did Merri. We sometimes see Sage there—that's all."

"Sage got one of her teachers to give us exclusive lessons really cheap," Merri added. "Because it's during the time when he's got his advanced students—like her—there. And he's not supposed to do that, so we've been keeping it a secret."

Damn, she's good, Gen thought. Coming up with lies on her own, Gen usually had to scramble to think of something and hope it sounded innocent enough, but Merri...Merri was smooth enough about it that Gen almost believed it herself.

Gen and Levi stared at one another for several long seconds. She couldn't be certain if he believed her or not, and she loathed lying to him but...

But could she tell him the truth? She'd always just assumed he'd think she was crazy. Witches, warriors, magic, apocalypses, assassins... Though she sometimes wanted to confide in him, realistically it wasn't a conversation she had the slightest desire to have.

"Goin' out for a smoke," Stephie called from somewhere in the other room.

"I'll join her," Merri said quickly, leaving the two of them alone to Gen's dismay.

"How often have you been seeing her?" Levi said after they heard the front door close.

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"I saw her a couple of times this week, including this afternoon," Gen said with a sigh. "Barely spoke to her, 'cause she's not exactly the talkative type."

"I can't believe you didn't tell me," he muttered under his breath, dropping his gaze to the linoleum floor.

"And what would that accomplish, besides you being pissed off at me? I know you're mad at her, but she—"

"She knows what happened to Hayden!" His eyes snapped up at hers again, blazing with anger. "It's her fault—"

"She loved him," Gen cut in. "If she could have done something to help, don't you think she would have?"

"She could've gone to the police."

"Except no one snuck into his room and killed him," Gen said. God, it hurt to talk about all this again, and fresh feelings of sadness and regret welled to the surface. "*If* she did know something, and *if* she did go to the police, how would that have stopped a blood clot? And if she was, in some way, responsible for what happened, don't you think she probably hates herself even more than you hate her at this point?"

"So you're taking her side?"

"There aren't any sides in this, Lev."

Silence welled up between the two of them—silence of the awkward variety. It was the kind of thing Gen never thought would happen between them; in over eight years, there never came a time when they didn't know what to say to one another. But here they stood in her kitchen, where they'd stood a million times before over the years, and somehow in the past month enough of a chasm had developed between them that she was truly at a loss for words.

Levi moved to the nearest chair at the maple dinette table and dropped down into the seat, his shoulders slumped forward and head hanging down. Gen fidgeted for a few minutes longer, praying the nachos would hurry up and cook so at least she'd have something to do. Should she go over to him? Give him a hug? Did she want to risk pissing him off and making everything worse?

"Sage asked about you," Gen said at last, tensing as she awaited his response. When he didn't say anything, she continued. "When I saw her on Monday, she asked how you were."

"So?" he muttered.

"So she didn't ask about anyone else. I figured she was...like, concerned about you."

"Yeah, I'm sure she really cares," he muttered. They heard the front door open and close as Stephie and Merri returned from their smoke break, and Levi stood. "We should probably put one of the other movies on."

"Yeah, I'll just get the food..."

He was gone before she'd finished the sentence, however.

Dammit.

So her continued association with Sage was going to be a problem. And how the hell would she solve it? Avoiding Sage wouldn't work, but lying to Levi just made her feel awful.

She turned off the oven and opened it, then slid the baking sheet out with a folded towel.

“Gen, get in here!” Stephanie called. “Hurry!”

With a sigh, Gen left the nachos sitting on the stove, then returned to the living room. Stephanie, Levi and Merri all stared at the television, each looking concerned. Jeez, she knew the movie was bound to be pretty bad and everything, but they were looking like someone died or something...

Her gaze moved to the television screen, where rather than another *Re-animator* movie, she found them watching the news. A reporter stood out in front of a brick building, and after a few seconds Gen recognized it as the club they had been at the night before. A caption at the bottom of the screen said, “Body of teenager found.”

Oh, great, someone did die...

“The body was found in the field behind the popular club *On the Map* just hours ago,” the reporter said into a microphone. Beyond her, Gen spotted police cars and officers, and yellow tape marking a crime scene. “We have confirmation that this is being treated as a homicide. No word yet on persons of interest...”

“Is it someone from town?” Gen asked, looking at the others. “Someone we know?”

“It’s Warren,” Levi said quietly.

“Warren Humber?” she repeated. “But...we just saw him last night—”

“And today he’s dead,” Stephanie said.

Except for Hayden, Newhaven hasn’t seen a murder in at least four or five years, Gen thought, recalling one mention of a homicide years ago when she was in elementary school. Weakly, she sat on the couch next to Levi to listen to the rest of the story, all the while keeping her fears to herself.

What if this too was somehow connected to her, Merri, and Sage? And if it was...precisely what the hell were they going to do about it?

Six

Genevieve had seen at least a dozen girls at the dance so far dressed as a cat. And by “cat”, she meant “slut” but with more whiskers and fake ears. A couple might have been mice. One looked vaguely like a bunny. All were a little on the whorish side.

Which was one thing she could not understand about a Halloween dance: why the hell was everyone so boring? Some originality would go a long way. Not that Gen’s costume was all that new—she and Levi had been dressing up like Magenta and Riff Raff from *Rocky Horror* since they were ten. But they had gone out of their way over the years to make the costumes as authentic looking as possible and were at least *trying* to be unique. To make matters worse, it seemed half of the male population attending the dance decided to just throw on the classic *Scream* mask, and then didn’t even bother with the full robe ensemble. Laziness and no enthusiasm...it was just sad.

Unfortunately, she actually arrived in the poorly decorated gymnasium of her school for the dance with a couple of those unoriginal people. Kourtnee was definitely the most provocative looking cat Gen had ever seen, while Peyton was a rather adorable grey mouse. But it was when Merri showed up at her door to wait for Levi to pick them up dressed up in normal clothes, except for a black T-shirt with, “Trust Me, I’m A Zombie,” painted in white across the front that finally gave Gen a good laugh.

An hour into the dance, and it was all pretty much uneventful. Of course, a few police officers in full uniform might have had something to do with that. Two high school students being murdered in a month had put local law enforcement on edge and, still thinking gangs were to blame, officers had shown up at the dance to keep an eye on things. Detectives had been in the school that week interviewing anyone who had been at *On the Map* the night Warren was killed, including Gen. At least she didn’t have to lie this time around; she honestly had no idea what happened and had barely spoken to the

guy all night. As far as she'd heard, no one had any clue what had happened to him, and when she'd brought up the event to Michael—wondering if perhaps there was something more apocalypse-y going on—he'd brushed her off by suggesting she was paranoid and stupid.

Though she saw Sage a couple more times at Michael's throughout the week, at Merri's suggestion Gen didn't bring up the idea of her attending the memorial part of the Halloween dance, and Sage hadn't mentioned it either. Not surprisingly, she hadn't appeared at the dance that night.

"Please tell me you're having more fun than it looks like you are," Gen said to Merri as they stood off to the side. Peyton had gone to the DJ booth to see about some requests, while Levi and Kourtnee were dancing. Stephie was nowhere to be seen which left just Gen and Merri to talk, and so far, Merri had been pretty silent and kept to herself for the evening.

"I'm having more fun than I look like I'm having," she said, albeit unconvincingly.

"Okay, now once more, with feeling."

Merri cracked a grin. "I'm fine. Not much in the way of eye candy, though."

"Hey, I thought I looked kinda hot today—"

"Eye candy with *boy* parts."

"Oh. Right. Well..." Gen had a simple solution to that. She pulled her cell phone out of her small purse and waved it in Merri's face. "Call him."

"Him?"

"Stop playing."

"He's not going to drive from Toronto to go to a stupid high school dance that wouldn't even let him in 'cause he's twenty-one."

"I could call him."

"They still wouldn't let him in."

With a sigh, Gen tucked the phone away once more. "Fine, but if you change your mind—"

"I won't."

"—let me know." Gen still hadn't eliminated the possibility of calling him later herself and just not telling Meredith, but she'd probably have to wait until she was alone for that.

"They said they'd get to our requests in, like, two and a half hours," Peyton said with an apologetic smile as she returned. "They're full up until then. Insane, right? 'Cause you know most people just request the same stuff."

Which was a problem that could easily be solved, in Gen's opinion, by not leaving the song request box out in the office regardless of whether a dance was coming up or not. She seemed to recall seeing that thing there back in September, and if it had been collecting songs all that time, no wonder they couldn't get a request in.

"They did say *The Time Warp* was coming up soon, though," she offered.

"Bout damn time."

"But they're not allowed to play a couple of the others ones," she continued. "Too racy or something."

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Gen was certain she'd heard worse in contemporary music playing that night, but she doubted complaining would get them anywhere. "At least we're getting something." Honestly, how could someone have a Halloween dance and not play the whole damn soundtrack?

"So how about the punch," Peyton said. "Think it's spiked?"

With the number of cops wandering the room and the four chaperone teachers standing at the punch table? Right. "Probably not," Gen said. "Want some?"

"I can get it—"

"It's cool," Gen said quickly. Maybe if she got Peyton some punch, she could make believe they were on like a date or something. That might work for...oh, about five seconds or so, she thought wistfully.

Merri declined Gen's offer to get some for her as well, so she and Peyton stood in potentially-awkward silence while Genevieve went to the refreshment stand. She had to agree with Merri—the dance was pretty dull, but then it had been the other two years they'd gone. At least before, when it had just been her and Levi, they spent most of their time together, and stared longingly at their respective crushes—he at Sage, and she at Janine—and then make jokes about how they'd end up miserable and alone one day, but for one another.

A whole lot changes in a year, she thought as she poured punch into a couple of Styrofoam cups.

"You done with that?" a familiar voice to her left asked just as Gen set the ladle down next to the bowl.

Startled, she swung around to see Janine standing beside her, empty cup in hand and waiting to grab some punch.

Though apparently not that much has changed—I still have no idea what to say to her.

"Uh, yeah," Gen said quickly, her common sense making a brief appearance to save her from making a complete ass of herself. She stepped out of the way and picked up the two cups she'd filled.

"I like your costume," Janine said casually as she poured herself a glass of the drink, dark eyes focused on her task and only sliding Genevieve's way when she was done. Gen felt a little lump form in her throat when their eyes did meet, and she thanked god Peyton and Merri weren't near so they couldn't see her look like such an idiot.

"Thanks." She tried to smile. Was that even working? Did she look weird? Oh, this wasn't going well... *Think of something else to say, damn you!* Her gaze skimmed over Janine quickly, trying not to stare at any inappropriate places—which turned out to be a difficult task. She wore a bright red, rather form-fitting dress hemmed mid-thigh with a long pointed tail sewn into the rear, and a pair of sexy black heels put her close to Gen's height. Glossy dark hair framed her face, held back by a pair of devil horns. "I-I like yours too."

"It's not very original, I know," Janine said with a laugh. "Easy enough to do, though. But I really like yours—Magenta is one of my favourite characters."

Oh-my-god, she's so awesome.

"Yeah, me too."

“Did it take too long to put together?”

“No.” *Shit, I’ve said like exactly ten words to her—eleven if you count my stuttering.* Why was her mind suddenly blank? This was awful.

Janine flashed a smile that, despite the fact it was a cliché, could only really be described as *dazzling*. Worse still, it did nothing to help loosen Gen’s tongue, which remained in hiding.

“I’d better get back now,” she said. “Nice talking to you, Genevieve. And let me know if you need a Columbia next time.” To Gen’s surprise, there wasn’t a hint of sarcasm in her voice with that remark, and she gave her another genuine smile before leaving for the crowd of dancers.

Feeling a tad on the dazed side, Gen took the cups of punch back to where Merri, Peyton, and now Levi stood, and leaned against the gym’s wall.

“Janine knows my name,” she said, still a little shocked.

“Janine-Janine?” Levi asked.

Gen nodded. “Unless I died on my way to get punch. If so, please don’t bother resuscitating me, ‘cause this death thing kinda rocks.”

“Who’s Janine?” Peyton asked, looking at each of them in turn.

“Girl Gen has had a crush on for like ever,” Levi answered before Gen could.

Of course he had to say that when she hadn’t, explicitly, said anything to Peyton yet about being into girls. It wasn’t that she was ashamed or had any desire to lie about it... But there was always the chance that Peyton would get weirded out or immediately assume Gen had been hitting on her for the past few weeks. Sure, she kind of *had* been hitting on her—or at least thinking about it—but not in a blatant way, and she had no desire to make Peyton uncomfortable.

Genevieve dared to glance over at Peyton. Anything short of horrified, she could live with.

Peyton’s eyes had widened a little and she seemed to be searching for words. Nothing read as “horrified” but Gen hadn’t ruled that possibility out yet.

“Oh, so you’re...like...” Peyton paused, but it was probably just as well—finishing that sentence hardly seemed necessary.

Little point in denying it...

“Yeah.”

“Oh. Cool.”

Genevieve perked up slightly at that and gazed at her hopefully. “Really?”

Peyton shrugged. “Yeah. Twenty-first century and all, right?”

Relief rushed over Gen and she let out a deep breath, not realizing until then that she’d been holding it so long. Granted, it wasn’t an admission of, “Oh my god, me too! Let’s go out!” but it wasn’t, “Ah, get away from me, you freak!” either. Maybe not a step forward, though at least it wasn’t one backward.

“To each his—or her—own.”

Great, she had to add that. Gen’s heart sank just a little.

Thankfully, a familiar guitar riff kicked in. She looked to Levi to find him already staring at her, a grin lighting his face.

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"I think we need to do the time warp, Genny," he said, offering her his hand, which a returning Kourtnee didn't seem pleased about. Considering Kourtnee had barely spoken three words to her all evening, however, Gen wasn't feeling too upset about that fact. Happy to see an even greater spark of her old friend back, she gladly took Levi's hand and raced for the dance floor. A quick glance back at the others saw Peyton tugging Merri along, and Kourtnee standing back to look at them as if they were all nuts.

Sadly, she wasn't the only one. There was inevitably a split among people in the gymnasium; those who thought the song was awesome, and those who thought that first group of people were insane. Occasionally, DJ's were embarrassed to even play the song. Some people had no sense of humour.

Gen also found it remarkable how many people couldn't follow the simple dancing instructions The Criminologist provided during the song's chorus; how hard was a jump to the left and a step to the right? Of course, she and Levi took it a step further, following the bulk of the movie's dance sequence by heart, and even falling in a heap on the floor at the end of the song.

"Think they're going to give us a Breathalyzer soon," Levi whispered with a grin. He nodded to one of the chaperone teachers across the room who had been gesturing in their direction and chatting up one of the uniformed officers. Levi stood first and offered Gen his hand to help her up.

She accepted his assistance and rose to her feet. "Unless someone spiked the punch without my knowing, they'll be in for a shock..." Her voice trailed off as she studied Levi's expression. Brows furrowed, lips pinched together—shit, he was getting pissed off. What the hell was his problem?

"Lev," Gen started.

"What's *she* doing here?"

Though she could guess at this point whom he meant, she followed his gaze to the gymnasium's main entrance anyway. Sage stood in the doorway, looking out of place not because she wore casual—and surprisingly stylish—clothes rather than a costume, but because it was clear she had no interest in being there. She made no move to find anyone she knew, and barely glanced around the room before she moved quickly to the back, seeking out the quietest, emptiest corner to stand by herself.

Gen looked back at Levi again, having little desire to say what she knew she must. "I told her she should come."

"You what—"

"And before you flip out on me, let me remind you she was a big part of your brother's life, whether you're happy about that fact now or not. I told her about the fundraiser here tonight and said I thought she should come, so if you're going to be pissed at someone, make it me."

The tension palpable, Levi said nothing for a few minutes, and then somewhat grudgingly turned his attention to Gen again.

"You should have told me."

"I'm sorry...really. She said she wasn't going to—"

"You still should have told me," he said again and walked off the dance floor, disappearing into the crowd.

There's a lot I should tell you...but I can't.

Gen made her way to where Merri and Peyton stood, then the three returned to where they had been standing before.

"Did she tell you she was coming?" Gen asked Merri, nodding in Sage's direction.

"I think a more apt question would be, 'has she even spoken to me once in the past week,' and the answer would be 'no.'"

"Should we...I don't know, go over and say hello, maybe?" Gen offered.

"She probably wants to be alone."

"If she wanted to be alone, she would have stayed home. I can't really believe that she showed just 'cause Michael told her to..." Gen winced as Merri caught her eye, reminding her Peyton was listening to them. They had made an informal pact weeks ago to avoid talking about Michael—or the fact that they, along with Sage, spent so much time outside of school with one another—so that they wouldn't have to answer questions and worry about having to match up their stories with one another. Levi had been the exception—Gen couldn't *not* give him an explanation. But Peyton didn't need to know.

"So she was Levi's brother's girlfriend?" Peyton said when neither Gen nor Merri continued the conversation.

Gen nodded. "And she doesn't like...people," she added.

"All people or just certain ones?"

"Uh, pretty much all of them. She definitely doesn't like me. I still think we should go over there."

"I don't know," Merri said.

"Um, if she gets pissed and throws me through a wall, I'll concede you were right and give you ten bucks, 'kay?'"

"She's going to throw you through a wall?" Peyton's eyes widened.

"Uh..." *Probably shouldn't tell her I meant that.* "No, just kidding."

I hope.

On the bright side, Sage didn't run when they approached—neither away from them, nor towards them wielding a sword. Considering whom they were dealing with and that she could kick their asses in a heartbeat, Gen felt she should count her blessings as she found them.

They attempted to trade pleasantries when they reached her. She wasn't overtly rude, but the whole exchange seemed awkward to Gen. Sage still didn't seem happy to be there, Gen and Merri had to watch what they said around Peyton, and though Levi wasn't in sight, Genevieve could pretty well assume he was glaring at them from somewhere across the room.

"So this is it?" Sage said a little coolly. "This is their memorial fundraiser?"

"Well...yes and no," Gen began. "They'll probably have something more official at some point, but I heard the student government came up with this idea for now. The net proceeds from ticket sales are going to charity. Same with

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the money from later tonight when they auction off government members as ‘gophers-for-a-day.’”

“I’m pretty sure there’s an official memorial being planned for the spring,” Merri added. “For both Hayden and Warren.”

“Oh, and there’s a dance-a-thon starting around ten,” Peyton jumped in. “People took pledges. I’m not entered, but I think I’m supposed to give money to someone. I hope it’s not a lot, ‘cause I’m pretty broke. Not that I don’t want to donate money to *Crimestoppers* and that—I’d give all kinds of money to help stop gangs from hurting people and stuff—but I’m still looking for a job in town so I’m basically left with my allowance. And I guess it sounds pretty sad that I, like, still get an allowance and that, but—” Her face was shading a deep red as she seemed to realize she was babbling, but could do little to stop it, so Gen gave her ribs a gentle nudge with her elbow.

“Anyway,” Peyton continued, taking a deep breath and giving Gen a quick smile of thanks. “I just wanted to tell you I’m sorry about your boyfriend.”

Awkward silence hung in the air as Peyton waited under Sage’s stony gaze for some sort of response, be it a rebuff or an acceptance of her sympathy.

“Thank you,” Sage said at last, her voice barely heard in the din of music and talking in the room.

No one seemed to know quite what to say after that, so the four took up leaning against the nearest wall and looking on in silence.

“Why isn’t Levi coming over?” Peyton whispered to Gen after a few minutes. She nodded to where Levi and Kourtnee stood with a few other people, which was noticeably far from Sage.

“He’s...resentful about a few things,” Gen said carefully. “We just gotta give him time.” *I hope.*

“Anything I should avoid talking about? ‘Cause I kinda have a habit of putting my foot in my mouth, as you might have noticed on occasion.”

“You? Never!” Gen feigned shocked. “No, don’t worry about it.” Warning her not to mention Sage seemed too much of an invite for more questions, so Gen skipped the real answer and prayed she wouldn’t kick herself for it later.

A sudden prod in Genevieve’s side startled her, and she swung around to look at Merri.

“What—”

Her gaze followed Merri’s towards Sage, who visibly stiffened and stared straight ahead, a slight sheen to her eyes as if tears hovered there.

“Sage,” Gen started, but she didn’t get further than that as Sage suddenly walked from the group, gaze downcast and step swift.

“I have no idea what happened,” Merri said before Gen could ask. “She just got really upset out of nowhere.”

Genevieve’s gaze went to Levi. His eyes followed Sage’s quick exit, then returned to Kourtnee, who had been dominating the conversation and failed to notice the brief absence of his attention.

Dammit, what the hell had he done? Stood there glaring at her or something? Sure, he had a right to be mad, but taking it out on Sage was not the way to go about it.

Gen muttered something about being right back, then stalked toward Levi. He noticed her approach and slipped away from Kourtnee to meet her.

"And what precisely did I do to get you so pissed?" he asked.

"That was a really big step for her to show up here," Gen said. "Really big. But you can't just leave things—"

"I didn't do anything."

"She just stormed off—"

He gestured around them. "Listen."

She stopped her ranting for a moment. No voices out of the ordinary—she couldn't even distinguish actual words being spoken. Nothing but the music was clear...

"The music?" she guessed, confused. "What, she has a problem with Van Morrison?"

"This is their song," Levi explained. "First one they ever danced to."

"Oh." Well, sure enough, she managed to make a fool of herself anyway. Peyton clearly wasn't the only one capable of sticking her foot in her mouth. "It's actually kinda stalker-ish that you know all that."

"It was at our cousin's wedding a few years ago. I couldn't help but know."

"Oh," she said again. She felt her face heat up, and thanked god for the many layers of make-up she wore; hopefully Levi wouldn't be able to tell how embarrassed she felt. Fine way to treat a friend—running up and accusing him of evil. Wow, she sucked. Unless... "This isn't exactly a popular song. Why would they play it?"

"You're suggesting I requested the song so that she would get upset and leave?"

Gen sighed—he was right, that thought was absurd. "No. I'm sorry. Just getting paranoid, I guess—Lev, where are you going?"

He suddenly turned from her and started into the crowd.

"Lev—"

"I'm going to prove I'm not the scumbag you now seem to think I am," he replied curtly, then continued toward the DJ booth. Minutes later he returned, a small sheet of paper in hand.

"Here," he thrust it towards her, "they had a stack of requests from the request box, and you'll notice that's not my writing"

She looked over the paper to see the words, "For my girl. Crazy Love. Van Morrison." And though the writing definitely wasn't Levi's, it did look familiar...

"Did he write this?" she asked. As she looked at him again, she found his eyes steady on the paper.

"I think so," he said quietly. "He'd been talking about us going to this one as a group dressed up as everyone from *Rocky Horror* for awhile. He could have thrown the request in the box at any time."

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She tightened her grip on the paper and looked over it once more. “Can I take this?”

“You want to give it to *her*?”

Gen bit her lip a moment, debating what to tell him. The truth seemed the best way to go, though he probably wouldn’t like it.

“Yeah. If I can find her. Okay?”

Certainty filled her; he’d say no. Probably yell at her for asking, snatch the paper away, and avoid her for the next week—

“Whatever,” he muttered instead, taking her aback. Before she could thank him, he turned and walked away, returning to Kourtnee and his other friends.

Now she just hoped Sage hadn’t taken off for home ‘cause there was no way in hell Gen would be catching up with her...

Outside the gymnasium, the hallways were disturbingly quiet. The music’s bass still thudded loudly enough, but at least the hum of voices and laughter was blocked out. No sign of Sage, however—no sign of anyone for that matter.

If I were Sage, where would I go...?

Ah, dammit, Sage *would* totally go home. Or maybe not...

Gen started down the hallway. Hayden’s old locker was on the ground floor and nearby. It seemed likely Sage might head there.

Footsteps sounded in the next hallway, somewhere beyond the corner, in the direction of Hayden’s locker. Gen quickened her pace, dashing around the corner in time to see Sage’s nimble form slipping out the heavy doors at the far exit. Beyond the glass doors, Gen made out the sight of Sage dropping to a sitting position on the steps, then wrapping her arms around her and shivering beneath the dim exterior lights. Calling out didn’t seem as though it would be helpful—Sage might decide to take off for good—so Gen moved quickly down the hallway to join her before she left.

“Hey,” Gen called softly as she stepped outside. The night air was ridiculously cool, and for the first time in years Gen considered rethinking dressing up like a maid for Halloween and wandering outdoors in the middle of autumn.

“Whatever you’re going to say, I don’t want to hear it,” Sage said with a shake of her head.

“Sage—”

“Just...don’t. I’ve heard it all.”

They weren’t good enough friends that Gen felt she could just sit down next to her and say something comforting or even explain what she was doing out there, so instead she moved to the bottom of the steps and held out the crinkled piece of paper.

“Here.”

Sage glanced up to study Gen for a moment, dark eyes shining in the light, then moved toward the paper. She took it gingerly, fingertips trembling ever so slightly.

“It was in the request box up there,” Gen said softly. “He must have—”

Without another word, Sage stood and started away from the school. She didn't look back, and Gen figured it wouldn't do any good to follow.

"What happened?"

Gen turned around to see Merri and Peyton standing in the open doorway, peering into darkness in the direction Sage had taken. Giving them the short version—'cause she was fucking cold—Gen skipped the details and ended with the explanation that she didn't see the need to follow Sage when she left.

"Perhaps we'll see her tomorrow," Merri suggested, giving Gen a familiar look that said she meant to add, *at Michael's house* to the end of her sentence. "And we can talk to her then."

Right—'cause they did a lot of talking about their grief and feelings at Michael's place. It was a regular therapy session with him around. Gen might have rolled her eyes at the thought, but having Peyton so near reined her common sense in.

"Yeah, maybe tomorrow," she said instead.

"Does she live far from here?" Peyton said as she stepped out onto the steps, still looking in the direction Sage had left in. "Won't she need a ride?"

"She walks—" Gen stopped suddenly as she realized Merri was leaving them, closing the door to the school. The seer gave her a knowing grin, then turned her back on them. What the hell? It seemed pretty clear Peyton wasn't into that sort of thing...

"Everywhere?" Peyton said.

"Huh?"

"She walks everywhere?"

Shit, she had been in the middle of a sentence. "Yeah," Gen said quickly, not fully remembering what she had been saying before Meredith made her quick exit. "Does a lot of walking. Into fitness and stuff." *And probably killing people with her bare hands if necessary.*

"I feel so bad for her," Peyton said, going down the first few steps. "I mean, I don't know her or anything and I never met her boyfriend before he...but I guess I'm like one of those hopeless romantic people and it's just *so* sad that happened to them. Can you imagine what that must be like?" She shivered a little, though from the cold or the thoughts she expressed, Gen couldn't tell. "Losing a boyfriend like that...it must be so hard— Not that you'd lose a boyfriend, but like a girlfriend, for you, which is like the same except that it's a girl, and I'm talking like a crazy person again, aren't I?"

"Vaguely, but it's okay."

"So did you ever go out with that Janine girl?"

Gen might have laughed at the absurdity of the question if she didn't also find it so depressing. "No. She's got a girlfriend, and I think we're just really incompatible."

"Why?"

"Well, for starters, I have this problem of not being able to speak coherently when I'm within five feet of her."

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"That would be a problem," Peyton agreed. "So that's it? No one else, just her?"

Gen shrugged. Her lack of a love life had always been her least favourite conversation topic, but telling Peyton to shut the fuck up seemed like it might damage their budding friendship a bit.

"I don't think it matters," she said instead. "Mostly I just know a whole lot of straight girls, and that doesn't seem like it would be all that rewarding to pursue."

"So...you don't like me?"

Oh, god, had she really just said that? Genevieve felt her face flush with colour. Worse still, the same affliction she had with Janine earlier seemed to come over her again, and she couldn't find any words. Had she managed to open her mouth, it seemed likely she'd only manage something unintelligible and embarrassing, so she forewent any attempt at conversation and kept her mouth shut.

"You can just say no," Peyton said quickly, and though it was difficult to tell with the light, Gen could have sworn she saw a hint of blush in the girl's cheeks. "It's okay."

"Um...I think I'll take the fifth," Gen replied when she'd found her voice. "I just don't want to weird you out."

"It...it won't weird me out."

Breath caught in Gen's throat. Her lips parted slightly, ready for any words she might have to say, but she couldn't bring herself to utter them. She held Peyton's gaze, trying desperately to read it and wishing her supernatural abilities extended past extinguishing candles in favour of something useful, like telepathy.

"No?" she chanced.

Peyton bit at her bottom lip, smearing her pink lip-gloss slightly. "No."

"Did Merri say something to you or—"

"Nope. I just thought...I mean, I thought before that maybe you did, but I didn't want to say anything..."

Who Gen may or may not like seemed like a moot point—she figured the bigger question was who Peyton liked, but of course actually *asking* her seemed an inconceivable tactic.

"Is this making you uncomfortable?" Peyton asked suddenly.

"Um...yeah."

"I'm so sorry—I didn't mean to..."

"It's all right—"

"No, I shouldn't have...I kind of have a habit of saying things without really thinking and I just thought I might as well ask you, but I never meant to make this so awkward and it's just after hearing about Sage and her boyfriend, it made me really sad, and I guess a little brave, and I just thought—"

"I like you," Gen cut in without giving her words much thought. *God, I'm going to regret this...*

Peyton paused her speech, and she stared at Genevieve for a long moment. There was something in her gaze...hope, maybe? Could it really be...?

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Gen breathed out when she didn't find any hint of abject terror in Peyton's voice.

"Me too. Only with you—not me. Not that I have a problem with me—no more than most people have with themselves, I guess—but that's really not the point and I'm babbling again."

"Can you say that part again?"

"That I was babbling?"

Gen shook her head and Peyton grinned with understanding.

"I like you."

Right then, Gen's heart seemed to lurch in her chest, proving the cliché wasn't a mere myth as she had once thought. Of course, that also meant that she didn't have a clue what to say, and the idea that she'd died and gone to heaven at some point that night seemed more and more probable as the minutes ticked by.

"This kinda feels like the part in a movie where the two romantic leads suddenly kiss for the first time while music plays in the background," Peyton commented with a laugh.

"Yeah, I've been waiting for some garage band pop ballad to start up or something...which they just might be playing inside right now, so maybe we should..."

"Head back?" Peyton wrapped her arms over her stomach and shivered. "I'm kinda cold so that's probably a good idea."

Though she realized then that she hadn't been feeling the bitter cold for at least several minutes, Gen agreed. They started up the few steps toward the door—back to the dance, back to the stares, back to where they probably wouldn't have another chance to continue this conversation.

"Peyton..." Gen dropped a step behind as her companion reached for the door handle.

"Yeah...?"

As Peyton turned around to face her, Gen took a chance and stepped forward suddenly. She hadn't actually kissed anyone before, save playfully on the cheek with Levi when they were kids, and while her heart insisted it was easy, her brain reminded her she could come across like an idiot. Still, after only a few seconds of hesitation, she leaned forward and brushed her lips over Peyton's.

Pulling back just as quickly, Gen scrambled to preempt any proceeding awkwardness. "Nope, no pop ballad playing." She shrugged. "Worth a try."

Peyton laughed and—thankfully—didn't seem bothered by it. She hauled open the door and gestured ahead of her. "Maybe next time, then."

Maybe next time... There would be a next time—Gen had the overwhelming urge to run up to Levi and bounce up and down with excitement, squealing. Even Michael could walk into the school at that moment to berate and yell at her, and it would have done nothing to darken that moment.

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Levi stood still in the shower, relaxing under the steady stream of hot water. Exhausted, he wanted nothing more than to climb in bed and sleep for the next ten hours, but after hopping in the shower to clean the Riff Raff make-up off, he found the heat and noise a welcome way to wind down after a long night.

Kourtnee had sulked on the way home when Levi said he had little interest in attending an after party she'd heard about, though he mused she'd get over it. Or perhaps attend it without him—she'd said she wouldn't, but if she did, he wouldn't find it so surprising. She had other friends, other social circles; she was nice and he liked her, but he had no illusions that they might suddenly become inseparable and start running with the same crowds.

What pissed her off even more was when he drove her straight home and declined her offer to come inside for a while. The night had left him drained. They'd stayed for the full dance, listening to a representative from *Crimestoppers* discuss the increase in youth violence and the need for witnesses to step forward, participating in the dance-a-thon, watching the student government auction. Dealing with the principal's brief talk of Hayden and even Warren had been difficult, but no more so than his almost-daily therapy sessions. It all seemed to sap his energy even more, however—all the talking. All this time, and no one ever said anything different. Hayden was a good guy. It wasn't fair that he died, but that's life. Time heals. Think of the good times. Christ, he was fucking sick of it all.

The shower water grew noticeably cooler, and though he played with the taps, it was clear the hot water was nearly out. He shut off the taps and stepped from the stall to the bathroom. Steam filled the small room, fogging the mirror and making it difficult to breathe. Still, the warmth was welcome, and Levi took his time drying off and changing into his pajama bottoms for bed. Gathering the Riff Raff costume and wig, he flipped off the bathroom light and started for the hallway.

At one in the morning, it was well past the hour his parents went to bed, so he wasn't surprised to find the house silent. Most nights he'd head to the basement to watch TV for a few hours, but after weeks of insomnia, sleep called to him and he was eager to oblige.

A noise in the room to his left paused his step. Was he just hearing things, or—

This time a floorboard creaked—he was certain of it. Fear constricted his throat and caused a tightness to form in his chest.

The noise came from Hayden's room.

Levi dropped the costume next to his own door, then backtracked to Hayden's. Wild theories entered his brain—it could be anyone in there. He'd lain awake too many nights speculating about those responsible for his brother's death to forget all those possibilities now. Had someone come to steal something, after all this time?

The smart thing to do would be to retreat to his room and phone the police...but even as he thought that, Levi found himself reaching for the doorknob, determined to catch whoever it was in the act.

His heart thudded in his chest as he turned the handle and cracked open the door.. Darkness met his gaze—no flashlights, no lamps on. He pushed the door open a little more...

Across the room, the window lay wide open. Curtains billowed in the icy wind, and the breeze chilled his still-damp skin. Goosebumps dotted his bare flesh, though at this point he couldn't say if fear or the cold caused it. The tree just outside the window blocked the moon, and the only light spilled through the door from the hallway.

Holding his breath and listening hard, Levi heard fabric rustle from somewhere to the right, near the closet, signaling someone must be there. He opened the door farther still and stepped completely into the room.

A scan of the near-empty space revealed stacks of sealed boxes and the disassembled bed frame propped against the wall, a few garbage bags of clothes in the center of the room...and a familiar figure huddled on the floor beside the open closet.

Sage.

Her back against the wall, she had her legs pulled up to her chest and arms wrapped around them. Head bowed, he couldn't make out her expression in the darkness and she didn't look up when he stepped in the room.

Anger roared through his veins. How *dare* she show up here. He knew she could climb the tree to get through the window—the walls were thin and he couldn't help but hear her and Hayden the odd night when she snuck in. But to think she'd actually break-in...

And break-in was what she *had* done. No denying that, and no reason why he couldn't phone the police. Sure, his parents wouldn't press charges in a million years, but maybe it would scare her into actually admitting whatever shit she'd been hiding.

Pissed and resolved, he strode across the room, his sights set on the cordless phone still plugged in and sitting on the floor where Hayden's nightstand had been.

"Where's his stuff?"

He paused mid-step at the sound of her small voice behind him. *Just ignore her and go for the phone...don't turn around, don't turn around...*

Levi turned around. She stared up at him, tears freely flowing over her cheeks, lower lip quivering.

And god, he hated her. Hated that after everything, he could still gaze at her and feel his insides torn in two; hated that her mere presence could remind him of his brother more than anything else had in weeks; hated that though he wanted to continue towards the phone to call the police, he couldn't force himself to do it.

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He held her gaze for as long as he could, mustering up every ounce of hate within him to finally go off on her about the part she played in Hayden's death—to scream at her and blame her and let it all out.

Then another fat tear brimmed in her eye and fell, tracing the gentle curve of her face, and he knew he couldn't do it.

"Mom packed it up," he answered her at last. "She rented a storage locker and moved most of it there. Dad's barely speaking to her over it."

She dropped her eyes to the floor and stared blankly for a few minutes. Levi hung back, unsure of what to do. Phoning the police still ranked as his preferred reaction to her presence, though at the moment he couldn't find it in him to do something so cruel. Telling her to leave was still another possibility, as was leaving her alone. His stomach turned at the thought of either of those, however.

Eyes traveling up to his again, her tears fell with greater frequency now.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice breaking. "I'm so sorry, Levi..." She let her head fall, forehead touching her knees, and her body shook with sobs.

Without even being conscious of what he was doing, Levi found himself moving toward her. He dropped to his knees next to her and slid his arms around her shoulders. Half expecting her to stop him—to push him away and run out of the house, and never speak to him again—it surprised him when she willingly leaned into him. As the side of her face pressed against his chest, hot tears hit his flesh. He hated that Gen had been right, but there was no denying it. Whether he liked it or not, Sage was part of Hayden's life, and of course she missed him. Grief dampened his own eyes as it welled within him once more.

"I'm sorry," she whispered again.

Levi tightened his embrace and said nothing.

After all, there was nothing more to say.

Seven

The incessant ringing of the phone awoke Genevieve late Saturday morning. She rolled on her side and threw the pillow over her head, praying it would stop.

At last, the ringing ceased, and for a moment she thought perhaps her magical abilities weren't quite so useless after all. Seconds later her father bellowed her name, however. Muttering a few curses, she picked up the cordless phone on her bedside table.

A glance at the number on the LCD display said the call came from a payphone. Who the hell would be calling her from a payphone?

"Yeah?" she mumbled into the phone, yawning although she'd had at least nine hours of sleep.

"I woke you?" said a familiar voice.

"Mer." Gen sat up in bed and yawned again. "Yeah, but I'm being lazy today—I should probably already be awake. Why are you calling from a payphone?"

Meredith paused for a moment. "I had some things to do downtown."

"Oh. You should get a cell phone."

"Well, I wanted to let you know that apparently we have the weekend off."

"Seriously?"

"I talked to Michael earlier and he said if any of us show up prior to Tuesday, we'll be shot on sight. I'm inclined to believe him."

Even without the threat of death, Genevieve was more than happy to oblige.

"That's awesome. Not like I have much else going on, but it's still cool."

"No plans with Peyton?"

Gen grinned in spite of herself. She hadn't said anything to Merri about what happened the night before outside the school. It was all so new and strange...awkward, even. She wasn't even sure what it all meant. She liked

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Peyton and Peyton liked her. Then what? Were they going out? Should they start holding hands and stuff? Is this even the sort of thing a person asks, or should she just hold on and see where it all goes?

“Gen?” Merri prompted.

“No,” she said. “No plans with Peyton. I don’t think. I’m not really sure, actually. Should you have any supernatural insights for me, that’d be really helpful.”

“Not really. Did you talk?”

Though Genevieve did her best to summarize their conversation and subsequent sort-of kiss, nothing came out terribly clear as she jumped out of chronological order. Excitement bubbled through her, just as it had last night, and she was pretty sure she was babbling incoherently. Confirming her suspicion was a long pause on Merri’s part when Gen had finished speaking.

“So...” Merri said at last. “You had a good time then?”

“Yes, and though I considered killing you at the time for leaving us alone, I’m glad you did. Do I even need to ask—?”

A knock on her bedroom door interrupted her.

“Hold on.” She covered the phone’s mouthpiece. “Come in!”

The door cracked open and Levi peeked around the corner. Dammit, they hadn’t really spoken last night after she followed Sage outside—she hoped he wasn’t there to yell at her.

“Mer, can I call you back?”

“Uh...”

“Oh, right, payphone. Call me later if you get a chance, okay?”

Though Merri agreed to phone her later, Gen doubted she would. She almost never called, never emailed—never actually contacted her about anything. She also didn’t talk about her parents much, and Gen had started to suspect they were those crazy, anti-technology types or something.

Levi hung in her doorway while Genevieve returned the phone to its cradle.

“You coming in?” she asked.

“You getting dressed first?”

She gazed down at her nightshirt and shrugged. “You’ve seen me in less at some point, I’m sure. I think it boils down to whether or not you can still tolerate my morning breath.”

He nodded and entered the room, easing the door closed behind him. She slid to one side of the bed so he could take the other and once he sat down and stretched out, she waited in silence for a few minutes. He must have come over to tell her something, since they weren’t due to be at Stephanie’s until around seven or eight.

“Did you catch up with Sage last night?” he asked at last.

Dread knotted in her stomach. Knowing his current opinion of Sage, this sounded like a segue into an argument.

“Yeah. Gave her the sheet with the request Hayden put in and she took off. Haven’t heard from her since.” To her surprise, Levi didn’t respond. “Are you here to yell at me about it?”

He shook his head and cast his eyes downward. "I miss you, Genny."

"Things haven't been the same," she agreed sadly.

"You're my best friend...and I don't like it being like this. I don't like *us* being like this."

"Me either." Still half worried the conversation was going to turn into an ultimatum regarding Sage, Gen tensed a little, prepared for an eventual argument. "So what are we going to do about it? Try talking like we used to?" *Shit, bad suggestion*, she realized before she could take it back. Talking like they used to would mean telling him everything, which she really couldn't afford to do anymore.

"Have any deep dark secrets then?" He eyed her closely. She couldn't be sure if he joked or not.

"Nothing recent," she replied. "Well...you might be mad at me for this, but...I kinda sorta...made progress with Peyton. A little bit. As in, apparently she likes me. Are you mad?"

Levi sighed. "Nah. I've been going out with Kourtnee for a week—why would I be mad? I mean, she's cute. Talks a lot, but cute. It's cool she likes you."

Genevieve breathed with relief, only realizing then that she'd been nervous about telling him. "Of course, I find out she likes me the very day Janine decides to talk to me. Great timing, eh?"

"You've become quite the chick magnet." He gave her a lopsided grin that put her even more at ease.

"Apparently, and if you ever figure out how that happened, let me know, okay? Now it's your turn. Any new deep dark secrets?" She expected him to laugh her off, but a sudden frown met her eager gaze. "Lev?"

"I did come here to ask you about Sage," he said. "Was she upset when you saw her last night?"

"To say the least," she mumbled. He didn't seem mad this time, at least. Sad, maybe, but not angry. "But she wouldn't talk to me. Took off before I'd said three words."

"Sage...broke into Hayden's room last night."

Gen's cold blue gaze shot to him suddenly. "What?"

"I was going to bed and I heard a noise. I found her in there, crying."

"What did she say? Anything?"

Levi stood suddenly and paced the room, keeping his eyes downcast. "Not much. I guess she didn't know Mom's been packing up his things—maybe she came there looking for something, or just to remember..."

"So you didn't talk to her or anything?"

He had walked all the way to the door at this point, and then turned and wandered back towards the bed. She couldn't make out his expression, not with him refusing to look at her like that...was it anger? Grief? God, she used to be able to read him so well, but now she hadn't a clue where his thoughts lay.

"She was curled up in the corner of the room," he continued. "And she just...she seemed so small. I've never seen her like that, not ever."

"So you didn't...yell at her or anything?"

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With a heavy, weary sigh, Levi sank down onto the mattress again. Perched on the edge of the bed, his shoulders turned inward and his head hung down. He stayed there in silence for a few moments until Genevieve shuffled to the edge next to him.

"I couldn't," he said at last. "You know, I don't think she's okay. *Really* not okay."

"Like...she might hurt herself or something?" Oh Christ, she'd never really thought of that. Not with that iron will of Sage's. Somehow she'd get through it—that just seemed a given. But what if...?

"I don't know," Levi said. "I sat with her for awhile, and then she just left without saying anything. I thought maybe...you said you and Meredith saw her sometimes. I thought maybe you were kind of friends with her, but if she doesn't talk to you..."

"I know someone she will talk to," Gen said quickly. *Or hopefully will.* She had a feeling Sage *would* talk to Michael, if he asked her too, but whether or not he would was anyone's guess. "I'll make sure someone helps her. I promise."

He nodded. There was no knowing if he believed her or not, but at least he didn't argue.

"There's something else..."

Genevieve braced for the worst, horrified it would be something involving Kourtnee that she had no interest in hearing.

Levi swung his gaze her way, dark eyes wide and sad, seeming to lay open his very soul.

"I'm still in love with her. I didn't think I was and I tried not to be...but I am. Fuck, what kind of horrible person am I?"

"You're not a horrible person." She slipped her arm around him and leaned her head on his shoulder. "You can't help how you feel."

"Don't tell her," he warned. "Please, don't ever tell her I love her."

"I won't."

"Promise?"

"Always."

~~*

The morning after Levi's confession to her about both his concern for Sage and his lingering feelings, Genevieve rose early with a mission in mind. Dragging herself to Michael's at nine a.m. was the last thing she wanted to spend her Sunday doing, but she had barely slept since talking with Levi. She knew Michael could probably reason with Sage, so she resolved to try to talk him into it.

Was it even any of her business? Possibly not, and it seemed certain that Michael would probably yell at her for it. But Merri had mentioned to her before that Sage seemed to trust him—though God knows why—and if he could help her deal with her grief, then Gen was willing to try.

Of course, as she finally stood at his front door, she found herself wishing she'd asked Merri to do it instead.

Though she wavered for several minutes on whether or not she should even disturb him—especially when he'd specifically said he didn't want any of them around that weekend—at last she raised her hand to knock.

Several minutes ticked by with no answer. A little relieved he didn't seem to be home, she decided to knock once more before leaving, just so she could claim she made an effort.

Unfortunately, footsteps sounded behind the door just then, and seconds later it swung open. Michael stood in a pair of long charcoal pajama bottoms, sleep in his eyes and hair even more of a mess than usual. In a word, he looked like hell—rough night, whatever he'd been doing. He squinted in the sunlight and yawned. His hand slid along the edge of the door, gripping it tightly for support.

"What?" he mumbled as he recognized her.

"Uh...I..." Dammit, she wished she had like an email address for him or something. A quick note would have been a lot easier.

"You're not supposed to be here today," he said, as if she needed reminding.

"I just wondered if I could talk to you about something for a second."

She thought for sure he'd turn her away, but instead he pushed the door open further and gestured for her to enter the house. She moved past him quickly, happy to be out of the cold though she never felt completely comfortable in his presence and that day was no exception.

Her mouth opened to speak as he closed the door behind her, but he brushed past her and went immediately for the kitchen. As she followed, her gaze swept over the familiar space to find it not-so-familiar suddenly. The kitchen table and chairs had been moved across the room, and all the books were removed from the shelves opposite appliances in the kitchen.

"You moving?" she asked, praying her voice didn't sound as hopeful as she felt.

"Renovating," was his reply. He filled the coffee pot with water and moved to get a coffee cup from the cupboard. Tipping it in her direction, he gazed over his shoulder at her and raised a brow in question.

"I don't drink coffee," she replied.

"Tea?"

"Um, sure." She didn't generally drink tea either, but it was so rare he offered her anything, she hated to refuse. Maybe he was sleepwalking or something; that could explain why he wasn't acting right. Or maybe he had some kind of head injury...

He filled the kettle next and it was then Gen's gaze fell to his bare back and sides. Several dark red scratches marred his skin—fresh by the look of them.

"Get attacked by a bear?" she asked, a small smile hovering on her lips. It was hard not to giggle.

Michael met her eyes and watched her gaze stray to his sides again.

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“Cat.”

“Maybe that pussy needs to be declawed.”

“The thought has crossed my mind on occasion,” he said dryly. “Now what do you want?”

“It’s about Sage.”

“I mean what kind of tea,” he said sharply with a glare. Gen mused he must have finally woken up.

“Surprise me.” She regretted that statement almost immediately—rat poison seemed a very real possibility with him. “So don’t you want to know why I’m here to talk about Sage?”

“Mind if I have my fucking coffee first?”

“Whatever.” Christ, if she knew he was going to be such a baby about it, she would have stopped at Tim Horton’s first.

He pulled a few more ingredients out of the cupboard and thankfully none of them resembled rat poison, at least from Gen’s view. She kept her silence as he took to pouring the drinks and added a tablespoon of honey to her tea, but couldn’t keep her silence when he dropped a generous amount of whiskey in his coffee.

“So is that your usual morning ritual or just to deal with me?” she asked as he scooped up the mugs.

“Bit of both, though today I’m leaning toward the latter.”

Genevieve didn’t doubt it.

As he walked past her, he thrust the mug of hot, fragrant tea in her direction. She accepted the cup with care and followed him out of the kitchen. Michael took a seat on the couch, slouched down a few inches so his position resembled more of a sprawl, and took in a long sip of hot coffee. Gen settled on the edge of a nearby chair and waited for her tea to cool.

“Okay, explain,” he said. “And be done by the time I finish my coffee.”

“It’s about Sage.”

“You already said that.”

God, he was annoying. She quickly reminded him of the fact that he advised Sage to go to that dance, informed him that she had shown up, and then described how it all went to hell when Hayden’s request was played. He looked then as though he was going to bark something at her about wasting his time, but she continued before he could speak, finishing with what Levi had told her.

After voicing her concerns, she took a sip of the now-cool tea. “And by the way, this is really good—what is it?”

“*Masala chai*,” he replied. “And can you perhaps refresh my memory as to why, exactly, you decided to tell me all this?”

“I was hoping you could talk to her.”

“Why?”

“Because she listens to you. I thought...I don’t know, that maybe you could help her or something.”

“Her boyfriend died—did you think by now she’d be over it?”

"No," she snapped. "I know she's upset—this isn't about her getting over him. It's about her losing it. What if she tries killing herself?"

His face remained impassive—no luck there.

"Fine," she continued. "You don't actually care about her—I get that. But you told us before that all this end of the world crap hinges on the fact that the three of us have to stay alive. Don't you think her suicide would impact things a little negatively?"

As he tipped his mug to his lips, he watched her from over the rim and, to Genevieve, seemed to be considering her words. Of course, if appealing to him as a human being didn't do it, at least cold logic spoke to him.

"Can you help her?" Gen asked when it seemed he wouldn't say anything further.

"I'll talk to her."

"But don't tell her that I told you all this," Gen said quickly. "And *really* don't tell her Levi told me any of that—it was probably supposed to be a personal thing. Maybe just tell her that you—"

He waved toward the door. "I'm not playing those games. You can leave now."

That didn't seem such a bad idea to Gen. After draining the mug, she stood and returned it to the kitchen. Though it seemed preferable to get the hell out of his house as soon as possible, she turned to face him once more when she was only halfway to the door. Perhaps it was the positive development with Peyton on Friday, or the fact that Levi had come to confide in her, just like old times, but Genevieve felt bold suddenly. Stronger. A whisper of power rushed through her, so sudden and small she almost didn't notice it at first...but it was there.

"Actually," she lifted her chin slightly and her voice took on a self-assured tone, "I have something else I wanted to talk to you about."

"Is that so?" He seemed more amused than threatened, but she refused to let him embarrass her into backing down.

"Yeah. I want to know something about that day at the farmhouse, when we all went there."

He didn't seem surprised at her question. "I figured you would. You want me to tell you what you did to them?"

A little shudder went through her at the thought. "No, actually. I'm not sure I ever want to know about that. I want to know why, when that man had a knife to my throat, you almost didn't do anything to help me."

Finally getting the words out had done nothing to quell her fear of him, but she did feel some weight drift off of her shoulders. A lump formed in her throat as she awaited his answer, however, and as long minutes of silence passed, the air grew heavier with expectation and tension.

"You're standing here right now as a testament to the fact that I *did* help you," he replied coolly, "on a couple of occasions."

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"It's not that I'm not grateful, but that's not the point. You helped me, but not before thinking long and hard about it. I *saw* you. You know I did. You were thinking of letting me die."

Michael regarded her without a word, continuing to casually sip his coffee. "Yes, I did."

Having that confession at last did little to ease her mind.

"Why? I'm not stupid—I know this is personal. You stalked me for weeks and you didn't do that with Sage. I'm willing to bet you didn't with Mer either. And if you were willing to stand there and watch that man murder me, I'd hazard a guess that you've considered doing it yourself a few times." Now that part she hoped he'd argue with, but the cold half smile on his lips told her otherwise.

"Interesting deduction." He downed the last of his coffee and rose. Though their heights nearly matched, she couldn't help that he intimidated her, and every second was an internal struggle not to back away from him.

"If I'm supposed to keep coming here and trusting you, I have to have the truth," she said. "*Can* I trust you? Am I going to be spending the rest of my time here looking *over* my shoulder, afraid of you?"

He stalked toward her slowly, and again she fought the urge to backpedal. Two feet away from her he stopped, staring at her and saying nothing.

"Should I be worried about you deciding to randomly go homicidal on me?" she asked again.

He seemed to consider his response for a moment. "No."

Gen couldn't say if she found that reassuring or not. "And should I expect that the next time my life is in danger you're going to stand there considering whether or not you're going to save me?"

"Probably not."

Even less reassuring.

Power continued to twist through her veins and down her arms, winding around her fingertips. She didn't actually know if any of it could do her any good—if any real magic was dwelling within her at that moment—but that little power was enough to ignite her sense of fearlessness again.

Genevieve took a step forward and gazed coldly into his green eyes, issuing a challenge that she only half hoped he'd accept.

"I want to know why this is personal," she said. "I need the truth—whatever it is. I need to understand."

Michael took another step forward so mere inches separated them and looked her dead in the eye.

"The day you understand is the day I *will* kill you," he said evenly. "So I'd say it's in your best interest to forget about it."

At this point Genevieve was absolutely terrified—a threat on her life tended to do that to her—but she kept her composure as best she could.

Gen plastered on an exaggerated smile, calmly said, "Thanks for the tea," and abruptly turned toward the door. Once outside—and a safe distance from Michael's—she muttered a few curses.

She'd better learn how to do a goddamn fireball soon 'cause a certain target was just begging to be burned alive. The imagined sight of him writhing in fiery agony made her smile.

Suddenly conscious of her gory thoughts, Gen nearly stopped mid-step. Christ, what had happened to her? She had felt sick at the thought of doing something horrible to the people who really *had* tried to kill her—how could she really be smiling about burning someone else alive?

Genevieve shivered a little and she knew the sudden chill wasn't from the cold.

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A call from Michael late that Sunday afternoon had startled Sage. She'd heard from Merri—she knew that, for whatever reason, he had said he had no desire to have anyone around that weekend, even her. It was with disappointment that she accepted, and planned to spend both afternoons out jogging. And then, just as she laced up her running shoes, the phone rang and her mother informed her that her *sensei* was on the phone. That alone worried her—two weeks had passed since she'd dropped out of all her classes without telling either her mother or Michael. So why would one of her teacher's call?

But relief and a spark of curiosity came when she heard Michael's voice on the line, abruptly informing her he would be expecting her within the half hour.

In less time than that, she stood at his front door, sweat sprinkled across her brow from the run. Over the past few weeks, she hadn't knocked once upon her arrival, knowing that if he expected her, the door would be open and she was to walk in and immediately start stretching. Michael had little tolerance for small talk and greetings, and she was glad of it.

On this day, however, she found herself hesitating. Something didn't feel right, and though she normally wasn't the sort of person to get mysterious intuitive nudges, she couldn't ignore it this time.

Still, she clasped the cold doorknob and thrust the door open.

Inside, Sage slipped off her shoes and socks and left them by the front door, then strode into the main room. Already dressed in long track pants and a hoodie, she didn't see the need to change. Without any sign of Michael, she perched on the arm of the couch and waited. Furniture had been moved out of the kitchen since the last time she'd been there days ago, and now the kitchen counter was heaped with tools and boards. Against the far wall were long, wide boxes only a few inches deep, along with a huge roll of plastic.

She sincerely hoped he hadn't called her there for help to dispose of a body. It was bad enough helping Merri get rid of the guy who shot at them over a month earlier; though Sage prided herself on having a strong stomach, the whole event wasn't one she was eager to repeat.

There was the sound of an engine in the driveway then as a vehicle pulled in, followed by car doors slamming and voices talking loudly. Minutes later the front door opened and Sage tensed, expecting the worst.

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Not one of the three men looked familiar, nor did any of them pay her notice as they passed by to go to the kitchen.

“Should we get started then,” one called, the tallest and oldest of the three. “Yeah.”

Sage swung around to see Michael standing in the loft, looking over the railing. Dressed in a thick black sweater, he seemed to meld into the shadows up there, and she realized he might have been watching her when she came in without her noticing.

“Beer’s in the fridge,” he called to the visitors. “You’ve got today and tomorrow, and you’re already late.” His gaze went to Sage. “Get your shoes on and come upstairs.”

Confused, but accustomed to following his directions, she did as she was told and found him waiting for her at the top of the steps to his loft. She hadn’t been up there once in the past month and a half she’d been coming to his house, but didn’t have time to spare the space a glance before he was leading her to the shadowed far right corner.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“They’re installing a breakfast bar,” he replied. “So we’re working upstairs.”

Upstairs...was there a third floor she wasn’t aware of?

Michael yanked on a cord hanging from the ceiling. A simple bulb turned on, revealing an iron ladder affixed to the wall. It led to a hatch door in the ceiling, and after gazing at it for a few seconds, she returned her attention to Michael.

“Had it installed yesterday,” he replied to her unasked question. “It makes sense to have more than one exit here.”

After a nod from him toward the ceiling, Sage went to the ladder and climbed up. A few shoves on the hatch door and it swung open.

Cool November air brushed her skin as she climbed onto the roof. Though the sun wouldn’t be setting for awhile yet, thick clouds blanketed the sky, threatening to snow if it got much colder.

“Rope ladder is over there,” Michael said as he followed her and closed the hatch door again. He gestured to a steel box bolted to the flat roof near the building’s edge. “Not my preferred way to leave, but a possibility.”

“It’s a good idea,” she agreed. Moving towards the edge, Sage gazed at the horizon. She could see a good half of the town from up there, and the distance from everything...it was simple. Peaceful. Easy. Perhaps she might persuade him to move their training sessions up there more often, even if it was a little cold.

“Tell me something, Sage,” he said casually. “Why is it you were home when I called today?”

“Huh?” She wheeled around to face him, confusion clouding her expression. He stood about three metres away and watched her with interest.

“You have *Muay Thai* classes Sunday afternoon,” he replied.

She flushed a little—she didn’t realize he remembered that.

"You don't normally show up here Sunday evenings until around six, if at all, so I'd venture a guess those classes finish at four. Why were you home at three-thirty?"

Why bother lying to him? She doubted he'd actually care anyway, especially not if it meant she'd have more time for his instruction.

"I dropped them," she said. "A couple of weeks ago."

Michael watched her in silence. Shifting under his steady gaze, she dropped her eyes to the side.

"You fought hard to go to those classes, and you just left?"

She nodded, waiting for the inevitable "why."

"What else have you dropped?"

Sage glanced up at him sharply. "What?"

"What other classes of yours have you dropped?"

Dammit, why did he seem so mad at her? "All of them," she replied with a sigh.

"Why?"

A shrug. Her *Aikido sensei* threatened to discipline her regarding her aggression and warned her not to come back if she couldn't control her temper...so, logically, she didn't go back. It wasn't long before the rest of the classes fell to the side as well.

"Your sensei asked you a question," Michael reminded her coolly.

Sage bowed her head with the obedience ingrained in her. "You know much more than my other teachers do," she said. "I thought you could teach me."

"I don't know *Muay Thai*, which was why you were so eager to keep those classes, as I recall."

"I thought my time would be better spent with *kenjitsu*."

"If you can't stick with your previous disciplines, how am I supposed to believe you'll follow future ones?"

She struggled to think up an answer for him—anything to keep him from throwing her out and refusing to teach her. But before anything came to mind, he spoke again.

"That's not why I called you and brought you up here today."

Looking up at him again, she studied him curiously. "Then why..."

"I thought there was something you should see." He reached into the back pocket of his black jeans and pulled out a Ziplock bag with something small and square inside. She hadn't long to speculate on the object when he threw it her way.

She caught the bag and turned it over in her hands. A familiar looking compact black cell phone...what the hell?

Holding it closer to her face, she examined the phone. Something had dried a dark brown on it, flecks falling off into the bag.

