

The book cover features a muscular man with a beard and short dark hair, wearing a white V-neck t-shirt. He is standing in the center, looking directly at the viewer. The background is a dark, stylized cityscape at night, with blue and white light trails swirling around the man, suggesting supernatural or paranormal themes. The title 'GHOST OF LIES' is written in a large, ornate, golden-yellow serif font, with 'GHOST' on the top line and 'OF LIES' on the bottom line. The author's name 'ALICE WINTERS' is at the bottom in a clean, white, sans-serif font.

GHOST OF LIES

ALICE WINTERS

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MEDIUM TROUBLE BOOK 1

ALICE WINTERS

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CHAPTER ONE



HIRO

The body is lying feet from me.

I can hear the sound of sirens filling the air as if frantically attempting to find and save the woman. But it's too late, and now that she's dead, I can't let them find her yet.

The issue is, with the sirens growing closer every minute, I'm running out of time before they find me standing here in the woods, smack-dab in the middle of a crime scene, looming over a body they're struggling to find.

Looks a wee bit suspicious.

But I can't leave yet because just beyond the woman's body, where she likely died before being dragged a foot or two, sits a young woman wearing the exact same clothes as the body on the ground. There's a peculiar glow around her, but besides that, she looks the same as the body.

"Can you hear me?" I ask the woman.

She's sobbing as she sits on the ground, knees pulled up to her chest as she rocks, and the sound is heart-wrenching, but if she won't talk to me, there's little I can do for her, so I have to keep trying.

As the darkness of the woods surrounds me, I walk over to her before kneeling down, knowing slow, steady movements are best when they're in this state of mind. I reach out to touch her face, but she isn't old enough for me to be able to feel. Instead, my hand passes through her.

"Can you hear me?" I ask again, voice gentle in hopes of reaching her.

She doesn't act as if she can, even though I know my words can find her. The issue is that the ghost of the woman is too new. After a person dies, if their ghost is left behind, it's generally inconsolable, unreachable, and fixated on their recent death. I know that better than damn near anyone, but I also know that right now, I need her to snap out of it because if she wants me to find who killed her, she needs to start helping me.

The sirens haven't gotten any closer, telling me they're probably on foot by now, searching the thick trees for the woman they'll be unable to save.

"Ma'am, I need you to talk to me," I urge.

She slowly looks up at me. "Did you kill me?"

I shake my head. "I didn't kill you."

“You killed me,” she says, sounding convinced.

It’s still too early for her to even comprehend what’s going on, so I don’t blame her for the wild accusations.

“You killed me, you killed me, you killed me.” She’s growing hysterical as she shakes her head and then begins to scream. The noise is tearing into my ears, making it hard to hear much else.

Shit.

“You better start running,” another voice cuts in.

I turn to look behind me and catch a different woman watching me. The glow around her is similar to the woman I’m kneeling in front of, but she looks more real and far more familiar. And I know if I reached out to her, I could touch her, even though no one else can.

“I can’t leave yet, Natalie,” I tell her. “She *just* died.”

“I didn’t want to die,” the wailing woman says.

I turn my attention back to her now that she’s stopped screaming. “I know. Where did he go?”

Her hollow eyes lock on to mine. “Why’d you kill me?”

They’re getting close now. Were they able to track her phone? Do they know the exact location? Think, think, think. “After I killed you, where did I go?” I ask, having found that sometimes if I just give the dead what they want, they’re more likely to work with me.

The ghost is quiet for a moment before pointing to her left, away from the noises, and deeper into the woods.

Quickly, I’m on my feet and running. I might be leaving prints behind, but if I can find the location of the killer before they get away, her ghost could pass on. She could be at peace and not stuck roaming the area where she died, begging to move on.

“Hiro, he’s here,” Natalie says, and I turn just as a man slips out from behind a tree and pummels into me. He drives a knife toward my face that I quickly dodge, but his weight is enough to throw me back, causing me to hit my head on the ground. He drops down onto me, planning to use his weight to keep me down.

Shit, shit, shit.

This wasn’t part of the plan. My plan was to find the location the guy went to, tip off the police, and send them over to do the dirty work. My plan wasn’t to be stabbed in the middle of the woods by a guy who smells like he basked in a barrel of alcohol and has a mullet. I turn my head fast, trying to pull away, but I feel the blade of the knife whiz by me.

I always knew being nosy was going to get me killed one day...

I really didn’t think today would be that day.

Twisting hard, I try to get my leg up and knee him in the back, but he’s using his weight to hold me down.

“I didn’t mean to kill her,” he says, which really seems like a weak statement as he’s trying to cut my face off.

“Then why are you trying to murder me?” I pant, trying my hardest to protect myself from his knife. “If you didn’t mean to hurt her, you can fix this. We can figure out what happened.”

He shakes his head vehemently. “I can’t!” he yells, which I think is a bit of a lie, telling me that maybe it wasn’t such an accident after all. I mean... who accidentally stabs someone to death?

He swings the knife hard as I duck down and throw my arm up to protect my face. It catches on my jacket as I hear a noise to my left.

“Police, drop the weapon and put your hands up!”

I turn to look at my savior and immediately sour.

He's not really the man I was hoping would come save me, but this is how fate works... especially for me. I guess if my options are between being stabbed by the killer or being saved by Detective Stick-Up-His-Ass, I find myself *slightly*—ever so slightly—leaning toward the detective.

“No! Please!” the man says as he chucks the weapon, like he can suddenly become innocent by flinging the murder weapon where he thinks they might not see. He puts his hands up and I shimmy out from under him.

If all goes right, the detective will be horribly preoccupied with the guy, and I will just waltz on out of here and run as fast as my legs can carry me back to my car and pretend that I had never set foot in this patch of trees in my life. I crawl a few feet before slowly rising up, like the slower I move, the sneakier I might be. I can simply slip behind a tree until the detective forgets about me.

“Mr. Moore, you are *also* under arrest,” the detective says as someone else handles the killer.

Now *that* startles me. “Wait, what?” I ask as he comes toward me.

“Ooh snap,” Natalie says, the ghost equivalent of the least helpful person around. Thankfully, no one else can see or hear her.

Detective Maddox Booker comes around the tree to face me. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

“I think he just wants to see you in handcuffs,” Natalie says, and at this very moment, I’m thrilled Detective Booker can’t hear her.

“I think you’re confused,” I decide as I give him a warm smile that does nothing to lighten the expression on his handsome scowling face. “I was *helping* you, see?”

“No, you were destroying the crime scene *again*,” he growls.

I... might have fucked up.

Detective Booker and I have run into each other more than once, but we rarely share words as I’m usually running as fast as I can back to my car and refusing to answer what I was truthfully doing. The last time he arrived at a crime scene that I’d beaten him to, he’d taken it upon himself to decide that I was the enemy and became a royal pain in my ass. Okay... maybe I’m also a pain in his ass by disrupting his crime scene, but I’m trying to help.

I keep smiling, even though it feels quite awkward at this point.

“Why’s your face look like that?” Natalie asks. “You look constipated. You never want to look constipated in front of sexy Booker.”

I ignore her but also drop the look, which makes her grin. “I was helping find the guy because you guys weren’t here yet,” I explain. “And aren’t you homicide? Why are you here? How did you know there was going to be a body?” I try to glance beyond him to what they’re doing with the killer, but Booker body blocks me before I can do anything.

“What’s it matter to you?” he asks as he sets a hand on my back and starts directing me away from the scene.

I can hear Natalie giggle, like she thinks this is hilarious. “If you’re lucky, he’ll handcuff you. I wouldn’t mind if he slapped some handcuffs on me,” she says.

I ignore her, as I usually do in the presence of others. When you’re facing the possibility of being arrested, the last thing you want to do is start talking to dead people that no one else can see. “I was helping.”

Detective Booker marches me into the clearing where I see his brother Ben, a police officer who is much nicer, arresting the guy. That must be why someone from homicide was here. Were they together when his brother got the call?

“Maddox, what are you doing?” Ben asks as backup begins to flood the scene.

“Isn’t it clear?” Booker says, like he’s rather proud of what he’s done as he orders me to stay

right there for a moment as he turns to the other officers. As he talks to them, Ben walks up to me and smiles.

“Hiro, right?”

I nod, feeling more than a little defeated. “Yeah. I think I’m getting arrested.”

Ben shakes his head. “Maddox isn’t going to arrest you. He just shouted it in the heat of the moment. You’re fine.”

I eye him suspiciously. I know Maddox probably shouldn’t arrest me but I’m pretty sure his pettiness alone will spur him to do it anyway.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Ben asks with a quizzical look. He’s always been rather nice to me whenever I run into him, unlike his brother who thinks I’ve crawled out of hell just to irritate him.

The shrug I give is the least convincing thing I’ve ever done. “Just... you know...” I’m not sure how to explain this when the truth rarely does me any good. People don’t react well to being told that you were trying to deal with ghosts.

Speaking of which, I look around until I see the ghost watching them deal with her killer. She’s calmed down, already at peace, telling me she’ll be able to move on as soon as the scene quiets down. So arrested or not, I’m happy to have been able to help her with that.

Booker, seeing that I’m daring to open my mouth, rushes over to make sure I shut it. “Ben, don’t talk to him,” he growls and jerks his head in the direction of the car. I know I need to follow or I really will get arrested.

Ghost Natalie walks beside me for a moment before saying, “I feel like you’re enjoying this. I mean... how could you not be enjoying this?”

I give her a glance because it’s *never* a good time for that level of stupidity. The looks I get from the other officers as I’m marched over to the police car make me want to announce to everyone that I am not, in fact, the killer, because I’m kind of being treated like I am and see why they might be momentarily confused.

I question whether a plea attempt will work. “Detective, I really... I’m sorry I was here, and I’m sorry that I—”

“Trampled all over the crime scene, ran after a man who had a weapon, put yourself and possibly others in danger, and for what? Just some kicks? Do you watch too many superhero movies?” he asks.

“My name *is* Hiro,” I joke.

Clearly, I shouldn’t have joked.

The joke falls as flat as I did when the guy pummeled me.

The walk at that point turns awkward for everyone besides Natalie who is ridiculously amused by the whole thing.

“Tell him you did it because you were hoping to see his charming face,” Natalie says. “That’ll help. I know that’ll help.”

I decide that if I don’t want to spend the rest of my years in jail, it’d be best to *not* do that.

Assuming that he was just trying to scare me turns out to be quite wrong as he opens the back door to the police cruiser. I assume this means “Get in or you’ll be even more arrested,” so I quickly get inside. And without a word, he returns to the scene, leaving me to awkwardly sit there alone. I mean... if it was a *real* arrest, he’d have frisked me, right? Read me my rights? Done something. He’d have... I don’t know! I’ve never been arrested.

“Don’t say it,” I tell Natalie now that I’m alone with her.

“You realize you literally just jumped in the car to be with him a bit longer,” she says, then

giggles. “He didn’t even *tell* you to get in and you jumped in.”

“You’re not funny,” I grumble as I lean back on the hard seat. “He was going to arrest me if I didn’t comply.”

“Was he?” Natalie sits beside me, able to sort of interact with things or at least appear to since she’s an older ghost. She’s haunted me the longest, and when she’s around me, it seems like she can do more things than when she’s alone.

I know most people wouldn’t use negative words like “haunted” when talking about one of their closest friends, but I sure as hell am going to say haunted when it comes to Natalie. She’s followed me around for most of my life, harassing and judging me and swearing like a sailor, even when I was a child. And still, I put up with it because there’s really nothing else I can do.

When Detective Booker and his brother head over, I realize that maybe now they’ll let me go. They’ll be like “Ha ha, just a joke. Don’t do it again,” and I’ll give them some finger guns or something and run off... maybe you shouldn’t finger gun an officer... thumbs up it is.

“Are you really taking him in to get his statement? You know we could do that right here?” Ben asks as he gets into the driver’s seat.

“Yeah,” Booker says. “He wants to go to the station, don’t you, Hiro?”

“Yes?” I ask, uncertain what the right answer to this is.

“He said he wanted a good tour of the station for his birthday,” Maddox says. “Isn’t that right, Hiro?”

“Um, sure?” What the hell is this? Why am I just agreeing with him?

Ben looks back at me. “Is today your birthday?”

“It is,” I say grudgingly.

He gives his brother a look of pure shock. “You literally looked into him, saw it was his birthday, and *still* decided that you were going to do this?”

“I sure did,” Booker says, looking awfully smug.

Ben whistles. “Jeezus, Maddox, you’re in a mood today.”

Which is funny when I thought Maddox was born “in a mood.”

Maddox gives no shits as Ben starts driving back to the police station while I awkwardly sit there with Natalie who is now blowing in Booker’s ear. Of course, he doesn’t see it and he definitely doesn’t notice when she climbs onto his lap.

She keeps looking back at me, like she thinks she could get me to say something or laugh. “Come on! It’s funny! It’s like a little lap dance for your birthday, but instead of you getting the sexy guy, I do.” The only way to solve anything here is to flip her off. *Of course*, that’s the very moment Maddox turns his head to look at me. His eyes narrow as I give him a sheepish smile.

“I wasn’t flipping you off. My finger... is sore. I jammed it. When I fell. Just stretching it.”

“Uh-huh, sure,” he says.

I glare at Natalie who gives me her best look of innocence as she climbs into the back seat with me.

“Maddox, are you going to Dad’s this weekend?” Ben asks.

“I don’t want to. I have that case I’m busy with, and all he wants to do is go fishing.”

“Last time you went out, you vomited all over, didn’t you?” Ben asks with a grin and a playful elbow nudge.

The best way to describe Ben and Maddox is to say that all of the happiness was drained out of Maddox’s body and shoved into Ben, probably sometime during childhood if I have to guess. I’m just glad I’ve only ever had the pleasure of seeing them, mostly Maddox, for a few minutes at a time. I

think Ben is older than Maddox, so maybe their mother used up all the kind traits on Ben.

“I’ve never gone fishing before,” I helpfully add to the conversation.

Ben looks back at me in the rearview mirror. “Haven’t you?”

“Don’t engage with the prisoner,” Maddox says.

“Hiro, you’re not a prisoner. You’re a witness,” Ben adds.

I ignore Maddox but give Ben a soft smile. “No. My grandpa wasn’t really into any of that outdoorsy stuff. He tried taking me camping once when I was young, got drunk and fell down a hill. I spent three hours looking for him, only to find him curled up in the tent next to ours with some strangers because he thought it was our tent. We never went back.”

Ben laughs but Maddox just glances back at me. Ben says, “Your grandpa sounds like a hoot.”

“He was,” I say as we pull up to the station. Maddox immediately gets out and opens the door for me. As soon as I’m out he power walks off, leaving me to assume I’m to follow him into the station before he takes me straight back to a plain white room with a single table and two chairs.

“Stay here. You’ll need to give your statement when I get back,” he says.

“Okay...”

At this point, I decide he’s probably not actually going to arrest me and Ben was telling the truth. If he was, wouldn’t he take down my information and like... check me in somehow or something? Or read me my rights? Honestly, I have no idea; my knowledge of being arrested is extremely limited and based on movies. This is just to scare me.

Right?

...

Right?

Fuck, please be right. What if he really does arrest me? What am I going to do to get out of that? My claim that I was tipped off by a dead person does very little to help my credibility when I’m the only one who can see and talk to the dead person.

I can’t tell him that as I’d been driving toward home, a ghost came shooting out into the middle of the street, terrifying the ever-living shit out of me. While ghosts meander across the street, there’s still a part of my brain that is convinced it’s a person before it sets in that I can drive straight through them. I had slammed on the brakes hard enough my car was left squealing, and he’d seemed to take note of me. He alerted Natalie who alerted me, before fucking off as ghosts are known to do. Whenever a death is imminent, they seem to lose their focus and become fixated on the death. Thankfully, the woods didn’t have too many ghosts lingering, or I’d have had trouble even getting near her body.

Natalie told me that the ghost had allegedly seen a man chasing a woman while holding a knife. Quickly, I’d pulled my car off to the side of the road, jumped out, and run in the direction he’d come from. Which is how I found the crime scene and the body.

But confessing all of this to the detective sounds like a bad idea, leaving me to sit here on the hard chair contemplating my choices.

CHAPTER TWO



MADDOX

“You’re really going to make him sit there?” Ben asks as I walk over to my desk. It’s my day off, but it looks like I find myself here *again*. I’d been with Ben when he got the call, and instead of staying behind, I’d jumped in with him, so really... it’s my fault.

“Yes. He’s wasting my time, I can waste his. I’ll get to him in a few to get his statement.”

“You’re not supposed to fake arrest people either. Do you want to get into legal issues?”

“I didn’t fake arrest him. I didn’t even tell him to get in the car. He did all that himself. I assumed it was because he didn’t have a car. You cleared up that he’s here as a witness. He must have wanted to give his statement here instead of near a body. It’s not my fault he went with us. Honestly, I was just doing a good deed,” I say in response. “Now, where’s your car?”

Ben stares at me before shaking his head. “Mine is in the parking lot,” he says as he holds out some keys. “Where’d you put him?”

I glance over at my kindhearted brother. Always the hero. “I’ll handle it. I won’t be that long,” I say.

He sighs but gives me a nod as I snatch up the keys. “You’re such a grump sometimes.”

“Thanks,” I say as I hurry out to Ben’s personal car that’s parked in the back. Mine is currently at Ben’s home, where I’d left it before tagging along. While I know none of this is my business, and what I really should do is head home, I still find myself driving back to the woods that the woman was found in. Instead of going back to the scene, I make a loop around the wooded area. While it isn’t horribly dense, it still spans a good hundred acres or more and isn’t public property.

So why the hell was Hiro here, and how the hell did he just “stumble” onto the crime scene? Was he with them? If he was working with the killer, why would the killer have attacked him?

On the very last road I have to check, I come across a car half on the berm, half dipped into the ditch. Since it’s still running, it causes me some hesitation, but I’d run Hiro’s information in the databases to get his vehicle’s make and model before heading out on this expedition. And sure enough, here’s his car.

So he didn’t drive in with them.

No... he entered from a point in the middle of nowhere. But why?

Parking Ben's car behind Hiro's, I get out and walk over to it, noticing the skid marks from him braking hard. The door is unlocked, so I reach in and switch his keys off before tossing them under the seat in case someone decides they need themselves a new car.

Since I don't have Hiro's permission to search the car, I shut the door and look through the windows for the possibility of a police scanner.

There's nothing inside that even looks off, so I don't bother nosing anymore. Backing away, I look at the ditch he had to have walked through. It rained recently and the ground is wet, so the ditch is full of water. Instead of going around to where it's shallow, he went right through it, like someone in a hurry.

Was he listening to police radio somehow? Maybe on his phone? Is that how he knew what was going on?

I find myself following his trail, easily trackable with the wet ground. While a few times he seemed to adjust his direction, he never changed it severely enough to tell me he had no idea what he was doing. He knew exactly where he was going, but how? Did she scream? Had he pulled off on the side of the road for something and heard her scream? But then why'd he brake so hard?

I can't imagine any noise would have carried this far, not when the wind is moving in the opposite direction. So what, then?

Sure enough, his prints led him right to the spot. I don't get too close because I don't want to deal with the others asking what I'm up to on my day off. Instead, I turn around and start trekking back toward my car.

It's one thing if he was playing vigilante, but what struck me as odd was his reaction to the dead woman. Or... more precisely, his lack of one. Ben and I had seen things like this before, and while it never became easy, it still sadly became a job. Being in homicide, you get so used to the dead that it's just another part of the day. But Hiro... he neither had the curious reaction where he wanted to continually look at the dead woman, nor was he upset, wanting to avoid looking at her. He even joked with us in the vehicle.

Worse yet, this wasn't the first crime scene I'd found him at. Is someone tipping him off? Or am I really thinking too hard about this?

"Fuck," I grumble as I hurry over to Ben's car and get into it.



HIRO

"It's been an hour," Natalie says. "Like, I love a man in uniform, but all the sexy ones must have taken the day off."

I'd talked to a few people, but still, nothing from the detective.

I'm isolated enough that no one will likely hear me if I talk, but I try to keep it quiet anyway. "Can you go see what Detective Booker is doing?"

"Sure, sure. I'll be back as quick as a lick of a dick," she says as she floats upward since homicide is on the second floor.

She's gone not even ten seconds before floating back down. "He's in the bathroom and his penis... Hiro... his *dick*..." Her eyes get extremely wide.

Oh.

My.

God.

I am being possessed by a ghost. Haunted. Tortured. “Natalie, go find his desk. See if there’s anything interesting on it.”

She eyes me for a long moment. “Don’t you want to know how big it is?”

“His desk?” I ask, knowing full well what she’s talking about.

“Dick.”

Kind of. “No! What the hell, Natalie. Go!”

Her hands start off at about two inches apart before gradually growing to about two feet. I have to assume it’s somewhere in there but the way she’s waggling her eyebrows at me just makes me glare at her.

“I’m going!” she says before floating back up. This time, she’s gone about fifteen minutes before returning. “Really boring stuff. His penis was back in his pants.”

“Good. It would have been weird for him to be working with it out.”

She shrugs before nodding. “True. Okay, so he was looking up information on a man named Joshua Wicker.”

I still at that name. “What?”

“You know him?” she asks.

“No, it’s just... are you sure?” I ask, but before I can send her up to get more information, I see Detective Grumps walk into the room. He stands in the doorway where he motions for me to follow. I jump up, hoping this means he’s grown a heart in the past hour and has decided to set me free.

I step out of the room but before I can say or do anything, he’s on a mission and I’m left to guess that I’m supposed to follow him. We make our way up the stairs, into homicide and over to a desk in the corner.

“Have a seat,” he says as I notice there are eyes on us. The desks are staged across a large open room, but his is at the end where he has a little more privacy. There are a few people who are busy at work, but I’m just glad no one is watching the scene as I sit down.

Maddox sits across from me, and I find myself not at all surprised to see that his desk is perfectly neat. He still spends a moment shuffling things around that surely don’t need to be shuffled before looking at me.

“Start from the beginning. How’d you end up in the woods?” he asks, deep voice already telling me he’s not putting up with any shit. And I’m almost positive my ghost story would be considered “shit” to him.

The man is ridiculously handsome and the way he’s looking at me just draws me in even more, making me realize that when the killer pummeled me to the ground, I suffered severe brain damage. Finding Detective Stick-Up-His-Ass attractive is severely wrong to ever do.

“So?” he prods.

I had a good hour to get my story straight, so with much confidence, I say, “I saw someone running and she looked like she was distressed, so I pulled over and ran into the woods to see if I could help her.”

“Okay,” he says as he takes a pencil and draws a line and then another at an angle as I realize I’m about to get schooled. He scribbles on the straight line for a moment. “So, you were driving down County Road 52, right?”

How... did he know that? Shit... did he find my car? “Yeah...”

“And you stopped and parked your car here,” he says as I realize that my story is just about ready

to get fucked. I should have known he was about to dissect it. Did I seriously think I could trick a detective who clearly *knows* what he's doing? Of course, he's not done as he taps his pencil and stares at me. "What's funny is that the lady's car is here," he says as he points. "So she oddly would have had to run *all* the way across the woods to get close enough to the road for you to see her before turning around and skirting back in toward the man chasing her. *And* she called 911 for help when she left her vehicle which was over here. We also have to assume that she was killed within five minutes since our responders were there within six. She must have been moving really fast to run this whole distance just to see you, and instead of going to you for help, she dipped back in toward the man trying to kill her. It's a wonder she didn't outrun him. She must be *fast*."

"Ohhhh snap," Natalie says, which does little to help the situation. "There was so much sass in that as he obliterated your story."

It was a really fucking sucky story. I'm realizing that now.

"So, let's hear this story again," Maddox says.

I'm so deep in this hole, I feel like I should offer to bury myself while he watches. "I... I'm sorry I lied. I was in the woods when I heard her. But I know it's probably private property, and I didn't want to get in trouble."

"What did you see in such a panic that you didn't even shut your car off?"

Shit. Shit. Shit.

"Are you listening to police transmissions?" he asks.

I don't even know what to say. Do I agree and then he'll tell me that's a lie as well because I don't have one of those radio things, and then he'll ask where I hid it and I can't very well say I shoved it up my ass. Can you listen on phones? Hell if I know. I've never had an interest in listening in on police stuff before.

So I do what any insane person would do. "You're the detective in charge of Joshua Wicker's case," I state point-blank.

That immediately derails the conversation, but now he has a whole new load of questions for me. "Excuse me?"

This is stupid. So stupid. "Never mind. Can I go?"

"How'd you know I was looking into Wicker?" he asks.

"I saw the name up on your computer... reflecting in your beaming smile," I say. Kill me now. Right now, before he does it for me.

Maddox looks around for where it could have possibly reflected, and I know this won't work at all if he's turned his screen off Wicker, but I stand my ground, looking as confident as I can be while I'm screaming a little on the inside.

His eyes narrow. "Stay out of shit. I don't know how you're getting tips. I don't know if you think you're some hero or PI or something or maybe you have someone at the station giving you tips or something, but you need to stay off them, got it?"

I feel like a child getting disciplined. "Yes. I'm sorry."

He waves me off. "Go downstairs and find Ben, he'll drive you to your car."

I don't bother dallying, I'm up and rushing for the door with my dignity intact. When I reach the lower level, Ben waves at me while he's busy talking to someone. I walk over and he glances at me long enough to hand me a container that I can see a slice of cake inside before he turns back to the woman he's talking to.

I smile as I realize he got me a piece of cake for my birthday. Why can't his brother be a bit more like him? When the woman walks off, Ben smiles at me. "Come on, I'll drive you back to your car. Is

Maddox finally done grumbling and growling at you?"

"I'm hoping," I admit, which makes him laugh.

"So does everyone else, trust me. He's not just like that with you. He's like that with everyone. There's only ever been one person I met who could tame that grumbly beast."

"Wow, that's impressive. Are they an actual saint?" I ask.

That makes Ben laugh as he leads me out to his cruiser. "Might be."

I'm thankfully allowed in the passenger seat this time, so I don't have to feel like a convict while questioning my life choices.

As Ben drives, he glances at me before taking a deep breath. "Hiro... you really do need to stop sticking your nose into things."

"I would never stick my nose into anything," I say as deadpan as I can.

He spares a glance at me so I can see the expression on his face that shows he's quite positive I'm lying. "Alright, you need to stop *stumbling* onto crime scenes."

"It's called bad luck," I assure him.

"Yeah, no, it's not. You're going to get hurt. And trust me, my brother doesn't want to be finding your body next, okay? That's why he's being tough on you."

I nod because I know that all too well. The rest of the ride is Ben talking about his son, a thirteen-year-old who went fishing with Ben and Ben's oldest son, and when he caught a fish that died when he tried throwing it back into the water, he was so horrified that he's refused to ever fish again.

As Ben pulls over next to my car, I thank him before getting out. That's when I remember the cake I'm holding. "Oh! Thank you for the birthday cake," I say.

He holds his hands up. "I didn't get it for you, Maddox did, but he'd probably skin your ass if you thanked him, so you're welcome," he says.

I look at him in surprise then dread. "Oh no... it looks so good too. There's poison in this, isn't there?"

Ben starts laughing. "I wouldn't think so. If you ended up poisoned, he'd just have to work harder cleaning up the mess and it *is* his day off."

I snort. "Very true. Sorry for the hassle. I'll see you around."

"Hopefully not."

I give him a grin and shut the door before getting in the driver's seat of my car that someone had thankfully shut off for me. Was it Maddox? Had he returned to the scene after dropping me off? Maybe there's a heart in there after all.

CHAPTER THREE



HIRO

As soon as I'm in the car, Natalie pops into the passenger seat. You'd think after years of being haunted, I would be used to it, but it still makes me jump every now and then. And whenever I do, it makes Natalie especially giddy.

"Oh, your precious little face!" she says, rather thrilled. "Did you think the boogeyman was here to get you?"

"Worse. You," I grumble.

"Ooh, where'd you get the cake? That looks positively delicious."

"Detective Evil-Maybe-Not-So-Evil got it for me for my birthday," I say, finding myself mystified by these words. They can't be real, right?

"Poisoned," she decides. "Definitely poisoned."

"I was thinking the same thing. Ah well, it looks good enough I'm not sure I care."

"Well, if I find you foaming from the mouth and sprawled out on the floor, I'll know who to haunt."

"I'll be right there with you," I assure her.

Through my years of having a close-up look at the deceased, I've learned that when a person dies, one of two things happens to them. Either they immediately move on, and I never even see their spirit, or they linger as a ghost, something keeping them tethered to the mortal plane.

Ghosts are usually around for one of two reasons. One is that they had an unjust death. Something ripped their life from them in a cruel way, and maybe it showed that it wasn't yet their time to go by leaving a part of them behind. The other reason is they left someone behind so precious to them that they couldn't rest until they were positive happiness or something that satisfied them came to that precious person. Generally, once whatever kept them here is solved, they move on.

I still haven't figured out why Natalie was stuck behind, and she hasn't seemed inclined to share it with me. I feel like she knows but she's never bothered to tell me. Why she doesn't want me to help her move on beats me. Some ghosts fear what's on the other side and hang on to what they can, but I've never gotten that impression from her. I do know that when she eventually does move on, I'll be horribly devastated.

When I pull into the apartment complex, Natalie disappears, off doing whatever she does when she's not harassing me. She never tells me what she does on the days she leaves me, and I can't help but wonder if it has to do with whatever is tying her here.

She clearly disappears a moment too soon because she absolutely loves drama and would hate to miss me getting harassed by my landlord. The small apartment building I live in is set back on a road with a house toward the front of the property where the landlord lives. He likes to use it as a way to block our entrance to the apartment when he's irritated with us.

The moment the landlord sees me, he rushes out of his house and into the middle of the road before I can move past. Honestly, it's a good thing I was paying attention or I might have hit him.

I can only imagine the horrors of having his ghost haunt me.

I shudder at the thought.

Randy's a man in his seventies who gets his kicks from harassing people. I think it's what keeps him young and spry. I mean... I don't know any other seventy-year-old who can boogie off the porch and leap in front of my car with such lightning speed. He smacks the hood of my car like he thinks he has to emphasize his annoyance as he comes barreling up to my window.

"Roll down the goddamn window," he yells.

Even though I can hear him perfectly, I cup a hand over my ear and lean toward the window. "I can't hear you." It's the little things that give me joy in an otherwise bleak day.

He smacks the window then motions for it to go down. With a sigh, I roll it down and give him my best smile that is instantly blocked by his glare.

"Rent's late," he says.

"By... two hours."

"Rule is that rent is due by four PM on the first of the month," he declares.

"I would have had it to you on time, but I was in jail," I say with a smile as I pull out the money and hand it over.

Randy's eyes narrow as they look up from where he'd been counting the bills. He insists on cash so he doesn't have to claim it all on his taxes or maybe because he just loves counting it every month, like he wants to find me with the wrong amount. "Why were you in jail?"

"Well, I had to get your money one way or another," I joke as I put the car in drive and start creeping away, but before I can escape, he hangs on to my open window, leaving me to start dragging him. And the last thing I want is to murder him in some way.

"Hey! Hey! Right in the contract it states you cannot be a felon!"

"I'm not," I say pleasantly as I slowly continue creeping. He keeps up with me with narrowed eyes. "I wasn't in jail for a felony. It's okay. I was joking."

"Drugs? You're selling drugs, aren't you? Prostitution? Trafficking? You just got this look about you."

I just keep smiling at him while wondering what exactly that look is. "I said I was joking."

He shakes his head as I regret joking with this man who is about to make my life hell. "No, no, nope. Which one was it? I'll search the Google and find out."

"Why settle for one when you can do all three?" I ask. Why can't I learn to just keep my mouth shut?

"Out! I want you out of my complex by tomorrow! I'm keeping your deposit."

Maybe... just maybe, that wasn't the best idea, but I just get so sick of his constant harassing that maybe I'm fine with him kicking me out. "Okay. Thank you," I say. While I know he can't make me leave by tomorrow morning, I find that maybe I don't care.

“That’s it?” he asks, like he wants to keep fighting.

“Uh... yeah. Should I remove the dead bodies from my closet or leave them for the next guy?” I ask.

“I’m calling the police,” he says, but I’ve really had way more than my share of run-ins with the police. Imagine Ben or, god forbid, Maddox showing up at my apartment. I couldn’t think of anything more dreadful right now.

“Randy, I’m joking. I promise. I’ll be packed up and out as soon as I can find a place to stay,” I say, knowing he has no legal way to boot me out of the apartment, especially when I’ve already paid rent. But maybe it’d be best to look for a different place anyway to get away from him.

“Tomorrow.”

“As soon as I can,” I grudgingly agree.

He finally lets me go as I continue on my way to the apartment. When I reach the parking spot labeled four, I pull in and head inside. The apartment is rather quiet this time of day, so I walk up to the second floor and put my key in my door. The moment I let myself in, a ghost pops up in front of me and screams, “Happy birthday!”

I jump into the air, send my keys flying, and nearly pass on into the afterlife myself. Thankfully, I manage to hang on to the cake. “Goddammit, Sean!” I yell as I stare at my brother while clutching my chest. Ghosts get their kicks over the littlest and most annoying things. It just *thrills* them when they do something overly annoying and ridiculous.

He’s laughing so hard he’s bent over. “Oh my god. I’ll never get sick of that. I’ll never...” Sean smacks his leg as he wipes away faux tears. “What’s wrong?”

My eyes are wide as I stare at him, unsure why he’d even bother asking that question. “What’s... what’s wrong? You tried killing me.”

“I just wished you a simple happy birthday,” he says with a huge grin. “Come on, give me a hug.”

I glare at him, but I honestly can’t resist reaching out to him. If I focus just a little, it lets him become tangible enough that I can pull him into me and hug him, making him feel almost solid. It seems to be something only I can do because I don’t know anyone else who ghosts can touch without slipping right through them.

“I thought maybe you moved on and forgot about me,” I say as he refuses to let go. I know he loves moments like this... moments where he can “feel” again, but it takes a lot of concentration on my part, especially for such a long period of time, and far too soon I have to let him go.

“Really? I was just here the other day,” he says.

I’m almost uncertain if I should tell him. “It’s been three weeks.”

He looks at me in surprise. “Has it really? Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” I say, knowing far too well. There were many times I fretted that I was never going to see him again. “I missed your annoying ass.”

My brother has been dead for almost a year and a half at this point. As a teen, he was an occasional problem child, growing up with a life that wasn’t quite what a child’s life should be. But when he hit his twenties and ended up with an unplanned kid, he turned his life around. He really stepped up to the plate. Even now, he’s always eager to be there for me or for his daughter. He spends most of his days following his daughter, Libby, around and watching her grow. The rest of his time, he spends with me, but he seems to be losing track of time recently, which concerns me.

“I don’t like this area,” he says as he looks around.

“Well, I just got kicked out of my apartment, so you won’t need to worry about it much longer,” I say.

He laughs, knowing I'm well aware that's not what he was talking about.

"So? What'd you get me?" I tease. "It better be good."

"You'll like this one," he assures me as he whistles. "Come on out."

Another ghost appears in the room, but this one is quite... oddly dressed with a teeny-tiny vest pulled over his massive chest and a thong with strips of what looks like neon leather that shake as he shimmies up to me with a huge grin on his face.

"Ghost lap dance!" Sean declares.

The ghost looks ecstatic about this, nearly as ecstatic as my brother who has clearly also come back from the dead to haunt me.

"Oh my god. I'm not getting a lap dance from a ghost," I hiss, but clearly the ghost can't *hear* me because he steps closer and starts shaking his massive and muscular chest back and forth as my brother beams, proud of himself.

"Thank you, but no thanks," I tell the ghost who finally looks down at me to acknowledge that I am, in fact, talking to him.

"That's what your brother said you'd say but he explained that you were just a bit shy," he says as he pushes up into my space.

My brother, more able to materialize around me than the others, gives me a push. I stumble back and land in a chair as Stripper Ghost gets all up in my business. There I am with his floppy ghost dick hidden only by a thin thong as I glare at my brother who is delighted.

"Yeah, you like that, don't you, Hiro?" Sean asks, all-out giddy.

I flip him off, pop open my cake and just start eating with the fork they'd thankfully supplied. If they hadn't, I'm not sure Stripper Ghost would have let me get up to get one.