Blood.

Sage looked back up at Michael. "This is *his*?"

He nodded.

"But you said you never found it at the farmhouse."

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“It wasn’t at the farmhouse.”

Her mouth went dry. “What?” she managed to whisper.

“I didn’t find it at the farmhouse, Sage.”

“Where did you find it, then? You said they must have had it—that since they called me after they attacked him, they must have kept it...”

His lips formed into a cold smile as realization finally dawned on her. Grief, rage, hurt...it all welled in her at once. Betrayed. God, he killed Hayden? How could he...?

“You’re far more useful to me if you have a mission for yourself,” he said, as if reading her thoughts.

And then she picked just one of those emotions. One that wrapped itself around her suddenly, warmly, almost comforting in its simplicity.

Rage.

“I’m going to kill you,” she swore.

Michael shrugged nonchalantly. “Have at it.”

Eight

Michael watched and waited, a smile on his face, no doubt enjoying the anger and frustration in Sage's expression.

Could he really be all that confident she wouldn't actually throw him off the damn building? Obviously, he didn't know her very well.

Sage dropped the cell phone to the ground beside her and bolted forward. There was still a fair distance between them, and she knew he'd see her early moves coming, but she didn't care.

She went for a shoulder grab upon reaching him, which he met with a *shibonage*, effortlessly turning and throwing her away. She tried again, the fluid movements coming easily to her, and again he met her with a reversal. Shifting tactics, she rushed him once more, feigning a simple jab, then throwing a right hook his way. Not only did Michael anticipate her, but he ducked out of her way and countered with a rough punch to her side. She'd been struck the odd time in her life, but now she stumbled back a few steps, feeling as though a truck had hit her.

Not once did surprise ever register in his eyes. No fear, no worry...he expected everything she did, everything she tried. He frequently pointed out her weaknesses in training—he had an eye for it, and she had still been working on correcting the problems. Of course he'd see it now, though; of course he'd anticipate her thoughts.

She gripped her side and winced. Pain fueled her on, pushed her forward. She straightened and leaped at him, barreling into him at full speed. Once again, he pivoted from her path. This time he grabbed her wrist and swung her arm around so he held it twisted at an awkward angle against her back.

"You know..." His breath tickled her ear and she could almost hear the smile in his voice. He wrenched her arm further and Sage couldn't keep from crying out. "Even your boyfriend put up more of a fight than this. I'm disappointed—"

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Pinpointing his head's exact location while he spoke, she slammed her own head backward. Pain shot through her as her skull connected with his face, but she pushed it aside. Surprise had loosened his grip on her and she pulled her arm free.

As Michael regained himself and moved toward her, she grabbed his wrist, hitting a pressure point and using the *yonkyo* move to force him to the ground on his stomach. A glance to his waist revealed a sheathed knife at his belt.

Sage went for the weapon. As her fingers clasped the handle, Michael broke from her hold and threw her off balance. Recovering before he could attack again, she leaped at him and pinned him on his back, thrusting the point of the knife to his throat.

Panting, she met his eyes. He didn't look the least bit scared. She pushed the blade closer still, nicking the skin but not completely tearing flesh. Sweat soaked her brow despite the cold. The fight was brief, but at least she had the upper hand.

"I'm waiting," he said coolly.

Sage responded with another threatening push of the knife, but still, she didn't kill him.

A second later she wished she had as she heard the click of a gun cocking and felt something cold and metal under her chin. Where he'd gotten the revolver, she couldn't say as she hadn't seen it on his person earlier, but it was here now and there was nothing she could do.

"Put down the knife, sweetheart—we both know you're not going to use it."

Hot tears formed in her eyes that she tried to blink back, but to no avail. Her chest tightened, throat constricted...she failed. God, she failed.

"Put down the knife." He shoved the barrel of the gun into her flesh harder.

She squeezed the hilt of the weapon, bit savagely at her lower lip until she tasted blood, mentally prepared herself for the blood and screams when she finally pushed the blade forward, and the shot to her head that would inevitably follow...

With a frustrated sob, she tossed knife aside and slid off of his chest. Crumpling into a heap, she waited there, head down, for him to kill her or whatever he planned to do. The fire was gone—it didn't matter anyway. Nothing mattered. Michael would put a bullet in her head and then she'd be gone too.

"Will you just shoot me and get it over with?" she whispered.

His shoes scraped on the roof as he moved to collect the knife, and then stood.

"I'm not going to shoot you," he said.

"I think maybe you should."

He said nothing as he walked away from her. Seconds later, he called her attention. "Head's up."

She glanced up to see him toss Hayden's cell phone her way.

Unable to muster the anger she felt before, she gazed down at the phone and cried as grief swept over her. She swallowed hard.

“Why don’t you open the bag and have a look at it,” he suggested.

“Why don’t you leave me the hell alone!”

“Just do it.”

Tears blurred her eyes as she pulled the plastic bag open and pulled out the phone. She turned it over gently, running her fingertips over dried bits of blood...

Her gaze settled on the keypad. It looked like new, strangely... A few of the numbers had rubbed off of Hayden’s phone—she remembered it so clearly. But not this one. Confused, she hit the power button and tried to cycle through the stored numbers, but found none.

“It’s not his?” she said suddenly, gazing up at Michael.

“No,” he said.

“But it looks like—”

“I took the description you gave me and found one on eBay.”

She looked down at the phone again, relieved but still confused. Casting the object aside, she glowered up at Michael. “What the hell—”

“I didn’t kill him, Sage.”

“But you said—”

He took a seat across from her, a few feet away. Noticeably absent were the gun and knife.

“Why, honestly, would I kill your boyfriend?” He cocked a brow with curiosity. “He gave you something to worry about, something to protect. He tied you to this world. And without him, you’re apparently left with a death wish.”

“I don’t have—”

He raised his hand and silenced her mid-sentence. “I gave you ample opportunities to kill me and a reason to do it. You failed. You had to know I’d kill you if you didn’t kill me, and still you wasted every opening, every chance I gave you. That’s what I call a death wish.

“And that can’t happen. Merri and Genevieve *need* you. When something inevitably happens again, they’ll be depending on you. You all need to have the same priorities: to fight and to live. And that’s why you need to get a handle on this.”

Get a handle on “this”...right, because that was so easy.

“You don’t understand what it’s like,” she cried. “You don’t—”

“The happiest moment of your day is usually when you first wake up,” he interrupted.

She looked up at him sharply, a bit confused and annoyed. Their gazes met, locked, and she couldn’t shake the feeling of him looking right through her, her every thought laid bare.

“Sometimes it lasts a few minutes,” he continued, “sometimes almost an hour. It’s during those moments that you don’t remember he’s dead and it’s the best feeling in the world.

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"And it's followed by the worst moment of your day. Sometimes it's a reminder, like you think of something you'd like to tell him that day, and sometimes it's just a random moment when it all comes back to you. But suddenly you remember he's gone and you won't get to see him that day, or any day, and that first remembering is always the worst."

She balled her hands into fists, digging her nails into her palms. He was right and it hurt. Hurt more than she could ever say, and him recounting it so perfectly made her relive those moments all over again.

"You spend every day pretending to be okay," he said. "Pretending you're not about to break down—pretending you're not spending every second thinking about throwing yourself off the nearest bridge. And you hate everyone around you for forcing you to keep pretending, for saying things to you about healing and the stages of grief, as if they have the slightest understanding of what it's like. For now, you can get away with mourning—people expect it from you. But within the year, you already know they'll be wondering why you're not moving on—why you're not the same as you used to be."

"And you hold it in until you're alone for the night. Then you lay awake in bed, unable to sleep, praying that when you finally drift off, you'll dream of him. And when you do, it makes waking up and dragging yourself through another day even harder."

Silence followed. While she debated how to respond, she realized her tears had stopped at some point during his talking. She couldn't will up enough energy to be sad anymore...now she just felt the loss. Empty where something of herself used to be.

"Who did you lose?" she said, her voice soft. She knew she'd hit her mark when he swallowed hard and his eyes twitched slightly, as if he fought not to look away.

"My wife," he said after a long pause. He lost an inner battle then and did end up dropping his gaze to the side. "And my son."

"What happened?" She didn't really expect him to answer her and was surprised when he did.

"She was murdered."

"And your son?" She wasn't normally this nosey, but it was difficult enough reconciling the idea of Michael not just as a husband, but also a father.

"Died in the womb. She was eight months pregnant."

A horrible feeling of dread welled in her. "It was because of us, wasn't it? Something to do with me, Gen, and Merri? That's why you're helping us? Was it the people who came after us?"

"Something like that," he said quietly.

Whether it was continued shock, empathy, or just morbid curiosity at this point, Sage didn't know for sure, but she couldn't keep at bay the desire to know more. "What was her name?"

He didn't want to answer her. She had spent enough time around him to know; it was in the annoyed tightening of his jaw, the slight purse of his lips. But for some reason, he met her eyes again anyway.

“Anne.”

“And his?”

A sigh. She half expected him to bring out the gun again. “John Michael, after my father.”

“How long ago?”

“Not as long as it feels.”

“Does it ever get easier?” she whispered, half afraid of his answer.

“That depends on who you ask.”

“I’m asking you. Everyone says time heals. I want to know if it’s true.”

He sighed heavily and shook his head. “Time doesn’t. You don’t ever actually heal. What time does is make you forget. Enough days go by and you forget more and more until it no longer plagues your thoughts. People think that means they’ve healed, but if you bring up the memory in conversation, it crashes down on them again. Most don’t get over loss.”

The thought horrified her. “I’m going to forget?”

“It’s your choice.”

“How?”

“You want it to stop hurting? Let go of all of it now. Let yourself forget. By this time next year, you’ll be better. Two years from now, you’ll have ‘moved on’ as everyone says.”

“And if I don’t want to?” God, forgetting seemed worse than the pain. Living with the hurt of remembering every day how much she missed him was preferable by far to letting it all go.

He shrugged. “Then you hold on. Fight the urge to push it out of your mind, then get used to being miserable.”

“Is that what you did? Or did you let yourself forget?”

“I don’t know anymore,” he said. “Somewhere in between at this point.”

“So...just don’t forget? That’s it?”

“Talk about him. Go over every detail you remember over and over again.”

Though her mother had repeatedly tried to get her into therapy, Sage doubted a psychiatrist would be so agreeable with the idea of talking about Hayden in the hopes of remaining miserable.

“I don’t...” Christ, it was an embarrassing thing to admit, but there seemed little point in having pride at this point. “I don’t really have anyone I talk to.”

“I figured as much. You wouldn’t have a death wish if you did.”

“I mean, I don’t think Gen or Merri get it. And it would be easier if...” She cast a sideways glance his way, hopeful but realistic about the answer he’d give her when she finally asked what weighed on her mind. “Can I talk to you? Not just about Hayden...maybe you could talk about Anne?”

She tensed, waiting for him to scoff at such an idea, but instead he studied her in silence.

“Just...just little things,” she added. “Once a day or something? I tell you something about Hayden, you tell me something about Anne?”

He’ll never agree... Just as she doubted it, though, he gave a sudden short nod.

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“For now.”

The wind picked up and Sage shivered, but had no desire to head back inside. Thankfully, Michael never suggested it.

“So...where do I start?” she asked, waiting for his instruction, as always.

“The beginning is usually a good place. Where did you meet him?”

At least that was easy; she’d been thinking about it a lot lately.

“School. Ninth grade. A business class everyone was required to take. Hayden was the co-op student, a couple years older than us. I knew his brother—Levi—from History because we were in the same group for a project. Instead of whatever accounting work we were supposed to be doing, we were discussing that other assignment. When Hayden came over, I thought he’d get us in trouble—I didn’t know at the time they were brothers. But instead he just suggested we do what we were supposed to during class time, then Levi could have everyone over after school for the History thing.”

Michael interrupted to ask her details. What did the room look like? Who was in her class? Where did she sit? What was Hayden wearing? What did he say? Eventually she let her eyes drift closed and recalled every detail she could—every sight, every smell, every sound. She couldn’t remember it all—that would be impossible—but she retrieved what she could.

And, surprisingly, she felt a greater peace than she had in months just closing her eyes and remembering.

“I showed up that night,” she said, continuing the story once she’d gone over every detail she could. “I guess I was a little early—Levi wasn’t back from basketball practice yet and the other person in our group didn’t come at all. So I sat in the kitchen to wait and Hayden kept me company.” For the first time in her life, she wished she’d kept a diary or journal. Something where she could have written down everything and reflect on it now.

The sky around them had been darkening, dusk approaching quickly now that it was late fall. But though it also grew colder, she wasn’t interested in heading back in yet. The cold, the emptiness of the roof, the distance from everything else—it was numbing. Comforting. Like Michael said, even though she didn’t go so far as to plaster on a happy face, she was always pretending to be okay—pretending it was easy holding everything in. But outside, on the roof, removed from everyone, she could drop her defenses and cry until she had no more tears if she needed to. It was a whole other world up there.

“What about Anne?” she asked, looking back at Michael and hoping he didn’t rescind on his promise to talk about his wife. “Where did you meet?”

“A party.”

His own gaze drifted to the side absently, recalling the memory. Expression unreadable, she tried to guess at what he was thinking or even feeling... The memories would of course be painful, considering she was murdered, but Sage thought at least he’d briefly look content while recalling her. Instead, he never smiled, nor did he look sad. He seemed...drained.

“There was a job offer at a school near where my brother lived,” he said. “I decided to move there and take the position.”

“You’re a teacher?”

He nodded. “Was. Briefly. I was packed, ready to move...and I got word he’d...been in an accident and killed. He’d left behind an estranged wife, but I inherited most of his estate. It was one of those small, rural towns that consist of a couple roads at most, and everyone knows one another. I moved in and a neighbour invited me to a party... and I saw Anne there.”

Sage wasn’t so bold as to press for details as he had done with her, so she waited to see if he’d continue.

He did.

“She was standing in the back of the room with a friend. The host had taken to introducing me to everyone, and eventually got to her. She was...shy. Very polite, barely made eye contact. Her friend left her at some point that night and I approached her. And we just...talked.”

Smitten at first sight, by the sound of it. Bizarre to picture Michael in such a way, but she doubted he’d go to all the trouble of lying about this for her sake. “What was she like?”

“Kinder than I have ever deserved in my life.”

“I suppose she was pretty?”

“She was to me.”

“Do you have any pictures?”

He shook his head and pulled himself to his feet. “That should suffice for today.”

Rather than argue, Sage stood and followed as he started for the hatch door.

“You were wrong about one thing you said before,” she said.

“And what was that?” He threw open the door and as he put his foot on the first rung of the ladder, he gazed up at her.

“I don’t dream of him. I try, every night, but I don’t.”

“I don’t usually dream of Anne either,” he replied with a sigh. “But I thought someone would be luckier than I’ve been.”

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After coming down from the roof, Michael had sent the private contractors home, with the instruction that they were to show up mid-morning to finish. He was paying them to do the job rather than by the hour, so they’d better hurry the hell up. Sage relaxed into their regular routine after the contractors had left, following his instructions and keeping focused far better than she had recently. He sent her home at nine, and at last the house was silent...

Even if his head wasn’t.

Glass of Jack Daniels in hand, he dropped down on the couch and took a long drink.

His gaze absently went to the sketchpad on the coffee table. Thinner and larger than the one he usually used, the sheets were eleven by fourteen inches and kept solely for the purpose of planning canvas paintings.

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He set his glass on the table, and then picked up the sketch pad. After removing the pencil stored in the spiral binding, he flipped through the first few pages.

Anne. Always Anne. Pages and pages of her.

And it wasn't the first time he'd planned a painting of her. Over and over again he'd fill a sketchbook with plans, deciding on the pose and the lighting...then when it was time to paint, he'd burn the book. Every time. He'd paint still life, landscapes, occasionally hire models, but could never even start one of her.

A sketch in a book was easy. The book could be closed and put away. Or burned, in some instances. Investing the time and energy in a painting, however, was impossible. Staring at her round dark eyes every day while he worked, struggling to match the shade of her skin...

And perhaps that was what he feared most of all. The conversation with Sage had highlighted his own guilty thoughts—the knowledge that he couldn't remember everything. Anne had been gone so long—too long. He couldn't recall every mark on her skin, every eyelash, every line on the palm of her hand... A painting would mean facing that. A sketch was about capturing generalities; an oil painting would mean details. Ones he might not remember anymore—that he might not *want* to remember anymore.

He just...he was tired. So fucking tired. He'd spent so long obsessing on these memories...and he resented it. Hated it. But no matter how he tried, he couldn't let it go.

Obsessed.

Trapped.

Fated.

He had no illusions of what Anne would think of him if she could see him now. Yet another reason for not wanting to see her portrait every day, coming alive beneath a brush he controlled. Those familiar dark eyes wouldn't be looking at the same person she once knew.

Michael closed the book and threw it to the other end of the couch. He'd burn the fucking thing tomorrow.

Leaning his head on the back of the couch, he closed his eyes and tried to empty his mind. Relaxation never came easily to him, though, so he swallowed another mouthful of his drink and waited for it to kick in. He raked his hand back through his hair. Fuck, he wished he could sleep. And not just sleep, either—drift into nothingness. Just one night with no dreams, no nightmares, no faces of regret nagging his brain. That was all he wanted at this point.

Peace. Not a lifetime of it. He didn't deserve that kind of thing. But a few hours? Jesus Christ, he'd give just about anything for that.

But even awake, he couldn't linger in quiet for long; his phone rang just then. Michael didn't answer it—didn't even glance in its direction. When the machine picked up and no one left a message, he stood and went to the fridge for another glass of Jack Daniels.

A half hour later, just as his mind neared the familiar restlessness that was his slumber, a knock sounded on his door.

Much like his phone, he didn't answer.

A second knock came, more insistent this time. The last time he'd answered the door without having the slightest desire to, Genevieve had been out there—reason enough to keep avoiding it.

Blessed silence followed, however, and for a moment he thought whoever it was had given up. And then his cell phone rang.

He pulled the phone from the coffee table. "What?" he said as he pressed it to his ear.

"Wanna answer your door?"

Krysta.

"No."

"Pretty please?"

He hung up on her.

Minutes later, she knocked again. Then she called. Then she knocked again. Alcohol amplifying his annoyance, he rose from the couch and went for the door.

A smirk played on Krysta's lips as he threw open the front door.

"What?" he asked sharply, definitely not in the mood for her games that night.

"I called but you didn't answer," she said with a slight pout that he didn't believe for a second. "I got really worried. Mind if I come in?"

"Get the fuck out of here," he said in something resembling a snarl.

"Now that's rude." She shouldered her way past him and wandered into the main room, gaze scanning the place. "So this is how the other half lives."

Her carelessness about entering his space pissed him off even more. "I said, get the fuck out of here."

She threw a haughty look over her shoulder. "And I heard you."

Christ, if he had to fucking throw her out... Annoyed, he slammed the door shut.

As she sauntered around the living room, he returned to the coffee table to get his glass, then went to retrieve the JD from the refrigerator.

She slipped off her jacket and cast it to the floor. A black blouse and tight red skirt confirmed that yes, she did own more clothes than the robes and negligees she usually lounged around her apartment in.

"I'd love a glass of wine," she said.

"Then you should go home and get some."

Sashaying past the couch, she stopped where the old kitchen table rested, turned, and pulled herself onto the edge. Her hands slid along the wood, propping her body up as she leaned back comfortably. Long bare legs dangled below.

"You're a terrible host," she informed him.

"I don't recall requesting guests." He downed another gulp of liquor.

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"Then you probably should have answered the first time I called. I play hostess very well."

"Get the hell out of here, go home, and try calling again."

"If I do, will you answer?"

"Fuck no—I'm going to bed."

"I could join you."

"Or you could leave."

"You could make me." She gave him an inviting smile.

And he knew he shouldn't go anywhere near her. Not when he was this angry. Not when she was looking at him like that.

But his feet were moving him forward, one after the other. There was something triumphant about her gaze when he reached her—as if she'd already won. And he hated her for it.

He snatched her wrist and wrenched her forward. Excitement sparkled in her expression.

"Wanna play rough tonight?" she asked. "I'm game."

"Not playing. Get out."

Krysta leaned forward, nose then lips grazing his neck, settling over his pulse. Hot breath on his skin—God, the feel of it, coupled with the Jack Daniels, made him dizzy.

"And I told you," she whispered, hooking one leg around his. "You can make me."

As he glanced down at her, she lifted her lips and kissed him hard, simultaneously grinding her hips against him.

If it were just a quick fuck, he'd be fine with it. But that wasn't how she worked; it was like a game of chess. Always was, and every move mattered. It wasn't just about giving in, but who gave in first. Who had power over whom. Who had the control.

He could drag her out of the house and lock the door, but that wouldn't really be winning. Not for her.

His hands going to her thighs, fingers splayed and pressing hard into her flesh, he pushed her skirt up until it bunched at her waist. Little surprise she didn't wear panties.

In response, she reached between them to grab him roughly, and she grinned with satisfaction at finding him hard.

"Still want me to leave?" she asked as she yanked down the zipper of his jeans.

"In due time," he replied.

Her chuckle was cut short by one hard thrust, and he was in her. Warm, wet, she clutched him back and rocked her hips forward. Legs wrapped around him. Elbows hit the table as she leaned back. Eyes partially shut, still a self-satisfied smile on her face.

But he kept distanced. Watched her. Read her expressions. Pushed into her again and again until she was arching, moaning, clawing his arms, and then finally climaxing.

He pulled out of her abruptly as she came, still painfully hard but not willing to do anything about it. Zipping up his pants, he took a step back.

She blinked a few times as she felt him move away, then her eyes shot open, sending an accusing glower his way. "Michael—"

"Get out," he said coolly.

She sat up again, graceful despite the lewd position, but didn't move from the table. Instead, she gave him a sexy grin, apparently not yet realizing she'd lost.

"You don't really expect me to leave you like that, now do you?"

It was still about power—always about power. Annoyed that he hadn't been at her beck and call earlier, she showed up at his place to prove a point: she still had some kind of power over him. She expected to get what she wanted, and what she wanted was someone unable to resist her. And he wouldn't give it to her.

Krysta wanted to play games? Fine; cold rejection before he reached his own release, making the whole thing resemble a pity fuck. She was left sexually satiated, sure, but her ego bruised.

Checkmate.

"Get out," he said again.

Watching the realization that he was serious play out on her face almost made him grin, but he held it back.

She parted her lips to speak, but closed them again, thinking

Michael gestured to the door.

Krysta was swift to throw on a mask of indifference, but not so quick that he missed the change in expression.

"You know," she said, her tone warning. "I may have to rethink this arrangement of ours if this is the way you're going to be."

"Stay the fuck out of my house then."

One emotion she rarely showed was anger, however, and this was no exception. She stood casually, pretending to be unbothered, and straightened her skirt.

"Next time you're over," she called as she walked past him to pick up her jacket, "I think we're going to have to teach you some manners."

"Close the door on your way out."

She did, but not before casting a quick glance at him over her shoulder. A knowing wink and she left for good.

He locked the door behind her, finished his drink, and then decided on a cold shower before bed.

Being near Krysta, he mused, was clearly playing with fire. He had no illusions it was anything but dangerous; though far from any of the places he used to call "home," he still had sources, and all of them warned she wasn't to be trusted and was *never* to be crossed.

Not that he worried. Michael could name a couple dozen other people in the general area he'd consider more worth his concern, and even then, they paled in comparison to others he'd known in his life. For now, she was an

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occasional distraction. Though the idea she could become a threat was always in the front of his mind, he didn't trouble himself with it.

Michael would cross that bridge when he came to it.

~~*

As night fell, the ground froze and frost grasped the remaining greenery in its death grip.

Sage hopped the cemetery fence with ease and followed a familiar trail through the rows of graves. The farther she traveled, the more her once-brisk step slowed.

As many times as she'd been there, she still wasn't used to seeing his gravestone.

A line of stark white, granite markers met her at the back of the cemetery, and though his was near the end, newer ones had been added since his death.

Life moved on. Death continued its rampage... And yet she felt frozen in place, stuck in time in a harsh world without him.

Face to face now with the marker of his brief life, the date of his death staring grimly at her, Sage slid into a kneel. The cold ground bit through her pants to her knees.

She reached out to the earth gingerly, fingers trembling as they touched the ground. He was there, sort of, buried beneath, rotting in a box.

Gone.

The trembling moved into her hand and up her arm, claiming her as it went, until her entire body wracked with sobs.

Some days, it didn't seem real, as if her brain refused to accept that he was gone. However, other days—like that night—it was all hyper-real. Every moment, every breath, every step...she felt it. Felt him gone. Felt physically sick with the loss.

"I miss you, baby," she whispered, knowing he couldn't hear her—knowing he'd never hear her again. "I miss you..."

Everything hurt...but she wouldn't give it up; would never let it go. The memories were all she had now.

All she had...

Gone.

Nine

Something pointy and hard stabbed into Genevieve's side—an elbow, to be exact. She sent a sharp look to Levi, who sat at her side in the school stairwell.

“What?” she hissed.

“You’re staring,” he whispered. His gaze went across from them to Peyton briefly and pointedly, then back to Gen.

“So?” she whispered back, leaning close and muttering directly in his ear. “I’m allowed to. She’s, like, my girlfriend.” And who could really care that she was staring at her girlfriend? Besides, she hadn’t even been meaning to stare at Peyton; it was more a general, gaze-off-into-space-blankly kind of thing that she tended to do early in the morning when she waited for the bell to signal her first class would be starting. She couldn’t be faulted for that.

Of course, there was the small matter of her not being certain Peyton was really her girlfriend. She had left the dance Friday night thinking she probably was. She tried calling her Sunday afternoon, but apparently Peyton was busy and according to her mom, couldn’t come to the phone. Monday rolled around, and everything seemed like it had been before the dance. Now Tuesday, Gen had another day of friendly smiles, but basically nothing more. There had been a moment of hand-grazing at her locker yesterday afternoon. It sort of seemed to count. But otherwise, it was as if their discussion outside the school that night hadn’t actually occurred, and on more than one occasion Gen wondered if she had briefly gone crazy.

The familiar ring of her cell phone interrupted her thoughts and she pulled it from her bag. A text message read, “Outside. Now. Bring M.” She recognized the caller as Michael.

With a sigh, she glanced at her watch. Homeroom was in about two minutes, and it seemed a likely bet that whatever he wanted, they wouldn’t be back in time.

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She responded with, “F U!” Staring expectantly at the screen, she waited, knowing he probably wouldn’t leave it at that. Sure enough, seconds later another message came.

“NOW.”

Wow, all caps. He must be mad.

“What is it?” Levi asked, noticing her frown at the message.

Though in conversation with Peyton about something at the time of the call, Merri seemed to have a sixth sense about things and immediately glanced Gen’s way to follow the exchange.

“My stalker,” she replied with a sigh.

“Is someone bothering you again, Gen?”

She winced, realizing she’d forgotten he had been concerned before when Michael originally did stalk her.

“Is it that girl from Geography?” Merri cut in, once more with one of her brilliant lies before Gen could come up with something.

“Yeah.”

“She missed a class and Gen gave her the notes, now she’s thinks Gen’s her friend and whines to her about all her problems.” She gave Levi an easy smile, then turned to Gen. “She need us to comfort her over some tragedy?”

“Probably...” Gen gathered her bag and stood. Merri followed, and Gen sent an apologetic look to Levi and Peyton. “We should be back soon. She might have locked herself in the bathroom threatening suicide though, so no promises.”

Homeroom bell rang and the stairwell filled with students, giving Genevieve and Meredith an opportunity to disappear into the crowd and towards the front doors.

“What’s up?” Merri asked.

“It’s Bosley,” Gen muttered. “Apparently he has an assignment or something.” They stepped outside and Gen was glad she hadn’t dropped her coat off at her locker. “Also, while I appreciate you making up stories for me—’cause you’re really good at it and all—next time you should probably go with something more convincing than me giving someone class notes. Everyone knows I don’t take notes.”

“Good point—I’ll keep that in mind.”

Idling in the bus zone outside of the school was Michael’s convertible. The roof up, Gen couldn’t make out who was with him, but someone definitely sat in the backseat.

“Did he tell you what’s up?” Gen asked as she and Merri walked to the car.

“No. Not a clue what this is about.”

Reaching the car, Gen stooped and stuck her head into the open passenger window. It was Sage in the back, staring blankly at the seat in front of her. Michael looked annoyed to still be waiting for them.

“You know,” Gen started, “part of the fun of being a slacker is that I *do* show up at school, I just don’t do anything. I can’t get away with skipping class all the time *and* not doing homework. It’s one or the other.”

“Get in the car.”

She tried to protest, but that didn’t get her anywhere. A brief argument followed, in which Merri insisted on taking the back so Gen could have more legroom. Finally seated in the car, Gen looked back and forth between Sage and Michael, hoping someone would give details as to what they were doing.

“So?” she said at last when it seemed they wouldn’t. “Where are we going? Road trip somewhere? ‘Splainy, please.”

“Toronto,” Michael said at last.

“That’s boring. Why there?”

He met her eyes, and shifted the car into gear. “You’re going to meet David Shaw in the hopes he can tell me more about The Immortal.”

While the car sped out of the parking lot and toward the highway, Gen didn’t bother to glance back at the school, and therefore failed to see Levi watching the exchange with curiosity from outside the school.

Shaw lived alone in the heart of the city. By the time they left the highway, a fine sprinkling of snow had settled on the pavement, making the already congested city streets more frenzied. Taxis whirled in sudden u-turns in the middle of the road to collect their fares, throngs of people poured across the road when the lights changed, and the few bicyclers seemed in serious peril of getting run over.

“So this guy knows we’re coming, right?” Gen asked as Michael pulled the car into the visitor lot at an upscale condominium building. He’d said little about Shaw during the long drive, and now she’d started to worry they were there to ambush some poor old man.

“You did talk to him, right?” Merri prompted when Michael didn’t answer.

“I phoned him last night.” Michael left the car without another word and Gen exchanged a worried glance with Merri.

“And?” Gen said as she got out of the car after him.

“And he thinks we’re coming tomorrow afternoon, so he’s probably packing to leave the country today.”

“What if he left the country last night then, if he’s in such a hurry?”

“He wouldn’t,” Michael said.

“You can’t know that—”

“He’s responsible, and even spooked, he wouldn’t leave immediately. He’d take at least a day or so to make proper arrangements.”

“How could you possibly—”

“I do my homework.”

Gen stopped near the car while the others moved toward the building, and crossed her arms in annoyance. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Would you hurry the fuck up!” he snapped.

She picked up her pace until she trailed Merri and Sage by just a few steps.

This isn’t going to go well, Gen thought as they made their way into the building. She, Sage, and Merri waited back a few steps while Michael spoke to

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the doorman. God knows what he might have said to him, but for some reason the group were let into the building. If Gen had to venture a guess, it involved bribery of some sort, but she didn't want to know either way—it would just make her an accessory.

Michael wasted little time looking around, instead leading them directly towards the elevator. He didn't hesitate once they reached the fifth floor to take them to Shaw's condo. Much like the time they went to Krysta's, Michael seemed to know exactly where he was going.

"You scoped the place out first, didn't you?" Gen asked as it dawned on her. "Same with Krysta's."

"It would seem foolish to walk into a building with any of you without knowing the place first," he said.

Even stranger still, Gen realized that must have meant he checked out Krysta's place before they arrived there because he was looking out for her. Somehow that seemed even more unsettling than his death threats.

They reached a door near the middle of the hallway where Michael stopped to knock. Light shone through the peephole, but it went black as someone stepped in front of it.

When no one answered, Michael knocked again.

"I know you're in there, Shaw," he said. "We're not leaving."

A chain rattled and the deadbolt snapped. Michael's hand moved to his side, reaching for something in his jacket pocket, and Gen shuddered to think what weapon might be waiting for the person on the other side of the door if it wasn't whom Michael expected. He'd said he checked out the building before, but she supposed anyone could be in the condo waiting for them.

The door opened a few inches. An older man, easily in his fifties, stood within. In a word, Gen would call him "refined." He wore black slacks and a white, pinstriped shirt with the sleeves rolled carefully up, as if he'd been working. Thinning salt-and-pepper hair topped his head, cut closely to his scalp. Though four strangers stood in his hallway, and he eyed Michael suspiciously, he didn't slam the door immediately, didn't shout at them. He seemed the sort of man that would never let anything—even Michael's attitude—get in the way of manners. Dark eyes were focused on Michael and Gen couldn't determine if he even realized there were three other people in the hallway.

"You're early," the man, who Gen surmised was David Shaw, said curtly.

Michael tilted his head to the side to look past Shaw. "I see moving boxes. Going somewhere?"

"I think you already know the answer to that," Shaw said. "Now, I'd prefer you leave before I contact security." He made a move to close the door and Gen had a feeling that the situation would get ugly real quick with Michael handling things.

"I'm sorry." Gen darted in front of Michael and gave Shaw a sweet smile. "He," she gestured over her shoulder to Michael, "is really rude and never should have barged in on you like this. Maybe you could talk to me, Mer, and Sage, and we can leave him to brood out in the hallway?"

Shaw regarded her in silence for a moment, then cracked a grin. "Which one are you?"

"I am like the world's *worst* witch, also known as Genevieve." She stepped to the right and pointed out the others. "There's Sage, the Warrior, and Merri, the Seer. And of course, you've met our dear Michael." She patted Michael on the shoulder and any other time she was certain he'd snap at her, but he seemed to be on his best behaviour for Shaw.

David Shaw stepped back from the door and gestured inside the condo. "Come inside." His gaze flickered to Michael and his smile faltered. "All of you, I suppose."

After Shaw ushered them inside, he snapped shut two bolts on the door, locking his guests in, and then took their jackets and hung them in the notably empty front closet. He then offered tea and coffee, showing nothing but politeness to a group that had all but broken down his door. Merri offered to help and followed him into the spacious kitchen not far from the entrance, while the others continued into the living room.

"I suppose you're going to bitch at me for that," Gen said immediately. "But might I remind you before we start that at least it got us in the door?"

"You have proven yourself useful, for once," Michael conceded. "And you said about the most intelligent thing you have to date."

"Which was?"

"That you're the world's worst witch."

"Bite me." She dropped down on the cream coloured, sectional sofa.

"When he returns," Michael said in a low voice, "if he decides to be difficult, you can try to coax more information out of him."

"Aw, you promise?" she said with a heavy helping of sarcasm to her voice.

"He likes you," Michael continued. "He may be more willing to talk to you than me. Think you're capable of leading the conversation?"

Gen stuck her tongue out at him in response and he must have taken it as a yes because he didn't bother pressing her for confirmation.

While they waited, she took a moment to absorb the high-end condo. The first thing that struck her were the shelves that lined the wall opposite the couch. Half were still filled with books, while piles of boxes nearby presumably held the rest. She couldn't make out any of the titles, but Thad had said Shaw taught Philosophy, so she figured that was a subject predominantly featured. The décor itself had very clean lines and eclectic influences. Boxes, however, were stacked in all corners of the living room, most sealed and waiting to be shipped off to God knows where.

He really must have been spooked, she thought. *Michael was right—he plans to at least leave town, if not the country.*

Sage sat next to her on the couch, noticeably as far away as possible, while Michael occupied the nearby armchair. Several minutes of silence passed, and then Merri and Shaw returned from the kitchen. Merri set a tray of mugs on the coffee table while Shaw poured tea.

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“So what, precisely,” Shaw began as he took the chair opposite the girls, “would you like me to tell you?”

“Everything you know about the woman you knew as Natalya,” Michael said.

Shaw drew a cup of tea to his lips and took a sip. “That would take a considerable amount of time.”

“We aren’t going anywhere.”

“Um, I gotta get home sometime today,” Gen spoke up, in part because she meant it, and also because Michael had finally given her an opportunity to be of use. She hoped Shaw would respond to her. “So how about you just tell us about when you met her?”

“That was when I was merely twenty years old,” Shaw began. “I was in university and I saw her at a bus stop. I was...drawn to her.”

“Thad said something like that,” Gen said. “What do you mean ‘drawn’? Like a pull?”

“I mean it almost literally. My body was turning toward her without my being aware of it, and when I saw her, I just started walking. She came home with me, we spent the afternoon in my bed, and she told me who she was.

“An immortal. And I didn’t believe her—not then, not right away—but I listened. She’d been on Earth thousands of years, seen the rise and fall of civilizations, and always she sought me.”

“Because you guys knew each other in your past life?” Gen asked and Shaw nodded.

“So she told me, many times. I don’t remember, though. Never recalled anything about it myself, although she was able to tell me the details as if it were yesterday. She stayed with me for a few years, and then vanished one day. She used to warn me that she didn’t wish to interfere with my life for long, and apparently she meant it.” Given the subject matter, Gen thought it might have been painful for him to bring up such memories, but instead he recited his words as if they were practiced, the sadness in his eyes never quite reaching his voice. Detached. “The last time I saw her was over thirty years ago, and that is why I cannot help you, Mr. Parris.”

“You’ll have to do better than that,” Michael said. “You’re the only person I know of who’s ever actually seen her—”

“I don’t know where she is,” Shaw gestured to the handful of framed photos on the wall to his left. Gen made out smiling faces; a younger version of Shaw and a few children. “I tried looking for her for over a year after she left, but came up with nothing. I eventually married, raised a family, and tried to put this business out of my head. Maybe you should move on as well.”

“That isn’t an option,” Michael insisted. “I need to speak with her—you know that.”

“I know that if Natalya doesn’t *want* to be found, then she *won’t* be found. You will have to wait until she’s ready.”

“Do you have any photographs?”

“None.”

Gen couldn't tell if Shaw was being obstinate because he really didn't have any answers, or he just enjoyed tormenting Michael. Either way, she found the entire exchange amusing; it wasn't often Michael didn't get what he wanted.

Surprisingly, rather than argue with Shaw some more, Michael turned Genevieve's way. "Give me your bag."

"No! Wait, why?"

Michael glanced at Shaw with a touch of contempt. "Because we're not leaving here until I at least know what she looks like. Give me your sketchbook and a pencil."

Gen grudgingly dug out the requested items, but not before pointing out that he should be more prepared next time.

While Michael pulled his chair next to Shaw's and flipped open the book to a blank sheet, Gen leaned back on the couch and turned to Sage.

"You look bored," she observed. "Why'd you let him drag you along?"

Sage shrugged. "It was this or sit at home."

Though Michael hadn't yet told her if he'd spoken to Sage about Hayden or not, Gen did detect a subtle change in her. She wasn't happier, she didn't seem at all friendlier...but she seemed more relaxed. She actually made eye contact with people now and then and would speak without waiting for someone to speak to her first. If Michael did help her in some small way, then perhaps he wasn't all bad.

"This may take awhile," Shaw directed to the girls, breaking Gen from her thoughts. "If you'd like to go for a walk, there's a café just down the block."

"Sounds like a plan," Gen said as she stood.

"You're not going anywhere," Michael said without taking his eyes from the page.

"But—"

"Sit down."

She sank back down on the couch to sulk. Merri, however, stood and looked carefully at Michael.

"I was going to head to the smoke shop for a second," she said.

Michael nodded without even a glance in her direction.

Genevieve half expected her to argue a case to bring Gen and Sage along, but instead she slipped on her worn winter jacket and left without a word.

Nice someone gets his unwavering trust and loyalty, Gen thought bitterly. She could kid herself and pretend that he needed her there to help him nag poor Shaw for things, but the truth was Merri always got special treatment.

Maybe she'll at least bring some snacks back with her...

~~*

Meredith sat on the subway, tapping her foot nervously. She had a feeling Michael knew she wasn't heading to the smoke shop, but he didn't try to stop her. As time went by, and she neared the point where she'd be getting off the subway, she almost wished she had just hit the store and gone back to Shaw's. If

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there had been the slightest transit delay, she might have chickened out, but the TTC was on time, so off she went.

The subway paused at her stop and she got off with a few dozen other passengers and walked through the underground paths and up the stairs until she reached the surface. She caught the nearest bus, then ten minutes later found herself at her destination: an apartment building not far from the university.

While she helped Shaw in the kitchen earlier, she had found herself requesting the address even before she knew the words had left her mouth. He didn't ask why, didn't press for details, but simply told her what she wanted to know.

Now, here she was.

Merri waited outside for a few minutes, passing the time with a cigarette, which eased her nerves considerably. After stamping the butt out and deciding it was too cold to stand out there any longer, she at last went inside.

The stairwell took her to the second floor and after following a corridor, she found herself before a door. Hesitation-filled moments passed, a deep breath followed, and then she raised her hand and knocked.

There were very, very few times in her life that she could recall having actual butterflies in her stomach, but at that moment she definitely did. Just as she felt her courage dwindle and the desire to run beckoned to her, the door opened.

Thad Kincaid stood in the doorway. Merri couldn't decide whether she was relieved he was home or not.

"Hi," she said with caution, and attempted to gauge his reaction to her presence. He wasn't smiling, but he hadn't slammed the door yet. *Seems like a step in the right direction...* "I was kind of in the neighbourhood."

"Michael took you guys to see Shaw?"

"Yeah, they're back at his condo. I'm playing hooky."

"Look." His grip tightened on the door as if he was about to shut it. "I've got a paper due and I'm swamped—"

"Please don't close the door—"

"—so I should probably get back—"

"Can I be honest with you?" she interrupted.

"I'd prefer that over lying, but it seems a little late now."

That stung. She swallowed hard. "I'm..." Nothing seemed more difficult than forcing her thoughts into words, and for once she wished she had more practice with it. "I'm not used to *nice* guys. And it kind of freaked me out, so I was subconsciously sabotaging things. It was stupid—I was stupid. I apologize. And in the interest of keeping with the honesty thing, I'd really like you to give me another chance and let me inside, 'cause my shoes are wet from the snow."

His gaze slid down to her torn running shoes and he didn't yet smile. "You should probably invest in boots."

"That did occur to me on the way over here when I stepped into a puddle of slush."

“So you’d like to come in just because your shoes are wet?” His tone at least seemed a bit lighter. Merri took that as a positive sign.

“Well, I’m hoping for some activities that involve nudity as well, but I’ll take what I can get.”

“Now you’re speaking my language.” He was guarded still, she could tell, but he seemed to be softening. He stepped back so she could come inside. “And you’re lucky you’re cute. I really wouldn’t forgive you if you were ugly, unless you brought a friend to participate in the naked time.”

“I’ll keep that in mind in case I’m ever disfigured in an accident and in need of your forgiveness.” She shucked off her coat in the tiny apartment corridor and slipped off her shoes at the door.

Thad paced down the hall toward the kitchen at the back of the apartment. “Want something warm to drink? There’s really bad cappuccino or—”

“Coffee’s good,” she said as she followed.

A strange feeling hit her suddenly, and she blinked a few times as her vision blurred. Fear. A gasp of horror sounded in her right ear. Thad’s apartment disappeared, and wherever she was suddenly standing, it was dark, like night. Pavement beneath her feet. Something on the ground in front of her...shoes, legs, a torso...

A body...

Life had given her a lot of practice at looking calm to those around her when a random vision hit her, but she lagged behind in the hallway while Thad was still talking to her in the kitchen. He turned to see what delayed her.

“Merri?” His voice sounded distant, but she held on to it and tried to pull herself back to reality.

Not today...any other day, but not today... She reached out until her hand hit the wall beside her and she braced herself there while she took a few deep breaths.

“Merri?”

She glanced up as the world cleared once more to find Thad at her side.

“You okay?”

Nodding, she tried to smile while ignoring the icy chills rolling up and down her back.

“Did you see something?”

She’d almost forgotten that he knew who she was, so there seemed little point in lying. Still, she’d rather not give him any of the details. “Just a flash of something—happens all the time. I’m glad it was here and not on the subway, though, ‘cause it tends to creep people out.”

“You’re sure you’re okay?” he asked again, reaching out to trace the curve of her jaw.

Relief washed over her at his touch. “I think I will be.”

~~*

An hour passed with Michael hunched over the sketchbook, taking directions from Shaw regarding Natalya’s appearance. Sage pulled a book from

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her bag and read in silence, while Gen fidgeted in her seat and whined plenty. Shaw occasionally engaged her in conversation, until Michael interrupted to gain more details for the sketch.

After a while, Genevieve stood to stretch her legs by walking around the room. She stopped at the window to gaze outside, and then turned back to the group. “Mer’s been gone awhile. Isn’t anyone worried?”

“I believe she went to visit a mutual acquaintance,” Shaw said.

“Huh?”

“Kincaid,” Michael filled in.

“Isn’t she the sly one. That’s good, though—I thought they were totally cute together.”

“Why don’t you think in your head rather than with your mouth?” Michael said without taking his gaze from the paper.

He heard her wandering his way and his body tensed with irritation.

“Oh my god,” she said with a gasp as she leaned over his shoulder.

“What?” He glanced up to see her blue eyes fixed on the dark haired beauty Shaw had been describing. “Do you know her?”

Gen shook her head. “No, but that’s, like, really good. I mean...God, that talent is totally wasted on you, ‘cause you’re just such a prick.”

“Go sit down.”

Gen complied.

At last, Shaw looked over the final drawing and nodded. “That is how I remember her. Of course, her hair could be different now, but I wouldn’t forget that face.”

Michael studied the picture. Taking in all of the woman’s features and allowing for minor errors Shaw might have made, he was certain he’d never seen her before. She would no doubt be drawn to Newhaven at some point if she hadn’t been already, however, so he could run it past his contacts later and see if anyone recognized her.

“I don’t think there’s anything else useful I can tell you,” Shaw said, a not-so-subtle request for them to get the hell out of his condo.

“Sage, Genevieve, take the dishes into the kitchen,” he called to the girls. They did so without complaint, leaving Michael alone with Shaw.

“Did she ever talk about the others?” Michael asked, studying Shaw’s reaction. He would have liked to have Merri there, to at least tell if Shaw was withholding something, but it hadn’t occurred to him at the time to ask her to stay.

“Only in the context that they were out there somewhere. Nothing about the future—that wasn’t her way. As you can imagine, being who she is, she was very much about the past. I think we’d all be better off if she could let it go, but that hasn’t happened yet. Please remember, Michael, that it does no one good to spend so much energy on something that once was.”

“A man once said that very same thing to me,” Michael said.

“Oh?”

“And I slit his throat for it.”

"Well, I suppose it is in my favour that Natalya would make you suffer an eternity if you ever laid a hand on me."

"Might be a way to get her out of hiding."

"I wouldn't advise going about it that way. Besides, you haven't decided whether or not you still have a use for me, and you are much more patient and pragmatic about such things now than in your younger days."

Michael swallowed down the lump in his throat. Granted, he figured Shaw would look into him a bit...but not to that extent. "Been doing some research?"

"I wouldn't let you in my home otherwise. And you can't move far in this world without the information making the rounds, which is why I didn't want you here."

"Are you leaving after we go?"

Shaw shrugged. "I wouldn't tell you either way."

Gen and Sage returned to the living room then, and Michael handed the sketchbook to its owner.

"Should we go get Merri?" Gen asked as she packed up her messenger bag.

Shaw went to the small desk in the corner where his phone sat and jotted something down on a small card. He handed it to Michael. "That's Thaddeus's address, which I gave to the girl earlier."

"Thank you for seeing us," Gen said brightly.

Shaw smiled genuinely in response. "Just promise me one thing.." His went to eyes Michael for a moment. "Once your powers are in full force, knock some sense into this one for me."

"With pleasure."

"Mr. Parris," Shaw said as the group was leaving the condo.

Michael held behind in the doorway and looked back at the older man.

"Remember, I have nothing to gain by telling you this...but let *it* go."

Michael ignored Shaw's words. "We'll be in touch."

~~*

Thad's room in the small apartment he shared with a few others seemed little more than a large closet, but it was still nicer than Merri's place, so she didn't complain. Presently, she was wrapped up in a flannel sheet, stretched out on the futon mattress he kept directly on the floor and staring at the ceiling.

"Pizza, ma'am?"

She propped herself up on her elbows and grinned as Thad Kincaid returned with a plate of reheated pizza and a couple of cans of pop in hand. He kicked the bedroom door shut behind him and then dropped onto the mattress next to her.

"Now, you are limited to what was in the fridge that looked edible. I'd order a fresh one, but I'd like to be able to pay rent this month."

"Tough life of a college boy?"

"You know it."

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The front door opened then closed, and a voice called from the hallway in a decidedly feminine voice, “You home, Thad?”

“Yes. And busy.”

“You live with a girl?” Merri asked in a low voice, brow raised in question.

“No, I live with two guys and one of them has a girlfriend who lives with us.”

“So you live with a girl.”

“Yeah. Orgies are kept to a minimum, though—only on statutory holidays.”

He settled next to her, placed the plate on the floor by the bed, and then flopped his arm over her stomach and drew her back down. Leaning over her with a grin, he pressed his lips to her forehead. “I’m glad you came by.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“You know, I still don’t get why you like me,” she said, as it honestly did baffle her on more than one occasion.

“It isn’t obvious?” He kissed the tip of her nose. “It’s totally ‘cause you put out.”

“Ah, it all makes sense now,” she said with a giggle.

Late lunch forgotten, he bent his head down and kissed her deeply, dragging the sheet down and capturing her breast in one warm hand.

A phone rang in the other room, but stopped after two rings. Moments later Thad’s housemate called his name.

“Still busy,” he replied between kisses.

“It’s someone looking for a girl named Merri.”

With a sigh, he rose and cracked the bedroom door open a few inches to get the telephone receiver. Merri drew the sheet back up over her chest and accepted the phone from his outstretched hand.

“Yeah?” she said with a sigh.

“Funny, I didn’t dial the corner store,” Gen said on the other line.

“You leaving now?”

“We’re outside Thad’s building.”

Merri drew herself onto her knees and peered out the window at the head of the bed. Below, she saw Michael’s car parked on the street.

“I can see that.”

Genevieve, seated in the passenger side, leaned forward to look out the windshield and waved as she spotted Merri.

“Mer?” she said.

“Yeah?”

“What happened to your shirt?”

“I’m hanging up now, Gen.”

“Wait, don’t you need a ride?”

Merri glanced back at Thad, who seemed to guess the reason for the phone call.

“If you stay, we can hit a movie before I take you home,” he offered.

That sealed it for Merri.

“See you tomorrow, Gen.”

~~*

“Merri’s got a boyfriend,” Gen sang as she hung up her cell phone. She clasped her hands together in delight. “I’m so happy for them. They were so adorable at the club and I’m pretty sure she’s been thinking about calling him a lot after that fight, whatever it was about.”

She caught Sage’s sad gaze in the rearview mirror and immediately regretted her words. It was probably weird for her, seeing couples like that.

“She’s not coming,” Gen continued, though Michael seemed to guess as much as he started the car again. “So I guess we can head home. And whaddya know, but I’ve once again missed all my classes. I’m so going to fail because of you.”

Michael didn’t say anything and instead kept his gaze on the road. When Gen realized they weren’t heading back the way they came, she looked around in alarm.

“Where are we going? That’s not the highway.”

“We have to make a stop,” was all he said. She was pretty tired of him being cryptic like that, but she was used to it. As they drove, they passed signs that proclaimed they neared the airport. With any luck, Michael would be the one getting on a plane, travelling one way.

“I’ll be back shortly,” he said as he parked the car. “Don’t go anywhere.” Though he left the keys in the ignition when he exited the vehicle, Gen only briefly considered stealing his car. She was a terrible driver, after all; best not to kill them both.

“What do you think is going on?” Gen turned to face Sage.

Sage shrugged.

“So are you going back to Michael’s later?”

“Probably.”

“You’re there like every day?”

“Usually.”

“Are you actually learning anything new, or is it just Michael beating you up?”

“I’m learning plenty of things,” Sage replied, her tone slightly sharp. Gen wouldn’t be deterred, however; she didn’t know how long Michael would be gone and in the meantime desired a little conversation.

“Like...what?”

Sage sighed. “Like patience, concentration, and balance—the fundamentals of many things, which is more than I can say for you.”

“I’ll have you know I learned a new spell recently that Mer and I have been working on.”

“And does Michael know this?”

“Duh, of course not. It’s a defensive spell and I might have to use it on him someday.”

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"Let's see it, then."

"Nuh-uh, you first."

"What do you want me to do?" Sage asked. "Punch you?"

"Um, no," Gen said quickly, 'cause she figured Sage just *might* smack her. "But think of something impressive. I'm gonna do magic for Christ's sake, so it has to be as impressive as that."

"Impressive like a candle going out?"

"*Ha ha.*"

Sage thought for a moment, then nodded. "Okay, I've got something. Can you put the roof down?"

It took Gen a moment to figure out the controls, but eventually she was able to get the convertible top down.

"Okay," Genevieve said. "Impress me."

Sage pulled herself up onto the seat and then placed one hand on the frame and the other on the back of the driver's seat. She lifted herself slowly, relying on the strength of her arms, and twisted her body so her head face downward and legs rose toward the sky.

"Not impressed yet." Gen yawned for effect.

"Just...wait." Sage breathed out, focusing on her balance. She shifted her weight onto one hand and straightened her arms. At a snail's pace, she took her hand from the back of the seat and stretched it out beside her so she balanced on just once hand. The wind picked up, but she maintained the position.

"Okay, that's impressive."

"So what's your new spell?" Sage asked, still not changing her position.

Gen closed her eyes and rehearsed the simple spell a few times in her mind. Comfortable with the words, she whispered the incantation, breathing power into the phrase. She opened her eyes again in time to see Sage topple into the backseat and yelp.

"Oh my God, are you okay?"

"What did you do?" Sage sputtered as she sat up again. "I couldn't move, I couldn't—"

"It binds the person I direct it at," Gen said. "But I can't hold it for more than a second. It's the kind of thing I'll be able to do to like a bad guy or Levi when he's bugging me. It'll give me time to get away. What thinks?"

"Some warning next time would be great."

Gen couldn't help but chuckle, and after a few moments Sage joined in.

"Get in the backseat," Michael barked from behind them.

"Why," Gen began, but as she turned, she realized he wasn't alone.

A blond man in his late thirties stood behind him, a carry-on bag over one narrow shoulder and suitcase in hand. Light blue eyes twinkling, the guy flashed her a grin, but she hadn't decided yet if she should return it, being that he was a friend of Michael's.

"Aw, did you make a friend? I mean, one that's not a skanky Satanist?"

He gave her a look, suggesting he wouldn't even bicker with her that afternoon, and with a sigh she unbuckled her seatbelt and climbed in the back next to Sage.

Michael took the guy's luggage, and while he stowed it in the trunk, his friend got in the passenger seat.

"You'll have to tell me more about the skanky Satanist later," the guest leaned over and whispered to her, a light Scottish accent to his words. Fine lines crinkled around his eyes and the corners of his mouth with his amusement.

"Skank pretty much sums it up," she said just as Michael got in the car.

After putting the convertible top back up, they were soon on the road again.

"So...who's this again?" Gen asked when it seemed Michael wouldn't be making any introductions.

"Finn O'Shea," Michael replied.

"Just Finn, love," the guy said. He met her gaze in the rearview mirror and smiled. "And you would be?"

Gen introduced both herself and Sage, leaving out the "witch" and "warrior" part, as she didn't know who he was or what exactly he knew about Michael.

The car passengers were fairly silent travelling back to Newhaven. Michael dropped Finn off at his place first, let Gen return to the roomy front seat, and then drove to Sage's.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he told her as she got out. Gen thought Sage might have protested not going over that night, but ever the obedient one, she got out without a word.

"I can't take it anymore," Gen said as he drove towards her house. "Who's your friend? How did you ever actually make a friend? Does he eat puppies or something?"

"Not to my knowledge and I've known him for a few years."

"Then who is he?"

Michael stopped the car in front of her house. "Give me the sketch of Natalya."

Genevieve did so, but not without reminding him she wasn't letting him change the subject. She tore the sheet from the book and handed it to him. In exchange, he gave her the card with Thad's address.

"What's this for?" she asked. She turned it over to see it was a business card with Shaw's contact information, including an email address and cell phone number.

"Keep in touch with him," Michael advised. "Let me know if he tells you anymore about Natalya, or if he does in fact leave the country."

"I'm not doing your dirty work for you—"

"This isn't for me. It's for the three of you. Don't argue."

"I'll tell you what Shaw tells me if you tell me who Finn is."

Her phone rang suddenly and she snatched it out of her bag. Peyton's number greeted her excited gaze.

"Hold on, I've gotta get this," she began.

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“Just get out of the car—”

“Just a sec!” She answered the call and greeted Peyton, ignoring his glare.

“Missed you at school today,” Peyton said.

Those words coming from her gave Gen a little thrill to hear. “I know, I’m sorry. I had to help out this...” She sent a sideways glance at an annoyed Michael. “This really useless guy needed my help with something, and I’m just such a saint that I couldn’t say no.”

“Would you get out of the damn car?” Michael snapped, but she waved him off. Still, she figured she’d better speed things along.

“Hey, what are you doing tomorrow night?” she asked Peyton.

“Busy with family stuff.”

“Oh.” Damn. Hope she’s not just blowing me off. “Thursday?”

“I’m free.”

“Wanna come over for dinner?” Gen held her breath for a moment while waiting Peyton’s response.

“Sure!”

“Okay, I’ll catch you after school then...but I really gotta go right now. See you tomorrow.” She hung up and returned her attention to Michael. “Sorry, but that was my girlfriend. Did I tell you I have a girlfriend? ‘Cause I do. Her name’s Peyton.”

“I still fail to care. Get out.”

“Anyway, I still want to know who Finn is. And I’m not leaving ‘til you start talking.”

Michael clearly didn’t want to tell her, but eventually he spoke. “He’s a medium.”

“He sees ghosts?”

“Communicates with them.”

“And is this purely a social visit or are you expecting someone to die?”

“I asked him to come here for Sage.”

“You mean...” She processed the information for a moment. “Like, to contact Hayden for her?”

“That’s the idea, but she doesn’t need to know that in case he can’t.”

“You’d really do that to help her?” Gen asked, more than a little shocked at the thought.

“It was just a phone call,” was his cool reply.

“Aw, you can say that all you want, but deep down you’re a big softy.”

“Did I forget to threaten you with death today or something?” he asked, irritated.

“Actually, yes.”

“I see. Then get the fuck out of my car before I shoot you.”

“My day is complete.” She grabbed her bag and slid out of the car. It didn’t seem right to leave it at that, however—not when he was actually showing signs of being a real human being. She wanted to encourage that kind of behaviour, after all. “It’s really good that you’re doing that for her, though.”

Skyla Dawn Cameron

“Be at my place by three tomorrow,” he said, ignoring any more talk of Sage.

Yep, a big softy. With a gun.

Ten

“Block,” Michael barked as he threw another punch at Sage. She blocked the strike, but weaker than she should have and her arm wavered under the hit.

That's what years of "classes" will get you—girl still has trouble believing someone will hit to hurt.

“That was terrible,” he informed her.

“Why can’t I just duck or use a reversal like I usually do?”

“Because your moves should be varied. You *will* get hit and it *will* hurt if you don’t learn to block more effectively.”

The door to one of the side rooms creaked open. Finn had stayed up all Wednesday night, well past the point of exhaustion, then dropped dead on the guest cot and slept for eleven hours straight. Now that he was awake in the early evening, Michael figured he’d stumble around sleepily for awhile as he tried to remember where he was, and so he didn’t turn when he heard his friend up and about.

A giggle followed from where Genevieve and Merri sat just a few feet from where he and Sage worked.

“Michael, your friend’s naked,” Gen said in a low voice.

“Finn, clothes,” Michael shouted, still without turning.

“Ah, bugger,” came a mutter. Several minutes later, the door opened again. No giggles ensued, so Michael figured he was at least slightly clothed.

“Take a break,” he said to Sage as Finn padded towards the kitchen. Sage retrieved her water bottle and then, to Michael’s surprise, sat down on the couch with Merri and Gen.

Michael went to the kitchen, where Finn waited at the new breakfast bar, and put on a pot of coffee.

“Time change is gonna kill me,” Finn said with a sigh. “Don’t know how you could stand to travel so much.”

"It was harder with Laurie phoning whenever she felt like it, which tended to be in the dead of night wherever I was. Did you run into her in London?"

"Yeah. I think she's still a bit mad that you fired her."

"I gave her a decent severance package."

"She wasn't looking for a severance package. Didn't ya ever—"

Michael shook his head. "I don't fuck employees."

Finn gestured over his shoulder to where the three girls sat, brow raised suggestively. "And—"

"Or students," Michael interrupted him.

"You've got wee things like that running about here everyday and you didn't think to stoat—"

"They're practically children."

"They're...nubile."

"Still not going to happen." The coffee prepared, Michael turned to fetch some mugs and to effectively end the conversation. Finn must have taken the hint, for he didn't continue. Michael filled two mugs and handed one to his friend.

"And which did ya call me about?" Finn asked.

"Sage."

"The dark one, is she?"

Michael nodded.

"When do you want to do this then? Tonight?"

"Nothing with her right now. I don't want her getting her hopes up—it'll do more harm than good."

"I can't just open up to every damn spirit in the area, Michael. I need someone who knew the lad."

Michael's gaze settled on Genevieve, who seemed deep in conversation with Merri about something. He nodded in her direction. "You've got a volunteer over there."

Finn swiveled on his seat to study the girls. "Which one?"

"Blonde."

"She'd be up for it?"

"Yes." *As long as she doesn't have to actually do any work*, he thought with a touch of disdain. "Take a few days to get used to the time zone and get settled. When you're ready, I'll make arrangements for her to be here without the others."

"I don't mind if they're here. I know you said you don't want the one around the first time I try but—"

"I don't think it would be wise for Merri to be present," he said, putting it as delicately as he could. Finn didn't know the true nature of the girls and Michael preferred to keep it that way. "She's...sensitive to things. You tend to attract attention."

"What can we do this evening, then? Sit with these pretty ladies and stay in all night?"

"We can hit a bar."

"You be my wingman tonight?"

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"Of course," Michael snorted. "I'm not getting drunk enough to force you to drive my fucking car."

"I've driven your bloody American cars before—"

"You wrapped my Porsche around a tree outside of London last year. This is the second car I've had to buy since living in town and I'm not taking a chance with it."

"Lemme change and we can go." While Finn returned to the next room, Michael called to the girls.

"You can leave now."

"Yay, dinner at home!" Gen said brightly and jumped up to retrieve her bag right away.

"But it's early," Sage protested.

"I'm going out."

"Hey, you can go out tomorrow, too," Gen said. "'Cause remember I'm having my girlfriend over for dinner."

"No one cares about your damn girlfriend," Michael muttered.

"Merri does. Don't you, Mer?"

"Absolutely," Merri said with a grin.

He watched Sage, who for a moment looked as though she had something more to say to him. If he had to venture a guess, it involved discussing Hayden and Anne, for they hadn't had that conversation yet that day. He needed at least one day of rest, however. For so long her pain was his own, and it seemed easier some days to ignore it altogether. Push it out of his head completely. He wouldn't rescind on his promise to talk to her—not yet anyway—but sometimes there was only so much he could take.

She seemed to understand that there would be no reminiscing about dead lovers that day, so she moved to retrieve her jacket and shoes. Once dressed, she trailed behind the others as they moved towards the door, however, biting her lip and debating saying something.

"My mom's friends are in town and they're all staying at a casino for the weekend," Sage said to Merri and Gen. "My sister's babysitting their kids and Mom doesn't want just me and her in the house. Can...would either of you like to stay over this weekend?" Everything she said came out awkward, as if she'd never made such a request in her life. A few moments of silence passed, in which it seemed everyone was too shocked to comment.

"Sure," Gen jumped in first. "I'll bring my overnight bag to school and go straight to your place after on Friday. That is if *someone* can live without us for the weekend." She looked pointedly at Michael.

"Gladly," he said. "We'll pick up on Monday."

"How 'bout it, Mer?" Gen said.

"I can't Friday," Merri said. "I'm busy."

"With Thad," Gen said in a dreamy voice.

"But Saturday's good," she continued, ignoring Gen. With that decided, the three went out the front door, letting a rush of cold air in briefly.

Michael threw the coffee mugs in the dishwasher and Finn returned from changing.

“So, do I get to hear about this skanky Satanist I hear you’re seeing?”

“She’s not a Satanist.”

“But she’s a skank?”

“I’m not introducing you, so don’t ask.”

~~*

Late Thursday afternoon, Genevieve lay on her bed, gaze on the ceiling, waiting for Peyton to return from the washroom.

Gen found she was far more nervous bringing Peyton home after school the next day than she had been when she asked her to dinner in the first place. She hadn’t informed her parents that she was having company over, and definitely wouldn’t tell them she was her girlfriend. A couple years earlier she’d told them about liking Janine, and that had led to merciless teasing from her father and her mother telling all her friends. The fact that Gen had special powers and her life was occasionally in danger seemed enough of a relationship obstacle; she didn’t want to add her parents embarrassing her to the mix.

After showing her around the house, Gen had ended the tour at her room. She was a little worried about doing so initially, as she had only ever had her regular friends hang out there and wasn’t sure if it was “normal” to do with a girlfriend, but decided at last to just give it a shot.

She heard the bathroom door open and made a mental effort to seem relaxed and normal.

“I can’t believe you’re allowed to do your walls this colour,” Peyton said, gazing around at the vibrant purple walls. “My mom would go ballistic and probably disown me or something like that. My options were baby blue, pale yellow, or dusty rose. Hunter green was okay for the den, but never, ever a bedroom.”

“Oh, my mom’s a firm believer in dusty rose,” Gen said. “You didn’t see my parents’ room. But the purple thing wasn’t a big deal; they like me to express myself.”

“Must be nice.” Peyton sank down on the end of the bed. “My little brother gets away with that, but I never did. He had a Lacrosse game last weekend on Sunday and got to miss church. If I ever tried that, I’d be made to quit the team first. You’re lucky.”

Gen eased up to a sitting position and absently played with a dangling thread on the comforter. When she spoke, she tried to sound casual. “So you guys are kinda religious?”

“Not like really or anything. Not more than most people. Don’t you at least go to church?”

“Um, once when I was like six.” She neglected to add the part where she hated every boring second of it and begged her dad to take her home again.

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Church became a threatened punishment after that and she still shuddered at the thought of being made to go back.

“We’ve gone every week since I was a kid. Wednesday night I go to a youth group thing too—I always have, but I just started going to the one in this area when we moved. Hey, you should come sometime. The pastor’s really nice and it’d be fun.”

“Yeah,” Gen said, trying to sound excited, but the idea of spending an hour hearing about how she was going to burn in hell for eternity didn’t sound “fun.” *Although it might be interesting to inform people I am both a lesbian and a witch, and then give a little demonstration of both. That’d go over well.* Still, getting Peyton kicked out of her church group for bringing along her girlfriend would probably be problematic for their relationship. While Gen was trying to think of something more to say about church, she found Peyton’s gaze going to her dresser.

“That looks like a really old book,” she said. “Do you collect stuff like that? My dad does—he gets all kinds of first editions...you should show him that one sometime.”

Dammit! It was the book recounting all her other lives and stuff that Michael had given her. At least it wasn’t a spell book, though God knows she had some of those lying around as well.

“Yeah, it’s just this old art history book,” she said quickly. “Kinda obscure. This guy I know—this, like, artsy guy—gave it to me. To look at. ‘Cause I like art.” *Wow, I should get some lying lessons from Merri sometime.*

“Gen, did you ever like boys?”

“Um, no, but I’ve always appreciated logical segues.”

“I know, I’m sorry. If I’m not talking constantly, I’m thinking constantly, and I forget stuff doesn’t always make sense. I was just wondering, is all.”

“Well, no, I’ve never been into boys. I mean, I liked plenty as friends and I love Levi more than just about anyone. But never got the whole hetero thing. Girls are much prettier, anyway.”

“Yeah,” Peyton leaned back on the bed and sighed. “I don’t think I ever really liked boys either. It was weird, not knowing anyone else like me.”

The butterflies in Gen’s stomach started up again. She should probably do something now, but she’d be damned if she knew what. Some moments were easy—it was like hanging out with any friend. But then she’d get the overwhelming urge to kiss her, and her brain would jump in and warn that it might not be appropriate.

She settled for stretching out on her stomach next to where Peyton lay. Resting her head on her folded arm, she studied Peyton’s face in silence for a moment. Her long dark eyelashes grazed her upper cheeks when she blinked, her expression was always animated and immediately drew Gen in when she spoke, then there were those lips that seemed rather kissable... No, she could honestly say she never understood the attraction to boys.

“Hey, wanna see something cool?” Gen said.

Peyton turned onto her side to face Gen. “What?”

“Magic.”

“Magic?” She looked skeptical, though Gen could hardly blame her.

“Yep.” Genevieve nodded to the pillar candle on her dresser. “I’m going to light that candle using only the power of my mind.”

“Is this one of those things—”

“It’s totally not what you’re thinking. Watch.” *There’s more than one trick Michael doesn’t realize I know.* True, lighting a candle was much, much more difficult than putting one out, and she couldn’t do it solely with her mind, but instead required a spell found midway through the workbook Michael had given her. And she’d only successfully done it once with Meredith, but she decided to give it a shot anyway. Worst case scenario, it didn’t work and she’d look like an idiot, but that could always be passed off as a joke.

She focused her gaze on the candlewick and let her vision tunnel until it was all she saw. Breathing deeply, she tapped into the power around her and directed it at the candle. She mumbled the words of the spell, low enough that her audience couldn’t make them out.

Ignite.

Peyton glanced back and forth between Gen and the candle. Her jaw dropped when she saw the wick ignite.

“Oh my god, how’d you do that?”

Gen grinned, pleased that not only had she completed the spell successfully, but she managed to not embarrass herself in front of her girlfriend. “I told you: magic.”

“Is it a trick candle or something?”

“Or something.”

“Do you have a controller or remote or button that you press—”

Gen interrupted by leaning forward and kissing her suddenly, tentatively. Perhaps magic wasn’t the best idea, but at least she had a good way of ending the conversation.

Peyton responded to the kiss, and though it was still a little awkward, Gen felt things definitely seemed smoother than they had the first time. Between the magic and the kissing, Gen’s head was swimming as if she was drunk and she felt giddy as the kiss ended.

“I wanted to ask you,” Peyton said, her wide grin mirroring what Gen imagined was on her own face. “My family is doing their annual Christmas party next month. Do you want to come?”

As long as it’s not at church. “Sure.”

“Great! It’s usually kinda boring, but I’m glad you’ll be there with me.”

With her. I’ll be ‘with’ her somewhere. Gen didn’t think the world could get much better than that moment.

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Genevieve retrieved her overnight bag from her locker and slung it over her shoulder, which was made difficult by her thick winter jacket.

Children of the Apocalypse

“Running away from home?” Levi said as he leaned against the locker next to hers.

She closed the door and snapped on the lock. Pausing before answering, she briefly considered lying. Sure, he decided he still had feelings for Sage, but they weren’t exactly BFF’s or anything.

“Sage’s,” she said at last. “Her mom’s going away for the weekend, so she asked me to stay there, to keep her and her sisters company.”

“Want a ride?”

“Did you get Hayden’s car back or—”

He shook his head. “Police never gave us that back, though I don’t think they ever found anything useful on it. But insurance got us a new one and after a lot of arguing, Dad let me have it.” He took her overnight bag for her and the two of them walked toward the parking lot.

“You got someone to talk to her?” he asked, genuine concern showing on his face. “Will she be okay?”

“I think so.” She recalled what Michael had said two days before. He must have spoken to her about Hayden by now and went so far as to have a friend from the U.K. or wherever to come down. Maybe if Finn could contact Hayden, Gen could even tell Levi... Michael wouldn’t like it, sure, but then Michael didn’t like anything.

They drove to Sage’s in silence. When he pulled in the driveway, Gen prepared to thank him, but he turned to her first.

“I didn’t see you or Meredith the other day after you went to talk to that girl.”

“No, we decided to blow off the rest of our classes,” she said quickly. “That was when we ran into Sage and she asked me over to her place today.”

“Okay, just curious. Are you coming to Stephanie’s tomorrow?”

“I may still be at Sage’s.”

“Let me know. Otherwise I’ll see you on Monday, Genny.”

God, I hate all this lying, she thought as she got out of the car. *Much more of this and I’ll be as good at it as Mer.* There didn’t seem much she could do about it, though, so she plastered on a smile as she walked up to Sage’s front door. A second car was parked next to one she recognized as Diana Bethany’s, so she figured Sage’s mom’s friends were already there.

Sage’s younger sister, Kat, answered the door when Gen knocked. She had only met her once before and it was the day Hayden was attacked, so the kid was understandably quiet and upset then. On this day, however, she smiled brightly when she let Gen inside.

“Sage just got home from a run so she’s up in the shower. I’ll take your bag downstairs.” Kat took her overnight bag and disappeared down the hall. Gen stowed her shoes and coat in the closet, then continued toward the living room. The youngest Bethany girl, five-year-old Cecilia ran past with a squeal and raced upstairs. A second girl, about Ceci’s age, followed with long red hair trailing after her.

Diana Bethany stepped out of the kitchen and smiled when she saw Gen. "I'm so glad you can stay here this weekend, Genevieve. Sage tells me your friend Meredith will be by tomorrow as well to stay with the girls. I feel a lot better having another person in the house."

"It's no problem." *'Cause if someone breaks in and attacks us, Sage will really need my help to kill them.*

"And thank you for helping to bring her out of her shell. She's done much better the past few days, and I thought you probably had a hand in that."

Or thank you Michael. Gen smiled in response anyway.

"Have a seat, dear, and I'll get you a drink. What would you like?"

"Um, water I guess. Thanks." Gen continued toward the living room, where she heard the T.V. on but no voices. A man and a woman, each perhaps thirty, sat on the couch. A sleeping six-month old with a head of strawberry blonde hair rested in the blond man's arms. His blue eyes went to Gen as she entered the room and seconds later the woman's did the same. The girl Gen saw playing with Ceci must have been theirs, for the woman had the same copper hair.

"Hello," the guy said with a kind smile that put Gen at ease while being in the unfamiliar environment. She tended to feel horribly uncomfortable with people she didn't know, but relaxed a little in their presence and sat down.

"Did you see which way the girls went?" the woman asked.

Gen gestured over her shoulder. "Ran upstairs."

"I'll make sure they don't break anything." She rose and left the living room. Kat returned just then and her eyes lit up as they settled on the baby.

"Aw, is she asleep?" she asked.

"She is," the child's father said.

"We've got Ceci's old crib set up—want me to put her down, or would—"

"That's fine."

Kat retrieved the baby, who didn't stir as she was being moved. "Hiya little Maya. Oooh, I just love babies!"

"I didn't really just hear my thirteen year old say that," Diana called from the kitchen. She returned with Gen's glass of water, and then looked about the room. "Where did Eve go?"

"To look for the girls."

"You guys are supposed to be out here to relax—I'll go find her."

As Diana left, Gen pulled her messenger bag onto her lap. Sage wasn't back yet, so she figured she might as well get some homework done. Not schoolwork, however; the notebook she retrieved contained the notes she and Merri had been making with regards to their own investigations into The Brethren and whatever Michael might have been keeping from them. They didn't exactly have much in the way in information yet, but in between practicing spells and meditating at Michael's, they had combed the books he had available to them for anything useful. Nothing helpful had come up yet, though, so Gen decided to independently work up a new plan of action. So far, her thoughts centered on finding truth serum of some sort and drugging Michael with it.

Children of the Apocalypse

And of all his books, nothing about any assassins, no explanations regarding the people who attacked us...nothing about us, let alone mention of The Brethren, whatever they are. She couldn't say what the hell she and Merri would do if they couldn't knock Michael out and inject him with truth serum.

Maybe he'll decide to talk the next time we're almost getting murdered by random men.

"What?"

Gen's head shot up to see Diana's friend, Eve, standing in the living room doorway staring at her with curiosity and a touch of worry.

"I-I didn't say anything."

Eve's eyes went to her husband for a second, and Gen followed the gaze. They two of them exchanged a series of long looks, though no words were said. At last Eve sat down.

A few minutes of silence followed, and then Eve turned back to Gen. "Okay, I've just got to ask something." She glanced back at her husband as if he'd said something, and then continued. "You gotta understand, I'm a protective mother. Are my girls in any danger here?"

"What?"

"Assassins, The Brethren or whatever—are my girls safe here while I'm away?"

Gen shot a glance at Eve's husband, but he was shaking his head and rolling his eyes. "You're scaring the kid," he said to his wife in a low voice.

"Yeah, well, she's freaking me out."

"The girls are settled in Ceci's room," Diana called as she returned. She hung in the living room doorway, as if she wasn't ready to sit yet. "They're doing unimaginably cruel things to Barbies—it's safe not to ask."

"Dezzie probably started it," Eve said. "She gets it from me."

"I figured as much. Anyway, let me throw my bags in the car, go over my instructions for the kids, then we can head out so you can clean house." Diana gestured to Eve but addressed Gen. "This woman is phenomenal at poker. She almost got us kicked out of a casino at one point, but Colin managed to calm security down. I'll never know how she does it."

"It's pretty simple," Eve said with a grin. "I can read minds."

Gen caught the sudden look her husband gave her, but Diana seemed to overlook it.

"Now *that* I almost believe," Diana said before she left again.

"You can read minds?" Gen said once Sage's mom was out of earshot. "Both of you?"

"And you can put out candles by force of will," Eve said. "We're a whole group of super freaks. You still didn't answer my question."

Genevieve supposed that, given everything she'd seen and experienced—and in some cases done herself—she shouldn't have been so shocked, but thus far everything had been confined to her small little world. This was too much.

"We don't mean to put you on the spot," the man, Colin, said gently. "But we do need to know whether or not the girls are in any danger being here with you..." He paused, frowning slightly, and Gen felt the urge to shield her mind,

though she had no idea how that would be accomplished. "You or Sage, apparently."

"You don't need to worry," Gen said, glancing back and forth between the two of them. "Your daughters will be fine. I was just...thinking and exaggerating. And you really don't need to worry with Sage around; she's wicked strong."

"Worrying is a given," he said with a small, half-smile. "But I'll take your word for it that it's unfounded."

"Now how about a showing of good faith," Eve said brightly. "I know someone's secret that I believe you'll be totally pleased to know, given your thoughts just minutes ago. It's about...ah, shit, I'm bad with names." She looked over at her husband. "Who was that guy we saw? At the gas station?"

"You told me you weren't paying attention." A smile hovered on his lips. He slid his arm over her shoulder and she settled against him.

"Well, I'm nosy."

"Michael," he filled in for her.

"Right." She returned her attention to Genevieve. "We ran into Michael, and I'm pretty sure it's the same guy you were thinking about smacking around a minute ago because he also mentioned something called 'The Brethren.'"

"He spoke to you about it?" Gen asked, confused.

"Well, no, he was thinking about it while he was talking to some guy he was with. Now, it's not like I go around monitoring everyone's thoughts and invading their privacy all the time, or anything like that."

Behind her, Colin mouthed the words, "Yes, she does."

"I heard that," she directed his way before continuing. "Anyway, the whole thing stuck out in my head 'cause a., that guy's a fucking psycho, in case you weren't yet aware, and b., he clearly wasn't a *delusional* psycho, so when I heard him thinking about some life or death situations, I listened up. 'The Brethren' came up. Do you know what they are?"

Gen shook her head.

"I only got a few glimpses. They're definitely bad news, and they're definitely after some people that Michael guy is loathed to be looking after."

He doesn't have to 'look after' us!

"Ah," Eve raised a copper brow, and Gen flushed a little as she remembered the woman could read her mind. "So it's you guys. Well, he knows a lot more than he's telling you."

"Are you purposely leaving out the computer?" Colin asked her. "Or are you saving that for your grand finale?"

"Computer?" Her brows furrowed.

"Yes, where he not only keeps files on such things, but where he has indexed all of his books."

"Sneaky bastard," she said, and gave him an affectionate smack.

"I simply wanted to learn as much as I could about any potential murderers in the same town as the girls while we're away," he continued.

"Whatever—you're just as bad as me. No concept of privacy whatsoever."

Children of the Apocalypse

“So you mean I don’t have to go through all of his books one by one?” Gen asked. “I can just go on the computer and it’ll tell me which books have info on The Brethren?”

Colin nodded. “Although if I were to advise you of anything, it would be to avoid him as much as possible. There are corners of his mind that very few would tread.”

“He has his moments,” Gen said, a little unsure as to why exactly she was defending the man, except that he had saved her life on more than one occasion.

“No, *I* have my moments,” Eve said. “He has nanoseconds of humanity, and they’re the result of practicality rather than feeling.”

“They’re few and far between,” Gen agreed. “But I don’t really have a lot of choice in the matter right now.”

“Be careful,” Eve said. “He’s dangerous, and I don’t say that lightly.”

“I’ll be okay,” Gen said. She heard footsteps in the hallway and looked to see both Sage and her mom in the doorway. *I’ll be okay...I’m not alone.*

“Ready to go?” Diana directed to Eve and Colin.

Gen rose when they did and fell into step with Sage as everyone headed for the front door. Kat waited to the side with the two five-year-olds. Diana said goodbye to her girls, while Colin picked up his daughter for he and his wife to bid goodbye. Once the adults were gone, Kat chased the young girls back upstairs to play, and Gen and Sage headed for the basement.

“Sage,” Gen said as they walked. “I need to tell you something that you may not want to hear, ‘cause you’re such a Michael fan and all, but...” She launched into the brief details of her recurring dreams and mention of The Brethren, that she and Merri had been trying to look into it on their own, and ended with what Eve and Colin had told her before they left. While Gen sat cross-legged on the couch and told her everything she knew, Sage sat on the end of her bed absorbing it all.

“So my mom’s friends are telepaths?” Sage said at last.

“Of course you’d miss the main point and focus on something like that.” Gen rolled her eyes. “What do you think of everything else?”

“You think we need to break into Michael’s house, crack his computer password, read his private files, steal his books, all because you had a dream that mentioned a group that may or may not exist, may or may not have anything to do with us, and because my mom’s friends, who are secretly telepathic, told you they heard him thinking about these things?”

“Jeez, when you say it like that it sounds so silly.”

“It *is* silly.”

I knew I shouldn’t have told her. “Fine, if you’re not going to help us, could you at least not tell Michael?”

“Of course I’m going to help you. You’ll need the help.”

“And you won’t tell Michael?”

“That would be a little stupid considering I’ll be helping to break into his home.”

“Good point. I guess we need to talk to Merri.”

Getting a hold of Merri proved to be difficult because it turned out Sage didn’t have her number either. Genevieve found that, thankfully, she had left Thad’s number on her phone, so she called him up. Sure enough, Merri was with him, and after Gen gave her the gist of what she’d learned, Merri promised to be at Sage’s the following day. Saturday evening found the three of them huddled in Sage’s room, hatching a plan of action. It would require a few days of preparation, but Gen figured the plan would be a sound one.

Get ready, Michael, Gen thought as their schemes took shape. Whatever you’re keeping from us won’t be your secrets for long.

Eleven

Her stomach doing flip-flops, Genevieve bit at her lower lip nervously and looked around.

“Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea,” she said in a low voice to Merri and Sage.

“But it was your idea,” Sage pointed out.

“I have a lot of stupid ideas sometimes, you know. What if something goes wrong? What if he’s home? I can’t have him kill me—I have a girlfriend now.”

Merri gestured ahead of them to Michael’s house. “His car is gone. He’s not home.”

“What if Finn took his car and—”

“He won’t let Finn drive it. And before you go on about Finn being home, there’s no way he’d stay there alone. C’mom.”

At least it’s dark, Gen thought as they stopped in front of Michael’s house. It had taken them a few days to get ready, and then they had to wait for Finn and Michael to head out on Friday night before they could break in. Sage had wrangled a key temporarily and got a copy made earlier in the week. Gen still didn’t know how she managed it, but she wasn’t about to worry.

Sage slid the key in the lock and not a breath passed among them until she successfully turned it. The door opened easily.

The house was silent, empty, and dark.

“I sure as hell hope you brought a flashlight,” Sage said as they stepped inside.

Gen grinned in the darkness. “Better.”

“Oh, great.”

A few muttered words and a lot of concentration later, a light flared up a foot away from Gen and then dimmed to a warm glow.

“That’s pretty cool,” Merri said. “Where’d you get that one?”

"Modified the candle lighting one." As Gen moved, the light followed. "I've tried it a few times, but I'm still surprised it works."

"That makes two of us." Sage took the lead and went straight for the stairs at the back of the room.

"You should have called Thad to join us," Gen said to Merri as they followed. "I bet he'd dig breaking into Michael's and going through his stuff."

"Nah, I figured this was a girls' night out," she replied. "Besides, it's bro's before ho's, right?"

"Damn straight."

"You know," Sage called from where she waited for them near the top of the steps. "The light follows *you*—you're going to have to hurry up."

And here I was hoping for a nice, leisurely break-in...shoulda left Sage at home.

Gen raced up the steps with Merri at her heels. Towards the back of the loft was the computer, in sleep mode for the evening. Merri took the chair and slid it up to the desk. A shake of the mouse and a window popped up, prompting for a password to continue.

"Did anyone manage to get a password?" Gen asked. She glanced at her companions but neither responded. "Great."

"I'm going to try a couple." Sage leaned over Merri to reach the keyboard.

"What do you think it might be?" Gen asked as she failed to get a look at what Sage typed in.

"Just a couple of names he's mentioned before...but it doesn't look like they're working." She stepped back and frowned at the monitor. "Suggestions?"

"Give me a minute," Merri said in a low voice. She closed her eyes and straightened her back, then lifted her hands and set them on the keyboard. Her fingers twitched a little, then she began hitting the keys one at a time, a second or two between each stroke. Gen struggled to make out the letters typed in the dim light, but only caught a few before Merri hit enter at last. Michael's desktop came into view.

"Do I have to worry about you breaking into my locker now?" Gen asked.

Merri glanced up at her. "Seventeen, thirty-three, twelve."

"Dammit."

"But that's 'cause you had me get your cafeteria money from your coat last week—you told me the combination."

"Oh. Right."

"So what am I looking for?" Merri asked as she returned her attention to the computer.

"Colin said it would be some kind of database with a listing for all the books he owns..." Gen pulled a notebook and pen from her bag and readied herself to write.

Merri scanned through the document listings until she found the one relating to books. Thankfully, Michael seemed to have things well organized, and they had the ability to search by tags. Merri plugged in first, "The Brethren" and then, "Children of the Apocalypse" to see what came up.

Children of the Apocalypse

“Okay, we’ve got...sixty-three references on ‘The Brethren’ and one-hundred-and-forty-one on ‘Children of the Apocalypse,’” Merri said with a sigh.

“Well...damn,” Gen muttered.

“Damn?” Sage looked at her curiously.

“If it was three, we could smuggle them out no problem,” Gen said. “A couple hundred means we’re kinda screwed, unless we can send Michael on a trip for a few weeks as well as convince him to let us housesit.”

Merri leaned closer to the monitor, eyes narrowing on the list. “A few of these are from the same books. I’m guessing we should start there—we’ll have better luck in a book that mentions both terms.” While Gen handed off the notebook for Merri to write out a list of books for them to find, she turned to Sage to conjure up another small light source to follow her around.

“I’ve never had two going at the same time,” Gen warned her. “There’s a chance I could set you on fire.”

“Never mind.” Sage took the book list from Merri. “I’ll turn on a light.” She jogged down the stairs and disappeared into Finn’s room to check the books stored in boxes there, while Gen took the list Merri gave her and went for the shelves at the far side of the kitchen. The books were arranged alphabetically by author—or at least the ones that listed an author. She found three before Sage joined her.

“He’s got all the boxes taped up really well and stacked in the closet,” Sage said. “There’s no way I can get into them without him knowing. How about you?”

“I’ve got a few...” Gen added a couple more to the pile, and then handed them to Sage while she looked for others. “Any more and he’s going to notice, though. We’ll probably need to do another break-in. At least we’ll be pretty good at this by the time we’ve been through everything.” She readjusted the books on the shelf so there didn’t appear to be any holes where they’d been removed. “Think he’ll be able to tell?”

“Probably under normal circumstances,” Sage said with a sigh. “I’m hoping with Finn around he won’t be paying too much attention.”

If he does notice, we’ll be in some serious shit. At least I can possibly set him on fire, though.

They returned to the loft to find Merri printing out dozens of pages.

“Find anything good?” Gen asked.

“I don’t know,” Merri said. “I found pages and pages of notes on something that came up in the database, so I just hit ‘print.’”

Genevieve stuffed the books they’d gathered into her messenger bag while they waited for the printer to finish.

“So should we head back to my place?” she asked. “I mean, unless we have any other plans for illegal entry tonight, the parental unit is out so—”

Sage put up her hand suddenly. “Did you hear that?”

“Huh?”

Somewhere outside the front of the building came the sound of a car door being slammed shut.

Gen's heart pounded. "Dammit, he's going to kill us!"

"Turn it off, Mer." Sage darted toward the back of the loft.

Merri snatched up the printed pages and shoved them Gen's way, who stuffed them into her bag and ran after Sage.

"How are we going to leave—he's going to find us and—" Her gaze settled on a ladder in the corner. *What the...?* Sage climbed up to the ceiling and pushed open a trapdoor to the roof.

"Come on." Sage disappeared through the small square doorway. Gen bolted up the ladder, her heavy bag digging into her shoulder and weighing her down. Merri followed and once they were all on the roof, Sage closed the door again.

"Shit—what are we going to do?" Gen shivered in the cold November air, wishing she had some kind of levitation spell.

"There's a ladder over there," Sage gestured over her shoulder, "in the box."

Merri wasted no time running to the steel box. She flipped open the lid, then looked up at Sage, eyes wide and bewildered. "It's a fucking rope?"

"How else would it fit in a box?"

"Oh god," Gen whispered. "We're all going to die."

Sage crept to the front of the house and looked over the edge. "His car's not here..." Her arm stretched out and she pointed to something in the distance that Gen couldn't make out. "There's a cab driving away—I bet it was Finn." She turned back and stalked to where the others waited, the calm look to her face easing Gen's nerves a little. "We can go down the ladder, and then I'll head to the front and knock on the door, and just tell Finn something about wanting to come up here to meditate. I'll roll the ladder back up and put it away, wait an hour, then leave through the front door. Michael won't know we've been here."

"But..." Gen gazed over the edge of the building. "I don't want to go down the ladder."

"It's either that or Michael finds you here. Come on." Sage lifted the rope ladder from the box and dropped it over the edge so it unrolled. She turned back to Gen and held her hand out expectantly. "I'll take your bag. It's probably heavy."

Genevieve happily handed the bag off. Her stomach twisted with worry as she watched Sage swing herself down onto the ladder and slowly descend. Merri went next and reached the bottom without incident as well. Too soon it was Gen's turn.

Dammit, I'm going to plummet to my death...

She sat on the edge, took a deep breath, and put her foot on the first unsteady rung. *No, no, no, bad idea...* Levitation spells were definitely her first stop after this. The rope ladder wavered under her weight, but she put a second foot down. Holding on for dear life, she climbed down her eyes squeezed shut. After what felt like an hour had passed, she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"You made it, Gen."

Children of the Apocalypse

She opened her eyes to see Merri smiling up at her reassuringly. A glance down revealed her feet were only a few inches from the ground.

“Okay, no more bright ideas from me,” Genevieve said once she was on solid ground.

Sage handed Gen back her bag. “So I’ll meet you back at your place in ninety minutes or so?”

“Yeah. We’ll be waiting. And we’ll see if we can make sense of the books in the meantime.”

Sage jogged around to the front of the building while Merri and Gen started home.

An hour later, Genevieve and Merri sat in the Weists’ living room in an otherwise empty house. Books lay open and strewn across the floor, coffee table, and couch, while the printed sheets of notes were scattered among them. Merri sat on the couch, staring worriedly at the books resting on the cushions beside her. Gen had a similar expression of fear and confusion from where she sat on the floor.

“Maybe we’re reading it wrong,” Merri offered.

“You’ve been saying that for an hour,” Gen pointed out. “We’re not reading it wrong. What are we going to do?”

“We’ll wait ‘til Sage gets here.”

“And then?”

“Then we’ll figure it out.”

“I’m going to look for some beer—I think Dad has a stash in the basement fridge.”

Merri nodded her agreement. “I could use a drink.”

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Sage had found Finn didn’t care in the least that she’d shown up, and he’d paid little attention to her at all. After rolling up the rope ladder and returning it to the box, she waited around a short while, and then slipped back downstairs and left without Michael’s houseguest even noticing.

When she reached Genevieve’s, she found lights shining through just one of the windows at the front of the house. A knock at the door brought Gen and a barking dog to greet her. As Genevieve stepped back to let her inside, Sage was chilled by the other girl’s worried expression. Gen didn’t say anything as she led her to the living room.

Sage slid off her coat and folded it over a chair, and then took a seat on the floor by Gen.

She noticed Meredith seemed just as concerned as Gen did. “What did you find?”

“It’s bad,” Gen said.

"How bad?"

"Very bad," Merri said.

"Can you give me an idea? Scale from one to ten?"

"One being me not getting my homework done," Gen began, "and ten being we're all going to die, I'd put this at seventeen and three quarters."

Nothing like Gen's exaggeration to put me at ease. "Did you at least find out who The Brethren are?"

Merri pointed to the stack of printer paper in front of her. "The notes I found on the computer were translations Michael had gathered from a few books, two of which we brought here. We can't read them, though, so we're relying on what he says they say.

"The Brethren have been around almost as long as Natalya has, in some form or another. Those assassins that came after us? They're part of it."

"But just the tip of a really big, really old organization," Gen took over. "They've got human members here, plus a whole whack of them in other dimensions and stuff, which I can't even wrap my head around. And they really, really don't like us."

"Putting it mildly," Merri added.

"So they're out to kill us?" Sage asked, still not terribly impressed with their findings. Logic dictated that if the four of them were so important in the first place, of course there'd be a bunch of people who wanted them dead.

"Devoted is more like it," Gen said. "They're über secret, über dedicated, and über dangerous."

"And this is different from what we've already had to deal with how, exactly?"

"From everything Michael has found..." Merri gazed down at the papers helplessly for a moment. She paused, took a deep breath, and looked up again. Her eyes settled on Sage's and the look gave the Warrior a shiver. Gen looking terrified, she could deal with, but Merri never seemed scared about anything.

"What has Michael found?" Sage prompted.

"They're going to succeed, Sage," Gen said.

"Michael has dozens of books of prophecies and everything," Merri continued. "Everything says at least one of us will die and there's no stopping it."

"But how do you know if maybe it was supposed to happen when they came after us two months ago? How do you know we didn't...I don't know, invalidate it then?"

"There's three of us," Gen pointed out, "at least that can be killed. And these Brethren guys? We're talking numbers that might as well be infinite."

"And this prophecy crap isn't too exact in terms of dates," Merri said. "But by all accounts, it's set to happen sooner rather than later. This has gotta be why Michael's been trying so hard to find The Immortal."

And why he was so worried that I have a death wish... It wasn't some kind of friendly teacher concern, or worry that maybe she wasn't taking things as seriously as she should...he knew they could all be in immediate danger.

Children of the Apocalypse

"Is that why Finn's here?" Sage pondered aloud. "Michael could be looking for people to help us if we need it, right?"

"I don't think so," Gen said quickly. Merri glanced at her sharply, but Sage couldn't decipher the look she gave her and Gen continued on as if she hadn't noticed. "He probably would have shown a bit more interest in us or what's going on at this point if that was the case. I'm pretty sure he's just a friend."

"We should ask Michael about this," Sage said, though she knew Gen would immediately object. "Maybe there's something more that he can tell us."

"Uh, if he didn't tell us anything in the first place, why would he bother now?" Gen said.

"But—"

"But we can't really trust him," Gen said. "I know you do. I know Merri kind of does too," she cast a look at Meredith briefly, who didn't disagree, "but I don't. We can only trust each other. We have to stick together."

"Anyway, I don't know if there'll be any point in even asking him about this." Merri gestured around at the books. "It sure as hell seems like he had his reasons for not telling us in the first place."

"Yeah, if anyone has any ideas about how I can un-know what I now know, that'd be awesome," Gen said.

The phone rang in the kitchen then, and Gen rose to answer it.

"What's the plan to return the books when you guys are done with them?" Sage asked.

Merri started gathering up the papers strewn across the couch. "Not sure at this point. I guess we could take the key and drop in any time. Or maybe next time we're there, you could coax Michael up onto the roof and Gen and I could put them back."

"Do you think he ever planned to tell us about all this?"

Though her mouth opened to speak, no words came out as Merri paused to deliberate her answer. "He probably would have. Eventually. I don't think he'd tell all of us, not all at once. He'd probably wait until he was forced to, somehow."

"Til it was too late?"

Merri shook her head. "I don't think he'd wait that long. At least for us—he might for Gen." She cracked a smile, but Sage suspected she might be serious. "If I was going to guess, I'd say he wanted something more substantial to tell us."

"And maybe that'll be sooner rather than later." Gen looked a little shaken as she returned to the living room.

"What now?" Sage asked.

"Michael. He wants me to come over tomorrow. *Just* me."

"You think he knows about the books?"

"I'm guessing yes. And that he's planning to kill me."

"Want us to come with you?" Merri asked immediately, but Gen shook her head.

"I should be okay. But if you don't hear from me that night, you can start looking for the body."

~~*

By the next night, Gen wished she'd agreed to have Merri and Sage come along. Michael's request for her presence *had* to relate to the missing books, and of course he would blame *her* for it. She hadn't bothered to bring any with her, however, just in case he didn't know they were gone and his reason for calling her involved something else. Plan A. was to play dumb. Plan B. was to run like hell.

Michael met her at his front door seconds after she knocked, as if he'd been waiting. Though she was about to step inside, he moved forward so he stood on the dark front step with her and closed the door behind him.

"You need to keep the following in mind," Michael said sternly without so much as a hello. "Finn doesn't know the details behind Hayden's death, he doesn't know exactly who you, Sage, or Merri are, nor does he understand your significance. He also doesn't know about that day at the farmhouse and he doesn't need to know you can do anything other than put out a candle. No apocalypse, no Natalya—nothing. Got it?"

"Um...hi to you too."

"Do you understand me?"

"Yes, fine—just let me in the house and out of the cold, all right?" She had no idea what the hell he had been talking about or what Finn had to do with the books, but she'd given up trying to understand the guy.

Once inside, Gen found the house unusually dark. The couches and coffee table were moved to the far corners so a large empty space was left in the living room. Finn sat down on the floor, sprawled comfortably amongst a dozen lit candles.

"So," Gen said as she slipped off her coat. "Séance or sexy male-male porno? Either way, I don't think you need me."

"To contact Hayden, he needs someone who knew him," Michael explained in a curt voice that suggested to her he thought she should already know these things. "Sage shouldn't be here in case it doesn't work. That leaves you. Sit down so he can get started."

Worry crept over her as she moved to where Finn sat. She'd love to contact Hayden as much as the next person, sure, but despite what Michael said, it seemed to make much more sense to have Sage there. Why would Hayden want to come and talk to Gen? What if he was busy in the afterlife hanging around Sage, and Finn interpreted it as him just not being available for contact? A heavy pressure weighed on her as she sat gingerly on the floor and crossed her legs. Pity Michael didn't explain ahead of time why he invited her over; at least then she could have made up some excuse not to come.

"Before anyone does anything," Michael said. "How about you explain why you've been taking books."

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Shit. She'd prepared for this line of questioning, though, and hoped he couldn't somehow tell she had a ball of worry rolling in the pit of her stomach.

"Well, you're always bitching that I'm not as focused as Sage," she said quickly. "So I thought I'd start learning more. And I rented three movies about witches: *The Craft*, *Bell Book and Candle*, and *Teen Witch*. And two of them implied that witches lose their powers when they fall in love, and since I have a girlfriend now, I don't want to lose my powers."

"You believe everything you see in a movie?"

"No, that's why I rented three of them. That, and 'cause there was a deal and I could keep them for a week. But anyway, I thought I'd borrow some books so I could learn more. And nothing says I'll lose my powers, so I'll return them tomorrow."

"She didn't lose her powers in *Teen Witch*," Finn interrupted.

Gen's brows furrowed in confusion as she tried to recall the movie. "Yes she did; she threw away the necklace and broke the spell."

"No, see, the necklace was merely a symbol—she didn't need it. And even after she threw it away, everyone at the prom danced in unison. That has to be the cause of magic, therefore she accepted her power over people and didn't give anything up."

"Aaah," Gen said with a grin. "That's much less depressing. Good interpretation."

"If you're done discussing your love of eighties teen movies..." Michael glared at Finn.

"He's right," Gen said. "My favourite witch movie is from way back in the nineties: *Practical Magic*. Sandra Bullock is really hot in that one."

"Mmm," Finn nodded his agreement. "And Nicole Kidman."

"Should we maybe move this to the video store or something?" Michael snapped.

"Can we?" Finn asked. His smile faded under the look Michael gave him, however, and he dropped his gaze and sat up straight.

"So what do I have to do?" Gen asked Finn.

"You don't need to worry about a thing right now. But he," Finn gestured to Michael, who sat at the new island in the kitchen drinking a beer, "needs to sit as well."

"I'm not part of this—" Michael began.

"It would help to have a third. Sit."

Michael tossed back the rest of his beer and surprisingly didn't argue further. He did, however, make it abundantly clear that he took no pleasure in the task and stalked to where they sat. He dropped to the ground with a thud and glowered at Finn.

"Tell me, what's his name?" Finn directed to Gen.

"Hayden Daniel Greene."

"What else can you tell me about him, hun?"

"He was eighteen, in high school." She blinked back a few tears and took a deep breath. "He died about two months ago."

Finn's eyes narrowed a bit, but not really on her—it was as if he focused on something in the air in front of her. “How did he die? Was it violent?”

Gen fought the urge to glance Michael's way. He said not to give details, but surely she had to tell Finn *something*.

“He was attacked—stabbed—but seemed okay. It was...like, surgery complications or something. Do I really have to keep talking about this?”

“You're doing fine, love. Now let's see if your friend is hanging around.” He reached out with either hand. Gen gingerly accepted the one on her side while Michael rolled his eyes and took the other. “Complete the circle, kids.” Finn nodded at them.

“Don't be such a baby.” Gen snatched up Michael's other hand. “We don't have cooties.”

“I wouldn't be so sure about him,” Michael replied dryly.

“Close your eyes and concentrate. Both of you.”

Easier said than done, Gen thought.

Several minutes of silence passed with only their breathing heard.

“Hayden Daniel Greene,” Finn said suddenly, startling Genevieve and making her jump. “Got a girl here who'd like to speak to ya. It's safe to come through.”

Gen wasn't sure if something was supposed to happen or not. If she'd hear a voice, if she'd feel a presence... Perhaps the candles would flicker or a breeze would pass... But nothing happened.

“Don't be afraid, Hayden. I'll be able to hear you. We're ready to pass on a message to your girl. Speak to us.”

Keeping her eyes shut tight, Gen tried to concentrate. She didn't know if she could actually help, but she forced any magic at all in her to call to out Hayden, to will him to speak to Finn.

After a long bout of silence, Finn sighed and Gen felt him release her hand. She opened her eyes. “What is it?”

Finn raised his hand to his face and rubbed his forehead, as if in slight pain. “He's not here.” His gaze went to Michael. “Nothing at all. No presence, nothing lingering. He's not on this plane.”

“I don't understand what that means,” Gen said. “Can't we just try again?”

“We can try a dozen times. Not sure it'll do any good.”

“But why—”

“He's gone,” Michael said, abruptly rising. “Fucking waste of time.”

“If a spirit has something like unfinished business or might have suffered some confusion around death, they hang around the living,” Finn explained to Gen. “Right now, there are half a dozen in this room, wandering around.”

Gen gave an involuntary glance around, but of course saw nothing.

“Your friend's boy isn't here, though. He woulda heard me and no one can pass up a chance to leave a message for a loved one. Haven't even seen someone like that hanging around your friend when she's here—not even once. That means he's moved on. I see it often enough. He was a happy lad, no? Nothing troubled him?”

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Gen nodded.

“So he didn’t feel he had to stay. He felt safe to move on.”

“Oh God,” Gen whispered, covering her mouth and closing her eyes. “God, what are we going to tell Sage?”

“Nothing,” Michael said coolly.

She swung around to face him. “How can you say that? She deserves to know. Maybe...I don’t know, maybe it’ll give her some kind of peace?”

“How could that give her peace?” Michael snapped. “She’s holding on to him, but he’s left her. How the fuck would that be helpful to know?”

“I could do this again,” Finn offered. “Just tell her I see him and give the usual message. Prepare ahead of time—”

“No,” Gen and Michael said in unison.

“You can’t lie to her,” Gen added. “She should know the truth.”

“Don’t you dare breathe a word of this to her,” Michael warned.

“But—”

“First of all, you wouldn’t explain it properly. Second, she can’t handle that kind of information right now.” He stormed toward the door and threw on his coat. “I’m going out. If you want a ride, hurry the hell up.” And with that, he left and slammed the door behind him.

“Did that seem way too personal to you?” Gen asked as she stood.

Finn rose as well and nodded. “When I first met him, years ago, he was looking for his wife.”

Gen’s gaze snapped to his and she paused mid-step. “He was married?”

“So I understand it.”

“And she went missing?”

Finn chuckled. “No, love. She was dead. He was looking for a good medium to contact her. I came recommended.”

“Did you find her?” Given Michael’s reaction earlier, she wasn’t surprised when he shook his head.

“No sign of her. She didn’t linger with him; moved on, like your friend’s man did. I don’t think he ever accepted that.”

Her perspective shifted and Michael seemed far more human suddenly. A widower who never managed to find his dead wife...a surprisingly tragic background for someone so decidedly evil.

“I doubt he’ll wait,” Finn said. “You’d best be going”

Gen nodded and retrieved her jacket.

“One more thing, though...”

She glanced back at him.

“If your friend is really looking to talk to her guy, ask around town for a person who can contact The Serpent.”

“Sounds like a video game character.”

“I can only communicate with someone in this world—The Serpent will get you into the others. But I wouldn’t try unless you are very, very serious about it.”

“Lemme guess; I shouldn’t tell Michael, right?”

"I wouldn't if I were you."

She committed the name to memory, waved goodbye, and then went for the door again. Outside, she shivered in the cold night air and looked around. At first glance she almost missed the black convertible parked in the shadow of the building. Michael sat in the front, but hadn't started it yet. He stared blankly through the frosted windshield ahead of him.

For the first time since she'd known him, she felt a moment of sympathy. Though still a prick who considered letting her die on more than one occasion, he apparently did have feelings somewhere in him. Taking in a breath of icy air, she moved towards the car. He didn't look at or speak to her as she climbed in the passenger side, but simply turned the key in the ignition and started driving.

She didn't say anything to him on the way to her house, and he didn't so much as acknowledge her presence. As he stopped the vehicle outside her place, she considered leaving immediately, but found herself pausing.

"I'm sorry about your wife," she said gently.

His gaze turned her way sharply.

"Finn told me. I wasn't going to say anything—"

"Get out of the car."

"Even though it didn't work, that was a really good thing you tried to do for Sage. You could almost pass for human." She offered a smile, but it was only met with more cold words.

"Get the fuck out of my car."

With a heavy sigh, she complied, and had barely stepped away from the car when he sped off down the road.

Well, I had exactly an ounce of sympathy for the man, and I've now used it...back to pure hatred again.

Inside the house, she found her parents sitting in the living room, watching television. Her father chuckled at something on the screen, then looked up when Gen approached. "Hello, dear. Peyton called."

"She said to call her back," her mom said in a low voice.

As Gen's gaze moved over her, she realized she looked upset about something; her arms were crossed over her stomach, and eyes were red-rimmed. *God, I hope it's not my fault.*

"You okay, Mom?"

Rebecca Weist gazed back at her daughter and offered a grin. "Bad day, hun, that's all. Be sure to call your friend back soon—she said it had to be before nine-thirty."

Genevieve grabbed the phone in her room and hit the newest addition to speed dial.

"Hello?" Peyton answered.

Flopping down on her bed, Gen smiled absently. "I'm really glad to hear your voice."

Twelve

Genevieve drew a glass of sparkling punch to her lips and took a sip. It was bitter and she barely got down a mouthful without making a face, but somehow she managed to smile and fake enjoyment through the overpowering taste of cranberry.

“Great punch,” she said.

“Mom’s personal recipe,” Peyton said with a smile. “Everyone always asks her to make it. Non-alcoholic.”

Pity that.

Gen glanced around for a nearby plant she could dump the drink in discreetly, like people did in the movies, but that didn’t seem like a possibility. Several poinsettias sat on various tables throughout the house, but in the room where Gen stood, most had clumps of people standing nearby. Someone would notice for sure.

Perhaps I’ll have to finish drinking it after all. Gen gave a little shudder at the thought.

Only at the Christmas party a half hour so far, Gen found it felt like much, much longer. Though she’d hoped it would be a nice, relaxed gathering, instead she found Peyton lived in a large, upscale new home just outside of town. A dozen BMWs were parked out front. Her father had made numerous jokes about it when he’d dropped her off, but even then she couldn’t crack a smile; her stomach turned and twisted ‘til she felt ill with nervousness. For what seemed the millionth time so far, she sent a glance down at the black dress pants and red shirt she’d worn, and felt horribly underdressed. Both came from a sale rack last spring, and just one of those poinsettias probably cost more than both items put together. But Peyton looked adorable in a green velvet dress with long sleeves and a short skirt. Her dark curls were swept up into a loose bun, with tendrils grazing her neck. Gen had the overwhelming urge to touch

her, but she figured P.D.A. would be frowned upon by these people...most of all, Peyton's mother.

Gen's gaze slid to where Mrs. Rice stood. Striking though not really pretty, she had the same dark hair as her daughter's, however she kept hers pulled back with severity. That day she wore all black but for a string of white pearls that hung just above the modest neckline of her blouse. She had a cool air about her and a smile that never quite reached her eyes, and Gen had decided almost immediately that she had to be evil. Literally, the more she read from Michael's books, the more it seemed possible Mrs. Rice could be a demon disguised as a human. Possibly a giant shape-shifting lizard.

Mr. Rice, however, seemed quite the opposite; a friendly man who had gone out of his way to speak to Gen when she first arrived. He'd gone to the basement to play billiards with several of the men at the party, but had at least tried to make her feel welcome beforehand. She'd longed to join the guys downstairs, however she doubted that would make good impression with Peyton's mother.

"Hey," Peyton said, drawing Gen's attention from darker places. "Wanna see my room? Dinner won't be for awhile."

"Absolutely." Gen followed her from the living room, but stayed two steps behind so she had the opportunity to casually leave her punch on a side table without anyone noticing.

Up the massive front staircase and towards the back of the house was Peyton's room. Sure enough, the walls were dusty rose with a floral border at the top as Peyton had warned her. Though the room was bigger than Gen's parents' master bedroom, Peyton had little furniture. Her twin-sized bed had an eyelet canopy and bedspread that seemed more suited for an eight-year-old, but Gen suspected her parents treated her as such. Everything in the room was kept immaculately clean and tidy, and Gen felt a pang of embarrassment realizing she'd thought nothing of bringing Peyton into her own mess of a room.

"There's not really a lot to do." Peyton sat on the edge of her bed. Gen took a seat a few inches away and turned to face her. "I've asked for a T.V. for Christmas every year since I was a kid, but they keep saying not until my grades get up. And I can't seem to raise my average above a 'B+'."

"At least you've got a laptop." Gen nodded to the notebook computer on the desk in the corner of the room.

"Yeah, that they made sure didn't have internet access: it's only for homework. Paul—my brother, you didn't see him but he's downstairs with Dad—just went and reset whatever they had done to his so he stays up and talks to his friends all night, but he won't do mine. You're lucky your parents let you do what you want."

"Hey, you said your dad is getting you a car when you graduate next year—I'd give up my T.V. for a car."

"It's on the condition that I live at home while I do university. So I'll be driving to Toronto and back every day."

Never mind that, I'll keep my television. God, Peyton's mom *had* to be a demon.

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“Or I *will* if I can ever get my grades up. Not sure the car deal works if I have to go to community college—then I’ll be lucky if they buy me a bus ticket.”

“I’d help you study, but then I’d have to do more work and I’m happy as a ‘C’ student,” Gen said. “You should ask Merri, though. She’s got all ‘A’s’ and I bet she’d help.”

“You think so? I’d pay her.”

“Sure. I’ll mention it the next time I see her. And she told me she wanted to get a part time job anyway, so tutoring would probably work well for her too.”

“Good,” Peyton said with a relieved sigh. “I’ve been stressing about that for awhile...I feel so much better now.”

Gen rested her hand on Peyton’s knee gently, reassuringly. “That’s what girlfriends are for, right?”

Though Peyton opened her mouth to say something, she froze as they heard heels clicking on the hardwood hallway outside the room. She stood abruptly and smoothed her skirt.

“Peyton,” Mrs. Rice called as she appeared in the doorway. Her dark gaze flickered to Genevieve, then back to her daughter again. “Mrs. Jacobs wants to hear the piece you’re doing for your piano exam in case she can give you any pointers.”

“We’ll be right there, Mom.”

As Mrs. Rice left, Peyton started to follow.

“Hey,” Gen called after her in a low voice, and managed to stop her before she reached the door. Blaming her nervous stomach for keeping her from being at all observant earlier that day, realization hit her and she needed some clarification. “Your parents don’t know about...like, you and me or anything, do they?”

Peyton’s eyes widened and Gen had her answer. “Oh God, *no*. They’d flip. And you can’t say anything—I just said you were one of my friends from English class.” Her brows pulled together in a frown of worry. “That’s okay, right? I mean, I just wouldn’t know what else to say and—”

“It’s okay,” Gen said quickly, swallowing back the sting of her words. “Besides, it’s kinda sexy, having a secret affair and all.”

Peyton’s grin told of her relief. “Good. I didn’t want you to be mad at me. Now wait and see how I flub through Shubert—it’s going to be scary.”

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Stretched out flat on her stomach on top of her bed, Sage stared at her open Math textbook. The words seemed to blur together; she must have been staring too long. After Christmas break, in just two and a half weeks, she was to attend school again in time for exams, per her mother’s request. The private tutor she worked with a few times a week was a pain in the ass and it almost seemed a relief that things would be going back to “normal.”

Whatever normal means anymore.

Upstairs, the doorbell rang. Her mom was out and Kat was glued to the computer in her room, so Sage rose to answer it. The bell rang a second time just as she reached the door and opened it.

Levi. He stood on her front step, heavy snowflakes falling and sticking to his dark hair and winter jacket.

"Hi," she managed to say once she found her voice. She hadn't seen him since that horribly awkward night after the dance a month and a half ago, and was quite content forgetting it all happened. "Do you...um..." She glanced over her shoulder, thinking she was probably supposed to let him inside, but she had no desire for him to stay that long. Thankfully, he shook his head.

"I'll just be a minute."

She slipped on her shoes by the door, and then stepped outside onto the porch.

"We're going away for Christmas break, and leaving early tomorrow," he said. "So I only had time to give you this tonight." He reached into his jacket pocket and produced a small jewelry box.

Sage took an involuntary step backward, gaze fixed on the gift. "I can't. I'm sorry, but—"

"It's not from me." He still held the box in her direction. "There was a message on the machine two weeks ago from a store...Hayden had put a down payment on this and they were waiting for the rest of their money."

"You paid for it?" she asked, still not accepting the gift.

Levi shrugged. "There wasn't much left to pay—he'd given them a postdated cheque for most of it. And Dad throws money at me all the time now. I already did my Christmas shopping and actually had cash left after Genny's present. Can't spend all my money on hookers and cocaine, right?"

"What'd you get Gen?"

"A new easel from the art store. Don't tell her—we're not exchanging 'til I get back from holidays."

"I won't."

"Anyway, the jewelry store said he ordered this back in the summer and he obviously wanted you to have it."

At last she took the small box and stared at it resting in her hand. "Thanks," she said without looking up.

"Yeah, well, Merry Christmas and that." He quickly turned, stepped off the porch, then jogged towards his car.

Sage slipped inside once more, so focused on the jewelry box that she barely noticed her skin burn from the heat of the house after being outside. Back resting against the door, she stared at the gift for several long moments before she reached for it with trembling fingers.

After taking a deep breath, she opened the lid and stared down at the ring within. A white gold band had alternating sapphires and small diamonds along the top, making five stones total.

"Who was it?" Kat asked from partway down the stairs.

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Sage wiped at her eyes without thinking, closed the box, and stuffed it in her pocket. "I'm going out for a bit. If Mom gets back sooner, tell her I'll be home in a few hours." After slipping on her jacket, she grabbed her key and headed out into the snowy night.

Though Michael's car was in the driveway, none of the main lights were on in the house.

Please be home, she thought as she knocked on his front door. Several minutes later Michael answered, to her relief.

"Can I talk to you?"

He got that look he sometimes had, as if he was about to tell her to fuck off, but instead he sighed and nodded. "Let me get my coat—we'll go for a walk." He returned a few moments later and started walking straight past her. Sage took up beside him.

"Levi dropped this off at my house a half hour ago..." She took the ring box from her pocket and handed it to him. "Hayden bought it for me. I guess for Christmas."

Michael flipped open the lid and regarded the ring in silence as they walked. "A promise ring, I suppose."

"Hmm?"

He handed it back to her. "A little antiquated, but I suppose some people still do it. It's a promise of commitment, sometimes used as a promise to propose at some point in the future."

She squeezed the box tightly in her hand as they walked. How many people had held it since him? Jewelry store owners, Levi, and now Michael...but several months ago, Hayden had looked at it, handled it, planned to give it to her, pictured her wearing it...

"He used to say we should get engaged after college," she said. "But I always kind of thought he was joking. His mom was always worried we were getting too serious—she was paranoid I'd get pregnant, apparently. So I thought he just talked about getting married several years in the future just to bug her."

"I'd say he wasn't joking."

"What was your wedding like?"

He sighed. He grew weary of telling her things—she knew it—but he hadn't yet called the deal off, so she continued to press him now and then. "Simple. Small. Her family, a few friends, and my sister in law. Nothing terribly exciting."

"I always wanted to elope. I mean, I never thought about it a lot... Hayden would have wanted something big and traditional but I would rather just take off and not tell anyone. Did you guys go somewhere for your honeymoon?"

He shook his head. "Getting through the wedding was hard enough."

"What do you mean?"

"We had a lot of problems in the few months before we married. The wedding didn't solve anything, though of course I stupidly thought it would. But I was trying to be better."

This was the first he'd ever indicated that he and Anne had anything but an idyllic life. She supposed it made sense—they were only human, after all—and Michael wouldn't have been easy to live with. Still, he had never spoken of any problems like that before.

"What did you do that was so bad?"

"Let's just say I screwed up a lot and she suffered for it, and leave it at that."

"I'm sorry things weren't that great," she offered.

"They were still better than they are now, but that goes without saying."

Sage nodded. "I understand. Even though..." She paused. When she originally planned to tell Hayden about what she was, she'd sworn Gen and Merri to secrecy where Michael was concerned, but there hardly seems a point in lying now... "I guess I should tell you that I was going to tell him the truth. Just about me—nothing to do with Gen or Merri. But I thought that since people went after him to get to me, he should know the truth and decide what to do about it. Even if it meant breaking up with me, he should have that option... And I wish I did sooner and that he had left me—it would have been so much...*easier* than this." She braced herself for yelling, but he didn't remark on her confession.

"In the interest of being honest, then, you should know about Finn, if you don't already."