"How about some music in this joint?" the stripper ghost asks.

"I'll set the beat," Sean says, then tries to badly beatbox while the stripper turns around and shimmies his ass in my face as I eat my cake.

"I'm not sure I could top this birthday. First, I got carted off by a hot, yet assholish detective."

"Ooh, damn, boy," Stripper Ghost says, *approvingly* I might add.

"Then I got detained at the police station."

Stripper Ghost swings his ass around as he looks back at me. "Like... did you get put in sexy jail? This officer arrested me one time but after I sent her to heaven and back, she let me free during her body-consuming orgasm," Stripper Ghost helpfully supplies. "Did you tickle his nuts?"

"Yeah, Hiro, did you tickle his nuts?" Sean asks.

I narrow my eyes and eat my cake while pretending not to glance at Stripper Ghost's rather nice ass. I mean... it's there, so it's not my fault I might sneak a peek or two.

"What happened next?" Stripper Ghost asks.

"Then my landlord didn't like any of my jokes and told me he was kicking me out."

"On your birthday?" he asks. "What the hell, man? Want me to haunt his ass?"

"Nah, I think his life is miserable enough just living with himself, but thanks for the offer."

"Yeah, man, you kind of have a shitty life at the moment."

"Maybe keeping your nose out of things would make it less shitty," Sean unhelpfully supplies.

"Stop trying to disrupt my lap dance. Go back to beatboxing. I was enjoying that. It kind of sounded like a whale call," I say.

Stripper Ghost turns around to eye me. "I was thinking mixed a bit with a peacock call."

I nod. Clearly, Stripper Ghost gets me. "Right?"

He puts a foot up on the chair and starts gyrating in my face as I take another bite of the absolutely

delicious cake. There was no expense spared on this beautiful slice of cake or my evening entertainment.

As I finish my cake, Stripper Ghost seems to finish his lap dance, which I won't complain about.

"Well, that was... thrilling," I say.

"You need a minute to yourself?" Stripper Ghost asks, like he thinks him gyrating in my face while I ate cake and my brother watched was enough to give me a stiffy.

"Nah, I'll be okay. Something I can help you with? Help you move on or anything?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Not my time just yet, but thank you for the offer. I think I'm still needed here a bit longer."

"Come find me if you need some help," I say, more than happy to help out if I can. There isn't always something I *can* do, but I'd do my best to try.

"I will. Have a good birthday, birthday boy," he says, and with a smack of his own ass, he disappears from sight.

I turn to my brother and raise an eyebrow. He's grinning like a fiend as he runs his fingers through his blond hair.

We aren't biological brothers—which is obvious with me being Japanese—but we're brothers in every way that matters. We'd been together since I was thirteen and he was fourteen. After leaving my first foster home, I met him at my second and final one where we quickly bonded and became more like brothers.

"Where the hell did you find him?" I ask with a grin.

"He's fun, isn't he? His daughter goes to school with Libby, so we run into each other every now and then. I just knew the moment I remembered your birthday was coming up that he had to come along," he says.

"I appreciate it, it was quite amusing."

He gives me a grin. "I thought you would. Now tell me about this hot detective who's tickling your fancy?"

I let out a noise that's somewhere between a grumble and a growl. "He's not tickling *anything* on me. He's a guy I don't even know, who seems to keep finding me in... precarious situations."

"Because you're running after dead bodies again?" Sean asks with a disapproving look.

I avert my eyes. "No."

His blond eyebrow rises. "Hiro, don't lie to me."

"I've never lied. I don't run after them, I happen to just... stumble over them every now and then by pure accident."

He grumbles, knowing that maybe my accidental stumbling isn't so accidental after all. But I feel like I was given this ability for a reason, and I need to use it to help anyone I can along the way.

"No one expects you to be a hero," Sean says.

"I know," I say. "But that doesn't mean I'm not going to do what I can."

Sean sinks down on the couch so he's facing me. "Just... Hiro, I'm dead. It doesn't matter how far you go, it doesn't matter what you dig up, what you do, you will never be able to bring me back."

The words still hurt a little. Not because of the way he said them or what he said, but because I know they're the truth. I know that no matter what I do, I will never bring my brother back. "I know," I say. "I'm being good."

"You're not," he says. "You think you're going to stop him from killing again. You think he's in this area."

"What else did you get me for my birthday?" I ask, ignoring him completely.

He shakes his head, but he seems to understand that I'm done talking about it. "That lap dance wasn't enough?"

"That was like an appetizer. Where's the rest?"

Sean grins at me. "Awfully greedy for your big two-nine. Where's this sexy detective? I'll go haunt him and see if I can snatch a pair of his underwear for you to sniff."

My face scrunches up in displeasure. "You're disgusting. And just because someone's attractive doesn't mean their personality isn't rotten. What if we sit down and watch something?"

"I could handle that. Natalie's not around?"

"You're not going off and having ghost sex with Natalie on my birthday."

He shrugs. "That was once."

I stare at him.

"Three times but it was an accident each time," he says as he leans back on the couch.

"How do you accidentally have sex with someone?"

"It's like 'Oh whoops. This is my dick' and she's like 'Oh whoops. This is my vagina' and then you see what happens when you put them together."

I stare at him, *positive* I could have done without... *all* of that. "I thought spending the day at the police station was enough to ruin my birthday but nope... nope, it was that right there."

He's laughing, not at all abashed. Wiping everything he'd said from my memory, I join him on the couch and turn the TV on.

"There's a new Marvel movie out, right?"

"Yeah, I can rent that," I say as I click over to find it.

Even though my brother is dead, I still have him beside me. But I know that if I find his killer and avenge Sean, he will likely move on and leave me behind. A huge part of me hates that idea because I'm not sure how to wander this world without him. For now, though, I just have to appreciate the little moments with him.

When I was young, I thought this ability I had was the worst thing ever. I was scared of what I could do and what I had to deal with. I was haunted by so many deaths and ghosts that I found life unfair at times. Then I realized that there's no one else as lucky as me because when my brother died, he was still able to be a part of my life. No one else got a second chance to tell their loved one goodbye.

"Please come visit me more," I selfishly ask as the movie starts to play.

"I will... I'm just... it's not good here right now. It's not... things are uneasy. If you promised to stop getting involved in shit, I think it'd be better," he says.

I feel bad for putting him through that, but he has to know that no one can hurt him anymore. "I know." I need to stop the man who killed him from hurting anyone else ever again.

"And what if you find him, and instead of stopping him, he kills you instead? What then?" he asks, eyes hooked on to mine.

"The movie's starting," I say, knowing it's a weak attempt at pushing his attention off it, but I'm going to do what I can to appease him because I know that I have to end this.

I lean into him, just wanting to feel him, and even though it puts a lot of strain on my brain to lean against him for so long, it's worth it.

CHAPTER FOUR



HIRO

“He needs help.”

“He’s dying.”

“Hiro, you need to help.”

“He’s dying.”

I jerk awake, a flood of voices washing over me, and as I come to, I realize my room is packed with ghosts. They bustle around me, chattering and moving, a wash of noise that fills the room. Most I don’t recognize, which tells me they’re drawn to me just because there’s someone in the area in the process of dying. Ghosts seem to get a bit antsy when that happens, which is how I end up, on more than one occasion, at the scene of the crime. “What’s going on?” I ask as I try to make sense of what’s happening.

Since I sleep naked, it’s a bit awkward climbing out of bed to face a room packed full of strangers while I have nothing on, but somehow, I’ve even gotten used to that.

I grab a pair of sweats that’d been lying on the floor and tug them on before grabbing a shirt on my way out the door. “What’s going on? Natalie? Sean?”

Neither of them seem to be in the area, maybe pushed out by the chaos filling the room. It must be close, otherwise I can’t imagine they’d be this restless. And quite a few of them I recognize just from being around. Someone in the apartment building, maybe?

“Help. Help,” a ghost shouts, maybe projecting what happened to them or what’s currently happening—it’s hard to tell. Quite often the ghosts are so unsettled that they don’t even know what’s happening themselves.

As I step into the hallway, the ghosts trail after me, a rush of incoherent words and noises. “Where?” I ask. I’ve found the best way to get information is with direct and simple questions. No one answers, but they move toward the stairs, so I start down them and find that there are no ghosts on the first floor.

Taking a guess, I head out the front door, only to find them gathered farther down the road. I start running toward them, my phone gripped tightly in my hand as I question if I need to call it in. But if I start calling in speculative deaths, people will start looking at me funny, especially when I don’t

exactly have a person or place to give them. And hell, maybe the ghosts are just going haywire and their ghosting abilities are a bit off.

Running down the desolate street in the dark makes me question my sanity. Say someone *was* killed, was the killer still hanging around? Would I stumble on the crime scene? I'm practically defenseless out here. I really need to get a gun or a taser or something. I can't imagine myself shooting someone... unless maybe it was to save a life?

"Here!" a ghost shouts.

"Here!" another echoes.

"Here..."

I turn to see them hovering around the door leading to my landlord Randy's house. "Fuck," I mutter.

Maybe Randy got done pissing off the wrong person and is now facing down death's door. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised. He doesn't seem to know when to keep his mouth shut.

I knock on the door, hoping this is a huge misunderstanding. He'll open the door, cuss me out, and send me on my way, reminding me that I have until tomorrow to make myself scarce. Joke's on him, I haven't started packing yet.

"Help, help," a ghost calls as it disappears inside.

Fuckity fuck. Do I really have to deal with this?

Walking over to the closest window, I try to peer through it, but the house is completely dark and there's nothing to see. Do I call the police? Tell them some lie and then run back to my apartment? But if he needs help...?

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I go back and beat on the door again before trying the doorknob. It's locked up tight, so really, the only way I could get in is through a window. Imagine if I broke in through the window only to find him sleeping. I'd literally go to prison then. Or maybe the morgue after he shot my head clean off.

As a last-ditch effort, I start searching for a hidden key, but Randy doesn't strike me as a "hidden key" kind of guy. He's paranoid as fuck.

"Help! Help!" a ghost screams from inside.

They're gathered around me, watching me expectantly, unsure why I've let a door come between us.

Without thinking it through, I pick up a decorative rock, give one more knock, and smash the rock through the window. Thankfully, the windows are old, and the glass breaks away with ease. What I *hadn't* expected was that Randy had an alarm system in place that immediately starts going off, announcing my arrival. Really, I should have guessed that he'd have cameras everywhere.

But I'm all in now. I reach in and switch the lock on the window before pushing it up and climbing through. I catch my hand on a piece of glass and jerk it back as pain spikes into it.

"Fuck," I hiss as I climb through, unable to let this cause me to hesitate. "Randy?"

Silence.

Should I be quiet? But if someone was here murdering him, they'd have set off the alarm when breaking in, right? Something else must have happened.

Unsure where to even look, I start into the next room, hitting lights as I go. "Randy?"

Still nothing. With the bottom floor searched, I rush up the stairs, wishing the ghosts would help in some way other than creating chaos around me. Just as I'm preparing to call the police and make it their problem, I see a foot sticking out of the bathroom in the glow of the hallway light. The ghosts pack around him, and I have to wave at them in an attempt to disrupt their tight circle so I can reach

him.

At first, I can't tell if he's dead or alive. His ghost isn't here, but that doesn't always tell the true story. Some ghosts seem to have nothing holding them back and leave before they even materialize, while others hang around for years or even centuries. So I reach down and press my fingers against his neck, hoping to feel something as I realize he's severely bleeding.

Anxiously, I shift my fingers around until I can feel the lightest brush of a pulse under my fingertips, telling me he's alive. I pull out my phone and make a call, even though the police should already be heading here with the alarm going off the way it is. It just adds to the noise the ghosts are creating.

"911, what is the address of your emergency?"

"I'm not positive of the address but Rolland Road, white two-story house just outside Rolland Apartments. The house alarm is currently going off, so there might be people on the way."

"Okay. What's the problem, sir?" she asks, voice steady and calm. It's almost strange when all the other voices around me are anything but.

"This guy, he's fallen. Hit his head and is bleeding profusely. I'm not sure why or what happened," I say.

"Is he breathing?"

"Yes," I say as the chatter from the ghosts tries to drown her out.

"Help, help!" a ghost shouts.

A chorus of "helps" begins to circle around the room. They're closing in on me, making it hard to breathe and impossible to hear anything the woman is saying. I miss the second part of what she's telling me to do to help him because the ghosts are too loud. They're so fixated on me helping him that they're making it harder for me to do so.

"Quiet," I whisper, not wanting to disrupt the woman, but my voice gets drowned out.

They don't even pretend to hear me, their voices escalating until I can't even think.

"Shut up," I snap.

The room falls silent as the ghosts look down at me, like they suddenly remembered I'm there.

"Sir, is there someone else with you?" the woman asks.

"No, sorry. Can you repeat what you were saying?"

There's a moment of hesitation before she begins again. As she runs through her questions and instructions, I listen and do everything she asks while also wondering how the hell I'm going to explain any of this. I wish I could run back to the apartment, but they have my phone number and will easily be able to figure out I was the person who'd broken through the window. At this point, it'd be best for me to just remain behind and deal with things as I'm faced with them.

Sirens are the first sign that they're getting near, so I rush down the stairs and unlock the door before hurrying back to Randy. I'm almost reluctant to go back into the room the ghosts are packed into. I look in at them, all hovering around Randy like some kind of fucked-up summoning circle. Sometimes, it's hard to even function when they act like this, leaving me straining to even think or act. Why the hell does it take such a toll on me?

I'm relieved when the ambulance and police car arrive, allowing me to step back and let them take over. "Are you family?" an officer asks.

I shake my head. "No, I live in the apartment down there. I set the alarm off when I came in because I couldn't get him to answer and was scared something was wrong. I'm sorry."

She smiles at me. "It's okay. He'd have lain there all night if you hadn't."

My head is beginning to pound because of the ghosts, so I'm thrilled when the officers eventually

let me leave. The ghosts are starting to disperse now that they're moving Randy, and I'm grateful to leave them behind. I hurry on home, hoping no one ever bothers to ask why I'd been so adamant about getting into the house or how I'd known that he'd collapsed.

Right now, I just want to get into bed and sleep the headache away.

CHAPTER FIVE



MADDOX

“Hey, Maddox, I’m headed out. Before I go, I saw something interesting last night that I thought you’d want to hear about,” Sami Bell says as she stops by my desk. She’s an officer who works the third shift, but we’ve known each other for years.

“What’s that?” I ask as she grabs a chair and slides it over to my desk. I’ve only been here a few minutes at this point, so she’s on her way out.

“That guy you had in here yesterday, I saw him last night,” she says.

It takes me a moment to place who she’s talking about. “Hiro Moore?” I ask in surprise.

She gives me a nod, clearly pleased to have a bit of gossip that I want to hear. “Yeah. So in the middle of the night, a home security alarm goes off before we get a call that an older man is down and bleeding. Take a guess who was there when I showed up.”

“Hiro,” I say in disbelief. What the fuck? Is this guy actually a killer and we just write it off as the wrong place, wrong time kind of thing? “What was he doing there?”

Sami grins at me. “I see that look on your face. He wasn’t trying to kill him. You’re always so skeptical of everyone. Anyway, the older gentleman had a heart attack and busted his head on the counter on the way down. That Hiro guy is his renter and had broken in to try to help him.”

“Broken in. Why did he break in? What time was it?” I ask.

“I think about three AM.”

How does no one see how fucking suspicious this guy is? Is it just because he smiles and says nice shit that everyone simply writes him off? “He just... happened to *randomly* decide at three AM that he’s going to go check on his landlord who just *happened* to have had a heart attack and fallen? Can we get a toxicology report on the landlord?” I ask.

Now she’s looking at me like I might have lost my mind. “You... you think he did something to give him a heart attack?” she asks in surprise. “You actually think he’s involved somehow? I mean... Maddox, he seemed shaken up. When I arrived, he was pale and upset... someone trying to kill their landlord wouldn’t be in that situation.”

“Probably anxious he’d been caught,” I say stubbornly. “I want a toxicology report.”

She sighs and shakes her head. “You know we can’t do that just because you think it’s suspicious.”

But I'm telling you, if he actually planned to kill the guy, he'd have just let him die. They said if they hadn't gotten the older man in, he would have died. Hiro also wouldn't have called the police, he'd have just left."

I watch her for a moment as I think about it before shaking my head. "This whole thing is too damn sketchy. You can't tell me this isn't fucking suspicious."

"I... think you're being unreasonably tough on a guy who literally just saved the life of his landlord."

"Serial killer," I declare, semi-joking... kind of.

Sami gives me a look of disbelief. "When faced with an act of kindness, we call serial killer?"

"Yes," I say, which makes her laugh.

She rocks back in her chair. "God, Maddox, you need some time off. Who else have you been condemning silently?"

"Silently!" Ben says from behind her before laughing. "Oh, my dear baby brother is silent about nothing."

And, of course, Ben needs to stick his nose in it. "What are you doing up here? Get downstairs and do your job," I say.

"Oh, but it's fine for Sami to be up here?" Ben asks as he grabs a different chair and sits across from me. "Who are we talking about?"

"The guy that Maddox is convinced is a serial killer," Sami says.

Ben thinks about it for a long moment. "Maddox thinks everyone he doesn't like is a serial killer. Did I tell you about the time when we were teens, he was convinced our mailman was a serial killer? Instead, our mom was just doing the dirty with him behind our backs."

"I'm still not positive he's *not* a serial killer," I say.

Ben's grinning, obviously finding much enjoyment in this. "True... he had the look."

My phone buzzes, interrupting me before we can continue our chat, and I see that it's Elena Perez, the lead detective of the neighboring city as well as Deputy Chief Molly Parker's wife. While legally, Elena took Parker's last name, they both go by their maiden names to keep confusion down in the workplace. "Sorry, I have to take this," I say.

"Duty calls for you, and I need some sleep," Sami says as she gets up and waves bye to both of us before heading out.

"Be safe," Ben says to me.

"Always. Same for you," I say as he follows after Sami, leaving me to accept the call.

"Detective Booker, I'm hoping you could help me out," Detective Perez says.

"What's going on?"

"I'm sending you the address right now. Can you be here in thirty?"

"Sure," I say, not surprised Perez is playing secretive. She's always ten places at once and loves to give *just* enough information without wasting time giving too much. I think she also gets her kicks out of it.

While it's outside my jurisdiction, I don't question why I've been called. I'm more than happy to help out wherever I can, and I know that if they're asking for me, it likely relates to one of my previous cases.

The drive, which takes the entire thirty minutes, leads me out to an abandoned motel off the main highway leading into the next city over. The sign has long since fallen apart, only the base of it still standing, and the motel was boarded up years ago if the sun-bleached look the wood is sporting has anything to say about it. Currently there's a gathering of marked and unmarked vehicles in the parking

lot that's been ravished by years of neglect, and the area is cordoned off. Weeds as tall as my knees sprout between cracks that I walk past on my way over to the room that seems to be the focus.

Detective Perez sees me and marches right over. She's a petite woman, barely five four, but her attitude makes up for it. I remember there being some talk when she first arrived because some of the older men thought it was a funny joke this small lady was now in charge until she whipped her detectives into shape. Now, everyone loves and fears her, which I think she enjoys. Even though Elena and I get along quite well, it doesn't mean that her wife, Deputy Chief Parker, tolerates me any more than anyone else.

"Morning," I say.

"Morning. I have something I thought you'd find interesting," she says as she leads me over to the door of room seven. I slip protective gear on to keep from tracking anything outside the room into it and follow her in past the crime scene tape.

The first thing I notice, other than the techs and officers bustling around, is the cleanliness of the room. It looks almost like a brand-new room, clean bed made up, no dust or dirt. There's an old TV set up on a stand, a chair facing it. In the chair sits a man. He's not strapped down, but there's a piece of duct tape across his mouth. His wrists don't show signs of having been tied, making me wonder if he'd been drugged.

There's a knife wound right to the chest, just one single stab. The flow of the blood shows that he struggled some, which means the killer placed him back in the chair near death or after death.

It's just like the others. The room set up differently than it originally was, almost decorated in a way, taped mouth, stab wound. I've had two other cases like this in the past year and a half, so it can't be a coincidence. There's nothing horribly specific about the death, but they're still similar enough to show a pattern. The first two cases weren't part of my workload but after our senior detective retired, I'd been saddled with them, which was why I was looking into it yesterday. By now, things were running cold, but I knew there had to be something more to it.

"Same killer?" Perez asks.

"Sure looks like it, doesn't it? It's been six months since the last one... it was too much to ask for it to end there, wasn't it?"

"Always is," she says. "Well... we have a serial killer on our hands, and we need to figure out why before there's another victim."

I give her a nod, knowing I'd try my best to put an end to this knife-wielding killer before they have a chance to strike again.

CHAPTER SIX



HIRO

I run the knife along the top of the box before popping it open and looking in at the new array of books.

When I'd turned eighteen, I'd taken the money I'd inherited from my biological parents and bought myself a small bookstore. While the probability of a bookstore in this busy city surviving with chains surrounding it was minimal, I still pressed on. I had a bit of money to feed into it and while the rest of my adoptive family thought I was a little bit crazy, I pressed on. Both of my brothers, neither of whom were blood-related, supported me the most. Sean was there for every moment of it, and Nicolás, who was busier with his job, tried to stop by when he could after work and purchase books. That's not to say my adoptive mom wasn't supportive, it was just that she was a realist and *really* thought I was wasting my money. But all three of them were there the day I opened it.

It's nice having people by my side to call family.

While the bookstore isn't booming, it's thriving. I make a steady income and top it off with a few medium-style readings on the downlow. I don't advertise it, but I still get contacted two or three times a week through word of mouth to help someone connect with a person they've lost. I never ask them to pay but tell them if they'd like to buy some books instead, I'd be more than grateful.

"Any erotica?" Natalie asks as she pops up in front of me.

"No," I grumble. Not because there's no erotica but because I'm well aware she's trying her hardest to startle me, and when I have a knife in hand, I'd prefer not to be. I haven't opened the store yet, so I can freely talk to her without anyone questioning my sanity.

She's grinning now. "Remember the time you read my favorite book to me?"

I point the knife at her like I'm trying to threaten her. "I do... I didn't realize it'd be just pages and pages of porn," I complain.

She's beaming, absolutely proud of herself. "You were like seventeen and your face was so fucking red. It was delightful, but it was my birthday, so you couldn't stop. You were all 'She reached out and grabbed his c-c-c-c-c-co...willie...'"

I turn to glare at her as she grins. "Don't ask me for a favor ever again."

This seems to make Natalie irritatingly smug. "Come on, you know I'm here for you. I just wanted

to show you that I was comfortable talking about whatever, and you could share with me that the neighbor boy made you horny.”

My glare deepens. “I didn’t get horny when I saw the neighbor boy.”

“Then why were you jerking off that one time you came home from swimming with him? Remember? I walked in on it?”

She’s like this endless vault of embarrassing information that I’d love to never recall. “I remember. Who invited you? Why are you here?”

She sits down at the table as she grins. “I’m here because I love you. So how was your birthday?”

“My brother got me a stripper ghost to give me a lap dance,” I say.

Her smile drops. “I missed a lap dance *and* your brother? You know Sean and I have a thing. I’m playing hard to get and he’s just *hard*.” She winks at me.

I pretend she doesn’t even exist.

Clearly, Natalie is unimpressed with that as she waves her hand in front of my face. “Hiro, can you hear me? Do you want me to repeat the joke? Maybe you missed it?”

“Natalie? Natalie, where did you go? Natalie? She must have left,” I say quite dryly.

“Don’t ignore me,” she says, still grinning. “You know everything I say to you is out of love.”

I have my doubts as I raise an eyebrow but before I can say anything else, Natalie just disappears. Odd.

She generally loves hanging around at least until she’s harassed me enough that I try to hide from her. She probably saw a cute guy on the street or something.

As I’m moving things aside to make room for the new books on my new release shelf, something catches my attention. It’s a ghost standing right in the middle of the road.

Honestly, this isn’t unusual, but what *is* unusual is that I recognize his back.

Sean? That’s Sean, right? What the hell is he doing just standing in the middle of the road?

I stand up and head out the front door, hoping to get his attention without needing to go too far. The streets are busy this time of morning as people walk to work, so I can’t draw attention to myself by shouting to him. Others might start questioning my sanity then and avoid my bookshop.

As I walk out of the store, I notice that something looks wrong with Sean. His back is hunched, his head is hanging down. Something’s not right, but he’s standing in the middle of the busy street where I can’t reach him.

“Sean,” I say quietly, hoping people simply think I’m talking to someone on the other side of the street or something, but he doesn’t even flinch. “Sean!”

Nothing.

I wait for a break in the traffic and rush out into the road where I pour everything into making Sean solid enough for me to reach him, but as I grab for his hand, mine slides straight through it. How the hell could that happen? I couldn’t even *feel* him, let alone grab him. I can always feel Sean.

The thought that there’s a reason I can’t touch Sean makes me anxious as I try to get his attention. “Sean, come on. Talk to me. What’s going on?”

There’s a car coming; I can’t just stand here if he doesn’t want to move.

“He’s back,” Sean whispers.

“Who is?” I ask, but the sinking feeling in my stomach tells me exactly who. “Sean, please. Come here, Sean.”

He continues to ignore me, and I know I can’t just stand in the middle of the road waiting to get hit.

“Fuck,” I hiss before running out of the street.

Uncertain, I stand on the sidewalk a moment longer, leaving people to make their way around me as I stare at Sean, just *willing* him to come to me. To talk to me. To tell me I'm wrong. Tell me I've made a mistake.

Please... please let me be wrong.

"What's going on?" Natalie asks from behind me.

I rush back into the bookstore before turning to her. "I think Sean's killer has killed again."

Natalie draws still. Ghosts react poorly to the dead—even if they don't know them, they seem to have this group mentality where they stick together—but it's probably worse for her since she knows Sean because of me.

"Natalie, stay focused. I can't lose your attention."

She slowly looks up at me as I will her to stay grounded.

I reach out and brush my hands against hers, which grounds her more than anything. "I can't get him to talk. Can you look around? See if you can find out anything?"

She nods slowly before disappearing.

As I stand there in the middle of my store, I realize that I don't give a shit what anyone thinks of me, especially the easily irritable detective—I have to stop this man before he kills again.

Quickly, I pull out my phone and call Barry, the guy who works weekends for me. There's a possibility he'll be able to fill in for me, and if not, the store can remain closed until I return.

"Hello?" he asks, sounding like he'd just woken up.

"Barry, would you be able to open today? If not, it's okay."

He clears his throat. "Yeah, sure, I can be there in an hour. That alright?"

"That'd be fantastic. Thank you," I say.

There's a moment of hesitation before he says, "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Thank you."

"Up too late partying for your b-day?" he teases.

"Something like that," I joke before rushing out the door, stopping just long enough to lock it, and racing back to the parking lot where my car is.

The drive to the police station is filled with anxiety. I keep hoping Sean will pop up into the passenger seat, telling me he'd been distracted by something meaningless and that my fears were senseless. But things never go that easily for me.

When I reach the station, I go in and try to beeline my way up to the second floor and over to Maddox's desk, but I'm immediately stopped before I get too far.

"Can I help you?" the woman behind the front desk asks.

I smile. "Oh, sorry. I have an appointment with Detective Booker."

A different woman who appears to be a police officer smiles as she walks by. "Detective Booker is out right now."

"That's okay, do you know when he'll be back?" I ask, hoping she'll have an answer for me.

She shakes her head. "I don't."

"I'll just wait for him, then. I know where his desk is, I can wait up there," I say as nonchalantly as I can.

She doesn't seem keen on that idea as she steps in front of me. "It could be hours."

"That's okay, I'll wait," I say, really wishing I could slip up there. I'm sure he doesn't leave anything amazing out on his desk, but I could listen to the others to see if anyone says anything.

The receptionist waves to a set of chairs by the door. "I'll let him know you're waiting."

"Thank you," I say as I sit down and begin my wait.

While I do, I use my phone to search for any news that could correlate to another killing. I have no idea when it happened or where, but if Maddox is out... is he there now? If he's there... I could talk to the ghost, I could see if he saw something about his killer that Sean missed. There's a possibility that I could end this.

After an hour, the woman at the desk smiles at me. "Do you want to come back later? I'll tell him you were here."

I shake my head because I know that if I don't ambush Maddox, he'll shoo me off and likely ignore any messages to contact me. "No thanks, I'm fine waiting."

"It could be hours."

"That's okay," I say with a smile.

About an hour later, Booker comes in... the issue is that it's Ben Booker and not Maddox. This Booker looks a whole lot happier to see me than Maddox ever will.

"Hiro! What'd you get brought in for today?" he teases.

"Nothing yet. I need to speak with Maddox," I say.

"He's out right now, I believe."

I give him a warm smile. "I know. I'll wait."

"Did something happen? Can I help you?" he asks.

Why can't Maddox be the nice one? Why is it that I have to deal with Maddox the Grump?

The door opens and I look over at Maddox in surprise.

"Speak of the devil," Ben says as Maddox looks between him and me, and then rushes right on past us like he can avoid both of us.

"Detective, I need to talk to you," I say as I jump out of my chair to catch up. He quickens his pace, like there's a possibility he can outrun me.

He shoos at me, making me feel like I'm a stray animal. "I don't have time. I'm just grabbing some stuff because I have to keep moving," he says as he continues brushing past me to the stairs. I rush after him, squeezing through the door before it slides shut and he can manage to slip away.

"I want to help you with the murder from last night," I say, knowing that if there *wasn't* a murder or if he didn't yet know about the said murder, he might just write me off right there... or think I was involved.

Instead, he draws to a stop, one foot on an upper step, but he still refuses to turn to face me. "What murder?"

"Murder... the guy who killed Joshua Wicker."

He's quiet for a long moment before turning to look at me. "Who told you that?"

"Can I talk to you? In private?" I ask.

He seems to hesitate before giving me a curt nod and leading me upstairs. He takes me to a room that's much nicer than the one he'd brought me to yesterday and waves me to a chair. When I sit, he takes the chair opposite from me before sitting down.

His intense blue eyes bore into me, likely hoping he can scare me into answers. "Who told you? Who is in the department feeding you stuff?" he asks. "Are you listening to police radio?"

"No. I'm..." Who is the last person I've told this shit to? And to tell someone I don't even know who basically already thinks I'm an undercover criminal is awkward as hell. It's one thing when people reach out to me because they already know what I can do. It's another to tell them.

"I'm waiting," he says.

"I see that."

He stares at me.

I stare at him.

I mean... I'm not complaining, he's very nice to stare at, but I'm also sure he's getting annoyed. In fact, I'm not sure... I'm *positive*. Every second I wait, his eyes narrow. They're so narrowed at this point, it's a wonder he can even see anything.

"I don't have time for this," he grumbles as he stands up.

"I can see ghosts," I say.

The look on Maddox's face is expressive enough that I nearly laugh. He must see the spike of amusement because he turns back toward the door and starts to leave. "I don't have time for your shit."

No, no, no. Why did I try to laugh? It was his expression. The way he looked... I couldn't stop myself.

I force my expression into something serious. "It's not shit. How the hell do you think I've been figuring out all of this stuff? I know everything because the ghosts have been—"

Bringing up the G word obviously wasn't the right step because he looks more annoyed than ever. "Who set this up? This a joke? One of the other detectives? I bet Ben did. He thinks this is funny, but trust me, it's not. It's a damn waste of my time when I have other shit I need to do."

Shit, shit, shit. "It's not a joke. Please let me help. The guy who killed whoever last night or this morning or whatever, he's the same guy who killed my brother. I know he is. I want to help you find him and stop him."

"Did your ghost brother tell you this?" he asks, amused expression on his face.

"Yes, he did," I say as stubbornly as possible.

He snorts, clearly finding this nothing more than amusing and maybe a bit irritating. "I'm busy," he says, then slips out the door without another word.

Fuuuuuuck. I slump down on the table as I think about *allllll* the ways that could have gone better. My hope that Maddox will return is quickly shoved off to the wayside as I dejectedly walk out of the room and back out to my car.

I'll just have to figure it out myself.

CHAPTER SEVEN



MADDOX

Ghosts.

Ghosts are telling him about dead bodies.

How stupid does he think I am?

“What is that look for?” Ben asks as I head over to my desk.

“What look?” I ask, maybe a bit shortly. It’s not my fault everything is going to shit today.

“You look like you stole candy from a baby while sucking a lemon and stepping on your cat’s tail,” he says, looking far too amused by all of this. He enjoys my irritation, leading me to believe he’s the one behind this joke.

“Did you put Hiro up to this?” I ask, skeptical as hell.

“Up to...?” Now *he* looks skeptical.

I read Ben’s face for a long moment but one thing I know about my brother is he sucks at secrets, so I don’t think it’s him... probably. Who knows? It seems like everyone has secrets.

“What are you talking about?” he asks.

“Nothing, I’m busy,” I say.

Ben just shrugs and continues on his way as I head back to my computer.

How the hell *did* Hiro know about the murder? Someone who works here has to be feeding him this shit. Or he’s listening in... but then... hmm...

I snatch up my laptop and stuff it in its case before hurrying back out the door. I have a little time before I absolutely need to be back at the crime scene. I’d come back to the station to wrap up a few things with another case that I’ve decided I can do later. Instead, I drive to the nearby hospital and head inside. At the front desk, I ask for Randy Offerman and get sent up to his room with no issues. He’s no longer in the ICU, so he should be able to talk, and hopefully, give me some answers I’m looking for.

When I reach the door, I knock before slowly pulling it open and looking in at the man sitting up in bed. He looks pretty spry for a guy who’d been down with a heart attack ten hours prior.

“You back to probe me?” he asks, thinking I’m a doctor or something, I guess. Hopefully a doctor, since I’m not sure anyone else should be probing him.

“No probing. I just have a few questions. Randy Offerman, right?”

He looks quite grumpy as he stares at me. “Yeah. Who’s asking?”

“I’m Detective Booker,” I say as I show him my badge. “Do you think I can ask a few questions?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Detective?”

“Yes.”

“Are you investigating my heart attack?” the older man asks while looking at me like I’m crazy. “It was a little one. They said it wouldn’t have been a big fucking deal if I hadn’t smashed my goddamn head on the way down. Concussion. Bullshit. Stupid fucking counter in the way, if you ask me.”

I’m not sure which part is the bullshit, but I just give him a nod. “Do you feel up for a few questions?”

“Sure, shoot away. Hopefully, you have more sense than that dumb nurse. Poor girl is just downright stupid. She left crying,” he says.

What a lovely gentleman. “To my understanding, you have a renter by the name of Hiro Moore.”

He gives me a curt nod before wincing. His head must still be hurting him or maybe it’s karma for making his nurse cry. “Yeah, they said he found me last night... said I could have died if he hadn’t. That what this is about? His felony?”

“His felony?” I ask in confusion. I’d looked into Hiro before, and he doesn’t have anything beyond a few minor things. Picked up after dark as a fourteen-year-old in a public park and a case of underage driving that the service worker dealt with. After that, his history was clean.

“Yeah, he said he was in jail yesterday. I told him it was in the contract he couldn’t live in my apartment with a felony, so I kicked him out,” he says.

I might wince a little. It’s not too often I feel even a smidge of guilt but that one is a little like a stab in the side. I mean... Hiro was obviously exaggerating about the whole being in jail thing, but this also means I might have had some minor... correlation with him getting kicked out of his apartment. “No... I just... brought him in for some questions. No felony.”

“Hmm...” Randy contemplates this for a long moment. “Good... I suppose he saved my life, so I might let him hang around until he fucks up again,” he says. “The moment he even minorly fucks up, he’s out. I’ll be watching him so closely.”

“How exactly did he know you’d collapsed?” I ask, hoping to get the conversation back on track.

He shrugs. “The apartment building is a good five hundred feet or so from my house...no idea. Ah well, I’m alive.”

“You have a security system up?” I ask.

“I do!”

“Do you have cameras in or around your house?”

The man looks awfully smug as he nods. “I sure do. There were some hooligans hanging around wanting to break in and steal my guns. They think twice about that now,” he says. “Especially after I told them the next time that I catch them looking at my house, I’m gonna shove my boot up their asses so far they’ll be tasting my sole for weeks.”

I try to pretend he’s not threatening children as I say, “Can I watch the record? From last night?”