She glanced up at him, confused. "Gen just said he was a friend."

"Apparently I didn't give her enough credit," Michael said dryly. "Finn is a medium I've known for a lot of years. I had him come here to contact Hayden for you."

He's been in town for over a month now. Sage stopped dead, her emotions a tangle of hope and anticipation mixed with anger for Michael not telling her sooner.

"What are we doing out here then? We should go back to the house and—"

"We already tried; he's not here anymore."

"Finn's not here?"

"Your boyfriend isn't here anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"Finn can only contact spirits that are still lingering in this world. The fact that he couldn't contact Hayden means he's moved on."

No, no, he has to be here! "That doesn't make any sense. Finn must have done something wrong—he would still be here."

"He's not. We tried a séance to call him here. Finn has looked for him every time you're around, but nothing has worked. He's not here, Sage. Finn says it's fairly common for spirits to move on when they feel they aren't needed..."

But I need him. She bit back tears.

"You said Gen knew about this?"

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"She was there for the attempt at contacting him."

She didn't tell me...God, I'm going to kill her...

"I know what you're thinking," Michael continued. "But Finn has tried everything. He's not here."

"Why didn't you tell me this sooner?" she whispered.

"I wasn't going to tell you at all and Gen had instructions to do the same."

"But why—"

"Because you've had a difficult enough time with this, and it didn't seem prudent to add something on top of it."

"He couldn't contact Anne either?"

"No."

"Why did you decide to tell me now?"

"Because," he said with a heavy sigh, "I loathe admitting it, but Genevieve was right and you deserve to know."

As she mulled over his words, her very thoughts felt heavy and weighed down upon her. Hayden had moved on simply because he thought she didn't need him, or he wasn't worried about her, or something? She squeezed the jewelry box again and reminded herself that it couldn't be because he didn't care. She never once doubted he loved her. Logically, she could tell herself that he believed she could take care of herself, that she would make it through his death intact—that the fact that he wasn't lingering meant something positive... But in her heart it stung and she couldn't keep away the doubts.

It was probably a normal reaction. She suspected Michael felt the same way about not being able to contact Anne, and he'd probably confirm as much if she asked him. But she had no desire to talk about that anymore. He'd known about this for awhile, but hadn't told her yet...Gen was right—they couldn't really trust him.

"I need to ask you something," she said.

"What?"

"You mentioned before, vaguely, that there were prophecies or something concerning us, concerning the apocalypse. What kind of details are in those?"

"If anything had made mention of your boyfriend or the fact that he was to die, I would have told you."

"Does it talk about *our* deaths, though? Me, Gen and Merri?" Now that she knew at least part of the truth, here seemed a good way to test him. "Is it possible one of us might die?"

"Anything's possible."

"I mean it. They're my friends now and I want to know."

Michael said nothing for at least a block. She couldn't be sure if he chose to avoid her question or if he even considered it until he spoke up at last.

"Probably," he said at last.

Sage's mouth went dry. So he did seem capable of telling at least *her* the truth. "One of us will die?"

"I've encountered a few sources that have said yes."

"And if one of us dies, that's it, right? It's all over? All of this is for nothing?"

"Pretty much."

"Do you know who?" She tensed in anticipation of his answer. Nothing Gen and Merri had found listed any names, so she doubted he'd give her one, but—

"I have my suspicions."

She glanced up at him sharply. "Who?"

He shrugged, not meeting her eyes. "Nothing is set in stone."

"Is it me?"

He seemed to weigh that question for a moment, when at last he spoke. "No."

"So one of the others... What are you going to do to help them? You *are* going to do something, right?"

"I've exhausted my resources already. If we don't hear from Natalya soon...I'm not sure what else to do."

Was there relief now that Sage knew it wasn't herself? Or even greater worry for her friends? *I hate living like this...*

"I think I'm going to go home now," she said quietly.

He nodded, and said nothing as she veered off the next street they came to, which led away from his house.

She didn't, however, go home quite yet.

Though she'd only been in Gen's home the one occasion, she'd been in the car a few times when Michael dropped her off, and Sage found the house easily. A man she presumed was Gen's father answered the door when she knocked, let her in without reservation and called his daughter to come downstairs.

"Hey." Gen paused at the bottom step. "What's up—?"

"Why didn't you tell me about the séance?"

Gen's blue eyes widened and she glanced behind her to ensure her parents weren't listening. A quick jerk of her hand over her shoulder served as a request for Sage to follow her upstairs, and once in her room, she closed the bedroom door.

Gen spun to face Sage. "Okay, the first rule of fight club is that you don't talk about fight club around my parents."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"If you're asking me that, then it must mean Michael told you, which means you probably have your answer—I was forbidden to open my big mouth on the matter." Gen sank down onto the bed and frowned. "I'm going to have to kill him, aren't I?"

"What happened that night?"

"Nothing. I'm sorry, but nothing happened. We sat around in a circle...okay, it was more like a triangle...but we sat there and Finn tried to call him and nothing happened."

Her knees weakened and Sage dropped onto the rattan chair opposite the brass bed. "It doesn't make any sense."

Children of the Apocalypse

"You know Hayden. He was easy going. He just wouldn't hang around and haunt people."

But I want him to... "I can't believe you didn't tell me."

"I'm sorry, but Michael said—"

"That doesn't matter!" She bit back any more outbursts that threatened to leave her and checked her emotions. When she spoke again, she had nearly convinced herself of her own composure. "*You* were the one who said we couldn't trust him. *You* were the one that said we had to stick together."

"You're right and I'm sorry. I meant what I said—I just wasn't sure how to tell you."

And Sage couldn't fault her for that—not when she had no idea how to tell Genevieve what Michael had said earlier. He seemed certain it was either Gen or Merri who would die, but wouldn't say specifically. That kind of thing would likely drive both girls mad.

"Really, I'm sorry," Gen said again, probably interpreting Sage's silence as a sign she was still mad. "I know it probably hurts—"

God, everyone's pity exhausted her sometimes. She could tell Gen about what Michael said another day—she just wanted to get out of there. "It's fine." Sage stood to go. "I should—"

"Wait. Maybe there's something we can do..." Genevieve went to her dresser and took a book from the top. She flipped through a few pages until she came to a scrap of paper being used as a bookmark and held it up for Sage to see. "Finn gave me the name of someone...sort of. He said we could find someone in town, probably, to connect us with this person called The Serpent, and that they might be able to do more than he did."

"Connect with who, though?"

"I dunno—I didn't find out anything further, 'cause who am I going to ask, right? Like, besides Michael who is far from forthcoming."

Dammit. "There must be someone—"

"*Michael* is connected," Gen said. "Me, I know someone whose parents grow a bit of weed. See the distinction?"

"What about that witch?"

Gen scrunched up her face, as she seemed to realize whom Sage referred to. "The slut?"

"Wouldn't she know?"

"Hmm..." Genevieve considered the idea for a moment, then hopped up and went to her computer desk to sit. "I don't think I caught her last name, but we can search by address to get her number..." Gen must have found what she was looking for, as a few moments later she reached for her phone.

"Will she help?" Sage asked.

"Hell if I know."

"What are you going to say?"

"Again, hell if I know," she replied as she dialled and held the receiver to her ear. "Guess I'll wing it—hi!" She straightened her back and dropped her bright tone down a few notches, presumably so she didn't sound like a teenager.

"I'm looking for someone—someone in the area—and I was told you were the person to talk to." She paused, listened, then seemed to pale a bit. Taking a deep breath before responding, however, seemed to calm her down and she didn't seem quite as nervous as Sage expected she would.

"I got your name from Michael Parris," Gen continued coolly. "He *said* you were the kind of person to talk to about this, but if you don't know anything..." She paused again, and then grinned at Sage. "That would be much appreciated. We're looking for someone who can connect us with The Serpent. Yes, I'm sure... Yes, I realize that's a bad idea... Look, before you even say it, I'm sure the consequences will be dire or something too—will you tell me or not?" She snatched up a pen and paper from the desk suddenly and scribbled something down. "Yeah, thanks—say hi to Michael for me. Or something." Hanging up the phone, she turned to Sage. "Okay, she gave me an address. Just in case we're going to our doom, however, I'm going to send it to Mer so she can find our bodies. She sometimes checks her inbox at Thad's, so it's possible she'll get the message sometime next week."

"Just give me the address and I'll go—"

"Nu-uh. This is probably a really bad, bad, *bad* idea, so we'll both go."

Sage wasn't certain about that logic, but she didn't argue.

Genevieve claimed she recognized the address as one on the outskirts of town, so she called a cab for them to take to the house. As the taxi drove away, leaving Sage and Gen standing in an empty driveway, both girls had their reservations about what they were doing.

"You've got a weapon, right?" Gen asked.

"I never carry one."

"Great—some warrior you are. You're supposed to have a sword so we don't have to rely on my lame-ass magical abilities."

"If we're going to need a sword, you should probably leave right now."

They walked up the front steps, gazing at the dark bungalow before them. Gen hung close to Sage as she knocked on the front door. Moments later, the light just inside turned on and they heard footsteps nearing. As the door opened, Gen absently grabbed Sage's arm and squeezed.

A small, elderly woman stood within, squinting her eyes in the dim light. "Can I help you girls with something?" She walked up to the screen door to see them.

"It's always the little old lady you should watch out for," Gen whispered in Sage's ear.

"We're looking for someone who can connect with The Serpent," Sage said.

"Well, I-I don't believe we have many snakes around here. Did you check in the garden?"

Damn waste of time—that witch was probably playing with us.

Children of the Apocalypse

"Oh, but you know Austin has some pet snakes," the old lady continued. "He's my grandson. Are you looking for one of them?"

"At this point, we'll try anything," Sage said.

"Let me call him for you." The elderly woman went toward the back of the hall and called for her grandson. Quick footfalls hit the hardwood floors. An eight-year-old boy appeared around the corner.

"This keeps getting better and better," Gen said in a low voice.

"Let's just go," Sage began.

"C'mon, we can just see it through. At least Mer will get a laugh out of it later."

The young boy walked up to the door and gazed up at them. "Yeah?"

"We're looking for The Serpent," Sage said. "Or at least for someone who can connect with it."

He stepped away from the door. "Come inside."

This has to be some kind of practical joke.

Though she paused to see if the kid would crack a grin and show he was joking, he continued to stare at them with nothing but seriousness. With a sigh, Sage hauled open the door, and she and Gen went inside. They followed the boy deeper into the house. The place clearly belonged to the old lady—not a single piece of furniture dated more recently than the fifties. Austin led them to a sitting room, while his grandmother hung in the doorway.

"Should I get some cookies for you and your friends?" she asked.

Wow, she looks out of it.

"No Grandma." Austin stared at her. "We're busy."

She left without a word and the whole exchange disturbed Sage. *Creepy little boy.*

The boy sat in a rocking chair and gestured for Sage and Gen to take the couch opposite him. "First, we discuss payment."

"No," Gen said before Sage could respond. "First, we discuss who you are and what the deal is with 'The Serpent.'"

"You came here to see me and you have no idea who I am?"

"We're looking for someone who can contact the...deceased," Sage said. "We were given this address."

"Then we discuss payment."

Sage figured she had *maybe* five or six bucks in her pocket and she doubted Gen had anything to contribute. *Maybe he takes debit?*

"What are you, like five?" Gen said. "You'll probably spend it all on candy."

"Insulting me will cost you extra," Austin said without cracking a grin.

"Is there a Children of the Apocalypse discount plan?" Gen asked hopefully.

No wonder Michael wants to kill her, Sage thought with a roll of her eyes.

Austin sat back and regarded them thoughtfully. His light blue eyes went back and forth between them, sizing them up perhaps? Studying them? Sage couldn't decipher the look he gave them.

"You're serious?" he asked.

"Okay, so it was a stupid suggestion," Gen said. "You know," she turned to Sage, "being a witch and a warrior has done nothing but almost get us killed a few times—think we can exchange our membership cards for something better?"

"Yes, I believe we can make arrangements," Austin said.

Both Sage and Gen turned his way quickly.

"You're kidding," Sage said.

Austin eyed them both. "Tell me why you're here and what you need."

Gen explained about Finn trying to contact Hayden, but Austin kept his eyes locked on Sage the entire time.

"So can you help us contact him?" Gen asked.

"Not exactly. I can connect with the other world and pass on a message. *You* can't, however."

Sage's hopes fell. A message was better than nothing at all, but she would give anything to see him again...

"So where does the snake come in?" Gen asked.

Austin's gaze snapped to her. "*The Vision Serpent*. Show some respect."

"Um...sorry?"

"The Serpent is the conduit to the after life," he explained. "I call it with a blood sacrifice and through it I communicate with the spirit realm."

"Blood *sacrifice*? Like a cute fuzzy animal? We're not doing that. Ever. And I'll probably call PETA on you."

"My blood."

"Oh."

"Isn't there any way..." Sage began. *I need to see him...* "A way I could—"

"You want to actually have contact with him?" Austin guessed.

"I'd give anything."

"Anything?"

"Sage," Gen said worriedly, grabbing her arm. "Sage—"

"Anything."

As the ticking clock behind her ceased, the room around them darkened until she saw nothing but that which was in their general area. A glance to her left revealed Genevieve was gone—only Sage and Austin, their respective seats, and the coffee table between them remained. Austin stared at her with a strange intensity that seemed out of place on his young face.

"I can offer you the opportunity to see him," Austin said.

"The Serpent?"

He shook his head. "Not in the afterlife. For real. If you could change the past, would you do something to save him?"

For several long moments, she couldn't speak. *Could he be for real? Did he really mean...?*

"In a heartbeat," she whispered.

"I can give you the chance to take back one thing—change one decision you have made. And that *could* lead to him still being alive."

Children of the Apocalypse

Suspicion knotted her stomach. “What will this cost me?” She’d make a deal with the devil himself if it meant having Hayden back, but she’d prefer at least a warning of the price she was to pay.

“Nothing.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“I mean it.”

“But why would you—”

“Because of who you are. Because when fortune eventually smiles on you, I hope that by doing this, you will smile on me.”

She hadn’t a clue what he meant, but she nodded anyway. “What will happen?”

“You change one decision you’ve made and the world changes with it. When you leave this place, things will be different. No one else will know what happened.”

“And he’ll be alive?”

“Possibly,” Austin said. “There are many futures.”

“But what if he’s not? What if—”

“I wouldn’t send you without a way to restore things, though you’ll need something specific to this time...” He leaned forward and pulled the small wooden box on the coffee table towards him. Opening the lid, he dumped the contents on the table and rifled through the bits of string, elastics, stones, and chains.

Her hand went to the jewelry box in her pocket. “I have something.” She handed him the ring from Hayden.

Austin looked it over and nodded. “It will do.” He slid the ring onto a long chain and fastened the clasp. “I can give you a twenty four hour window. If you want to go back to how things were, just put on the ring.”

She slipped the chain over her head and tucked the ring beneath her shirt.

“Are you ready?”

Slowly, she nodded.

The boy pulled a knife from the pile of things he’d dumped on the table and put a thick slice in his arm. Sage’s eyes fixed on the wound, horrified at how casually he watched the blood drip from his arm onto the table. Next, he ran his other hand through the crimson pool, drawing patterns and shapes she didn’t recognize.

“Close your eyes,” Austin said. “Think of the decision you want to take back.”

She did as he instructed. What choice could she change? Maybe she could have stopped him from going into that parking lot alone. Or she could have killed the members of the Brethren at the creek when she had the chance. But there was still the man who sent them—Hayden would still be in danger.

It was then she knew what decision she had to change. Taking in a deep breath, she squeezed her eyes shut and spoke.

“I’m ready.”

~~*

Sage tightened her grip on her knapsack and knocked on the door again. Levi, from class, had told her and the other guy in their peer group to meet him at his house around four...so where the hell was he? Dammit, she'd knocked like three times already—

The door swung open then. Hayden, the co-op student from business class, stood before her.

"Hey..." He leaned on the doorframe, out of breath. "Sorry, just...heard the...bell. I was in..." He gulped down some air. "In the basement."

Sage bit back a grin. She'd been waiting outside for several minutes and her supposed host apparently wasn't home—she should be furious. The anger wasn't there, however—she couldn't even muster up a frown.

"The stairs are killer," he said, offering her a charming, lopsided smile.

"I bet."

"Levi's not home. Were you supposed to work on that project tonight?"

"Yeah. There was another guy too."

"He's not here either. And Levi didn't say anything about it to me."

Goddamn it, she was going to kill that guy. It wasn't easy cutting time out of her schedule of evening classes, and he insisted on them meeting at his house that night. A glance at her watch revealed it was quarter after four. She could still make it to Aikido if she hurried...

"Want to wait inside?" Hayden gestured behind him.

His dark brown gaze held hers for a moment and a strange, unfamiliar feeling settled deep in the pit of her stomach...

Butterflies?

"I don't know, I should probably—"

"Lev'll probably be home soon. We're kinda low on food, but I am an exceptional chef and I'm sure I could whip something up." He raised a brow in question. "C'mon, we've got like six hundred channels—there'll be something to watch while you wait. If you don't mind my company, that is. I could help you plot your revenge against my brother."

She should go—she knew it. But something seemed to push her forward; something beyond her control or comprehension.

"Ok—."

Wait, no, I can't. She remembered who she was, why she was here. She couldn't do it.

"Sorry," she said coolly, straightening her back. "I have somewhere to be."

He frowned a little and sighed. "Alright. Maybe I'll see you again sometime—"

But Sage was already walking away.

~~*

Sage opened her eyes and blinked a few times. The living room was back the way it was, except Genevieve was gone.

"Did it work—"

"You need to leave now." Austin rose. "It's almost my bedtime."

A little dazed, Sage stood as well and walked back towards the front door.
Did it work?

Children of the Apocalypse

“Austin,” she began, turning to face him.

“Twenty-four hours,” he reminded her. “Good luck.”

Sage stepped outside into the cold December air. Everything looked the same as it did before—a fresh layer of snow on the ground, waxing moon, only a few days left before Christmas. The next day, Friday, would be the last day of school before the holidays, and Levi had said the family was going away early. Would it be the same in this...this version of things? Her pace quickened, a familiar house in mind. She had to see him—had to see if it had really worked.

Please let him be alive...

Hayden’s place was well across town and a considerable hike from Austin’s. She was in a full run by the time she reached the Greenes’ residence, however. Cars rested in the driveway and there were lights in most of the windows. At least they were still home...

Pausing near the porch, she considered her actions. Running up, knocking on the door, and demanding to see Hayden didn’t seem like the best plan if she hadn’t been dating him in this version of the world. *But if it’s necessary...I’ll make it Plan B.*

She sidestepped the garden and rounded the house. A glance up to his bedroom window revealed a dark room. *Where would he be?...* Around the back of the house, she saw light through the basement window. Not a breath escaped her lips and she crept forward, gaze fixed on the window. She dropped to her knees in the snow and peered inside, past the frost.

Oh God. Her hand moved to cover her mouth, to escape the sob that threatened to pass.

Hayden lived.

Thirteen

Hayden sat on the basement couch, as he had a million times with her, Xbox controller in hand and gaze fixed on the television screen.

Several minutes passed with Sage unable to take her eyes off of him. Her fingers absently went for the chain around her neck. She pulled out the ring and squeezed it in her palm. *I'll never put it on—not ever.* Not now that she had him back.

He won't remember me, she reminded herself. *We haven't been dating for the past two years—I'll be lucky if he knows my name.* But it was all worth it. Like Michael said, anything would be worth it to have him back.

Sage stood at last, wiping her eyes dry. A glance at her watch revealed it was nearly eleven-thirty, and in this reality she had school the next day. Time to head home before her mom freaked out.

Her own home, however, was among the darkest on the block. Her mom hadn't even bothered with Christmas lights, which seemed horribly out of character.

At least they're asleep and they won't know how late I am getting back, she thought. After slipping inside, she locked the door behind her and looked around the main floor. Everything appeared the same; there were Ceci's toys, her Mom's briefcase, Kat's cell phone... She breathed with relief—though two years of history were different, at least they hadn't moved.

Sage headed downstairs and readied for bed, making as little noise as possible as to not wake her mother. As she climbed beneath the covers and switched the bedside lamp off, she considered the matter of Gen, Michael, and Merri. Was it even worth telling them? She'd probably seem crazy if she did manage to explain it coherently. Then Michael would yell at her for going to see the kid and his grandma, no doubt. God, what if he made her go back?

Children of the Apocalypse

Aware of the ring hanging around her neck, she hugged her pillow tightly. So she wouldn't tell them. Not yet. Perhaps eventually—well after the twenty-four hours were up.

Though it took awhile, at last she drifted off and for the first time in months she didn't cry herself to sleep.

~~*

As her eyes opened, Sage immediately glanced at the clock by her bed. After ten in the morning—she'd missed her first class already.

Muttering an obscenity under her breath, she grabbed a change of clothes and her book bag, and ran upstairs for the shower. At least her mom and sisters were already gone, so she had the place to herself. Thoroughly washed, changed, and ready for school, she skipped breakfast and left the house in a jog.

Her anatomy class had just begun as she slipped into the school. Thankfully, this-reality-Sage seemed to be taking the same classes as her, however following the teacher's directions when she'd missed so much school proved difficult.

I'll adjust, she reminded herself as she struggled through a short homework quiz. *It's a small price to pay to have him back.* Worst case scenario, she failed to get a scholarship next year and had to go to community college. If the reason she missed out on that was because she'd altered her history in order to save her boyfriend's life, there would be no complaints from her.

Lunch couldn't arrive soon enough for Sage, and as soon as the bell rang, she was out the door and on her way to her locker. The halls filled with students, and ahead of her she spotted a familiar tall figure. Genevieve weaved—and in some cases pushed—her way through the crowd. She reached her locker a few moments before Sage caught up with her.

Will she remember anything? She was there when it happened, sure, but...

"Hey," Sage said as she leaned on the locker next to Gen's.

Genevieve looked her way, startled. The dark circles under her eyes were a stark contrast to her light complexion, which was paler than usual. Tired blue eyes looked back at Sage.

"What?" Gen snapped. She stared expectantly for a moment, but when words failed Sage, Gen went back to stuffing her books in her locker.

"I just wondered what's up," Sage said at last.

"Why?"

Jesus, she's bitchy—how could Gen change so much in just two years? "What the hell is wrong with you today? Michael giving you shit?"

Genevieve's full attention shot to her. "How the fuck do you know about him?!" Her eyes grew huge and simmered with a combination of anger and fear. Sage found herself stammering her response.

"Why wouldn't I—I mean I—"

Realization struck Sage suddenly like a slap across the face. *She only knew about me because of what Levi saw that night I was attacked, and he only witnessed it*

because Hayden asked me to go to his game... So in this reality, Michael hadn't found her yet.

"How do you know about him?" Gen yelled, frayed nerves showing in the wail her tone took. The scene startled several people in the general area, and they sent curious looks Gen's way.

"I-I'm sorry." Sage backed away. "It was just a—a mistake." She slipped into the crowd and zigzagged between people until she could duck around a corner. Pressing her back to the wall, she held her books tight to her chest and processed this change. So they didn't know about her. Did she even want them to?

"Sage."

She glanced around for the source of the voice, hoping Gen hadn't tracked her down yet. Her gaze fell on a guidance counselor cutting through the crowd.

"Ms...Sommers," Sage said, the name taking her a moment to remember. *God, what the hell is happening now? Am I a problem student here or something?*

"Your uncle's been calling all morning," Sommers said, as if Sage was stupid for not already knowing this fact.

Keep calm, try not to look too confused... But she had very little contact with any of her uncles, so who exactly would be calling her? Her mom's brother lived in Saskatchewan and her father's side had absolutely nothing to do with her.

"Um...why?"

"You'd better call him right away—come on. He was very worried."

Sage followed Sommers down the corridor and towards the guidance offices. They stopped at a desk, where Sommers handed Sage the telephone and a pink slip of paper with a message on it. She dialled the unfamiliar number.

"Hello?" a gruff voice answered.

"Uh, hi. It's Sage—"

"Where the hell have you been?"

He sounded a little familiar...

"Uncle Badri?" she asked.

"Who the hell else were you expecting? Now why didn't you come home last night?"

So it was her dad's brother. What happened during these past two years? Had her mother dropped a few I.Q. points and gotten back with her father?

"Where were you?" he repeated.

"I was at home. I was late getting in, but I—"

"You went back there again," he said, understanding reaching his tone. "This has gotta stop. Your Aunt Jay is trying to clean the place up—the real estate agent is appraising the house next week. You can't keep going there—"

I don't fucking care if they think I'm crazy anymore! I can't keep doing this.

"Why are you selling the house? Where's my mom?"

"Just—"

"I want to talk to my mom," she interrupted. "Does she know about this?"

Silence followed. "That's not funny, Sage."

Dread pooled in the pit of her stomach. "Why would it be?"

Children of the Apocalypse

“Look, I’m coming to pick you up. We’ll discuss—”

Sage slammed the receiver down and spun to face Sommers. “What the fuck is going on?”

“Please lower your voice—”

She felt her face heat up with rage. “What the fuck is going on!”

Sommers eyes narrowed, concern knitting her brows. “Did something happen with your uncle’s family?”

Sage snatched up the phone again and dialed a familiar number.

“Who are you calling?” Sommers asked as Sage pressed the receiver to her ear.

“My mom.”

“Sage,” Sommers said calmly. “Put down the phone. You know she can’t answer.”

“Where’s my mom?” she said as she hung up.

“Are you having memory blackouts?” Sommers said with concern. “Trouble remembering things? Do you recall where you were last night?”

“I was home last night. Now where the hell is my mom?”

“Have a seat—”

“I don’t want to fucking sit down!”

Sommers sighed heavily and took the seat behind her desk. “You’ve pushed the accident out of your memory, I take it.”

“What accident?” Sage managed to whisper.

“A few weeks ago,” Sommers said, as if that would jog anyone’s memory in and of itself. When it didn’t, she continued. “Your mother and sisters were in an accident.”

Oh no, please... She dropped onto the chair behind her, gaze fixed on the floor.

“Do you remember yet?”

Sage shook her head.

“Your mom had picked up your sisters after school, I believe for a dentist appointment. An SUV hit theirs—a hit and run, according to witnesses.”

They can’t be dead...they can’t all be gone... How could this really be happening? Trading Hayden’s death for that of her family—what the hell kind of cosmic joke was this?

“Are they okay?”

“Your sister Ceci had minor injuries. She’s in the custody of your aunt and uncle.”

Oh god no...mom?

“Your sister Katlynn is...in the hospital. She has been since the accident. Perhaps your uncle can take you to visit her today.”

“Is she going to be okay?”

“Sage, there’s...there’s little brain activity. You don’t remember any of this?”

“I told you I don’t!”

“She’s on life support. From what your uncle has told me, the doctors don’t think...” Sommers didn’t finish and Sage understood why.

She bit her lip, worry gripping her then. Why would her uncle be telling the guidance counselor all this? Unless...

"Where's my mom?"

"She's..."

"Is she okay?"

"She's in the hospital as well. She had some head trauma and spinal injuries."

"Is she on life support too?"

"No, but... Sage, I really think you should talk to your uncle—"

"Just tell me what the fuck is going on! What's wrong with my mom?"

"As I said, she had head trauma. I think it would be best if you went to the hospital. I can schedule you another appointment to talk about this later this afternoon, if you'd like—"

"Who did it?" Sage interrupted, fearful that she already knew the answer.

"The SUV left the scene of the accident and they haven't been caught," Sommers said gently. "It was just a very, very bad accident."

It wasn't an accident. The Brethren assassins still came after me. God, in this reality, they're not dead....

Sage buried her head in her hands. This couldn't be happening. She had to go back—couldn't let this happen to them. *But, I can't go back to having him be gone too...* And maybe it wasn't as bad as Sommers made it sound—maybe doctors were working on her mom and Kat and they would be okay after all. And didn't doctors always tell people the worst news? Prepare them so they'd be surprised later?

"Do you need a few minutes or—"

I need to get out of here. Only vaguely aware of her movements, Sage stood and stumbled towards the door. She slipped back out into the busy hall, tunneled vision blocking out the bodies around her. One collided with hers, knocking her books to the ground.

Automatically she dropped to the floor to pick them up.

"I'm sorry—let me get those."

Her head snapped up at the familiar voice to see Hayden kneeling next to her, scooping up the scattered books. His friendly grin faded as his eyes met hers. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah—I'm..." Her lower lip trembled and tears made it difficult to see. She wanted nothing more than to crumple on the floor and cry, and breathing deeply had been doing nothing to calm her down. Grief hugged her tightly—a familiar feeling she couldn't seem to escape no matter where she went...

Holding her books for her in one arm, Hayden stood and offered her his hand. She accepted the gesture, shivering a little as her fingertips made contact with his. Once standing again, she retrieved her books from him.

He frowned in concern. "Bad news or something?"

Her eyes locked on his, their dark depths both comforting and a painful reminder of what she'd left behind. How the hell was she expected to make that choice?

Children of the Apocalypse

But Mom and Kat are still alive, she thought. *They might be all right after all. And if not, I'll talk to Austin—I'll find a way to change this...*

"I have to go," she said when she'd found her voice at last. "Thanks for..." She couldn't face him anymore and fled from the corridor. After tossing her books in her locker, she went straight for the front door. Would Austin be home, though? It was only noon, but did strange, magical kids like that actually go to school?

Her uncle might be there soon, however, so Sage didn't waste time leaving Newhaven High. Down the street was a convenience store, and it was there she chose to use a payphone and call a cab. Though she could have called from within the school, it seemed less likely that she'd run into her uncle there. After withdrawing a twenty from the bank machine, she met the cab outside and directed him to Austin's house.

She requested the cab wait for her as she raced up to the bungalow Austin shared with his grandmother, and pounded her fist on the door. Her impatient banging was met several seconds later when an annoyed Austin finally answered.

He frowned up at her, sighed, then stepped out onto the porch.

"Thank god you're home," she whispered.

He crossed his arms over his small chest. "My grandmother and I are working on our gingerbread house."

"There has to be another way to do this." Her eyes filled with tears. "My family was in an accident and—"

"So go back."

"But then Hayden will be dead!"

"Sounds like you have a choice."

That little prick. "I can't make that kind of choice. You've gotta be able to do something—"

"You had one," he held up his hand and waved his index finger at her, "choice. One decision you could change."

"Let me do another—"

"That's not how it works. You get *one*. I can't do anything about what happened."

Sage paced back and forth across the porch, raking her fingers back through her hair. *This can't be happening...* "There's gotta be another way."

"I told you I couldn't make any guarantees," Austin said, softening his tone a bit. "I'm sorry. I have to go back inside now." He opened the door and stepped into the house, but sent a glance back at her over his shoulder. "Merry Christmas."

She stared at the closed door for several moments in shock. How could he just leave her like that? Why wouldn't he help her?

The taxi horn honked behind her and Sage jumped.

"Metre's running, babe," the driver called.

Swearing under her breath, she stalked back to the cab and directed him to return to the school.

Michael, she thought as she walked back into Newhaven High. If anyone in town would have any idea of what to do, it would be him. Michael was connected—Michael knew a lot more than he told anyone. He could help, though whether or not he *would* was a completely different matter. *So I'll have to make him tell me...and I'll need help.*

Lunch was nearly over, and students crowded around their lockers. Sage wove around people until she reached Gen's locker, where she found both the Witch and Merri deep in conversation.

"Both of you, come with me," Sage interrupted.

"Who the hell are you?" Merri asked.

Sage walked right passed them, only pausing briefly to gesture for them to follow. She waited for them inside the girls' washroom, where she kicked out any unwanted occupants.

"What do you want?" Gen asked as Sage locked the door behind her and Merri.

"I take it you guys and Michael haven't killed The Brethren assassins yet, right?" Sage said.

"Who the fuck are The Brethren?" Gen said.

Sage took a deep breath. This wouldn't be fun.

She explained what she could; that she was the Warrior, that she was from another "reality" in which she had been dating Hayden and he died, and that she and Gen had gone to someone who was able to let her change things. She detailed what she knew about the four men with identical knives that had been chasing Gen and Merri, and related what happened to her family. When she finished, both of the other girls stared at her in shock.

"Mer, you know I'm telling the truth," Sage said when it seemed no one else would speak. "I mean, you could tell if I was lying." Her dark eyes pleaded with Merri, who watched her coolly in return. "Mer?"

"I believe you, I think," Merri said with caution.

"Mer—" Gen began.

Merri ignored Genevieve's warning tone. "So what are we supposed to do?"

"I figure if anyone knows how to fix this—or knows someone who might know—it's Michael," Sage said.

"Now Michael is *not* going to believe you," Merri said.

Sage glanced at her watch. "I'll deal with him, but I have to head to the hospital first." *I need to know how bad this is...* "I'd really appreciate it if you could tell him what I've told you, though. And if he still doesn't believe you, mention Natalya."

"And who is Natalya?" Gen asked.

"The fourth one of us—an Immortal."

"Um...what?"

"No—no, he would have told me about a fourth," Merri insisted.

"He didn't," Sage said. "We only found out while he was trying to track her down, through a guy named David Shaw. You haven't met him or Thad yet?"

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“Who the hell is Thad?” Merri said, definitively answering Sage’s question negatively.

“Your boyfriend,” Sage replied.

“Now I *know* you’re crazy.”

“So do I get a girlfriend in this alternate universe?” Gen spoke up.

“Yeah, someone named Peyton,” Sage said, though she could hear the skepticism to Gen’s voice. “You’ve been talking about her nonstop, but I don’t really know her.”

“Isn’t she in our English class?” Merri said.

“Uh, yeah,” Gen replied. “And she’s not into chicks. She went out with Levi last week.”

“Look, if you just tell Michael what I’ve said, he’ll believe me.” *Probably*, she silently added. “Head to his place. I’ll meet you there.”

“But—” Gen called as Sage headed for the door.

“I’ll see you in a few hours.”

The hospital was within walking distance of the high school. At the reception desk, Sage requested both her sister’s and her mother’s room numbers. Kat’s was the nearest, so Sage headed up to the third floor to see her.

She heard the slow beep of a machine just before she stepped into Kat’s room, but nothing else. Hardly recognizable, her little sister lay on a hospital bed. Sage walked to her side. Kat’s hair was bound back in braids, but for a spot on the side that had been shaved, leaving a long ugly scar. Her left arm was in a cast, while the right hooked up to several I.V.’s and machines.

“Oh, Kit Kat,” Sage whispered as she reached her sister’s side. She gingerly touched Kat’s hand, her fingers sliding over the smaller, lifeless ones. Though Sage glanced over the machines, she could discern nothing from their flashing lights and noises. She ran a hand over Kat’s brow, hoping to see a reaction, hoping what her guidance counselor had said was wrong. But still, her sister didn’t open her eyes, didn’t flinch—didn’t move. Even the machines breathed for her.

“I figured you’d show up here eventually.”

Sage swung around to see her uncle, Badri, standing in the doorway.

She hadn’t seen any members of her father’s family in years, though he looked the same as she recalled. Older than her father, hard eyes, and an embittered frown, she’d disliked him immensely growing up. Her parents had fought a lot, and her father left them when she was just a child. His family had sided with him during the disputes, and Sage grew up with a grudge about it.

“You weren’t at the school,” he said.

“How long did it take you to figure that out?” she snapped.

“Don’t be such a brat. Not here. Your teacher at school said you had some kind of breakdown—”

"Yes, I had a breakdown. So can you explain to me why you're here when my dad's not?"

"He's in jail again."

"Smack around another girlfriend?"

"Allegedly."

Big damn surprise. Sage rolled her eyes. "So why the hell are you here again?"

"I'm your mother's power of attorney. She never told you?"

She shook her head.

"I was called after the accident."

Sage had no idea that her mother had kept in contact with him, let alone that she would permit him to make important decisions regarding their finances and health.

"I want to see my mom."

"She's in another wing—I'll take you there."

After giving her sister's hand one last squeeze, Sage followed her uncle from the room. In the doorway, she cast a glance back at Kat. *I'll try to make this right...I promise.*

Diana Bethany was on a different floor of the hospital, in the wing for patients requiring longer term care and rehabilitation. Sage found her mother seated in a wheelchair in a common room, staring out a window. She rushed to her side and dropped down on her knees.

"Mom?" Sage whispered, reaching up to clasp her mother's hand.

Diana blinked a few times as she glanced down at her daughter. It took a moment, but eventually recognition passed through her dark eyes.

"Sage. Is everything all right—"

Sage stood up on her knees and hugged her mother, happy to be in her embrace. "Mom, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry..."

"About what?" Diana asked kindly as she brushed the hair back from her daughter's forehead.

Tears shone in her eyes as she gazed up at her mother. "The accident."

"Oh sweetie, you can't blame yourself for that. I'm glad you weren't there too."

"I'll be out in the hall," Badri called. Her mother gazed over her shoulder at him, smiled, and nodded.

"Why did you let him come here?" Sage asked as she sat back on her heels.

"He and Jayanti have been helping us out a lot. Don't be so rude with him."

"He said you're selling the house."

"You know that... We've talked about it. In the New Year, we're going to be moving in with them in Toronto. I can get better treatment out there."

"Can Kat get better treatment too?"

Her mother's eyes glistened with tears. Her lips parted, but rather than speak, she wrapped her longer fingers over her face.

"The-the counselor, at school, says I'm having a breakdown," Sage said quickly. "Because I can't remember much about the weeks since the accident."

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“Sweetheart...” Her mother reached down and took one of Sage’s hands in both of hers. “I think we’re going to be taking her off the machines.”

“But she can still get better—”

“We’ve been talking to a few doctors. There’s no brain activity. Honey, she’s not going to wake up.”

No...no... Sage’s hand went to the ring hanging on the chain beneath her shirt. How could she trade Hayden for Kat?

“We’re going to wait until after the holidays,” her mother continued gently. “We’ll still have one last Christmas with her.”

I’ll make this right, Sage thought, the image of her sister in that hospital bed burned in her mind. *I’ll go to Michael, I’ll make him find a spell or something—even if I have to go through his computer myself—and I’ll make this right.*

Sage walked the way to Michael’s place, hoping Merri and Gen were already there and had explained at least a bit to Michael. If they had broken him in a little, convincing him she told the truth might be easier.

Michael’s old car waited in the driveway, so she guessed at least he was home. She banged on the door until Merri answered.

“He’s pissed,” Meredith said in a low voice as she let Sage inside. “Really pissed.”

Not exactly news.

Inside the house, Michael leaned on the arm of a chair in the living room, facing Sage and the front door. Arms crossed over his chest, she recognized the look on his face; as Merri said, he was pissed. Gen sat on the couch a few feet away, feet tucked under her and cheeks stained with tears. Long hair hung around her face, giving her a tired look.

Michael wasted no time getting to the point. “What the hell have you been telling them?”

Sage took a deep breath. “The truth.”

“Oh, right, the truth that you learned while you existed in another reality.”

“Yes. How else would I know about The Brethren, about Natalya, about David Shaw? Thad Kincaid, Shaw’s student whom you’ve been corresponding with to try to learn more about the Immortal? I know you have a friend named Finn O’Shea who lives in London, and that he’s a medium, because you asked him here to contact my boyfriend who died. And you know Finn because you wanted him to contact your wife, but he couldn’t.”

Michael’s face changed then—his eyes widened and flesh paled.

“You tell me about her because I lost Hayden,” Sage continued before he could stop her. “I know you used to be a teacher and you met her at a party. And I know you used to promise to take her to the theatre, but you never got to. And I know you fill sketchbooks with drawings of her that you later burn. You were going to name your son after your father and I know Anne was murdered—”

"Enough," he cut in. Sage went silent, accustomed to doing so under his steady gaze.

"You were married?" Gen spoke up in a small voice.

"Shut up," he snapped her way, then directed his attention back to Sage. "If this is true, how did you do it?" He nodded Gen's way. "This one wouldn't have been any help."

"Gen found out from this witch, Krysta, that there was a kid in town—Austin—who can connect with the Vision Serpent. We went to him, hoping he could contact Hayden, and he offered to let me change the past."

"The Vision Serpent...Jesus-fucking-Christ, do you have any idea what you've been playing with? Do you know what that 'kid' is capable of?"

"Yeah," she said, matching his dark tone and stalking forward. "I know that he brought me Hayden back—*that* is what he's capable of. Now I need to know what else is out there—or *who* else—that can do something about my sister. She's in the hospital on life support."

"You haven't a fucking clue what you've—"

"And you're telling me you wouldn't do that for Anne? You wouldn't—"

Glass shattered in the far left of the room, startling everyone. Sage glanced around, alert and attempting to detect the source of the noise. Her gaze fell on the window in time to see more panels break. Michael hit the ground, blood splattering on the floor around him.

"He's been shot!" Merri cried.

"Get down!" Sage ducked to avoid any further gunfire.

Gen dropped down behind the couch, while Merri knelt near Michael.

Sage crawled to meet her. "Jesus, you get shot in every reality." She grabbed a semi-conscious Michael under the arms. "The kitchen," she shouted to the others. There weren't any windows in that area, and it seemed a better place to find temporary cover.

Merri went ahead of her while Sage dragged Michael across the floor, leaving a bloody trail on the hardwood.

"Mer, look for weapons," she instructed as she safely moved Michael behind the kitchen table.

"Way ahead of you," Merri said. Silverware clattered on the floor as she dumped out the contents of drawer. She separated the steak knives, scissors, and anything else sharp she could find. "Why are they doing this now? They've come at us a few times, but—"

"They've got all of you confined..." Michael gasped in pain as he sat up. "And they must think they can kill you this time." The bullet hole in his chest seemed dangerously near his heart, but he otherwise seemed to be functioning. He reached forward but winced in pain again. "My ankle...there's a gun."

Merri went for the weapon while Sage grabbed a knife from the stack.

"I don't suppose you put in the roof exit yet?" Sage asked.

Michael looked at her sharply, surprise passing through the depths of his eyes for a moment before he recovered. "They hadn't yet been to my home, so I've put it off."

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“Damn. So what—”

More glass shattered as something sailed through the window. A bottle landed several feet away, cracking open and spilling a liquid on the floor. Sage breathed in deeply.

Gasoline.

“They want to smoke us out,” Michael said, confirming her thoughts.

“We gotta get out of here,” Sage said.

Michael rifled through his pocket and produced a set of keys, which he thrust into Merri’s hand. “You need to drive.”

“They’ll be waiting at the front,” Sage said.

“Then shoot anything that moves,” Michael said, nodding Merri’s way. “Go first and...” His eyes travelled over their faces. “Where the hell is the other one?”

Sage glanced back to the main room and found Gen still crouched behind the couch, face a mess of tears.

“Get the fuck over here!” Michael shouted at her.

Another bottle filled with gasoline hit the floor not far from where Gen hid.

“Now!”

“They’ll shoot me!” Gen cried.

“Jesus Christ, you’re fucking useless—”

“I’ll get her,” Sage said quickly. “You guys get to the car.” She crawled forward, keeping an eye on the windows and her hand on the knife. Just steps away, a lit book of matches hit the floor.

Dammit...

“Gen, c’mon.” She reached for the other girl’s arm.

“They’re going to shoot us,” Gen sobbed.

“Mer and Michael are getting the car—we’ll be fine. But you have to come with me.” *God, this Gen is even more of a whiner than the other one.* She wrapped her fingers around Gen’s wrist firmly. “Come on.”

Fire snaked along the trails of gasoline around them. She yanked on Gen’s arm and dragged her towards the door, both of them in a half crouch. The front door lay open. *I hope they made it...*

Out of view of the windows, Sage and Gen stood at last. Beyond the front door, Sage saw Merri and Michael making their way to the car. Glancing cautiously out the door but seeing no sign of trouble, Sage gave Gen’s wrist another tug and moved towards the car.

Gen froze behind her, drawing Sage to halt.

“We’re almost—” Sage looked back and her eyes widened in horror. A Brethren assassin had Genevieve pinned against him, knife against her throat. In the chaotic moments that followed, Gen’s terrified eyes met Sage’s, and Sage tried to move, tried to stop him...

He slashed the blade across Genevieve’s throat. Hot blood struck Sage in the face as she stepped forward to stop him. Gen’s eyes went glassy, and though her lips parted, no sound escaped them.

The assassin let her go and Gen fell forward into Sage's arms.

Behind her, Merri screamed and fired the gun, striking the assassin in the chest. Sage backed up, Gen's lifeless body heavy in her arms.

"Everyone in the car," Michael shouted.

Merri had the vehicle running by the time Sage got herself and Gen into the backseat next to Michael. Tires squealed as the car spun out of the driveway and flew down the road.

"Is she..."

Sage looked up to meet Merri's tearful gaze in the rearview mirror. Gen's body moved in Sage's arms and for a moment she felt an instant of hope that perhaps she was okay after all... And then her eyes settled on Michael, who had eased Gen back to feel for a pulse.

Blank eyes stared up at the roof of the car and Sage knew the answer before he spoke.

"She's dead," he said quietly.

Sage doubled over, hugging her stomach and openly crying. It wasn't supposed to happen this way...

"I just wanted Hayden back," she whispered, to no one in particular. "I just wanted him..."

"I wanted Anne," Michael said, his voice cutting through her and immediately drawing her eyes his way. "More than anything. But I would never change the past to have her back."

"Why?"

"Because I'm supposed to be here for the three of you," he said simply. "And that never would have happened if she had lived."

"But—"

"Some things are more important than what you want, Sage." He gazed down at Gen, and Sage couldn't decipher the look in his eyes. A hint of grief? Of regret? She didn't know.

And I never will.

After driving in silence long enough to ensure they weren't being followed, Sage directed Merri to a familiar road after dusk had fallen. As she got out, Sage sent a final glance back to the car where she could make out the form of Gen's lifeless body in the back and Michael staring straight ahead. They drove off, leaving her to stare up at the house in silence.

Her feet felt heavy as she forced them forward, up the path to the porch, then onto the porch to the front door. Pressing hard on the cold plastic button near the door, she heard the bell ring within.

Moments later the door opened and Levi peaked out. He looked her up and down, and then frowned. "Are you—"

"I need to see your brother," she said in a soft voice, well aware that she was covered in Gen's blood but not wanting to bother with an explanation.

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“But—”

“Please.”

Levi stepped back, still staring at her with worry, and called for Hayden. Several minutes later, Hayden came to the door. Sage stepped back. He understood the invitation and slipped on a pair of shoes, then met her out there.

“Are you okay?” he asked in concern. “Was there an accident? Do you need a pho—”

Sage threw her arms around his neck and pulled him close, sobbing into his shoulder. His arms tentatively went around her waist. She knew he probably didn’t even remember her name, but she held him anyway.

She breathed him in, felt the familiar plane of his shoulders, his back—everything was so familiar. But her joy at feeling him in her arms again was crushed by the knowledge it truly would be the last time. She tightened her embrace, heart aching.

Tilting her head to look up at him, she was met with an expression of confusion, but didn’t care. She leaned up and kissed him softly on the lips, tears falling steadily.

“I love you,” Sage whispered against his lips, eyes squeezing shut. “I love you so much...and I miss you more than anything...” Her voice broke. She moved one hand to her neck and felt around for the chain. Once in her grip, she yanked it from her neck and slipped the ring off. The chain clattered to the floor of the porch as she wrapped both arms around his neck again.

“Please tell me you love me,” she whispered.

“Um—”

“Please.”

“Okay...” There was doubt in his voice, but he hugged her tightly. When he spoke, she felt his warm breath on her ear. “I love you.”

She positioned the ring at the tip of her finger.

I’m sorry.

She let out a deep breath. “Goodbye.”

Sage slid the ring onto her finger.

She could feel the couch beneath her, the cold night air replaced by the warmth of a home, and someone’s hand on her arm. Though everything was different, she kept her eyes closed, wishing it had been a bad dream. She felt the ring on her finger, however—a reminder of what she had just done.

“Sage, you can’t seriously be thinking...”

She opened her eyes to see Gen sitting beside her on the couch in Austin’s home, her friend’s grip tightening on her arm in worry.

“You don’t know what he’s talking about—it could be dangerous.”

Sage felt a warm tear hit her cheek; she reached up to brush it away. “You’re right.” Casting a glance at Austin, she found the kid stared at her with little

emotion. A small nod her way was the only indication given that he remembered what happened.

“Why don’t we just stick with the Vision Snake thingy?” Gen suggested.

“Maybe another day,” Austin said. “I think I’m done working tonight.”

“Let’s go home.” Sage rose from the couch and left the room without another glance behind her. Genevieve followed suit, and soon the two of them were back outside on the street in front of the house.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to talk to him,” Gen said immediately. “Maybe another time...”

“It’s okay.”

“And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you—”

Sage met her friend’s eyes. “It’s all right, Gen.” She took a deep breath, hoping she didn’t sound too upset. Her voice cracked a little, but seemed steady enough. “Do you want to call a cab home or walk?”

“I don’t mind hoofing it if you’re okay with it,” Gen said with a grin. “Unless you want to be by yourself...”

Sage shook her head. “It’s okay. I’ll walk you home.”

Fourteen

Dark. Night, maybe? A room with no light seemed a possibility...but no, no, she had a sense of being out in the open...

And it was uncommonly cold. Too cold for it to be indoors. A breeze brushed her cheeks and she breathed in the fresh air deeply. She heard...water. Waves lapping at a shore, smacking rocks. The ground beneath her, however, was hard, even, and solid—not a beach, not natural ground.

Focusing her thoughts, her feelings next, she dug through the tangle of emotions and grabbed one thread to start.

Desire. Her skin flushed and body tingled with heat. She...wanted. Craved. This wasn't normal desire. It seemed heightened and stronger. She felt the overwhelming need to...to *consume*.

Onto a new thread now. Pain. Screams. Flesh tearing from bone. She sought the old thread but it was lost to her—she was lost, abandoned to the mess of terror...

Merri opened her eyes.

Sweat dripped from her forehead, her heart hammered in her chest, and all her limbs trembled.

She rose from her couch and went straight for the bathroom, where she splashed cold water on her face. Several minutes of deep breathing later, she felt her nerves ease considerably.

The same vision had been plaguing her thoughts recently. Since that day at Thad's in November when she'd had a brief flash, every few weeks it would invade her dreams again, or disrupt her during her day...

Three months later, however, the visions had grown more and more frequent. She was done ignoring them; it seemed the only way to deal was to face them head on.

She crossed her apartment and grabbed a can of Pepsi from the fridge. After an episode like the one she'd just experienced, a rush of sugar usually made her feel better.

Her phone rang from where she'd left it on the coffee table. The bit of extra cash from tutoring Peyton for two months gave her enough to pick up a cheap cell phone and supply of phone cards. The money Lexie sent still paid for rent and the few utilities rent didn't cover. If she got another tutoring job, maybe she actually afford something above basic cable.

"Hello?" she said as she answered.

"You ready yet?"

Merri swung around to glance at the clock on the microwave. She'd lost an hour. Shit.

"Will be shortly."

"I could swing around and get Gen and Peyton first to give you more time?" Thad suggested.

"That would be appreciated."

"Okay, but this means I'll be in the car alone with your hot lesbian friends. I may be awhile if I can coax them to pose for the camera."

"I *won't* be waiting out front, then. See you soon."

Merri slipped into a new pair of jeans and a dressy shirt, both of which she had shoplifted on separate occasions. Going out with Thad had its drawbacks: mainly that she couldn't shop solely at the Salvation Army Thrift Store as much. She did tend to eat better than the no-name instant dinners she was used to, however, so it seemed a fair trade off.

Twenty-five minutes after he called, Thad pulled up at the building where he thought she lived, and Merri waited for him out front. Once she'd slipped into the car, Thad leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"That was a quick photo shoot," Merri said.

Thad held up his camera phone to show her a grainy picture of Genevieve and Peyton in the back kissing. Merri cast a glance back at them and they giggled in response.

"He asked nicely," Gen replied with a grin.

"I'll bet."

The girls held hands in the back, whispering and laughing about something. They looked happy and Merri was glad of it, for Gen's sake.

"Levi's going to meet us there, by the way," Gen said.

"With Kourtnee?"

"No, thank god. I think they had a fight. Probably 'cause she's a skank."

"She's not a skank," Peyton said.

"She might as well be. Present company excluded, but why are all the guys we know dating skanks?"

"Uh, think about that question for a sec, Gen," Thad pointed out.

"Who else do we know dating a skank?" Peyton asked.

"Oh, possibly Michael, though I don't know if whatever they're doing can really be called dating."

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Merri rolled her eyes. Michael would kill Gen if he knew how often she casually referenced things around Peyton that she really shouldn't be referencing.

"Who?" Peyton asked.

"He's a friend of mine," Thad said quickly.

"Yeah, he's seeing this real witch," Gen added.

God, she's going to get herself into trouble one of these days...

"So I guess with Levi coming alone, Sage wouldn't have been a fifth wheel?" Merri said, changing the subject. "She might have come along."

"I don't think she wanted to," Gen said. "She's been real quiet the past...well, forever."

Merri had noticed a difference in her as well, as if she were even more melancholy. But she seemed to have accepted something, as if she were content in her sadness and grief.

Still, Gen had tried to get her to go out with them. It was a Saturday, just a few days before Valentine's Day and almost two weeks before Genevieve's birthday. Thad knew a place outside of town that had great Italian food, and though Merri originally proposed a double date, Gen had wanted to bring Levi as well. Merri pointed out that would mean Kourtnee too, but Gen grudgingly invited him anyway. Sage flat out refused to go, however.

Thad stopped the car in the parking lot and the group got out.

"I'm going to have a quick smoke," Merri said. "Meet you inside?"

Thad looked as though he was about to say something—her smoking bugged him, she knew—but instead he nodded.

A man stood outside the restaurant as well, cigarette poised between his lips and newspaper in hand. He offered her a light when she withdrew a pack of smokes from her pocket, but she declined. He might be just acting polite, but Merri always found the act insulting, as if men assumed either she was incapable of lighting her own cigarette, or they thought her stupid enough to be travelling with smokes but no way to light them.

Though attempting to mind her own business, the front of the newspaper caught her eye.

Body found at local motel.

The touch of dread coating her stomach after her earlier vision seemed to thicken.

"Hey, you done with the front page?" she asked.

The man shrugged and handed her the outside page.

She scanned the article for the pertinent details: a motel on the water, young male found dead, killed sometime during the night...

Near the end of the article, the reporter mentioned the deaths of Warren Humber, Hayden Greene, and another guy Merri hadn't heard about. Though the article didn't say the deaths were connected, a police officer was quoted as saying the murder rate in the general area had been strangely high as of late.

Hayden, of course, had nothing to do with it, but the others did seem strange. The next page continued on, suggesting perhaps the increased homicides were a greater trend trickling in from Toronto.

Something felt wrong, however. Excluding Hayden, all the other murders took place near the same stretch of road, all young men, and no one had any suspects. It *had* to be connected to her dreams and visions.

She stomped out her cigarette, but didn't go inside quite yet. Instead, she pulled out her phone and dialled Michael's cell phone number. Luckily, he picked up.

"I need to talk to you," she said.

"What about?"

"Did you see today's paper? *The Newhaven Daily*?"

"You really think I follow stories about local craft fairs and little league tournaments?"

"I'm serious. There's...look, I don't want to do this over the phone. I'm on a double date right now, but I'll drop by when we're done—"

"I won't be home."

Damn him. "This is important."

Silence followed for a moment. "I'm on the road right now. *If* I'm going in your direction, I'll stop there briefly. Where are you?"

She gave him the address of the restaurant, but not before warning him not to disrupt their dinner. There was no sense worrying the others, and it would probably be best if Peyton and Levi didn't see Michael.

He told her he'd be there in twenty minutes, so Merri returned to the restaurant—with the newspaper article folded in her pocket—and found Thad's table easily. Gen, Peyton, and Levi were crowded into one side of the booth, while Thad and Merri had the other.

Gen nattered on about something, though Merri wasn't really listening. Her eyes strayed around the restaurant, glancing out windows and checking out the patrons around them. She almost expected Michael not to show up at all and tell her later she had been stupid for bothering him in the first place. But as her waiting neared the half hour mark and the plates of hot Italian food arrived, a glance at the bar showed a familiar profile.

Though Merri tried to excuse herself from the table to meet with him, Gen insisted on accompanying her, so Merri pretended to have to hit the washroom. No one would buy another smoke break so soon.

"This was such a good idea to go out tonight," Gen said as they stopped at the bathroom sinks. She hopped onto the counter and swung her long legs back and forth. "I thought for sure my mom would have some lame ass party idea, so I didn't bother planning anything, but I'm pretty sure she's not going to bother."

Merri played with her hair and pretended to seem as if she actually had something to be doing in there. "Your birthday's still two weeks away. It could just be a surprise."

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"I don't think so. My mom buys shit like party supplies way in advance. I already found where she stashed my present and there aren't any party favours in there. I was just going to whine that I didn't want a party anyway—not after last year's winter hell known as my sweet sixteen party—but she could have at least made an effort. I'm glad I got to go out with you guys anyway and that Peyton's evil mother let her out for an evening. Did I tell you she's the devil?"

"Several times," Merri replied.

"Yeah, well, she's awful. And I think she hates me. She doesn't want Peyton drinking, so she won't let her go out to anyone's birthday party if it's at a home. 'Cause apparently sleepovers equal Jello Shooters and body shots or something in her warped brain."

"So she hasn't told her mother yet about the two of you?"

Gen's gaze dropped. "No. Not yet. I mean, it's no big deal and all. Her parents are a little nutty, though, so she can't tell them, but she doesn't mind being open around you guys, so it's okay."

Merri had noted when she came to the table that for some reason Levi was sitting between Gen and Peyton, so she wasn't certain Peyton really was that "open" as Gen seemed to hope, but it seemed far too hurtful to point that out while they were supposed to be celebrating. Meredith kept her silence, though vowed to sit down with Gen and speak to her about it at some point.

"Ready to go back? I don't want the tortellini to get cold."

At least here was hopefully a moment to slip away. "You go on ahead." Merri faked a weak smile and wrapped her arms around her stomach. "I'm actually not feeling very well—I just want to splash some water on my face and sit here where it's quiet for a second."

"Are you all right?" Gen asked immediately with concern. "We can go home or—"

Dammit, I don't want her to think I'm sick for her birthday dinner. "No, no, I'm fine. It's just a cold, but sometimes all the screaming kids out there get to me."

"I'll order you some ginger ale," Gen promised before leaving. Merri held the bathroom door open a crack and watched her disappear in the direction of the booth. Now she just had to slip out and get over to the bar.

Thankfully, the restaurant was considered to be a "family friendly" one, and the bar lay in a completely separate section from the dining area. Merri ducked out of view of her own table and made her way around to the bar where Michael sat sipping a beer. She slid onto the barstool next to his.

The bartender immediately looked her way. "I'm not serving you."

"And I didn't fucking ask you to, now did I?" she snapped. He visibly backed off, so she and Michael were left with a bit of privacy.

"This had better be good," Michael said as he turned to her.

Merri pulled out the newspaper page folded in her pocket and handed it to him. He scanned the article, and then passed it back to her.

"So?"

Of course he wouldn't see the connection. "So something's going on. Young men don't just randomly get murdered."

“Apparently they do.”

“Look, I’ve been having...visions or something about this. That tells me we should be looking into it.”

“Christ, you’re as paranoid as Genevieve.”

“She brought this up too?”

“Back when the kid died at the club the night you were there.” He continued to sip his beer as if nothing was wrong and the reaction—or lack thereof—annoyed her.

“And you don’t think this is important?”

“Had the other two died at the same location one of you had just visited, then maybe. But this,” he gestured at the paper, “is nothing.”

“And the fact that I keep having visions...?”

“Read the article again. It says, several times, that there is very little crime in this general area, let alone homicide. You’ve only lived here for what, six months or so? Logically, you’d probably have visions of some of the only crime occurring here.”

“And how does that change the fact that it looks like a serial killer? That this is all connected?”

“It doesn’t. The police can handle it.”

“And what a fine job they’re doing,” she snapped.

Michael sighed and set down his glass, as if annoyed he had to patiently explain something simple to a stupid child. “You aren’t a superhero. Neither are Sage or Gen. The three of you aren’t heading off to stop killers or monsters and rescuing civilians. Your job is to stay alive, not play Scooby-Do.”

“But—”

“But nothing. I’m not having any of you risking your lives for something that doesn’t even concern you. If visions are bothering you, we’ll work at blocking them.”

“And what if this isn’t something the police can handle?”

“For example?”

“The...” She had to check herself and ensure she didn’t use “The Brethren” to describe the assassins from before, as Michael still didn’t know she and the others had found out about them. “The people who came after us before. That wasn’t the kind of situation where we could just let the police handle it when they came after Hayden.”

“That was different. They were directly threatening your lives. Now, by all means, should you encounter some proof—while *not* doing anything at all that could conceivably endanger your life—that this serial killer is going to come after you, by all means let me know and we can gang up on him and kill him. Until then, I’m not worrying about it.”

There seemed no use bringing up the “innocent lives” thing, as Michael clearly didn’t give a damn about any of that, so Merri bit her tongue. Annoyed, she stuffed the article back in her pocket and stood to leave the bar.

She froze as her eyes met those of Genevieve, who stood in the archway.

Fuck.

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Merri quickly moved to meet her and though Gen opened her mouth to speak, she silenced her by raising her hand.

"I just had to talk to him about something," she said.

"So you're sneaking off—"

"I didn't think I should invite him to sit with us in case Peyton had questions, and then there's the matter of Levi thinking Michael is your creepy stalker whom he had chased off months ago."

"Fine, but you couldn't have met him later?"

"He said he wouldn't be home."

"Ah, right—he and Finn are probably off being man-whores or something. I like Finn and all, so I'm guessing Michael's just a bad influence on him."

Merri was pretty sure at least Michael wasn't whoring with anyone but that witch still, but she didn't say anything.

"So you had to drag him here to ruin our night?" Gen continued.

"I didn't want to ruin anyone's night, which is why I snuck over here to meet him. And with any luck, he's leaving, so no worries."

"So why'd you invite him here?"

Damn, she was hoping Gen might have forgotten that she hadn't actually answered that question yet.

"I wasn't really lying when I said I wasn't feeling well," Merri said quickly, making it up as she went along. "I had a vision and it kind of weirded me out. I'm supposed to call Michael when it happens, and I guess he wasn't that far from the restaurant."

"You two were arguing."

"Um, yeah—have you met Michael before?"

"Good point. Well, come on—Thad was asking for you."

She could have just told Gen the truth; it would have been simple, and Gen would undoubtedly be on her side about it. But at the same time, she had to agree with Michael. So what if there was a serial killer? Were they really supposed to go and stop him? Not everyone could be saved, and she knew that was probably something Gen wouldn't understand. She'd want to help, want to do something to stop people from being killed. And if they foolishly ran off like a regular Scooby-Gang to save the day, Merri would never forgive herself if something happened to Gen—or Sage, for that matter. It would be better to just ignore all of this for the time being, and should any future visions reveal something more—something that could be of use—then she would go to Michael and demand he help her do something about it.

Thad drove Peyton home first, then Gen, then swung around towards Merri's apartment—or at least the building he thought was hers. She expected a few heated moments and then a goodbye, so it surprised her when he cut the engine and turned her way.

"What was up with Michael tonight at the restaurant?"

Jesus Christ, she was getting bad at keeping secrets from people. “I guess I suck at having secret meetings with people. Did Gen tell you?”

“I told *her*. I saw the two of you at the bar, and then asked her if you were done in the bathroom yet.”

“I just had to talk to him about some things. Seer things. He happened to be in the area. Okay?”

It didn’t seem to be okay, but he didn’t argue. Instead, he reached across her to the glove compartment, popped it open, and withdrew a small, flat box wrapped in white paper with a single red bow.

“Happy Valentine’s Day,” he said with a smile as he met her eyes. “I would have saved it for Thursday, but since I’m working...”

She hadn’t actually expected anything from him, and held the gift for a few moments after he handed it to her.

“Well now I feel bad.” She grinned. “You got me something and all I had planned was a blow job.”

“I couldn’t ask for a better Valentine’s Day present than that. Or any day present, for that matter.”

She ran her thumbnail along the paper and tore into it, leaving her with a plain box. She opened it and gazed at the tiny book within, no larger than her hand.

“Aw, isn’t that sweet—you think I’m literate,” she said.

“It’s a book of poetry. When Shaw moved rather abruptly—and I think you know why—he told me to take whatever books I wanted. This one,” he nodded to the book, “was one Natalya apparently gave him way back when.”

Merri gazed up at him in confusion. “He didn’t want to keep it?”

Thad shrugged. “I think it bothers him—not the book, but the memory of her. I get the distinct impression he doesn’t like the idea of her coming and messing with his head every lifetime, then disappearing again.”

“Destiny be damned?”

“Apparently. I guess I don’t blame him. But anyway, I thought you’d like it.”

Never in her life had someone given her a book of poetry. Or any kind of book, for that matter. She wasn’t sure anyone had ever thought of her being intellectual enough for that.

She flipped it open, scanning through the crisp, yellowed pages. Her eyes came to a dark red ribbon bookmark placed near the end of the book. “Did he leave the bookmark in, or you?”

“That was me. Lame attempt at being romantic, I guess.”

She gazed up at him. “Your attempts aren’t lame.”

“You can say that all you want, but right now I feel like an idiot.”

Flipping to the bookmarked page, Merri read the poem.

*She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that’s best of dark and bright*

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*Meet in her aspect and her eyes;
Thus mellow'd to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.*

*One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impair'd the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.*

*And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!*

"It's Lord Bryon," he explained. "One I really like—I was glad to see it there."

The final line of the poem stuck out at her. Innocent. About the least likely adjective that could be used to describe her.

She glanced up at him and smiled quickly. "I love it. Thank you."

He reached out to brush the hair from her face, then leaned forward and kissed her. "Don't suppose you're going to invite me up?"

"I can't—I told you before, my mom isn't great with the idea of me seeing anyone. Especially not an older someone."

"Ah, right." He sat back in his seat, but kept his steady gaze on her. "Your mom. Whom I've never met. And Gen's never met. And whom you never talk about."

"Okay, why don't you just figure out what you want to say rather than insinuate it?"

"I don't think you live with your mom."

"Well, I wish you were right, but you're not."

"What's her name?"

She wasn't ready to give in yet, and continued grinning, as if it was all a joke. "Loretta. What's your mom's name?"

"Where does she work?"

"One of those General Motors subsidy plants that employs half of the town. Where does your mom work?"

"Why do you never, ever talk about her?"

"Because we have a really shitty relationship. Satisfied yet or would you care to try water boarding to pry some more answers from me?"

Skyla Dawn Cameron

“I’m not going to push you to tell me anything you don’t want to,” he said. “But I want you to know you can trust me.” He squeezed her hand gently, reassuringly. She felt sick. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I know—and there’s nothing to tell, I swear.” She leaned forward and kissed him. “I’ll talk to you later this week? To exchange a few more Valentine’s Day gifts *not* in a public parking lot?”

“Sure.”

Merri gathered her gift, then stood outside her fake apartment building with a cigarette while Thad drove away.

It’s not you hurting me that I’m worried about...

Fifteen

Genevieve sat in the stairwell alone, munching on chocolates from her little Valentine's Day gift from Levi. He had basketball practice and she had no idea where anyone else was, but she was happy to spend that lunch hour by herself. Though perhaps a little unromantic for a supposedly romantic day, she wouldn't let that stop her from enjoying some chocolate. And the lack of romance could be explained by a desire not to give into consumerism, should she really want a reason for it.

"Hey." Merri entered the stairwell and sat down next to her. "Guess what I remembered today?"

"The book?"

Merri nodded and retrieved the small hardcover book from her knapsack. After hearing about the gift from Thad, Gen had insisted on seeing it herself, and she was glad Merri remembered it at last.

"Oh-mi-god that is the sweetest thing ever," Gen said as she flipped through the book. "David told me he's happy Thad gave it to you."

"You've heard from Shaw?"

"Yeah, Michael asked me to keep in touch with him. You know, like a spy or something."

"I don't remember him saying you'd heard from him."

"Uh, 'cause I didn't tell him, of course. Shaw's nice—I'm not ratting him out to that prick." Gen met her friend's eyes and held her gaze for a moment. "And don't tell Michael. Promise?"

"Promise."

She turned her eyes back to the book. "Good."

"Did Shaw leave the country after all?"

Gen shrugged. "Didn't say. We mostly talk about him and Natalya. It's all pretty tragic, natch."

"Anything interesting?"

"Only that in some lives he was a chick. And they still got together. So she's bi. How awesome is that? We're a progressive bunch."

"I guess gender doesn't matter when it comes to love."

"Right," Gen said with a snort. "I'd be damned if I ever screwed a guy. Ugh. Anyway, this is an awesome present. That's so romantic that he gave you poetry." Handing back the book, Gen gave a little sigh.

"What did Peyton give you?"

"Just a Valentine's Day card in my locker." Gen fished through her bag and produced the simple card.

Merri looked it over. "'To my best friend on Valentine's Day?'" she quoted.

True, the words stung a little, but Gen offered a smile. "My cards weren't much better."

"Hey, I liked the *Dora the Explorer* Valentines you got," Merri said. "They were...cute."

"Not much more romantic than the one Peyton sent me, though. And I told you about her mom. She's just...like a lunatic. So Peyton doesn't want her to know we're together yet. She'll tell her in time."

"I know you said Peyton has a difficult life, but..."

"You don't know the half of it. I've been going to her youth group meetings for a couple of months now."

"Which would be a world of awkward, I'm sure."

"Hell, yeah." Gen shuddered. "You wouldn't believe the number of reasons I'm damned for sure—and that's excluding the whole 'lesbian witch' thing, which they obviously don't know about."

"And obviously won't be."

"Not any time soon," Gen agreed. "As much as I'd like to tell them some time—that might be kinda fun. Then there was this one time, after singing and praying, that a girl fell on the ground in convulsions. I wanted to call an ambulance but they said she was just speaking in tongues."

"Is she okay?"

Gen shrugged. "Apparently grand mal seizures aren't something Evangelicals are worried about."

Peyton appeared in the stairwell then. Gen's eyes lit up until they met her girlfriend's. No smile greeted her, no look of love—nothing but red-rimmed eyes and a slight glare. A rose was clutched in her hand and Genevieve's expression fell.

"What's wrong—?"

"Can I talk to you for a second?" Peyton asked, her voice cracking a little. She tapped her foot nervously.

"Yeah, sure..." Gen swallowed hard and rose. Merri gave her a look, but Gen avoided her eyes—dread pooled in her stomach, but she tried to keep calm. Peyton moved quickly out of the stairwell and into the hallway, and Gen followed. Though they paused to speak there, a group of students walked by. Peyton opened her mouth to speak, then seemed to think the better of it and

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continued walking out to the side doors. She stopped outside and spun to face Genevieve.

Gen shivered in the cold. "What is it?"

Peyton held up the red rose. Tied to the stem with a ribbon was a tag. "What's this?" Her voice took on a shrill tone of hurt and anger.

The school had a program where students could pay a few dollars to have a rose and a card delivered to a peer just before lunch on Valentine's Day, so Gen had decided to surprise Peyton with it.

"It was just a present," Gen said, shocked at the level of distress apparent in Peyton's dark eyes. "It was supposed to be romantic."

"But we talked about this!"

With a sigh, Gen realized what had her so mad. "I didn't send it to your goddamn house. What's the big deal?"

"What's the big deal? You sent a rose with, 'Love Gen' on the card to my classroom!"

"And I repeat: so what? No one cares. It's not like I sent a huge lesbo singing telegram to kiss you at your piano recital."

"Goddamn it! You can't do things like this!" She tossed the rose onto the snow at Gen's feet and the action struck Genevieve like a slap across the face. "You don't understand—"

"But—"

"Everything is easy for you—"

"Easy? Jesus Christ, what planet are you living on? You don't think I've been teased and harassed and called names for the past three years? It's *not* easy! It's not simple! No one ever said it would be—"

"But it's different for you. Your parents don't care; your friends don't care—"

"No, but for some reason my girlfriend cares!" Gen crossed her arms over her chest, shivering, and tried to force back her tears. Still, her vision clouded. She tried to lower her voice, to respond without the hurt, and act calmly. "Look, I know T.V. says stuff like you shouldn't force anyone out, and I'm not trying to do that. This was one little flower out of all kinds of them delivered today. No one is going to tell your mother."

"You don't understand—"

"Yeah, I think I do! And I can't do this. I've faked it at dinner with your parents and at your stupid youth groups and at school and any time we're anywhere unless it's out of town. I can't hide what I am..." She took a deep breath. "And you're gong to have to decide what you want."

"Gen—"

"Just tell me!" Gen squeezed her stomach to keep from shaking and fixed her gaze on Peyton's. "I want you. I need to know if you feel the same."

"You *know* how I feel! You know that—"

"I know what you tell me. But I don't think you want me enough to fight to keep me."

"So what are you saying? We can't be together unless I'm out?"

“Not out...just...I don’t know, able to calm the fuck down about things? You just—”

“It’s not that simple!”

“It *is* that simple!” Gen chewed at her bottom lip. She couldn’t stop shaking, though she didn’t know if it was from the cold or the pain. Taking a few breaths to steady her, she tried to keep from shouting. Instead, her voice came out low and strangely calm. “Either your heart is breaking right now...or it’s not.”

Tears streamed down Peyton’s face. “Gen, I...I can’t. Please—”

But Genevieve didn’t hear anything else as she stormed back into the school. Merri still sat where she’d left her in the stairwell.

“Gen? What’s wrong?”

Genevieve leaned against the wall and sank down to the floor. “I...I think I just broke up with Peyton.” She let out a sob as Merri pulled her into a hug.

Worst Valentine’s Day ever, Gen thought as she walked up the steps to her house. She’d gone to Michael’s briefly, but couldn’t deal with his crap and decided to leave early. It was dark by the time she reached her front door. Some moping to depressing love songs up in her room was definitely in order. Maybe she’d skip dinner too, and then crank up Nazareth’s *Love Hurts* in candlelight.

“I’m home,” she called. The lights were on, but no human answered her greeting—only Penny met her at the door. “Mom? Dad?” Her gaze travelled to the foot of the stairs where a suitcase sat. Walking toward the living room, she found her father in his favourite chair. “Dad, what’s going on?”

He stared at the T.V. and answered without looking at her. “Your mom’s leaving, Genny.”

“Where’s she going?”

“Her sister’s, I imagine.” He took a swig from a bottle of beer.

“Um, why?”

“She’s leaving me.”

Gen’s eyes widened. She waited for the punchline, for a grin—for anything to suggest he had been joking. No reassurances came.

“She’s what?”

“Leaving,” he said again.

“Why?”

“Good question.”

She paused in the doorway for a moment, hoping he’d say something further, but no explanation came. Gen turned and stormed up to her parents’ room to find her mom packing another suitcase.

“Mom?” she called in a low voice.

Teary blue eyes looked up. Patches of red dotted her face and Gen realized her mom had been crying for a while.

“Hi sweetheart. How was school?”

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“D-don’t ask me about fucking school! What’s—”

“Watch your language, Gen.”

“What the hell is going on?”

Her mother turned back to her packing and stuffed a pile of clothes in an open suitcase. “I’m so sorry honey, I didn’t want to do this right before your birthday, but...but I can’t stay anymore.”

“But...Mom, I know he’s not easy to live with and he can be an ass, but that doesn’t mean you have to—”

Rebecca Weist dropped a blouse abruptly and turned to her daughter. “He’s been having an affair with someone at work.”

Gen felt her whole world grind to a halt at that moment. “What?”

“His poker games? They don’t exist—he’s been going off to meet her.”

“How long?”

“I’ve known for a couple of months. And he just keeps avoiding conversations about it, like always.” Rebecca rubbed at her eyes and zipped up her bag. “I’ve tried so hard to deal with it, but...I just can’t right now. I’ve asked him to leave, but he won’t so I am—just for now.” She swung an overnight bag over her shoulder and heaved up the second suitcase.

Gen stared in silence for a few moments as her mother carried her bags downstairs. It was too early for hurt, too early for betrayal... For that moment, she couldn’t get over the shock. Her mind tried to piece this new information together, to somehow wrap her brain around it.

“Mom...” She started down the steps to follow her mother to the door.

“Honey,” Rebecca dropped her bags beside the front door and turned to her daughter, “I’m sorry. I’d take you with me, but you’d have to leave Penny because your Aunt Janice can’t have her in the apartment.”

Gen gazed down at her dog. No, she couldn’t very well leave Penny too... Her bottom lip trembled. “Please don’t go.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow—I promise. And I’ll pick you up on the weekend and we can go out somewhere. This is just temporary until your father and I can figure some things out.”

Falling into her mother’s embrace, Gen squeezed her tightly.

“I love you, sweetheart.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

Once again in tears, Rebecca gathered her things and left the house, leaving a draft of cold air in her wake as she slammed the door shut.

In mere moments, Gen’s shock turned to anger. She stomped back into the living room to confront her father.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she shouted.

Leo Weist didn’t reply; instead he took another sip of beer.

“How could you do that to Mom? How could you do that to this family?”

“That’s enough,” he said softly, still not meeting her eyes.

Rage rose within her. “Don’t fucking tell me that’s enough! What is wrong with you? Get up and go after her! You need to—”

Leo rose abruptly. “That’s enough!”

Gen couldn't recall a time in her life when he'd raised his voice like that and she shrank back just a little.

"I am the parent in this house—not you." He gestured towards the stairs. "Go to your room."

Tears built heavily in her eyes as she stared at him, unmoving.

"Now!"

Gen raised her chin slightly in defiance. "Fuck you." She turned before he could yell at her anymore. She shoved her feet into her boots, threw on her coat, and slipped the leash on Penny. After leaving the house, she stood on the front porch in the cold for several minutes.

She had no idea where to go or what to do, just that she needed to be out of the house. Sage and Mer were at Michael's. Levi's house was a possibility, but she didn't know for sure if he was home.

And god, every time she was around him, she had to constantly lie and be on guard. Every minute of it was hell. That's all anyone seemed to be doing—lying to one another. Her mom and dad...Peyton and her parents...Levi and the truth about Hayden's death... Even with Sage, Merri and Michael, they all kept secrets from one another. Even among *them*, she couldn't be honest. And she was so fucking sick of it, she could scream.

Maybe it's time I put a stop to this.

Genevieve started walking.

Though Penny was unaccustomed to walking distances as far as Michael's house—and in the cold at that—she kept up with Genevieve and didn't drag her feet too much. Gen herself was exhausted by the time she reached her destination. She didn't bother knocking, although the door was locked. Instead, she readied a simple unlocking spell she had learned and tested the odd time at Michael's. The door opened easily.

"I think we all need to have a chat," Gen said as she strode inside and passed the others. Her voice told of her weariness; she'd reached the end of her tether and everyone else must have realized as much as they looked at her in surprise.

Sage and Michael had been sparring as usual, but paused at the sight of her. Merri and Finn each sat on the couch reading, and they in turn put down their books.

Gen stopped at the kitchen island, slid off her coat, and filled a bowl with water for her dog. While Penny collapsed at her feet, Gen hopped onto a barstool. Her face stung from the cold and worst of all her eyes hurt from crying on and off as she walked.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Michael asked.

"Calling a 'family' meeting. I'm really sick of everyone lying all the time so I think it's time for some honesty." She locked eyes with him. "I've been emailing with David Shaw for about a month now. And no, I'm not going to tell you

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anything he's said. I'm not your spy and my conversations with friends are none of your goddamn business."

Michael stared at her for a long stretch of silence before speaking. "Finn, take a walk."

"What? But—"

"I said, take a walk!"

Grumbling under his breath, Finn stood, dressed in his outerwear, and left with the door slamming behind him.

Merri went to Gen's side. "What are you doing?" she asked in a low voice.

"Coming clean."

"I know you're upset about Peyton—"

"Look, I don't want this to be the kind of group where everyone is keeping stuff from everyone else when half of our problems could just be solved by being on the same page."

"Gen—"

"I know what I'm doing."

"Anything else?" Michael walked toward her and stopped a few feet away, arms crossed and expression suggesting he wasn't terribly impressed with her yet.

"Yes, in fact, the next bit will lead into you revealing some things to us as well." Gen leaned her back against the counter and took a deep breath. "Last November, the three of us broke into your house."

From the corner of her eye, Gen saw Merri drop her head and curse under her breath. Ahead of her, Sage stepped forward cautiously, while Michael didn't move. His jaw tensed, but he didn't respond yet.

"I'd been having some recurring dreams," Gen continued. "And one of the things that stuck out was a reference to 'The Brethren.'"

Something changed in Michael's eyes then—a flicker of worry, perhaps? Gen savoured the moment.

"Then I ran into a couple of telepaths. They told me about the database on your computer. Sage, Merri, and I stole your key, broke in, and that's when—and why—I took some of your books."

"Find anything interesting?" he asked coolly.

"Actually, yes. It seems you've failed to tell us that one of us is supposed to die. I think that's a conversation we probably should have had several months ago."

"She's right," Merri spoke up. "You should have told us."

"I fail to see how knowing about your imminent death would have been helpful," Michael replied.

"So it's certain?" Merri asked. "There's no stopping it?"

"I had hoped Natalya could tell me that, but she doesn't seem to be in a hurry."

"Were you going to tell us?" Gen asked.

"If it became necessary."

"You are such a fucking prick."

"Do you know who it is?" Merri asked.

Gen glanced at her. "Huh?"

"We didn't read everything there was on the subject. Are there any specifics we missed?"

Michael glanced at Sage for a moment. A horrible realization hit Gen.

"Is it Sage? Or did you tell her already? What's going on?"

"He said he knew," Sage said quickly. "But he wouldn't tell me who."

All three girls watched him, waiting for any kind of answer.

"Yes," Michael said at last. "There have been theories. All of you have been indicated at one point or another, but one name comes up quite a bit more than the others."

None of them dared chance a breath as the tension rose.

Michael's eyes fixed on Genevieve. "You."

Her throat went dry. "Bullshit," she managed to whisper. She felt everyone's eyes on her and Michael...could that be a smile of satisfaction on his face?

"If you have several hours to spare, I could show you the evidence," he said.

She felt Merri's hand on her arm and her fingers trembled.

"I don't believe you," Gen said before anyone else could speak.

"Believe what you want."

"You're just making it up because you don't like me. Now you're trying to scare me 'cause I'm smarter than you and I broke into your house!"

"What exactly was your point in asking if you aren't going to believe what I tell you?"

"But—"

"But nothing. Most of what I've read has indicated that you're the one. And unless Natalya can tell me something I don't already know, it looks like you won't have a choice in the matter."

The words hit her hard. Her lip trembled, emotion swelling in her. After all the crying she'd done that day, she didn't believe more tears could fall, and yet there they were again. "Please tell me you're lying," she said in a low voice.

Michael shook his head. "Sorry."

"Yeah, right—I'm sure you're all broken up about it," she said bitterly.

"If you die, I've wasted a lot of years of my life. I wouldn't say I'm cheerful about that prospect."

"But—"

"There's nothing I can do about it. You're going to die."

"I think she already did." All eyes shot to Sage, but she turned her gaze to Gen. "You remember back at Christmas? When we went to see that little boy, Austin?"

"About the Vision Serpent?" Gen nodded. "Yeah—"

Michael swung around to look at Sage. "You did what!"

Sage dropped her gaze. "You heard me."

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"In a nutshell," Gen interrupted before he could go off on a rant on Sage, "Finn told me that to contact Hayden, we needed to find someone who could contact the Serpent."

"I'm going to fucking kill him," Michael muttered.

"So I called Krysta—anonously—and she directed us to this kid."

"I'm going to kill her too."

"So we went to see him, but it was a bust."

"No, it wasn't," Sage spoke up. "I...he... Austin let me change one decision in the past in the hopes that Hayden would live. And it worked."

Gen listened to the whole tale of Sage's venture into an alternate present, her own death, and being forced to trade Hayden's life once again. When she completed her story, silence filled the room. Sage shivered, though the room was warm, and shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

"The both of you are a pair of fucking idiots," Michael muttered.

Gen ignored him and instead fixed her tearful gaze on Sage. Her heart ached for Sage—she couldn't imagine going through all that and making that choice... "I can't believe you...you gave him up like that."

Sage glanced at Michael. "Some things are more important than what we want." A look of understanding passed between them that Gen couldn't decipher. Before she could ask, Sage looked away. "I thought there might have been a way to do something for my mom and for Kat, but not for you. And I couldn't let you die."

Gen slid off the stool, walked to Sage, and threw her arms around the other girl. She imagined a hug was the last thing in the world Sage would have wanted, but couldn't help herself.

"Thank you," Gen whispered.

Sage hugged her awkwardly in return, though didn't reply. She gave a wan smile as Gen stepped back again and rubbed at her eyes.

"Do you want to go back to see the kid?" Gen offered, ignoring the look of horror she got from Michael. "We can go right now—"

Sage shook her head. "He's not there anymore. I went by a few days after Christmas. Both he and his grandmother were gone. House was empty."

"So might that have...I don't know, validated the prophecy or whatever?" Merri asked. "Gen *did* technically die."

Gen swung her gaze to Michael, a sense of hope coming to her.

Michael thought on the idea, then slowly nodded. "Perhaps. I'd still prefer to speak to Natalya."

"Shaw seriously doesn't know where she is," Gen said. "Though I might not actually tell you if he had given me a location, I would have checked out any leads myself. He doesn't know anything."

"Okay, you have to get that stupid notion of 'checking out leads yourself' from your head. *You* aren't prepared to do that kind of thing. And just because your death in some other reality *might* be the death I've seen referenced in various texts, that *doesn't* mean you're invincible. Plenty of people still want you dead."

"The Brethren." Gen nodded. "Yeah, I gathered that. I told you, we've been doing some reading."

"And what else do you think you know?"

"That there are a lot of them," Sage said. "They've been around a long time and they're committed to killing us."

Michael nodded. "That about sums it up."

"Why?" Gen asked. "Why kill us? Why do they hate us?"

"Once again, that's probably a better question for Natalya. I just work here."

Gen wished she had some kind of evil spell to do to him for being so flippant on the subject of their impending doom, but anything she knew of that might do some damage would require preparation and time.

"How could you not tell us about them?" Merri said. "How could you not tell *me*?"

"Because apparently you can't be trusted to keep your damn mouth shut and let things be," Michael said.

"But—"

"I'm taking care of this. None of you need to worry about it."

Gen didn't think any of them actually believed him. They were still on their own. Heaven forbid he trouble their poor delicate minds with life or death information.

"Now am I going to need to change my locks?" He looked at each of them in turn.

"That kinda depends on whether or not you plan on keeping important shit like that from us," Merri said.

"Fine, if it turns out anyone else is set to die, I'll inform you of it."

Someone knocked on the door. Merri went to answer it, and returned to the living room again. "It's Finn. He wants to know if—"

"I'm freezing my bloody balls off out here," Finn shouted from the doorway.

Michael nodded his consent. "The three of you can head home now. Unless, of course, there are any more discussions that should be had?" He looked at Gen pointedly.

"No, I think that about sums it up."

"Good. Now get the fuck out of my house."

Sixteen

Letting the door thud closed behind her, Genevieve walked into Michael's house and strode into the living room where Merri sat on the couch. Merri glanced up eagerly. "Did you get it?"

Gen turned and lifted the back of her shirt. "Yep. Did it yesterday and just took the bandage off an hour ago." She glanced over her shoulder, as if she could somehow see the tattoo on her lower back from that angle. "Whaddya think?"

"It looks perfect—just like the drawing you gave them."

Gen thought of the blue and green sunburst she had taken to the parlor and smiled. It didn't seem right to pick a random drawing—her tattoo should have meaning to her—so she spent weeks drawing different designs until she settled on one she liked. Meredith had been a big part of the process, instantly supportive of some funky body art.

"And now I have to moisturize it—don't mind me." Gen pulled a small tube of lotion from her pocket, put a dab on her finger, and ran it over the tender spot on her back.

"A tattoo?" Sage said with a touch of distaste. She left Michael by the punching bag, picked up a bottle of water, and sat on the couch with Merri.

"Yes. I saved up birthday money for it, so happy belated birthday to me."

"Your parents let you?"

Gen shrugged. "Trial separation has been like a month and a half now, and they're still not getting along. Dad *is* quite committed, however, to pissing Mom off as much as possible, so he approved it. Isn't it cool?"

"You got a tramp stamp?" Michael said.

Gaze shooting his way, her jaw dropped. "What?"

He nodded at her back, eyes scanning the tattoo. "Tramp stamp. That's what a tattoo there is referred to when it's on a girl."

"I'm not a tramp!"

Michael shrugged. "Well, now you look like one. You just need a thong sticking out of your jeans, and you'll be set."

"I'll get right on that, thanks." She dropped her shirt and sank down on the couch next to Sage.

"I like it," Finn said from his perch on the chair opposite them.

"You would," Michael said with a roll of his eyes.

Michael went to the kitchen to pour a glass of water and Merri followed. Sage continued to discuss with Gen the pros and cons of body modification—which Sage fully put her vote in the "con" section.

"You can't get over the fact that one day your body will stretch and change and that'll look faded and hideous? And what if you decide you don't want it anymore?"

"It's a statement of who I am right now. Stop being a downer."

"What, and you're going to get another to show who you are next week? And the week after?"

Gen rolled her eyes. "Of course not. Next week I'm getting a nose ring."

"Oh, god." Sage shuddered.

"Relax, I'm kidding. I think I'd like an eyebrow ring. Maybe a bellybutton piercing. No nose, though."

While they talked, Gen glanced toward the kitchen. Merri and Michael argued in low voices that Gen couldn't make out. Whatever their exchange was about, it definitely seemed heated, and ended with Merri storming outside for a cigarette. Michael gestured for Sage to meet him once more at the punching bag, and the two of them went to work.

"Ya curious what that was about?"

Gen jumped a little at the sound of a voice over her shoulder. She glanced up to see Finn leaning over the couch behind her.

"Mer and Michael?"

He nodded.

"Haven't a clue. Do you?"

"Girl's been having visions about some local killings. She thinks they're connected."

"Michael doesn't?"

Finn shrugged. "Doesn't care."

"She hasn't said anything to me about it."

"She *is* talking about a murderer, love. Probably doesn't want you to be involved."

Genevieve thought on it for a moment. There was that argument Mer and Michael had a couple months earlier when the group of them went out for dinner. *Merri said she'd been having trouble with visions and that she needed to talk to Michael about it...* "What murders?"

"Young lads, I think. Mentioned a club...don't recall the name."

"*On the Map?*"

"That would be it."

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Warren... So Merri knew something about who killed Warren Humber? And had there really been other killings since then? *Maybe I should start reading the newspaper.*

"How do you know all this stuff?" Gen asked.

Finn gave her a small smile. "Have a listen when people don't think you hear them, and you'd be surprised what you learn." He walked around to the couch and sat next to her. "Pity Michael won't look into this."

"It would definitely be better than sitting around here doing nothing," Gen agreed.

"Especially when one of us has certain skills that would be of use in solving the case."

Her worried gaze going his way, Gen studied his expression. He knew about her and what she could do? Michael said he didn't, but—

"Lads died a violent death, there's a chance they're still around," Finn continued and realization dawned on her.

"Ah. 'Cause you're a medium, you could..."

"Right."

Genevieve and Finn looked to where Michael sparred with Sage.

"Yeah, it's too bad he nixed the idea of looking into this," Gen said casually.

"It might have been a good time," Finn said.

"Especially on a Saturday night when there isn't much to do in town."

"And by the time Michael wants to look into it, spirits could have moved on."

"Oooh, time sensitive—didn't think of that. So...in the interest of justice being done, want to go talk to a ghost tonight?"

Finn smiled. "Name the time."

Around ten o'clock, a cab pulled up in front of Gen's place. When she went to the door to leave, her father asked where she was going, but she didn't bother answering him. Life at home had become tense without her mom around and Genevieve was still resentful about it.

Mom'll probably be pissed when she hears about it tomorrow, she thought as she approached the cab. Still, it made life interesting.

Gen had called Merri earlier in the evening, but she didn't answer her phone. Sage had mentioned wanting to spend time having dinner with her family. Michael, for obvious reasons, wouldn't be helping them, so Gen found Finn alone in the cab.

"Did you get the addresses of where the murders occurred?" Gen asked. The taxi driver gazed at her curiously in the rearview mirror, but she ignored him.

"One on the beach, one behind a motel, and one at that club. Which boy did you know?"

"The one at *One the Map*."

"I guess we'll be heading there then."

Finn paid the driver once they reached the club parking lot, and he and Gen got out.

"Everything I read said that the lad's body was found around the back." Finn slung his arm over her shoulder casually, which he seemed fond of doing now and then at the house, as they moved toward the back of the busy club. Gen shrugged it off and continued walking.

A handful of police officers stood out in the parking lot—ones that definitely weren't there the last time Gen had been to the club some months ago. She and Finn made a point of avoiding the police by ducking behind cars and hugging the fence that ran from the side of the building to the back.

Though lights shone from bulbs along the rear of the building, it grew darker and darker the farther they walked. Pavement extended for several metres to where a chain-link fence separated it from a field.

"Shoulda brought a flashlight." Finn gazed up at the cloudy sky where no moon or stars lit their way.

I know I'm not supposed to do any magic around him, but... He was right—Gen could hardly see anything herself. She closed her eyes, muttered a few words, and conjured up a dim glow that floated near them. When she opened her eyes again, she found Finn staring at her, blond eyebrows raised in question.

"It's really easy—just like putting out a candle."

Finn nodded, as if he believed her explanation.

They paused about halfway between the back of the club and the fence. "So what do we do now?"

"What you did before. Relax and call your friend."

Friend? Christ, she'd barely spoken to Warren a handful of times since ninth grade. *And I doubt he'd want to talk to me now...*

She had just opened her mouth to call his name when Finn put up his hand to stop her.

"I see someone," he said. "Lad about your age. Dark hair."

"I guess that's him." *Unless someone else died recently.* Gen felt a slight chill as Finn stared at something she couldn't see.

"He's coming toward us...he said he recognizes you from school."

"Uh, hey there, Warren," Gen said weakly. Cold air brushed her skin.

"He's saying something...something about coming out here to meet...*her*."

"Her? Her who?"

"She said she'd be here...said she was meeting him... The new girl."

"The new girl? Who, Peyton?"

Finn shook his head and frowned. "He's moving away from us now." He started toward the field and the fence, and Gen followed.

"So he knows who killed him?"

"Not sure. He just keeps talking about the new girl."

Maybe it's Peyton's mother—she's definitely new in town. And evil.

Finn halted his step abruptly and Gen nearly ran into him.

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“What is it?” she asked. His gaze seemed fixed on something in the distance, and though she tried to make out what he saw, there seemed to be nothing but darkness.

“Do you hear it?”

Gen listened. Noises came from within the club, there were cars crunching gravel in the parking lot, and wind blew across the field. Beyond that, she heard nothing in particular that she could make out.

“It’s music...”

She gazed back at the building. “Uh, yeah, that’s what you usually hear at dance clubs.” Though hoping for a grin in response, Finn’s expression didn’t change. “Finn?”

He moved forward, as if in a daze. Cold air rushed over Gen and fear made her skin prickle. Something warned her away, paused her step, made her question what they were doing. Whatever drew Finn forward pushed Genevieve back.

“We have to get out of here... Finn!” She grabbed his arm and pulled him to a halt. “Finn!”

As his eyes met hers, the haze in their depths seemed to dissipate. He blinked a few times. “What happened?”

“Kinda hoping you could explain that one. Was it Warren? Did he say something or—”

Finn shook his head. “No...no, there was something else...”

“Another ghost? What’s going on?”

“Don’t rightly know. Didn’t feel like I could control myself...” His voice trailed off as his gaze settled on something several feet ahead. “What is that?”

Gen took a few steps forward and peered into the darkness. They stood near the fence now, so the light around them couldn’t extend much farther into the field. Her eyes adjusted to the dimness and a shape took form several feet away in the barren field. The shape was long, narrow, and looked like... *Feet...legs...*

A gasp escaped her lips. “Oh my god...is that a...a body?”

Fingers wrapped around her upper arm. “We have to get out of here,” Finn said.

Gen nodded weakly and backed up in a hurry, though she couldn’t tear her eyes from the corpse. Police had been patrolling the area—the body couldn’t have been there for long. *So whoever killed him might still be around...* Finn tugged harder on her arm, and at last she turned and fled the scene.

They slipped back around the building and through the parking lot, avoiding O.P.P. officers as they went.

“I can’t believe this,” Gen whispered. “There really is a serial killer...we have to tell Michael—we have to tell the police.”

“Police are going to want to know what we were doing there,” Finn pointed out. “I’d guess they’ll find the body eventually.”

"But if the killer is still around, 'eventually' isn't good enough! What if they have a chance to catch him?" She pulled out her cell phone and prepared to dial. "We can call anonymously—"

"They'll track down your phone, Gen."

She paused. He was right about that. "So what do we do, then?"

Finn glanced at the club. "I'll go in and call from a payphone. Just relax, love—it'll be fine."

She watched him jog through the front doors to *On the Map*. He was right—she couldn't get involved with the police. There seemed too great a risk they might want to connect her with these murders after she was involved with Hayden's death too. And, as she was sure Michael would point out, they shouldn't draw any more attention to themselves than was necessary.

She was about to put the cell phone away when she thought the better of it. Whatever was going on, it definitely felt supernatural in origin. She couldn't explain why or how she knew it...she just had to trust her instincts. *And Michael will have to trust them too*, she thought as she dialed his cell phone number. No one answered, and just as she finished leaving him a message on voice mail, Finn returned.

"Made the call," he said. "Got us a cab, too."

"So you don't want to wait around and see what's going on?"

Finn shook his head. "We should get out of here."

~~*

Across the bedroom, Michael's cell phone rang from within his pants pocket.

Should have put the damn thing on vibrate, he thought, making no move to rise and answer it. His voicemail picked up and the phone went silent.

Krysta came in then with a glass of wine and lounged on the bed, silky hair falling over her bare, creamy brown skin. "I was thinking we could go out for dinner tomorrow night."

He glanced at her as if she was on crack. "Excuse me?"

She took a sip of her wine and gazed at him over the rim. "Dinner."

"Right," he said with a derisive snort.

"Might be fun," she said, giving his thigh a playful slap.

"I'm not going out for dinner with you."

She continued on, as if he'd said nothing to contradict her plans, and began suggesting restaurants she liked and ones she'd like to try. He recognized half the names she mentioned, and they were all expensive as hell.

Once she added talk of going out to a theatre to the discussion, he decided to find out what that phone call was about and rose from bed.

And the interruption is even worse, he thought as he recognized the number. Why the hell would Genevieve call him on a Saturday night?

After glancing at Krysta and hearing her continue to talk about going on a fucking date, he decided to listen to the message after all.

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“Michael,” Gen said, her voice filled with worry. “I...okay, so we did something kind of stupid. Me and Finn went to *On the Map* to talk to Warren’s ghost—and don’t yell at us, ‘cause we wouldn’t have gone alone if you had been willing to look into this—and we found a body. There are police here and everything and...and I really think this isn’t a normal killing. Finn got all weirded out and...” She sighed heavily. “I don’t know if we’re staying here or leaving, but can you try to meet us if you get this soon? Something strange is going on... Bye.”

Jesus Christ, he couldn’t trust any of them alone for one night.

He slid his clothes back on, stuffed his phone in his pocket, and went for the door.

“Where are you going?” Krysta called after him.

He was already down the hall and near the front door before he responded. “Out.”

“But we were—”

Michael didn’t hear anything after that as he closed the front door behind him. As he hopped in the front seat of his car, he dialed Merri’s number. Several rings in and she picked up.

“Hello?”

“You busy?”

“Just getting ready for bed—why?”

“What the hell did you tell Gen and Finn about your serial killer theories?”

“Nothing,” she replied, an edge to her voice.

“I’m not fucking around here. What did you tell them?”

“I told you: nothing. Haven’t said a word about it. Why?”

“Apparently they decided to investigate and they’re in trouble.”

“Shit.”

“My sentiments exactly. I’m right near your place—get dressed and I’ll pick you up.”

“I...” She paused. “I can’t right now.”

“You have five minutes.”

“Michael, I can’t—that’s not enough time.”

“Look, I know you don’t live where you said you live. And I don’t give a fuck who you are or what you’re hiding from—just tell me your damn address.”

Silence followed and Michael’s annoyance grew—he really didn’t have patience for her shit that night.

“Don’t tell the others,” she said.

“I won’t.”

At last she gave him the address, which he recognized as one of the rougher areas of town.

“Be outside in ten minutes,” he said. “And call Sage. Have her head to the house in case Finn and Gen go back there while we’re at the club.”

~~*

The cab pulled up at Michael's, and both Finn and Gen got out. Genevieve gazed up at the dark house as the taxi drove away.

"Looks like he isn't home," she said, wrapping her arms around her stomach and shivering. "Is he usually out on Saturday nights?"

"Often is," Finn said vaguely over his shoulder as he went to the front door and unlocked it. "I'm sure he'll be about in a wee bit." He held the door open and gazed back at her. "Coming in?"

In truth, she wanted nothing more than to go home and curl up in her bed. But her legs were restless and she felt like she'd downed five cups of coffee and a can of Redbull—there was no way she could sleep just yet.

Might as well wait around and see what Michael has to say about this, she thought as she went on inside.

Genevieve took a seat on the couch while Finn went to the kitchen.

"Want a drink?" he called.

Still shivering though it was warm inside, Gen nodded. "Yeah. Michael has this chai tea thing I like, if you can find it." She tapped her feet nervously while she waited. "So you don't remember what happened? It was like you zoned out or something."

"Strange thing—I don't rightly know. I was speaking to the spirit and then you had my arm and were yelling at me."

"Did Warren say anything else about his killer?"

Finn shook his head as he walked over with their drinks. "Not a thing." He handed her a mug of tea and sipped a beer himself. "Sorry I couldn't be more helpful."

"It's cool. Michael's gotta listen to us now, though. So when will he be home?"

"Not sure."

He'd better get here soon, she thought, glancing at her watch. Pissing off her dad was fun and all, but strolling into the house at one a.m. would get back to her mom, and Gen didn't want to deal with her. *I'll finish my tea and get out of here.*

She pressed the rim to her lips and took a sip. Gen tried not to make a face as a slight salty taste met her tongue. Finn was nice enough to make her tea and she didn't want to complain, but...god, it was terrible. She closed her eyes and gulped it down, attempting to keep the warm liquid from hitting her taste buds.

"I should probably get going," she began, preparing to rise.

"I'm sure Michael will be home at some point." Finn took her arm and drew her back down. "I could give him a call?"

"It's okay, I..." *I already did...didn't I?* She couldn't for the life of her remember if she'd called Michael or not. She hadn't actually spoken to him—she would have remembered being yelled at. Had she left a message or something? *Why is my memory so hazy...?* "I can talk to him tomorrow, though."

Her legs wobbled as she tried to stand again. Slumping back onto the couch, she giggled suddenly as the whole situation seemed incredibly funny. Her head leaned against the back of the sofa, twin blonde braids hanging over her shoulders, and she stared up at the ceiling. It seemed to move farther and

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farther away from her...or was she sinking into the ground and moving away from it? Genevieve laughed at the thought.

Something's wrong... Part of her knew something wasn't right—*she* wasn't right. Why couldn't she stop laughing? Why was the room spinning?

A shadow moved over her. Gen tried to sit up, but found herself falling back again. A voice spoke words in a soft voice, though she couldn't make them out... Someone was telling her to relax?

"I...I have to go home." She tried to sit up again, but hands drew her back down, firmer this time. Fingers trailed over her bare arms, her sides...

Panic gripped her. Someone was on top of her, holding her down, pinning her arms to the couch. Her body felt weak and refused to follow her commands. More soothing words followed that weren't so soothing.

I have to get up—to get out of here... She gathered the last bit of strength she possessed and focused her mind, pulling forth familiar words and phrases, then pushing them past her lips.

The body atop of hers froze as she finished the spell.

Gen pushed him away and scrambled to her feet. She tried to direct her attention on the door. It seemed so far away...

Her legs gave out from beneath her and she slipped onto the hardwood.

As she fell on her side, her head spun. Her concentration broken, the spell wore off her assailant and he was on her once more.

~~*

"I hope to God they weren't any of the people the police took for questioning," Merri said as Michael drove them home from *On the Map*. Cops had been milling around the place when they got there, and the buzz at the club when Michael went in said another body had been found. "Gen would crack for sure."

"And Finn would probably be deported." Michael turned the car onto the road that led to his house. "You're sure you didn't tell them that—"

"For the last time, no. Don't you think that if I'd told Gen about my suspicions, I would have insisted on going with her if she decided to check it out?"

Michael had to admit that she had a point there. And if Merri had been involved, she would have at least made Sage go along with them as well.

He hoped to hell that Gen and Finn weren't picked up by the cops. The thought of how much money he'd have to use to bribe even small town O.P.P. officers made his head hurt.

As he swung the car into the driveway, dread touched his stomach. The front door lay wide open and lights were on in the lower floor.

"Something's wrong," Merri said, echoing his thoughts. She hopped out ahead of him and rushed for the door just as he cut the engine.

Michael popped open the glove box and took out the gun from within. As he approached the house, he heard shouts. His pace quickened and his grip tightened on the gun.

Sage had Finn pinned to the wall by the throat. His eyes were huge, his hands were up defensively, and he sputtered some kind of response to the threats she yelled his way. On the floor, by the couch, Merri knelt at Gen's side. His throat constricted; Gen's shirt was torn, tears streaked down her bright red cheeks, and her eyes had trouble focusing.

Merri helped Gen up onto the couch while Michael moved toward Sage and Finn.

"I got here a few minutes ago," Sage said, her voice tight with rage. She glanced at Michael from the corner of her eye. "He was on top of her. If I hadn't come in..."

"We had a rough night," Finn said. "It was just—"

Sage smacked him hard across the face.

Michael's gaze went to Gen again, then to Finn. His friend wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Check his pockets," Michael said.

Though she gave him a confused look, Sage didn't argue. She tightened her grip on his throat and thrust him harder against the wall, and then fished through his pants pockets with her other hand. Moments later, she produced a tiny bottle of white powder.

"What the...?"

Michael snatched the bottle from her and studied the contents. His gaze locked with Finn's. "G.H.B.?"

Finn shifted and looked away.

"Make a side trip into the club while you were there?"

"He drugged her?" Merri shouted from the couch.

"You son of a bitch!" Sage punched him again.

"Let him go," Michael said.

Both coherent girls looked his way sharply.

"What?" Sage asked in a low voice.

"Let him go."

Her eyes darkened. Reluctantly, she released her grip on him.

Just as Finn opened his mouth to speak, Michael gestured to the spare room. "Pack."

"But—"

"Pack. *Now*."

Finn retreated to his guest room without another word.

"We should call the police," Sage said immediately.

"We should cut off his balls," Merri added.

"You need to get her home," Michael said. "Someone should probably stay with her overnight as well."

"I can call my mom," Sage offered. "Tell her that—"

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"I'll stay with her," Merri cut in. "No explanations needed around my house."

Michael pulled a twenty out of his pocket and tossed it on the coffee table. "That'll cover a cab."

"A cab?!" Merri stood suddenly, glaring up at him. "You're not even driving her home?"

"No, I'm driving Finn to the airport."

"Make *him* take the goddamn cab!"

Michael pulled out his cell phone and walked toward the kitchen. "Don't argue with me right now." Leaning against the counter, he dialled information and had his call directed to the airport. The earliest flight back to London left mid-morning, so he booked a room at a small motel as well.

Just as he left the kitchen, Finn exited the guest room, suitcases in hand. He didn't say a word when Michael told him to wait in the car, but instead did as he was told.

Michael waited until he heard the front door click shut behind Finn before he spoke to the girls at last.

"Sage, there's a small, hardcover book on the nightstand in my room. Go get it." Once she left to follow his instructions, he turned to Merri. "I want you to go outside and find a small rock."

"A what?"

"A rock."

"He just tried to rape Gen and you want me to bring you a goddamn rock? Are we going to beat Finn's head with it?"

"If we were, I'd suggest finding a large one rather than a small one."

"But—"

"Just do it."

She grumbled a few expletives under her breath as she stomped toward the front door.

Sage returned a few minutes later with the book. She handed it to Michael, and then perched herself on the arm of the couch where she watched Gen with worry. The witch herself stared straight ahead, eyes red-rimmed and shoulders quivering.

Michael thumbed through the book, scanning the pages until he came to the one he wanted. The front door slammed closed and he glanced up just in time to see a rock sailing towards his head. He caught it and looked it over. *This will do.*

He knelt in front of Genevieve and held open the book. "Can you read this?"

She blinked a few times as her eyes met his. "What?"

"Can you read the damn book or not?"

"Stop yelling at me!" She broke into tears again.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Merri jumped in, taking a seat at Gen's side and putting a protective arm over her shoulders.

Michael took a deep breath and tried not to snap back. He thrust the book toward Geneveive. "Can you read the book or not?"

Gen's eyes settled on the text and she nodded weakly.

Michael dropped the rock in her hand and folded her fingers around it. "Read the words on this page and try not to screw it up." Merri and Sage each gave him a sharp look, but he ignored them.

Gen spoke the words of the spell, stumbling and mispronouncing a hell of a lot of them, but at last she made it to the end. He took the rock from her and deposited it in his pocket.

This had better fucking work.

Outside, he found Finn sitting in the front seat of his car, the hood of the convertible down. His friend didn't say anything as Michael sat in the driver's side. Just as he slid the key in the ignition, a body climbed into the backseat.

Michael's eyes went to the rearview mirror and locked with Merri's gaze.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

"You're going with Gen to her house."

"Sage is going to take her and wait until you drop me off later."

"I'll drop you *now*."

"Michael, I'm staying."

He muttered under his breath, but didn't argue as he pulled the car out of the driveway. *Time is tight as it is.*

The vehicle's occupants remained silent as Michael drove Finn to a motel just outside of town. Every few minutes, Michael caught sight of Merri glaring at Finn. The source of her anger kept his gaze fixed ahead.

As the car halted in the empty parking lot of the motel, Michael expected his friend to make a hasty exit. Instead, Finn leaned back in his seat and turned his cocky grin Michael's way.

"You think you're so much better than me." His gaze shifted to Merri for a moment before returning to Michael. "Both of you. But for Christ's sake, remember who I am? I see who haunts you. You've done a bloody lot worse than me, Mike—you have the ghosts to prove it. The stories they tell? You should hear it sometime. And you..." He swiveled in his seat to look at Merri. "He hovers over you every second. Killing a bloke doesn't make him go away, love."

"Are you about finished?" Michael said coolly.

"I think so."

"Take your bags and sign in at the lobby. They put you in room five. I'll be there shortly."

Finn did as he was told, and Michael watched him leave in silence.

"I can't believe you're just letting him go like that," Merri said bitterly. "I know you don't like Gen, but he—"

"Stay in the car. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Going to bring him dinner too? Or just order him a hooker 'cause he got interrupted before?"

"Quit arguing and stay in the damn car!"

Children of the Apocalypse

Merri slumped back in her seat, crossed her arms, and glared at him.

After watching Finn enter his room, Michael stepped from the car and retrieved a black bag from the trunk. As he crossed the parking lot, he was thankful both for the late hour and the location of the motel—the place was deserted.

The door to Finn's room lay unlocked and inside he found his friend sprawled on his stomach on the bed, glancing over the room service menu.

"You couldn't spring for a better place?" Finn said without looking up. "You can afford it. I don't think anyone here delivers past midnight." He glanced up and his smile fell to a look of annoyance. "You can fool them with this high and mighty act, but you're forgetting I know you. I know what you've done."

"I don't manipulate children into dangerous situations, then roffie them."

"Nah, a roffie would cut out all the fun for you, wouldn't it?"

"You knew they were off limits. I *told you* they were off limits."

"Of course." Finn glanced back at the menu. "Wouldn't want anyone messing with the Children of the Apocalypse, is that it?"

Michael's throat constricted and his jaw tensed.

Finn looked up and smiled as he saw his words hit their mark. "Didn't think I knew about that, did you? Always did take it for granted that I have two ears and a brain that does work part of the time."

"How long have you known?"

Finn shrugged. "A few months. I also know there are a lot of people interested in those girls. It would be a shame if they found out where they were, what their weaknesses are..." He turned back to the menu once more. "So I definitely think it would be in your best interest to spring for a nicer place for me."

Michael lifted a length of rope from the duffle bag and tossed it on the bed. The rope struck the mattress and Finn glanced at it in confusion.

"What the...?"

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way."

Finn's blonde brows furrowed in confusion, then he paled as realization hit him. "Whoa, Mike—"

"You said it yourself—it would be a shame if certain people found out about the girls."

"Just a joke—I wouldn't say anything..." Finn pulled himself into a sitting position and backed up on the bed, holding his hands up defensively. "C'mon—"

Michael snatched him up by his shirt and thrust him into the wall by the bed.

Sweat formed on Finn's forehead. "We're friends! You can't—"

"You crossed a line tonight," Michael said in a low voice.

"You do this and you'll never be rid of me. I'll haunt you for eternity."

Michael shrugged. "From what you've said, it sounds like at least you'll have some company."

“But—”

“And for what I’m about to do...I’m not sorry.”

Seventeen

Genevieve's head pounded. She rolled over in bed and forced her eyes open to see the bright light of day illuminating her bedroom.

Bad idea, she thought as she rolled back over. Sleep wasn't eager to return, however, so with a heavy sigh, she sat up in bed. As the blanket fell away from her torso, she recognized the sleeveless shirt she had worn the day before, and a glance under the covers revealed her legs still clad in jeans. Why would she go to bed still dressed...?

Her gaze drifted over the room. Penny lay next to her, snoring softly. Everything looked normal enough... Then her eyes settled on a figure slumped in a chair across the room. Meredith had dozed off while still in a sitting position, her head rolled to the side.

Why the... Memories came back to her then—so few that she almost thought it had been a dream, but too vivid to really believe it had been anything but real. Hands on her, her vision blurring, being unable to fight back...the terror from the night before rushed over her once more. She hugged her stomach and let out a sob.

The sound woke both Merri and Penny. The dog sat up and yawned, then rested her head on her owner's lap.

Merri sat up suddenly alert as if she hadn't been sleeping at all. "Gen?"

Gen gazed up from behind tears and a mess of blonde hair.

"It's okay." Merri swiftly stood and was at her side in seconds, drawing her into a hug. "I'm sorry—I'm so sorry I wasn't there. I should have seen it coming...I should have been able to tell what he was. If I'd known, I never would have—"

"I know, I know..." Gen let go of her friend and clutched her stomach once more. Though she hadn't eaten since an early dinner the night before, whatever contents remained in her stomach curdled and she felt certain she would be sick in just moments. Closing her eyes, she willed her stomach to settle and took a

few deep breaths. When she spoke, her voice came out weak and barely audible. "How did I get home?"

"Sage brought you in a taxi. It was pretty late."

"Is she here too?" Gen opened her eyes to glance around the room for some sign of her other friend.

"No, she couldn't stay, but we didn't want you to wake up alone, so I came by. Do you...do you remember much about what happened? You don't have to think about it right now, but—"

Gen shook her head. "Only...bits and pieces. I...I tried to get away, but I could barely think let alone move..."

"He drugged you."

No wonder I can't remember anything. Her stomach twisted once more. What she did remember was bad enough...what happened that she didn't know about?

"Mer..." Genevieve tried hard to force the words out. "What did he...I mean—"

Merri squeezed her shoulder in reassurance. "We got there before he could really do anything—it's okay. You won't need to go to the hospital."

"How did you know I was there?"

"Michael, if you can believe it. He got your message and picked me up so we could go to the club, but first I called Sage to go to the house in case you and Finn went back there. I'm so glad I did..."

"But he didn't..." She shivered a little in the warm room and couldn't bring herself to speak the words in her head.

"No, I promise. Sage came in and beat the crap out of him, then Michael and I got back."

"What happened to Finn? Is he still..."

"Michael sent him off on the next flight to London. You won't see him again and you don't have to worry about him hurting you. Gen, I'm just so sorry I wasn't there."

"It's not your fault." *It's mine...all mine...how could I be so stupid?*

"Do you want me to make you some breakfast or something?" Merri offered, but Gen shook her head.

"I can't eat right now. I wanna get cleaned up."

"A shower might make you feel better."

Yeah, right. "Maybe. Go on downstairs, though—if Dad's around, he'll probably make you pancakes or something."

While Gen gathered up her housecoat and a change of clothes, Merri rose and went reluctantly for the door. She cast a final, apologetic gaze back at Genevieve, then left the room.

Though normally, Gen found a hot shower invigorating, that morning she stood under the hot water for nearly half an hour and cried. She scrubbed her skin raw, rinsed, then scrubbed it again, but nothing made her feel clean. Too late, she remembered she wasn't supposed to soak the damn tattoo so soon after getting it.

Fuck the tattoo, she thought. I'll get Dad to fund for a touch-up visit in a few weeks.

Children of the Apocalypse

As the water began to run cold, Genevieve stepped out of the shower at last and glanced in the mirror over the vanity. Dark bruises ran along her right side. She reached to touch the spot and winced. Still sore. She vaguely remembered trying to run the night before, only to fall again, and a handful of marks on her body proved it. On one arm, a few more bruises fell in spots. *Fingerprints.*

She yanked on underclothes, a pair of jeans and a tank top, and left her hair in loose, wet clumps around her shoulders. Normally she'd towel dry it, but she couldn't stand to be alone any longer. Avoiding even one more gaze at her own reflection, Gen left the bathroom in a hurry and went to look for Merri.

Downstairs, she padded toward the kitchen. She heard the crinkle of newspaper pages turning and knew her father must be awake. Sure enough, he sat at the table across from Merri. Each had a cup of coffee.

"You got in late last night," Leo Weist said without looking up.

"What the hell is your point?" Her hand shook as she poured a glass of water—any small bit of relaxation her shower might have brought seemed gone for good.

"You can't go out all hours of the night—"

"Like you care."

"Where were you?"

"We were at Sage's," Merri said quickly before Gen could answer.

Leo met Meredith's gaze. "Really?"

"Yeah. We went by for a few hours—just a girl's night kind of thing—and it's pretty far from my place so Gen told me I could crash here."

Gen shifted uncomfortably as her father turned his eyes her way. "And why do you look hung over?"

"Because I was actually at an orgy and there was a lot of alcohol involved."

"Dammit Genevieve, do you realize another kid got killed last night at a club? I worry about you—"

"You don't give a damn about me."

"That's not—"

"Don't you even pretend for a *second* that you care about this family. If you did, you wouldn't have let Mom go."

Leo folded the paper and dropped it on the table. "You're grounded."

"Go to hell."

Her father stood and left the kitchen. Gen sank down onto a chair.

"Welcome to family time at the Weist residence," she said to Merri with a sigh. "Sorry he didn't make you pancakes."

"He offered, but I didn't feel like eating," Merri said. She eyed the newspaper he left behind. "Hey, can I see that?"

"Looking for some detes about the murder?" Gen asked as she passed along the paper.

"Hoping the police have some suspects so I can get these visions out of my head..."

"Good luck with that."

“Oh my god,” Merri whispered.

“What?”

Seeming at a loss for words, Merri could only turn the paper Gen’s way.

Genevieve glanced over the headline. “This isn’t about the murder at the club... Caucasian male, mid-thirties, apparent suicide...some tourist from the U.K. hung himself. So?”

“That was the motel where Michael dropped off Finn last night.”