“Have at it. I like to watch those little shits bike past and see the look of fear in their eyes when I always know they’re coming,” he says.

What a lovely man.

After Randy hands over the information, I thank him, tell him that I hope he’s better soon, and hurry out to the car. I’m not exactly... doing what I’m supposed to be doing. Looking up shit on Hiro wasn’t in my plans for the day, yet here I am.

I drive to the nearest burger joint, order myself a meal, and park out back before pulling my laptop open and inputting the information Randy had given me. When I access the site, I realize that not only does he have his house coated in cameras but the apartment too. None from inside the tenants' rooms, but some from the hallway and the exterior. I don't know which floor Hiro is on, but I play the first-floor one until after the time the alarm at Randy's home had gone off before switching to the second floor.

At 3:21, Hiro comes lunging out of his apartment into the hallway. He looks around, says something I can't pick up on the recording and darts for the stairs.

Was it in a fit of rage over being unjustly kicked out that he decided to break into his landlord's where he found him lying on the ground? Or am I just trying to find a way to paint him in a bad light to make sense of what's going on?

As I watch him run, I notice that he has nothing in his hands besides a cell phone. If he was planning on breaking in, he'd at least have something to aid him, right?

I follow him through a couple of cameras before I come across the one on Randy's porch. Hiro stops and stares at the door for a moment, like he's considering moving on without even going up to Randy's house. Up until this point, everything he'd done had been precise and quick, but now he seems hesitant. Maybe he's debating if he really should break in?

Then, of course, he goes against my assumption, and starts knocking on the door wildly. Calling out for Randy, checking the windows, trying again.

Randy had to have texted him, messaged or called him or something. Someone told Hiro that Randy needed help and yet they forgot to inform me of this. There's no other explanation, and it sure as hell wasn't "ghosts."

That's when I remember Hiro saying his brother had been murdered. So I type in Hiro's information again, leading me to see that he has no biological siblings. He was in foster care for a long time, so maybe he's considering one of the past victims his brother? I run through the victims, three of them now, and find the person I'm looking for.

Sean O'Reilly.

Died at the age of twenty-eight, a year and a half ago.

The first victim.

Is that why Hiro thinks he needs to be some vigilante? Because his brother was killed in such a horrible and gruesome manner?

I shake my head and shut my laptop, knowing that I need to get my head back in the game because I have far too much shit to do to spare a moment on Hiro... but the coincidence of it being his brother...

I think I need a drink after this.

CHAPTER EIGHT



HIRO

“What crawled up your ass?” Sean asks as I slump down on my kitchen table. I’d spent all day trying to find a single ghost who had an inkling of an idea where the body of the new victim might be, only to turn up nothing.

“Sean!” I yell, sitting up quickly.

“Hiro!” he yells back, having no idea why he’s yelling.

He’s in too jovial of a mood to even realize what’s going on. Does he even know? Was it just a feeling he’d had? Was I wrong? But no... Maddox wouldn’t have acted like that if I was wrong.

“What... was going on earlier today?” I ask as I scrutinize him.

“With?” he asks as he watches me closely in return.

“You came by the bookstore but wouldn’t talk to me,” I say.

His eyebrows scrunch as he appears to be thinking about it. “I did?”

“Yeah,” I say. I’m tempted to ask him, but I know he doesn’t remember any of it. I’d just be starting a fight where he’d beg and plead for me to drop it, to move away from this city. On top of that, I’d be poking at the festering wound of his death.

“I... don’t remember any of that,” he says. “Huh... I really don’t remember anything from the morning at all.”

“Hey, handsome,” Natalie purrs as she enters the room.

“She’s talking to me,” I say before Sean can purr something back at her that will make me gag.

“Oh, she doesn’t want you,” Sean says as he winks at Natalie.

I try to body block them from looking at each other, but Natalie just floats right through me to get between us. “No! No creepy ghost sex in my apartment. Fuck off, both of you.”

“Nah, we’ll keep it in our pants. I think today we need to have a house party,” Natalie says.

I look between them, quite skeptical about why she thinks we need anything of the sort. “Why?”

“Because I want Sean to introduce me to this stripper,” Natalie says.

Sean starts laughing. “You missed it. His junk was all up in Hiro’s face. He loved it.”

“‘He’ as in me or Stripper Ghost?” I ask dubiously.

“You, definitely,” Sean says. “You loved it and you know it. Best birthday ever.”

I grin, positive that's not the case, but still loving the distraction. "At least I didn't try to beatbox through it."

"Now *this* I have to hear," Natalie says as she jumps onto my counter to sit. Sean actually looks embarrassed as he shakes his head.

"I have no idea what he's going on about," Sean says, trying to play it all cool now that Natalie is here.

"Uh-huh," she says. "Sure, sure."

As they talk and laugh, I head over to the balcony door and slide it open. The night air is cool as I step out on it, loving the sound of their chatter behind me but also feeling like my brain is a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions.

Sean's murderer hasn't killed in about six months. A part of me had hoped he'd been caught or died or something else horrible. Then again, I'm not even certain it's the same guy, right? Just because Sean had a reaction to it doesn't mean it's the same guy.

I sigh and lean against the railing when I hear a noise to my left. At the end of the railing that wraps around my balcony sits a bird... a ghost bird, to be exact.

It's odd for a bird to be hanging around after death... extremely odd. I've seen the occasional cat or dog who refuses to move on without their owner, but even that is rare.

The bird is large, all black, making me think it's a raven. I'm definitely not up on birds, so my knowledge about them is scanty at best.

He (or she—let's be honest, they look the same to me) looks over at me and tilts his head. His beady little eyes stare right into my soul, like he's judging me.

"What are you looking at?" I ask.

Clearly, he's offended by what he sees as he jumps off the railing and flies off into the dark night sky with a caw.



It's far too early in the morning as I'm waiting in my car for the moment Maddox pulls in to the station. He's not going to be happy to see me, but if I just corner him, I'll definitely get some reaction out of him. Probably a complaint for harassing the detective, but sometimes I gotta do what I gotta do.

"Ask him if he's dating anyone," Natalie says.

"Yes, I'm going to be like, 'Hey, Detective Booker, even though you're a grumpy grouch, you're really fucking sexy, so tell me all about your sex life. Who're you bangin—'"

"Grumpy grouch?"

I nearly leap out of my seat, busting my hand on the steering wheel as I realize that Maddox is standing outside my window that I'd cracked for a smidge of fresh air. Not only did Natalie *not* warn me that the grumpy grouch we were talking about was walking up to the window—I mean, what's the use of *seeing* ghosts if they don't warn you about shit?—but now, the grumpy grouch in question has heard everything I just said.

Instead of turning to him, I slowly reach over to the window, feel around for a bit, and roll it the rest of the way up before starting my car. I will drive off into oblivion, never to be seen again.

Maddox raps on the window as I try to drive away. I *want* to drive away. Everything in my being is telling me to leave, but I know that if I want to do this, if I want to help Sean, I'll have to choke down my pride. Ever so slowly, I just give in to my fate and roll the window down.

“Oh, Detective, there you are. I was waiting to talk to you,” I say with a smile, like I can play it off that I had no idea he was there or heard anything that was said. Maybe even forget that I said it at all. “How are you?” Maybe he didn’t hear the sexy part which somehow horrifies me more than the grumpy part.

“A grumpy sexy grouch, apparently,” he says as he stares in at me, arms folded over his chest. Why’s it making him even sexier?

“I wasn’t talking about you,” I say, while trying my hardest to have a poker face. It’s probably the worst poker face to have faced, but I’m fucking *trying*.

“You said Detective Booker.”

“Detective Hooker is actually what I said,” I say, smiling again.

“Now I look like a hooker?” he asks, eyebrows rising.

Fucking hell. “No?”

“No?”

“No...”

His eyes narrow.

I shake my head. “So, anyway, I was hoping you could tell me where the crime scene is so I can go and talk to the ghost of whoever died,” I say, deciding *that* might be the best way to distract him fully.

“I’m sorry, I can’t. Detective Hooker has real shit to do that has nothing to do with you and/or imaginary ghosts,” he says. “Now shoo. Go back to doing whatever you’re doing.”

“I was stalking you.”

“Clearly. Also, that’s illegal.”

“Yeah, I’m aware. But I’m still probably going to do it until I figure out where this crime scene is, so you might as well take me with you. Less hassle to just give in, you know?”

He seems to think about that for a moment. “Okay, if I take you to the crime scene, will you promise to drop it?” he asks. “You’ll just... go away?”

“Yes!” I say as I turn off the car and quickly get out.

I hurry after him as we make our way over to a dark gray car that I get into the passenger seat of.

“Why is this going so well?” Natalie asks as she gets into the back seat. Honestly, she’s being pretty smart questioning his change of heart when I’m just going for it. “This is suspicious. Ooh, he’s got porn back here!”

I quickly turn to look as Natalie laughs and laughs.

“Oh my god, you’re so desperate,” she says, which makes me glare at her.

“What?” Maddox asks, probably questioning why I’m looking all around, and then glaring into his back seat.

“Nothing,” I say as I sit prim and proper. I’ve decided that if I say nothing, it’ll appease him the most. So I will be silent *alllllll* the way there.

The issue is... the direction he turns. He heads away from the city, which surprises me. The killer generally leaves his victims in a location where others will find the body—so far, it’s been a library and a park—so would he even make a scene outside of town? Why would he kill them out this way?

Silence fills the car as he turns off the main road and onto a side road... the same side road that I take to get to my apartment. Anxiety sets in. Did he kill someone close to my place? The killer can’t know I’m looking for him, can he?

Maddox pulls up to my apartment as I realize that perhaps I am an idiot. “Okay, step out really quick, and I’ll show you everything you want to see and know. It’s super awesome outside the car

right now.”

I stare at him. “You’re kicking me out here so I can’t follow you... aren’t you?”

He actually smiles at me. I’m positive it’s the first time Maddox has smiled at me, and it kills me a little inside how much I like that smile, especially when I remind myself that smile is filled with evil. “I sure am,” he says, sounding rather proud.

“*But* my car’s back at the police station.” I point in its direction, in case he’s not aware, even though he’s probably worked there for years. I don’t know how old he is exactly, but if he’s in his late thirties, it’d make sense that he could have been at the same location for over ten years.

“Right. Guess you can’t follow me, then,” he says as he waves me off. “Shoo. Go on, now.”

Fucking hell.

“Fine, take me back to my car, I won’t follow you,” I say with a sigh.

He glances at his watch. “No time. The grumpy grouch sexy Detective Hooker needs to move on.”

I think horror is what gets me out of that seat. Not an attempt to listen, not because he asked me to. Pure horror.

As I stand outside my apartment, I watch the car buzz off without me in it, with no way to reach my own car unless I take the bus. Partway down the road, Maddox even rolls down the window far enough to wave out it.

Fucking hell, he is a dick.

“*Caw!*”

Startled, I look up only to find the raven sitting on the railing of my balcony again. He twists his head this way and that, like I’m the most interesting thing in the world, before leaping up and flying away.

I slowly turn to look at Natalie who is whistling a little tune to herself. “Not only am I horrified by all of that, but I’m now also being haunted by a bird,” I say. “This is your fault.”

“Oh, look at the time, I have to split. Love ya,” she says before disappearing.

I sigh and start walking for the bus stop a moment before my phone rings. It’s an unknown number, but with work, that’s not too uncommon so I answer it.

“Hello?”

“Is this Hiro?” a man asks.

“Yes, it is.”

“Hiro, I got your number from Sally Yeats...” he says, sounding almost hesitant.

It takes me a moment to remember who Sally is. She’s a woman who’d been wanting some closure to her husband’s death about a month ago. I’d done my best to connect her with her husband before helping him move on.

“Um... yeah, what can I do for you?”

“This is silly, but I thought I’d try anyway,” he says as I keep walking.

Quite often, the people who call me seem to think it’s foolish for one reason or another, but they still have enough of a hope that they go through with it.

“My wife died a year ago... she was a painter. *Loved* to paint, but she would always take her ring off before she painted. She... she didn’t put it back on before she left for the day and was killed in a car accident. I was... I was really hoping to find that ring of hers. It’s just something I hold dear, and Sally suggested it. It’s silly, I know,” he says.

“No, it’s not. I can certainly try,” I say. “I can’t guarantee that I can do anything, but yeah, I have some time this morning, if you want? We can see if I can find anything.”

He lets out a sigh of relief. “That would be fantastic. And what’s your price? You know what,

don't worry about it. I'll pay whatever you need if you find that ring."

"I don't need anything. Just... it'd be great if you felt like supporting my bookstore, the Open Book, the next time you're in the need for a good book," I say.

"Of course," he says.

He gives me the address and I tell him it'll be a little bit since I have to *retrieve my car* after Detective Stick-Up-His-Ass left me carless.

CHAPTER NINE



HIRO

When I pull up to the grand house, I'm surprised, but it's likely why he promised to pay me whatever I wanted. I park my car and head up to the front door where I knock. When the man who answers the door looks out at me, I find myself rather startled.

"You're... the mayor," I realize.

He looks surprised. "Oh, did I not introduce myself?" he asks. "Sorry, I was a bit in my head. A little hesitant about that phone call. It feels ridiculous, you know? But at the same time, I can't stop hoping."

"That's okay," I say as Mayor Todd Hopkins holds his hand out. Generally, I don't mind who I help, but I find myself a bit anxious about the idea of someone who's in the public eye knowing what I can do. "I just... I generally turn down things from people with some... social power, you know? I don't really want this to be a known thing, so it'd be wonderful if you could keep it to yourself."

He nods. "Yeah, of course! I won't tell a soul."

I give him a smile. "Thank you."

I follow him into the house, and as he gives me a tour of the grand old home, I try to feel for any spiritual energy but I'm coming up with nothing as we walk through long hallways and peek into large rooms. She might have passed on already if she didn't have anything holding her back, and if she did move on... there's nothing I can do to help.

Todd looks at me hopefully as he takes me up the stairs. "Anything?"

"Not yet... with car accidents... ghosts don't always stick around. Most accidents weren't malicious, and if she felt that, she might have moved on," I explain. "What about her favorite room?"

"Oh, that would be her painting room. She was just the best painter I know. Absolutely gorgeous paintings. She would pour her heart and soul into them," he says as he hurries me upstairs to a room that he swings the door open to.

I step inside and look around at the art that lines the walls.

I'm not sure what I'm expecting, but walls and walls of painted orgies is not it.

"She loved realistic paintings," he says, eyes sparkling with delight, like he's blind to the giant phallus painting hanging on the far wall, or oblivious to how it's not realistic at all. At least in my

experience.

“Yeah... um, very... raw,” I say, cringing a little at my own choice of words.

It’s raw, alright. The one closest to me has two men sandwiching a curvy woman between them.

“Is she here?” he asks hopefully.

I was so fixated on the *size* of the monster dick that I forgot I was looking for a ghost. “Oh, umm...” I look around, but it doesn’t take much to see that the woman is not currently in her room of orgies. Feeling bad for the hopeful man, I shake my head. “Sorry, no. Well... we could go to the crash site. Sometimes they hang around there?”

“Sadly, that’s hours from here... but we could... I don’t have time today, and I’m sure you’re not prepared for a journey like that.” The disappointment in his voice is enough to make me feel awful for him. It’s wonderful getting to help people, but sometimes hearing their devastation over me not finding anything for them makes it a struggle.

“Oh...” I try to think of what else to tell him.

“I have one more spot!” he says as he rushes out of the room and down the stairs. I nearly have to run to keep up with the man who is no longer even showing hesitance. I hurry out the door as he jogs across the yard and out to a beautiful pond, stopping beneath a willow tree.

“She loved to paint here,” he says. “She loved spring and fall when she’d sit out here and paint away.”

“It’s gorgeous,” I say while wondering how this area inspired such... naked paintings and giant phalluses. As I look around, I hear a soft whistling that draws my attention, but I don’t see anyone. “Did she like to whistle?” Who knows if it’s another ghost fucking with me.

“She did! She’d whistle that song... what was that song... It was from *The Little Mermaid*...”

Soooo she loved *The Little Mermaid* and painting giant schlongs?

“What was her name again?”

“Danelle.”

I look up into the willow tree. “Danelle, are you here?” I ask.

The whistling stops a moment before a ghost materializes in front of me. “No... nuh-uh... uh-huh? Can you see me?” She leans in really close like the closer she gets, the better she’ll be able to see.

“Yes,” I say.

She scrutinizes me. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“Is she here?” Todd asks excitedly.

I always feel awkward talking to a ghost in front of someone, but I smile at him. “Yes, so... you can tell her whatever you want.”

His eyes glisten as he looks toward the area I’d been facing. “Danelle... It’s me... obviously, I mean, you can see me. Can you see me? Can she see me?”

“Yes! What’s going on? Can he hear me?” she asks excitedly.

“Yes, she can see you. And no, he can’t hear you, but I can tell him what you’re saying,” I say.

Todd looks relieved, no longer questioning his own mind for asking me here. “Danelle, I love you so much. I miss you every day. I always wanted to tell you goodbye, but... I just thought I never could until we would see each other again in the afterlife. You are the light of my life.”

She reaches out to him, like she’s hopeful she can touch him, but her hands go right through his face. There’s a flash of disappointment, but she still smiles brightly at him. “You’re the light of my life too. Tell him that. Hurry,” she says.

“She said you’re also the light of her life.”

She waves at me. "Tell him that he's my hunkalicious."

"What?" I ask, not having signed up for this, but I sigh. "She said you're her hunkalicious."

Todd looks surprised, like maybe a part of him had still been thinking that I was pulling his leg.

"It... It really is her."

"Tell him I miss his giant donkey dick," she says as she waves at me to hurry.

I choke, positive I heard wrong. "E-Excuse me, what?"

She looks at me like I'm the crazy one. "Tell him I love his giant donkey dick."

"I'm not telling him that," I hiss.

Todd looks at me like I might be withholding the grandest thing from him. "You have to tell me," he says. "It's her last words."

"Yeah, but—"

"No buts," she says, giving me a look like *I'm* the suspicious one. "What kind of medium are you, not even relaying my... death words?"

I stare at her while wondering how this got turned around to *me* being the odd one. "She said... she misses, *and loves*, your giant... thing," I say as I point.

"My heart?" he asks, eyebrows knitting.

"No, your..." I point to the general groin region.

He looks so happy. "My pants? She did always like my pants."

"Your dick," I say.

He looks relieved. "Oh... yeah, this is definitely her," he says, ecstatic about this while I'm dying inside.

"Ask him to strip. I want you to strip too. I want both of you naked for the rest of this," she says.

"No," I say flatly.

She gives me a heartbroken look. "You would withhold my final wish?"

"Yes! I'm not... doing that!"

"Then he can be naked. Tell him to strip. Oh! I want *you* to strip *him*! With your teeth!"

Ignoring her, I say, "Do you think you could tell me where your ring is? Your husband wants to know where it is." Please let this distract her.

Her eyes get wide as she rushes over to the tree. "Here, it's in a little container that I'd tuck in here," she says with a lot of hand motions involved. I walk over to the tree and push up on my tiptoes to see that in a little crevice is a tin container. I pull it out and open it up, revealing the ring.

Todd takes it from me with shaking fingers, and I find that everything I've been forced to look at and say has been worth it. "T-Thank you," he says, getting choked up. "I can't... I can't ever thank you enough for this. I can't... Anything you ever need. Anything at all."

"Yeah, you're welcome. I'm just glad to help," I say with a smile.

"Can you stick around a little longer? So I can talk to her?" he asks hopefully.

"Sure... but if this is what she was hanging around for... to help you find this, I want you to know she'll be moving on before long, okay?"

He nods, but he has me sit out there with him until she's moved on. At least this time, he got to properly say goodbye. And we got to keep our clothes on, much to his wife's dissatisfaction. I believe I was called an old stuck-up hag at one point for not stripping him with my toes.

As we're walking back to the house, he's quiet, but I can tell he's happy.

"Wait right here," he says before dashing into the house. He returns after a few minutes with a large bag that he holds out to me. "I want you to take this. And if there's anything you ever need, let me know."

I take it, and as the bag tips toward me I see that it's a painting... an orgy painting. But I take it anyway. "Thank you."

"Of course. That was one of her favorites, but I know she'd want you to have it."

"Thank you," I repeat. As I start to turn, something dawns on me. "Since... you're the mayor, you have a little pull in things, right?"

"Depends."

"Umm... there's a case... going on in Clinton right now... through homicide. I'd love to be a consultant if you happen to know... like someone there or something."

Todd's eyes get wide. "You can talk to the ghosts."

"I can."

"You can find out things no one else ever could."

"Right."

He nods. "Consider it done."

"Seriously?" I ask in surprise, unsure if he actually *could* have a say in this.

"Yes. Done. I'll give you a call."

"Thank you so much," I say.

And as I walk away with my orgy painting, I realize that Detective Grumpy Sexy Grouch is going to have an absolute fit, and that puts a grin right on my face.

CHAPTER TEN



MADDOX

“Let me get this straight... you want ghost boy to work with me on this case?” I ask, *positive* I’m not hearing anything right.

Deputy Chief Molly Parker raises an eyebrow. “What’s that?”

“Ghost boy, the guy who can see ghosts, he’s who’s helping me?” I ask as I watch my boss sit behind her desk. She looks as confused as I feel. Clearly, she wasn’t given much information on his “specialties” and why he was recommended as a consultant.

She shuffles things around on her desk, which is something I know she loves to do when she’s annoyed. “I was told that he was knowledgeable about the case, and that I didn’t have much of a choice in the matter... and you don’t either,” she says, just pretending she heard nothing about me mentioning the whole ghost thing.

I nod slowly as I try to think about what to say or do. “We’re literally bringing a regular citizen into a very serious case...”

“Well, Booker, I’m confident you can handle him, and if you happen to make it so he doesn’t want to be here, then that’d be *such* a pity.” She smiles at me. “Have a good night, Booker. I’ll see you in the morning with a big smile on your face to greet your new consultant.”

“I sure can’t wait,” I say as I plaster the fakest smile I can onto my face. It makes Parker laugh before quickly covering it up.

“No,” she says, trying to get the serious expression back on.

“You told me to smile.”

“Tomorrow. You can’t smile today. Just see if he’s of any use. If he’s not, you can write up a report on how he’s distracting you, and we’ll see if we can just guide him off in another direction... away from us,” she says.

“Now *that’s* something to smile about,” I say.

She shakes her head and waves at me, like she wants me to go away.

Since I’d already been on my way out, I head down the stairs and out toward my car. Honestly, I’m impressed Hiro even figured out how to weasel his way in. But I doubt he’ll last long, especially because there’s no such thing as ghosts.

When I pull into the driveway of my two-story home set off in a nice suburb, I see the curtain rustle. Clearly, I'm late to the party.

The moment I slide the key into the front door, I hear them beyond it and swing the door open. Two cats expectantly look up at me, irritated that their meal is now fifteen minutes late.

"Did you starve to death?" I ask sarcastically.

Bandit, the orange tabby, begins to yowl, which is the most annoying noise in the world. He thinks it's cute, but it's honestly quite obnoxious. The other cat is Stella, a long-haired calico who gets her kicks trying to trip me while weaving between my legs and acting disgustingly offended if I accidentally bump into her while trying to walk, like she wasn't the cause.

I'm not a cat person. I've never wanted cats and honestly prefer dogs. I always wanted a German shepherd or a Doberman pinscher, but instead... I have cats. Two annoying, needy cats that think I'm the love of their life.

Reggie came with them, and when he passed away five years ago, the cats were left with me. I knew I could find them new homes. The cats and I never really saw eye to eye, but the thought of giving away something that Reggie loved was much harder than feeding them twice a day.

I walk into the kitchen and pour some food into their bowls, only the best as Reggie had insisted, before heading toward the bathroom. I don't get far before Bandit starts yowling again and Stella trips me then bats at my leg in anger, like it's my fault.

"You two are the neediest creatures," I grumble as I grudgingly sit down on the floor. Bandit leaps onto my lap and scales up to my shoulder where he then decides that's still not high enough and climbs onto my head. All the while Stella rubs on my legs. I reach out and give her a scratch.

After Reggie passed, Ben said he'd take them, and I considered it for a long while—so long I ended up getting attached to them... grudgingly.

Bandit reaches down and smacks at my nose until I drag him down and pet him as he rolls around in my lap.

"Don't think you're going to make me a cat person," I grumble as he starts chewing on my button. "Neither of you are that cute."

After sitting uncomfortably on the floor for a few more minutes, I slowly start to stand up. Neither cat is impressed by this. "Now I need to take a shower," I say, which means that while I shower, they stand on the ledge and stare at me through the clear curtain. Stella fell in one time, leading to me getting scratched like hell and needing a new shower curtain, so I always watch them warily to make sure if either of them fall in, I just leave them to their wet demise instead of helping like last time.

"Tomorrow is going to be a long fucking day," I mutter.



Hiro is all smiles as he parades up to my desk. He'd probably spent most of yesterday dealing with paperwork and procedures. Sadly, he passed the background check, which means he's now my new consultant.

He's dressed in a pair of tight blue jeans and a gray button-down that complements him and his silky black hair. Clearly, he's trying to make a statement, but it's going to take more than that to impress me even if he looks rather nice. Honestly, it's not about being attractive or sexy or any of the other things someone might accidentally describe Hiro as. It's about knowing that just because someone is "sexy" doesn't mean I'm going to listen to him ramble on about seeing ghosts.

His brown eyes watch me closely, and there's a gleam to them, like he's being energized by my annoyance.

"Good morning, I brought you coffee," Hiro says as he produces two cups.

I want to tell him that I hate coffee, but I was running late this morning and didn't get a chance to drink any on my way in, and the idea of having to deal with him without coffee sounds worse than accepting it, so I grudgingly take a cup.

"Let's see what you can do," I say as I hold out two bagged knives. "Which one is the murder weapon?"

He looks surprised. "Oh just... right into it, are we? Umm... yeah... I'm not psychic or whatever. I can't... like... I can talk to dead people, not knives," he says, then gives me another smile like if he smiles enough, I'll forget that I don't want him here.

I take a sip of my coffee and scrutinize him for a moment. "So, dead people. You need to be at the scene to see them?" I ask.

He shrugs. "It really depends. If it was recent then yes, they'd still be around the area they died. If it happened a while ago, they could have wandered off."

"Alright, let's go," I say.

While I don't believe him *at all*, I've decided that if I can prove him wrong quickly, I can push him off onto someone else and go on with my day. He seems none the wiser as I hurry off to my car after putting the knives back.

"Are you taking me to the dump where you'll kick me out and drive off again?" Hiro asks skeptically as he gets in the passenger seat.

"I would never do that," I say, even though I dumped him off just the other day. Oh, the joy I felt as I drove away almost makes me smile.

"Ah, turned a new leaf, have you? The Grinch's heart grew three times in size or something like that?" he teases.

I shift my eyes onto him as he pretends he's looking out the window to avoid my brutal glare. "I'm very busy and don't have time for this... stuff," I say.

"Well... that's great then because there's a possibility I can help you with 'this stuff,'" Hiro retorts.

"So you can see all ghosts. Wherever you go there are ghosts?"

"No, not all. I can only see ghosts who have been left behind. So anyone who had a peaceful death, or knew they were dying, say like an illness, has likely moved on. Even some who were unjustly killed move on—maybe someone was waiting for them on the other side or something pushed them to move on quicker. Sometimes it's hard to tell what makes some move on but ties others behind."

"So when you can't find the ghost I'm leading you to, you're going to conveniently say they moved on?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I might. Is there any way I can work with the other Booker?" he teases.

"No. Ben is too nice. He'd just agree to whatever crazy shit you spew," I say. "He'd hang on to every word you say as you string him along."

"I *am* pretty interesting. Like earlier, I picked up a box and the bottom fell out and the books went everywhere," he says, like any of that might show how interesting he is.

"Why didn't you predict that was going to happen?" I ask.

He seems to find this amusing. "I'm not psychic. And neither are the ghosts."

"I feel like I'd be more impressed if you were," I say. "At least that'd be interesting compared to

talking to imaginary friends.”

“I’m positive the only thing that’d impress you is if I were nowhere near you right now,” Hiro says as I pull into the parking lot of a city park. His assumption is quite accurate. Maybe he *is* psychic.

“Let’s go,” I say, nodding for him to get out of the car.

He watches me closely, positive I’m going to drive off and leave him here, which sounds very amusing, but I’m pretty sure Parker would be pissed. “You go first,” he says.

“I’m not going to leave you here and drive off.” Not that I didn’t think about it.

He hesitates before pushing the car door open and getting out. Just because I’m an asshole at heart, I lock the doors and restart the car. The narrow-eyed look he gives me makes me grin. Ah, I love being an asshole.

I slowly start to back away as he stares at me before shouting something along the lines of “You’re an ass.”

I am, Hiro. The sooner you learn that, the better.

He folds his arms over his chest and taps his foot in a ridiculously dramatic way. If he wasn’t currently harassing me, I could almost look past that other nonsense and see how attractive he is.

Grudgingly, I pull back into the parking spot and get out of my car as his glare burns holes through me.

“You’re not funny,” he says as I get out.

“I’m hilarious, actually,” I say as dryly as I can while I start walking. I finish off my coffee and toss it in a bin before heading deeper into the park. When I reach the end of the path, I hang a left into the trees before stopping.

“Three weeks ago, we found the body of a sixteen-year-old girl here. No clues on who killed her or why. We’ve found a few pieces of evidence, but I’m not going to tell you what they were, oh Psychic Hiro. I want to see what you can come up with,” I say.

He looks around before nodding. “Okay. Can I have her first name?”

“Harper.”

“Okay.”

I step back and wait for some big showy spectacle. Some arm waving or magic circle making, maybe some salt thrown in. But instead, he just wanders around the area, consistently avoiding the spot where her body had been lying, making me wonder how he knows that’s where it was. It’s not like we released that exact spot to the public.

After five minutes of him wandering around and looking every which way but down, I start to grow impatient. Is this proof yet that he doesn’t know diddly-squat?

“You done?” I ask impatiently.

“No,” he says. “Harper?”

He’s still as he glances around, scrutinizing everything closely. Then he jumps a few inches in the air and mutters, “Fuck,” while grabbing his chest.

“What?” I ask before I can stop myself.

“Nothing, sorry,” he says.

“Oh, not Harper?” I’m well aware of the sarcasm coating my words.

“No, it’s someone else. Natalie, this is Detective Grouch, I mean Detective Booker. Detective Booker, this is Natalie. She has already sat on your lap, watched you pee, and blown in your ear, so you’re actually quite acquainted with each other,” he says before wandering off.

I let out a grumbling noise and decide I’ll give him ten minutes while I work on something else.

Finding a park bench, I sit down and start answering emails with my phone. Nine minutes later, I can't sit still any longer and head back to find Hiro sitting on the ground.

"What'd she have to say?" I ask.

He glances up at me. "I can feel her here, but she won't come out. Often, when they're young and die a traumatizing death, they pull back every time they see a person. I need more time."

"I don't have more time," I say.

"Then leave me here. I'll call you when I get something or get a Lyft home or whatever," he says.

Well... that was easy. I really didn't think I'd get rid of him so quickly. "Sounds good," I say as I hurry off, leaving him to it before he changes his mind. If he wants to stare at a tree all day long while pretending he can see ghosts, he can have at it.

I have a killer to catch.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



HIRO

“This is so *boring*,” Natalie whines. “Why didn’t you make Detective Hunkalicious hang around?”

“I know it is, but I have to prove that I can do this,” I say, since I’ve now been here for *hours*. Honestly, I can’t tell Natalie that I agree with her about how boring this is.

“Ask him for an easier one. You know that he’s just being a grumplicious,” she says. “You want him naked, don’t you?”

I turn my narrowed eyes onto her, which just makes her grin instead of shutting her up. Why I expected anything else, I’m not sure. Since Barry can’t cover the afternoon shift, I eventually get up and grab a Lyft back to the station. I don’t bother going in. I know with nothing to show for it, Maddox won’t be happy, so I grab my car and head straight to the bookstore.

When I walk in, Barry smiles at me. “Hey! How’d it go?”

Barry’s a big guy who works hard to keep himself in shape. While he doesn’t know about the ghosts, he does know I’ve been allowed to help out the department as a consultant, which is why I needed him to take on a few extra shifts. He’s around my age, recently out of the military and going to college to be an engineer. Right now, he has some time off school, so it’s actually working out well for him to take over, but I assured him that if I was going to make this a long-term thing, I’d hire someone else to help out.

“Everything alright?”

“Yeah, it’s all good. The mail came so I set it on your desk,” he says.

“Thank you. I really appreciate this.”

He gives me a wave like he wants to assure me it’s not a big deal. “Of course,” he says as he grabs his bag and heads toward the door. “Oh, before I forget, there was some guy in here asking about you. I told him you’d be in later. I kind of got creeper vibes from him, though, so be careful.”

“Okay, thank you,” I say, unsure if I should take that seriously or not. Barry’s always been a little paranoid. He likes to scare customers off by looming over them if he thinks there’s a chance they might try to steal a book. It was probably something as simple as a salesperson or maybe an indie author hoping I’d put their books on the shelves.

Instead of stocking shelves or doing anything productive for my business, I spend the afternoon

stalking Harper Jones on the computer. I read up on everything I can on the news articles that describe how an early morning jogger found her body the morning after she was murdered.

After all the articles begin to sound like copies of each other, I start looking into her social media and anything else I can to find out more about her personality. She was a good student, loved her dog, and volunteered walking dogs at the dog shelter. She seemed to live the ideal life. There's no way she'd have moved on. She was young, it was a murder, and I can *feel* her there. I just need to find a way to get her to come out.

When I close up the bookshop at six, I head straight back to the park, hoping I have some better luck.

As I'm walking to the spot, Sean pops in front of me, causing me to slam into him.

He grabs me by both shoulders. "Hiro! Libby got into the gymnastic school she wanted! They said she was phenomenal!"

I look at him in surprise. "Seriously? That's awesome. I'll have to call and congratulate her."

He's clearly thrilled by the idea. "Yes! Tell her I'm proud. Tell her how proud I am!" he says as he tries to shake me. "Right now. Call her right now."

"Okay, calm down," I say as I pull out my phone a moment before I see a flickering of something behind him. "Harper?" I call out, but it's gone as quickly as I'd seen it.

Sean looks around before his eyes lock on to the spot where Harper had died. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm calling Libby," I say as I step away from the area and put the call on speaker so Sean can hear and hopefully will get distracted.

"Hello?" a male voice says.

"Hey, Vic, can I talk to Libby?" I ask.

"Hey, Hiro! How are you?" he says. Vic became Libby's stepdad after her mom, Hailey, married a year ago. It was a really hard time for Sean, not because of Hailey marrying, since they were no longer together, but because he was afraid Vic would "take his place," though he at least likes Vic. He said he haunted his ass for a while until one time he managed to push a vase off a display because I was around, but since he didn't have much control without me near, it fell toward Libby. Vic had jumped into action, rushing her out of the path and gaining Sean's approval.

"Great," I reply.

"Libby's right here," he says.

"Uncle Hiro?" Libby asks.

"Hey, girlie. Your dad told me you got into the gymnastics school."

"He did? He saw?" she asks, voice steadily rising.

"He did."

Somehow, I'd let Sean talk me into telling Hailey, Libby's mom, about my ability to see the dead. It was rough going, but after sitting her down and telling her things only Sean would have known, she started to trust me and eventually let me tell Libby as well.

Libby talks to me for a bit as I relay what her father has to say. She's ecstatic and I'm glad I'm able to give her that, since she can no longer have her father. When I'm finished, Sean rushes off to do whatever Sean does, leaving me in the park alone in the dark.

I go back to sitting near the tree where I can feel Harper the most. "Harper, I'm here to help you. I want to help."

She's there, but it's clear she has no desire to come to me. And any time I move toward her when she does appear, she disappears, so I resort to sitting and waiting and watching. Around nine, an idea

hits me, and I call Maddox.

“Calling to tell me you ran out of salt?” he asks.

“Salt?” Is this like a sugar joke? Like when you go to the neighbor for sugar? I’m so confused.

“Isn’t that what mediums do?” he asks.

Oh... ha ha. So funny. “Not this one,” I say. “I was wondering if you have a dog or have access to one.”