Gen looked back at the paper. *Oh god...*

~~*

Michael was sitting at his breakfast bar with a cup of hot, black coffee when someone banged on the door. He glanced at the clock. Who would come by at noon on a Sunday?

Leaving the coffee on the counter, he exited the kitchen and yanked open the front door.

A folded newspaper was thrust in his face immediately. It took a moment for his gaze to focus on the black print. *U.K. Tourist Found Dead Outside of Newhaven*. He glanced over the top of the paper and recognized Genevieve.

“What the hell is this?” she said sharply.

Here we go. Michael sighed heavily and walked back to the kitchen, leaving the front door open. He heard Gen’s footsteps starting after him and the door slammed closed.

“Before you start bitching at me, keep in mind that if I hadn’t done it, Sage might have, Merri *definitely* would have, and the two of them would have been stupid enough to get caught. I was just keeping them out of jail.”

“So this really refers to Finn?” She tossed the paper on the breakfast bar and regarded him with her hands placed on her hips.

“Yes.”

“And you killed him and made it look like a suicide?”

“Yes.”

“How could you...he was...you can’t just...” She opened her mouth to speak, but no more words came out. Her face was flushed from anger, dark circles ran under her eyes from lack of sleep, and she looked about ready to snap.

Michael glanced at his cup of coffee. “Want a drink of something?”

Her mouth fell open again and eyes widened, as if surprised by his cavalier attitude. At last she let out a sigh of defeat and dropped onto a barstool. “Sure.”

He retrieved another mug from the cupboard as well as some tea, and then put the kettle on. After topping up his cup of coffee, he leaned on the breakfast bar across from her.

“Where are the others?” he asked, a little surprised that she had stormed over on her own.

“Sage is still at home—she called to check on me just before I left to come here. Merri went back to her place to get a change of clothes, then I think we’re going to Sage’s later. I didn’t think you’d want us here...”

"I don't."

Gen nodded. "O-okay."

As silence took up between them, Michael watched his guest. Her vacant gaze drifted to the floor and shoulders turned inward. He still couldn't figure out why the hell she showed up there—she could have bitched about him killing Finn just as easily over the phone. There were bruises on her arms and her wrists, dark spots against her pale flesh.

"I just feel so stupid," she said at last in a low voice. Her eyes moved to the countertop and long hair fell over her face as she shifted in her seat. "I didn't ever think that he...I mean, he was kinda touchy-feely sometimes, but he always seemed nice enough. Not like you." She glanced up suddenly and gave him a half smile. "No offense."

"None taken."

"You know, I kind of remember you yelling at me last night. Did you have me do a spell or something?"

Michael studied her for a moment before answering. It seemed doubtful she remembered much, so it would be easy enough to lie to her...

"Yes."

"For what?"

"The motel where I dropped Finn off might have been a shit-hole, but it was a shit-hole with a security camera watching the hotel room doors. I had you cast a spell on a small object—a rock Merri got from outside. As long as the object was in my possession, I couldn't be seen on surveillance equipment. It only lasted a few hours, but it was enough to get in and out of the room."

"Oh god..." Gen clasped her hand over her mouth. "So I'm an accomplice now? The police will find out you knew him and—"

"They were here early this morning. I confirmed that he suffered from depression, and given the illegal prescription for antidepressants they found on him, I believe they consider the case closed."

"Antidepressants? I didn't know..." Her sentence trailed off as realization dawned on her. "You planted it on him?"

"Yes."

"So this was all premeditated... And this means I helped you with first degree murder! I—"

"I'm pretty sure that, even if the case *wasn't* closed, the cops didn't have a theory going that a witch unknowingly used magic to help cover up a homicide that they don't even think was committed."

"I'm not even talking about going to jail—I'm talking about bad karma. I helped you kill a man! I helped you kill your friend..."

"Are you telling me that you didn't want him dead after last night?"

His words seemed to slice through her and her expression changed suddenly. Worry flickered through her eyes before she answered. "Of course not." Her tone held little conviction.

He raised an eyebrow, daring her to come clean.

"Well, I... I'm against capital punishment. If I thought it was right to go around killing men who were assholes, I probably would have murdered you a really long time ago."

"So you're telling me that you woke up this morning, remembered—or at least had it explained to you—what happened, and you *didn't* want him dead?"

"Maybe a...a little. But what I want doesn't matter—he didn't deserve to die over what he tried to do to me."

"Before you think this is all to do with you, it's not. Last night, he threatened all three of you."

That gave her pause. "He what?"

"He said he'd go to The Brethren. That couldn't happen, so I had to remove the threat." The water had boiled, so Michael turned his back on her while he made a cup of tea.

"But you couldn't work it out? You couldn't...I mean, he was your friend, wasn't he?"

Michael shrugged without looking at her. "He crossed a line."

"Well, it makes more sense knowing that he threatened all of us. I didn't think you'd kill a guy just for trying to assault me."

He didn't reply. The tea ready, he passed the mug her way, and then reached for his coffee to finish the cup.

Genevieve stared down into the tea, frowning.

"What the fuck is your problem now?" he asked. "It's the kind you liked before."

"I know, I..." She shivered, hands wrapping around her to rub her bare arms for warmth. "It's what Finn made last night."

"Jesus Christ, I'm not going to fucking roofie you." He reached to take the mug away, but she grasped it before he could.

"It's fine. Sorry." She shook her head as she took a sip of the tea. "I'm just...jittery, I guess. I just keep thinking I was so stupid. I should have brought Merri or someone, or just not gone... And I knew I should've gone right home and not accepted the drink and—"

"It's not your fault."

"It feels like it is. I should have sensed something—what kind of witch am I? But I...I've never been in a situation like that, you know? I hear all the warnings to girls to be careful, but I thought that was for straight chicks. Which sounds stupid, I know... I should have been paying more attention."

"It's not your fault," he repeated. "It's mine. I shouldn't have allowed him any contact with the three of you. I thought I was watching him, but apparently I was wrong since I didn't know the two of you planned to investigate at the club."

Gen shook her head. "You couldn't have known he would..." As her eyes locked with his, she visibly tensed at what she saw in their depths. "You knew?"

He didn't answer.

"He's roofied girls before?" Gen asked, hysteria creeping into her voice.

His silence seemed to be enough of an answer for her.

Children of the Apocalypse

"How could you...but he was your friend! How could you be friends with someone like that? Is that what you guys do on Saturday night—you drug women and rape them?"

"Hardly," Michael said with a derisive snort. "I'd rather fuck someone who's awake, thank you."

"But you knew what he did and you didn't care?"

"You know who I am, you know what I'm capable of, yet you're surprised at the company I keep?"

"Well...to be honest, I was kinda surprised you had any friends at all. I guess I should have known you'd be pals with rapists."

"He was hardly the worst of the people I know."

"But you..." Tears filled her eyes as she gazed up at him, her expression that of a wounded puppy. "You didn't know he'd try doing that to one of us?"

"No. He was told, explicitly, to leave the three of you alone."

"Even me? I know you hate me and you did want to leave me to die..."

He didn't comment for several long minutes, his gaze dropping to stare at the granite countertop.

"You're..."

Fragile. "You're weak and you're..."

Innocent. "Naive. This kind of thing would change you. It would..."

Damage you.

Michael sighed. "It would probably make you even more useless than you already are if something like that traumatized you, and I don't want to have to add therapy to our list of tasks every day."

"Well, at least you're honest." She sipped her tea in silence, haunted blue eyes focused on the pattern of the counter.

Michael glanced at the clock—she'd better be leaving soon. The whole exchange, it just...it bothered him and he just wanted her to get the hell out of his house.

"Can I see the spell book? The one you had me read from?"

Dammit, of course she'd ask about that. He was tempted to say no, but then she'd probably whine about it later.

"You're not ready to try any of them yet," he said as he walked to where he left the book on the coffee table near the couch. "Just read. Don't cast. Got it?"

Gen nodded. He set the book next to her and she reached for the cover. Pale fingers ran along the text of the title.

"Michael?"

What now?

She gazed up at him, once again crying. "Was it because of my tramp stamp?"

"Jesus, you're thick," he muttered. "It's not because you got a tattoo, let alone where you put it."

"But maybe he wouldn't have—"

"You were attacked because you were in the presence of a rapist. It has nothing to do with *you* personally."

“But—”

“Fuck, you’d argue about anything. I’m not saying this to make you feel better—believe me. It’s the truth. It doesn’t matter what you say or what you do. It’s not about you. It was *him*. Now I’ve got better things to do today than sit and listen to you whine about something that’s *not* your fault. Will you leave already?”

She nodded and drained her tea. Book in hand, she started for the door, but stopped a few feet away.

Great, what now—

Turning suddenly, she ran back to him and threw her arms around him in a hug. His throat constricted at her touch—it bothered him more than anything had so far, and his skin began to crawl. Michael stiffened in her embrace, but she didn’t seem to care.

“Thank you,” she whispered, squeezing him tight. She stepped back just as quickly as she’d approached him, held up the book, and gave him a weak smile. “And for this too.”

He was about to tell her to fuck off already when she turned and left on her own without another word.

Michael was kidding himself—he knew why the prospect of what had almost transpired the night before bothered him. That kid walked through the world so wide-eyed and trusting. She was stupid and obnoxious, sure, but if something too traumatic had happened to her, she’d be...changed. He’d seen it first hand; he knew what it could do to someone. And he wasn’t about to watch it happen to her.

Perhaps that was what bothered him the most...that he even cared in the first place.

He stared at the door for a few beats longer, then went for the bottle of Jack Daniels in the fridge and committed to drinking away the afternoon.

~~*

Sage leaned against Gen’s locker on Monday afternoon. “How are you feeling?”

Genevieve shrugged and avoided her friend’s gaze. “Still breathing.”

“I thought you might have stayed home today.”

She shook her head and shivered a little. “Not in an empty house. I’d go stark Raging mad. And I’d probably want to be out of there by the time my dad got home from work anyway, so I figured I might as well go to school.” She piled her books into her locker and rifled through the top shelf in search of her supplies for the next period.

“Are you good to head to Michael’s today?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I just thought that...” Sage paused, and Gen could guess where her thoughts lay, but she didn’t say anything. “I thought it might be weird for you.”

“I went by yesterday and I was fine.”

Children of the Apocalypse

“You did?”

Gen nodded. “I...I had to talk to him about a few things.” She hadn’t bothered telling Merri or Sage about her conversation with Michael the day before when she met with them, instead electing to keep her silence for the time being. She had meant her promise to them months ago about being honest, and she still fully intended to tell them the truth about Finn’s death, but all of it was too fresh, too raw, to talk about right away.

“Did he mention Finn?”

“Yeah.”

“And...?”

“And it’s true,” she said with a sigh. “He killed him. I’ll let Michael tell you guys the rest later today.” The bell rang, signaling the start of the next period. *God, I just want to go home...* She leaned against the locker next to her own for a moment and sighed. “Why can’t the day be over yet?”

The halls were packed with students rushing last minute to their classes. Gen’s gaze settled on Janine, who smoothly weaved among them. The other girl seemed so confident, so put together...

And I feel like such a goddamn mess.

As Janine passed them, her dark eyes went to Gen, and she smiled in greeting. Moments after she was gone, the exchange finally seemed to register in Gen’s head.

“Did Janine just look at me?”

“Who?” Sage asked.

Gen sighed. “Not important. I’m probably going crazy. So I don’t suppose you want to skip the rest of the day and just go over now?”

“Should we get Mer?”

“Haven’t seen her today.” Gen stuffed her spring jacket into her messenger bag, slipped the pack over her shoulder, and snapped the locker closed. “So?”

“I *do* have a Chemistry test right now...”

“Can’t you make it up tomorrow?”

Sage gave her an apologetic look. “I’m sorry...”

Of course, she has to be the perfect student... “Okay. Guess I’ll meet you—”

“There she is.” Gen and Sage turned suddenly to find the source of the voice that invaded their conversation. The corridor was nearly empty now except for them and two figures that stood a few metres away. Gen’s assigned guidance counsellor watched from the side of a police officer.

Oh god, they know about Finn... Somehow, despite Michael’s promises, the police had figured out what happened. It did seem illogical that they suspected her, but Michael? She had little doubt he possessed a record of some sort—he was too casual about murder to be someone without a past...

As the officer approached them, Gen took a deep breath and hoped to god her face didn’t betray her fear. If they had just killed Finn in self defense, at least then they would have had some sort of...well, *defense*. Instead, the police would see the whole thing as cold blooded murder—which, she had to grant, it was—and Michael would go away to prison for god knows how long, and... *Stop*

it, Gen. She had to calm down. Maybe the police didn't know anything—maybe it was just about whoever died at the club on Saturday night. The police came around and questioned people when Warren died.

"Hi," Gen said as she met the policeman's eyes, her throat scratchy and voice a little too loud. "Is something wrong?"

"Your name is..." He glanced over the small notebook in his hands. "Genevieve, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Did I do something, or..."

"No, nothing like that—you don't need to worry."

Easier said than done.

Gen stepped forward uneasily. "What's this about, then?"

"We're looking for someone and we believe you know her."

At this, Gen was genuinely confused. "Who?"

"I need to know if you," the cop glanced at Sage briefly, "either of you have seen this girl." He pulled out a black and white photo of a young woman about their age.

Gen didn't recognize her. "No."

Sage shook her head as well. "I don't know her. I have to get to class, is it okay if—"

The officer nodded. Sage gave Gen a meaningful, "I'll see you later," look, and started down the hall.

"Please take a closer look, Genevieve." The cop thrust the photo towards her.

With a sigh, Gen took the picture and studied it. The girl looked rough—like the type that would show up on the Maury Povich show and have to go to boot camp or something. Heavy, black eye make-up, cold eyes... "Sorry, I don't think I..." The resemblance in the photo hit her rather suddenly.

Oh my god.

"Is something wrong?"

Gen looked up sharply. "N-no. Nothing. Why are you asking me about this?"

"In late October you were at the club *On the Map* when Warren Humber was murdered?"

"Yeah."

"Witnesses claim you were seen with a girl who matches the description of the one we're looking for."

Gen gazed down at the photo again. There was no denying it—the picture was of Merri. "Who is she?"

"Her name is Belle Swanson, and allegedly she's a killer."

Eighteen

Genevieve sat at a computer station in the Newhaven High library, staring at the screen in a daze.

Belle Merrilee Swanson: a Nova Scotia teen wanted in connection with a murder. There were articles from small, local papers that contained interviews with Loretta Swanson, the girl's mother, where she pleaded for her daughter to turn herself in. Belle Swanson had a juvenile record a mile long, including everything from petty theft and shoplifting right up to assault. Then, last July, she murdered a man in cold blood.

And the more Gen looked through articles that included photos of the girl, the more certain she became that Belle was the same person she knew as Meredith McCreary.

At first glance, the two seemed nothing alike. Belle had a hard expression and wore a hell of a lot of make-up. If Gen ran into her in a dark alley, she'd probably run the other way. Merri, on the other hand, always seemed gentle. It wasn't just the way she dressed, either—it was her very demeanor.

But, Gen realized, she hadn't always trusted Merri. Every now and again she glimpsed another side to her—another person entirely. Although just one day ago, Merri had watched over her while she slept, then hugged her and promised it would be okay after Finn's assault, she had also shot a man several months ago. A man who attacked them, sure, but...but she hadn't even hesitated. She just killed him, and then acted like it was nothing at all.

Gen couldn't find many details about the murder victim, let alone Belle's motives. She might be able to give Merri the benefit of the doubt...

But at the very least, she's been lying to us, Gen thought with a shiver. Even if Merri had nothing to do with the murder she was accused of, she had never told anyone about it. Never told anyone she was a runaway, never told anyone she was being pursued by the damn police. Did Michael know? It seemed unlikely; Michael wouldn't want any extra attention drawn to them.

The police officer had told her little about why he was looking for Belle Swanson, except that authorities had D.N.A. proof she was at the club the night Warren Humber was killed. Gen had asked if the girl—whom she swore she had never seen—was wanted for that murder too, but the cop declined to answer.

Warren's ghost told Finn he had gone outside to wait for someone...for the new girl...

And Merri was definitely new in town.

She had disappeared that night with Thad for awhile, but who knows how long before he left? Merri came back inside alone nearly an hour later. She could have...

Stop it, Gen. How could she think her friend would kill Warren? Unless he was secretly a member of The Brethren and Mer had caught him trying to kill Sage, it seemed impossible...didn't it?

Perhaps it was time to look into things further.

Standing outside of Meredith's apartment building after school, Genevieve looked up at the many floors of windows. She and Sage had walked her home dozens of times, they'd been in the car with Michael to pick her up, and yet Gen had never been into Merri's place. She didn't even know what apartment number might be hers.

Although the rows of buzzer numbers near the security door were labelled with last names, none of them were McCreary—or Swanson, for that matter.

Aliases... The police officer had said Belle used a few different names after going missing. Leigh Bell was the only one he had given her, and that one wasn't listed either.

Guess I'm back to the drawing board. She wasn't sure what she expected to find at the apartment anyway. If Merri was around, should she tell her about the police? Demand the truth? What guarantee did she have that it wouldn't be another lie? *And if she is off killing people randomly, I'd rather not confront her about it right now.*

Gen's gaze went to the apartment building next to Merri's. Maybe it wasn't necessary to involve Meredith—or even Michael—right away...

She walked up to the familiar building and buzzed apartment 7-F.

"Yes?" a woman's sultry voice answered.

"Uh, hi. I was here one time, like a couple of months ago, and I don't know if you remember me, but I kind of need to talk to you."

Silence followed, and Gen wasn't sure if the Wicked Witch of West Newhaven was still listening or not.

"I'm a friend of Michael Parris's," she offered. "Well, sorta."

Krysta responded by buzzing her inside.

Drunken butterflies dove around Gen's stomach like mad as she rode the elevator to the seventh floor. She wasn't stupid; she knew it was likely quite idiotic of her to involve Krysta in this, but the truth was that she didn't have

anyone else to go to. Sage would go straight to Michael, Levi would tell her to go to the police, and Michael...Michael would probably just take Merri's side anyway. It probably wouldn't bother him in the least if they had a killer among them, considering he was so blasé about murder anyway.

And he did say that if he hadn't killed Finn, Merri would have and she'd be caught... So there seemed a good chance he knew already.

Krysta's apartment door lay open by the time Gen reached it, and the witch herself stood in the doorway. Her arms crossed over her stomach and shoulder leaning on the doorframe, she regarded Gen with a grin.

"If it isn't 'The Witch,' with a capital 'W' and everything," Krysta said dryly.

Gen bit her lip nervously. *Oh, great, she remembers...* "Yeah, that's me. Look...I need your help."

That seemed to amuse Krysta all the more. "Is that so?"

"Yeah."

"Does it involve scaring off important people in town, like Austin? Because I'm not interested in that—I have to work here, you know."

Gen paled a little. "So you knew that was me?"

"Of course I did."

Her hope deflated. "So you're not going to help me?"

"As I said, it depends what it involves."

"I have a friend who said she lived in the building next to yours, but I think she was lying. And it's really important that I find out what's going on with her."

"You *could* ask her."

"If I thought she'd be forthcoming, I wouldn't be here."

Krysta stepped back from the doorway. "Come inside, then."

Maybe I should have asked her to meet me in a public place. Though Gen felt the same trepidation she had felt the first time she went to Krysta's with Michael, she forced herself forward.

Genevieve went immediately for the couch across the room and perched on the edge, body tense and ready to jump should Krysta throw any evil Satanist spells at her.

"So what, precisely, did you have in mind?" Krysta sat on the arm of the chair near the couch and crossed one smooth leg over the other.

"Is there some kind of like...truth serum, only in spell form? Something I can cast to make her tell me the truth?"

"There *is* such a thing, but I doubt you could cast it."

"Hey, I've casted plenty of things—"

"You'd have to have a stronger will than the subject of the spell." Krysta looked Gen up and down with a smug smile.

And Merri seems pretty strong-willed. Dammit, the witch had her there.

"So I'm screwed?"

"I didn't say that." Krysta rose and glided toward a bookshelf across the room. After scanning the spines of the various texts, she pulled a large hardcover off the shelf and flipped it open. "I wouldn't bet money on you being

able to control someone else's will, but affecting yourself shouldn't be a problem."

"What do you mean?"

Krysta set the book on the coffee table in front of Gen. "We make you a seer."

Genevieve glanced up at her sharply. Why pick that word? Was she referring to Meredith in some way? Had Michael told her about them?

Gen decided to play dumb for the time being. "Meaning what, exactly?"

"You will temporarily be given sight. This spell calls for true sight, but that would probably drive you insane, so we'll simply give you the ability to detect lies. Grab the box behind you and we'll get started."

While Krysta left to pick up supplies from the other room, Gen turned and took a large wooden box from the windowsill behind her. She set it on the coffee table, then glanced toward the hallway. No sign of Krysta yet. She could just take a peek inside...

Fingers lightly touching the box, Gen lifted the lid and glanced inside.

"Go ahead and open it."

The lid dropped with a thud and Gen jumped back at the sound of Krysta's voice.

The other woman nodded at the box as she walked over with a handful of candles. "Pick something out of there."

Half expecting to find another scary voodoo doll or something, Gen opened the box with care. The interior was lined with velvet. One side housed a pile of chains, while the other kept stacks of various pendants and gems.

Gen selected a small, clear gem in a silver setting, as well as a chain. After placing them on the table next to where Krysta was setting up candles, she put the box aside. "So what is it for?"

"While you wear the necklace, you'll be able to see." Krysta gave her a look that reminded her of Michael's "could you be any stupider?" one. "You *have* done that before, right?"

"No...oh, wait, yeah. I did it on Saturday. Only I used a rock."

Krysta froze and met her eyes suddenly. "A rock."

"It only lasted a few hours, but—"

The witch shook her head and went back to what she was doing. "I doubt it last more than a few minutes. You'd have to be much more skilled to use a stupid rock, and even then it wouldn't hold the magic long."

"My mistake." She'd have to mention that little flaw to Michael later, just in case the spell hadn't worked and he was, in fact, on the security camera by Finn's room. "So what do we do?"

"You can start by lighting the candles."

Gen glanced around. "No matches?"

Krysta rolled her eyes and sighed. Her gaze slid along the circle of candles; the wick of each one lit instantly.

I could do that. What a show off. "And after the candle lighting?"

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Krysta placed one hand face up on the coffee table and touched the fingertips of the other to the pendant. “Do exactly as I’m doing, focus, and keep quiet while I recite the words.”

Gen set her open hand on Krysta’s palm, then gingerly touched the stone of the pendant. Just as she closed her eyes, she felt a sudden rush of power unlike anything she had encountered before. The energy was deafening, like loud music playing at full blast, and seemed to strike her physically with its force. Suddenly the small spells here and there that she’d accomplished seemed like child’s play.

As Krysta spoke the foreign words of the spell, Gen tried to focus and keep her concentration, but she doubted she was contributing anything of value to the casting. Several minutes passed, silence followed, and it wasn’t until Krysta’s hand moved that Gen’s eyes flew open.

“Is it...is it done?”

Krysta’s eyes went to the pendant and Gen’s followed. The formerly clear stone had turned a dark violet. “I didn’t put much into it, so it should only be good for the rest of the day. If you need more than that, you’ll have to pay.”

Gen breathed with some relief. “So this is a freebie?” *Thank god.* She didn’t have any cash on her, and—unlike how Sage was with Austin—she wasn’t interested in owing favours to creepy people with a lot of power.

“We’ll just say that Michael owes me,” Krysta said with a smile.

Yeah, that’ll go over well... She supposed there would be no way of keeping Michael from knowing about the meeting now.

“And you’re sure it works?”

Krysta gave her a look that suggested she wouldn’t dignify such an inquiry with a response.

“Okay, how about telling me how *I*’ll know if it’s working?”

“While you’re wearing it, ask your friend a question. You’ll see a purple aura around her. If it goes dark, she’s lying. If it goes light, she’s telling the truth.”

That seemed simple enough. Gen slipped the pendant onto the chain and fastened it around her neck. So far, nothing looked different, but then she hadn’t asked Krysta any questions, so she couldn’t expect to see anything yet.

“If that’s everything...” Krysta’s gaze flickered to the apartment door.

“Yeah, that’s it.” Gen rose and walked toward the door. Just as she was about to leave, she turned to glance back at her host. *Might as well see if it’s working.* “Just out of curiosity, when you said that Michael would owe you for this, did you mean a sex thing?”

“Of course not,” Krysta said, her face impassive.

Gen shuddered a little. “You are *such* a liar. Gross.”

The walk to Michael’s house was long and...strange. Though she didn’t actually speak to anyone she saw on the streets, occasionally she encountered groups speaking to one another in low voices. Periodically, the tone of violet

around them would change as they spoke—sometimes slowly, casually, other times changing so drastically that Gen had to pause and blink. About halfway to Michael's, her head began to ache.

If this damn thing gives me epilepsy, that witch will have hell to pay. Assuming, of course, that Gen could do anything but *not* get her ass handed to her by Krysta if it ever came to that.

By the time she reached the house, it was dusk. She wasn't surprised to see both Sage and Merri in the living room.

"You're late," Michael said, but she ignored him. A dull ache had settled around her head and it took time for her gaze to focus. Slowly, her eyes moved to Merri.

"Who are you?" Gen asked.

Merri glanced at Sage and Michael respectively, as if perhaps they understood the question. "What do you mean?"

"Who the hell are you?"

Rising from the couch, Merri took a few steps forward so she and Gen stood just a metre apart. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm Merri." Her brows pulled into a frown of worry. "Did something happen to you? Was it a spell or—"

An aura of violet around Meredith darkened to near blackness almost immediately. The pendant around Gen's neck seemed to weigh heavily on her and she resisted the urge to yank the thing off. "The police are looking for you."

Merri's eyes widened, her body tensed, but when she spoke, she sounded collected. "Well, that's weird."

"They said you're a killer...*Belle*."

The room was silent but for an audible gasp that passed Merri's lips. "I have no idea who—"

"Stop lying to me!" Gen shouted, horrified at the darkness hovering around her friend. "Stop lying to all of us! I spoke to a police officer. I know you killed a man back in Nova Scotia. I know you've been lying about your name and your family—you don't even live in that apartment building, do you?"

"You've gone insane—I'm not answering these questions." Merri turned suddenly and picked up her knapsack, stuffing loose pages and textbooks from her homework inside.

"I know you were supposed to meet Warren outside the club the night he died."

Merri froze and looked up at her, grip tightening on the strap of her bag.

"What did you do to him?" Gen whispered, searching the other girl's gaze for something—anything—that might answer her question. If she didn't speak, she couldn't tell for certain whether or not she was lying...but her reactions so far made her look all the more guilty. "How are we supposed to believe that *you're* not the serial killer or something?"

"Gen, that's silly," Sage began as she rose, but Gen waved her off.

"Just tell us the truth," Genevieve said, her gaze still fixed on Merri. "Merri or Belle or whatever name you want to use. What the hell have you done?"

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Slinging her bag over her shoulder, Merri bolted from the house, leaving the front door swinging behind her.

“What the hell is your problem?” Michael snapped.

“My ‘problem’ is that we’ve been trusting a known murderer for months now. She hasn’t even told us her real name!”

“Did it ever occur to you she might have had a good reason for it?”

“Did it ever occur to you that she’s dangerous?” Gen shot back. “She brought the police here, Michael. She brought unwanted attention to all of us and she didn’t even warn us. You, of all people, should be pissed off about that.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m exactly joyful about the prospect,” he said dryly.

“Do you know what she’s done? Is that why you’re defending her?”

“I don’t think there’s cause for concern right now.” His aura turned dark.

“You’re lying.”

Their eyes locked for several long moments, and then his gaze dropped to the pendant hanging high on her neck. “What the hell is that?”

“A little spell I cooked up with someone.” *Not that I actually contributed anything; thank god he can’t tell when I’m lying.* “It’s for seeing who’s lying to me.”

“And what the hell is that going to accomplish?”

“I know she was lying—”

“So? What now?”

“Now she tells us the goddamn truth—”

“If she wouldn’t tell you the truth before, she certainly won’t now.” He stalked across the room, grabbed his jacket from behind the door, and slipped it on.

“You’re going after her?” Sage asked.

“Try not to get killed,” Gen said.

“If she bolts—which is quite likely at this point—you’re both in trouble,” Michael said. “We can’t afford to lose track of the Seer, for Christ’s sake. Both of you go home—I’ll see you tomorrow.” Without even another glance at them, he stormed from the house and slammed the door behind him.

“So what’s going on?” Sage asked.

“I’ll tell you on the way home,” Gen said with a sigh as she slipped off the necklace.

~~*

Metal hangers scraped against the bar in the closet as Merri yanked off a pile of clothes. She had arrived in Newhaven with nothing but her knapsack, and her current wardrobe certainly wouldn’t fit in there. She threw everything from the closet onto the couch, then grabbed the dresser drawers one by one and emptied the contents on top.

Can’t walk out with a pile of clothes in my arms... Why the hell hadn’t she bought a fucking suitcase or something? Of course, the simple answer was that she didn’t think she’d have to leave so soon. *Or leave at all...*

She ran to the kitchen to open cupboards and drawers, rifling through the contents until she came across a box of garbage bags. That would have to do.

She stuffed armfuls of clothing into a large green bag, tied it once it was full, and dragged it toward the door. She had to get out—had to get on the road again. Deep down, she knew she shouldn't have stopped for long—she shouldn't have listened to Michael. Of course the police would be on her heels. She couldn't hide forever.

Can't hide, but I can run. And that was what she'd do. She'd just keep running.

Another tug on the bag and the side split, spilling clothes on the floor.

"Goddamn it!" she screamed, dropping onto her knees to stuff everything back in again. The bag continued to tear. Grasping the whole package, she heaved it across the room. Clothes were strewn across the floor and the bag knocked over a lamp on the far wall. The glass bulb shattered.

Merri let out a sob and buried her head in her hands. *I'm not ready. I'm not ready to go yet.* God help her, but she liked it there in Newhaven. She liked her friends. She liked her boyfriend. She was...

Happy.

But she had been comfortable—too comfortable. She stopped paying attention. If the police had been asking about the night at the club, that must mean she slipped up then. True, it had been risky dressing a little more like her usual self, but that couldn't be the only thing she did... *But I was there all night—I probably left prints, DNA, and all that stuff around.* And of course that kind of thing would be on file somewhere.

So the authorities officially knew she was in Newhaven, and not only were they after her for one murder, but apparently a few others that she didn't actually commit. They knew her friends and it would only be a matter of time before they found out where she lived.

Her cell phone rang from within the front pocket of her backpack. She'd take the phone with her and ditch it after being on the road for awhile; she didn't want to be traced, but leaving it there meant the police could cycle through her saved numbers, and then they'd be bugging people like Thad...

Thad. Her eyes teared at the thought. He knew something was up with her, but he'd never really pushed. He had trusted her. It would kill him to find out what she really was... But she didn't have time to say sorry. Didn't have time to explain or try to soften the blow. He'd learn that he spent all these months fucking a murderer and be all the more glad she didn't stick around.

Gotta keep moving. Merri dragged herself off the floor and grabbed a new garbage bag. This time she only half filled it, leaving the remaining clothes in a pile. She had enough clean clothes for a week or so; the rest could be evidence or whatever the cops decided to do with it. Though there was little food in her cupboard, she grabbed a few non-perishables and bottles of water from the fridge, and stuffed them all in her knapsack.

At last she came to the stack of letters from Lexie and the cash she and Jay had sent. If the cops figured out where she lived, they'd figure out the fake name she'd been using and no doubt check the post office. The next time she

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went in to get her mail directed to a new address, they'd catch her. *So much for any more cash from my family.* She was definitely on her own now.

Money stuffed in her pocket, knapsack slung over her shoulder, and anything of need or value stuffed in the garbage bag, Merri cast one final look back at her apartment. *So this is all that's left of Meredith McCreary...*

Too bad. I kinda liked her.

~~*

Michael had spent most of the night driving around town looking for Merri, but to no avail. He went by the building he knew was hers, but there was no sign of her. Local hotels—even the dives—brought up no results. He had swung by the bus station a few times, but it was empty as well.

It occurred to him that she might have already been arrested, which would be...problematic, to say the least. A short conference with a few contacts he'd made at the local O.P.P., however, and he knew that wasn't the case. No one matching Merri's description had been brought in, and the police had no more leads about the young fugitive, Belle Swanson.

Either she was still hiding in town somewhere, or she had hitchhiked out. The former, he could deal with. Wherever she was, she could be found. The latter, though...that meant they were in trouble. He hadn't a clue where she would go.

In part, Michael blamed himself for the whole situation. He knew she was hiding something. He knew she was on the run. Logic dictated it would all catch up with her eventually. But he hadn't asked for any more from her. If pushed, it seemed likely she'd run, and that could be dangerous. As it turned out, he was right, but...but if it had been him rather than Genevieve, she might have heard him out. And then he would have had time to prepare and ensure nothing came of this police investigation. Now, however...

Now it could be too late.

He went home to catch a few hours of sleep, then he was back on the road again in the morning, searching. It was when he decided to take a second tour of the bus station that he finally found her.

Merri sat on a bench in front of a sign for buses leaving town. A lumpy garbage bag was on the seat next to her and she clutched the strap of her backpack in both of her hands. He had to do a double take at first; this time, her hair was blonde and barely brushed her shoulders.

Michael took a seat on the other side of her. She didn't look at him, but instead kept her eyes fixed in the direction the bus would be arriving.

"Did you come to see me off?" she asked in a low voice.

"I came to tell you not to leave."

"Not really an option anymore." She fished a pack of cigarettes from her bag, pulled one out, and lit it.

"You can't keep running."

"Can't stay here either."

"You know Sage and Genevieve need you here."

"I'm pretty sure they feel safer *without* me around, actually. I'll get caught eventually anyway...I just figure it'll be better if it happens away from them. It'll be better if they don't see it."

"Do you remember what I told you when we first met?"

Merri smoked in silence as she thought about it. "I remember you bitching at me for not getting in your stupid car when you first told me to."

"I told you that I don't care who you are or what you're running from. I'm here to help you. And that's still true."

"You don't know what I've done, Michael. You don't..."

"So what have you done that makes you think I won't still help you?"

"I..." She dropped her cigarette on the cement and stomped it out, then stared at the butt for several minutes. At last she turned her head and gazed up at him, long blonde bangs falling in her eyes. "I'm a killer."

Michael barely blinked. "And I'm not?"

"I know you've done worse than me, but...but that's not going to matter to Gen and Sage."

"Why did you do it?"

"It doesn't matter—"

"It might to them. Why did you do it?"

Merri shook her head. "It wasn't in self defense, it wasn't temporary insanity...it was cold-blooded murder. I made a plan that involved the death of someone and I executed it."

"Are you sorry?"

She shook her head again. "I'd do it again in a heartbeat. The only change I'd make is that I would have done it sooner."

"Sounds like your victim deserved it."

"Is that based on your considerable experience as a murderer?" she asked with a small smile.

"Either he deserved it or you're a sociopath—it's that simple."

"Does that apply to you too? Are you sorry for anything you've ever done?"

He didn't answer her at first. In truth, he didn't *want* to give it much consideration. "Regret can't change the past."

"No...but it can certainly affect the future. So did all the people you killed deserve what they got, or are you a sociopath?"

It's not so black and white where I'm concerned, he thought, though he decided to ignore her question. "Are you coming back with me or not?"

"I can't. The police know I'm in town, they'll—"

"I can handle the goddamn police. You'll have to find a better excuse than that."

"Gen and Sage," she said. "What am I supposed to say to them? How are they going to trust me? Especially Gen—"

"Gen's a fucking idiot. I'll deal with her as well. Are you coming?"

She stared in his eyes without saying a word. Half of him expected her to bolt, but at last she nodded. "I trust you."

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"It's about fucking time," he muttered.

"You have to tell me something, though. When we first met, you told me that if I let you in on my situation, you'd explain yours. So start talking."

Of course she had to bring that up. The kid had no sense of appropriate timing. "Later."

"No, now. I don't expect you to tell me everything—that'll take awhile, I'm sure. But...just tell me if I'm right. Was Gen the one who did..." She looked him up and down, then met his eyes pointedly. "...*this* to you?" She studied him in silence for a moment, frowning as she thought. "No...it was because of her somehow, though, right?"

There seemed little point in lying since she already knew the answer. "Yes. In a manner of speaking."

"Are you ever going to tell her—or even Sage—the truth about you?"

"Hadn't planned on it."

"They will find out eventually. *Gen* will figure it out. She's getting stronger."

"She'll only know if you or I tell her."

"Or if Shaw does."

Shit. She was right—Shaw knew. Shaw might say something... But until they got to that point, there seemed no use speculating. He'd deal with it when it came up.

"Can we leave yet, or are you planning to wait until the police finally show up here?"

"She scares you, doesn't she?" Merri asked, ignoring the fact that their conversation about Genevieve had already ended.

Michael sighed. "Why would she?"

Merri's eyes didn't leave his. "Because you think she's like you. You think you know what she could be capable of."

Yes, I do... "I know at the moment she's barely capable of putting out a fucking candle. We'll worry about other situations that arise when they *actually* arise."

"If you say so."

He highly doubted she'd leave the conversation there permanently, but it would do for now.

"I guess I should take my crap back to my apartment," Merri said as she rose. While she slipped her backpack over her shoulder, Michael grabbed the garbage bag. "I think I'll skip out on school again today and at least until this gets sorted out. Any suggestions for how to deal with the police?"

"For starters, we get you good identification and start forging records."

"I've got a fake driver's license from last year..." She dug the small, laminated card from her pocket and handed it to him. "It's the name I was using at the apartment and for my mail."

Michael only needed to glance at the card to tell "Mary Swan's" I.D. wasn't real. "I'm surprised that got you as far as it did."

"Yeah, I overpaid. But it was something."

"First thing we do is get you a decent birth certificate, new social insurance number, and a health card. Then you can apply for an actual driver's license." They reached his car and Michael tossed the bag of clothes in the back. He got in the front and Merri climbed in the passenger side.

"Great, and how much is that going to cost me?"

"I'll cover it."

"I don't like owing—"

"You won't be owing me anything. Consider it an investment in a worthy cause."

"Which would be?"

He gave her a sideways glance as he started the car. "Saving the world."

As he swung the car away from the bus terminal, Merri tugged at her blonde hair and the wig fell off. She tossed it in the back.

Michael glanced at her in surprise and she shrugged.

"You didn't really think I'd bleach it, right? Please." She ran her hands through her real hair, shaking it loose. "It's bad enough that I have to fix my roots all the time to stay a brunette. If I went blonde, it would be a daily chore to keep up. You might as well write 'trailer trash' on my forehead. So...any thoughts on what to tell Gen and Sage yet?"

As he drove, Michael thought about that very thing. Snarling, "Shut the hell up and deal with it," was a possibility.

"I'll figure something out," he said at last.

"Good, 'cause I don't know..." Her sentence trailed off as he turned the car onto her street.

Two police cars were parked in front of her apartment. Sure, it seemed possible—and perhaps even likely—that it was a drug bust, but it seemed too much a coincidence.

"Duck down," he said as he triggered the roof back up on the convertible. Merri slid down in her seat so she couldn't be seen as he rounded the corner away from the building.

"Shit," she swore. "Where the hell am I going to go?"

"For now, we hide you. There was nothing at your place that could trace you to me, was there?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. Never written down the address, never told anyone there...no ties whatsoever."

"Then you can hide there while I sort this out."

Thankfully, they didn't run into any other cops before they reached Michael's house, and the two of them got out of the car and swiftly moved to the front door.

"You don't go to school, you don't go to work," Michael opened the front door, "and you don't go anywhere until I—"

Michael and Merri froze just inside the door. Genevieve and Sage waited for them in the living room.

"Of course, you still have a fucking key," he muttered as he tossed the garbage bag of Meredith's things on the floor.

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“No, you just left the door unlocked,” Gen replied.

He’d smack the damn witch if she got in his way at that moment. Michael gestured for Merri to put her stuff in the spare room while he went to the kitchen for the phone. Time to purchase some decent forgeries. “We’ve got shit to do, so don’t start your bitching ‘cause—”

“Oh, for once we’re in agreement,” Gen said. “We don’t have time to talk right now.”

Someone knocked on the door suddenly. Michael and Merri both froze and looked to the door, but it was Gen who walked confidently over and opened it. She smiled at the intruder and gestured for him to come inside.

“Yes officers,” Gen said coolly. “She’s right here.”

Nineteen

Meredith felt herself stop breathing right about the time the two police officers stepped into Michael's house.

Now she *really* had nowhere to run; they'd catch her before she got to the other exit on the roof. And despite what Michael said, there would be no hiding after this either.

No, Merri was officially screwed.

Michael was livid, and Merri half expected him to pull out a gun and shoot the cops—and probably Gen—on the spot. Instead he waited, fingers flexing into a fist and chest rising and falling with anger. Sage looked a tad confused herself, as if she hadn't been expecting the police.

So she didn't know what Gen was planning...

And Genevieve herself had an unreadable expression and cool stance. After gesturing towards Merri, she crossed her arms at her chest and leaned against the far wall, watching.

Two officers, one tall and broad, the other shorter and older, approached. Merri forced herself to take a deep breath.

The taller of the two held a small notepad in his hand. He stopped a few feet away from her and read something jotted down on the paper. "Your name is Meredith McCreary, from Newhaven High?"

Merri nodded.

The older man held a file folder, which he opened. Both of them glanced through the contents, flipping through papers and photos. They glanced up at her a few times, then back to the folder again.

"Remarkable," the taller one said.

"Very similar," the other officer agreed.

Merri nearly held up her hands with her wrists pressed together to tell them to just arrest her and get it over with. What was taking so long?

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The older one shook his head. "Eyes are different, though. Facial structure is finer. Still, you'd almost think they were related." He gazed up from the photo and gave Merri a genuine smile. "We're sorry to trouble you, but you look like a fugitive we've been pursuing. We've shown the photo around town and a number of people suggested you might be her, but you're clearly two different people."

"It looks like she's left town," the first officer added. "Glad we could get this sorted and out of the way." He glanced over his shoulder at Genevieve. "Thank you very much for your help, miss."

Merri felt cemented in place as she watched the police officers leave. What the hell had just happened?

Genevieve closed the door behind the cops, and just as it clicked shut, Michael was on her.

"What the fuck is your problem? Why would you bring them here—"

Gen met his eyes, her own burning with blue fire. "They were all over the school this morning looking for Belle Swanson. I had to get rid of them."

"But...why didn't they recognize me?" Merri whispered, staring at Gen. "How could they not know it was me?"

"It's a little thing I like to call *magic*." She breezed past Michael and lifted a book from the breakfast bar counter. Merri recognized the tome as the one Michael had her read from the night Finn assaulted her.

"What did you cast?" Michael asked.

Gen pulled a small quartz from her pocket and held it up for them all to see. "Turns out these work better than regular rocks. I'd have gone with a diamond if any were lying around the garden outside. Anyone within a ten foot radius of the person carrying this stone won't recognize Merri as Belle Swanson." She tossed the stone Meredith's way.

Merri caught it and turned it over in her hand a few times before meeting Gen's eyes. "How long does it work for?"

"You'll probably get a few days out of it before I have to recharge it. I thought maybe Michael could spring for a better quality crystal or something in the future, but it'll do for now."

Merri squeezed the quartz in her palm. Gen had done that for her? After all that had happened? To top it off, she implied that she'd keep casting the spell as often as necessary. "Gen, I—"

Genevieve raised her hand to stop her, eyes hard and cold. "I don't want to hear it. You've lied to me—to all of us—for months. I have no idea who you are and I don't care right now. Just tell me one thing; did you kill Warren?"

My god, she really believes that... Merri shook her head. "No. He hit on me that night and tried to pass some drugs onto us. I told him I'd meet him out back to get rid of him. But I didn't kill him."

"Good."

"If you listen to me, I can explain—"

"I don't want to hear any more of your lies," Gen said. "I don't trust you and I don't know when I'll ever trust you again. Now if you'll excuse me, I'd

like to try to make some of my classes this afternoon.” Though she started for the front door, she turned back once and tossed something Michael’s way. He caught a stone pendant on a chain. “Give that back to Krysta for me.”

The door slammed behind her and everyone stared for a moment, dumbfounded.

“Um...when did she turn into such a bad ass?” Sage asked. “Cause it’s kinda cool, actually.”

“I’m going to kill her,” Michael said, still staring at the door.

“Michael—” Merri began.

“Don’t you dare make any excuses for her—”

“But she kind of solved this problem for us,” Sage interrupted. “Just like that, Merri—or Belle or whomever—is off the hook.” She glanced over at Merri. “What *do* you want to be called?”

“Merri’s fine.”

“But if she hadn’t—” Michael continued, but it was Merri who stopped him.

“This is my fault. I put everyone in this situation.”

“And you’re just mad that she solved Mer’s problem before you could,” Sage pointed out with a shrug. A sharp look from Michael seemed to silence her on the subject and she dropped her gaze to the floor.

“So you didn’t know what she was planning?” Michael asked.

Sage shook her head. “She called me this morning and told me to meet her here. She didn’t say anything about having the police waiting.”

“I’m going to kill her.”

“Michael, she bought us some time,” Merri said. “Go easy on her.”

“You should probably thank her,” Sage said. Her face shaded red as Michael turned his glare her way. “I’m gonna go to school now. You coming, Mer?”

Meredith looked to Michael, who nodded his agreement.

“Might as well make an appearance now that they won’t recognize you,” he said.

“Want us back here later?” Sage asked.

Michael shook his head. “Not you or Gen. But you,” he looked at Merri, “still can’t go back to your apartment. You’re free to stay here—in fact, it would still be safer for the time being, so I’d prefer it.”

Though grateful that she didn’t have to go back to that awful apartment building, she wasn’t entirely comfortable with the idea of staying at Michael’s. He was already insisting on paying people to forge new identification and records for her—she couldn’t very well stay at his place for free as well. He’d never tried anything with her, never looked at any of them like that, but still...still, she didn’t like owing a guy anything, in case he decided to collect at some point.

“For now,” she said carefully.

“Then go to school and I’ll see you later.”

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Merri and Sage stepped outside the house. A glance around the street didn't show any more police officers lurking. Merri absently reached for the quartz in her pocket and felt the outline of it beneath her jeans.

I hope Gen was telling the truth.

"So I guess you want to know what's going on?" she said to Sage as they walked. Tensing, she waited for anger and accusations from her friend, but they never came.

"Not really. I don't care what's going on. You've saved my life and that's enough for me. When Gen cools down, I'm sure she'll feel the same way."

I hope you're right.

~~*

Michael stood alone in his house for a few minutes after the girls had left, trying to sort everything out in his mind.

Yes, Genevieve had finally made herself useful, but he still wasn't pleased about it. When the hell would these kids get it through their heads that they shouldn't be doing things on their own? He might not relish the job of looking out for them, but he'd committed to it anyway. The situation could have been dealt with much more safely if Gen had just come to him in the first place when the police approached her. If her spell hadn't worked... *Merri could have been dragged off in handcuffs.*

But her spell *did* work. Even a few nights ago, when she'd charged a simple rock with magic while being drugged, her spell had worked. Just like Merri said...

"She's getting stronger."

And that was the point, right? To help the girls get stronger. They had enormous burdens to bear, too many things to face in too short an amount of time. They were still young, though. Reckless. Foolish. And that led to mistakes and lapses in judgment.

He wouldn't kid himself, however. There was more to it than that.

"She scares you, doesn't she?"

The stronger she got, the more unpredictable things became. They'd nearly had a fucking disaster a few nights before. And the next time? She didn't know, yet, what the real world was like. She was still an innocent. But if something happened again, something he couldn't prevent, and she changed... *And if she fully realizes the things she can do...god knows what will happen.*

So what were his options? Keep her in the dark about her power in case something bad happened to her, or protect her long enough for her to grow into someone responsible enough to handle magic. Fine ideas that wouldn't ever work in practice.

It would have been so much easier to let her die. To let everything go to hell...

He picked up Merri's garbage bag of clothes and knapsack from behind the couch and tossed them in the spare room, then locked up the house. He had

one issue to deal with, and then he could work on getting Merri settled with an actual identity.

Krysta let him inside the building as soon as he buzzed and was waiting for him in the living room of her apartment.

"I thought you'd be here sooner," she said with a smile.

Michael stopped in the doorway, retrieved the necklace of Gen's from his pocket, and tossed it on the couch next to Krysta.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?"

Krysta picked up the pendant and deposited it in a small wooden box behind the couch. "Doing your friend a favour."

"Leave her alone."

"*She* came to me, Michael. Maybe you should get her a leash."

"First you sent her to that fucking kid—and we both know what he's capable of—and now you're helping her with spells. This has to stop."

"*You're* the one who told me what a powerful little witch you had on your hands," Krysta said with a casual shrug. She rose from the couch and wandered his way, lips pulled into a pout. "Rethinking that position, are you? No reason for you to get so upset about *your* mistake." Stopping just inches away, she placed her hands on her hips and smiled up at him.

"Leave her alone," he said again.

"Let me remind you once more; I didn't contact her in the first—"

"She doesn't need your influence."

"And what's so bad about me? Hmm? Maybe I could teach her a thing or two."

"Stay the hell away from her."

"And what's so special about her? Why is it you're so worried about someone corrupting her precious little brain?"

Michael ignored the question. "If she comes to you again, send her away."

Krysta's predatory grin widened, as if she took great pleasure in their exchange. She moved her hands to him and ran her fingers down his arms. "Or what?"

"Or I'll kill you."

"I'm starting to think I might find it interesting to see you try..."

He grasped her wrists and yanked her hands from his arms. Fingers still gripping her, he twisted her arms swiftly until her eyes winced with pain.

"No, I actually don't think you would," he said.

Krysta's brown eyes darkened to near black. "Get the hell out of my apartment."

Michael dropped her arms again. "With pleasure."

As he walked down the hallway away from her, returning to the elevator, he heard her behind him.

"This isn't over."

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"It never is," he muttered under his breath as the elevator doors closed.

Right around three in the afternoon, Merri returned to his house after school, without Gen and Sage as he'd requested. She left a small stack of notebooks and a textbook on the breakfast bar.

"Remind me not to leave my knapsack behind next time," she said with a sigh as she stretched her arms and slid onto a barstool.

"We need to discuss living arrangements," he said.

Almost immediately, she grew fidgety and her eyes hardened. "This is only temporary. Once I can—"

"You have better things to do than work several jobs to pay rent at some shitty apartment, and I have room to spare." Without waiting to hear her next feeble argument, he started toward the spare room and threw the door open. Merri followed him and the two of them stood in the doorway.

He hadn't done anything to the room yet except change the sheets on the cot after Finn left. Not anticipating any guests staying for long periods of time, Michael hadn't thought to buy something better than a cot. Boxes of books that he'd put off sorting were stacked along one wall, while trunks of his things from some of his other old apartments around the world collected dust in the closet. Simple shades covered the windows, but otherwise nothing else adorned the walls and the only furniture was the cot.

"I'll get the boxes moved out tomorrow," he said. "And I'll make sure there's room in the closet for your stuff. I'd prefer you keep out of my room and the other spare rooms. You have free range of the rest of the house."

"Michael, I can't live here for free."

Jesus Christ, what the hell was her problem now? "Look, I've got plenty of room to spare, the house is fully paid for so it's not like—"

"I'm fine if this is temporary, but since you're going to the trouble of hiring a forger and that... I would just prefer to pay rent. My cousin and my brother have been sending me money over the past few months for rent and stuff, but I can't risk getting my mail transferred again. I'll give you what I have saved up, but—"

Why the hell did these kids have such a problem with someone helping them? Merri at least seemed to have more sense than that... "If you find somewhere else to stay, that's fine, but I doubt you could afford it, and you're needed here with Sage and Gen."

"But—"

"You don't want to stay here for free? Fine. I'll give you a job."

Merri visibly tensed. "What?"

"I'm in between assistants at the moment."

She frowned slightly, as if she hadn't been expecting that proposition. "An assistant?"

"I have books sitting in boxes here because they need to be organized and filed into the database on my computer—which I believe you have some familiarity with—and I have no patience to go through emails from people who think they have something to tell me about the three of you. If you want to earn your keep, that's how you can do it. I'll give you an estimate of what I paid my last assistant if you think I'm just making up work for you to do."

A long stretch of silence passed in which she seemed to consider his words.

"You're serious?" she said at last.

"Have I ever been anything but?"

"I think I should buy my own groceries."

"Fine."

"And you really need to get cable at some point."

Christ, maybe he should just send her packing now. "Anything else?"

"Any rules about having people over?"

"Keep out of the common area, otherwise I don't care what you do with Thad in your room."

Her face coloured a bit. "And I suppose the same goes for Krysta?"

"She isn't permitted to be in this house." *And whether or not I see her again this century is looking doubtful.*

"You know by having me here, you're just setting yourself up to deal with girly sleepover parties," she said with a grin.

"I'm due for a vacation soon anyway."

~~*

Wednesday morning, Gen stood at her locker sorting through books for the day. Not going to Michael's the night before meant she actually had time for homework for once...which she'd blown off, and caught a movie with Levi instead. Deciding to at least make an effort to finish an essay or two, the best course of action seemed to be skipping her next class in favour of a study period at the library.

Thankfully, she hadn't yet run into Merri that day. She still wasn't sure what to say to her. The sense of betrayal after her lies seemed too fresh, and Gen hadn't yet decided how to deal with it. Michael would probably just yell at her some more for upsetting his precious, innocent Merri, so she wasn't eager to see him either.

"*Love* the tattoo."

Gen closed her locker and looked over her shoulder to see a familiar pair of chocolate brown eyes gazing at her lower back.

"Thanks." Gen chanced a smile at Janine, which the other girl returned.

"Did you get it done in town?" Janine started walking and Gen followed—it was in the direction of the library anyway, though in truth she probably would have gone to class if that was where Janine headed.

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“Yeah, there’s a new parlour on Division. It’s a nice place. Reasonable prices.” *I should stop before I start babbling—maybe she’s just being nice in starting a conversation with me.*

“I’ll have to check them out. I waited around for like two hours at the place I went before...” She reached for her shoulder and slid the neckline of her shirt to the side to reveal a Celtic cross on her upper back.

“Nice.”

“Thanks. I love your design, though. Was it one they had in their gallery or did you pick it out elsewhere?”

“I drew it.”

Janine raised a dark, shapely eyebrow in surprise. “Really? It’s gorgeous. I don’t suppose I could convince you to draw me something for my next one?”

Oh, please do convince me. “Sure.”

“I’m headed to the library to work on my Calculus homework—wanna join?”

Gen was so incredibly thrilled at the prospect that it took several moments—and Janine giving her a confused look—to realize she hadn’t yet answered and her mouth lay wide open.

“Yes! I mean, I was just headed there myself.”

Did I somehow work a love spell in my sleep? Gen wondered as the two girls walked to the library together. Surely Michael would have warned her at some point if she could inadvertently cast spells?

For now, there seemed little point in worrying about it—she’d just enjoy Janine’s newfound interest in her and ponder the reasons why later.

Maybe.

Gen opened the library door for Janine. The other girl smiled as she walked by and Gen felt a little flutter in her stomach. This actually seemed to be going well...

Just as Gen followed, she felt fingers wrap around her wrist and jerk her backward.

“Hey—” She sent an accusatory glance over her shoulder.

Michael’s cold green eyes looked back at her. “Why the hell aren’t you in class? I’ve had the office paging you.”

“Jesus, are you working for my mother or something now?” She yanked her arm from his grasp. “I’m busy—I’ll talk to you later.”

“We need to go somewhere. Now.”

“Then it can wait until after—”

“No. Now.”

The handful of students around the library had all turned to stare at them now and Gen felt colour rise in her cheeks.

“Are you still coming?” Janine asked. Gen looked back at the object of her affection to find Janine looking from her to Michael curiously.

Le sigh.

Gen snapped her attention to Michael. “Go wait outside the school—I’ll be there in a damn minute. Comprende?”

“Hurry up.”

She stared after him a few beats longer to ensure he really was going, then she turned back to Janine with an apologetic smile.

“Sorry, that’s my...uh...employer...sorta.”

“He wants you to work during school?”

“Um...yeah, he’s like really incompetent and always needs my help. Maybe do the library thing another time?” *Please say yes.*

“I don’t usually do the library thing anyway.”

Gen’s heart sank.

“Maybe the club thing would be better.”

“Club...thing?”

Janine leaned against the library doorframe and gave her a dazzling smile. “*On the Map* is the local hotspot now that people keep getting killed there. I’m going Saturday night. Wanna come?”

Oh-my-fucking-god-yes! “Yeah. Sure.”

“Great.” She gestured over her shoulder. “Better get in there and start working, though. Guess I’ll talk to you later.”

“Yeah. Okay. Later.” Gen gazed after her as Janine continued on into the library. So was that like a date they had planned? Janine supposedly had a girlfriend, and since she was one of only two out lesbians in the school, it seemed like their breakup would be news. *Not that I’ve been paying much attention to any rumours lately.* Between what happened with Finn, and then the past few days with Merri, Gen was barely aware of what day of the week it was let alone who was dating who. But another pretty girl hitting on her? This was totally awesome. It was like she fell asleep and woke up in *The L Word*...only with less cheating and general skankiness.

The cell phone in her back pocket rang. A glance at the screen revealed a text message from Michael telling her to hurry up.

She turned to look down the hallway, where she could see the front doors to the school. Michael stood out there glaring in her direction and gesturing at his watch.

What a whiner. She texted him back a message that said, “one minute,” then stowed her books back in her locker and headed outside.

“Do you just wait around here until you see me talking to a pretty girl so that you can interrupt me and ruin my life?” she asked as they started walking away from the school. She spotted his car parked in the bus zone at the end of the walkway, so she guessed he had some sort of field trip in mind. “More spell books from skanks?” After tossing her messenger bag in the back, she got in the passenger side of the convertible. Michael took the front seat.

“We’re going shopping.”

“Is this going to turn into that scene in *Pretty Woman* where people bring out all kinds of ugly eighties clothes for me to try on?”

He started the ignition. “Not shopping for you.”

“Have you come out of the closet as a female impersonator and you want my fashion tips?”

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He glanced at her sharply as he pulled the car out of the school parking lot. "It's for Merri."

"We're buying *her* ugly clothes?"

"No one is getting any clothes!"

"Then why the hell did you drag me—"

"Merri is going to be living at my house now, since she can't go back to her apartment because of *you*."

"Uh, maybe she shouldn't have been such a big ol' liar, then. Why do you need me here?"

"She needs proper furniture and things. You can pick it out and help move it."

No amount of protesting could get her out of the task. Though Gen initially consoled herself with the prospect of having full access to his credit card, Michael nixed that idea when he revealed that everything would be paid for in cash, and he would be overseeing all purchases.

They left the department store by early afternoon. The backseat of the convertible was filled with any purchases that could fit, while the furniture pieces would be delivered within the hour. After seeing the obscene amount of money Michael parted with for his new houseguest, Gen briefly wished she could have a room there as well, until the homeowner himself snapped at her a few more times about her stupidity and incompetence.

"Okay," she said as she lugged inside the last bag of bedding and things from the store. "Congratulations—you made me miss an entire day of school for this. Can I leave now?"

She found Michael standing outside the spare room with two large boxes in his arms. "Start grabbing boxes and move them into the far room." He nodded toward the back of the house to some rooms she'd never been in.

"Why can't we have Sage do this?" she called as she reluctantly complied. The boxes of books were heavy as hell and she only managed to carry one for every three Michael moved. "She's stronger than me."

"Sage isn't the one who nearly had Merri leave town."

"Once again, not my problem." God, it was like he decided to punish her with manual labour or something. *Next up will be a mop and broom.*

Thankfully, the delivery of furniture arrived before he could make her clean anything. While Michael directed the delivery people to drop the boxes off in the spare room, Gen went to the kitchen for a drink.