“For? Sacrificial ritual?”

“Yes, I want you to bring the dog so when I sacrifice *you*, I get to keep a dog,” I say.

“Okay, let me write that down as reasons why you shouldn’t be a consultant... ‘Wants to murder me... and asks me to steal a dog.’ Got that. Anything else?”

“Just... bring a dog to the park! She really liked dogs and animals, so I thought maybe if we brought a dog out, she’d come out to see it.”

“Hold on... You’re still at the park? Come on, give up.”

“I went to my shop for a bit, but yeah, I’m back now. Find me a dog.” I hang up before he can say anything else snarky and annoying. His charm doesn’t work as well when I can’t see him.

About fifteen minutes later, I hear shoes on a sidewalk and turn to look as I see Maddox looking less than impressed while holding a cat that’s on a harness. The harness is pink with little bows on it and the delight must be apparent on my face.

“Do *not* look at me like that. I didn’t buy the harness, and I didn’t want the cat,” he grumbles as he sets the orange tabby on the ground. It’s clearly used to the harness as it wanders around, thrilled to be on an adventure its owner definitely didn’t want to be part of.

“You look adorable,” I say, which makes his already scowling face sour more.

Here’s this tall, muscular man holding on to the dainty pink leash of a cat and *still* he pulls it off. What kind of sorcery is this?

He waves the leash around. “Just take the cat.”

“You’re not leaving your cat with me. Come here and sit down,” I say as I pat the spot next to me.

“This is ridiculous,” he grumbles as he walks over with the cat before sitting down. “Do you know how ridiculous this is?”

“Cat in a pink harness with bows ridiculous?” I guess.

He scowls.

“What’s his name? Or hers?”

“His, and it’s Bandit.”

I reach out and pet Bandit who is thrilled to have someone who is not a monster to pet him. “Harper, this is Bandit,” I say as the cat gets distracted by a fluttering leaf.

Silence.

Bandit wanders around as we sit in silence for about five minutes before I see Harper peek around a tree at the cat. She looks between us before slowly walking over to Bandit and kneeling down. I’ve always sworn some animals can see ghosts because his attention seems to shift over to her for a moment before he starts batting a stick around.

“Harper, I’m Hiro and this is Detective Maddox Booker,” I say, feeling awkward to be talking with Maddox next to me, but also knowing that I need to stay focused if I don’t want her to disappear again on me.

“I know who he is,” she says. “He’s grumpy.”

I grin. “He is grumpy.”

Now “Grumpy” is also “Scowly.”

"I like his cat though," she says as she watches Bandit. "If you have a cat on a harness, you must be a good person, right?"

"I think he's all bark and no bite," I say.

She watches me closely for a moment. "How can you talk to me?"

"I'm not sure. It's how I was born," I explain. "I really want to help you. Can you tell me what happened to you?"

She starts to draw back a little and I can tell I'm losing her.

"Harper, we need to help you. You'll be stuck like this until we help you," I explain.

She's quiet for a moment, just watching me. "I can leave here then?"

"Yes."

"Okay... I was taking an extracurricular music class at the University of Clinton... and every night, I would walk home in the same direction as this college guy... from a different class. I don't know what class he was from. He'd smile and say hi, so I... I didn't think it was a big deal. And then he started to talk to me some... at first, I just... I kind of thought it was neat a college guy was hitting on me... but then he started to make me feel uncomfortable. Even though I thought I was being foolish, I started hanging out at the library an extra half hour so I wouldn't have to walk with him. I should have told my mom or something, but I thought I was just overthinking things. It was like a week later that I was walking home and saw that he was in the park. I slipped into the trees thinking he wouldn't see me, but he ran up and stopped me."

She hesitates as she rubs at her face, telling me it's hard for her to recall all of this. "Then... then he grabbed my wrist and pushed me against a tree. He told me he loved me but wanted to know why I was avoiding him. When I told him to let me go, that he was creeping me out, he didn't, so I kicked him. Then he swung his metal water bottle at my head. The last thing I remember is hitting the ground. And then I was... standing here. I was watching him as he tried to wake me up. He was shaking me and screaming and... I just lay there. I just... no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get up. Then, in a panic, he took off running."

"Can you tell me where he ran off to?" I ask.

She points deeper into the trees that line the west side of the park.

"Is there anything he left behind?"

"He left the water bottle. He threw it."

"Can you show me?"

She nods and starts walking, so I nudge Maddox who is just staring at me. I can tell he's still skeptical as hell but at least he has the decency to not interrupt me as I follow her. She walks for a bit before pointing up. I don't see anything at first until I pull my flashlight out and see the slight glimmer of the light bouncing off the metal water bottle hanging from a tree limb, presumably where the strap had been caught.

Maddox is silently staring at it as he holds his cat.

I turn to Harper who seems transfixed by the sight. "Can you tell me his name?" Silence. "Harper? Can you tell me his name?"

She jumps at the sound of her name. "Oh... umm... His first name was Robert, but I don't know his last name."

"That's okay. If we got you some pictures, you could point him out to me?" I ask.

She nods. "Yeah, I can."

"Alright. Maddox couldn't hear anything you said, so I'll have to tell him," I explain.

Harper smiles at me. "Thank you."

It warms me that she's happy I'm here to help. Some don't get it and are stuck roaming, but hopefully she'll be able to move on quickly. "Thank you for trusting me."

I turn to Maddox.

"Do you know how long we scanned these woods for?" he asks.

"You just need to ask the right person," I say before telling him everything she said.

He watches closely and I find his expression nearly impossible to read. Does he think that I wandered the woods until I found the water bottle that he *and* his team missed, then created this big spectacle? Or does he believe me? It's impossible to tell.

When I'm finished, he watches me for a second.

"Do you... not believe me?" I ask, honestly curious.

"I didn't say that," he says, but he doesn't confirm one way or the other before plopping his cat in my arms, turning away, and making a call.

When he returns he's slipping his phone into his pocket. "I need everything you can get on this Robert guy. Age, hair, ethnicity, what class he was coming from, what he carried. Everything."

"Okay," I say. I start to talk to Harper but before we get too far into it, some people who work with Maddox show up. I feel extremely awkward talking to Harper in front of them and she seems to be highly unfocused with them around, so I take her to a quiet area to get all the information I can.

When Maddox returns to me, I relay all the information I was able to get, which he gives to someone he calls. Then he's off again, leaving me alone with the girl and the cat.

CHAPTER TWELVE



MADDOX

When I get the call that we have a possible match, I turn around to try to find Hiro. For someone who wanted to be a part of this, he seems to disappear quite quickly.

All the while, my brain is trying to decide what's going on here. There's no way he's talking to a ghost. There's just no fathomable way. Did he find the water bottle? But how could my team have missed it and he didn't?

I just... there's no way he can talk to ghosts, right?

When my team emails me the list of Roberts who would have been leaving class around the same time as Harper, I hold it up to Hiro. "Can you tell me which one?"

He takes the phone and without even looking at it, he points it away from him before saying, "She says the third one. Robert Matthews."

He doesn't look at it as he hands it back, either, and I can't help but wonder if he did that on purpose to show me that he couldn't have that knowledge without someone helping him.

"So can..." I stare at Hiro as I try to find my words. "Harper... go with us to verify that we have the right guy?"

"Um... we can try. She's kind of attached to this area at the moment—newer ghosts seem to fixate on their place of death—but she can move on if she tries. I'll see if she'll follow me," he says.

"We're going to let someone else apprehend him while I stay back with you. I just want her there to tell us for certain."

"Do I hold the cat the whole time?" Hiro teases.

"He can wait in the car. Let's go."

I head out to my car while the team works on the scene before following two officers to Robert Matthews' home. I park on the street as I glance over at Hiro before getting out. He gets out as well and smiles to his left.

"It's okay," he says quietly as the officers knock on the door.

Robert answers the door with alarm in his eyes as they dart between the two officers.

"She said that's him," Hiro says before turning from me. "It's okay."

I watch as Robert covers his face and drops to his knees before the officers even say anything.

Even from here, I can hear him going, “I didn’t mean to. I didn’t mean to hurt her.”

As I watch the whole thing play out, I find myself at a loss for words. Today, I went into things positive that this was going to be an absolute waste of my time, and instead, we closed a case I feared was going to stay open. And with the help of someone I never thought would actually be helpful.

Even after they pack Robert into the car and drive off, I’m still just standing there, staring at the spot Robert had been kneeling.

“Harper...” I start, not sure what I’m going to say.

“She’s gone,” Hiro says. “Ghosts move on when they feel at peace... I think seeing Robert hold that level of regret let her move on.”

“Get in the car,” I order, unsure what else to say. I don’t mean to make it sound so sharp, but the logical part of my brain is telling me Hiro is trying to trick me somehow.

“Okay...”

He gets in as I pull open my door, but I have to move Bandit who has taken over my seat. I set him on Hiro’s lap without wondering if he actually wants the cat.

He rubs Bandit’s ears before glancing up at me. “You know you should get him a little carrier or something in case you’re in a crash, right?”

I ignore him as I sit there, scrutinizing him and trying to figure out how he is pulling this off. “Close your eyes.”

His eyebrows lift. It’s clear he’s amused, which makes me trust him even less. “Why? This sounds sketchy. Are you going to do something sketchy?”

Me? Has he forgotten about his own existence? How am I even remotely the sketchy one here? “Is there a ghost here?” I ask, sounding ridiculous even asking such a question.

“Um... yeah, Natalie is here.”

“Alright, close your eyes.”

He seems a bit confused but closes his eyes. “Okay...”

“How many fingers am I holding up?” I ask as I hold up two.

“Two.” There is no hesitation. He doesn’t tilt his head my way or open his eyes at all. Instead, he looks quite relaxed in my passenger seat while stroking the cat who is all purrs.

“Now?”

“One.”

I close my hand in disbelief. No, no, no... this isn’t right. This isn’t real. “Which one was it?”

“Your right pinky.”

I put out four fingers, feeling like a fool. “Now what?”

“She said your willie is out, but she’s also a fucking pervert, so I’m going to guess it’s not,” he says.

“What?” I ask, startled by the answer.

He opens his eyes and looks over at me. “So... me solving a case wasn’t enough, we now have to guess the fingers? What else do you want me to guess? You’re just so determined to be right, aren’t you?”

I narrow my eyes at him, but his grin is undeterred. “What *are* you?”

“Alien,” he whispers.

My eyes narrow even more at his ludicrous answer.

“Natalie is now sitting on your lap,” he says nonchalantly, like this is a normal occurrence. “Her breasts are like *right* in your face. She’s jiggling them now.”

I continue to stare at him, refusing to react to this information.

His grin shifts back to a more normal expression. “What else do you want from me? How about this, I want you to type something on your phone, and show it to... your steering wheel, alright? I’ll tell you what it says.”

I quickly type “buttercup, blueberry, tree,” hoping random words will throw him off and I can go back to sane town.

“Natalie says that it says ‘Hiro wants... your...’ He’s silent before he glares at the steering wheel. “I will banish you, evil spirit,” he growls. “Anyway. Buttercup, blueberry, tree.”

I toss my phone in the back seat, start the car, and begin driving. I don’t know where I’m driving to or what getting away from this place will do for me when the issue is *in* the vehicle *with* me.

“I will forgive you for everything evil you’ve ever said or done to me if you stop somewhere for food,” Hiro says with a smile aimed right at me. “I mean, it’s a lot to forgive. Like the time you detained me *on my birthday*, and the time you interrogated me, and the time you conned me into getting in your car with you before you dropped me off without my car.”

I’m silent as I pull into a McDonald’s.

“Do you want something?” Hiro asks as he peruses the menu.

Silence.

“Are you going to pout now that you’re wrong?” Hiro asks as he leans forward to get a better look.

“Yes,” I say, determined to not give in to him no matter what I do.

He starts laughing before leaning over me to order. After he’s finished, I decide hunger wins out and order some food for myself before pulling up to the window. The moment I stop, Hiro tries handing me a credit card, but I ignore him and pay for it myself. I hand him the bag of food, and instead of driving home, I park in a parking spot out front where we can watch the traffic move past. He hands me my burger as I sit there, contemplating everything.

After a moment, I turn to him. “I’ve decided I don’t trust you, you’ve made all of this up, and it was all staged,” I declare.

“Natalie is still on your lap. Natalie, get down,” he says, like she’s a dog that won’t stop jumping.

I open a packet of salt and dust it over my lap, which makes Hiro laugh.

“Salt doesn’t affect them, but I also love how you insist you don’t believe a word I say yet you start tossing salt at her,” he says. “She got off. She asked why you have to be so salty all the time.” He barely manages to say that without laughing.

“You’re not funny,” I say as Bandit climbs onto my lap just to take a chomp out of my burger before I realize what’s happening. “You damn cat.”

Hiro laughs again as Bandit darts off with his bite to chew on in peace. “This your cat?”

“Sadly.”

“Sadly? You clearly love him,” he says, watching the cat purr as he chews. “You can’t even pretend you don’t.”

I let out a grumble so he can be well aware of my level of annoyance at this statement. “Don’t get fucking cocky and pretend you know everything now. I still think this is all a big hoax.”

Hiro nods. “Totally don’t blame you for not believing me after all of the stuff I showed you today. I mean, really, there’s an explanation for all of it, like I can read minds or I’m psychic or something. Ooh! I know. I’m a better detective than you.”

That makes me grumble more than him seeing ghosts does.

“Why are you so determined to help?” I ask.

“Because every time I see my brother, I can’t stop thinking about the guy who killed him,” he says.

He really does see his brother? “So your brother’s imaginary ghost is still here?”

Hiro grins at me. “Yes.”

“Is he here right now?”

“No... he’d probably murder me if he knew what I was doing. He gets really upset when I do anything that pertains to finding his killer,” he says.

“Sounds like he’s the smarter one in the family.”

“You can’t tell me if someone killed Ben that you wouldn’t do everything in your power to find him.”

“It’s different.” Even I can hear how stubborn I sound.

“Why? Because Ben’s blood related?”

“No, because I know what I’m doing and I can also protect myself.”

“Carrying a weapon around doesn’t make you invincible,” he says.

“Neither does wandering around and talking to ghosts.”

He’s quiet for a moment as he bites into a fry and seems to think. “Say what you will, Maddox, but I’m going to help my brother’s ghost find peace with or without you. But maybe we could work together to end this before anyone else has to die.”

“I’ll think about it,” I say, which seems to satisfy him more than I thought it would.

“You do that,” Hiro says.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



MADDOX

“What the hell’s happened to you?” Ben asks as he grabs me in a headlock and starts holding his hand against my forehead like he’s checking my temperature. I battle him off me, already annoyed by his shit, and it’s only eight in the morning.

“Nothing. What happened to you? Ah right, you were born this goddamn annoying,” I growl.

That makes him laugh as I turn to face him.

“What’s this I hear about you and Hiro cleaning up cases?” he asks.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, wanting to pretend I know nothing about Hiro.

“Hey, Ben!” Hiro says as he climbs up the last step of the stairs and sees us. I scowl at him too, even though I told him to be here by eight, and that if he was late, he wasn’t helping ever again.

“Speak of the devil,” Ben says, positively thrilled by this development. It’s annoying how entertained by all of this he is.

“You must be talking about Maddox, then,” Hiro says with a grin, which makes Ben laugh. They’re like two annoyances that come together to make one big annoyance. “I hear they call him Mad Maddox.”

That *really* gets Ben going. “Only if we don’t ever want to see them again.”

“You two are working together today. Good luck,” I say, but as I walk away, Hiro hurries to catch up.

“I have my niece’s gymnastics recital or whatever it’s called this evening at six but beyond that, I am *alllll* yours,” he says with a smile.

“Don’t you have a business to run? I think they need you.”

“Yeah. But there’s this weird thing called employees who can run it for me when I’m gone. I also just received a huge donation to the bookstore from the mayor that’s going to let me hire some more help, so I’m all yours.”

“What’d you do to the mayor? Drug him? Con him? Threaten him?”

“Blackmail,” he says as we head toward an empty room in the back. “In exchange, he gave me a painting his wife did of an orgy.”

That makes me shift my attention to him. “Excuse me, I misheard that.”

Hiro looks dead serious as he shrugs. “He literally handed me a painting of three people having sex as a thank you. It was awkward, but I still hung it up right in my apartment so anyone who stops by can enjoy it.”

I just sigh because what else is there left to do when he constantly makes shit up?

When we walk into the empty room, I shut the door. “Did you bring... what I asked?”

“I brought He-who-shall-not-be-named,” Hiro says, and I want to be annoyed but I can’t when he’s literally saying it because of how I asked my question. I’m over here acting like I’d asked him to smuggle in some drugs.

“I feel like I’ve lost my mind,” I say as I set up my laptop. “Okay, Sean, is it?”

“Yes,” Hiro says.

Oh my god, I can’t believe I’m doing this. I feel like an idiot. “Sean, I want you to tell me everything about the night you died,” I say.

Hiro looks to his left for a moment before his expression thins. “Sean, come on, he’s helping us.”

I can’t get used to this. There’s no way I can get used to this. This is too fucking weird.

“Sean wants to know that we’re just here to get his point of view, and that I’m not involved,” Hiro says.

“I want nothing to do with Hiro,” I concur, which really isn’t a lie.

“See?” Hiro says with a smile. “He hates my presence, and do you really think he’ll let me help when he thinks I’m crazy and simply talking to myself?” Hiro turns back to me. “He won’t answer anything until I tell you that he said if you let me help, he will haunt you until the day you die.”

I stare at him a bit uncertainly while trying to look like I don’t give a shit. “Tell him that I want nothing to do with you.”

That seems to amuse Hiro *and* get Sean to talk. “Alright, so he says he’d gone to the bar to have a drink with some coworkers before seeing that the one lady he worked with was struggling to even stand up. I guess she’d recently broken up with her boyfriend or something and decided to drown herself in alcohol. Since the lady lived a couple blocks from the bar and Sean didn’t drive, he had to walk with her.

“He walked her home with no issue, left her at the door and started toward the train station. She lived on the far side of town, so he said the street was pretty dark. He thought he saw someone following him, but he couldn’t tell and didn’t think anything of it. It was a neighborhood, so seeing someone out wasn’t a big deal. He said that’s when he heard footsteps behind him, and just as he started to turn to look, a dark bag went over his head, cutting out his vision. He said he reached for it as something snapped around his... around his neck,” Hiro says, and I can tell this is starting to stress him, but he just shakes his head and pushes on.

“Whatever it was that was wrapped around his throat grew tight and he started to claw at it. He threw himself forward, dragging the guy with him, but it was too tight around his neck. He couldn’t see where he was going, so his foot caught on the edge of the sidewalk, and he was flung forward. The weight of the man drove him down to his knees and he said he could feel grass under him, but there was nothing he could do. He said that when he threw himself back, his head smashed into the concrete and everything went dark after that.

“When he woke up, he was strapped down to a chair, unable to move or see anything. He could only tell that he was sitting. He could feel carpet under his feet and a chair beneath him. He said that he tried to struggle, but he couldn’t get his body to move. And that’s when he felt him...” Hiro seems upset, but he quickly composes himself before looking up at me.

Pretty much everything said corresponds with the police reports. I wasn’t the lead detective, but I

was one of the ones on scene. I never engaged with Hiro at the time, but thinking back, I remember him. Sean had been found in a building that was rented out for gatherings at a park in the city. It was used frequently but was locked when it wasn't rented out. What I remember most is an older detective, who has since retired, talking about how weird it was that the deceased's brother was obsessed with seeing the crime scene to the point where he caught him trying to break into the building. They wrote it off as grief or that maybe he thought he could solve a case that was quickly running cold.

"You were trying to find your brother's ghost," I realize.

He looks startled. "What's that?"

"I remember the lead detective saying how Sean's brother kept trying to break into the crime scene. You were trying to get to Sean."

Hiro nods. "Yeah... I was also losing my mind a bit. Sean wouldn't leave the scene and without me going inside, I couldn't even talk to him. I thought that maybe he knew or had seen something I could tell the police, but by the time I finally spoke to him, there was nothing left to tell them that they didn't already have."

"I'm sorry," I say.

He gives me a soft smile. "Thanks."

"Okay... I have a few questions for Sean. He never saw the guy, correct?"

"No," Hiro says.

"What about when Sean said that he'd pulled the guy forward. He must not have been too tall, then?" I ask.

"Sean says he's not sure if the killer moved with him or if he was able to pull him with his weight. He said he can't remember clearly," Hiro says.

"Hmm, okay," I say. "Can you ask him if he remembers any smells or any—"

"He's gone..." Hiro interrupts, looking apologetic. "He gets antsy when talking about it. But when he comes around again, I'll pin his ass down and make him answer the rest. Probably nothing of use?"

"Nothing new, sadly," I say.

"I'm glad you're now resigned to believing me," he says with a wicked grin.

I just grunt as a reply then give him a wave. "I'm done with you."

"No, you're taking me to the scene of the crime," he says, determined.

The issue is once I start involving him in stuff, where does it end? Does it end with me putting him in danger? Does it put him on the killer's radar? "I can't now."

"Why?" he asks.

"Because I'm not a babysitter," I say as I stand up, gather my stuff, and leave the room. I head over to my desk and sit down as Hiro grabs a chair and sets it as close to my chair as he can before sitting in it.

Would it be wrong of me to pick up the chair with him in it and toss it down to my brother? Those two can play together for a bit. "Go home. I'll call you when I need you," I growl.

"You actually can't kick me out," he says, irritating me horribly because he *knows* there's nothing I can do.

While I can't kick him out, I suppose I can just ignore him. Since I can't do too much around his nosy ass, I decide to check my email and pull up one from my boss and start to reply.

"You spelled vigorous wrong," he says as he points.

"No, I didn't," I say as I immediately see that he's right. "Don't read my email."

"Are you just going to leave it like that?"

My narrowed eyes shift over to him. “That’s how we spell it. It’s a running joke,” I grumble, incapable of fixing it with him sitting there. I have to fix it. I can’t just *leave* it there blindingly wrong.

“Ah, I love running jokes where I write my superior something where I spelled things wrong,” he says, so fucking smug. Just fucking *filled* with smugness.

“I think Ben would like your help,” I say as I tilt the screen toward me, fix the spelling error, and send it off as quickly as I can. His knowing grin tells me he realizes what I did, but he doesn’t say anything. Shockingly.

I slam the laptop shut. “Fine, if I take you there, you’ll be done and go home?”

“Yes,” he says, which is clearly the biggest lie I’ve ever heard. It’s like I’m just feeding his inability to listen and he’s just getting his way.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



HIRO

“Silence. The time spent driving between places is perfect for reflecting and *silence*,” Maddox says, which is just weird when he’s literally the one talking. He continues to tell me how he doesn’t want to take me anywhere, and how I should just play alone with my imaginary friends, even though he’s taking me somewhere and also believes about the ghosts, despite not wanting to admit he does.

He’s a very complex man.

“Thanks for the cake the other day,” I say.

He sours immediately, which wasn’t the reaction I thought I’d get out of a thank you, but this *is* Maddox I’m referring to.

“Ben was supposed to tell you it was from him.”

So *that’s* what he’s annoyed about. Of course. “Ah, nah, he threw you right under the bus immediately. He exposed your kindness... broke right through your bad guy routine and exposed it all.” I’m more than pleased to be involved in this case, and Maddox looks less than pleased to have me involved. I’ll just have to continue to be overly useful. So useful he won’t be able to get rid of me. Already, his words are saying one thing and his actions are saying another.

“I will give him a pile of cat shit for Christmas,” Maddox says, which I guess is his equivalent of being annoyed at someone.

“Do you have more than one cat?”

“Two.”

For wanting to be “silent,” he sure readily gives me answers. “I don’t have any animals, but this dead raven has been following me around a little bit.”

Maddox just gives me a look which I likely deserve. “A dead raven. Is it just like a carcass? Did you stuff it? Is it in your living room? Do you sleep with the creepily taxidermized raven?”

“I like how you’re trying to just build up this strange image of me playing with a raven carcass or something. It’s a ghost raven.”

“You are *honestly* the strangest person I’ve ever met, and working my job, you meet a lot of strange people,” Maddox says.

“And you’re over here trying to make me even stranger! No, I don’t have any taxidermy animals.

No, I don't carry a dead bird around. I think I'm pretty normal... I mean... you know. I *look* normal."

He glances at me without a word.

I narrow my eyes at him. "What's that?"

"I said nothing, so don't worry about it."

"Have you ever gotten along with anyone *in your life*?" I ask curiously.

"No... no, I haven't." He's far too proud of this fact. He's even grinning a little, he's so proud.

When I notice us leaving the city, I find myself wondering where we're headed. Hell, maybe he's planning on dropping me off even farther from home since my walk back would be even longer. "He didn't kill in Clinton?"

"No."

"Isn't this the first time he hasn't?"

"That we know of. If we know of all of them, this is his third victim, but there might be more," he says.

"Interesting."

Natalie makes a noise, like she's dissatisfied with the conversation. "What else is interesting is that you haven't told Dreamy Maddox how dreamy he is," she says as she squeezes between the seats and sits on the middle console.

I ignore her even as she pretends to stroke the gearshift while winking at me.

"What?" Maddox asks, clearly picking up something that set him off about Natalie's presence.

"Nothing, disgusted by my closest friend is all. Normal stuff."

"Your closest friend is a ghost?" he asks, sounding a bit incredulous.

"If you had someone who haunted you, went everywhere with you, and watched you pee on occasion, you'd just give in and make them your friend too."

"You're talking about this... Natalie imaginary friend that you've made up?" Maddox asks.

Natalie gasps, and at first, I think it's about being called an imaginary friend until she goes, "He knows my name!"

I sigh. "Natalie is excited you know her name. She has a bit of an... infatuation with you."

"She's the one who saw me pee, right?"

"Yes."

"Tell him I've also watched him sleep," Natalie says.

"What?" I hiss. "You went into his house?"

"No, he was sleeping in his car."

"Your ghosts have been in my *house*?" Maddox asks, sounding rather irked for someone who doesn't believe in ghosts. It's like he wants to claim they're not real while also feeling irritated when they do something.

"She said you were sleeping in your car," I say.

He narrows his eyes at me like he's annoyed I have this top-secret information. But he's not given too long to be annoyed as he pulls into the parking lot of a run-down motel. A large section is cordoned off with people moving around. I'm surprised there are still so many here as we get out. There's a short woman standing by the trunk of her car with her arms folded.

"She already looks aggravated. Do you two just stand there and judge people together?" I ask.

Maddox smirks at me. "We sure do," he says as he turns the vehicle off and gets out. "We made someone cry last week."

"And I bet you were oh so proud," I say. He doesn't have to answer—his smile answers for him.

"She's scary but in a sexy way," Natalie says. "I think she's my soulmate."

"I thought Maddox was," I say.

"Nah, you can have him. He likes the wang too much, I think," she says as she floats through the vehicle to get a better look at the woman. I get out as Maddox waves at me.

"Hiro, this is Detective Elena Perez; Detective, this is Hiro Moore. He... got pulled in as a consultant by our mayor because he can speak... to ghosts," Maddox says, looking like it hurts him to say such a ludicrous thing out loud.

Elena's lips quirk up. "Cute." She turns to me and holds her hand out. "Nice to meet you. What is it you do?"

"Talk... to ghosts," I say, feeling a little intimidated by the small woman. The way she grabs my hand and squeezes it when I say "ghosts" is a bit... worrisome *and* painful. She's ten times more terrifying than Maddox is.

"I don't have time for the mayor's shit, Maddox," she says as she drops my hand and turns her narrowed eyes onto Maddox.

Letting them chat about how ridiculous they find this, I turn to the motel and see someone looking out at me. While the two detectives talk about ghosts and the lack of their presence, I head toward the tape that's keeping me out, but the ghost staring through the window at me urges me on.

"Hold up," Maddox barks as he grabs me by the collar and drags me back. "What are you doing?" His rumbling voice does a little something to me that I'm not proud of.

"Wanting to talk to the ghost. Why are you strangling me?" I grumble as I straighten my collar.

"You're just going to waltz into a crime scene?" he asks.

I hesitate as rational thought returns to me. "Well... I mean... now that you say it like that, I hear how dumb it sounds, but I got a bit distracted."

He leads me over to a man who checks Maddox's identification before we're let in. I look at the people milling around, busy at work while I feel a bit out of place, but with Maddox by my side, I'm positive no one's going to mind me.

He equips me with gloves and booties and tells me not to touch or do anything as Elena walks up to the door before giving Maddox a look like she thinks this is not only a waste of time but a waste of life.

"Humor me," Maddox says. "I've told him nothing about this, so beyond what he could have read in the news, it's all him. Let's see what he can do. The ghost might not even be here."

"The ghost," Elena says dryly.

"Oh, he's here. He's watching us," I say. "Can I go in now?"

Maddox guides me inside the motel room. "Don't disrupt anything. Got it? You stand in this little tiny square and don't move from it."

"Seriously?"

"The room's not that big. You can shout if you need to."

I sigh but stand on my allotted square while Elena and Maddox also stand in my square while breathing down my neck, like that'll help me concentrate. "What's his first name?"

"Franklin," Maddox says.

As I stand there, I realize that Franklin wasn't watching us through the window like I thought he was. No... he seems to be stuck in some kind of routine. He disappears through the wall and for a moment, I question if we've scared him off.

The three of us are left standing there in complete silence before Elena snorts. "Okay, come on, what's he really here for?"

That's when Franklin walks in through the front door. He's slumped down as he passes right

through us, and I hate the feeling; the chill that runs through me makes me shudder. He walks over to a chair and sits down in it. Then he starts to thrash. He's shaking his head back and forth, moving this way and that before he slumps down in the chair.

After a minute, he gets up and turns to look at the chair for a long moment before going back over to the window and starting it all over again. By the third time, I'm just horribly confused. It's like he's living his death over again and again, but why? I've seen people inconsolable but never like this.

I push past Maddox and go out the door and down the sidewalk.

"What's he doing now?" Elena asks.

"I have no idea," Maddox says as they follow me out to the room next door.

I point to it. "Can I go in there?"

"Why?" Elena asks stubbornly.

"Because Franklin must have come from in there. He keeps going in there. Was he originally in that room or something?" I ask.

Maddox shakes his head. "Not that we know of," he says before looking at Elena.

"The other rooms were searched already."

"Can I see what he's doing in there?" I ask.

Maddox looks over at Elena who sighs. "Waste of time," she mutters before unlocking the door and letting me in.

I follow her inside, but Franklin must be in the next room.

"What are you... seeing?" Maddox asks.

"Well... Franklin comes in through the door of the other room, walks over to the chair and sits before thrashing for a while and slumping down. Then he gets up, turns to look at the chair, looks out the window, then goes through this wall before repeating it... it's like he's stuck in this loop of how he died or something. I've never seen anything like it," I say.

Franklin fades through the wall, but what I didn't realize is that it wasn't this room, he just keeps going straight across into the next.

"I'm sorry, it's not this room," I say as I back out onto the sidewalk and jog to catch up. Many of the curtains are drawn, so I can't tell where he ends, but when I reach the final room, which is the office, I know this must be it. "Here, quickly," I say, and Elena grudgingly follows me as Franklin passes through me and disappears.

The place is run-down with peeling wallpaper and dusty counters. There are two broken chairs in the corner stacked haphazardly on top of each other.

"I'm assuming the room has been searched?" Maddox asks.

"It has. My techs are very thorough," Elena says.

After a few minutes Franklin returns and immediately turns right. He steps through the open doorway and into the back room where he stops in front of an old picture of a map of the US before turning around and starting on his circuit again.

Without waiting to get yelled at, I pick the picture up and pull it off the wall before looking at the writing behind it.

Written in blood are three words:

Three more left

"Stop touching shi—" Elena stops as she stares at it. Then she grabs the picture from me and pushes me back before I can disrupt anything else, but not before I notice a small keychain hanging from the nail the picture hung from.

I leave them to it as I head back in to where Franklin enters. As soon as he's through the wall, I

jump in front of him.

“Franklin, stop, please talk to me.”

He goes right through me, making me shudder again.

“Fuck.” I grimace, despising the feeling. “Franklin, listen to me.” Impatiently, I wait for him to come around again before pushing my all into being able to touch him. I pour myself into it, and the moment he comes through, he slams into me so hard, I’m shoved back and knock into the pile of chairs, tripping into them so the chairs and I all go crashing down. Maddox and Elena quickly rush in.

“What was that?” Elena shouts as she sees what else I’ve done.

“You alright?” Maddox asks as he holds his hand out to me.

“Yeah, thanks,” I say as I take his gloved hand and let him pull me up.

“What happened?” he asks.

“I tried making Franklin solid to stop him, and instead, he just tossed me out of the way.”

Maddox looks surprised. “Solid? Like you can make them solid enough that people can touch them?”

“Hm... not really, but I can touch them,” I say. “Sometimes when they’re in that form, people can feel them but that’s it. Or they can sometimes move an inanimate item a little or something. It’s really draining doing it, though. I get a headache and am exhausted when I’m done.”

Elena’s just staring at me with narrowed eyes like she’s waiting for us to jump out and tell her it was all a fun trick. Maddox seems to enjoy simply staring, like he doesn’t know how else to show his comprehension.

“I’m good,” I say with a smile as I head out the door.

They stay behind, so I head back to the room Franklin was killed in. Since he’s there longer, maybe he’ll listen.

“Franklin,” I say, but again, nothing.

I wonder if it’s what I’d just found setting him off? Maybe the keychain? Maybe if they removed that stuff, his ghost would calm down?

“Franklin?”

Nothing.

I push my power into him again, hard enough that I manage to hook his wrist, but he just drags me after him before disappearing through the wall. My head is starting to hurt, but if I could just get him to talk, we’d be one step closer.

“Franklin?” someone says behind me.

Confused, I turn and see a ghost I don’t recognize standing there.

“Franklin,” another says as it materializes in the room.

“Franklin...” And another.

Are they mimicking me? Do they know him?

“What are you doing?” I ask. “Are you trying to help him?”

“Franklin,” another says, popping up to my left. And as the room fills with ghosts that Franklin wades through, they start in on an overwhelming chorus of “Franklin, Franklin.”

What the hell is happening? Is it like with my landlord, and they’re panicked because of the death? I suppose I’ve never been to a recent crime scene like this before... is this what they usually do?

I plug my ears as the noise becomes deafening and quickly turn around to push through the door, needing to get away as the pressure in my head swells and the death surrounds me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



MADDOX

Hiro comes flying out of the room, looking like he's in a panic. He slams into me but doesn't really even seem to acknowledge me as he runs halfway across the parking lot before squatting down and closing his eyes.

"I think your ghost hunter has lost his mind," Elena says, and I don't know why it rubs me the wrong way. I've always known Elena can be brash and a bit... uncaring when it comes to these kinds of things, but at the same time, Hiro is doing something we can't do. He's figuring out things that the two of us couldn't figure out. We could look at the facts all day long. We could try to see what connects these three victims together beyond a similarity in age and all living within forty miles of each other, but this shit? We can't do this shit.

I shift my eyes over to her. "He found something your prized team didn't," I remind her, voice maybe a bit sharp.

"He did," she says, sounding reluctant to admit it.

I walk over to where Hiro is still squatting down before kneeling in front of him, unsure of what else to do. "Hiro?"

He doesn't even react to me. He has his hands plugging his ears and his face is tight with concentration.

"Hiro!" I shout.

He jerks back and looks up at me. "I'm sorry. What?"

"What's going on?" I ask.

He hesitates before shaking his head. "I can't hear you. There's too much noise. Just... give me a minute. I'm fine. You can go back to working."

I watch him for a moment longer as he continues to sit with a clenched jaw as I wonder what he's hearing. Whatever it is, it must be overwhelming—or is something else causing this?

The thing is... I can deny the ghost thing all day long, but this shit is too much. First Harper, and now this? It isn't like the location of the motel is even public knowledge at this point. So he couldn't have planted evidence, and I know the moment they run the blood for DNA, it'll come back as Franklin's.

I sit down next to Hiro, and he looks over at me, startled.

"I'm fine, really, you can help them," he says, brown eyes searching mine.

"It's her jurisdiction," I say, even though I know I'd still have my nose in all of it if he wasn't here. But that's alright, she has her team on the way, and when they arrive, I'll join them, though this makes me question... did the killer leave signs like this behind at the other places? Or is this something new? What else has been missed?

And a killer who has a set number in mind is generally killing for a reason. We've had no ties between the last victims, but this new information means that could be all wrong. Where is the tie we've missed? Did they know each other? All of the victims so far have been within forty miles of each other, so that's not impossible. But then that means they know the killer, and if they did... could Hiro's brother be the answer to it?

Having seen nothing, though, could Sean tell us? There's a reason the killer picked these three and there's a reason why he has three more in mind; I just have to figure it out.

Hiro slowly begins to straighten. He drops his hands, and instead, wraps them around his knees as he stares at the building.

"You alright?" I ask.

He doesn't look at me. "Yeah, sorry. You don't have to sit with me," he says, acting like he's embarrassed.

"It's fine, I don't mind. What happened?"

"Um..." He seems hesitant to talk about it. "Well, there were a bunch of ghosts who showed up and started shouting for Franklin... I'm not quite sure why."

"Like they knew him?"

He looks thoughtful before shrugging. "I don't... think so. Ghosts just... act weird around horrible deaths. There's something here that's keeping him in this... limbo. I can't even interact with him, which is really unusual. But then again, I've never been around many recent deaths that are like this. I think that keychain might have meant a lot to him or something... I'm assuming it's his and not the killer's. Is there a way we could give it to a family member or something? I know it's evidence, but..."

"Sorry... it's crucial evidence, so at the moment that wouldn't be a possibility," I say.

Hiro nods, probably already assuming I'd say as much.

But maybe there's something else that can be done about it if it really would allow him to talk to Franklin. I'll have to think about that. "How long have you seen ghosts for?" I ask.

He glances at me, looking a bit surprised. "You mean my imaginary friends?"

I try not to give in to his sass. "Yes."

He gives me a grin before turning his attention to his hands that are picking at his pants. "I don't ever remember not seeing them. I didn't interact with them much until my parents passed away, but they've always been there."

"Must have been a lot to deal with."

"It was. But it's not a big deal," he says with a smile. I've noticed a lot of what he's said has been "not a big deal." Like he's used to brushing everything off. It's weird how when I met him, I just thought he was nosy and a bit snarky just for a laugh, but there's a lot more to him. Imagine that, I actually take a moment to pay attention to someone and see that there's an actual human under there.

I notice a car start to pull in as he rubs his head, but I'm glad to be distracted from my thoughts. "I have some migraine relief in my car, middle console. Grab some while I deal with this."

"Thanks," he says, getting up and heading toward the car as I decide to meet back up with Elena.

Before going into the office, I head back to the room Franklin had been killed in. As I stand there, I think about Franklin still being in this room. How many other ghosts have watched me trying to figure out their deaths? How many had begged for me to listen when I was incapable of it? How many were able to point right to who killed them, but instead, were left to watch as I worked? I always did the most I could, but the ones I couldn't finish always haunted me. The ones that'd never find closure...

I hold out my hand and wonder what it'd feel like to touch them.

I shake my head, knowing I need to get back to work and stop thinking about this ludicrous stuff. When I turn, I nearly slam into Elena—I'd been so deep in thought I'd never seen her there.

"Shit, you scared me."

Her arms are folded over her chest, but she's not as standoffish with me now that Hiro's not here. "I'm used to scaring the young'uns, but I haven't scared you yet," she teases.

"Yeah, lost in my own thoughts, I guess."

"So, ghosts..." she says.

I shrug, not sure what else to do. "He figured out the Harper case for me. That girl who was murdered in the park? He got the name of the guy who killed her, could tell me what the killer looked like, found the fucking murder weapon... the logical part of my brain doesn't want to believe him, but how can you not?"

She's quiet for a long moment as we both stand there, watching the spot Franklin had died. "But ghosts?"

I shrug again. "I don't know. I really don't know anything," I realize. We can be skeptical all day long, but he's gotten us results we didn't previously have.

"Well... Maddox, what you do know is how to be good at your job. If he can't tell us anything more now, we at least have something to go after. We have another clue and we're one step closer to finding this depraved sonofabitch. So come on," she says as she heads back out the door.

As we walk toward the office, I notice that Hiro is still in the passenger seat of my car. He's resting his head on his hand that's propped up on the middle console, fast asleep.

"He alright?" she asks.

"He said he was having a headache, so we'll just let him sleep. He thinks if we get the keychain back to Franklin's family, Franklin might be at peace enough to talk to him, but right now, he won't even interact with Hiro."

"We can't do that."

"No, but we could maybe do something else to help Franklin," I say.

She shakes her head like she's still struggling to comprehend this, but I don't blame her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



MADDOX

As I get into the car and start it, Hiro jerks awake.

“What time is it?” he asks, looking around in alarm.

“Five fifteen.”

“Shit...”

“What?”

“My niece’s recital is at six.”

“Where?”

“Harbor High School auditorium. I won’t be able to get my car in time to run back. Can you do me the biggest favor ever and drop me off there? Then I’ll get someone to drive me back or grab a Lyft or something,” he says.

“Of course I can drive you there,” I say. It’ll take about forty minutes, but he’s saved me more than forty minutes’ worth of work, even if I don’t bother admitting that. “As long as you’re completely silent the entire ride. The definition of silence.”

“Hmm...” Hiro thinks about that for a long moment before shaking his head. “I... I don’t think I can do that,” he says with a grin. “I mean... can you really ask that of me? That’s just... I mean, I knew you were evil before, but I guess I never realized to what extent. Maybe I should start walking...”

“Well, now you know,” I say. He grins at me, and I’d hate to admit that I’m glad he clearly feels better.

“Are you *actually* related to Ben? I just have my doubts.”

I glance at him sideways. “I am.”

“Hmm... odd.”

I raise an eyebrow as he gloats, like he enjoys telling me that Ben is the nice one.

“Ben’s always been *too* nice, you know? People would walk all over him when he was younger because he’d do anything for anyone. At least he grew up when he had his kids.”

“How many kids does he have?”

“There’s a thirteen-year-old who was a... ‘whoops, forgot to use protection’ kind of thing. They

also have a twenty-eight-year-old who was a ‘whoops, forgot to use protection’ while in high school and a seventeen-year-old who was actually expected. She’s the favorite,” I joke. “At least, she thinks she is. He’s a good dad.”

“But the real question is... are you a good uncle?” Hiro says, appearing amused.

“Well, when they stay with me, I make them sit in the corner and play with sticks. Sometimes, if I’m feeling generous, I give them rocks that they’re allowed to stack. And then other times, if I’m feeling *super* nice, I let them get a new rock out of my landscaping, but they have to put it back before they’re allowed to sleep.”

“Wow, you’re... I’ve never met such a kindhearted man before. That’s so nice how you make them appreciate their extremely kind father even more.”

I’m trying not to grin because I feel like if I show him *any* indication that he’s *amusing* me, I’ll instantly regret it. I’ll never win then. “Thank you. I try my best when it comes to my niece and nephews. The niece you’re going to see today, is that...?”

“Sean’s daughter,” Hiro says.

“You must have been really close to Sean?”

“I am. We were placed together when I was thirteen and he was fourteen, and we were inseparable. He’d been dealt a shit hand, and I was dealing with... a lot of shit, but he kept me from losing my mind. My other brother, Nicolás, joined the family a little later on, but he fit quite well.”

I slow the car down at a stoplight. “Is he close to your niece too?”

“Nicolás? Yes, he is, but he’s been out of town, so I don’t think he’ll make it,” he says. “Business or something.”

As I pull up to the high school where the recital is being held, I turn to Hiro. “I’ll just hang around and pick you up after. I can find something to do for an hour or two.”

He immediately shakes his head. “You don’t need to do that. I’m sure you have more important things to do.”

I try to think of anything “more important” to do before shrugging. Besides my cats, I really don’t have much. Ben and I see each other at work, but outside of it is much rarer. I think it stems from the years when we really didn’t talk at all. Our parents had done a pretty amazing job at tearing us apart when they divorced. “Not really. I live a pretty boring life.”

“As a cat lady?” he challenges.

My eyes narrow. “I do not... *want* cats. The cats are... stuck with me, and I’m stuck with them.” I would never in my life have gotten a cat. This is Reggie’s fault.

“Yes, you both looked *so* miserable together. Just... awful you have such an innocent fluffy lovebug. Since you have nothing to do besides contemplate your cat ladyhood, come with me,” he says. “My family won’t care. You’re not just going to sit in the car.”

“And you think sitting in a dance recital will be more fun?” I ask skeptically.

He grins at me as my eyes catch onto his. Why is he so fucking charming when he smiles? It irritates me that he thinks he can just con me into doing stuff by smiling at me and irritates me more that it seems to work.

“Well...” he starts. “You tortured me, so I’d like to torture you with the art of... children dancing. It’s absolutely dreadful and I would love to have you join me.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Uh... huh. And is this something I actually *have* to partake in?”

Hiro seems pretty adamant as he nods. “Natalie says she wants you to go so she can sit on your lap since she usually has to sit on a stranger’s lap to watch. Sean said he’ll sit on your other leg.”

I put the car in park as I raise an eyebrow. Honestly, he’s making this sound worse by the minute.

“I can’t even tell if you’re joking or not.”

He starts laughing as he undoes his seat belt. “I’m not.”

Now this is ridiculous. “Why don’t they sit on *your* lap?”

“Then *I* couldn’t see. You can see *through* them. Come on, it’ll be fine,” he says. “I think you owe me one.”

“You’d just *love* to see me tortured,” I grumble as I turn off the car.

He looks highly pleased with himself when he gets out of the car. Grudgingly, I follow while questioning why I’m even bothering. I could happily sit in the car and wait and play on my phone. Instead, here I go, walking after this anomaly while questioning why.

I think I’m fixated on the idea that if I’m around him long enough, I can figure out what the hell he’s doing, but how’s that going to happen at a damn dance recital for his niece? He’s not going to slip up and be like “Oh, it was all a big magic trick I learned out of this ninety-nine-cent magic trick box.”

As we step up to the busy entrance, he glances at his phone before hurrying through it.

“Are you sure I can’t wait in the car?” I ask.

“Positive,” he says as he waves me on. “See, if I take you with me, I suddenly look cool.”

“What?” I grumble but he ignores me as he hurries over to a woman and a man.

“Hey!” he says as he steps up and hugs the woman before the guy grabs him in a hug as well.

“Who is this?” the woman asks.

“This is Maddox. He’s the guy who threatened to arrest me on my birthday and left me locked in a room *on my birthday*, and then coerced me into getting in a vehicle alone with him before driving me miles from my car and kicking me out, forcing me to find my way back to my car,” Hiro says, which... I mean... makes me sound a bit like an asshole.

“No, I...” I hesitate as I think about which part I could deny. Is there *any* part I can deny? I really am a dick...

“At a loss for words,” Hiro says with a smile. “Maddox, this is Hailey, my niece’s mom, and her husband Vic.”

Vic grins as he takes my hand. “A police officer, then?”

“Detective,” I say.

Hailey smiles as she greets me. “I’m sure it’s not the first time someone wanted to kick Hiro out of a car and make him walk home.”

“See?” I ask as I turn to Hiro. “Sounds like I did a good deed.”

“Right, right,” he says. “Anyway, I’m helping him with a job, and it ran late so I needed him to drive me straight here. Then I realized what better way to torture him than to make him sit through a dance recital while a bunch of children roll around on stage.” Hiro has a wicked grin on his face as I realize I’ve allowed myself to be conned.



HIRO

The lights flicker, signaling time to take our seats, so we head inside. I follow after Vic, who looks over his shoulder at me before his eyes flicker to Maddox. When I first met Vic, I didn’t know what to think about him. He was a bit rough and tough, and something about him reminded me of the father in the first foster home I’d stayed at. I think that correlation is what led me to having a hard time trusting

him, but he's proven over time that he's a great father and pretty nice guy.

Something I've learned after dealing with the dead for years is that first impressions aren't always right. Another thing I learned about dealing with the dead is they love large gatherings like this. It's like any family member who's ever passed on needs to make sure they're here to watch and stand in my way.

We get into our seats a moment before Sean and Natalie rush in, both very excited.

"I feel oddly uncomfortable sitting on the lap of your sexy detective," Sean says. "I feel like you should at least get to sit on it first, you know? Maybe ask for permission."

"I'm not asking," Natalie says as she sits down on Maddox's lap.

"They're on my lap, aren't they?" Maddox whispers.

"What?" I ask like I have no idea what he's talking about.

"You're staring at my leg area quite intently."

"Maybe I just like your pants. They're very pantsy."

He's staring at me like I've lost my mind. This is how I flirt with a sexy man. Wait... why the hell *am* I flirting? Well... I'm not actually flirting. This isn't flirting. Oh dear god. Don't flirt with him.

"Hiro, honey, if you look at him with that expression on your face, he's never going to want you," Natalie says, which just results in me glaring at her.

"Ask him if you should sit on it first," Sean suggests, drawing my mind out of the hellhole it'd found itself in.

"I hear nothing besides the squawk of a parasite," I say to Maddox with a warm smile.

Now Maddox looks concerned. Maybe he's a little offended I'd speak of the dead in such a way. "That's... that's what you call your brother?"

"If you could hear him, you'd call him that too."

Maddox's eyebrows rise. "What's he saying?"

"Ask if I can sit on his face," Natalie asks.

I decide that Maddox already thinks I'm losing my mind. "Natalie wants to sit on your face and Sean wants to ask permission," I say.

"To sit on my face?" Maddox asks.

I glance over at Sean, who sighs. "Don't even give me that look like you want to know the answer to that! Of course I don't want to sit on his face."

"Sean said yes. He wants to sit all over your face," I say.

Sean's eyes get huge as he waves his arms around. "I did not! Now you're making me look like a pervert like Natalie!"

"He said that he wants to be right up in your face," I say.

Maddox's eyebrows just keep going up every time I talk. "Did he...?"

"Yes. He asked if you care if he has clothes on or not."

"He can take his clothes off?" he asks.

"Oh yeah... kind of. I don't know. It's confusing," I say.

"So... at a children's recital, your brother wants to sit on my face naked?" Maddox asks, completely deadpan as Sean gets between us so I can't look at Maddox. The soft glow of blue around him is the only thing telling me he's not truly there.

Sean looks ready to shake me. "If you do not fix this, I will haunt you so fucking hard. Oh, better yet, I'll ignore you. I won't come see you."

I grin before pushing him off. "He just threatened me that if I keep talking, he'll never see me again."

“Well, now I’m kind of disappointed no one wants to sit on my face,” Maddox says.

Vic leans into us. “What are you guys whispering about?”

“Work stuff. How have you guys been?” I ask as Sean sits on my lap so I can see nothing but the back of his head. I guess this is what I get for harassing him.

“Good, I started that new job,” he says as I see someone rush in.

“Sorry I’m late,” Nicolás says, squeezing past us to take a seat next to Maddox.

Nicolás joined the foster home I was in when he was about sixteen. At the time, he was a rather quiet kid who went along with what anyone wanted. He was quieter than Sean and me, and he must have kept everything bottled up until he set the shed on fire.

“I thought you were out of town,” I say.

“I was, but I just got back today. Libby told me I had to come or else I’ll get the orange popsicle next time, and she knows I hate orange.”

I snort since it sounds like a very Libby threat.

“Is this guy with you?” he asks as his eyes run up and down Maddox with a look of approval. I’ve always wondered if Nicolás was bi, but he’s never admitted to it, and does this snort whenever I ask him. It didn’t help that I had the hots for him growing up. He might be my foster brother, but we were well into our teen years before we met and there’s no real relation between us beyond having lived together for a few years.

Even setting the shed on fire didn’t push away that attraction.

“This is Detective Maddox. I’m helping him out,” I explain.

“Helping?” He nods slowly, like he’s trying to figure out the correct definition of helping. “Fun.”

I stare at him until he smiles at me. That smile still evokes some remnants of attraction for him, but not as much as I feel when I look at the grumpy detective.

Which just means that I need to get laid.

“Nice to meet you,” Maddox says, and he shakes hands with Nicolás who watches him closely.

They shake hands a moment longer than I thought was customary, leading me to have some strange thoughts about them together with me somewhere in the mix that I really need to just push off.

“You’re thinking of a threesome now, aren’t you?” Natalie asks.

“Don’t have a threesome with the detective and Nicolás,” Sean says with a shudder.

I ignore both of them as the show begins to start, as does the torture. An hour and a half of watching children dance is an hour and a half I will never get back. Libby is only in it for about fifteen minutes, but the way Sean just lights up makes it well worth it.



After the show is over, Libby pulls me to the side where I have to tell her everything her father thought about the performance while Maddox watches with his ever-unreadable eyes. He could think I’ve lost my mind and have conned my whole family, for all I know.

Nicolás stands next to me with both hands deep in his pockets as Hailey and Vic talk about something I can’t hear.

“Is there anything else?” Libby asks.

I look at Sean who seems to have exhausted every viable option. He seems uncertain. “Umm... what else do I say? Just... tell her that I love her more than anything.” And with that, he disappears. I can never tell if he does it on purpose or if something in him just makes him vanish before hearing the

end of it. Natalie disappeared at some point as well after telling me that even sitting on Maddox's lap wasn't worth the hell of that show.

"He says he loves you more than anything."

She beams at me. "I love him too."

I send her back to her parents and stand up since I'd been crouching to talk to her. "Well... that was thrilling good fun."

"My favorite part was when the child in red tripped and fell," Nicolás says, completely deadpan.

Maddox and I both look at him, which makes Nicolás laugh. "I'm kidding, I'm kidding."

"It was kind of funny," I admit.

"Slightly. Did you see how her legs kicked out as she did it?" Maddox asks.

We all contemplate what horrible people we are while trying not to laugh.

"Okay, I've tortured Maddox enough and really should get going," I say after moving closer to the rest of the family. "He needs to get back to his cat lady duties."

"You're a cat lady?" Libby asks, thrilled by the idea. "I've always wanted to be a cat lady, but Mom said you have to have at least *three* cats to become a cat lady, and I only have one."

"I only have two, so I guess I'm not there yet either," Maddox says as I grin and hug Libby.

When Hailey hugs me, she pulls me in close and whispers, "He's sexy, Hiro. Well done."

"No," I say, which just makes her wink at me.

Vic gives me a hug and tells me we need to catch up sometime and go bowling or something. When I turn to Nicolás, he holds his arms out, letting me step up to him before he hugs me. "I don't know what you're getting into, Hiro, but you need to be careful," he whispers.

I still and catch his eyes. "What do you mean?"

Nicolás's eyes flicker over to Maddox, but he lets go of me instead of answering and gives Maddox a wave. I'll have to call Nicolás and ask what that's about later. He's always had a weird knack for feeling things, and when I've mentioned it to him, he always tells me I'm reading into shit too much.

When Nicolás heads over to a car I don't recognize, I call out to him. "Where's your car?"

He hesitates before shrugging. "Minor accident. Rental for now. I can tell you about it later."

"Okay... I'm glad you're alright."

"Thanks. Have a good night."

Parting ways with Nicolás, I make my way out to Maddox's car before looking over at him.

"Did you love it or what?" I ask, trying to sound like I found it absolutely thrilling.

"So much. I loved it so much that I'm disappointed I don't have like ten kids to put into that," he says, making me grin.

"Thought you would."

On the drive home, I find it surprisingly easy to talk to Maddox. He's actually not too much of an ass when you force him to talk with his guard down. It's nice chatting some, even if nothing we talk about is overly interesting.

When Maddox pulls into the parking lot of the police station, he drops me off at my car, which I get into. It's late, and I really just want to go home, but I know that if I'm going to have Barry keep working for me, I need to pull my own weight and get some shit done at the bookstore.

Grudgingly, I head straight there and park in the front, since it's closed and I don't have to leave those spots for the customers. I grab my keys and slide them into the door before pulling it open and immediately stopping.

The store is packed with ghosts that are wrapped around a table. They're shoulder to shoulder,

backs hunched as they look down at whatever has captivated them.

“Guys?” I ask, but none of them look at me. None of them turn to me or even acknowledge that I’ve walked in.

Feeling oddly alone when packed into a room with about twenty ghosts, I walk toward the table as I hold my phone in my hand. I select Maddox’s name, my finger hovering over the send button as I walk, just in case I need to call him.

As I step up to the ghosts that have no interest in parting, I realize I’m going to have to push through them to even see what they’re looking at.

I will them solid enough I can push them apart, giving myself enough room to look at the table as my heart pounds in my chest, anxious about what I’m going to see.

I’m not sure what I’m expecting when I reach the table, but a note isn’t it. A simple piece of paper with *Hiro* written on the front. Why would the ghosts be so interested in this? Just a piece of paper?

Still... I hesitate before reaching forward and picking it up. The ghosts’ eyes follow my hand as I pull the thick folded paper toward me and slowly flip it open.

Stop now before you’re next.

My blood runs cold and without a semblance of a doubt, I know it’s from the killer. There’s no way the ghosts would be this drawn to it, if it wasn’t, right? But how does he know? Has he been watching Maddox? Was he watching the crime scene?

Even so... a regular person wouldn’t even believe I’d be of use. They’d see me as a bookstore owner and question why I was with the detective, not be wary of it. Does he know what I can do? Have I helped him in the past so he knows the ghosts of his victims could lead me to him?

I should show this to Maddox. I should tell Maddox and let his team handle it, but if I do... he’ll pull me off and I’ll be no closer to finding Sean’s killer. Maddox won’t stand for it and will keep me from the case. I can’t let him know. I can’t tell him. There’s no way the killer would have left fingerprints behind or anything that’d even help them. He’s been meticulous so far; why would he leave something now?

“Who left this?” I ask.

Silence.

I wave the paper before them, hoping to snap them out of this fixation. “Who left this here?”

“Don’t know,” someone says.

“Don’t know,” another repeats.

And then they’re all gone. Just like that.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

I hurry outside, quickly locking up because I have no interest in being in that place alone. And I hate feeling like one of my safe places is no longer safe at all. Rushing back to my car, I slide into it, still holding the paper that feels ridiculously heavy in my hand. What the hell do I do with this?

I toss it to the floor and start to drive.

My eyes flicker down to it... drawn to it.

I can’t stop looking at it.

Stop now before you’re next.

Fuck.

I reach over and quickly push it under the seat so I don’t have to look at it and keep driving. While I’m not sure I feel safer at my apartment, Randy has cameras everywhere. At least I’ll know if someone breaks into my home. But as I walk up to the apartment, I realize I’ve never felt so alone.

Maybe I should see if I could stay with Nicolás, but his place is thirty minutes from here, and if a serial killer really is watching me, I don't want to draw him into this as well.

I hear a *tink... tink* noise.

My blood runs cold as my heart begins to beat wildly in my chest. Slowly, I turn to look at the balcony door but there's only darkness beyond it.

Tink... tink...

I reach for my phone, prepared to tell Maddox everything, when I see a flutter of movement at the bottom of the window. I'd been looking too high.

Tink... tink...

I take a slow step toward the window as I try to peer through the reflection. On the other side is the raven, watching me closely. Slipping the lock off, I slide the glass door open just a little before looking out at it.

"What do you want?"

He tilts his head this way and that, watching me closely before hopping forward a few feet and passing through the crack.

"You... do realize you're dead, right? You can just go through walls?"

He watches me with his beady eyes, clearly not understanding me. I slide the door shut and lock it, not sure what I'm doing with this strange bird.

"Welcome to my abode, don't steal anything," I say.

He fluffs up his feathers, then shakes them out before trailing after me as I head into the bathroom. I shut the door before he can follow me inside, so he proceeds to peck at the door until I grudgingly open it.

How is this my life?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



HIRO

As I'm stacking a few things while Barry carries boxes for me, my phone rings.

Seeing it's Maddox, I instantly answer with, "Hello, Mad Maddox."

"What are you doing?" he asks.

He doesn't even hesitate at my jab, which makes me grin. "Unloading some boxes. We close at noon today, so we were finishing a few things up. You?"

"I was hoping to ask you a few questions, but my niece and nephew are over, so I can't meet you somewhere until they leave."

"I can come to your house, I don't mind," I say, trying to sound as carefree as I possibly can while eagerly anticipating his answer.

He hesitates. "Are you sure?"

So ridiculously sure. "Positive. Are you guys hungry? I can bring pizza."

"You don't need to do that."

"I don't mind," I say while my brain is trying to tell me that yeah, I really shouldn't be bringing pizza and getting too familiar with him.

"Okay. But I'll pay for it. I'll order it too. Johnny's Pizza work?"

There, that's less familiar, right? Making him pay for it? But I offered, so I should pay for it. "No, I'll pay for it, I suggested it."

"Not an option. I'm making you come over here. I'm paying. What time will you be able to pick it up?"

"Only if you're positive, because I'd prefer to pay, but give me thirty minutes."

"Got it," he says before hanging up.

I turn just as Barry slaps his hand down on the box I'd been unloading, making me jump.

"What are you doing?" he asks, watching me closely.

"Butting into something I really shouldn't be," I admit.

He snorts as he flips the box open and starts helping me unload it. "Well, you know what they say... if you're going to do something you shouldn't... do it well... or something like that. I don't really know."

"I'm doing something, alright," I grumble. "Sometimes, I question my decisions. Like the logical part of my brain is telling me that I really should back off, step away, not even look at the detective. But the other part doesn't listen at all."

"Eh, human nature. Why were you asking me about customers yesterday? Is something going on? Did someone steal something?" he asks with narrowed eyes. I'm positive Barry wants to catch someone, and I pity the person he catches because he can be quite intimidating.

"Nope. Someone just left something behind."

"Like...?" he asks.

I don't know if I should tell him or not, honestly. "A paper."

"Death threat?"

"Yes," I say, which makes him laugh since he thinks I'm joking.

"Probably a love letter. You should see the girls' disappointment when they come in and see me here instead of you," he says.

I raise an eyebrow because he's definitely not a bad-looking man. "You're rather handsome yourself," I assure him.

Barry snorts. "Oh, don't make me blush."

That makes me laugh since the thought of this hulking man blushing does nothing but amuse me.

"It's probably because you're distracted by doodling. Did you ever get into that art class you wanted?"

He shrugs. "I need to stay on task and get a business degree, not some art BS," he says, even though art's where his heart lies.

We finish up and walk out to the parking lot that's behind the building. Before heading to his car, Barry looks like he wants to say something to me, but seems to change his mind and offers me a wave instead.

Getting in my car, I head over to the pizza place and grab the pizza before driving out to the address I'd been sent while feeling stupidly excited. I'm sure Maddox just wants to interrogate me or something and I'm acting like a giddy teenager going to my crush's house for the first time.

When I pull into the driveway, I find a really nice home tucked away from the city. It's two stories with a large porch and blue shutters that match the door. The landscaping is gorgeous with large bushes and wildflowers that I do *not* see Maddox having the patience for. I wonder if he hires someone to care for them?

The realization hits me that I don't actually know if Maddox is seeing someone. Ben had said that there was only one person who could tame Maddox... am I an idiot?

I'm an idiot.

Yes, that's pretty much the sum of it. He's probably seeing someone who is amazing and wonderful and cooks him meals and says cute things like "Honey, I'm home" and does the gardening and probably works some six-figure job all at once.

The door swings open, but what greets me isn't a person but a ghost.

"Who the fuck is this?" he grumbles as he runs his eyes up and down me.

I open my mouth to say something to the rather attractive ghost when the person who had actually opened the door comes into view as the ghost shifts to the side.

"Hi! You must be the pizza man," the young teenage boy says.

"And you must be Ben's youngest?" I ask.

"You know my dad?"

"I do."

“What the hell is Maddox up to now?” the ghost grumbles as he runs his fingers through his blond hair like he’s exasperated.

Maddox comes around the corner. “Jonah, what did I say about opening the door?”

“You said it was your friend. I’m thirteen, not five,” he grumbles, and I wonder if years of Maddox working as a homicide detective has made him a bit overprotective.

“Friend?” the ghost grumbles then scoffs, like the idea of me being Maddox’s friend is hilarious and unrealistic.

“Go help your sister,” Maddox says.

“I don’t want nor need help from pests!” a girl yells from somewhere deeper in the house.

Maddox sighs as he looks at me. “Sorry about that.”

“Nah, no need to apologize,” I say. “I brought pizza. I am the pizza boy.”

“Sounds like a better job than consultant. Why don’t you look into that?” Maddox teases.

“Who is it, Reggie?” a female ghost asks.

“I don’t know. Some weird guy,” this Reggie ghost says.

What the fuck? Who is this judgmental guy?

“Come in,” Maddox says as he takes the pizza from me and leads me inside. I kick my shoes off by the door and turn around, coming face to face with a large picture.

The picture that is plain as day, the centerpiece of the room, shows the guy who is currently scrutinizing me as a ghost wrapped in Maddox’s arms.

Fuuuuuck.

“Bathroom?” I ask, which might come out sounding a little panicked.

Maddox points while giving me an odd look. “Down the hall and to the right.”

I hurry down the hall, hoping to leave the ghosts behind and maybe summon Natalie or Sean so they could tell me what to do.

Why is it that when I finally find a guy I like who is sexy, and secretly nice while being maybe a little grumpy, shit like this happens? The very moment I try to get to know him, I have to find out he’s being haunted by his former lover! What the hell do I do about that? I can’t tell Maddox that his dead lover is here.

Some people don’t want to know if their loved one has been left behind. They’ve already gone through their grieving process and don’t want to have to do it all again. And if Maddox really wanted to know, he’d have asked me, right? It’s not my place to offer that information without him asking.

Reggie, the ghost, just decides to waltz right into the bathroom with his ghost buddy.

“Does Maddox ever invite anyone over?” she asks as she eyes me while I try to pretend that I can’t see or hear them. Usually, I’m all for talking to ghosts and letting them know I can hear them, but not this one. Nuh-uh, I don’t even want to interact with this one.

Reggie gets in really close, which makes it extremely awkward as I juggle trying to look natural while only able to see his ridiculously handsome face. “No, which is why this is weird. He’s up to something. Look at him just standing there. He’s going to steal something,” Reggie decides.

Oh my god.

Look natural. I have to look natural.

Doing some weird body shimmy thing that does *not* look natural, I maneuver around him and head over to the sink to start washing my hands.

“Why’d he close the door just to wash his hands?” she asks.

“I told you he’s up to something,” Reggie says. “He’s not good enough for Maddox. I don’t like him.”

“You don’t even know why he’s here,” she says. “He could be someone from work.”

“He doesn’t look smart enough. But I’m still going to state that he’s not good enough for Maddox. Just look at his frumpy clothes.”

It takes *everything* in my power not to look down at my clothes as I shut the water off. I thought I’d dressed nice enough for work, and now I hear that I look “frumpy”? What the hell?

“He barely washed them. Was barely five seconds,” Reggie says. “How dirty. Ew.”

“He just looks sketchy,” the woman says.

Reggie points at her. “You get me.”

Oh my god, these assholes. I look perfectly acceptable in a button-down and dark jeans. Hell, I thought it was good enough to run my business in, so it can’t be that shabby.

Still, I give the shirt a little tug, since now I’m questioning it.

Hoping to get away from the brutal judging, I quickly walk to the dining room where Maddox is setting some plates down before an older teen girl and Jonah.

“Hiro, this is Jonah and Kacey. Guys, this is Hiro, he’s helping me with work,” Maddox says, and I find myself wishing I was more than some work guy.

“Oh... work? Boring,” the female ghost says. “I’m going back to the football game.”

She disappears, but Reggie doesn’t seem thrilled by the idea and sticks around as we sit down. “It’s nice to meet you two,” I say with a smile. “Your uncle tells me he only lets you guys play with sticks when you’re over.”

They both laugh and Jonah nods. “He did! But then I poked my sister with it, and he took away my stick too.”

“I asked for a beating stick to keep my brother away,” Kacey says with a grin. I think Maddox said she was about seventeen, but she looks younger with her purple dyed hair cut into a bob.

“If anyone gets a beating stick, it’s me,” Maddox says.

“And me,” Reggie purrs. “You liked it when I slapped you with my ‘stick.’” He says it right into Maddox’s ear, like Maddox might be able to hear him.

Maddox sets a plate with a slice of pizza on the table for me. “Pepsi?”

“Sure, thank you,” I say as he heads over to get me a can.

That’s when Reggie climbs onto the table, walks over the pizza and sits down right on my plate, like the closer he can be, the easier it is to scrutinize me. Like his ass is just smashing my pizza slice. Obviously... the pizza will be fine, but I have no way to get to it without going through his body. Do I just do my best to try to project that he’s intangible so I can go through him?

What if I touch him? He’ll instantly know and this ruse will be up. How annoying will he be once he knows I can see and hear him?

Maddox, probably seeing me just sitting there contemplating all of my life choices, stares at me as he comes back with a can that he sets down right through Reggie. “Something wrong, Hiro?”

“Nope. Not at all. Nothing at all,” I say then give him the biggest smile I’ve ever smiled.

His level of suspicion skyrockets as his eyes narrow, and Reggie leans in closer so I can’t even *see* Maddox when he sits down. If he started talking to me now, I’d literally have to crank my body to the side to even make eye contact.

Okay. This is fine. Let’s just reach right through the ghost groin and grab the slice and not set it back down.

Just... project intangibility... project putting my hand straight through and—

My hand slams into Reggie, immediately stopped by the firmness of Reggie’s groin as I cup his ghost dick through his pants. His eyes drop down to mine, mine snap up to his.

Fuuuuuuck.

I jump up. "I'll be right back," I say as I rush down the hallway and back into the bathroom where Reggie materializes in front of me. Shit, shit, shit. "Reggie, right?"

Reggie stares at me, eyes narrowing. "You can see me."

"I can. I've heard all the wonderfully nasty things you've said about me."

"Good," he says as he folds his arms over his chest. "I've never heard of a living person being able to see us. Out of all of them, why you?"

"I'm currently helping Maddox with a case he has," I say, believing if I immediately show I'm not a threat to his relationship with Maddox, then maybe he'll be nicer.

"You're currently bringing pizza over and being all smiles and googly eyes," he says. "Maddox is mine."

"That's fine. You can have him. I just want you to stop sitting on my pizza." I give him my best smile which usually has a calming effect on people, but it just makes Reggie look more stubborn.

His eyebrow shoots up. "You can have all the pizza you want, just don't touch my man."

"I don't want to touch him," I growl.

Now he looks offended. "Everyone wants to touch him," he says. Clearly, I can't win.

"Just... let me do my job, and I'll leave, alright?"

There's a knock on the door and I slowly turn to it before pulling it open to reveal Maddox, who looks concerned. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, Natalie was just... being a hassle. Huge emergency. HAD to come see. It was a..." I glance out the window. "Squirrel."

"A squirrel." He seems rightfully suspicious. There's no way this man will ever even find me attractive the way I'm acting... which is clearly a good thing.

"Yeah, she loves squirrels," I say. "Sorry. Coming."

"He knows?" Reggie asks as he squeezes between us.

I give a quick nod as he scrutinizes me, but thankfully, Maddox is taller than him so I can look up at him when he glances at me.

"You wanted to talk over work stuff when we're done eating?" I ask.

"Yeah, I had a few questions. Your brother here, by any chance?" he asks as he looks around, like he might be able to see him.

"No, he's not... should I have brought him?"

"Can you just bring him?" he asks curiously.

I shrug. "It's kind of a tossup. They are horrible listeners. Sometimes they'll immediately do what you asked, the next time they just ignore you and fuck off, and you don't hear anything from them for a while."

"I wish you'd fuck off," Reggie says.

I barely refrain from glaring at him.

We walk back in, and just as I reach for my pizza, Reggie sits his ass right on it. I decide to say fuck it, I'll just get a different piece, but when I reach for the box Reggie lies down on top of the entire table, covering all of it while smirking at me.

"We're going to the beach next weekend. Do you like to swim, Hiro?" Jonah asks.

"I do! I'm not the best swimmer, but it's a good time. What about you?"

"Kacey's part of the school swim team and has given me lessons for years," Jonah says.

"I tried drowning him a few times too... not successfully, obviously," Kacey says with a grin.

I take that moment to shove Reggie's leg out of the way and grab my pizza. The contact surprises

Reggie enough that he sits up and stares at me in shock as I merrily munch on my bite. I give him the smuggest look I can muster as I chew.