Merri and Sage walked through the open door a few minutes later. Both looked curiously from the deliverymen to Genevieve. Sage went to sit on the couch while Merri approached Gen.

"What's going on?" Merri asked.

"Your B.F.F. decided to drag me shopping. Like, because I'm a girl, I'll know what girl stuff to buy."

"He bought a bed?" Merri guessed as she slid onto the barstool next to Gen.

"He bought like half the store. Apparently all you have to do to get on his good side is kill a man and then lie about it for six months."

"Gen—"

Genevieve put up her hand to silence Merri. "Don't. I still don't want to hear it."

It looked as though the last of the deliveries had been dropped off, and Michael saw the men out the door.

"Can I go home now?" Gen called, but was disappointed when Michael shook his head.

"The bed has to be put together."

"What!"

"You picked out one that had multiple pieces."

Of course he'd turn that back on me. She'd picked out a wrought iron daybed because it looked pretty. Had she known she'd have to put the stupid thing together, she would have suggested a mattress and a bed frame.

Gen dragged her feet toward the spare room. Her muscles ached from moving boxes for the past half hour and she wasn't looking forward to more work. Merri and Sage followed.

Though Gen had expected Michael to be directing them, instead he breezed right past and went to the living room.

"Uh, there's a bed here for you to put together," Gen pointed out.

"Sage and I have work to do," he returned. "You and Merri can go to it."

It seemed, to Gen, to be a not-so-subtle attempt at forcing them to work out their differences, but considering the "difference" was that Merri was a murderer, Gen wasn't so eager to bury the hatchet. She'd hold her tongue, get the stupid bed put together, and even move the dresser and desk set, but she'd be damned if they started talking about their feelings or something stupid like that.

The girls worked in silence. About an hour after entering the room, they had the daybed set up and furniture moved. Already the dark, small room was looking bedroom-ish with the boxes gone. By the time they got the curtains up and the bed made, Gen thought it might even be homey.

"Gen, I want to tell you something," Merri said as they stretched out the fitted sheet over the mattress.

"I still don't want to talk about it," Gen said. "I probably wouldn't believe you anyway."

"Please..." Merri dropped the comforter on the bed and gazed downward, her brows pulled into a thoughtful frown. Gen stopped working as well to listen to her for a moment. "I want to tell you who I am and what I did. And I know you'll think even less of me than you do now, but I still need to say it. I owe you the truth."

At least you've figured that much out. "Fine." Gen sat on the bed and crossed her arms, waiting. "Start talking."

Twenty

Merri thought she might be sick as she sat down on the edge of the bed a foot away from Genevieve. Her stomach was in knots. For the past two days, she'd been thinking about telling Gen the truth, but hadn't actually gone so far as to plan what she'd be saying.

Which might have been helpful.

Gen's distant, reserved gaze was fixed on her own. Merri took a deep breath.

"My name *is* Belle Merrilee Swanson."

Gen looked as though she was going to snark back, but she didn't say anything.

Taking her friend's silence as encouragement, Merri continued. "As the police said, I'm from Nova Scotia. I have a brother, Jay, who's six years older than me. Our mom raised us and our dad wasn't around much..." *And god, I wish I could skip the whole life story thing.* But context was important, so she went on. "My dad died in a drinking and driving accident when I was nine. My mom had an on again, off again relationship with his brother, my Uncle Joe, and they ended up getting married about a year later."

"How very...Hamlet," Gen remarked.

Merri gave her a small smile "I always thought it was more Jerry Springer than anything, but yeah. We were pretty trailer trash as it is. Jay was a petty criminal by the time he was eleven and my brain was fucked up from day one." She gestured to her head. "The visions. Seeing things other people couldn't really see messed with me. I repeated second grade 'cause everyone seemed to think I was retarded or something.

"So anyway, Mom and Joe got married and he moved in with his oldest daughter. Lexie was really messed up back then. She's around Jay's age. Heavy drugs, a bit of prostitution..."

Gen's expression had slowly been changing as Merri spoke; there was nothing cool or distant about her now. Concern, not anger, had knitted her brows into a frown.

She's been sheltered, Merri reminded herself. It would probably be best not to go into too many details.

"Lexie left about six months after moving in. She turned out okay, though. Met a really nice guy who helped get her off of drugs and, as far as I know, they're still living together. But Uncle Joe's youngest daughter, from a previous relationship, came to live with us just after Lexie left. Danielle was about four or five at the time. We had a pretty full house for awhile. Then Jay went to jail for possession.

"Uncle Joe was one of those guys who probably never worked a day in his life. He was good looking, charming, and practically lived in front of the television on permanent layoff. Mom worked twelve-hour shifts a lot, so we never saw her.

"Like I said, I had been getting visions and stuff since I was little. I was used to it. And then I got one concerning Danni, about five years ago."

She still remembered the day so clearly. Danni was reading a book from the library. The kid was so smart—always had been. Merri really believed that she had a chance of making it in life.

But the vision changed all that.

"I saw her..." Merri's voice broke a little. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "With her father. I saw him..." *Keep in mind, this is Gen you're talking to. "...hurting her."*

A glance up at Genevieve revealed a look of pure horror. The urge to backtrack, to lie, to tell her anything but the truth was huge, but Merri kept going.

"Suddenly, a whole lot made sense. All of Lexie's troubles over the years, when she left home at such a young age... I understood what she'd been through. I tried to talk to her about it, but she was still on drugs at that time and wouldn't admit to anything. I didn't know what to do."

"You couldn't go to the police with just a vision, could you?" Gen guessed.

Merri shook her head. "Especially not with my juvenile record. Everyone knew I was a compulsive liar. My word wouldn't count for anything. And I *knew* it. I knew no one would believe me, not even my mom. You have to understand...when I get a vision, it's not just a T.V. screen playing a movie in my head. I'm right *there*. I hear things, I *feel* things...hell, sometimes I can even smell things. And I know things, as well. I can't describe where the knowledge comes from...it's like I connect with someone at that future moment and, for an instant, I feel and know everything they do. And I knew that he hadn't done anything to Danni yet...so I..."

She desperately didn't want to say this part. She wanted to end it right then and let Gen think she merely killed him and went on the run. *But I already told her this was five years ago...and I have to be honest, no matter what she thinks of me.*

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Merri detached herself from the memories and her voice lost all of its emotion. “I brought a proposition to him. I told him that I knew what he did to Lexie and what he was going to do to Danni, and I told him that if he left her alone, he could have me.”

Her eyes dropped closed as she heard Gen gasp. It was easy enough to remove herself from what happened, but she couldn’t look at Gen anymore—couldn’t bear to see that look of disgust in her eyes.

The details were still so vivid in her head. No matter where she ran, how she dressed, who she pretended to be, she couldn’t escape what she had been.

“It probably wasn’t a choice most people would make, but the way I grew up...being the Seer...I wasn’t like other kids. I was older, I guess. Still stupid, apparently, but I had to protect her. And I just knew no one would believe me, so that’s what I suggested. He didn’t take me seriously, of course. Denied up and down that he’d done anything, or planned to do anything. And then the next day I came home from school, and he decided to ‘inspect’ me. He said we had a deal—he’d leave Danni alone—but that I’d better be a virgin. Like the fact that I hadn’t turned thirteen yet wasn’t enough proof.”

She swore she could still feel his hands on her. Merri pulled back, hardened herself, and kept all the memories at a distance. Opening her eyes made it fade to the background of her mind, but she couldn’t look at Gen yet, so she stared blankly at the brick wall across the room. She cleared her throat before speaking again, and her voice came out cold and empty.

“He dragged that out for a week. Every day when I got home from school, he’d make me...” *She paused.* No need to go into any more details—Gen probably got the idea. “And for awhile, I thought that would be it. Then about a week later, while I was asleep, he came into my room, and... And I can’t say raped me, because I gave him permission. But I was terrified and that’s what it felt like.

“I couldn’t sleep in there anymore. I’d stay long enough to see if he was coming or not, then I’d end up in Jay’s room for the rest of the night. Even when he got out of jail, Jay didn’t come home, so he never knew the difference.

“I had an abortion a year after it started, then I finally went on the pill. I don’t know whose it was—I was known as the school slut at that point. The weekend after he first... I just starting fucking anyone at that point. Anything to get the feel of him off of me.

“And that went on for a few years,” she said with a sigh. “I wanted to leave...more than anything, I wanted to get out of that house, like Lexie did. But I couldn’t leave Danni alone.

“About a year ago, I knew something was wrong. He had less interest in me, probably because I was getting too old for his taste. A few times he dragged me to a card game and handed me to his buddies when he lost. So it was hardly a surprise, last summer, when I was helping Danni with her homework and I...”

Merri closed her eyes, briefly, to force back hot tears that threatened to fall. “It wasn’t a future vision this time. I touched her shoulder and I got a flash.

He'd started with her. I tried to get her to tell me the truth, but she just went running to her room crying..."

And there was nothing I could do. I failed her. The guilt still haunted her, still kept her up at night. She should have been more vigilant—should have done more to protect Danni.

"I still knew that no one would believe me. They'd believe him. My mom, my friends...everyone. I saw it so clearly—I'd be the one in trouble. There was nothing I could do...I just knew he had to die."

Her gaze trailed to the window. The sky had grown a bit darker than usual that evening due to heavy rain clouds. She remembered so vividly the day she killed him. It was a bright summer afternoon. Sunny. Hot. Normal.

"Mom was working a double shift. I sent Danni to a friend's overnight. I did most of the cooking and cleaning around the house anyway, so I was making Joe his dinner. As usual, he had a couple of beers...so when the antifreeze I slipped into his food hit him, he initially thought he was just drunk and went to bed. I cut the phone lines in the house and flushed his car keys just in case he got out of the house. By the next morning, he was having seizures. Though he was bigger and stronger than me, he couldn't get past me to the door in his condition. It took a few hours, but...eventually, he died. And I watched it happen. Stayed there until the end.

"I called Lexie to take me to the bus station. She figured out something was wrong, but I didn't tell her what. I figured it would be better for Danni if we didn't make a big deal about it anyway—that way she could just forget what had happened to her. Lexie gave me the money she had, which I added to what I'd stolen of Joe's, and made me promise to give her an address in case she and Jay could get together more money." Merri leaned back and sighed. "And eventually I came to Newhaven. I wanted to keep running, but Michael convinced me to stay. And that's the truth about who I am and what I did."

She waited for Gen to leave or give some sound of horror, but when she didn't say anything, Merri chanced a look her way.

Gen had her hand clasped over her mouth and tears streamed down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorry I didn't trust you—"

"Gen, it's okay—"

"No it's not." Gen wiped at her eyes, but didn't stop crying. "I'm sorry."

"You're not..." She looked and looked, but Merri couldn't see any change in her friend's eyes. "You're not, like, disgusted by me or...something like that?"

Gen's eyes widened. "God no! Mer, you spent the last five years being raped. I don't care what kind of deal you made with him—that's not your fault. You were just a kid."

Just a kid... Fuck, she didn't feel like a kid. She didn't remember *ever* feeling like a kid.

"And after what you went through...I'm sorry I pushed you, I'm sorry I didn't just trust you."

Children of the Apocalypse

"You didn't know," Merri said quickly. "It's okay. I know none of that stuff would be in the paper. I made Lexie promise not to tell. Even my mom doesn't know. And I didn't want Danni to grow up with that kind of baggage. If I brought up that defense, they'd want to drag Danni into court and make her relive all that...and I don't want her going through that too."

"When you said that...if you had known what Finn would do, you would have stopped him... You meant..."

Merri moved closer and put her hand on Gen's shoulder. "I would have done anything to stop him. *Anything*. I'm sorry if that scares you, but it's the truth."

"So no one knows what you went through? All those years...no one knew?"

"Just me, Lexie, and now you. Possibly Jay, but I don't know for sure."

"I won't say anything to anyone."

Merri shrugged and smiled awkwardly. "I don't want you to shout it from the rooftops, but I don't care if you want to give Sage or Michael the abridged version."

"So Michael doesn't know?"

If he does, he never said as much. And when they had spoken fairly openly at the bus station, he didn't indicate he knew any of the details. Merri shook her head. "Not as far as I know."

"He said something, a few days ago when I came here to talk to him about Finn. He said that if he hadn't killed Finn, you definitely would have."

So maybe he does know. She wouldn't put it past him to already know everything there was to know about her, but she figured he would have said something to her about it by now. *And he couldn't possibly know why I killed him.*

But then, with Michael's history, he could probably recognize a killer when he saw one. And on the night of the assault, she had been very insistent on them doing something about Finn. Of course, Michael would put two and two together once he heard the police were looking for a murderer.

And he didn't push me. Didn't ask for anything more. She figured she should apologize later for bothering him about his own situation. Curiosity still dominated her thoughts, but it wasn't fair to force confessions out of him—not when he was doing so much for her.

"So..." Gen wiped at her eyes again and forced a smile. "You didn't tell me if you like the stuff I picked out."

Merri gazed around the room again. She did love the furniture—she'd never, in her life, had anything new, let alone nice. The dark oak dresser and armoire were both tall and sturdy, and matched the desk and chair set pushed against the far wall. A thick mattress topped the wrought-iron daybed and was perhaps the most comfortable thing she'd ever sat on. She'd seen four different mix-and-match sheet sets of a high thread count in bold colours that were clearly Genevieve's choice. Half a dozen pillows of varying sizes sat on the floor, ready to be thrown on the bed. Gen had indicated earlier that Michael had a matching curtain set custom ordered to fit the dimensions of the window.

"It's all really overwhelming, actually," Merri said.

"Oh, you didn't see the best part yet." Gen rose from the bed and went to the far side of the room where a pair of boxes sat. She moved aside packing materials and bags to pull out a large, thin box, which she held up to face Merri.

"He bought a fucking laptop?"

Gen nodded and set it on the desk. "When I started saying that I wanted one too, he told me to stop bitching because this was for your job and he'd get it set up on his network. What job?"

"I'll be acting as an 'assistant,' and it sounds like secretarial work. Sorting books and acquiring new ones, answering his emails...I figure I'll know more soon enough."

"So...you'll have access to all of his files?" A smile slowly formed on Gen's face.

"Yeah. I'll keep an eye out for anything of interest."

"He probably knows that, so I doubt he'll give you access to everything."

Merri agreed, but it seemed worth a shot. She didn't feel one hundred percent comfortable with the prospect of betraying his trust, but if it came down to him or Gen and Sage, she'd side with her friends.

"I told you before, you can trust me, Gen," Merri said. "I know I've lied, but I've never kept anything that I thought would hurt anyone. If I learn anything important, I'll come to you with it."

"I believe you. And I'll probably believe anything you tell me for a good long while, so you're free to go to town and make up all kinds of stuff." Gen gestured over her shoulder. "Want to go tell Dad his planned worked, and that we duked it out and decided to be B.F.F.'s again?"

"Maybe we should still argue a bit, so it doesn't go to his head."

Gen rolled her eyes. "Probably too late for that. If his head gets any bigger, I think it'll explode."

Merri felt a bit of weight lift from her shoulders as she followed Genevieve back to the main room of Michael's house. So Gen didn't blame her for the things she'd done. She expected uneasiness, if not outright abhorrence. But Gen had accepted her. She didn't seem to judge her for it all.

An hour later, Merri sat on the couch doing her homework. Sage and Michael were sparing, while Gen had perched herself on a barstool where she read from a spell book.

"Michael, can Merri make a long-distance phone call?" Gen asked out of nowhere.

"Um..." Merri glanced at Michael, then at Gen. "I hadn't planned on making any. Why?"

Gen's gaze, however, was fixed on Michael. "Can she?"

He stopped the punch Sage had just thrown his way and met her eyes. "In theory. Why?"

She held up the small book she had been reading. "The section in this, on cloaking yourself from technology? I think I can do some of them."

"And your point would be...?"

Children of the Apocalypse

“Merri could phone her family. And if I do a spell from this book, the cops can’t trace the call.”

Merri slowly stood and dropped her book on the couch. “You’re serious?”

Gen nodded. “I wouldn’t want to make a habit out of it, ‘cause god knows I can screw up at any time, but we can definitely try.”

Everyone looked to Michael, waiting for his approval.

“Fine,” he said. “You try it *once*, carefully, and don’t fuck it up.”

Gen scurried around the house collecting supplies while Merri took a seat at the breakfast bar and stared at the cordless phone on the wall. She could call her family. Her mom wouldn’t want to hear from her, sure, but Jay and Lexie? Maybe even Danni?

She waited nervously while Gen set out a circle of votive candles, the open book, and a tiny clear stone in the centre.

“You’re sure this’ll work?” Merri asked.

“Um...pretty sure. The only problem, like it says here in the book, is that we probably won’t have a whole lot of time. I don’t exactly have mad skills to begin with, and,” she sent a glance back at Michael, “we aren’t using what would be considered quality goods here. I wouldn’t push it past a few minutes.”

So I’d better make this call count.

Gen took the cordless phone and fixed the tiny stone to the top with a piece of tape. “This book was written a bunch of years ago, back when you could take apart the receiver. You’re supposed to put the stone in there to disrupt the signal. I’m hoping that this’ll work, though.”

“‘Hoping?’” Michael pounced on the word as he approached them.

“I’d say I’m confident that it’ll work, but that would make me a big ol’ liar.” The phone ready, Gen set the receiver down in the centre of the circle of candles. She lit the wicks one by one by looking at them, then reached out and touched her index finger to the stone.

The entire sight was eerie to behold. Merri would trust Genevieve with her life, but still...still, she could understand what Michael saw there. Gen’s eyes were fixed on the stone as she spoke the words from the book, and something strange flickered through their depths. Something old, something foreign, something...

Terrifying.

Whatever it was, it didn’t look like Gen.

As she spoke the last words of the spell, the stone took on an orange hue. Gen handed off the receiver to Merri. “Make it quick.”

Merri tried to keep her fingers from shaking as she dialled. Her initial thought was to try calling home, but she had no idea if Jay would be there and she doubted her mom would let her talk to Danni. Lexie seemed like the best bet, and she had wanted to call her cousin for a while to let her know everything was okay.

She pressed the phone to her ear and listened to the ringing on the other line. *Please pick up, Lex...*

“Hello?”

Merri breathed out a sigh of relief. "Lex, hi."

Silence passed as seconds ticked by. "Belle?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"You have to hang up—they're still looking for you."

"It's being taken care of. Trust me. I just wanted to let you know I'm okay. The police found where I've been so I don't think you can send letters anymore. But I'm okay. How's Jay?"

"He started another new job. I give him six months before he gets fired again but he's trying real hard."

"And Danni?"

"She's doing good. Top in her class. You want to talk to her?"

"She's with you?"

"Yeah," Lexie said. "I watch her after school and make dinner while your mom is at work. Hold on, she's right here."

There was the sound of the phone being passed to another person and a tiny voice spoke up. "Hello?"

Merri squeezed her eyes shut. "Hey, kiddo. It's Belle. How's school?"

"Belle?"

"Yeah, sweetie, it's me."

"The police said you weren't coming back."

"No, I don't think I can come back. I did something bad, hun, and now I have to stay away."

"Because you killed Dad."

"Yeah... 'cause I killed your Dad."

"Lexie said Dad did bad things and that's why."

"Danni, I don't want you to think about that. Not ever. I just want you to forget about everything." She met Gen's eyes and the other girl nodded to the phone. *Time is running out...* "I have to go now, Danni. You'll be good for your sister, right? Promise?"

"I promise. I love you."

"I love you too, sweetie."

"Hey," Lexie said as she took the phone again. "Gotta go?"

"Yeah. I don't know when I can call again."

"It's okay. I'm taking care of her. Jay's keeping his ass out of jail. We'll be fine, but we miss you."

"I miss you too."

"Before you go, B... I just want to say I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I wasn't brave enough—"

"It's okay—"

"No, it's not. I should have... I just wish I wasn't so selfish then. That'd I'd done something when you came to me."

"Just keep taking care of Danni and it's all fine with me. I gotta go, though."

"Okay...bye, Belle."

Children of the Apocalypse

"Bye, Lex." Merri hung up the phone just as the yellow glow faded from the stone. She set the receiver down on the countertop.

"Everything's okay?" Gen asked.

Merri nodded. She blinked back a few tears. "They're fine. That's what matters."

"I wouldn't recommend making a whole lot of calls, but in a little while if you want to talk to them again, we can do that," Gen said with a smile.

"Thanks," Merri said, grateful for the support.

And that kind of support will make it easier to cross one more thing off my to-do list. There was still one person that she felt she had to tell...whether he rejected her or not, Thad had to know.

Gen and Sage went home around seven, which was a few hours earlier than usual, but Michael had said he was going out and didn't want teen girls to overrun his house in his absence.

Alone at last, Merri thought as she looked around the empty house. It seemed strange not hearing voices and music through the walls, and not encountering any large bugs scurrying across the floor. So this was her home, at least temporarily.

Also foreign was that feeling of not having to run. She could stay put for awhile. Not have to look over her shoulder. Not cringe in fear every time it felt like her stack of cards was about to fall.

Merri figured Gen would tell Sage a few things on the way home, but she didn't expect Sage would have a problem with the information. Gen was the one she'd been worried about, but she'd accepted her.

For once, Merri actually felt safe.

Still, dread pooled deep in her stomach. Gen and Sage weren't the only people she cared about...

And this is a conversation I have to have now, before I talk myself out of it.

She pulled out her cell phone and dialed Thad's number.

"Hey there, hottie," he said as he answered. "What's up?"

Merri smiled at the sound of his voice. "Resting after a busy couple of days."

"Ooh, do tell."

"I moved to a new place."

"Far away?"

"No, it's somewhere you've been."

"Is it the empty apartment down the hall? 'Cause if so, that would be awesome."

"No..." She couldn't do this over the phone—she had to see him. "Thad, can you do me a favour?"

"Anything. You know that."

"I know you've got class tomorrow morning, but...could you come over to Michael's?"

“Uh oh. Is he going to beat me up?”

“No. I just need to talk to you.”

His voice took on a serious tone. “What’s going on, Merri?”

“I have some things I have to tell you. And you’re probably not going to want to hear it, but I still need you to listen. Will you come over?”

“I’ll be there in an hour.”

Ninety minutes after hanging up the phone, Thad had been at Michael’s for over half an hour listening to Merri speak. They sat on her bed in her new room, the overhead light off but the desk lamp on, leaving the space only dimly lit. Merri sat cross-legged and facing Thad, her arms wrapped around her torso for support while she spoke.

Though she’d said most of the same things to Gen earlier, it was that much harder repeating it to him. Much like she had with Gen, she didn’t look at him—didn’t want to read his expression. Best to just say everything and then see how he felt.

“And the police tracked me to Newhaven,” she said once she finished the part about watching Joe die and going on the run. “Between the things Gen and Michael are doing, I should be safe now. It made more sense, at least for the time being, to have me stay here since Michael has extra rooms, and it’s a hell of a lot nicer than my actual apartment, which I made sure you never saw. And that is just about everything I’ve been keeping from you.”

Her body tensed and still she didn’t look at him. She expected to feel the mattress shift as he stood to leave, the bedroom door open and close, then his footsteps fade into the distance as he left for good.

Instead, she felt his fingers slide over her hand.

“And here I thought you were going to tell me you were having an affair with Michael.”

Merri glanced up sharply to see Thad giving her a sad, half smile. “You’re not going.”

“You thought I would?”

She nodded. “After the things I’ve done...”

“He deserved it.”

That was easy enough for someone who hadn’t been there at the time to say, but no matter what Joe had done, his death had been awful. He suffered. She’d made sure of it. She could have slashed his throat in his sleep and been done with it, but no, she had to find something painful. Something horrible. And she’d stood there in the house all day watching him die. *And I’d do it again tomorrow if I could.*

“But the other things I’ve done...” She gave a little shiver, though the room was a comfortable temperature. Her eyes locked with his. “I’ve been with *a lot* of guys. Often men. It wasn’t always consensual, but frequently was so I can’t say it wasn’t my fault.”

Children of the Apocalypse

“Hey...” He reached out and cupped her face, thumb grazing her cheek. “You *survived*. That’s what matters.”

She let out a deep breath that she hadn’t realized she’d been holding in and inadvertently let out a sob at the same time. His arms went around her and she let herself cry—really cry—for the first time in years.

“It’s okay,” he whispered, hand going through her hair. “There’s nothing you could say or do that would make me love you any less.”

She pulled back and gazed up at him. “What?”

Thad sighed. “Yeah. I said it.” He trailed his fingers down her arm, and then clasped her hand in his. “I love you, Merri.”

Loved. She wasn’t sure she ever remembered being loved—not really. There was never parental love. Never sibling love. Her family hadn’t ever really been around, and for those that had—even Lexie and Danni—she’d kept herself distanced from them. And she didn’t connect with her friends, didn’t connect with her boyfriends.

“Quit looking so surprised,” he said with a roll of his eyes. “Jeez, I gave you a book of love poems for Valentine’s Day. Don’t tell me you didn’t actually read it. And for someone who’s supposed to be the Seer and all perceptive and stuff, you’re a real dummy sometimes.”

She hugged him tightly and closed her eyes. “Will you stay here tonight?”

“Hmm, and miss *Feminist Approaches to Medieval Writing* in the morning? Let me take several minutes to really, deeply consider that. Yes, I’ll stay.”

Though the daybed was meant for one person rather than two, they both stretched out and made do with the limited space. Merri rested in his arms, both of them still fully clothed, and closed her eyes to rest.

“I think I love you too,” she said softly. It felt strange to say such words—to hear her own voice speak them—but it was the truth.

He folded his fingers over hers and she heard his voice next to her ear. “So you’ll keep Michael from beating me up tomorrow morning? ‘Cause he doesn’t seem to like me, so that seems like a definite possibility.”

Merri laughed. “Don’t worry, you’re safe with me.”

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“So, you’ve got a date with Janine?” Levi said with a smile.

“It’s not necessarily a date-date,” Gen said quickly. “It could end up being a group thing. Or it could be a horrible joke.” She grinned. “But I like to think it’s a date-date.”

“Who would have guessed that tattoo would help you pick up chicks?”

“I know, eh? Apparently, I could have gotten her attention ages ago if I’d just dressed up like Magenta and got some body art.”

They stepped out of the school Friday afternoon together. Levi had offered her a ride home, and she’d decided to skip out on Michael’s in favour of some quality time lounging around Levi’s house instead.

“So you’re going to *On the Map*?” he asked. “Even with all the unsolved murders?”

“Well, thus far it’s only been the unsolved murders of *guys*, so I think I’m safe, unless I suddenly got uber butch...” *Shit, the murders.* Gen nearly stopped mid-step. Days ago, she’d been so focused on figuring that out, but then the things with Merri took over and she completely forgot.

And, whether the victims are guys or not, there’s no way I’m putting my possible-date in danger. They had to figure out what was going on.

“Lev...” She turned to her friend. “I’m sorry, but I think I’m going to have to cancel. I just remembered this...thing I have to do.”

“Thing?”

“Yeah.” *Why don’t I have a bunch of excuses already made up for situations like this?* “I have to go Merri’s. About this class thing.” *Sorta true.*

Levi shrugged. “If you have to. I’ll see you tomorrow night at the club, though? Just in case it turns out to not be a date-date, but a group friend thing.”

“Yes, please! I could use the moral support.” Gen backed up in a hurry, hoping Levi would be too busy getting to his car to realize she wasn’t headed in the direction of the apartment where he thought Merri lived. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Later, Genny.”

I can’t believe I let a bunch of unsolved murders slip from my head, she thought as she swiftly walked to Michael’s house. Michael had been right—there was no way the group of them were ready to play detective and solve murders if they could so easily get distracted.

Gen burst through the door at Michael’s to find Sage and Merri had arrived several minutes ahead of her.

“Okay, we really gotta sort out this serial killer thing,” she said. Though she pushed the door closed behind her, it didn’t quite catch and lay ajar a few inches. Gen walked toward Michael, who stood in the kitchen.

“I thought we had this conversation a few times,” he said coolly. “You’re *not* looking into this thing.”

“Except with all of the stuff that happened, we haven’t had a chance to sit down and talk about all the new things I learned!”

“Which would be?”

Gen paused. Dammit, she probably should have collected her thoughts before she started talking.

Michael rolled his eyes. “Oh yeah, lots of new information.”

“No, really! Uh...the new girl! Warren said something about the new girl.”

“Except I already explained that,” Merri pointed out. “I *did* tell him I’d meet him out there.”

“Oh. Right. Well, there’s still the matter of something supernatural going on there. Finn got all wiggly and said he was hearing music. *And* I got wicked creeped out, like I felt something there.”

“Your evidence so far then is the word of a man who roofied and assaulted you, and the fact that you got ‘wicked creeped out?’” Michael asked.

Children of the Apocalypse

“Stop making me sound stupid!”

“I’m not--you’re accomplishing that quite well on your own.”

“My visions,” Merri said. “From what I’ve seen, I gotta agree with Gen. There’s something less natural and more super about the whole thing.”

“So we head there tonight while armed,” Sage said. She moved to the weapons cabinet and opened it, her dark gaze trailing over the swords and guns. “We investigate. We’ve got a witch, a warrior, a seer, and Michael. Why, exactly, should we be afraid of anything out there?”

“Okay, I gotta ask...”

Genevieve’s heart seized at the sound of a familiar voice behind her. Everyone turned to see Levi standing in the open doorway staring at them.

His eyes swept around the room, then settled on Genevieve’s. “What the hell is going on?”

Twenty-One

Several beats of silence passed with no one moving or acknowledging Levi's question.

"What are you investigating?" Levi asked, his eyes still on Gen's. "Why do you have weapons? What's this about witches and warriors and things? What the *hell* is going on?"

"Well done," Michael said.

Genevieve swung her head back to look at him. "Excuse me?"

"Does the word 'secret' not mean anything to you?"

"I didn't invite him!" She stalked a few feet forward, Levi forgotten for a moment. "And shall I remind you that it was *your* friend who threatened to take information about us to The Brethren?"

"Gen, ix-nay on the rethren-bray?" Sage said in a low voice, her gaze flickering Levi's way pointedly.

Ab, shit.

Gen took a deep breath and turned to Levi once more. "Hey there, Lev. So...I don't suppose you just accidentally happened to find me here?"

"No, I followed you. I've followed you here a few times."

That confession threw her for a loop. Following her? Levi? Shit, since when did he do that kind of thing? True, she hadn't been around him as much as she used to...they'd drifted apart over the past few months. But to have him resort to following her? That didn't seem right.

"Why the hell would you follow me?"

"Since you and Merri took off in a car—the one parked outside—one day a few months ago and I knew you were hiding something."

When we went to see Shaw...dammit. "And all this time, you never said anything?"

Colour rose in his cheeks and she realized it wouldn't be easy to talk her way out of this one. "So what the fuck are you involved in?"

Children of the Apocalypse

"Can't we just tell him?" Sage asked.

"No," Michael said immediately.

"Why not?" Gen and Sage asked in unison.

"Thad knows," Merri pointed out. "He's okay with it. It doesn't have to be a secret with everyone."

"No," Michael said again.

"Will someone answer my question?" Levi asked. He gestured to Michael. "Isn't he supposed to be your stalker?"

"No," Gen said quickly, then she rethought that answer. "Well, sorta, he was, but not in a bad way. Kinda."

"He attacked you and threatened you! I was there!"

"It was kinda just a misunderstanding. He's one of the good guys. Sorta..." Gen sighed heavily and walked to the couch, throwing her hands up in the air. "You know, I'm not going to be very convincing on the Michael front, so someone else can take over now." She flopped down onto the sofa.

"We're...sorta special," Sage took over. "And Michael helps us. He was trying to help Gen when you first saw him."

"You are *not* telling the kid this!" Michael said.

"But he knows something is up," Merri said. "The truth is probably better at this point."

"Looks like we outvoted you," Gen said with a smirk.

"This isn't a fucking democracy," Michael said.

"Well maybe it should be—"

"Someone explain to me what is going on!" Levi shouted and the others went silent.

"There are some things you don't know about Gen, Sage, and me," Merri started in a calm voice. "Things we can do."

"Is this...like a gang or something?"

Genevieve burst out laughing. Her mirth ceased as she realized no one else found it too amusing.

"I...just went to a funny visual place involving motorcycles," she said, dropping her gaze in embarrassment. "Continue."

"It's not a gang," Merri said. "It's...kind of hard to describe."

"You remember the night after your game, when you followed me through the creek and I was attacked?" Sage asked. "And I beat those men so easily?"

Levi nodded.

"It wasn't a coincidence that they came after me. They were trying to kill me because of what I am."

"Well, technically, they were testing you for their boss," Gen pointed out.

"How about we don't make this anymore complicated than it is?" Merri said.

"So *what* the hell are you?" Levi asked.

Sage shrugged. "The Warrior."

"And what the fuck is that?"

"Here's where it gets weird," Merri said.

“Oh, *now* it gets weird?”

“There’s a witch, a warrior, and a seer,” Gen said. “Well, and an immortal, but she’s not around. So we’re like the Chosen One, only there are four of us, and no vampires. At least I don’t think.” She glanced at Michael. “Are there vampires?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Good.” She turned back to Levi. “And we’re like a sign or something that the end of the world is nigh. I’ve always wanted to use that word in a sentence.”

“And Michael helps us,” Merri said.

“*Usually*,” Gen added.

“Any questions?” Sage asked.

Levi looked at each of them in turn. “You’re all fucking nuts.”

And Sage was so easy to tell, Gen thought. And people like Thad and David Shaw already knew—Gen forgot how insane it all sounded to a newbie. *A newbie like I once was.*

“Maybe I could do a spell or something to prove it to you,” Gen offered.

Levi rolled his eyes. “Oh, so you’re a witch now?”

“A relatively incompetent one, but yeah.”

“Like Izzy Marx?”

“No, a real one. I’m not a poser. Though I’m not as powerful as Krysta, so maybe—”

“Who the hell is Krysta?” Levi asked.

“Michael’s girlfriend,” Gen said.

“She’s *not* my girlfriend,” Michael said.

“Okay...” Gen raised her hands and made air quotes when she spoke. “His ‘special friend’ then. She’s not a witch with a capital W. She *is* a skank, though, with a capital S. She even beats Kourtnee in that department.”

“So Krysta isn’t a witch?” Levi asked.

“No, she’s *a* witch, just not *the* witch,” Merri said.

“So who’s *the* witch?”

Gen raised her hand. “That would be me.”

Levi’s eyes went to Merri. “And you would be?”

“I’m a seer.”

He gestured to Michael. “And he’s...?”

“A burden on the chicks with super powers,” Gen said.

“And what, exactly, do all of these bizarre fantasies have to do with my brother?”

Tension enveloped the room and no one dared speak for several long moments.

“I know she,” he gestured to Sage, “had something to do with it. I know it’s because of what she was involved in. Now what does this have to do with my brother?”

“The people who attacked him were the same ones you saw go after Sage,” Merri said. “They went after all of us.”

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"And Hayden?" Tears that he didn't shed brought a slight shimmer to his eyes.

"They did it to get to me," Sage said in a low voice. Gen glanced back at the other girl to see her head bowed and eyes closed. "You were right—it was because of me."

"And you couldn't tell the police about this?" Levi said. "You couldn't tell them when those guys first went after you? He would still be alive—"

"The police weren't prepared to handle it," Gen said. "What were we supposed to say? That there were four well-trained assassin guys that behaved like robots and were focused on killing the three of us because of our role in the apocalypse? I didn't even believe it at the time—there was no way the police would go for it."

Levi's cool gaze locked on hers. "You knew."

Oh...fuck.

"How long?" he asked.

"Lev—"

"How long!"

Gen sighed. "Since September."

"Back when it happened?"

She nodded.

"How the fuck could you not tell me?"

"Okay, think for a moment about what your opinion is of all this," Gen said. "You don't believe me now and you certainly wouldn't have believed me then."

"You *knew* who killed him and you didn't go to the police—"

"I just told you they—"

"You didn't even tell *me*! My brother's killers are still running around out there and all this time you knew—"

"Actually, they're not," Merri said.

"They're dead," Sage said.

Levi's gaze darted back and forth between them. "What?"

"Like she said," Gen said. "They *aren't* running around anywhere. They're gone now."

"So what, you kill people now?" He looked at Sage. "Is this what you meant when you told me you'd take care of it?"

"I killed one that attacked us here *before* they went after Hayden," Merri said. "After the attack, a few hours before he died, we tracked them down and...took care of it."

"Meaning you murdered them."

Though Gen wasn't one hundred percent certain what exactly she had done to two of them when she cast that spell, she refrained from pointing that out. "They were trying to kill us, Lev."

"It was self-defense," Merri said. "Tell him, Michael."

Michael put up his hands. "I'm having *no* part in this. It's your," he gestured to Gen, "mess, so you can clean it up."

This must be so hard for him to bear, Gen thought as she gazed sadly at her friend. She rose from the couch and approached him. “Lev—”

Levi threw his hands up in the air. “I can’t listen to this anymore. I don’t even know you people.” He started for the door.

“Lev—”

“Fuck off, Genevieve,” he called over his shoulder as he left.

Gen started as he slammed the door behind him. “Okay, that didn’t go well.”

“How could you let yourself be followed?” Michael asked immediately.

“Like I had any idea!”

“We should have told him sooner,” Sage said quietly.

“You shouldn’t be telling anyone anything,” Michael said.

“He deserved to know what really happened to Hayden.”

“Regular people can’t handle the world the three of you live in,” he said. “And it’s not about ‘deserving’—it’s about *safety*. The fewer people that know, the better for everyone.”

But it’s not like Levi is Finn. Levi was mad at her now, sure, but he wouldn’t go to their enemies about anything. And it seemed like the only way to truly keep everyone safe would be to totally cut herself off from people. That hardly seemed worth it. *Sage was right before...it should be up to Levi—like she wanted to leave it up to Hayden—to decide if he wants anything to do with us.*

“It’s understandable that he’s upset,” Merri said, quick to jump in as the voice of reason. “If we give him some time, he’ll come to terms with it. In the meantime, I suggest we go back to what Gen was saying.”

Nothing like some serial killings to get my mind off hurting my best friend.

“I’m still leaning towards ‘get armed and investigate,’” Sage said.

“I’m partial to ‘stay in and figure out what we’re facing’ myself,” Gen said.

“How about the three of you forget about it,” Michael said.

“I’m with Gen,” Merri said. “Meaning you’re outvoted again.”

“Oooh, we need a big eraser board or something!” Gen said. “Like on *House*, except instead of disease symptoms, we can write down a serial killer profile. And can I go undercover and interview witnesses?”

“Okay, if we’re doing this, we’re doing this *right*,” Michael said, an edge of annoyance to his voice. “I’ll speak to my contacts at the police station and the hospital about viewing copies of the autopsy reports and that. The three of you can go online and reread everything the papers said about the crimes.” He reached for his car keys on the kitchen counter and started for the door.

“And you’ll pick up a dry erase board?” Gen added. “With different coloured markers?”

“We’ll see.”

~~*

Gen was pleased when Michael *did* return home a few hours later with a large dry erase board. While he mounted it on the far wall, Merri went through

the notes he'd taken at the police station and hospital. Gen was the first to jump up and start jotting down notes on the board, highlighting any important details from both the official reports on the murders, as well as things from Merri's visions and what she and Finn had learned.

Sage sat at the back of the kitchen at the breakfast bar, glass of water in hand, watching the others with disinterest. She was all in favour of stopping a serial killer, sure, regardless of whether or not he was of supernatural origin, but...

Still, she couldn't get into the discussion. Her mind kept trailing back to Levi's arrival at the house a few hours ago.

Feelings of guilt stirred in her once more. They were never really gone for long, but seeing Levi again, watching him digest the truth about Hayden's death...it all made the hurt fresh once more.

God, what would he say if he knew *everything*? If he knew she'd had the chance to have Hayden back for good, but been forced to give him up?

They should have told him sooner, despite what Michael said. Granted, she had no idea *how* to even start that kind of conversation, but Levi still should have known the truth months ago. If she'd been in his position, she would have wanted to know.

Sage glanced up as she heard footsteps approach and saw Michael nearing her.

"A dry erase board, and yet you aren't interested," he muttered with sarcasm.

She glanced to where Gen stood across the room, drawing big circles around different words in various colours. "Some are more easily amused than others."

"Come on, she's about to crack the case." Michael nodded toward the board. "With details like, 'music', 'killings', 'water', and a whole lot of question marks, we should have the list of suspects narrowed down any day now."

"At least she's enthusiastic."

"Which would be helpful if enthusiasm solved crimes."

"So you really don't believe them?" She met his eyes. "You just think it's a 'normal' serial killer, whatever that means?"

"No."

Sage snapped to attention and sat straighter in her chair. "What?"

"The police reports said the victims drowned."

"Well...they're kinda near the lake, so that's not exactly strange."

"Except the bodies weren't actually *found* by the water. In the case of the victim from last weekend—the one Finn and Gen stumbled upon—he had only been dead a half hour or so when he was found. There weren't any signs that he had been dumped there after being killed in another location, his clothes weren't wet, and he showed no signs of drowning *except* that his lungs were full of water."

Sage looked at the board again and studied what little Gen had written thus far, the wheels turning in her head. “Exactly how supernatural does ‘supernatural’ mean, in this context?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I don’t know what else is out there. There are all these people in the world—me, Gen, and Merri included—who can do things, right? Perform things like magic and that?”

“Yeah.”

“So what else? What is real that we think isn’t? I know it was just a joke earlier when Gen asked if there are vampires, but...but *what else is there*? What other...creatures or something could we be dealing with? Are there demons? Monsters? We’re supposed to have an apocalypse coming at some point—doesn’t all that seem possible?”

She half expected him to tell her she was as stupid sounding as Gen, but instead she found his gaze fixed on the board. A frown slowly came over his face.

“Shit,” he muttered.

Uh oh... When Michael looked worried about something, Sage figured there had to be cause for it. “Michael—”

“New plan,” he called to the others as he walked toward them with Sage at his heels. Merri gazed up from the notebook in her hands and even Gen stopped writing on the board. “You,” he gestured to Merri, “need to go to my computer to start looking up books. Not everything is catalogued there, however, so the two of you,” he looked to Gen and Sage in turn, “can start going through the boxes of books in the other room.”

“Uh, I helped you move those the other day,” Gen said. “There are a hell of a lot of books—”

“Then I suggest you start *now*. Sage and I will bring out the boxes, you can pull out the books.” He moved toward the spare room without any further explanation.

“But what are we even looking for?” Sage asked.

Michael glanced back at them. “Tales of mythical creatures that could have basis in fact. Specifically, I’m thinking of sirens.”

~~*

“I don’t know...” Gen yawned. “...why we’re doing this.” As her gaze travelled over the book in front of her, the words seemed to blur and she felt another yawn coming on.

The open book lay on the coffee table with a dozen others while she sat on the floor. Merri had a stack of her own to go through where she sat on the couch. Sage and Michael were seated at the breakfast bar with yet more books. Midnight neared and they were no closer to answers than they had been hours ago.

Of course, he’s got like a bazillion books to go over—no wonder we’re so slow.

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Gen rested her head on her book and yawned again. "I already know who did it," she continued when no one commented on her previous remark.

"And that would be...?" Merri said without looking up.

"Uh, I can think of one evil succubus in town; it's gotta be Krysta."

"It's not Krysta," Michael said, also without looking up from his book.

Gen lifted her head to look his way. "You don't know that. I *told* you that woman was a demon or Satanist or something when we first met her. She had that doll thing in her bathroom cabinet with candles and stuff. I bet it was some kind of succubus spell."

"We aren't looking for a succubus—we're looking for a siren."

"Same thing."

"If you think that, then you'd better start reading more closely."

"How do we know it's not her, though? You still haven't given me a reason. I think we should probably just cut her head off anyway. Better safe than sorry."

"It wouldn't hurt to double check," Sage said. "Maybe make sure she has an alibi?"

"Yeah," Gen said. "I'll call her and ask where she was last Saturday—"

"She was in her apartment, with me," Michael said, still without looking up at any of them. "End of discussion."

"Oh." Gen slumped down again. Great, Michael just *had* to alibi their only suspect. He wasn't much of a team player.

"It's going to take us forever to get through all of these," Merri said with a sigh. "Your last assistant did a shitty job trying to catalogue things."

"She had a system, I just never did figure out what it was."

"This stuff goes so much faster on T.V.," Gen said. "But I don't sense a montage coming on, so we should get more help."

"Help as in...?" Michael glanced her way and raised a skeptical brow.

"Well, maybe Levi—"

"He's not going to want to come back here," Sage said.

"How about Thad, then?"

Merri paused her reading to meet Gen's eyes. "That's not a bad idea."

"This isn't a fucking party," Michael said.

Gen closed her book and tossed it on the floor. It landed on the hardwood with a *thud*. "I think we should start doing more than reading. We don't have all weekend for this—I have a date tomorrow night that I am *not* missing. You," she pointed at Michael, "should be out there shaking down all your contacts. Including Krysta, if you really don't think she's the one we're looking for. Merri can get Thad over to help us. I'll drop an email Shaw's way, just in case he knows anything about this stuff. How's *that* for a plan, Mr. Anti-Giles?"

"Tolerable, I suppose," Michael said as he rose. "Though I could simply be inclined to agree with you because I'm tired of sitting here."

While Michael disappeared upstairs to make a few phone calls, Merri went to her room to call Thad and invite him over for a "study date." Gen pulled out Merri's laptop and sent David Shaw an email, requesting any help he could provide.

"You think Levi's going to be okay with all this?" Sage asked in a low voice as she joined Gen in the living room. She sank down on the couch where Merri had been sitting.

"I don't know. He's never stayed mad at me for long, but that was before this year. It's not like it used to be."

"Nothing's like it used to be."

No, it isn't.

"Thad will be by tomorrow morning," Merri said as she returned. "He said he has a friend who may be able to help, so he's bringing him as well."

Gen glanced toward the loft. *I sure as hell hope Michael didn't hear that.* They already had a full house.

~~*

A hand shaking her shoulder awoke Gen from a dreamless sleep.

Stretched out on the cot in Merri's room, she yawned and turned over to see Meredith standing over her.

"Ooooh...I don't want it to be morning." Gen rolled over once more and drew the sheet over her head.

"Thad and his friend are on their way over," Merri said. "And Michael's already been up for hours."

Gen grumbled under her breath as she tore the blanket off and sat up in bed. *Stupid lousy supernatural monsters interrupting my life*, she thought. She missed her own bed, too, but Michael wouldn't let them go home the night before, deciding instead that it would be much better for everyone to stay under one roof so they could get back to researching in the morning. And Gen had been too tired to argue, so she crashed on the cot in Merri's room. *Which was easily the stupidest thing I've done in awhile...now I have to work.*

Sage had insisted on taking the couch in the living room rather than Merri's bed, but then she was nowhere to be seen when Gen got out there. Pots and pans banged in the kitchen, and a glance in that direction revealed Michael cooking breakfast.

So I really am the last one up... At least Michael hadn't come barging in the room to dump a glass of water on her head or something—that seemed like something he'd do.

"Where's Sage?" Gen asked as she wandered toward the kitchen.

"Went for a jog," Merri replied.

"I don't suppose she plans to pick up toothbrushes? 'Cause I could probably use—"

Michael grabbed a plastic bag from the counter and tossed it over his shoulder onto the breakfast bar without taking his eyes from the pancakes cooking on the stove.

Gen peered into the bag and withdrew one of a few packaged toothbrushes. "Cool. Maybe *Chez Michael's* isn't so bad after all. I don't suppose you also thought to get deodorant or anything?"

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"You can use anything of mine you find in the bathroom," Merri said. "Don't worry about—"

The front door opened and Sage returned. Two guys trailed her; Thad and another whom she didn't recognize. The other young man looked to be about Thad's age, and Gen figured he was the friend from school Merri had said would be coming over.

"They just got here," Sage said as she slid off her jacket and shoes. She walked up to the breakfast bar and took a seat.

"This is the last fucking time we do this," Michael muttered under his breath.

"He doesn't like guests," Merri whispered to Gen.

"No, he doesn't like *anyone*," Gen whispered back.

"We did bring donuts," Thad said as he walked over and set the box on the counter. He went to Merri next, wrapped his arm around her shoulder, and pressed his lips to her forehead in greeting.

"You also brought an uninvited guest," Michael said without looking Thad's way.

"Oh..." Merri's eyes widened innocently. "Did I forget to tell you that?"

"A *useful* uninvited guest," Thad said. He nodded to his friend. "In case *one* witch isn't enough."

"Yay! Less work for me." Gen took a closer look at Thad's friend. The top of his head of short, black hair barely came up to her nose, and his dark brown eyes were fixed on hers. "So what do we call a boy-witch?"

"We don't," Michael said. "We ignore him until he goes away."

"I think 'warlock' is the common phrase," Thad's friend said. "But I think that sounds cheesy so I don't usually refer to myself as anything but my name."

"Which would be?"

"Raji." His easy smile extended to his eyes. He reached toward her and she accepted his hand for a quick shake.

"Nice to meet you..." He held her hand for a beat longer, so she wiggled her fingers out of his grasp and backed away from the group. "I'm headed to get cleaned up now—save me some pancakes."

~~*

Merri noticed the gaze of Thad's friend, Raji, trail after Gen as she left. *Oh, great.*

"You're not her type," she said in a low voice as she started toward the breakfast bar. She glanced over her shoulder to see him still starrng in the direction Gen had taken. "Seriously."

With a sigh, Raji turned and followed. "Too short?"

"Too boy-ish."

"She's...?"

Merri nodded.

"He does have a thing for tall blondes," Thad said as he slapped his friend on his shoulder. "Probably should have said something, but I thought this would be funnier—"

A plate struck the counter loudly, startling everyone. Michael's glare was turned their way.

"This *isn't* a social visit," he said. "You people insisted on looking into these killings, so that's what we're doing, but if you're not going to take it seriously, you can leave."

"Oh, that reminds me..." Thad dug through his pocket for a moment and pulled out a slip of white paper, which he handed to Michael. "I guess Gen emailed Shaw last night. He called me this morning and when I said I was coming over here, he gave me a list of books that might help us. The ones with stars next to them are texts available online, if you don't have a copy. He doesn't know if it'll help, but it's the best lead he has."

Michael glanced over the list, then left for the loft without a word.

"Did you just make that up?" Merri whispered, but Thad shook his head.

"I was saving it for when he started yelling, though. Maybe I should have saved it for when things get worse."

And they'll definitely get worse, Merri thought.

And things *did* get worse.

Michael spent the afternoon yelling at everyone about everything, from the disorganized way people returned books to the boxes, to the noise of Gen yawning from time to time. When afternoon rolled around, nearly everyone seemed ready to call it quits.

Perhaps we're not so successful as a group after all, Merri thought as she closed yet another book on mythological creatures. She was starting to lean towards Sage's plan of, "get armed and go after the monster."

"I think I found something," Raji said from where he sat on the floor, back against the side of the couch.

Gen glanced up from her open book on the coffee table and raised a brow skeptically. "That's what you said half an hour ago. And an hour before that. You should probably stop going through books with weird languages when you can't translate them. It just makes Michael madder when he has to read it for you."

"This is different." Raji slid across the floor and set the book next to Gen's. He pointed to a particular passage.

Gen scanned the text, then grabbed the book and turned it over to look at the cover. "Lake monsters? We're not looking for Nessie."

"We've been focusing on mythology and old stories about sirens, but even if they're based on actual accounts, they're still stories, no? So I thought we should look at mystical theories surrounding what is commonly known as cryptozoology."

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"Please tell me this has a point," Michael said.

"Water is a natural conduit for energy," Raji quoted the text. "Therefore dimensional portals are often found near oceans, lakes, and ravines. If sightings of mythical beasts near large water sources are to be believed, it seems highly probable that such creatures are the result of dimensional tears.' That would explain how it got here."

"So we open the dimension again and send it back?" Gen guessed.

"I'm much more interested in killing it," Michael said.

Gen looked at him in horror. "Why do you have to kill everything? We can just send it home—"

"This *isn't* E.T.—this is a monster that has killed several people."

"Still," Raji said. "It would be a good idea to ensure that whatever portals might be around there are definitely closed. You don't want a second creature appearing."

"So Raji and I can start researching portal stuff," Gen said. "Like how to make sure the one around here is sealed up tight. Where should we start?"

"Two of the murders so far have occurred at that club," Michael said. "The first one and the latest. We should focus on that area—if there is a tear in the dimensions around the lake, it'll probably be there. If we don't find the siren, we check the other locations."

"So how are we going to find it?" Gen asked. "I didn't see anything the night Finn and I looked around. What if we *can't* see it? What if it runs from us?"

"We need bait." Both Raji and Thad opened their mouths to speak, but Michael stopped them by raising his hand. "I will act as the bait, if need be."

"And how are we dealing with the siren?" Thad asked. "I don't know about you guys, but I'd rather not drown, if I can help it."

"I wouldn't mind you drowning," Michael said dryly. "But yes, this isn't so simple that we can just waltz up and kill it."

Merri shifted in her seat and glanced up at the board. "Gen, you said that Finn said he heard something, but you didn't. He heard music."

"Yeah..."

"So us girls should be fine around it—it's the guys we have to worry about."

"Another spell?" Gen suggested, but Michael shook his head.

"Focus on the portal one first. In the event we can't kill the siren, sending it back should be priority."

"Uh..." Thad raised his hand. "But I really like the idea of *not* drowning."

"Then tonight, you can stay out of our way."

~~*

In the few times Genevieve had been at *On the Map*, she'd never seen it as busy as it was that night she went to meet Janine. Being the site of local murders

didn't seem to matter to anyone—in fact, it seemed to attract patrons. Serial killer groupies and curious residents were among the usual crowd at the club.

At least I'm not the only freak around here, Gen thought as she rounded the dance floor with a pair of virgin cocktails in hand. Hell, for a lesbian witch, she was starting to feel downright normal.

Her gaze settled on Janine. Gen had seen her walk inside the club from where she stood on the upper level, and decided to pick up a drink for both of them. Now she found the other girl was seated at a table by herself, watching the crowd.

So she didn't bring any friends. That meant it wasn't a group outing, but an actual date, right? Gen still hadn't heard anything about Janine's long time girlfriend, or if they continued to be involved. She had been hoping to slip the question into conversation that night, because she wasn't eager to jump into another relationship where she was the secret girlfriend.

"Hey," Gen said as she took the seat across from Janine. She set the cocktails on the table and pushed one Janine's way. Her stomach fluttered when Janine smiled.

"Thanks," she said as she accepted the drink. "Didn't know you were here yet."

Gen gestured over her shoulder to the upper level around the club. "Up there. Was me. Where I was, I mean. Uh...yeah." She grasped her drink and took a long sip before she could say anything else stupid.

"I can't believe how busy the place is," Janine said.

"Yeah—I don't think I know half of the people in here."

"I'm kinda glad of it, actually."

Gen's eyes froze on Janine's. What the hell did that mean? Was she embarrassed to be seen with her or something?

Janine must have noticed something was amiss in Gen's expression, for she was quick to correct herself. "Trish. My ex. I've stayed in the past few weeks because I didn't want to run into her—ugly break up."

"I hadn't heard about that."

Janine shrugged. "Didn't want to make a big production out of it. Know what I mean?"

"Not really—I couldn't have made a production out of my break-up with Peyton if I wanted to."

"You two were—"

Probably shouldn't have said anything... But then who the hell cared? Gen had handled the break-up remarkably well, so Peyton could shove it if she didn't like her mentioning it to Janine. "Yeah. For a few months—broke up on Valentine's Day."

"Ouch. That's gotta hurt."

"I did the breaking, so I guess it's okay."

After taking a long sip of her drink, Janine seemed to mull things over for a bit. "I'm pretty sure she's in my History class. Had no idea she was into girls."

Genevieve rolled her eyes. "Hence the breaking-up part."

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"Ah." Janine nodded. "Gotcha. Oh, did you bring Levi?"

Gen set her drink down. "Huh?"

Janine nodded in Genevieve's direction, her gaze fixed at something over the other girl's shoulder. "He's over there."

Oh...great. Gen sighed when she spotted him in the crowd several metres away. His gaze was fixed on her, though he made no move to join them at the table. She'd asked him to the club, sure, but since he was mad at her, she hadn't expected him to show up, and certainly not to stand there and glare at her.

"You can invite him to sit down," Janine said. "I don't mind."

"I think *he* would." *God, I wish this drink wasn't a virgin.* The whole situation was giving her a headache.

"You two are always together," Janine said. "I can't remember a time I haven't seen you side by side since we started school."

Her friend troubles momentarily forgotten, Gen let Janine's words sink in. *She noticed me? All this time, she actually did know who I was?*

"For the longest time, I actually thought the two of you were dating."

Gen nearly spit out her drink. "Oh, God no. I mean, he's nice and everything and I think he'd had a crush on me since we were eight, but...I'm not into that."

"Does he still have that crush? 'Cause he looks kind of mad."

Another glance over her shoulder and she saw Janine was right. His stare had definitely settled into "glare" territory.

"No, it's not about you and me sitting here. Other stuff."

"Like...?" Janine's face flushed a little. "It's probably none of my busine—"

"It's okay. I just..." She stirred her drink absently, gaze falling to the bright pink depths. "Levi found out I'm not the person he thought I was. And he's disappointed."

"Oooh, secret identity? That's hot." Janine pressed the straw between her dark red lips and took a sip of her drink.

Gen's cell phone rang. She pulled it from her pocket and checked the number.

"Oh yeah, really hot," she mumbled. She flashed Janine a quick smile. "Hold on, I gotta answer this real quick." Gen pressed the phone to her ear. "What?"

"We'll be at the club in about an hour," Michael said. "Meet us out back."

"You know police are milling around the place—"

"I checked, and no, they won't be. My source at the station says the cops believe there's a pattern to the killings, and they're focused on a different location. People will be patrolling, but I'll take care of them."

I really don't want to know what he means by that. She glanced at her watch and cursed under her breath. An hour would make it nearly ten o'clock—way too early to leave. Christ, she basically just got there. What the hell kind of date ended in an hour?

"But—"

"This was your idea," he reminded her. "*You* wanted to go forward with this."

Bastard. Of course he had to throw that back up in her face. "Fine. I'll see you then." She hung up the phone before he could reply.

"Another date?" Janine asked as Gen turned off her phone.

She said "date"! "No. Stupid guy from work needs help with something. Again. I'll have to duck out in an hour or so."

"Oh. That's too bad."

Yeah. Better make the most of it. "Wanna dance?"

Janine smiled. "I'd love to."

~~*

The field behind the club was pitch black.

"I miss Gen's light spell," Sage said with a sigh as the group walked.

Merri had to agree. Michael carried a small flashlight, sure, but had refused to bring it out until absolutely necessary, as they didn't want to be noticed out there.

It's really seeming necessary, though, Merri thought as she stumbled on the uneven ground.

The wind picked up. In the distance, Merri heard waves slapping the lakeshore, and she shivered. Her visions played fresh in her mind again—it all seemed so familiar. Disturbingly so, and no matter how she tried to distance herself, the fear clung to her.

Part of her wished Thad was with them, but then she'd probably just worry. He kept watch in the busy parking lot with Raji. The men waited on either side so they could see the sides of the building and would know if anyone approached.

Michael had parked his car off road about a quarter mile from the club, then led Merri and Sage through the field. Their plan seemed simple enough; Merri would keep herself open in the hopes of seeing the dimensional tears around the lake, then Gen would cast a spell to close it again. Raji was on hand to help if need be. Once that was done, they'd find the siren.

Which is easier said than done when we can't see a fucking thing. Michael seemed to hope that Merri's abilities as a seer would give her a certain advantage over the creature, but she wasn't so sure. And then they would wait. Michael was still willing to act as bait, not the least bit worried about his own safety. Truthfully Merri didn't worry either, but that didn't change the fact that the plan seemed a little...flawed.