“My ass was all over that,” Reggie hisses as he leans into my face.

“Hmm... the pizza is delicious,” I say.

“Thanks for picking it up,” Maddox says.

“Anything to keep you from arresting me again,” I say before giving him a wink that nearly sends Reggie over the edge. He’s flailing his arms around, eyes ridiculously wide.

Jonah’s eyes get wide as well. “Hold on... what?”

“I didn’t arrest you,” Maddox grumbles.

“On my birthday. Threatened to handcuff me and everything,” I say, which is a bit of an exaggeration, but I like the way it makes Reggie glare at me.

“Were the handcuffs furry?” Reggie asks.

I ignore him. As the kids finish up, they head back into the living room. Maddox cleans up the table while Reggie eyes me until a cat I hadn’t seen before comes over. This one is a long-haired calico, different than the one Maddox had taken to help out at the park.

“That’s Stella. She’s a bit of a stick in the mud with new people,” Maddox says, clearly having glanced at me or something at some point.

“Hey, Stella,” I say as I hold my hand out.

“No... Stella, no,” Reggie says, since Stella is now moving up to me, her black nose twitching. “Do not sniff him.”

“She’s sniffing me,” I say to Maddox, even though I might be saying it more to Reggie.

“Really? She generally hates people,” Maddox says as he watches with a smile.

“Stella, don’t. Stella, turn away,” Reggie demands as Stella must give me the sniff of approval since she bumps her head into my hand, choosing to rub on me.

“She’s so soft,” I say as I scratch behind her ear. Bandit, seeing what’s happening, rushes over and jumps onto my lap, immediately wanting attention. “They’re both very cute and clearly like me.”

“They are, aren’t they?” Reggie says. “But you can’t touch them. They’re mine. *Allllll* mine.” That makes me realize that Maddox really hadn’t wanted the cats—they must have been Reggie’s, and he felt responsible for them after Reggie’s passing.

I decide to at least semi respect Reggie and stand up before heading over to the table. Even though he’s being an ass, I assume a lot is jealousy over being unable to do things that I can. I’ve seen it eat away at ghosts who watch in envy as their loved ones move on. Some accept it, some struggle to. Reggie is clearly on the struggle side.

I watch Maddox as he comes and sits down across from me. “I’m wondering if you could talk to your brother some. We can now assume that it’s likely this is planned and calculated if the note on the wall of the motel shows us anything. He knows how many he wants to kill and usually, in a case like that, it means they’ve pre-targeted people.”

I hesitate as what he’s saying settles in. “But why would he have targeted Sean? My brother never did anything.”

“It doesn’t mean he did anything or was involved in something. It just means there’s possibly a reason the killer targeted him that we haven’t figured out yet. A tie between the victims beyond a similarity in age.”

“But why wouldn’t he have told me?” I say, uncertain.

Maddox seems to be hesitating, and I can tell he’s trying to talk in a way that will make me less defensive. “I’m not saying he was involved in something, but maybe he knew this person somehow.

It's so hard to tell exactly why, but we now have the possibility they knew each other. Try to see if you can get your brother to talk to Franklin. Could you do that?"

"Yeah, of course," I say, hoping if he does so and Franklin doesn't know him, it'll end this train of thought. "I'll see what he has to say."

"We can't write off the possibility that the killer wrote that simply to screw with us, but this is something we have to look into and hope we find something before the next victim. Maybe I could talk to your brother again?"

"Sure," I say as I glance over at Reggie who is sitting on the back of a chair, feet on the table. He's been oddly quiet this whole time. When I glance up to him, he catches my eyes and immediately glares at me. "How about I call you the next time I snag Sean?"

"Perfect. Thank you. I'm really hopeful we can get something from this," Maddox says, looking more determined than I feel.

"Could I visit the location of the second victim?" I ask.

"Yeah. It's been over six months, though."

"I don't care. Ghosts don't care how long it's been, they'll stick around until they find their peace," I say, wondering why he's never asked me about Reggie. Does he just assume Reggie has no reason to stick around? Does he not want to know?

"Okay. Then let me get something figured out, and I'll try to get us into that location," he says.

"Perfect."

Maddox turns quiet as he sits at the table. Reggie is busy staring at him, making me feel awkward for even being here. A part of me feels guilty for even hoping this house visit was something more than work, especially now that Reggie's been tossed into the mix.

"Okay... I need to get going, unless you had something else to talk about?" I ask, hating this turn of events but knowing that I need to remove myself from the situation before it's too late.

He looks up. "Um... well... yeah, that's it," he says, and I don't know why I find myself disappointed in that. Or wishing he'd ask me to stay a moment longer, even stopping me to talk about something else, no matter how mundane.

But instead, he just follows me out of the room. "Thanks for coming."

"Yeah, of course," I say, wondering why we couldn't have talked about this over the phone, but then I wouldn't have met the lovely Reggie.

"Don't come back," Reggie says with a little wave.

I tell Maddox's niece and nephew goodbye and then pull the door open, but before I can go anywhere, I nearly run into Ben who'd been stepping onto the porch. "Hey!" he says with a huge grin. Behind him is a younger version of himself, a guy in his twenties who is currently texting. He glances up when he hears Ben talking to me and gives me a polite smile.

"You guys are back early," Maddox says.

"Dad tried killing me," Ben's son says.

"For the last time, if I wanted to kill you, Wes, I would have brought cinder blocks to tie on your legs and toss you overboard," Ben teases.

The son, who's apparently Wes, snorts as he shakes his head. "So there we were on the boat. Gentle rocking waves. I was merrily fishing with my rod in hand... not that rod. Fishing rod—"

"We knew what kind of rod," Ben grumbles.

Wes grins. "And because my dad has two non-working feet, he slipped and slammed into me, pushing me right off the edge to be eaten by sharks."

"There are no sharks in the lake," Ben says.

"It's a dramatic life being Wes," Maddox explains to me.

"Makes sense. If my father pushed me off into shark-infested waters, I'd be a bit leery as well," I say. "Especially when he probably knows pretty well how to cover up a crime scene."

Ben shakes his head and points at Maddox. "That'd be Maddox. He goes on all the time about how stupid people are and this is how you'd cover that up and do this other thing. And how he could do it so much better."

"I never said I could do it *better*," Maddox says, even though the look on his face tells us all that he's confident he could be a better serial killer.

"He most definitely has," Wes says with a grin. "I'm Wes, by the way, since no one cared enough to introduce me."

"That's okay, Maddox tries to pretend I don't exist. Hiro," I say as I shake his hand.

"Hiro's working as a consultant to help with a case," Maddox explains, like he has to give them a reason I'm here. So much for wishful thinking.

"How were the other two?" Ben asks. "Did you have to make them cry again?"

"I only made them cry once, and you will never let me forget it," Maddox says with a sigh.

"Jonah still brings it up every time I tell him you're watching him. There's like this mixture of excitement, since he thinks you're super cool, but also terror. It's good for him," Ben says with a smile.

"That's so strange... I feel the same way every time I deal with Maddox as well!" I declare.

"You do not!" Maddox growls.

That makes everyone laugh, since they clearly know Maddox quite well. I give them a wave. "I'm headed out. You guys have fun and good luck. Maddox, when you have a time to meet tomorrow, let me know, please."

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Of course," I say.

We issue our goodbyes and I head out toward the car feeling awkward and strange, but that's my own fault for hoping that the reason I was being invited over had to do with... something.

"Hiro," Maddox calls out, and I turn around to see the other two have already disappeared inside.

I tilt my head as I look at him. "What's that?"

He watches me for a second before going, "Don't be late tomorrow or I'm leaving without you. I don't put up with people who are late."

"Yes, sir," I say sarcastically. "Just don't forget you haven't actually told me a time."

"I thought you were psychic."

"I momentarily thought you were nice."

He grins. "Joke's on us, right? I'll text you." Then he goes back inside and shuts the door, leaving me to head to my car.

The issue is...

Reggie's in my car.

I do not have time for this. Quickly, I walk past the car, like it's not even mine. I'm sure Maddox is watching me and thinks I've lost my mind but joke's on him, I lost it a long while ago.

"Get in the fucking car, dickhead," Reggie yells.

With no other option, I sigh and retreat to the car before getting inside. "I'm leaving, so hopefully that means you're staying here," I say as I start to back out of the driveway while he smugly sits in my passenger seat.

"What the fuck are you doing moving in on my man?" he asks.

“If you mistakenly thought any of that exchange was me ‘moving in on your man,’ then I think you need a refresher on what flirting is,” I say. “That was purely work.”

“Which is why you were so disappointed he didn’t ask you to stay,” he says with a knowing grin.

Even the little stab right to my feelings can’t deter me. “Well, he clearly has *awful* taste in men, so I dodged a bullet.”

He looks horrified at my declaration. “I’m sexy, perfect, and amazing.”

I snort, unable to hide my inability to believe any of that.

He lets out a feral-sounding noise as he grabs onto my arm. Then he stops as he pats my arm down, clearly mystified by the ability to feel me. He pulls my arm this way and that, which is quite distracting while I drive.

“Why can I touch you?” he asks, obviously forgetting he’d been contemplating my murder only a moment prior.

“I don’t know. It’s just a thing I do to ghosts who are around me,” I say. “If they’re close enough to me, they seem to gain some extra power or something.” Although, it’s concerning how good he is at it. Usually, it takes a while for ghosts to have this much control, but Reggie seems to be a pro at it... sadly.

Then he takes my hand and forces me to smack my own face with it. Jerking my arm away, I turn to look at him with narrowed eyes.

“I am *driving*,” I hiss, but he’s quite proud of himself as he cackles. Realizing that the last thing I want to do is show this asshole where I live, I pull off at a shopping center and park toward the back of the parking lot before turning to him. “What do you want?”

“I don’t want you to tell Maddox I’m around,” he says, surprising me.

“That’s fine. He hasn’t asked, which tells me he probably thinks you’ve already moved on or he doesn’t want to know,” I say. “But if he asks, I’m not sure I can lie to him.”

That doesn’t seem to please him. “I will haunt your ass so fucking hard if you tell him,” he growls.

“Join the party.”

His eyes narrow, and with a sigh, I realize that maybe I should play at least a little nice.

“I will not tell him about you, but I also don’t like the idea of lying to him. Sometimes, finding out shit like this is hard, but if he wants to know, then it’s his right to know. But I promise I won’t offer up the information,” I say. “Now, can you tell me what’s keeping you here? What could I do to help you move on so I don’t ever have to see your face again?”

“I don’t want to move on. I want to guard that house so every time you even *think* about coming over, I’ll be watching you,” he says. “I’ll be waiting, and I’ll be haunting you, even in your moments of ecstasy.”

“Great... lovely. I love having to work with a grumpy monster and a ghost monster from hell. Was hell too full for you? Was that the problem?”

Reggie smirks at me. “Hell doesn’t want me.”

I grin as I shake my head. “Yeah, yeah. Sure. If you decide you want to move on from your miserable life, let me know. I’d be more than happy to help you carry on or exorcise you.”

“Yeah, no thanks,” he says before flipping me off with both hands and disappearing.

“He seems like a good guy.”

I jump about a foot in the air as Natalie leans into the front seat. It makes her giggle, of course. “Dammit, you gave me a heart attack. I’m going to be ninety, and you’re going to jump in front of me like that and that’ll be the end of me.”

“Aw! You’ll get to be a ghostie with me! How exciting.”

“Yeah, sure.” I’m definitely not too excited by the thought. “So that was Maddox’s... something. Boyfriend? I dunno, but I’m pretty sure he hates my guts because he thinks I want Maddox.”

“Thinks? Honey, it’s clear you want that hunkalicious. Do you want me to battle him for you so you can take Maddox?”

“No, I couldn’t do that to someone,” I say.

“Umm... it’s not like he can have him. Hiro, he’s gone. The first hurdle of being dead is knowing that you’ll no longer be able to be there for your loved ones, but you also grow to learn that seeing your loved ones prosper and love others is worth it... anything to see them happy.”

“What about you?” I ask, since she always refuses to tell me anything about her past.

“Well... I mean... even though I know I can’t have him, as long as you let me sit on Maddox’s face every now and then, it’s fine.”

Why’d I even bother asking?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



MADDOX

What a fucking disaster. Hiro has to think I'm insane for inviting him over to ask if his brother can go with us... that's it. And to top it off, I was disappointed he left so early, yet I didn't do a damn thing to stop him. What kind of idiot am I?

I walk into the bathroom and turn the water on before splashing cold water against my face. "Reggie? Are you here?" I ask as I hold my hand out.

I couldn't get myself to admit that the reason I invited Hiro over had nothing to do with work and everything to do with Reggie. My plan had been to get him alone and ask if Reggie was still around. But the moment I was forced to face it, I found myself unable to ask. Do I want to know? It's not like I'll ever see or feel him again.

It's been five years since his death. It was hard, but I've managed, and what does knowing benefit me? Will it make me miss him all over again?

I'm better off not knowing. He and Hiro are both so snarky, I feel like they'd get along perfectly.

Bowing my head, I lean against the wall and push all of that back. I need to stay focused; I need to stay away from this shit. Inviting him over here with the intention of asking about Reggie was a foolish plan. I have better things to worry about. And being disappointed he left so early definitely isn't one of those things.



Hiro is late.

It's 9:03 Monday morning, and I told him to be at the department by nine or I was leaving without him.

"Well, aren't you in a mood," Ben says as I storm past him down the stairs.

"I am nothing," I declare as I hurry by him and out the door. I can see Hiro's car pulling in, but I pretend I don't notice and quickly get into my own vehicle, which I start. As I see him running across the parking lot, I throw it into drive and start to leave.

In the rearview mirror, I can see him yelling something while waving his arms around and it gives me minor joy to know that I've annoyed him. It's definitely not joy over seeing him show up... right? Fucking hell.

Grudgingly, I stop the car, forcing him to jog the twenty feet over to it. He grabs the door, only to find it locked.

Slowly, I roll the window down about two inches.

"You're late," I warn him, in case he didn't notice.

"You're making me later," he says as he yanks on the door again. "*Maddoxxxxx*."

"What?"

"Let me in."

"I told you not to be late."

He sighs as he slumps against the side of the car. "Yes, and I tried not to be, but sometimes shit doesn't go according to plan."

My phone rings, so I roll the window up and take the call. "Detective Booker speaking."

"You sound like that stick up your ass is even farther up your ass today," Elena Perez says.

"I like it up there."

"I bet you do," she says with a snort. "Anyway, I need a favor."

"Alright."

"Not my department but still a problem. A kid went missing. Family of four was out playing in the river when their kayaks hit a rapid and they fell into the water. The mom grabbed for the nine-year-old and said when she looked up, she couldn't see the ten-year-old anywhere. She had a life vest on, but the parents admit it was a bit too big for her. A storm is rolling in and we need to find her, so I was hoping your little... psychic friend could help."

"He... sees ghosts. You think she's dead?" I ask, hoping that's not what she thinks.

She's quiet for a moment, giving me time to glance at Hiro who is listening closely.

"I don't know what I think, but I know there's a little girl out there, and I'm hoping we don't find a body," Elena says.

"Yeah, okay, we're headed there now," I say as I unlock the door.

"If you're busy, you can send him along and the team can handle the rest," she says.

"No, it's fine," I say, not sure what I'm going to do at the previous crime scenes without him. If things finish up quickly here, we'll see if we can go to the place Joshua Wicker's body was found.

Hiro gets in as I hang up with Elena.

"I see you had a change of heart. Heart grow a teeny bit larger?" he asks.

"Not at all. Detective Perez just called. She needs our help," I say before explaining the situation to him.

He seems a little hesitant, and I realize that maybe I should have asked him before agreeing.

"That alright with you?"

He nods. "Yeah, of course. I'd love to help if I can... just hoping they don't actually need me... you know?"

"I understand," I say as I drive. It's about fifteen minutes from me, but I know the exact spot when I reach it because of the vehicles everywhere. Hiro gets out with me and a man I don't know too well, but is likely in charge of search and rescue, comes up.

"Perez told me to expect you two," he says. "And... I guess I didn't catch your... specialty?"

"We're just going to walk around and see what we can do, alright?" I say, dismissing the question.

He doesn't seem certain but shakes our hands. "I have divers out now. The rapids are pretty bad

and will only get worse as the rain starts coming in. I have no idea why some people think rapids aren't something to fear. And then to take kids out on them..." He shakes his head.

I get it. I've seen some truly awful and negligent people in my line of work. It doesn't make sense to someone like me, but people do what they want to do. There's rarely any way to combat that.

Hiro gives him a soft smile before walking over to the water's edge. The guy leaves us alone so I walk up beside Hiro, wondering what he sees, if anything at all.

"Anything?"

He glances back at me. "Here's the problem. If she died, her ghost will be tied to the body, at least right away," he says as I feel the first drops of rain. "That means if she died under the water, her ghost would be under the water. If she died two miles down the river, that's where she'd be. There's a ghost I could talk to, but he's packed into the middle of that group of people..." He sighs, and I realize that his issue is that he dislikes people seeing him talk to ghosts. I mean, it makes sense; it's taken me a bit to get used to myself.

Hiro turns and hurries to the side. "Natalie!" he hisses. "I need you to get that ghost to come over here." He's quiet for a moment before going, "Yes, I can hear you. Yes, I can see you. I need you to help us. A little girl fell out of a kayak right here, did you see it happen?" His expression tightens a little. "Please, I need your help..."

As I watch him work, I can't help but find myself amazed by this. At first, when I thought he was pulling my leg, it was hard to understand, but now, I can see how much strength this must take. Strength to not care what others think as you embrace something that no one else can see. And then to do what he can to use it to help others.

Honestly, he's quite impressive.

My attention shifts to him as he turns to me.

"He said he didn't see anything," Hiro says.

"Shit, okay. I think... I think we should walk it. I know they have many others walking it as well, but if she's still here when it's been over an hour... there's a possibility she's not alive," I say. "The only way she'd be alive is if she'd been swept down that river and eluded everyone so far. So let's walk."

Hiro nods and begins to walk with me as I wonder when I started to trust him—started to feel more like we were partners in this.



HIRO

It's slow going, but I have to scan the river as well as both sides of the bank, and it's getting harder as the rain starts to come down.

"Do you find your job hard to do?" I ask.

Maddox glances over at me. The rain is coming down at an angle and making his gray button-down stick to his chest. "You mean dealing with the dead?"

"Yeah," I say as I slick my wet black hair back from where it's sticking to my forehead.

"It's definitely not easy, but it gets easier... as I'm sure you know. I know it's awful to say, but even death becomes familiar after a while. It's hard to deal with, but I also know that every time I stop a killer, I could be saving someone."

It's interesting how we've both surrounded ourselves with death but in different ways. "Yeah... it's funny. You try to help the living and I'm trying to help the dead. We make quite the team."

"You're just off talking to imaginary friends and I'm elbows deep in hard, backbreaking work," he says, which makes me grin.

"Sure, sure."

Maddox has a soft hint of a smile on his face as he walks, doing his best to search for the girl as the clouds cover the sun. "It's oddly getting harder to deny what you can do."

"Right?"

"Do you ever... so if you come across a ghost, do you feel like it's your duty to tell the person they're following?" he asks.

I still as I wonder if he's talking about Reggie. Maybe he does want to know and he can't get himself to ask. "Duty? No. If it's been a long time, I generally just let it go. Why stir up old feelings and concerns if they've gotten to a point in their life where they're happy—why change it, you know? I don't know. I might be going about it all wrong. Sometimes I ask the ghost what they want."

He nods and I wait for him to ask about Reggie, but at that moment lightning cracks through the sky, interrupting us.

"This is not looking good," he says, head bowed.

"But we can't stop," I say as the rain makes it hard to even see.

"With our view growing less, let's spread out a little," he shouts over the rumbling of the storm.

I nod, trying to search, but the rain in my eyes is making it hard to see anything. There are walkers on the other side shouting the little girl's name across the wide river, and every step I take, I feel we have less of a chance of finding her alive. The water is sloshing against the rocks that make me wonder how the family even expected to get down here, and why they thought today was the day to go.

That's when I see a flicker of something on the water. At first, I assume it's just the spray of the water slamming against the rocks before I see the flicker again. When I stop walking, Maddox doesn't seem to notice and keeps going, but there's something... there's...

That's the moment the ghost materializes, and I realize what I'd been seeing was the ghost coming into existence.

If she *just* came into existence, it means she's *just* died... there's a possibility I could still save her. "Maddox!" I shout over the pounding rain as I race into the water. The rush of the current presses hard against me, slowing me down as my heart hammers against my chest. My foot slips and suddenly I plunge under, not having realized it was such a quick drop-off into deep water. I push to the surface and put everything in my power toward swimming to the middle where the ghost is standing on the rocks, staring down. I can't see the girl, but she has to be here. She has to be...

Water smashes into my face, filling my nose and mouth the moment I try to grab a breath. Coughing, I reach the rocks, but I can't see the girl. Did she already get swept away? Was this where she died only to be swept farther downstream?

I dive under and grab hard onto the rock, trying to pull myself along beneath the water. That's the moment I see the dark shape of the body of the girl. Fighting against the current, I push down until I can reach her. Wrapping my arms around her tightly, I kick toward the surface only to be quickly stopped where I'm at. Tugging does nothing... she's stuck on something and if I don't get her above water soon, there'll be nothing we can do.

Running my hands down her, I feel a strap from the life jacket stuck on something. I yank and pull but with the current beating me back, I can't get it free. I try the buckle but it's stuck. I jerk and yank

until it busts apart, allowing me to grab the girl only to be swept back and slam into a rock.

Losing my grip on her, she slips from my hands, and I turn quickly to grab her only to hit another rock, but I manage to grasp onto the edge of her shirt.

Desperately, I dig my fingers into the rock while trying to hold on tightly with my other hand. But like this, I can't seem to pull her toward me. The water keeps leaping off the rocks, smashing into my face, and making me feel like I'm going to drown. Panic ignites inside me because I feel like I can't even reel her in. I can't do anything but hang on tight and pray I don't drown myself in the process.

A strong arm wraps around me and I turn, startled to see Maddox there. He pulls me into him, holding me close as relief washes through me. His other arm reaches out and grabs the girl. Without missing a beat, he kicks off the rocks, driving us back into the water. I kick to try to help him, but the man is a powerhouse and with his help, he gets me to an area where I can stand. Still, he doesn't let go of me until I'm on dry land. He takes the girl and drops her onto the ground and immediately begins chest compressions.

I cough and gag as I drop to my hands and knees before looking back at the ghost of the little girl. I don't say anything to Maddox; he's doing everything he can to bring her back and I'm thankful he's here and knows what he's doing because I'm not sure I would.

The ghost is watching us now... likely drawn to her own body as she stands there, arms wrapped around herself.

"Come on... come on..." I whisper. "She hasn't been dead long, don't stop."

Maddox nods and I see the ghost flicker and then disappear.

"Oh, thank god," I say a moment before the girl spits up water. Maddox assists her as I sit there shaking, overcome with adrenaline and relief.

"It's okay," Maddox says, voice gentle. "It's okay."

She's dispelling water as I push myself up onto shaky feet to try to find someone who can get the attention of medical personnel. Thankfully, it seems someone has noticed what's going on and is rushing toward us. I step back to give them space as they move onto the scene as the lightning strikes again.

And in the flash of light, I see someone standing in the trees to my right. I turn to watch the woman who is staring right at me. From here, I can tell she's a ghost, but that's all I can see. But what's weird is that there are a few other ghosts scattered around her, just staring at her, watching her.

"Hiro—"

She turns around and walks away, but as she moves, the other ghosts quickly back away from her, like they're afraid of her.

"Hiro?"

I turn to look at Maddox who is watching me closely.

"Good job," he says as he reaches an arm around me and gives me this little one-armed squeeze that makes me want to lean into him but also reminds me that I can't. "You saved her life... if you were a moment later..." He can't seem to say what would have happened if I was a moment later.

"Yeah..." I say, feeling strange as my eyes drift back over to where that woman stood.

"What's wrong?" he asks as he ducks down a little so he's closer to my height.

I shake my head. "I'm sorry, I just... yeah. I mean, you saved her too. Thank god you know CPR or no matter what I did, she wouldn't be alive."

He squeezes my arm with a smile. "Don't discredit what you did, Hiro. You did a miraculous thing."

And that really makes me feel good because it's not too often the ghosts I find come back to life.

“Thank you.”

The guy who’d talked to us earlier calls out to us. Maddox gives me a nudge to follow him, so we walk over to the guy.

“How’d you do it? How’d you find her? We’d walked up and down this area... how the hell did we not notice her?” He seems to be rambling but there’s clear relief on his face.

“I think she was tucked behind the rocks. Or maybe she’d gone under as your crew walked past. She must not have seen the others or been able to call out for help,” Maddox says as my eyes drift over to the trees.

The row of ghosts still stand there, eyes fixated on whatever is going on in there.

As Maddox talks, I turn and walk toward them.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“Death,” one says.

“Pain,” another says.

Not again. “Someone’s dying?”

“Dead.”

“Recently?”

“Dead, dead. Been dead, is dead. Dead, dead.”

“Who are you talking to over here?” the guy Maddox had been speaking to says as I turn to look.

“No one, sorry,” I say, embarrassed that I hadn’t noticed him watching me.

“Good job, kid,” he says, which makes me feel a bit condescended to when I’m not a “kid,” but I just give him a smile and a nod.

“Excuse us,” Maddox says. That seems to confuse the guy, but he wanders off, leaving the two of us alone. “What’s wrong?”

“The ghosts seem... anxious. It’s probably just because of the girl...”

“You’re bleeding. Let’s get you back and cleaned up, alright?” he asks.

I nod as I tear my eyes away. “Thanks for diving in to save us. I was struggling there a bit.”

“I wish I’d have noticed sooner. I was looking off to the left, and when I looked back you’d just leapt off into the river. It took me a moment to find you through the rain. You must have been under when I was trying to search for you,” he says.

“Oh yeah, her life jacket was caught under the water. I think she’d been stuck there for a while, but she’d probably gotten exhausted and just couldn’t keep her head above the water. If we were a moment later or sooner, we’d never have found her. I saw her ghost flicker into existence.”

“Wait... so her ghost was already here?”

“Yeah. And a good thing too, or I’d never have noticed her.”

“I didn’t realize a ghost could be here yet they could come back to life.”

“It has to happen quickly, or they won’t come back,” I say. “Your quick CPR got her back.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you,” he says, which makes me smile.

When we make it back, we’re soaking wet, but they’re getting the girl loaded up in the ambulance. The family is anxiously watching her be carried inside.

“I’ll have someone look you over,” Maddox says, but I shake my head.

“Nah, that’s okay. I’ll be fine,” I say.

“You’re bleeding, though.”

“I really think I’m fine,” I assure him.

He seems uncertain but lets me head over to the car.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



MADDOX

“Honestly, I’m fine if you want to continue our plans for today,” Hiro says while looking absolutely drowned. There’s not an inch of him that’s not wet, dirty, or bloody, and he thinks we’re just going to waltz into a crime scene looking like this (even though said crime scene is quite cold). We currently *look* like a crime scene.

“You know what? I think I could find a sliver of compassion in my heart to take you to your house and let you at least change your clothes so you don’t look like the Loch Ness Monster walking in,” I say.

He snorts as he looks over at me, but I can tell something’s off. He’d seemed extremely anxious when he’d been looking into the woods and had been shaky from saving the girl, which is why I’d been inclined to hug him... and then I felt like maybe I shouldn’t hug him, which turned into an awkward one-armed thing. Why am I overthinking all of this so much?

“You remind me of this one time when I was soaking in the tub after I’d gotten shoved out of the way by a car. And as I was lying there feeling like death, my cat slipped off the edge of the tub and fell in,” I say.

Hiro grins at me. “I look like a wet cat?”

His grin makes me feel more at ease. Ahhh shit. Why am I letting him have this effect on me? “Exactly like one.”

“Thanks. You look as majestic as normal. You have this like... glistening look,” he says, which makes me laugh. “I’m like a wet cat and you look like a model that someone sprayed water on to make it look like you’re glowing. Got it.”

“I didn’t say that!” I protest, but of course he’d twist my words around to make him look like the victim.

“You most definitely did.”

“Maybe, but... you know what? I give up,” I say with a grin.

He, at least, seems distracted as I drive. I glance over at him as I say, “You did a wonderful thing today.”

“Thanks, I’m glad she’s alive. I... was starting to fear I wouldn’t find her,” Hiro admits.

"I know that feeling far too well. It really didn't look good."

"I hope her parents aren't so stupid now," he says.

I nod in agreement, but sometimes, it seems like even the prospect of death can't scare stupidity out of people. "Let's hope."

"Are your parents angels from above like Ben?" Hiro asks.

I snort as I think about my parents. "They're... there... semi-present, not really wanted."

"Just like hanging there?"

"Pretty much. They were a bit absent. A bit negligent. But there. Just... there," I admit.

"I'm sorry," he says, and I can't help but flinch as I remember that he grew up in foster homes and I'm complaining about my alive parents.

He seems to notice my reaction because he says, "This one time, my dad and my mom were driving separately and they both thought I was in the car with the other and off they drove, leaving me just standing there. I was confident they'd left me and were never going to return, and I was just going to have to become a wolf child."

I shift my eyes over to him, even though with the thundering rain, I know I should keep my attention on the road. "Wolf child?"

He grins at me as he nods. "Yes, I'd run on all fours and have to hunt with the wolves."

"How did that turn out for you?" I ask.

"Well, my mom came back after like twenty minutes. She picked me up and took me to get ice cream where she told me she'd get me an extra large if I didn't tell anyone at school."

"Did you?"

"I held on to my promise until today," he says. "I think the promise has run its course and it'd be alright to let you know."

"Probably," I say as I head toward his apartment.

When I arrive, there's no sign of the rain letting up, so we rush to the front of the building. I follow him up the stairs and into his apartment. It's well taken care of and clean in a lived-in way. It's small but spacious enough for a single person living alone, but I'm still not sure I could handle being in an apartment. I don't like the idea of neighbors so close to me.

The first thing he does is go over to the balcony door, slide the lock off and open the door. Then he slides it shut and locks it before turning around and noticing me watching.

"Ghost bird," he explains, like that's just a normal thing to tell someone.

"You... letting it in or out?" I ask.

"In. He really thinks he can't fly through the walls for some reason. He's just been... following me around. It's really weird. Probably like a death omen or something, but he's also kind of neat, so I just let him at it."

"Where's he at?" I ask as my eyes hunt the floor, even though I know there's no way I can see it.

Hiro points to a rug. "There. Oh! Did I show you my painting?"

He rushes over to a painting hanging on the wall before pulling it off and displaying it to me. It takes me a moment to fully register that I am indeed staring at a very explicit painting of two men smooshing a very busty woman between them.

"The mayor's wife painted it and the mayor gave it to me for helping him. Wasn't that sweet?"

"I honestly thought you were joking," I say. "Why are their penises so big?"

"I... I don't know."

"And you chose to hang it on your living room wall?"

"Yes, I want everyone to know the kind of person I am the moment they walk in," he says with a

grin.

“Do they both have collars on?”

“They do.”

“And she has their leashes.”

“Yeah... the mayor’s wife asked me to undress the mayor with my teeth. She’s clearly a bit... frisky.”

“Did you?”

“Did I what?” he asks.

“Undress the mayor with your teeth.”

He gives me a look as I try not to grin. “What do you think?”

“Hands?”

“No! Neither! He’s not someone I find overly attractive... you know... being much older than me.”

I find myself wondering what he does find attractive as he hangs the painting back up and clears his throat. “Anyway. Do you want to get a shower? I’ll find you some clothes.”

“You go get a shower first so I can check to see what you have going on and make sure you don’t need a doctor.”

His expression turns stubborn. “I don’t need a doctor, I’m fine.”

I give him a stern look that must set him in gear. And while he heads off to the bathroom, I find myself wandering around the apartment. I’m too wet to sit down, so I walk over to the rug the bird was last at. Is it still there? Did it go with Hiro?

This is fucking weird.

I’m over here just staring at a rug like if I look long enough, I’ll see something.

Quickly, I shake my head, trying to dispel the thoughts as I wait. When Hiro comes out, he’s wearing a clean t-shirt and a pair of pants that hug him a little too nicely. I try my best not to notice that as I walk over to him.

“Shirt off.”

“I’m fine.”

“Off,” I growl, and he must finally realize I mean business because he takes it off. I do my absolute best, which really isn’t much at all, to not let my eyes run down his bare body. When my eyes snap up, I see I’ve been caught looking, so I do what I do best. Glare at him.

Instead of noticing the way he’s now grinning at me, I try to focus on the areas that need medical attention. His back is red and already bruising, but there’s not much that can be done about that beyond some anti-inflammatories. He has some scrapes on his back and a cut on his shoulder, so I march him over to his first aid kit in his bathroom and sit him down on the edge of the tub.

I open the first aid kit and look in to see his “wide” selection. “This is what you have?” I ask as I hold up a teeny Band-Aid.

“Yes, you just have to use fifteen of them for a papercut-sized wound,” he says.

“Why the hell didn’t you say that you didn’t have anything and to go to *my* house?”

“I have Scotch tape if you want it,” he says with a grin.

“To tape your mouth shut?” I grumble.

He’s watching me with his rich brown eyes, and I can’t help but find myself being pulled into them. I swallow hard as I try to get my mind away from the place it’s adamant it’s going, and back to being serious and composed. The last thing I need is to invest myself in another person.

“My new bird is cawing at you. He thinks you’re evil,” Hiro says, snapping me out of my

thoughts.

“Well, tell him that unless he’s going to go fetch some damn medical supplies, he oughta shut up,” I say as I fish through the box before giving up. “You’re hopeless.”

“Thanks. Can I put my shirt back on now that it’s clear I’m not dying?” he asks. “Or would you like it to stay off?”

I ignore him as I press my fingers to the back of his neck and push his head down to look at his back. Just the brush of my fingers against his skin makes it feel like electricity is running through them.

I ball those thoughts up as fucking quickly as I can, then shove them down and brutally rip them from my body before trying to toss them into the trash only to realize that they won’t fucking leave.

Instead, I glance down at the scar that’d originally caught my attention before playing it off like I was looking at a bruise. Fuck, I’m clearly losing my mind.

“Well, what’s Dr. Booker’s consensus? Am I gonna live?” he asks as he tilts his head back and gives me a playful grin. “Or do I need an all-over exam?” The wink he gives me sucks up that ball of bullshit that I’d tossed out and slams it into my body. My scowl at my level of failure must make him quickly retreat as his eyebrows bunch up. “It was a joke.”

“It was hilarious,” I say, completely deadpan.

“I could tell, by the way you just *filled* up my apartment with laughter,” he says.

I shake my head as a chuckle escapes me. “Good, I’m glad,” I say as I grab his shirt and drop it on his head.

“Why don’t you get a shower here? I probably have some clothes that’ll fit.”

“I have dry clothes in my car I can put on.”

“Just take a shower, you smell like dead fish,” he says, which makes me grudgingly agree. I hold my hand down and take his wrist to pull him up to his feet.

“Go take something for your back,” I say as I look down at him. He’s not short, but when I’m six three, I make even average height people seem shorter.

Hiro glances up at me as I stand pressed in next to him in the small bathroom. My eyes drop down to his lips as he watches me closely. I can *tell* if I just so much as leaned into him, his lips would be on mine. They’d be mine to capture. I could press into him, feel him, touch him... dammit.

I tear my eyes away before sliding to the side.

He clears his throat and pushes past me. “If... If you need me to get your clothes, I’ll do that while you take a shower. Trunk?”

“Yeah...” I say, instead of telling him I’m more than capable of getting them. But clearly, I’m incapable of quite a bit, including keeping my eyes to myself.

Fuck.

He closes the door, breaking the spell and snapping me back to reality. What the hell is wrong with me? I’m just tired. That’s all this is.

Quickly, I get in the shower before realizing that during the mess of it all, I never got a towel or anything from him, but as I’m scrubbing the mud off myself, there’s a knock on the door.

“I’m setting your clothes and towel right inside. Don’t like burst out naked or something horrifying,” he says.

“Horrifying?” I ask.

“Correct. Have fun.”

“Yes, so much fun,” I say as I hear the door close.

Oh, I definitely could have some fun if I didn’t let my own stupid thoughts get in the way.

Just as I’m turning off the shower, my phone starts ringing. I reach out for my towel and dry my

hand before stretching out for my phone that's on the edge of the counter. Grabbing it, I see it's work and quickly answer.

They need me back at the department, immediately putting the day's plans of visiting past crime scenes even more on hold. So I get dressed, drape the towel over the edge of the laundry basket and step out to find Hiro sitting on the floor just poking at the air. Just... poking it.

He immediately stops and looks over at me. "I was..."

"Poking your imaginary friend?" I ask.

He starts laughing. "I just love looking ridiculous around you, honestly. Yes. I was poking the bird, but if I'd known you were looking, I would have looked all cool and stuff."

"I don't think you're supposed to poke birds."

"Well, this one needs to be poked. It's fucking weird."

"Alright, I'm sorry to leave you to your poking, but I just got called in. We'll have to reschedule. If this afternoon gets away from me, does tomorrow work?"

"Yeah."

"You sure you're able to skip work this much?"

"Yeah, my employee Barry's handling it. I promise."

"Okay... good."

And with that I give him a wave and hurry out the door with my wet clothes in hand. As I walk down the stairs, I see the landlord coming in through the front door. What was his name again? Randy... right?

"Hey, you're that... detective or whatever," he says.

"I am."

"Did you ever figure out what you're looking for? You still looking into Hiro?"

"Umm... no, he's helping me out," I say.

He nods. "Yeah... I haven't kicked him out yet either. Thought maybe that wasn't the absolutely best way to treat someone who saved your life, but who knows."

Who knows? "Yeah, makes sense."

"Stupid cameras stopped working. I just have to beat them around a bit, and they'll straighten the fuck up," he says and off he goes to beat some cameras. I wonder if the residents are aware how many cameras there are in this place.

I leave him to it, glad he hasn't taken it upon himself to toss Hiro out, and rush out into the rain to my car.

CHAPTER TWENTY



HIRO

“You’re not going with me,” I say as I stare at the bird on my front seat. “Shoo. Out. Fuck off.” Since Maddox couldn’t get away from work, we had to reschedule our visit to the past crime scene of Joshua, the second victim, until today.

“You’re yelling at an innocent bird,” Sean says as he slips into the car and sits in the front seat.

“He’s up to something,” I say as my brother holds his arm out for the bird. The bird straight up ignores him.

“Come here. I’ll take better care of you,” Sean says as he reaches out to the bird who immediately pecks him. “What a spiteful little ass.”

I don’t bother telling him he’s never pecked me; I just push the bird over. He jumps onto the gearshift before sliding off into the cupholder. He seems perplexed before deciding to make it his home.

“So... where are we going?” Sean asks, since all he knows is that I told him I needed him with me.

“For a drive. Ready? Or do you need to get back to Stripper Ghost?”

“Nah, I have some time. Stripper Ghost did say he’d like to gyrate in your face again when you have some spare time. Said it made him feel alive *and* horny.”

“Ah, okay. I’ll... let him know,” I say, which makes Sean laugh.

“The moment you say horny, I’m here and ready,” Natalie says as she pops into the back seat before seeing the bird. “Oh my god, he’s adorable!” She reaches for him only to be viciously pecked. “Or not. He’s Satan’s spawn, obviously. What the hell?”

“He’s fine,” I say as I reach over and pet the bird who is clearly pleased. It makes me gloat that Natalie and Sean are now annoyed.

Pleased with myself, I start driving to the police station where I’ll meet up with Maddox. My back is a little sore, but I’m honestly not too bad compared to how I could have been. I’d also been personally contacted by the parents who thanked me nonstop and told me the little girl was doing well.

When I pull into the parking lot, I get out, only to have the raven follow me and land on my

shoulder.

“Are you really going to take Spite with you?” Sean asks.

“Spite?” I ask.

“I’ve named it Spite because it acts spiteful and evil and annoying. If you haven’t named him yet, name him Spite the Ass.”

I look over at my shoulder bird who is just chilling and enjoying the day. “I guess?”

“Who is that sexy beast?” Natalie says, making me look up to see Maddox.

He sure is a sexy beast—

That’s when it hits me.

Oh no...

No, no, no...

“You’re not talking about Maddox... are you?” I whisper.

“I sure am not. Who is that beside him?”

As Maddox steps up to me, my eyes drift over to Reggie who is smirking at me as he *hangs* on Maddox. Why the hell did he come along? Why didn’t he stay put, haunting Maddox’s house and being an ass as far away from me as he could be?

“Hey,” Maddox says.

“Don’t look at him. Stop looking at him,” Reggie says as he steps between us and waves his arms around, like he can get me to stop noticing Maddox’s entire presence.

“Hi...” I say.

“Do not speaketh a word to him,” Reggie declares.

“Hi, I’m Natalie,” Natalie purrs.

Reggie grimaces when he looks at her but Natalie either doesn’t notice or doesn’t care. Then he leans into me to sniff me. Why the hell is he sniffing me?

“Ready?” Maddox asks.

“Am I ever,” I say as I hurry away from the ghost crew and into Maddox’s car. I have my seat belt buckled before he even gets in.

The three ghosts cram into the back seat with Reggie behind me. It makes me a bit nervous to have him looming over my shoulder, but I can’t let Maddox know about him.

“It’s about a twenty-minute drive, but we shouldn’t have any delays this time,” Maddox says.

“That’s great. I brought Sean with me and Natalie’s here too. We have a whole party going on in the back seat. My bird is here too.”

“Great,” he says, while looking a bit uncertain. I know he wanted Sean, so that must not be it. Maybe he just feels awkward dealing with them. I really don’t know. It probably is a lot for someone to handle.

“Stop talking to him,” Reggie says as he stuffs his head between mine and Maddox’s.

“I take it this is Maddox’s evil ghost partner?” Sean asks.

“Evil... evil *ghost partner*. I’m Maddox’s fiancé, thank you very much,” Reggie says.

Fiancé? No one told me he was his damn fiancé!

Suddenly, I feel something tighten on my shoulder. I look over and realize that Reggie has my seat belt in hand and seems rather shocked he can grip it.

“So we’ll hit the library first,” Maddox says.

“Okay, can we have the room to—”

Reggie yanks down on the seat belt which catches on my neck, choking me a little. Oh my god, Maddox’s evil fucking *fiancé* is going to murder me.

“Goddammit, stop it!” I snap as I grab the seat belt and yank against it.

“He came home smelling like you. Why was he taking a shower at your place? Huh? Huh?”

“We didn’t do anything!” I say as I realize I can’t get him to let up on it. Why the fuck is he so strong? Being in the same area as a ghost has always allowed them to do things they couldn’t do before but *this* much strength? Especially when I’m not specifically giving it to him? Am *I* getting more powerful or are the ghosts around me?

Maddox reaches over and yanks on the seat belt. I can’t tell if he just uses his massive muscles or if Reggie snaps out of it seeing his one true love rescuing me, but the seat belt releases.

“What the hell is going on?” Maddox asks, looking shocked.

“Ah, nothing. You know. Just... a little asphyxiation here and there. All good times, ha ha.”

Maddox pulls over and turns to stare at me. “I want you to repeat everything you just said, but say it while keeping a straight face because you’ve clearly *lost your mind*.”

I give him my “Everything is A-Okay” face and a thumbs up that doesn’t feel very confident. “It’s fine.”

“It’s *fine*? What the fuck just happened? It was a ghost? Ghosts can touch things? They can manipulate things?” he asks. “The ghost tried *killing* you.”

“You know how Franklin pushed me? I, for some reason, can make them materialize a bit more,” I say.

“So you materialized a ghost enough it decided to *murder you*?”

“You’re actually awfully dramatic when it was just a little seat belt... you know... throat... tightening. Let’s keep going.” Oh... my... god. I can’t tell him his dead fiancé is trying to murder me over some... some weird jealousy thing!

“What kind of monster is in this car that would *strangle you*?” Maddox asks, sounding a bit panicked.

I rotate to look Reggie right in the eyes. “I don’t know. What kind of monster would be mad about me helping you? Huh?”

Reggie might look minorly guilty as he looks every which way but at me. “I was simply making sure it worked. I thought my hand would go through it... I didn’t think I could pull it and once I was, it was so exciting I couldn’t stop. Why can I touch things around you?”

“He said he was simply making sure the seat belt worked, so all is good. We shall continue on!”

“Simply making sure it worked. Ah yes... makes total sense. So much sense. Why didn’t I think of that?” Maddox asks, clearly not amused by this. “Can’t you like... throw some salt at him? Exorcise him or something.”

I catch Reggie’s eyes. “Hmm. I probably could find a way to exorcise him.”

Reggie holds both hands up. “Alright... come on... my hand slipped. I’m too pretty to be exorcised.”

“He said his hand slipped,” I say.

“Is he usually this aggressive?” Maddox asks as he puts the car back in drive.

“Weirdly, I don’t know him very well and have no idea why he wants to harass me.”

Reggie’s face twitches. “No idea, huh?”

“None at all.”

Maddox looks concerned as he starts driving again. “Hiro, I’m starting to think you should be careful who’s around you.”

“Sadly, I can’t control them, or I promise I would,” I say. “I’d banish this one far, far away from me.”

He seems uncertain, but at least no one else tries to kill me for the rest of the drive. When we reach the library, I head inside with Maddox and my crew of ghosts. Maddox gets us permission to go downstairs where the murder took place. The killer had broken into the library about six months ago where he committed the second murder. It was downstairs in a room that's off limits to the public.

As I start down the stairs, I see Sean flinch and take a step back so he's on the top step staring down, a look of concern on his face.

"Hiro, why are we here?" Sean asks, sounding like I'd deceived him, instantly making me feel guilty. But I know if I'd told him beforehand, he probably wouldn't have come.

"I want you to help us," I say.

He shakes his head. "No, no. I told you to stay back. He's going to come for you. He's going to hurt you. You're putting yourself in danger. Hiro, please," he says as he reaches for me, like he's desperate to grab onto me to pull me out, but he can't reach me, like he thinks he can't take even a step down to me. "Hiro, please. Fuck, Hiro."

I walk back up the steps to him. "Sean, it's okay," I say as I reach out to him, but the moment my hand touches his, he disappears.

Fuck.

I glance back at Maddox who is patiently waiting at the bottom of the stairs with Reggie and Natalie. "I'm sorry, Sean left. Maybe I should have warned him, but I didn't think he'd come if I did."

Maddox nods. "It's okay. You tried. Let's see what else we can do."

I follow him down the stairs and over to a room that's closed up. He must have gotten a key because he slides it in and pushes the door open before turning on the lights. Walking into the room, I find myself looking around slowly for something that might catch my attention.

The room has clearly become a storage room, filled with boxes and other junk, making me wonder if it was one when Joshua, the second victim, had been killed.

"It's packed full," I say as I look around.

"Yeah... if you need anything moved, let me know. The room was a storage room at the time of the murder as well but it wasn't this crowded," Maddox says.

"Can you tell me where the body was?"

He walks over to a spot about halfway through the room. "He was sitting in a chair right here, facing the wall with tape over his mouth. He had a book on his lap and other books positioned around him. I was told this room was originally a private reading room before being turned into a storage room five years ago."

I walk up to the spot and wait but unless the ghost happens to wander to his death spot, he might not be much help.

"Your brother was killed by this serial killer?" Reggie asks as he stares at the spot on the floor where the chair the body was in once stood.

"Yeah, he was," I say.

Reggie stuffs his hands into his pockets. "Sorry. Doesn't mean I like you any better and won't harass you on occasion, but I'm still sorry."

"Thanks. Can you be of use and see if there are any ghosts here that could help us find Joshua's location?" I ask.

Reggie sighs. "I'm not doing it for you."

"I'm well aware," I say as he hurries off with Natalie by his side. I turn to Maddox. "I have them off on a ghost hunt, so let's see what I can find here."

"At this point, we didn't know we were dealing with a serial killer," Maddox says. "The way the

victim was positioned and killed showed clear premeditated measures and had some similarities to Sean's murder. They broke in, they brought the man here, and then they killed him. I had considered the possibility of a worker, but most had alibis that could hold up, and those that didn't weren't primary suspects: an elderly woman who uses a walker, a man with no correlation or connection... he didn't fit either."

He turns, scanning the room as he speaks. "So what I had left was a location. Tying someone up out in the woods and murdering them is more convenient than breaking into here. So why this place? Why this room? Did the killer and the victim have some tie to this room? Almost had to have for them to pick it. The issue with a library is the countless men and women who visit it every day. And it doesn't even need to be someone who visits it. It could be a memory of this place. It could relate to something else that happened in their life, a... traumatic memory in a different library, for example. But regardless... there's a reason. There's nearly always a reason, whether or not it makes sense to us. We know the room became a storage room five years ago, but before that, adults and students were allowed to schedule a time for it."

Maddox pauses for a moment, apparently thinking. "Another thing to note," he adds, "is that Joshua never lived in this city. This wasn't his library, and his family had no recollection of him visiting here, but that doesn't mean he never did."

"You think they used to meet here together?"

"I was hoping your brother could tell us that."

I think back to the look on Sean's face as he'd taken his first step down these stairs. Was it because he could feel the killer's lasting effects here, like I'd assumed? Or is there something more, something I'm missing? Is there the possibility my brother is purposely leaving out information? Has he been here before?

"What are you thinking?" Maddox asks.

"That I wish my brother hadn't disappeared," I say as I hear a noise behind me.

I turn and jump as I see the woman from the river standing at the top of the stairs looking down at me.

"What's wrong?" Maddox asks.

"I'm just jumpy as hell. Hi," I say to the woman. "I'm Hiro, what's your name?"

She watches me for a moment, her dark eyes ensnaring mine. She has long dark brown hair and looks to be about fifteen or sixteen, younger than I'd originally thought. Her stare is cold and it makes me feel hesitant.

"Do you know someone by the name of Joshua?" I ask.

She turns away from me and walks out of sight.

Rushing up the stairs, I turn to find her only to slam into Reggie who feels painfully hard whenever I hit him.

He smacks my cheek for fun, I guess. "Hey, dum-dum, I found a ghost called Weasel."

"John," the ghost says. "It's John."

"That's what I said," Reggie says before heading down the stairs to be with Maddox.

"Hey, John, I'm Hiro," I say.

He scrutinizes me before moving in closer and eyeing me up and down. "Looky there, you really can talk to us. Yeah, John, Johnny, Johnness, whatever you want to call me, I'm your library lucky-loo pal."

I raise an eyebrow, wondering how long he's haunted this world, and at what point he lost his mind. "Do you know about the guy who died down there?"

“Sure do. Real gruesome, bloody mess.”

“Do you remember what happened?”

“Yep. Real gruesome, bloody mess,” he says.

“Yes, but did you see it?” I press, since he really only seems focused on the aftermath.

“Hmm...” He thinks about it far too long for someone who has possibly seen a murder. “No... I don’t think so. Maybe.”

I sigh, unsure how any of this is going to help. Or how you “maybe” see a murder.

He lifts a finger. “You know what? Real gruesome, bloody mess.”

“Were you here or do you know of anyone who was here when it happened?” I ask.

“Joshua was here since he was the one being murdered. Get it?” he asks as he nudges at me with his elbow.

“I got it,” I say, unsure why I’m being subjected to this.

“Anyway. Talk to Joshua.”

“And he is?” If I could talk to him, it’d solve so much.

“Yeah, that I don’t know. He follows this girl around. She comes on...” He turns quiet as he presumably thinks about it... at least I think he is... the quietness has now become awkward and is stretching on.

“On?”

“Oh, right, she came yesterday, so whatever yesterday was. I remember her because her skirt was so short it sent the cranky librarian into fits.” He grins at the fond memory.

“Okay, thank you.”

I turn to Maddox, who’s come up the stairs and is standing near me. “He says that Joshua follows a girl around who was here yesterday. Can we look into the list of people who checked something out to see if one might be related to Joshua? They really prefer to follow family around, so my guess is maybe a sister or friend or... something like that.”

“Got it,” he says as he heads over to the desk while Reggie watches me. He draws a line over his throat and points at me.

I glare at the menace. “You’re not as scary as you think you are.”

“I’m terrifying,” he growls, even though he doesn’t look it. “I see the way your eyes peruse his body.”

While Maddox is talking to someone at the front desk, Reggie walks up and wraps his arms around Maddox’s neck before drawing his tongue up his cheek.

I just stare at him, unsure if I should be amused or not.

“Mine,” he growls.

As the librarian hurries off to do something else, I walk up to Maddox and ruffle his hair, which sends Reggie into a fit and confuses Maddox greatly.

“What?” Maddox asks, but I’m too busy grinning about it to say anything.

“No! Don’t you dare. His beautiful hair is now messed up,” Reggie says, clearly wanting to fuss over it.

“What’s going on?” Maddox asks.

“Nothing,” I say. “I just enjoy harassing others.” He clearly thinks I’m talking about him as he shrugs and turns back to the counter while Reggie seethes at me.

“I’m going to haunt you for eternity.”

“I can’t wait,” I say.

Since none of the names immediately jumped out, Maddox sent the list of names off to someone who will cross-reference them with Joshua's living kin and close contacts to see if we get a match. He's also left a message with the family. Since the ghost's sense of time could be off, I had Maddox send out a few days' worth of stuff in the hopes that at least one thing pops out at them.

I walk inside my apartment and turn the lights on as the raven flutters in before I suddenly stop.

The group of ghosts surrounding my kitchen table makes my blood run cold.

No, no, no... fuck. No...

They don't even turn to me as I enter the room. There's no way. There's no way he got *into* my apartment, right?

Slowly, I walk toward the table where the ghosts are transfixed. When I push through them, I see another single letter sitting on the table, unlined paper that looks like something a sketch artist would use.

With shaky fingers, I reach out and pick it up, flipping the folded sheet of paper open.

I told you to stop.

I drop the paper and look up just in time to see the female ghost standing on my balcony.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

What the fuck is happening? The fucking *killer* was in my home? How the hell did he get into my home?

Rushing down the stairs, I race out to my car and yank the door open. Spite flies in before the door slams shut, and I quickly back the car out of the spot and press down hard on the gas as I hurry down the road. When I see Randy in his yard, I turn into his driveway and park before getting out.

"Rand—"

"Five. You know the speed limit is *five* miles per hour. Not ten. Not fifteen. Not *six*. Five."

I ignore him or I'll be stuck listening to this all night while someone proceeds to murder me. "You have cameras on the place, right? Can I see them? Can I watch them?" I ask anxiously.

He looks suspicious of me for some reason. "Why?"

"Because someone broke into my apartment."

"Well... they're not operating right now. The one on the lower floor went down and they didn't have the same kind and two hours of bullshit later, I came home with a new one that I haven't put up yet."

"You have to be *kidding* me," I say, questioning if I have the absolute worst luck.

He shrugs. "I'm not, but I have something that'll help," he says as he heads into his house, leaving me in the driveway. Unsure if I should follow or not, I slowly trail behind him, hoping he doesn't remember that he wanted to throw me out not that long ago.

Instead, he hurries off to a different room as I stand in the foyer, mind racing. When he returns, he has a gun in hand, which—the way things are going—I'm of course positive he's going to shoot me with. Like an "I told you a while ago to move out. Now I want you to dig your own grave" kind of thing.

"Here, next person to even *look* at your apartment, shoot them," he says instead. Which... I'm not sure is any better.

"Uhh... I don't... I don't think I'm supposed to do that."

"Of course you are," he says. "Take it."

My brain is telling me to *not* take it, to *never* take it, but there's another part of me that knows if I really am being followed, if someone really is out to get me, even having the gun might be enough to push them back. I might not even have to shoot if it comes down to it.

"You sure?" I ask.

"Yep. Good luck."

I take the gun from him, unsure where his change of heart came from. Maybe nearly dying does that to a person. Then he picks up a pump-action shotgun. "I'll blow any motherfuckers that set foot on my land to pieces."

"Umm... okay, please make sure they're bad people first," I say.

Then I head out to the car which I get into, but instead of going back to the apartment, I think about where I should go.

Maddox immediately comes to mind, but then he'll insist on knowing why I'm there, and then I'll end up telling him about the note, which he'll use to keep me from ever helping him again. We're getting closer to finding who killed my brother; I can't give up now.

So maybe Nicolás?

I could be putting him in danger, but if the killer really wanted me dead, he would have been waiting in the apartment when I got home instead of leaving me a note. I really don't feel like I'd be too hard to kill. But he hasn't. He just wants me to back off. Maybe he feels like I could solve the case and just wants me to look the other way while he finishes a few people off? But again, this person is either interacting with me or stalking me to know when I leave and when I go to help Maddox. Is he following me now?

The thought makes me anxious as I make a call to Nicolás. He assures me he's more than happy to have me over, so I head his way.

When I reach the small house about thirty minutes from my apartment, he's sitting out on the porch on an old porch swing that came with the house.

"Hey," I say.

He smiles at me. "What'd you get yourself into?"

I snort as I rub at my face. "Is it that apparent?"

He shrugs and stills the swing long enough for me to sit down next to him. "You've always had a knack for sticking your nose where it doesn't belong. You're phenomenal at it."

"My very own specialty."

He grins. "Right. Is Sean here?"

"No."

"Just the two of us?"

"And a bird."

He looks surprised. "A bird..."

"I don't know. This bird has been following me around."

"Like a hummingbird? Because that's about the only thing I'd want following me around," he says.

"Raven."

That doesn't seem to reassure him. "Aren't they like bad omens or something? Harbinger of death or something?"

I glance down at Spite as he watches me, like he knows we're talking about him. He tilts his head to the side, watching me with a beady eye. "Uh... I'm pretty sure he's just a bird."

Spite flies up to my knee where he settles, pleased to have a spot of his own. Nicolás reaches out to my leg like he's going to pet him, and I glance over at him. While Nicolás has never been able to

see the dead, he seems to have a unique intuition that lets him do unexplainable things, like reach for the spot that the bird is in when I'm around.

"You sure you can't see the dead?" I ask as I watch his hand pass through the bird.

He leans back as his hand drops onto his lap. "Positive. But being around you makes these little... instances pop up, you know? Like glimmers out of the corner of my eye."

"But you still can't see them when I'm not around?" I ask.

"Not often. You're the anomaly, who is currently up to something. So... tell me what's going on?"

So I tell him about everything Maddox and I have been doing and everything we've figured out so far. When I finish, I notice Nicolás is picking at a scar on his wrist, a habit he's always had that's a dead giveaway that he's anxious about something.

"Nicolás, it's fine, I'm being careful," I say, since I didn't tell him about the notes. I should have, but I'm positive if I do, he'll drag me off and lock me up somewhere with Sean and Maddox as my gatekeepers.

He stops picking just to stare at me. "You're being careful? That's your excuse for why this is alright? You're fucking unraveling a serial killer's plan. This isn't your job, Hiro. Leave it to the professionals."

"It's our brother, Nicolás." Why can't he understand this?

"Our brother? Hiro, our brother is dead. I'm sorry, but he's gone. Chasing down serial killers isn't going to bring him back. You're going to end up getting yourself killed. You really need to back down before that happens."

I'm quiet because I don't like Nicolás upset with me. He's who I'm closest to from my new family, besides Sean, and I hate the idea of upsetting him. "I'm sorry."

He sighs as he rubs at his head. "Just... don't be reckless, alright? I can't stand the thought of you getting hurt."

"I won't," I assure him. "But... it feels good to help them, you know? All my life I've tried to help the dead, but this is a way I can help the living and the dead. I can help families find peace and allow the ghosts to move on."

"Just be careful and don't get hurt," he says as he sets his hand on my shoulder. "Let's go inside. Are you hungry?"

"I could eat."

"Good," he says as he gets up and looks over at me. "Promise me you'll back off or I won't feed you."

"I'll be careful."

That doesn't seem to satisfy him. "Back off or you will starve."

"I will... highly consider it," I say, even though I know I'm not stopping. I'm so close. I'm so extremely close, I can feel it. The killer wouldn't be this anxious if I wasn't.

I have to end this.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



MADDOX

A ringing phone disrupts me from my sleep. For one long moment, I debate ignoring it, but I grudgingly reach over to grab it before realizing that Stella has made my phone her personal bed because there's nothing like sleeping on a hard rectangular thing. I have to dig under her to grab the phone and pull it free before answering as she yowls her complaints at me.

"Booker here," I mumble.

"We have another death to add to your case," Deputy Chief Parker says.

"You're kidding. Already? There was such a large gap between the others and now we're being hit with another one?" I ask as sleep is snapped right out of me by her news.

"We're not positive yet, but that's where you come in. Don't forget your consultant," she says, like I could forget Hiro now that he's weaseled his way into my life.

"I won't," I say, but I'm honestly a bit uncertain about involving Hiro in a recent death. All the other crime scenes I've taken him to have been bodyless. Will he be alright with this one? But he could be vital to this. I have to remember that he's not helping me just to help. He's determined to find out who killed his brother.

As I squeeze out from under Bandit who is sleeping on my chest, I call Hiro.

"Hello?" he mumbles, half asleep.

"We have another body. Do you think you'd be alright to go?"

"Yeah, trust me, I've seen my fair share of the dead. Ghosts *love* dragging me off to dead bodies," he says, which makes me wonder just what kind of situations he's stumbled into. And how he's not been arrested for tampering with a crime scene.

"I'll pick you up in ten minutes."

"I'm... at Nicolás's so I can just meet you there."

"Nicolás's?" Why is there momentary annoyance that he's at Nicolás's? Nicolás is his brother... kind of... not really. And...

I have other shit to worry about. Why the hell am I even thinking about it? Or caring? It's just because he's attractive. I don't care what he does with Nicolás or anyone else.

"Fine, hurry up. I'm not waiting all day for you," I grumble before hanging up, which in retrospect

was quite rude and petty. But I feel kind of smug... while also feeling like a complete asshole.

My phone immediately rings, and I see it's Hiro calling me back. He's probably going to call me out on being an asshole, which I fully deserve.

"Yes?" I ask reluctantly. God, knowing that I was in the wrong and admitting to it is *not* one of my strong suits.

"When you get done pulling Mr. Grumpy Grouch out of your ass, can you get me an address or would you like me to use my ghostdar to just wander around until I find it?" he asks.

I sigh as I pull my dresser drawer open. "I'm sorry. I'm just... being frustrated with things."

"I know, I get that," he says, voice soft, which makes me feel like an even bigger dick. "We both want this to end, but we're getting closer. Maybe the reason he killed again so quickly is because he's afraid we're going to catch him, and he won't be able to finish what he's started. We've got this, Maddox." He sounds so confident that I can't help but lean into his confidence.

"Yeah, you're right," I say, even though I can't tell him that part of my frustration stems from him.

Fucking hell, this is stupid. I have bigger shit to worry about.

After getting Hiro the information that he needs, I hang up to get ready. Bandit judges me from my bed while Stella just looks disgusted that I removed my lumpy phone from her sleeping perch. Quickly, I get dressed and ready before hurrying out of the house.

Oddly, the location isn't too far from where the young girl had gone missing in the river. It's strange, but I guess stranger things have happened.

When I arrive at the parking lot, I see Hiro's car sitting there, making me feel like an even bigger ass for snapping at him to hurry when he beat me. He's standing outside it, leaning against the trunk with his arms crossed over his chest.

After I get out of my car, I try to buzz past him, but of course I don't get far before he goes, "Hurry up, I'm not waiting all day," throwing my own words right back at me. God, he looks so fucking smug and annoyingly sexy at the same time.

"I'm glad you're on time for once," I throw back at him.

He snorts but pushes off his car and starts following me over to where the path is cordoned off. I nod at the guy watching over the scene who knows me well enough he doesn't bother asking to see my credentials and knows that Hiro is with me.

"Do you know anything else about the scene?" Hiro asks as we head down the footpath leading to an overlook. The sun is starting to rise above the horizon, creating a beautiful pink glow that would be striking if not for where we were headed.

"Not yet. Suspected to be the same killer, but we won't know until we've had some time to look into it. Are there any ghosts around?"

"Not yet. Natalie's going to wander around and see if she can find someone," he says. "She said if she finds someone, she gets to sit on your lap."

"You're going to have to tell me more about this Natalie when you have some time," I say, since I'm quite unsure how this woman... ghost... whatever, can be as strange as Hiro makes her seem.

When I see my own team, I stop to get gloves and other gear to keep from contaminating the crime scene.

"Don't touch anything," I say as I hand Hiro gloves.

"I won't," he says as he gives me a look like he thinks I'm treating him like a child.

But I'm not done with him yet. "Don't walk anywhere."

He nods vigorously. "I'll just lie here. Maybe even roll."

Why is he so stubborn? And why do I still find him attractive? "Don't walk anywhere I don't

walk,” I say.

“I’ll step right into your footsteps,” he says. “Better yet, maybe I can just get a piggyback ride from you so I can’t possibly touch anything.”

I just stare at him until he gives me a look that says, “I’m not an idiot, I got this.” So I nod and head deeper in as a forensic technician named Mick walks over with camera in hand.

“Just got here but I’m already confident it’s the same guy,” Mick says.

“We don’t know that it’s a guy,” I remind him. He looks skeptical, but I still refuse to write anything off until I have proof. I know Sean described the person who attacked him as a male, but he also claimed to have very little information on them and never saw the person.

“True,” he says.

We walk together over to the body that’s sitting on a bench facing the outlook. The outlook is a popular attraction in the area. A little slice of the outdoors close to the bustling city. The drop of the cliff stretches over a steep decline that overlooks the river and gives a full view of the city.

There are two benches lined up facing the view at the end of the sidewalk that leads out to the overlook, but the body is on the left bench.

Honestly, I’m surprised to see it’s a woman this time. She’s sitting up straight, her head tilted to the side. Her hand is through the shoulder strap of a backpack with tape spread across her mouth. And again, same as the others, she’s been stabbed right in the chest.

There’s no doubt in my mind it’s the same killer, but I am surprised this one is a female. She’s probably of similar age to the others, they’ve all been within four years of each other, but I’ll know more once we get down to it.

Right now, I’d normally start looking into the scene, trying to pick apart details others might miss, but instead, I turn to Hiro who isn’t looking at the woman. Instead, his eyes are tracking something.

“She here?” I ask.

His eyes flicker up to mine. “Yeah. Much like Franklin, she’s very focused on something. I’m just going to watch her for a few minutes. Right now, she’s just sitting on the bench. Can I get a little closer? She’s on the right side.”

“Sure, just don’t touch anything,” I say.

I leave him to it as he squats down as close as I’ll permit him to the bench while my team watches him instead of doing their jobs. I’m sure by now word has gotten around, but I’m not quite sure what that word is. I can’t quite tell if they know about the ghost part or not. I think if they did, someone would have said something to me or him by now.

He’s not moving, just squatting there, staring at the right side of the bench as I realize that I’m doing little to help by staring at him. I step back several feet to take in the whole scene and Mick joins me, looking over at Hiro.

“He... alright?” Mick asks.

“He’s fine,” I say.

“What’s he doing?”

“Looking at something.”

Mick seems quite skeptical as he watches Hiro for a moment longer. “Like... did he notice something?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I say as a few of the others inch closer to hear what I’m talking about. I shift my gaze onto them, and it’s like I’m Medusa or something as they all freeze where they’re at and pretend they are hard at work on something else.

My attention is drawn back to the bag by the woman’s side, and I move closer to look at it in more

detail. It looks like a school bag, which strikes me as odd. Not saying a woman in her late twenties can't carry a backpack around, but it just has a look like something a kid would take to school. It's not new, though; it's worn in areas and there are a few drawings on it, like someone scratched into it with permanent marker. Perhaps a heart and maybe a badly drawn dog.

Again, I have to assume the location was specifically picked out. I'm doubtful the killer stumbled on her here, so did they bring her here? Was it willingly? The others hadn't shown signs of being drugged, so was she? No bruising on her wrists like she was tied and transported. Her throat looks blemish free, so no one choked her. She'd been stabbed and must have fallen facedown, as shown by the way the blood colored her blouse, but from the blood on the bench and the scuffmarks in the dirt, it almost looks like she'd been sitting on the bench when it first happened, maybe even talking to the person before she was stabbed. Then, I believe she fell onto the ground where she struggled to get away. She was then propped back onto the bench where she was posed with the bag to appear like she was looking out over the city.

I move over to where Hiro is and stoop down to his level. "Do ghosts usually still have the items they died with?" I ask.

"Like the same clothes and stuff?"

"Like this bag she's holding. Would she be holding it if she died with it?"

"Probably, especially in the state she's in. After they've been dead a while they can leave things, materialize things. They can change clothes if they think about it hard enough or run around naked. But those are ghosts who've been around for a long time. You're thinking she didn't actually have the bag when she died?" he asks.

"No... I'm wondering if it's even hers. I think it's a prop."

He glances back at the ghost. "She doesn't have the bag here."

"She's just sitting there?"

"Yes, sitting here staring out over the city. But she's not crying, not reacting. Just... sitting there. They're usually quite distraught, and she still is, but she's also... acting more like Franklin, just without the pacing."

"Interesting," I say as something catches my attention. I see Elena heading this way. "I'm going to talk to Detective Perez, I'll be right back. Don't roll your way closer to the scene."

"I promise not to," he says as I head over to her.

She gives me a sad smile when she sees me. "Another."

"Another. I'm leaning hard into this theory that the killer has a set group of people who affected them in some way. I'm nearly positive she's been staged with this bag, which makes me think that the killer is referring to something from school. But we'll talk to family to see if the bag is something she's been known to have."

"What's ghost boy up to?" she asks, and I look up in time to see him scaling over a fence that leads to an area off the path where kids like to drink beer and make out.

"Maybe he found something else," I say as I turn to join him.



HIRO

The woman stands up and starts walking. First, she walks to the edge and looks out over the city, then

she turns and heads over to the fence leading to a flat area filled with trees and brush. She climbs over the fence, so I follow close behind, making sure not to climb the area she does, in case there are prints or evidence or something.

There are some crushed beer cans littered back here, like the local kids thought they'd found a hot spot. The ghost walks past them and over toward the edge of the drop-off, this one with no fence.

She steps up to it and teeters there for a moment, waving her arms back and forth, like she's trying to catch her balance before she would have fallen.

"Hiro, don't get close to that," Natalie says.

"Trust me, I'm not, I hate heights," I say, having absolutely no interest in getting near the drop. "I just want to see what she's doing."

"She obviously doesn't fall, but maybe she was going to jump, and she changed her mind?" Natalie asks.

"I don't know," I say. "I really don't. But I'll let Maddox know."

"Speaking of Maddox," Natalie purrs.

"Hiro, what'd you find?" Maddox calls from behind me.

I turn to look at him and jump as I realize the ghost of the young woman who's been haunting me is right behind me. Dread fills me as she gives me a sickeningly twisted grin, like she's proud of the terror she's been filling me with. And then she reaches out and shoves me with both hands. The force that she hits me with is hard enough that it throws me back. She's screaming as she shoves into me, driving me back as I stumble away, unable to catch my balance with her inhuman strength. And that's the moment that the ground gives way beneath my foot.

Desperately, I grab onto her to keep from falling, only for her to disappear, leaving me with nothing as I begin to plummet.

"Hiro!" Maddox yells while Natalie rushes for me as I drop down. I try to grab the edge, but the force I slam into it with makes my weight yank me down. Desperately, I grab for anything as I fall. Terror fills me as my stomach tightens until suddenly, something catches my wrist. The grab is so abrupt, I slam into the side of the cliff. I glance up in time to see Sean clutch on tightly, but he can't stay materialized for long, especially when I'm too panicked to help him, and I slip right through his grasp. At least his help gives me enough time that I manage to dig my fingers into the side of the cliff, gripping tightly onto a root that's broken through the rock and dirt.

"Hiro, come on. Come on," Sean says desperately as he grabs for me again, but his hand passes straight through mine. "Hiro, concentrate."

I try. I really try, but my grip is slipping, and my feet can't find purchase on anything.

Sean looks so desperate as he reaches for me. "Hiro, dammit, concentrate! I can't touch you like this," he says as his voice quivers. The grip my foot has slips and my weight jerks me down as my hand begins to slide. I dig my fingers and nails desperately into the side of the rock as I slide down, pain spiking into them as a hand reaches down through Sean's outstretched arm and grasps my wrist.