"You know, we're still relying on the idea that the siren chick is hanging around this area," Merri continued. "But this is a busy place, and therefore not the best feeding spot. There's no guarantee—"

"There *is* a guarantee," Sage said. "The other spots—the hotel, the beach—are places where food would be scarce. But *On the Map* is regularly busy. This seems like the best bet."

Children of the Apocalypse

Maybe she's right, Merri thought. Maybe her doubt came from not liking the idea of facing this thing when they still didn't know much about it.

They neared the bright lights that ran along the back of the club. *And we're here...*

Michael stopped at the fence and peered through the chain link. "I don't see her."

"She's probably just—" Merri began to defend her, but Michael waved her off.

"She's probably just late. Jesus-fucking-Christ..." He pulled out his cell phone, the LCD screen bright in the darkness, and dialed her number. A few minutes later, he hung up. "She's not answering."

"She *is* on a date," Merri said. "I'm sure she's just—"

"We can send Thad in to get her," Sage suggested.

"No," Michael said. "He needs to watch the building."

"I'll go," Merri offered. "You two should stay out here in case you need to kill something."

Michael stepped forward and pulled out heavy-duty wire cutters from the bag he carried. He snipped through the fence until he could pull back a chunk of it for Merri to climb through.

"Hey," he said as she stepped through.

Merri turned back to glance at him. "I'll be careful—"

"Don't be careful—be fast."

Oh yeah, 'cause I frequently run a hundred metres.

Merri jogged—or walked quickly, as necessary—the way to the club without incident. As she reached the front of the building, she caught Raji's eye and gave him a nod. Michael had no doubt called him and Thad to let them know Gen hadn't shown up yet.

Inside the club, Merri glanced around for Gen. Truth be told, she was about to kill the girl herself. They really didn't have time for this...

She caught sight of Genevieve near the edge of the dance floor with Janine. The girls danced hand in hand to the music, laughing. Merri felt a twinge of guilt for having to separate them.

Still, we've got work to do. Merri wove through the dancers until she reached Gen and Janine. Gen's smile faded as her gaze settled on her friend. The glance they exchanged said everything.

"Oh...dammit." Gen turned to Janine. "I have to run. I'm sorry..."

Disappointment filled Janine's dark eyes, but she nodded. "Okay." She gave her a wan smile, and then began to back off the dance floor. "See you Monday."

"Yeah."

"Gen, I'm sorry," Merri said over the music as they started toward the door and in the opposite direction of Janine. "But we—"

"I know, I should have been out there..." Gen stopped suddenly, eyes fixed on the floor as she pondered something.

"Gen—"

"One sec." Genevieve turned suddenly and ran back toward Janine. She took the brunette by the arm, and Janine spun to face her. Gen stopped her mid-sentence when she leaned forward and kissed her suddenly. "I'll see you on Monday," she called over her shoulder.

Merri couldn't help but grin as Gen returned absolutely glowing.

"Sorry, I just had to do that."

"I'll tell Michael you got caught in a line at the bathroom," Merri said. "Rather than smooching with a cute girl."

"Even he can't ruin this moment."

No, but maybe a siren can.

The two girls walked swiftly outside and around the building. Once they hit the dark, Gen conjured up a glow around them and they hunted for the break in the fence where Michael and Sage waited. The glow around Gen illuminated Michael's annoyed expression.

"Where the hell—"

"You said 'about an hour,'" Gen pointed out. "You didn't say—"

"We were ten minutes late."

"Then I guess you shouldn't be pissed at *my* lateness, hmm?"

"Let's just find this portal," Sage said. "I don't like it out here."

Gen and Merri climbed through the hole in the fence to follow Sage and Michael toward the lake. Merri shivered as a cool wind blew off the water and wished she'd worn a jacket.

"What do we do if it's in the middle of the lake?" Gen asked. "I'm a little unclear about the range of this spell—we may need a boat."

"Do you see anything yet?" Michael asked Merri, ignoring Gen.

So far nothing seems out of the ordinary, Merri thought. And Gen was right—the tear could be anywhere. The beach stretched for miles, and if they had to search the entire lake, Michael might just be investing a boat after all.

The four of them paused at the water's edge while Merri looked around.

"From what I saw in that book of Raji's, time isn't a guaranteed constant," she said, feeling a little dismayed. "If it moves differently in this other dimension, then the tear doesn't always exist in our time. Or something like that. Honestly, it's all really fucking confusing." Merri continued to sweep her gaze over the water, hoping to find something that would help them.

A sliver of light a dozen metres away caught her attention.

At first she took it for a trick of light. When the clouds moved over the moon, the sky reflected on the water and threw off her vision. But then she saw it again and moved forward.

"There," she gestured to the light. "There's something off about the space right there."

Gen followed her and gazed at the spot. "Should I be seeing something? Because I don't."

"Trust me, there's something there. I don't exactly run into a lot of dimensional portals, but I'm pretty sure that's what I'm looking at."

Children of the Apocalypse

“Well...one way to find out.” Gen dug into her jacket pocket and pulled out a small velvet sack. Dipping one hand into the bag, she pulled out a scoop of dust. Muttering a few words of a spell that she and Raji had practiced earlier, she tossed the dust into the air.

Glittery particles stuck to the thin tear in space.

Gen gasped. “Um...okay, I see it.”

“We should hurry,” Sage said. “Like Merri said, these things come and go. You should seal it now.”

“Oh yeah, seal up a portal—I do this every day.” With a sigh, Gen dropped down to a sitting position on the ground in front of the dimensional tear and pulled out a folded piece of paper from her pocket, photocopied from a spell book. “Just don’t stand in my light, guys.”

Merri and Sage stepped back to let Gen do her thing. Michael’s cell phone rang and he moved a few feet away to answer it.

“This seemed a little too easy,” Sage said in a low voice. “I keep expecting something to jump out at us.”

“You know, you probably just jinxed us,” Merri said.

As Gen spoke the final words of her spell, the tear shimmered and closed. A low rumble, similar to thunder, sounded, and then there was silence.

Genevieve stood slowly, her hand going to her stomach. “I don’t feel so good.”

“Are you okay?” Merri asked immediately. “Did something—”

Gen shook her head. “Same thing happened that time at the farmhouse, which makes me guess that whatever I did to those guys involved dimensional stuff.”

“Who was at the club with you?” Michael said as he returned from his phone call and fixed his gaze on Genevieve.

Her brows furrowed in confusion. “Just a girl from school. Why?”

“Raji called and said some guy followed you outside. That’s watching the other side of the building and didn’t see him, but Raji’s sure of it.”

“Who would have...” Her eyes widened. “Oh god.” Long blonde hair swished around her as she looked back at the rear of the building. “Levi.”

Twenty-Two

“I told you that you jinxed us,” Merri said to Sage.

“I saw him inside,” Gen said as the group started away from the beach. “He must have...” She stopped abruptly and doubled over, hand going to her stomach. A wave of nausea swept over her again.

Merri went to her side immediately. “Gen, are you—”

“I’m fine,” Gen said, straightening herself once more. “Seems like sealing those dimensional tear thingies are rough on the body. Didn’t see that in the book.”

“Neither did I,” Michael said.

Gen half expected to hear him finish with a snarky remark about her being useless, but surprisingly he didn’t continue. A glance in his direction revealed little to alleviate her confusion—in fact, she couldn’t see anything at all.

My light source is gone... Perhaps the other spell cancelled the light one out? She tried to conjure it up again, but nothing worked.

“Something’s wrong,” she said. “The light...I can’t summon it.”

“You’re weak after the last spell,” Michael said.

“As opposed to usual?” she muttered.

“Maybe we should wait,” Merri said, but Gen shook her head.

“We have to get to Levi.”

“We haven’t seen anything out here,” Merri said. “He’s probably fine—”

“We *have* to get Levi,” Sage said, her step quickening.

~~*

Levi looked around the empty lot behind *On the Map*. Several minutes earlier, he watched as Merri came inside to speak to Gen. He knew something was up when the two girls took off moments later.

Children of the Apocalypse

He kept his distance as they walked around the club and then he waited at the side of the building for a few minutes. It seemed entirely likely they went out there to push drugs or something, and Levi didn't want to get in the middle of things, but...

But this is Gen, he realized. He didn't know what the hell she had gotten herself into, but he was determined to get her help.

He hadn't found anyone when he chanced a look around the back of the building, however. No people, no voices, no sign that anyone was around. So where the hell did Gen and Meredith go?

Beyond the weak lights affixed to club's exterior, Levi saw only blackness. Suppose they went for the field past the fence? Or even the beach? He sure as hell didn't want to head out in the dark to run into possible drug dealers...

Or killers. He recalled, vividly, his conversation with Genny and the others the day before. The group of them were involved somehow with killers—the people who murdered his brother and tried to kill Sage. And all this talk of special people and super powers...did they think he was stupid? That he would actually buy it? That he wouldn't recognize it as a smokescreen for whatever other shit they were into?

And poor Genny was wrapped right up in the thick of it. He knew she'd lied to him all these months, knew she'd kept things from him... But at the same time, he couldn't completely hate her. This person she'd become—this wasn't the Genevieve he knew and loved. It had to be the drugs or the influence of the others, like Merri. Gen would have told him what was going on otherwise. Maybe she just didn't know how to ask for help...

Whatever the reason, he wasn't about to let the same thing happen to her as happened to Hayden. He'd get her help—get the police, if he had to. He'd—

The sound of a voice singing caught his attention. Levi paused his step and glanced around. He couldn't pinpoint the location—it was as if the music came from all around him.

"Hello?" he called.

The song called to him, dragged him forward, pulled him into the darkness. A cold breeze brushed over him, bringing with it a watery mist, as if he stood at the lake's edge. Rational thought left him then—he just knew he had to follow.

~~*

Gen, Merri, Sage, and Michael moved quickly through the dark field...or as quickly as Gen could given her spinning head and frequent bouts of nausea. She had to stop a few times when a headache would swell up and she felt as though she'd pass out.

Halfway through the field and a couple dozen metres from the fence, she felt a hand on her shoulder draw her to a halt. She turned to see the vague outline of Michael in the darkness.

"We have to—"

"You're stumbling every few steps," he said. "You need to stop for a minute."

"But—"

"Sage, Merri, head toward the club and see if you can find Levi."

The other two girls took off ahead, and Gen had to admit they were infinitely faster without her dragging herself along.

"I seriously didn't see anything in that book that said it would take this much out of me," Gen said. She bent over and placed her hands over her knees, propping her body up while she closed her eyes and willed the rumbles in her stomach to pass. "I really suck."

"The fact that you were able to successfully cast the spell to begin with speaks volumes," he said. "Far worse could have happened than some flu-like symptoms."

"Worse as in...?"

"A brain aneurysm."

Gen stood straight and wished she could see him better in the darkness. His tone sounded dead serious and she wanted more than anything to see a wry grin or something. When he didn't follow up his words with a chuckle about her gullibility, fear crept through her.

"An aneurysm? Really?" *Please say no...*

"It's happened to others."

"You really let me do something that could have—"

"As you can see, yes, I did."

"I might have died," she pointed out, as obviously that fact had escaped his brain at some point.

"I knew you wouldn't."

"How?"

"You had done it before and you survived. You're stronger now than you were then—"

She elbowed him in the ribs playfully. "*You* gave me a compliment," she said in a singsong voice. "*You* think I'm awesome. I'm telling everyone as soon as we catch up."

Michael's cell phone rang, which he answered. All Gen caught was a couple of "uh huhs" before he hung up again.

"Levi hasn't reappeared around the front yet," Michael reported back to her. "Merri and Sage didn't see him at the back of the club, and decided to check with Thad."

Lev... Gen swept her worried gaze over the black field. Where the hell was he?

As they neared the fence, they caught sight of Merri and Sage again.

"No luck," Merri said.

Michael nodded. "I spoke to Thad."

"We can't see anything out here," Sage said. "But we need to find him. You only have the one flashlight?"

Children of the Apocalypse

We need the light spell, Gen thought. She was used to doing one that only lit the immediate area...it couldn't be that difficult to light part of a field, could it?

"I'm going to try again," she said. She closed her eyes and stood still, taking deep breaths to will her body to relax. Reaching internally, she sought the piece of herself that lay buried deep—the other girl from her dreams. The powerful version of herself, the confident one. She could do anything.

Gen drew on that energy and whispered the incantation, changing a few words so that a larger area would be lit. She knew immediately it didn't work, and so she pushed herself farther, repeating the words of the spell and willing it to succeed. Her head spun and she felt displaced, as if she wasn't quite there in her body...then she breathed out the final words and felt power tingle through her fingertips.

Her body swayed and she lost her balance. Hands caught her arm, saving her from hitting the ground.

As she opened her eyes, she found it difficult to focus on her surroundings—she wanted nothing more than to just sleep. A glance to her left revealed Michael holding her arm, keeping her steady. He looked down at her with a frown—perhaps of worry—and it was then she realized she could make out his features as if a light shone overhead.

"Are you okay?" Merri said from her other side.

Gen nodded as she stood straight. "It worked. That's what matters. We have to move, though."

"Looks like it has a radius of about two dozen metres," Sage said. "It's not a lot, but it should help."

"The bodies of the guys killed here were found between the fence and the lake," Merri said. "If the siren is leading Levi somewhere, it's gotta be around here."

"Someone can take Michael's flashlight and we can split up," Gen said. "We could..." Her voice trailed off as she noticed Merri's gaze fixed on a spot behind her. Turning around, she saw Michael walking away from them and into the dark. "Michael?"

"Looks like maybe the bait worked," Sage said dryly.

"I hear something," he called over his shoulder as his pace picked up.

"At least he's not a thrall yet," Gen muttered as she, Sage, and Merri went after him.

Sage moved up to his side, asking him questions about what he heard as they walked, while Merri kept an eye out for anything strange. Gen still felt dizzy and struggled to keep up with both their pace and conversation.

"It's definitely music," Michael said as they walked. "A voice singing something..."

"Can you make out words?" Sage asked, but he shook his head.

"No words...just the sense that I need to follow."

"He's not zoning out like Finn did," Gen said in a low voice to Merri. "Why not?"

"My guess?" Merri sighed. "The siren's full attention is diverted elsewhere."

Levi...

Michael stopped so suddenly that Gen nearly bumped into him.

"You three, go," he said. He handed off the bag slung over his shoulder to Sage. "I won't be much use to you." He swallowed hard, his gaze was fixed ahead, and Gen suspected it took every ounce of his willpower not to continue forward.

"You're sure you'll be okay," Gen started, but Michael waved off her concern.

"I'll phone Thad and Raji in case we need backup. Go *now*."

"I can take over from here," Merri said as she, Gen and Sage moved on without Michael. "I can already feel it..."

Though she wasn't feeling one hundred percent herself, Gen was infinitely happier that she didn't have the powers—or burdens—Merri did.

Several feet farther, the light around them revealed the outline of a figure in the distance. Gen's step quickened. "Levi!"

A second figure stood just in front of her friend. As Gen neared them, she saw hands on the back of Levi's head, drawing him nearer, and then Levi began to struggle.

Sage dropped the bag on the ground and raced head of them. Diving for Levi, she grabbed him by the shoulders and knocked him to the ground. Gen's need to check on him was put on hold when she caught sight of the siren.

A young man gazed back at her, eyes a solid midnight blue—almost black—and with soft, handsome features. He grinned at her. "Hello, Witch."

"Okay, why is it speaking English?" Merri asked.

The siren regarded her with a smile. "You hear my intent. Your brain interprets them as words."

Gen glanced Levi's way. Sage had him on his side where he coughed up mouthfuls of water. *We should keep it talking—keep it distracted and away from Levi.*

"So you know us?" Gen guessed as she looked at the siren once more.

"I know *you*." His voice came out smooth and melodic, though Gen could hardly see what had all guys so gaga over it. "I'm here because of what you did. You let me in."

What I did... Realization hit her suddenly. The day at the farmhouse. The spell she cast from that book without knowing what she was doing. It affected dimensions and sent those Brethren assassins somewhere else... *And let this thing into our world.*

Levi thrashed on the ground under Sage's grip, trying to rise, trying to heed the call of the siren. Merri joined them, kneeling down to give Sage a hand.

"So rather than look me up and ask to go home, you thought you'd start killing innocent people?" Gen asked.

"The desire, the need to consume," the siren said. "It's overwhelming. Need must be served at all costs. The need rules the body, the mind. You understand. Or you did. I see it in you."

"You're batshit crazy," Gen said.

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The siren moved towards her suddenly, so fast that it took a moment for her brain to register the movement. He grasped her head and yanked her forward. Fingers dug into her skull and Genevieve screamed.

The siren released her as a body collided with them.

Sage stepped between them, knocking Genevieve out of the way. "Go get the bag," she called over her shoulder.

Gen ran to where Sage had dropped the black bag a few feet away. Grasping the handles, she heaved it up and dragged it closer to Sage. "Please tell me you brought a sword this time."

Sage pivoted out of reach as the siren grabbed for her. She dove to the side, somersaulted Gen's way, and landed by the black bag. Grasping the zipper, she yanked it open and felt around inside. The blade of a long knife glittered in the light as Sage pulled the weapon from the bag.

"You're not still committed to sending this thing home, right?" Sage asked, meeting Gen's eyes for a moment.

"It's trying to kill us," Gen replied grimly. "Send it to hell for all I care."

Sage leapt up, the hilt of the weapon clutched in her hand, and advanced on the siren. Supernatural drowning abilities seemed to be his only defense, as he could do little to stop her from slashing the blade in wide arcs. The tip nicked his skin a few times, tearing flesh.

Gen moved to where Merri sat with Levi. Having recovered from his near drowning incident, Levi tried to rise again, unfocused eyes staring at the siren.

"He's not responding," Merri said, holding him back. "He's right out of it."

Pausing behind him, Gen wrapped her arms around Levi's torso and held him there. The front of his shirt was soaked, reminding her again how close she had come to losing him. She tightened her grip as she looked up at Sage.

The siren was fast—faster than Sage, perhaps—but the Warrior was quicker to react. She wove around him like a dancer, deflected his attempts at grabbing her with ease, and whipped the knife back and forth as she moved.

As the siren weakened, so did Levi's attempts to escape from them. Gen felt him stop pulling, stop thrashing, and all at once slump back.

"Lev?" she said as she lowered him to ground and knelt over him.

He blinked a few times as he gazed up at her. "Genny?"

She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. "It's okay. You're okay now."

Hearing footsteps treading on the ground nearby, Gen looked up to see Michael with Thad and Raji in tow. The two younger guys looked completely in shock at the siren, but Michael paid it no heed, instead heading straight for the black bag. He pulled out a simple sword, called Sage's attention, and tossed the weapon her way.

Sage caught the hilt and turned on the siren, who hissed in response. He was weak now, however, and did little to stop the blade from slashing across his throat. As he slumped to his knees, the siren dissolved into water and splashed on the ground. The liquid seeped into the earth and silence followed.

Gen glanced at Sage. The other girl's dark eyes were wide and excited. She panted a little and sweat dotted her brow, but she looked more thrilled than anything.

After sending a worried look to where the siren fell, Gen gazed up at Michael. "Is it...dead?"

"Um...looks like," Raji answered. He held up his palm pilot. "Did some reading on the subject while we were waiting. The siren has trouble existing in this dimension in the first place and apparently liquefies when the body is damaged too badly."

"What the hell just happened?" Levi asked as he sat up. He looked down at his soaking wet clothes, the spot where the siren had dissipated, and then made a face. "And...and I think that's my only question at the moment; what the hell happened?"

"There was a siren hanging around the lake that I accidentally let into this dimension," Gen said. "And it's been making out with young guys, causing them to drown. But we killed it. Any other questions?"

After dispensing introductions, the group gathered and headed back toward the club. The girls took turns trying to explain to Levi what had happened, in some cases repeating themselves, but he looked as confused as ever.

Still, Gen felt better being able to tell him everything. He'd adjust at some point, now that he knew they weren't all insane.

"So no one else was around when I chased after the siren guy, right?" Levi asked. "I don't want everyone at school thinking I'm gay."

Gen pricked immediately and smacked his shoulder. "And what the hell is wrong with that? Is being gay so bad that you wouldn't want people thinking that?"

"C'mon, Genny," he said. "What if everyone thought you were straight?"

"Oh. Okay, I see your point." She linked her arm with his and sighed. It was good to have her best friend back.

"I think that went well," Sage said.

Gen looked at her in horror. "Levi almost drowned after kissing—"

"Can we please stop acting like I had some kind of choice in the matter?" Levi asked. "And at least not so loudly?"

"Fine," Gen said. "Levi almost drowned after *falling under the inescapable thrall of a siren*."

"Thank you."

"I wouldn't say it's 'inescapable,'" Michael pointed out, a half grin hovering on his lips.

God, even he enjoyed himself, Gen thought.

"It's true," Merri said with a laugh. "Michael retained some willpower."

"Cause it was focused on Levi," Gen said. "We should have let it live a bit longer so it could go after Michael. He'd never live that down."

Children of the Apocalypse

“Although Raj and me missed most of that, I’m inclined to agree with Sage,” Thad said, sliding his arm over Merri’s shoulders. “I think that went well.”

Gen extinguished the light that hovered around them as they reached the back of the club and the overhead lights provided enough for them to see clearly. She didn’t say anything to the others, but even that simple spell had left her drained. Leaning heavily on Levi’s arm, she was glad for the support—and that no one seemed to notice how weak she actually was.

“Well, I hoped you enjoyed yourself,” Michael said. “Because that’s the last time we’re doing that.”

“But we did it.” Sage skipped ahead and turned to face them so she could walk backwards. Her eyes danced. “We stopped him from killing anyone else. Maybe *this* is what we’re meant to be doing. And God knows what else Gen let loose—”

“Hey!” Gen said. “It’s not like I knew what would happen.”

“So your mystical purpose is to clean up Genevieve’s messes?” Michael asked. Even he looked ready to burst out laughing, and Gen rolled her eyes.

“You know, you can all pick on me, but I *did* seal up that tear back there. So shut the fuck up.”

“There should definitely be a next time,” Sage said.

Just as they reached the corner, a figure stepped around the side of the building and stopped in front of them.

The group froze and stared at the young woman who confronted them. Shorter than Sage, but with lush curves and shoulder-length black hair, Gen recognized her immediately, and she imagined a few of the others did as well.

“I’m afraid I might have to say something about that,” the woman said in a smooth voice. Her fathomless dark eyes trailed over all of them, pausing the longest at Genevieve, Sage, and Merri.

Gen spoke up when it seemed no one else would. “Natalya?”

The Immortal smiled. “I haven’t used that one for about three years now, but it’ll do. Yes, Genevieve, I’m Natalya. Perhaps we could all go somewhere for a quiet chat?”

~~*

After ensuring Levi would be all right to drive home, Genevieve bid him goodbye in the parking lot at *On the Map*, and Merri did the same with Thad and Raji. Michael drove the three younger girls back to his house and Natalya followed in her own car.

While Sage, Merri, and Gen sat on the couches, Michael sat back on a barstool at the breakfast bar. Natalya stood not far from the girls, posture straight and movements graceful.

“So, like, what’s our purpose?” Gen asked once they were all settled. “Michael says the end of the world is nigh or something. I can’t believe I got to use that word again.”

"Yes, it is," Natalya said. "Well, *near*, that is."

"And we're important?"

Natalya nodded. "Very. There have been prophecies of the end times for thousands of years. The three of you—and myself—exist to keep it from coming to pass."

"Um...how, exactly?"

"Now *that* gets a little complicated and it's really not a discussion we should have tonight."

"So can you tell us about The Brethren?" Sage asked. "What do they want? I mean, besides having us all die."

"Death to the three of you is pretty much their focus," she said.

"We were attacked before, but others haven't come yet," Merri said. "Why not?"

Natalya nodded, as if she'd been expecting the question. "Their numbers are great, however they are spread all over the world and they aren't exactly what I would call 'organized.' They're separated into branches and the left hand doesn't always know what the right hand is doing, so to speak. The four and their leader that came after you were working as a small, independent group and had little contact with the others. Since they haven't set upon you, I'm relieved to say the rest of The Brethren aren't aware of where you are...as of yet."

"I'm glad you're finally here," Michael said. "There are a lot of things I need to—"

Natalya swung around to face him, straight black hair gliding around her shoulders as she moved. Her eyes narrowed on his. "You're half right."

Michael's brows furrowed in confusion. "Excuse me?"

"I'm glad I'm here as well, however there is nothing *you* need at this time except to have no further contact with my girls."

Silence reined in the room. Michael felt his heart beat faster as he searched for words, but Gen spoke up for him.

"Um...what?"

Natalya kept her cool gaze fixed on Michael. "You've pulled them into a confrontation with highly trained assassins belonging to The Brethren, taken them into a life-threatening situation this evening, allowed them contact with some of the most dangerous supernatural lowlifes in the general area, and I've had enough of it. These girls aren't here for your amusement."

"But it's not Michael's fault," Gen started.

"No," Merri agreed. "He—"

"He isn't providing a safe environment for you." When she turned back to the girls, she smiled kindly. "Your well-being is the single most important thing. Mr. Parris can't guarantee that."

"But he's been training us," Sage said. "We can't just stop. What are we supposed to do?"

"I have a close friend of mine on his way to Newhaven now," Natalya said. "Not only is he just as adept at training you, but I trust him implicitly."

"So you're firing him?" Gen said, shock spelled out across her face.

Children of the Apocalypse

"More or less," Natalya said.

"I live here, though," Merri said. "I can't help but have contact with him."

"And I'm not saying you can't continue to stay here, for the time being. However, your training will be done by someone else and you no longer need to trouble Michael with anything more." She turned suddenly to face Michael with a smile. "May I have a glass of water?"

He was livid. There was no other word for it—he wanted to kill her. Who the hell was she that she could just stroll in and change everything? Decide that everything he'd done wasn't good enough? He had done everything in his power from the day he came to Newhaven to find her—to get answers for the girls, to ensure they were taught and protected, and now this? If she didn't resemble the drawing David Shaw directed him to create, he would have questioned if it was, indeed, Natalya or not.

"If you don't mind," she said, reminding him of her request. She raised a dark eyebrow and tilted her head to the side, saying volumes with just that small movement. She knew he was upset. Knew he wanted to throw her out.

She also knew, however, that he wouldn't. He'd be civil, at least in front of the three girls.

Without a word, he slipped off the barstool and went into the kitchen to get her drink. His hand tightened on the cup to the point that he thought the glass might shatter under his grip, and his other hand shook a little as he poured water from the jug.

Michael heard soft footfalls on the floor behind him and turned to see Natalya. He thrust the glass toward her, which she accepted and sipped from gingerly.

He glanced over the top of her head to see the three girls whispering quietly amongst themselves. Satisfied they weren't listening, his angry gaze went to Natalya. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Ensuring the welfare of my girls," she said coldly. Out of earshot of the others, she made no pretense of being nice. "They could have been killed tonight."

"But they weren't—"

"But this wasn't the first time they were in danger of being killed or harmed, and half of the time you don't even know what's going on. *I know* what nearly happened to the Witch last week."

"The Witch? has a name."

"Don't you dare suggest that I don't know my sisters, and don't pretend that you care what her name is. I know who you are, Michael Parris. I know what you've done."

"Then you know why I'm here," he said. "And you know that I'm the one who's supposed to help them—"

"Why? Because someone, somewhere, told you that? Told you that everything happens for a reason and it was all so that you could be here, at this moment, to train them and teach them? They are *not* here as your playthings, nor are they here to give your pathetic life meaning. They have a purpose

beyond your understanding. I have lived much longer than you—I know far more about this than you do. As long as they are around you, their lives are in danger. And I'm not putting up with it any longer."

"You can't just do this," he said in a low voice. "You can't just—"

She stepped forward and glared up at him. "I think I just did. You are to have no further contact with them, save for the Seer while she *temporarily* stays here. My reach is far greater than yours and trust me when I say that you *do not* want to cross me."

Without waiting for him to respond, she turned back to the girls and strolled away from him. "I have to get to the airport, as I have a plane to catch shortly, so I'll be taking my leave. The three of you can gather here on Monday after you're done school. A man named Cade McMahon will be here around four p.m. and he'll instruct you from there. I'm hoping I'll be back in the country before too long, and I'll see you then."

"But—" Gen began, though Natalya stopped her with a warm smile.

"Questions, I know. Cade will be able to answer many of them. Those he can't shall fall to me when I return." Before she left, she sent one final, warning glance at Michael, then exited out the front door.

"Holy shit," Gen mumbled. Her wide blue eyes went to Michael. "I can't believe she fired you."

"She just doesn't understand," Sage said, rising. "We'll explain it to that Cade guy when he comes, though—"

"Leave," Michael said in a low voice, gaze fixed on the floor.

"Michael," Gen said. "It's okay—"

"I said *leave*," he snapped without looking at them.

A few beats of silence passed, then Gen and Sage finally rose to leave. As the door closed behind them, Merri turned to Michael. "I know what she said, but—"

"It's late," he said, starting past her and heading for the stairs to his loft. "Go to bed."

"It'll be okay—"

But Michael was already upstairs and didn't hear what else she had to say.

Epilogue

“I can't believe he got fired,” Gen said. She'd repeated herself several times as she, Sage, and Merri walked towards Michael's house after school on Monday, and it still came as a shock to her every time she said it. “How could she fire him?”

“She just doesn't understand,” Sage said. “She doesn't realize what he's done for us. We'll just explain to the new guy that Michael *is* out to help us and then maybe...”

“Maybe what? He'll give Michael's job back? If Natalya doesn't understand and won't listen to reason, I doubt this Cade guy will.”

“I think the problem is that she *does* know what's been going on around here, at least a little,” Merri said. “Let's face it; to the casual observer Michael isn't exactly a fluffy teddy bear.”

“Uh, you live with him and I don't think even *you* would describe him as such,” Gen said.

“Well, no. But I know he's been looking out for us. He's saved our lives. But if you were only getting reports about the things that go on, you might miss all the good things he's done.”

“Reports?” Gen frowned in confusion. “You think we've got, like, a mole?”

Merri shrugged. “I know Natalya probably has like contacts or something. But I talked to Michael yesterday about it and I got the distinct impression that she said she knows about things that aren't exactly common knowledge. What Finn tried to do, for example, or Sage going to see Austin. She knew what was going on here—like in detail.”

“So you *did* talk to Michael about it?” Gen asked. The three of them had a chance to discuss things earlier and Merri hadn't mentioned talking to Michael about anything.

“Only a little.”

"How's he holding up?"

Merri chuckled a little. "You care? I thought for sure you'd be happy about this."

"We haven't even met the new guy yet," Gen pointed out. "I figure the devil we know is better at this point."

"Well, I think it's wrong," Sage said, an edge of stubbornness to her voice. "I trust Michael. I don't know that I trust Natalya."

"Why would she lie?" Merri asked. "She's one of us."

"Maybe she just needs to hang around Michael a little," Gen suggested. "Then he can grow on her. Like...mold."

"How's Levi doing?" Merri asked. "I didn't see him today."

Gen shrugged. "He's fine. I spent yesterday at his house explaining just about everything."

"He's not still mad?" Sage said quietly.

Gen met the other girl's eyes before Sage looked away again. "The whole sitch is taking him some getting used to, but he's okay. I don't think he blames us, not really. He's definitely on Natalya's side in this, though. He doesn't trust Michael as far as *you* could throw him."

They stepped up to Michael's front door and Merri pulled out her key to unlock it. She slid the key in the lock and turned it, but nothing happened. She looked at Gen, then Sage. "It's unlocked."

"Shouldn't it be?" Gen asked. A glance in the driveway revealed Michael's car. "He's home..."

"And he usually keeps it locked." Merri opened the door and the three of them stepped inside.

Michael sat in the living room, elbows propped on his knees and chin resting on his hands. He didn't look up as the girls moved towards him.

"What's going..." Merri's words died as the three of them caught sight of another figure in the room. A tall, thin man stood with his back to them and facing Michael.

"This would be Cade McMahon," Michael said, still without glancing at any of them.

Cade smiled warmly as he turned to look at them.

At least he seems less threatening than Michael ever did, Gen thought. The fact that he hadn't thrown any knives or threatened them certainly gave him bonus points.

Small lines creased the corners of his mouth and eyes, and Gen would guess him to be in his mid-thirties. He stepped toward them immediately, and towered over them when he stopped a foot away.

Looking to Genevieve first, he extended his hand. "If Natalya's descriptions are apt, I believe you would be Genevieve, the Witch."

Gen shook his hand and nodded. "Yeah."

He met Sage next, and then Merri. "We have much to do and I don't like wasting time," he said. "We should go right away."

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Genevieve looked to Michael again, still expecting him to say something or order them around or...anything. But instead he sat there in silence, not acknowledging any of them.

"I guess we'd better go, then," Merri said when it seemed no one else would.

Cade gestured to the door and nodded for the three of them to go first. With some reluctance, the girls left at last. Cade followed and closed the door behind them.

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"This will work out much better," Natalya said. She stood at the window, peering out through the sheer curtains. Sunlight travelled over her, highlighting her fine features and making her all the more breathtaking. "I had high hopes after they took care of those assassins that the girls would be safe for a spell... But it's clear they weren't safe with him."

"I'm not sure if—"

She swung her gaze his way. "Michael Parris is a monster masquerading as a man. Do not question my judgment."

"I'm not. But I told you that I never thought they were in any real danger."

"They've had contact with any number of unsavory people, many of whom would sell them out to our enemies in a heartbeat, not to mention there's the matter of him allowing a friend to stay with him who in turn tried to assault the Witch."

"But they trust him."

"A mistake that can be excused by their youth and ignorance. But he *can't* be trusted. If you had any idea what he's done—what he's capable of—you wouldn't want Merri anywhere near him either, Thad."

Thad sighed. There was no use arguing with her, of course, but still... "Look at what he did for Merri, though. Gave her a place to live, helped get the cops off her back—"

"As you had me understanding it, that was as much the Witch's work as it was Michael's. A handful of good deeds in under a year hardly balance out his past."

"You and Shaw keep saying that, but what does that even mean?" Thad asked. "What has Michael done that's so bad? What are you so afraid he'll do to them now?"

"History repeats itself," Natalya said. "It always has and it always will. It doesn't matter if he tries to escape it. You can take the man out of a monster, but once it's in him, you can't remove the monster from the man."

Thad rose and started for the motel room door. "I have to go. Merri's expecting me and I'm pretty sure you were supposed to leave town days ago."

"And I will be," she said. "You said Cade is working out, though?"

"I guess." Thad paused at the door to glance back at her. "Merri said he's nice enough. Still haven't met the guy myself, so I'm taking her word on it."

Skyla Dawn Cameron

“And Michael is keeping out of their way?”

“Yeah. Don't worry—I don't expect he'll be a problem anymore.”

Chapter Commentaries

Chapter One

I'm really pleased with this chapter. After all the ones that gave me hell in Part One, I was relieved to find I hadn't turned into a complete hack. I tried to really jump right in with this one and not spend time summarizing Part One. We start off two or three weeks after the last chapter and I tried to bring in just about everyone we met before so you can all get a sense of where they are and what they've been doing. In a nutshell, Sage, Levi, and Gen are pretty screwed up. Levi probably less so because he at least tries to deal with things, but the others...not so much. And trouble's brewin'!

I also brought in three new characters, all of whom I LOVE. First up: Peyton Rice. She's meant to be like the anti-Janine in a lot of ways. While Janine is sexy, popular and perfect (to Gen) to the point of being intimidating, Peyton is the talkative, clumsy, cute girl-next-door sort. Essentially, she's a walking Sandra Bullock movie.

I also introduced someone who is clearly a "love" interest for Michael in Krysta. One of the things I liked about the Michael short story SURFACING was that between his dreams and phone calls, he had lots of different people to interact with, letting me show different aspects of him. Krysta provides me with the same opportunity, and also makes something rather clear to the reader (I hope): he's not opposed to witches in general, just Genevieve. But Michael is attracted to power more than anything—not merely that he wishes to obtain it, but that he's attracted to it in others. And there's definitely something about Krysta. ;-) Though she doesn't have a huge role immediately, I guarantee she'll be back a bit later...I mean, how could she not when Gen is so freaked out about her? In deciding where to pick up the story for the first chapter, my first thought was "I need a Michael and Genevieve scene" because they're just too funny together. And that one as they're leaving Krysta's apartment is one of my favourites.

Finally, we have Thad Kincaid. He didn't get to do much this chapter, but he'll be around for a little bit in the next one, where he hopefully endears a few

readers. ;-) He was originally supposed to appear briefly in Part One, but I had too many other things going on, so I pushed his introduction back to this first chapter.

Anyway, I felt this chapter nicely set up some important “mythology” development, and prepared for the coming character arcs of just about all the main characters—meaning Gen, Sage, Levi, Michael, and to a lesser extent, Merri. Meredith’s plot arc starts more next month when she finally gets a chance to take over POV, though there’s a hint in this one.

Chapter Two

This chapter switches over to Merri’s POV for the first time in the book and she was an absolute bitch to nail down for the first scene. It wasn’t until the second one that I figured out why. If you read the prequel Michael story, *SURFACING*, you’ll know there’s a lot more to Merri than meets the eye. She’s a bit of a chameleon—she’s good at hiding herself. It wasn’t until the last part of this chapter, when I really got a hold of her character, that I realized the reason she was so hard to write before was that she wasn’t being herself. So if that first bit is a little awkward...it’s all Merri’s fault! ;-)

I also tend to get a little ramble-y when I take on a new POV, as I’m trying out the voice, looking around through her eyes, etc. I ended up doing a lot of cutting with this chapter.

Anyway, I still pretty much like this installment. I like Merri, I like Thad, I like the dynamic between her and Michael, and I like the “real” Merri that comes out later. That final bit felt necessary for me on two levels: one is that it hints at a plot and character arc for her, and two, because it’s been a while since she shot that guy, and it seemed important to me to remind readers that she isn’t what she seems. Obviously, I can’t have her shooting people every other chapter, but I’ll try to play the multiple sides of her for contrast sake as much as possible.

Chapter Three

Um...yeah, this one was a bit of a mess. Mostly, I had a bunch of stuff I needed to put in there, but no idea where to put it.

I blame the problem on the first two scenes: Gen and her dad talking, and then the dream sequence. Neither of those was planned...I think originally I was going to head straight into the group visiting the club, *On the Map*, that Friday. Then one thing led to another (it’s kind of like sex with your neighbour that way) and suddenly I’m thinking, “Good Christ, what have I done? Where did all these scenes come from?”

But I do like what came out of this one, at least—I was pleased at Gen and Merri forming a bit of an alliance. Never would have guessed that would happen, even if you’d asked me a few chapters ago. But with Michael and Sage

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seeming to form a bit of a bond, I guess it was natural that these two would as well.

And something good came out of the first scene as well: if you wanted to know what Part Two is going to be about, that's kinda it. Love. Well, and lust. But mostly love. That's why everyone is getting love interests. Of course, since I'm doing this so early in the story, I'm bound to break them all up later, but we'll see.

Chapter Four

Finally, some hot sex! Okay, so a couple of people got laid, and I didn't go into a lot of detail about one, and virtually none with the other. Truth is, I think Michael and Krysta's sex life is best left to the imagination, for now. But at least he got laid—maybe he'll be a bit more pleasant now?

We spent a bit more time with Merri and Thad 'cause I just thought they were too damn cute. I like LOVE them together. And for anyone thinking Merri is acting out of character for sleeping with a strange guy...well, the fact is, you don't really know her character yet. She's a compulsive liar—quite frankly, NOTHING is out of character for that girl.

I should add that I have no idea how difficult it is to buy drinks for underage people in a club like they do in this chapter. Alcohol laws are kinda tight here in Canada, but this is fiction and I can do whatever I want, okay? :-p

There was a bit of a set up here for the typical “Girl makes arrangements to meet guy, then he gets left alone and possibly embarrassed” sit-com style thing between Mer and Warren...and in my twisted mind, it made sense then to not go for the usual silly thing and actually have it be like a baaaad thing. The first three chapters of part two set up the mythology changes and that for the next arc of the story...this chapter really starts some of the plot stuff. That's right—I'm gonna have a Big Bad in this part of the story. ;-))

Anyway, back to Mer and Thad for a second...I really didn't expect them to end on that note. It surprised me when she got all snappy and mad at him—I actually had anticipated him driving Merri to her apartment, and I don't have a clue how Levi got everyone in his car to go home later. Sorry, Lev.

Chapter Five

I think we see—clearly—more of Mer's hypocritical side here. Honesty is good, unless she's the one who is supposed to be honest. Then it's bad. I mean, if she was really all that concerned about what Michael has been keeping from the others, she'd tell them herself, right? But she doesn't, ergo Merri's a pot and should probably leave Michael the kettle alone.

The Merri/Gen friendship development kind of threw me for a loop, but it makes sense at this point—who else does she have to talk to about the stuff going on with her? There are just the four of them (well, and I guess Thad

counts too), that have this big secret and know what is going on. Sage is growing more and more distant from everyone, so she's not about to get all chummy with Gen. Obviously, she and Michael aren't going to be total BFFs or anything (although, admittedly, I'd like to see some kind of friendship develop between them at some point). That leaves Merri. And Gen is more or less over her distrust for the time being. I think.

And note the slow strain on Gen & Levi's relationship. That'll come to a head at some point in Part Two.

Chapter Six

"Let's do the time warp agaaaaaaain!" ;-)

Okay, so we jumped pretty ahead with things here. I suck at skipping long periods of time in books, so it was rather painful for me to let go of a whole entire week of story-time (which no doubt would have been filled with people talking about nothing for chapters at a time), but I did.

I'm actually kinda getting a kick out of the fact that Kourtnee hasn't had any lines of dialogue yet. Originally, I had to skip the early L/K romance in favour of the Merri/Thad one at the club. And after that, there just hasn't been a place for it. Now I just think it's funny that she's technically been present for a few scenes, but hasn't actually said anything... I think I'll just make it an ongoing joke. ;-)

Here we also have a brief visit from the Plot Contrivance Gods. Okay, so I had a number of visits, but it's fiction, so I'm allowed to. I have no real defense, except that I went over a dozen scenarios of how he could have gotten in the song request, and went with this one. And I think that, because it led to the final scene with her and Levi, I can be forgiven.

I wanted to play G/P (Genton? Penevieve?) as realistic as possible—nervous, awkward, uncomfortable... Gen's never had a relationship before, and it makes sense that she's unsure of herself.

I did rather like this chapter. I really liked Levi and Sage at the end. The whole scene made me quite sad, and I liked that she was able to completely break down in front of someone.

Chapter Seven

Gen and Levi are nearly back to being BFFs! Not that I'm confident it'll last through Part Two, but it makes me happy for now.

I realize Lev's confession about loving Sage is a bit of a jump from anything he said in Part One—he always just mentioned having a crush on her, and I think Gen referred to his feelings that way as well. Presumably, he realized at some point between seeing Sage the night before and Gen that morning that he was, in fact, in love with her. Or maybe I'm retconning...

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I also really like Gen and Michael's scene. He's mildly nicer to her when not quite awake and makes her tea. That just made me giggle. And she stood up to him—go Gen! Sure, he openly threatened to kill her, but I think she took it well.

And finally, I teased on my MySpace blog months ago that I had an “OMG!” moment coming up that was alllll the fault of fellow author Elaine Corvidae. The final scene, my friends, is what I referred to. ;-) All I can say is that it isn't what it seems.

Chapter Eight

Haha, told you it wasn't what it seemed. ;-) It was just too perfect an opportunity to pass up.

I like Michael and Sage sharing. It's like a cute little therapy group...but with more punching and kicking. This chapter was all about comparing and contrasting their character arcs.

I like at this point that Michael has something in common with each of the girls. Yeah, really, even Gen—you may not see it yet, but you will. And he clearly sees aspects of himself in each, and it reflects with his relationships with them. He'll give Merri trust without question because she does the same; they both know they lie, and all you can do is have some trust or you'll drive yourself crazy. He dislikes Gen, in part, because he already recognizes a piece of himself in her. And he's being understanding with Sage because he identifies with her situation.

And just when you think Michael's a cute, warm and fuzzy teddy bear thinking about his dead family, Krysta comes along. I didn't think that scene would actually make it into the story, but it shows quite the contrast between glimpses of old Michael and current Michael. Plus, as she doesn't get a lot of “screen” time (since it would probably involve a lot of sex scenes right now, and I hate writing them), I think it gives readers a rather complete sense of Krysta and their relationship. And it bumps me up to an R rating, which is always a good thing. Okay, truth is that people at the forum agreed they were disturbed by the idea of Michael having sex, so I decided to disturb people. It amuses me.

But him and Sage? Talking about Anne and Hayden? Love it.

Chapter Nine

Where to start... I think the biggest thing about this chapter is that Genevieve showed some real growth. As she mentions, she's learned a new spell with Merri's help, and just that little thing is enough to boost her confidence (in addition to her romance with Peyton and her standing up to Michael a few chapters ago...basically, everything's coming up Genevieve). She takes the initiative in dealing with David Shaw, and Michael goes so far as to encourage

her to do so. They are like *almost* friends in this one, which I kinda dig. I think things changed a bit because he has a certain amount of grudging respect for her after she had the stones to stand up to him. Of course, it goes without saying—as I’ve been hinting at it now and then and readers have basically guessed as much—but there will be a rather unpleasant confrontation between them at some point. In the meantime they seem quite comfortable in their mutual dislike.

Merri and Thad are back together! Yay! And if you were paying attention, you caught the brief further plot development in Merri’s vision. The introduction of this little (supernatural) mystery is actually going slower than I thought, but I guarantee a bunch of stuff will hit with a bang soon.

I don’t really want to talk about Natalya or that right now...I’ll just say that she will make an appearance some time before Part Two is up (well, okay, so she made an appearance at the end of Part One, so it’s not like a debut or anything).

Chapter Ten

I thought I’d address something that readers may or may not be wondering about: no, Michael isn’t some old perv who wishes to bang any of the girls. I revealed in an earlier chapter that he used to be a teacher. The girls are basically his students and yes, the man does have some ethics. It basically comes back to him compartmentalizing things again, though...G, M, & S go in the student compartment, Laurie was in the employee compartment, Finn is in the friend compartment, Krysta is in the lover compartment... Michael doesn’t like those compartments to mix. I imagine his arc will eventually involve some crossover, as he’s already borderline friends with at least Mer, and shares a connection with Sage, but that’ll probably just serve to mess him up.

Oh, yes, and Laurie is briefly mentioned. If you read the companion short story, SURFACING, you’ll remember her. I just figured I should mention her, so that story doesn’t exist in a vacuum, and it makes sense that Finn would know her.

Actually, it kinda surprises me how nice Michael’s been the past two chapters. He’s dealing well with Sage and helping her, then it turns out he’s looking out for both Merri and Gen. No, I don’t know what happened. I’m sure he’ll do something prickish soon, though. I also like how he gets to be kinda normal-ish in this chapter. I’ll chalk that up to Finn being around.

Ah, Finn. I have this problem in that I really want to give characters accents, but I hate writing them in because it gets distracting. Scottish can get kind of ridiculous in literature, so I figured I’d just say, “Yeah, he’s Scottish. Spends a lot of time in London, though. You can decide what he sounds like.”

Finally...you’ll notice two familiar faces in this chapter. ;-) It’s only semi-canon. Yes, if you revisited those characters in ten years, that’s what you’d find: they have two daughters (Desdemona Emily and Maya Louise, if you care), they’re still together, etc. However, *Catharsis* doesn’t actually exist in the same

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universe as *CoLA* (I mean, the timelines wouldn't mesh at all). I just thought it would be fun to do a semi-canon crossover.

Now, it was important for me to actually *do* something with the characters while they were there. I didn't want it to be pointless, so I had them help Gen along a bit. I hope the scene didn't drag a whole lot.

This has turned into a really long commentary, but I'm about to make it longer. What bugged me a little about this chapter is that it covers three days story-time with no decent segues in between the scenes. I'm sorry about that. I just got looking at everything I needed to cover and realized this was about the only way to do it.

Chapter Eleven

Well, I tried to do something different than the usual, "Uh, that person's a hacker-she can get into the computer!"

Anyway, I've been throwing in Gen doing some magic as much as possible 'cause I'll need her to be a bit stronger at some point and I don't want it to come out of left field. But while she casually throws out a line like, "I modified that spell" that's actually a kinda big deal. And poor Michael has no idea yet...

And to explain why I didn't have Finn actually contact Hayden (at least not yet)...look, I want Sage to have some kind of contact with him as much as the next person, but I've got a real problem with death in this world. When you've got reincarnation and people with super powers, death sorta ceases to have meaning. I feel like it'll lose some of its impact, if not all of it, if I can suddenly have all dead characters popping back in as ghosts with messages for people. That isn't to say I'll never bring back a dead character, or that they won't show up as a ghost, but that I want to keep that to a minimum. Plus I thought it would be that much sadder for Sage if she heard Hayden's spirit had "moved on" to a higher realm and that he didn't feel tied to the earthly plane. That's harsh to deal with (welcome to Michael's world).

Chapter Twelve

Most of this chapter centers around Sage. She's still a little hard for me to write. I got into her head in the next chapter a whole lot more than I have in the past, though, and I think I finally have a good grasp on her. She's very private, though, so it's hard to tell.

I kind of like the idea of Sage and Hayden, while seemingly opposites, had the most "traditional" relationship out of anyone in the story. It seemed, to him, logical that he would give his serious girlfriend a promise ring, even though it is old-fashioned and so very. That's really irrelevant and like the crappiest "behind the scenes" thing ever, but I just had to comment.

Originally, Michael was going to tell Sage who he thought would be the one to die, though I changed my mind about him saying. Seemed better to stretch it out awhile longer, since no one actually dies in this chapter. ;-)

Oh, for a random tidbit: Austin and his grandmother are a shout-out to my fave show growing up, *Twin Peaks*. Yeah, I know, it's a little obscure for a reference... Anyway, remember the grandmother and grandson from both the show and the movie? No? Then you suck. Go watch it and then we'll talk. :-P

Chapter Thirteen

I do feel like I finally got into Sage's head. She was always so isolated from everyone else, and this chapter has kind of furthered that; she's now experienced something no one else has and made the most difficult decision of her life.

The other thing I dig about this mini arc for Sage is that it tells so much about Michael as well. At the forum, it was questioned whether or not Michael had been telling the truth about knowing Anne's death occurred so he could fulfill his purpose/destiny...and yes, it's the truth. I think the only thing worse than going through all the horrible things in his past was to learn that it was all necessary. He knows this, he's accepted it to a certain degree, but living with it every day is still difficult.

Chapter Fourteen

Well, everything has slowed down quite a bit from the last two chapters. We jump to about a month and a half after thirteen ended. Remember that plot thing I keep bringing in, and then promptly forget about? Yeah, I gotta kinda get off my ass and deal with that, since we're heading into the latter half of Part Two.

So, to recap: Merri's been having visions. Something spooky is going on with some local deaths—the first of which occurred several chapters ago when the gang was at the club *On the Map*.

I'm not sure there's really much else to say about this one. It's like a short reminder chapter. That's it.

Chapter Fifteen

It's not Valentine's Day unless I'm breaking couples up.

Actually, though, for a chapter that could have been really sad, I felt it had a very positive feel at the end of it. Contrast Gen in this chapter with Gen from early Part One, and I think you'll see just how much she's grown.

Also: look at that, I *did* have a point to Gen's dad's weird behaviour in that other chapter!

Chapter Sixteen

The whole tramp-stamp thing made me giggle. Gen's tattoo and discussion about piercings is really about self-expression and confidence. In a way, I really saw her here as someone taking control of her body and her life...

And of course, that isn't without consequence.

Now, although I'm going to get into this in next month's chapter, let me say something equivocally; in no way should this chapter suggest the attempted sexual assault is her fault. When I say there were consequences to her taking control of her body and her life, I meant in terms of story and that, not literally. Essentially, if a character is too comfortable, I have to do something bad to them. Happens with guys too.

Anyway, I *love* the bit with Finn and Michael in this chapter, although it's brief. I love what this does for Michael—what it shows about him, what Finn hints at about him, and what this choice will ultimately do to him. Read this chapter and the next and tell me you don't love him just a little bit. ;-)

Chapter Seventeen

I had a hell of a time with this chapter. I had to deal with the fact that, while Gen thinks the assault is her fault, I don't and I don't want it to read like I think it's her fault. And who would have guessed that Michael would be the voice of reason?

This should really demonstrate just how complex a character he is. Here is someone with nothing but contempt for the girls and his job, and who has threatened to kill Gen a few times (and in some cases, almost allowed it to happen), and yet... Michael really was genuinely bothered about what happened to her. He looks at her and sees pre-bastard Michael, in a way. Though he doesn't deny his hatred of her, at the same time there's a protective streak to him and he doesn't want to see her damaged, which is what the assault would have done to her. Though the idea of Finn betraying all the girls to their enemies is mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, the fact remains that he brought the rope to the hotel room even before he was aware of what Finn knew. And I think this incident showed him something he didn't know about himself, and that scared him a bit.

Still, I don't think he should become a rape counsellor any time soon.

The other awkward bit is that I don't, honestly, think a survivor of sexual abuse is "damaged" in any way, and I'm not convinced Michael quite meant it like that either. The thing is, traumatic experiences affect different people differently. Sage lost a loved one, but she remained more or less intact—the same couldn't be said, necessarily, for Gen or Merri in that situation. Merri has been through things, but she adapted. Gen, however, is the kind of person who would really change, and not necessarily for the better. Michael knows that.

Chapter Eighteen

Hey, look at that—we finally get pay off for all the Merri hints I've been making! Or, at least we will soon. In a chapter or two.

The one thing that's a little off about this is that, because Merri/Belle is a minor, I'm pretty sure her name wouldn't be released in the papers and that, because of the Young Offenders Act or something, so Gen wouldn't have found her name online...but it's my story and I can do what I want to.

And how's that for an ending. ;-) I did warn people in a spoiler before Part Two started that Gen would once again have to face her trust issues with Merri and that this time she'd be in a position to do something about it.

Chapter Nineteen

I love Michael being all flustered that Gen rendered him obsolete. It makes me giggle. And telling Krysta off like that was great. She, of course, isn't out of the picture.

I am *so* sorry for the ending. I had meant to go straight into Merri telling Gen the truth, but it seemed better this way 'cause I wanted it done from Merri's POV (and I don't like POV switches mid-scene mid-chapter).

Oh, and Gen's joke suggesting Michael is a drag queen was put there specifically for my message board peeps. ;-) If you don't get it, then you should probably hang at my forum a bit more often.

Chapter Twenty

I find it interesting how Merri STILL tries to protect Gen from the real details of the truth. Her reasoning is different from Michael's...he's worried that Gen will grow hard and cruel, while Merri envies that innocence.

This pretty much covers everything you don't know about Merri. A word about why I had her kill him with antifreeze; Joseph was clearly a bad guy, but I also wanted to make it clear that Merri *is* very coldblooded. So she poisoned him with something painful and sat there watching it happen. Few of the other characters would have it in them to do something like that, even if they wanted someone dead.

Merri and Thad. *sigh* So cute. I love him. I kinda wanted the chapter to end right there, but the final scene was one I've been excited about, so I had to get to it ASAP.

Chapter Twenty-One

That opening scene was one of the most difficult things I've written in all of Part Two because of the number of characters speaking. It plays so easily in

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my head 'cause I have a TV screen going in my mind, but on paper it was a bitch. I hope it wasn't too hard to follow.

I've felt really bad about Levi getting shafted for these past few chapters, but honestly, until he became part of the main group, there just wasn't much for me to do with him. Now he's been let in on the inner circle, however, so he should start appearing a bit more (if he survives). In fact, he has a fairly significant role in the next chapter.

I brought in Thad's friend Raji because I wanted Gen to have someone to kind of bond with over magic and that, and she hasn't really had anyone like that so far. She and Merri work together sometimes, but I felt it was important that she have someone who "gets" the spell stuff. There was Krysta, but they didn't exactly seem like they would become BFF's that easily. And then I thought it would be hilarious if Raji developed this huge crush on her and she wouldn't know what to think. I do hope that wackiness will ensue come Part Three.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Poor Levi. I just felt like the only way he was going to trust Gen and the others was for them to save him. And the idea of Gen getting offended when he was embarrassed at everyone thinking he was gay made me giggle.

It also seemed important for Sage to save Levi. Important for her, important for him, important for the story.

I'm hoping in Part Three to give poor Levi more screen time. What I like about him is how much he likes all these bad-ass women around him. He's best friends with Gen (and was infatuated with her for years), has always like Sage, and I just think that's really cool of him. I think it says a lot about the character of a guy when he's drawn to strong women and doesn't feel threatened by them.

Natalya finally makes an appearance, which is perhaps the most important part of the chapter. She appeared very briefly in the epilogue of Part One (that was her in the final scene). And what does she do now that she's finally arrived? She fires Michael. Poor guy. Did anyone besides me feel a little bit bad for him in that scene?

The one thing I can promise is that at the end of each part of CotA, something will happen that changes everything because I don't want the story to get stale. In Part One, Hayden died. In Part Two, Michael gets fired. In Part Three...now, you don't expect me to reveal that yet, do you? ;-)

Anyway, the group had finally found a rhythm during the past few chapters, so it seemed necessary to break that up before anyone got too comfortable.

Epilogue

A simple epilogue with two scenes that made it to the final cut. There was one more, but I decided to leave it out. Since Cade McMahon will play a significant role in Part Three, I felt I should introduce him now. And, of course, I had to reveal there was a “traitor” of sorts among their ranks.

The scene that didn’t make it in revealed a big piece of the puzzle from Part Three...but I decided to wait and reveal it when the characters themselves find out. The Thad/Natalya scene seemed a good enough way to end it.

See you in a few months. ;-)

Cast

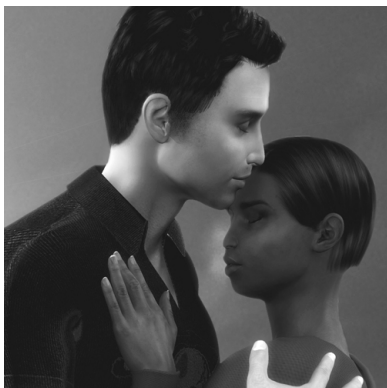


L-R
Levi, Gen, Merri, Sage, Thad, Michael

Gallery



Genevieve



Hayden & Sage



Krysta



Thad & Merri



Levi & Sage



Michael

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About the Author

Skyla Dawn Cameron is a full time author living in Southern Ontario where she writes up a storm and dreams of becoming world dictator.

Her debut novel, *River*, was released to critical and reader praise alike, and she finally got the damn sequel done. It's sitting with her publisher now. Her second novel, *Bloodlines*, begins a hot new urban fantasy series, and is currently available from Mundania Press.

Skyla moonlights as “The Marketing Whore” and is the author of several chapbooks that aim to encourage writers to shamelessly self-promote their work.

Feel free to drop her an email any time at skyladawncameron@yahoo.ca—in fact, do it right now 'cause ten bucks says she's checking her inbox as you're reading this. Her home on the web is located at www.skyladawncameron.com where readers will find all sorts of goodies including newsletters, community forum, contests, book previews, free fiction, and more. Dude, check it out. Like, NOW! ;-)



Other Works

Mundania Press – www.mundania.com

River

Wolfe (coming 2009)

Bloodlines

Hunter (coming 2009)

Lineage (coming soon)

Exhumed (coming soon)

Oblivion (coming soon)

Marietta Publishing

“Whiskey Sour” in Bad-Ass Faeries 2: Just Plain Bad

Indigo Chick Press – www.lulu.com/indigochickpress

Catharsis

The Marketing Whore's Guide to Shameless Self-Promotion

The Marketing Whore's Guide to Creating an eSerial

Children of the Apocalypse - Part One: The Beginning

Other

Nothing But Red (nothingbutred.wordpress.com)