Maddox's hand clamps onto mine, gripping tightly as he starts to pull me up. I hold desperately onto him as someone else grabs me, and then suddenly there are hands all over me, dead and alive, yanking and pulling until I scramble up onto the flat ground while my heart beats out of my chest.

Maddox doesn't let go of me as he pulls me into a body hold and drags me a good fifteen feet from the edge.

"What the fuck? What the absolute fuck?" he asks, sounding as out of breath as I feel.

My heart is in my throat. It's pounding so hard I feel like I can't even hear. It's racing out of my chest as I struggle to catch my breath.

“Hiro, what happened?” Maddox asks as everyone stares at me, wanting an answer I’m not sure how to give.

“S-She... she pushed me,” I whisper, unable to comprehend it. Unable to grasp this realization.

“Who did?” Maddox asks.

“I saw him get shoved back, but I didn’t see anyone there...” Mick says.

I cover my face with my hands as the noise around me starts to escalate. People are talking and ghosts are talking, and I can’t seem to figure any of it out. The ghosts are irate, crowding around me.

“How did she push him?” one asks.

“Why did she push him?”

“Who is she?”

“Where is she?”

“Not his time. Not yet.”

“Not his time to die.”

“Not yet.”

Hands on my wrist startle me, and I look up to catch Maddox’s eyes. “Hey,” he says, voice gentle and soft. “I asked everyone to back off. Can you get the ghosts to back off too?”

“Sorry.” I’m not sure if I can and I feel bad for causing such a scene.

“Don’t apologize to me. Just calm down, take a deep breath,” he says.

I do. I take a deep breath and close my eyes as the chatter of the ghosts around me begins to lessen just enough I can focus. Instead, I focus on the strong arms still grounding me, keeping me here, assuring me that I’m now safe as we sit on the ground.

“I’ve... I’ve never met a ghost that’s malicious before,” I admit. “She... she fucking pushed me. She tried to kill me. She... she’s been following me. Since the day we found the drowning girl. I see her places. And now I know she’s trying to kill me.”

Maddox wraps his arms around me as he lets out a deep breath. “I’m sorry. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Why was I too stubborn to tell him? “Because I don’t want you kicking me off the case. And I didn’t know if she was just a... curious ghost. I mean, I have ghosts follow me all the time, hoping I’ll help them pass on, but no... now I know for sure. She has something to do with this. She... she’s a part of this. And she doesn’t want me exposing who the killer is and is willing to kill me to keep me quiet.”

“Is there anything else you haven’t told me?”

Guilt fills me as I realize that keeping secrets from Maddox has been doing me no good so far. “S-Someone left me a note... at my bookshop and at my house to tell me to stop helping...”

The look on Maddox’s face makes me want to take back everything I’d just said and continue lying to him.

“You...” He closes his eyes for a moment as I realize that maybe I need to fear for my life again. “Thank god I’m still in a panic over your *life* or I’m positive you would be fretting over your life *again*.”

He stands up and pulls me with him, not releasing my wrist. I’m not sure if it’s a way to comfort me or imprison me. I kind of feel like it’s a bit too tight for comfort but I’d give anything for him to not let go. I’m on shaky legs as he drags me after him, his body language telling me he’s upset with me.

“I’m really sorry but I knew if I told you, you’d kick me off the search,” I say.

“You’re sure as fuck right I would have. And you wouldn’t have nearly died,” he growls as he

turns back to look at me. “Do you know how fucking ridiculous this is, Hiro? You could be withholding crucial information. You could have been killed.”

“Oh, like the killer is so skilled at keeping you guys from finding them with an entire crime scene but you think they’re going to fuck up with a little piece of paper? You’re not going to find anything on that paper, but good luck. I’m not done. I’m not leaving until we find him, and we stop this,” I say, voice rising with my determination.

He marches me over to his car and pulls open the passenger door before pushing me inside. I sit down on the seat, but I don’t pull my legs in yet.

My hands hurt and when I look down at them, I realize I did a splendid job scraping off skin on my fingers and palms. My elbows and knees hurt as well, but I ignore them as I watch blood from my fingers drip onto the pavement.

Maddox wraps his hand around the back of my head and for a moment, I think he’s going to shake me or torture me in some way, but instead he hooks me in close and pulls me forward until I’m pressed against him. Since he’s standing, my head is smashed against his abdomen, which I definitely won’t complain about.

“Fucking hell, you’re going to give me a heart attack,” he says, voice soft.

“I nearly had a heart attack too,” I say. “My brother grabbed me... if he hadn’t grabbed me, I don’t know what would have happened. It wasn’t for long, but it was long enough to slow me down so I could grab onto something.”

I hear some footsteps and Maddox draws back, releasing me, which is disappointing. I find myself wanting to keep hanging on to him.

“Need medical attention?” a woman asks.

“Yes, sorry,” Maddox says as he steps aside. The woman sets down her kit on the trunk and starts looking over my hands as Maddox backs up to talk to Elena.

Natalie creeps in and sits down on my lap. “Don’t do that shit again, you hear me? I can’t guard your ass if you’re dead,” she says as she leans her head against mine.

I smile at her, deciding to wait until the woman’s done to talk to her.

“I’m just going to get these lightly bandaged and we’re going to escort you to the hospital, alright?”

“Alright,” I say grudgingly. The moment she sets anything against my hand, I realize I’d rather bleed all over the car. “Really, I think they’re fine not bandaged up.”

She just smiles and continues on her journey of sadism. When she’s finished, she heads over to talk to Maddox.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Natalie says.

“Me too.”

“I saw her... I saw that woman, but I just... I just thought she was a ghost. I was going to ask her if she could tell us if she saw anything. I was... I just never thought...”

“No one would have,” I assure Natalie. “It’s not your fault.”

“But I couldn’t grab you. I couldn’t do anything. Sean had to help.”

“It’s okay,” I say as I press into her. “It’s my fault for not focusing so you guys could help. It’s okay.”

She doesn’t seem certain but gives me a sad smile.

“Where’d Sean go?” I ask.

She seems unsure. “He... he went in the direction that ghost did. I haven’t seen him since.”

“Okay. Thanks,” I say.

Maddox walks over and holds out a hand, then thinks better and just grabs my wrist before pulling me to my feet. "Someone's going to run you to the hospital. I can't leave right now, but I'll pick you up, okay? You're also going to have to give a report of what happened once you're done being looked over. I'll tell them that I'll handle it. I want to talk to you anyway about this ghost."

"Okay," I say, not really pleased to be leaving him but understanding that I have to.

"Someone's going to stay with you the whole time. Those notes that were left for you... can we get to them?"

"Yeah, one's in my car under the passenger seat, the other is on my table in my apartment. My keys are in my front pocket," I say.

He reaches into my pocket. Any other time, I think I'd have enjoyed it, but this time, I'm just disappointed we have to part ways.

"Let yourselves in. Do whatever," I say.

"Thank you. Please be careful," he says.

"Same."

I'm ushered off on my own while thinking about how close to death I'd come.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



MADDOX

Finally escaping the crime scene, I hurry off to the department. Since Hiro had finished before us, I'd asked Ben, who'd had the day off work, to run him from the hospital to the department since I didn't want him alone.

We'd ID'd the victim as Sasha Lopez, a local resident. Right now, we don't have much on her, but hopefully we'll be able to figure out a tie between her and the others that'll eventually lead us to the killer.

When I walk in and head over to the room Ben told me they were in, I find him, Wes, and Jonah laughing about something as Hiro grins.

"I'm sorry I bothered you all with picking him up," I say.

"No bother at all," Ben says.

"Trust me, no bother. Dad was taking me 'golfing.' He won't listen when I tell him golfing is for old people," Wes says with a grin.

"You're still pretty old," Jonah teases. Even though he and Wes are years apart, they seem to get along well from what I've noticed, although I think Jonah and his sister are closest.

"Definitely not for old people," Ben says. "I'm still young and chipper."

Wes seems amused by this as he continues to grin. I thank them again as they leave before sitting down across from Hiro who gives me a soft smile.

"I'm really sorry," I say.

"For? Did you pay her to push me off? I knew it! You know there are easier ways to get rid of me? I do like a good cake, so you could have just set one on the edge and I'd have just gravitated toward it."

I give him an attempt at a smile, not quite sure I'm prepared to joke about it yet. "You would have died if your hand had slipped."

"I know," he says. "I noticed that quite well."

"How are you?"

"I'm fine."

"Do your hands hurt?"

“They’re alright, honestly. They numbed me up, made sure nothing was broken, gave me a few butterfly stitches, and sent me on my way. I’ll be good as new in no time.”

“Okay... can we talk?”

“Sure.”

“Do you mind if I record it?”

He shrugs. “Yeah... that’s fine, I guess. I get a little weird with people hearing what I can do but as long as it’s just like... people who are... essential, that’s fine.”

“Okay, I promise I won’t share it with anyone who doesn’t have to hear it, okay?”

“Okay.”

I set the recorder out and switch it on, stating our names and the date, before turning my attention back to Hiro. “So start from the point where I left you. I’d gone to talk to Elena. Can you tell me everything that happened after that?”

“Yeah, the ghost crossed over the fence, a little closer to the drop-off than where I climbed over, and she walked straight over to the ledge, acting like she’d thought about jumping or something. She flailed her arms like she was trying to get her balance before stepping back. At that point, Natalie said something about you, and I turned to look and the ghost of the young woman who’d been following me was there. She just slammed into me, pushing me hard, and the force... it felt like I’d been hit by a fucking truck,” he says as he lifts his shirt and I see two bruises on his chest.

I lean in to look at them as he grimaces.

Hiro drops his shirt. “Normally ghosts can’t touch things, you know? But something about being around me gives them the ability to be a bit closer to being solid or something. To better explain this, ghosts who have a personal connection with me can touch me, hug me, things like that. When I focus on pouring my energy into them, they can even move things or touch other things. But never have I had one with the ability to push me with that much force. It felt like more force than if you’d have shoved me. I’m positive if you shoved me, you wouldn’t freaking bruise me like that.”

“If I punched you, it’d leave bruises, but a shove isn’t likely. So are you thinking she’s feeding off this... ability of yours or whatever it is? Magnifying it in some way that the others you’ve interacted with can’t?”

He looks uncertain as he shrugs. “I’m sorry, I really don’t know. I wish I did.”

“That’s okay. So she pushed you, then what happened?”

“I reached for her, but she disappeared, causing me to fall. My brother, Sean, he grabbed me, which is the only reason I had time to grab onto something and keep from falling.”

“Did you know Sean was there?”

He shakes his head. “No, he generally avoids crime scenes from this killer. He’s also been extremely distant since the library. I really haven’t seen him other than a brief glimpse of him.”

Hiro goes through the rest of it as I think about the situation. The ghost really doesn’t want him to be of use, which tells me she’s scared of what he could find out.

“The way she’s acting with you tells me you’re close or she’s afraid you’re close, especially if she’s trying to get rid of you,” I say.

“But I haven’t really done anything,” he says, and I’m surprised he feels that way.

“You’ve done a lot, and you’re capable of doing even more,” I assure him. “Now tell me about this woman who pushed you.” I pull out a notepad and flip to a blank page. “Everything about her.”

“Okay... she’s young, but it’s hard to tell. Anywhere between fifteen and twenty, maybe? I’m thinking younger but it’s hard to tell when I only see her for a few moments at a time.”

“Hair color? Eyes?”

“Hair is dark, almost black, I don’t know about her eyes.”

“Any distinguishing features?”

He leans back in his chair and thinks for a long time before shaking his head. “I don’t know. I’m really sorry. The previous times, she was really far away, and this time I’m kind of... blanking on it. I’m sorry. Did your team find the notes the killer had left me?”

Hearing about the notes instantly puts me in a bad mood. I’d gone to look for the note in his car myself before sending a team out to his place to look into how they got into the apartment. At this point we don’t have enough answers. But just knowing that the person was this close to Hiro makes me uneasy.

“Who else has a key to your apartment?” I ask.

“No one besides me.”

“No one in Sean’s family? Nicolás? Your foster parents?”

He doesn’t have to think long before shaking his head. “No... I’ve just always been there when they needed me, you know? We’ve never needed it.”

“What about your landlord?”

“Ohhh, I’m *positive* he has a key. I bet you he’s been in my apartment snooping around. He knows things that I know I never told him. He’ll be like ‘So... you’re reading car magazines, huh? I thought you were gay.’ And I’ll be like ‘What kind of misconstrued idea of being gay do you have,’ but I also refuse to tell him that it’s definitely Nicolás’s magazine.”

“And... you’re not creeped out by that?” I ask in disbelief.

“Totally. I mean, what kind of sexist opinion is it that I can’t read car magazines?”

I stare at him, fully aware that he knows what I’m talking about. He just grins at me.

Eventually he shrugs. “Honestly... it’s Randy being Randy, you know? I’m not too concerned.”

I feel like we need to have a talk about that later, but for now I just nod. “Fine.” We go over a few more things before I turn the recorder off. “I also think we need to talk about gun safety. Tossing a loaded gun under your car seat with the safety *off* is not safe *or* legal.”

Hiro hesitates. “Um... I might not have noticed the safety was off.”

“I think we need some lessons, then,” I say.

He seems willing to agree to that. “Yes, because I have no idea how to shoot a gun.”

“Yet you have a loaded one *under* your car seat, oh and loaded.”

“Randy gave it to me.”

“This Randy guy sounds fucking sketchy if I’m being real honest,” I admit.

“He is.”

I sigh because only Hiro would be fine with this information. “Okay. So we’re going to swing by your house, grab some clothes and necessities and head to mine.”

He stares at me but I give him absolutely no room to complain as I get up and wave him toward the door.

“Wait, what?” he asks, like it’s just now registered.

“I’m going to go hand this stuff over to someone, and I’ll be right there. Go wait at my desk.”

“Why am I going... home... with you? I mean... I’m not quite sure I’m complaining but I’m still going to ask.”

“Because I said so,” I say.

He nods slowly. “Okay. Yeah... I mean... what if we both go to *my* house?”

“Where someone is warning you to back off from an investigation? Where someone is leaving you *murder notes*?”

Hiro hesitates as I realize it's finally sinking in. "I see the issue. What if we *both* go to Nicolás's house?"

What is it with these weird questions? "I don't trust that you're safe at Nicolás's house. Can Nicolás fight?"

"One time he won the schoolwide championship of *Street Fighter*."

That entire sentence confuses me. "He's... a street fighter?" I ask.

"It's a video game. I won the next year when it was *Smash Bros*."

I narrow my eyes at this annoying man. "Go."

"Yes, sir," he says. "Right on my way, sir."

"Good."

He gives me a grin as he turns toward my desk. "You totally have a dominance kink, don't you?"

"Yes," I say completely deadpan as I part ways to stop at Deputy Chief Parker's office.

When I knock, she answers with, "Come in."

I walk inside and give her a smile. "Hey—"

"Don't 'Hey' me. You need to keep a better eye on your consultant. We don't need more eyes on us than we already have."

"I'm aware. It definitely wasn't on purpose," I assure her.

"He shouldn't have even been close enough to slip," she says.

"He didn't slip, he was pushed."

She nods slowly but the look on her face makes me know that this isn't going to be an easy thing to deal with. "Yes... by a *'ghost'*."

I can almost see the air quotes even though she doesn't use anything more than her voice to emphasize that she thinks all of this is a load of shit.

She taps her pen on the desk as she scrutinizes me. "Elena told me. Here's the thing, Maddox. I put him with you because I knew out of all these other detectives, you'd be the least gullible. Come on, now. I know you want to figure this out, but please, just take it seriously."

I stare at her for probably a good sixty seconds as I teeter between losing my cool and full-on exploding. They're not far from each other and are extremely close to happening. "Take it *seriously*? Have you ever known me to just not take something *seriously* when people are dying?"

The thing about Parker is that when faced with someone angry, she knows how to become angrier. "I know. But I also know he's cute and it's harder to get someone's attention if you're trying to tell them they're lying, okay?"

"You think I'm distracted because he's... 'cute.' No... I can't even believe you bothered to waste your breath saying that. Elena also thinks he's making it all up?" I ask in disbelief.

She shrugs. "Elena doesn't know what to think. But I need you to do your job and do it well."

I'm too pissed right now to even try to reason with her. "Yeah, I hear you. I have some other stuff that he made up when talking to his imaginary friends, if you bother to listen or care. He believes there's a girl involved in this, an imaginary one, you know? So I'm going to have my team looking into that to see what we can find."

"With what proof?" she asks, stubborn as fuck.

"What do you mean?"

"Proof. You're not wasting the team's time with no proof. Why send them off on a wild goose chase and distract them from their jobs until you have proof? Could your current reason for looking into this stuff stand up in court?"

I grit my teeth because we both know the answer to that. "But if we find something—"

“I said no. Keep your team focused and on factual stuff, alright?”

“Yes,” I say through clenched teeth. “I’m headed out.” I’ve done all I can do for now, but I know I should still check in with Parker about where things stand. But if she wants to keep me from doing my job then I’ll just leave and work on our side of things from home.

“I hope that means when you come in tomorrow you’re going to be refreshed and thinking with a straight head, got it?” she asks.

“Got it,” I spit out before quickly turning around. I have half a mind to run my information over to Lexi who could start looking for this mystery girl, but I notice Parker watching me. So I head straight to my desk where Hiro is grinning at something off to his right where no one is. Okay... so maybe sometimes he acts kind of strange, but isn’t that just because we shy away from anything unusual or different from us?

“Hey, talking to your imaginary friend?” I ask.

He glances over at me. “Yes, I told her that I can still flip her off with my hands bandaged up.”

“This Natalie again?”

“The one and only. She said that she loves the way you say her name so much it makes her... m-m... moist,” he says, which makes me snort.

“Um, please tell her that I hope she never says any of that again, and I’d prefer you didn’t repeat it.”

“Deal,” he says with a grin.

“Let’s go,” I say as I nudge him toward the door. I’ll just do my own research when I get home if Parker won’t let me do it here.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



HIRO

“Dun dun... dun dunnn...”

As I follow Maddox toward his house, I glance over at Natalie who is making the horrible sound effect from *Jaws* like she thinks it’s going to help. “No.”

She gives me a wicked grin. “I’m just thinking about your imminent demise when Reggie McCutiePie sees you’re moving in.”

“NO! NOOOOO,” Reggie screams, inches away from my ear. “Why do you have a bag? Why do you look like you’re moving in? Fuck off. Go! Shoo!”

He latches on to my leg like a child, screaming “NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!” and forcing me to drag him after me while I try my absolute hardest not to look like I have a limp. I give him a *look* since I can’t start spouting shit when Maddox is inches from me.

“Shoo. Shoo!” he says, realizing that me dragging him isn’t helping.

Then he slides in front of me, arms outstretched. As I try to keep walking, he shimmies this way and that, blocking my path.

Maddox slowly turns to look at me, eyebrows knitting. “Is there a problem?”

A huge, Reggie-sized problem.

“Nope, not at all,” I say as I fixate on Reggie being invisible and pass right through him. It’s a fucking awful feeling, but I’m positive I’d have been stuck on the sidewalk all night if I hadn’t. “You sure you don’t want me to go to Nicolás’s home? I think I’m fine. If the killer wanted to murder me, wouldn’t he have murdered me instead of leaving me a note?”

Maddox seems to hate my reasoning for still being alive. “You’re not going anywhere else, you’re staying where I can *make sure* you’re alive,” he says.

Reggie scrutinizes me. “Soooo... someone’s trying to murder you, eh?”

I give him a mini shrug since I still feel pretty confident that if I was going to die, I’d already be dead.

“Do they need help? What’s their name? Where do they live? Just for curiosity purposes, you know?” Reggie asks like he’s going to help someone off me.

I glare at him and slam the door in his face which is really stupid because it just makes my hand

hurt while he immediately walks right through the door.

Maddox carries my bag up the stairs and into a guest room where he sets my bag down on the queen-sized bed. "You can stay here."

"Thank you for this, I appreciate it. Mind if I meet you downstairs in a minute?" I ask as Reggie gives my bag a shove right off the bed.

Maddox stares at it for a long moment before his eyes flicker up to me like he's just going to ignore that. "Take your time."

Then he disappears without bothering to ask what is probably the most important question of "Is my former lover harassing you and wishing death upon you?"

"You're evil," I say to Reggie who grins at me.

"Thank you."

"I have no idea what even drew Maddox to you. Evil attracts evil, I guess," I growl.

"I'm an angel. A saint, really," Reggie says as he starts kicking my bag across the room.

"Stop!" I say.

He looks me right in the eyes and kicks it again. He reminds me of a cat who just isn't happy until it pushes the glass right off the table and likes it even more when you're looking them in the eyes as it happens.

"Maddox is concerned that someone is trying to kill me. That's it," I say.

He folds his hands in front of him and bats his eyelashes. "'Thank you so much, Maddox. I appreciate it and hope you don't mind when I climb into your bed naked and ride you into the sunset.'"

I stare at Reggie. "Ah yes, I sounded just like that."

"You did."

"There's nothing going on."

"Sure. Uh-huh. Yep."

I ignore him and head over to the door. When I grab the handle, I wince, finding that the painkillers are wearing off.

"What'd you do? Jerk off to images of Maddox for so long you rubbed the skin off your hands?" he asks.

"I did. That's all I can do anymore," I say, miming the jerking off. "Oh, Maddox—" I open the door only to come eye to eye with Maddox while I'm still miming away. Quickly, I slam the door in his face. "Excuse me while I go finish off what the ghost started."

There's a confused knock on the door. I'm not sure if the knock is *actually* confused, but I feel like it portrays confusion. "I was just... seeing if you were hungry?" Maddox says.

"Why, I was just feasting on a healthy dose of humiliation," I say.

"Well... would you like real food? To go with the humiliation?" he asks.

"Sure, I could eat."

"Give me ten minutes," he says as I hear him walk away before I turn to Reggie who is so very gleeful.

"Just... seeing you interact with other humans is pitiful. I kind of feel bad for you," he says. "It hurts my eyes *and* my heart."

"Thank you. You are an angel."

I head down the stairs while hoping that Maddox doesn't recall anything that happened upstairs.

"So... who were you moaning my name to?" he asks the moment I walk into the kitchen.

"I feel like there are more important questions to ask like... would I like water? Maybe some

chips? What about earplugs, for you, of course.”

He starts laughing as he carries two plates with sandwiches on them over to the table. “Would you like some water?”

“I’d love some.”

He gets me a glass before carrying it over and setting it down. I sit down and sigh.

“How are your hands?” he asks.

“They’re fine.” Too bad, right? Because if they weren’t, I wouldn’t have been pretending to jerk off to his name.

“Are you lying?”

“A little.”

He looks concerned, which is why I should have kept lying. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” I say. “Tomorrow, can we head back to the motel to talk to Franklin?”

“No. I want you to just stay here or go to work normally or something tomorrow.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You’re going to keep me locked in here? I’m going to help.”

“Yes, you are, but I’m going to go over this stuff for now, and I don’t need your help with it.”

I hesitate as I try to judge whether he’s actually telling the truth or not. “Fine, then the next day, I’m all yours.”

Reggie gags, so I glare at him.

“Thanks, I appreciate it. I’m hoping I can figure out who this girl is, and we can go from there.”

“Me too,” I say.



I swing the bedroom door shut and jump about a foot in the air. Reggie was hiding behind the door, of course. Hoping to give me a heart attack or something. If he can’t harass me into leaving, maybe he can murder me into leaving.

“Go away,” I say.

“Nah, I gotta watch you to make sure you’re not making moves,” he says.

“I would like to get changed for bed.”

“Go ahead, I won’t peek,” he says as he blatantly stares right at me.

I grab the bottom of my shirt. “You know what? This is kind of painful with my sore hands. I might ask Maddox if he’ll take my clothes off for me.”

He reaches out and grabs my shirt before shaking it around. “Nah, I’ll do it.”

“For fuck’s sake, stop it!” I growl as he jerks me all around.

“It’s hard to get right like this, alright?” he says as he does a few more jerks before I manage to just slide out of it in an attempt to stop the abuse. When he goes for my pants, I realize pain or no pain, I have to get them off myself. Quickly, I push my pants down and stare at him.

“You’re not going to change your underwear?” he asks.

“Well, it’s rather creepy with you watching.”

He smiles. “Good.”

I sigh and turn my back to him before changing. I probably could have done with a shower but the thought of dealing with my hands while doing so made me decide I’d just go to sleep like this.

“And there’s your penis,” Reggie says as he materializes in front of me.

I glare at him and quickly try to clothe myself.

“Mine is better.”

Why did I think any of this would work? “Of course it is.”

I turn out the lights and crawl into bed a moment before Reggie’s face appears inches from mine. “Fuck,” I hiss. “Why are you in bed with me?”

“Gotta watch you. Both eyes on you all the time,” he says as my door slowly creaks open. I nervously look at it until I see Stella in the light of the moon. She jumps up onto the bed and starts sniffing my face.

“Don’t touch her,” Reggie warns.

I reach out and pet her while staring at him with the same level of concentration as he had when I was getting undressed. “Aw... is that purrs I hear?”

“Don’t touch her.”

“I’m touching her.”

He glares at me as she climbs between us and curls up. “I don’t like you,” he declares.

“Noted.”

I close my eyes in an attempt to get him to fuck off, but the movement tells me he’s not going anywhere soon, and I can’t sleep with him staring at me. I pull out my phone and turn it to an episode that I start to watch.

“I hate this show,” Reggie informs me.

“Of course you do.”

For “hating it” he’s immediately staring at it and clearly gets into it within twenty minutes. “Look how stupid he is. Why’d he go inside without waiting for backup? What a fucking idiot, right?”

“That character is just asking to die,” I agree.

“Why’s she even *like* him?”

“I don’t know. He’s cute, I guess.”

“He *is* cute. I’d let him do dirty things to me,” Reggie decides.

He reaches out and almost absentmindedly tries to pet Stella. I’ve noticed when ghosts are distracted, they’ll try to do things that were second nature to them as a human. But instead of petting her, his hand goes right through her and I see the pain on his face. It makes me feel for him because I can sort of understand the frustration of being unable to interact with things yet still forced to live with them. It’s why I haven’t been too offended by anything he’s said so far. I can only imagine watching someone I loved yet never being able to touch or care for them. Never even allowed to let them *hear* me.

I watch him for a moment before reaching out and grabbing his hand.

“Ew, don’t be trying to put your moves on me,” he says, but I can tell there’s a little hitch to his voice, like he’s embarrassed that I noticed him try to pet Stella.

I press his hand down on Stella, but it immediately goes straight through her, only stopping when it gets to my hand.

“I know I can’t touch her. I wasn’t thinking,” he says as he jerks his hand back. “You don’t have to rub it in.”

“Stop being stubborn,” I growl as I grab his hand again and concentrate even harder before pressing it against Stella’s back. He can touch solid things, fairly easily around me, so there’s a possibility he can do this. I know living things, besides me, are hard for ghosts to touch.

His hand stops when it comes to her back, and he stares at her in disbelief. “I felt her.”

Now that I know I can do it, I run his hand down her back as I watch his expression light right up.

“I can feel her. Again. Quickly.”

“Just... have patience. It takes a lot of concentration,” I say.

He doesn't care if it takes a limb, he wants to pet her again. Then he leaps up. “Bandit! I want to pet Bandit.”

Already tired after the long day, the idea of hunting down a cat sounds exhausting, but it's the first time Reggie has seemed happy to be anywhere near me. With a sigh, I get up to help him find Bandit.

“He's in Maddox's room,” he says.

“What? I can't go barging in and ask for his cat,” I say.

“Of course you can. Tell him you can't sleep without the cat.”

“No,” I say, putting my foot down.

He stares at me. “Yes.”

“No.”

Bandit, who must have been privy to our debate, comes wandering out of the open door. I scoop the cat up and hurry downstairs to where we can pet the cat in private. I set him down as he purrs before grabbing Reggie's hand. He drives his hand down fast only to look absolutely devastated when his hand goes through.

“Why? How dare you deprive me of this?” he says, sounding absolutely heartbroken.

“Because you're rushing me. It takes a lot of concentration.”

“Is your brain not big enough?” he asks, like this could be a legit concern.

I stare at him in a way that conveys that I'm doing this for him and if he has a problem with it, I'd like him to take that problem and shove it up his ass. I'm not sure if the point fully gets across, but he's at least a little calmer as I hold his hand and run it down Bandit's back.

Stella comes up, confused on what we're doing but prepared to help.

“Stella now!”

“Uh-huh. Just... this takes a lot of energy. Give me a moment,” I say, but no moments are to be given as he reaches for Stella.

“Again. Hold the fuck on...” He sits up suddenly as his eyes get wide.

“What?” I ask.

“I want to pet Maddox.”

Dread sets in. “Oh my god. *NO*. We're not going to walk into his room and just start petting him.”

He gives me the saddest look I've ever seen. “Please?”

“Do you know how suspicious he'll be if I sneak into his room and just pet him?”

Reggie shrugs like he really doesn't get the issue with this. “He already thinks you're a creep. You might as well confirm his suspicion. He's a heavy sleeper.”

The look I give him must show him that there's no fucking way I'm just going to sneak into Maddox's room and start petting him because he sighs.

“Fine. Cat.”

We go back to the cat but with every stroke, I'm starting to feel sleepier and sleepier.

“Reggie, I can't do much more. My brain is shutting down,” I say.

Maybe that's his ultimate plan because he goes, “Just a few more.”

“Fine.”

The issue is a “few more” turns to *even* more and then some more on top of it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



MADDOX

When I pass Hiro's room, I'm surprised to see he's already up, since the door is open and the bed is empty. Maybe he couldn't sleep well. Heading down the stairs, I turn to the kitchen before my eyes flicker over to Hiro lying on the living room floor.

Panic fills me as I rush over to where he lies, Stella on his back, Bandit on his ass.

"Hiro!" I yell and he jerks awake, unseating Stella who seems highly offended and shows it by wrapping her body around his arm and attacking it with both back feet.

"Huh? What?" He looks around with wide eyes before examining his surroundings.

Relief fills me that he was simply sleeping on the floor. "Why... why are you sleeping on the living room floor? I thought something happened. You gave me a fucking heart attack."

He stares at me for a long moment, like he's also unsure why he's on the floor. "I feel like I make amazing first impressions."

"Amazing?" Confusing is more like it.

"Yeah..."

"So?"

"Huh?" he asks, looking and acting like he's drugged.

"Are you on drugs?"

He seems to think about that for a moment. "No?"

"Why did that sound like a question?"

"No?"

"There's that question again," I say. "Why were you on the floor?"

"Why wouldn't I have been is the better question," he says as he slowly pushes himself up. Bandit clings on until the very last minute before jumping off him. "I'm going with you to work."

"No, you're not. You can stay here or you can go to your own work. Can someone be there with you? What about that guy who works when you're not there?"

"Barry?"

"Yeah."

"Barry..."

“Yeah.”

“My brain is mush. I used my ghost mojo too much.”

“Is that why you were on the floor?” I ask, finding that makes at least a little more sense than him deciding the bed I gave him wasn’t enough and heading out to find the room with the plushest carpet.

“Yeah. God... that knocked me out. Hell,” he says as he stands on wobbly feet. I put a hand on his arm to steady him.

“Do you need something?” I ask.

“No, I’m fine. I like your carpet. Very plush,” he says as I notice he has carpet imprints on the side of his face. I have no idea why I have the sudden impulse to run my finger over his cheek to feel them, but I jerk my hand away and hurry off. I grab an apple, shout to tell him I’ll be back later, and run off like an idiot.

What the fuck am I doing?

Question of the fucking day.



After a full day of doing what I was told not to, I have a good variety of photos lined up to run by Hiro when I get back to my house. I’d threatened him and told him he’d better be there when I arrive or I’m not letting him out again.

He really didn’t seem to need to be threatened at all. And when I swing open the door, the smell of food hits me.

Confused, I make my way into the kitchen where Hiro is busy at the counter, and I’m struck by how domestic it looks as he turns around. It kind of makes me want to grab him and shove him against the counter and maul his face. And I might have if my eyes hadn’t landed on what he was making.

He gives me a smile. “I hope you don’t mind. I just thought if you wanted to go over stuff when you got home, we could get eating out of the way and... you know...” There’s the slightest tinge of red to his cheeks like he’s a little embarrassed, but I’m too fixated on the meal to even contemplate why it’s so fucking cute.

“You made... spaghetti...” I stare at it.

“I... did...” He stills for a moment. “You hate spaghetti, don’t you?” he asks. “You literally hate it, right? That’s why... yup. I’m an idiot. I’m sorry. I should have asked. I’m an idiot.”

“Reggie’s here, isn’t he?” I ask.

Hiro stills immediately, giving me my answer without having to say anything.

“W-What?” he asks.

“Reggie’s ghost is here, isn’t he?” I ask again.

He’s got a bit of a deer in the headlights look going on. “You... want to know? I feel like if you really wanted to know you’d have asked earlier.”

“I couldn’t get myself to,” I admit.

“I know, which is why I want to know if you *actually* want to know,” he says.

“Yes.”

He nods slowly. “Okay... yes, Reggie is here.” He bites his lip, looking uncertain, but I can’t keep it in any longer and start laughing.

“He’s such an asshole,” I say as I try to stop my laughter. “He fucking *knows* I hate spaghetti.”

Hiro snorts as he leans against the countertop. “He’s not... really the nicest, no...”

“Has he been harassing you?” I ask, unable to hide my amusement.

“Every chance he gets.”

Honestly, I thought hearing about Reggie being here would be like a sock to the gut. But maybe I’d already figured it out and maybe I was okay with it. Maybe I’d had enough time to process it. But hearing that Reggie was being Reggie... it just... made everything feel okay. Grief didn’t instantly slam into me. No... just... almost relief.

Hiro, on the other hand, still looks a little upset about the whole thing. “I’m really sorry. I didn’t know if I should tell you or not, but Reggie asked me not to and I assumed you’d ask if you wanted to know. I thought after I’d *passed out* being nice to him last night, he’d tell me what you’d actually want to eat but no. I should have known better. He’s currently cackling like a fiend.”

“Of course he is,” I say. “What were you helping him do last night?”

“I was helping him touch the cats.”

“You can help him touch the cats?” I ask in surprise. “Like he can actually feel them?”

“Yeah. It... took quite a bit out of me, which is why you found me face-planted on the floor, since Reggie didn’t kindly wake me up or anything.”

“Sounds like him.”

“He wants to know if he can touch you,” Hiro says.

That surprises me. “I don’t care.”

“You... won’t be able to feel him. I’m not sure I’m that good, but hopefully, he’ll be able to feel you,” he says as he reaches out to me. He presses down, but his hand never comes in contact with mine, and I find myself disappointed that I can’t feel Reggie.

Hiro suddenly looks alarmed. “No, I’m not touching him there, don’t be weird.”

“What’s he saying?”

“Nothing. I think he needs to learn what he should and shouldn’t say. Like think things through.”

“No, that’s not how Reggie works,” I say.

“He said to tell you he’s sorry for pissing in your shoes and blaming your brother’s dog,” Hiro says.

I start laughing. “Are you serious? He was so drunk, I knew he did it but he swore up and down he didn’t. Dammit, Reggie, you should have cleaned them up.”

Hiro grins, amused at this interaction. “He said you better eat my spaghetti.”

“I will,” I say.

“Really, you don’t have to,” he says.

“No, I don’t *hate* it, hate it. Just not my favorite and Reggie’s was always awful. He was a horrible cook.”

“He said he made it horrible especially for you.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me.”

Hiro looks a bit uncertain as he says, “Do you two want to talk? I can just be a translator.”

“Uh... sure,” I say. “I guess. How’s he doing?”

“You can talk straight to him. He says he’s fine... bored. Wishes you could hear all of his ‘wonderful’ jokes... And now he’s annoyed that I air quoted the wonderful part.”

I grin. “It deserves to be air quoted. Um... I don’t know what to say. I want to apologize, but I don’t know why. I guess just because I wish you were still here.”

“He said you should know where to shove your apology.”

If anything has ever made me believe Hiro, it’s this. It’s because I can feel Reggie in these replies. “The thing is... I can’t deny any of this. I can’t deny that he’s here right now because everything

you're saying is exactly what he'd say. Not that... I don't want him here. But what's held him back? I want him happy wherever he is. So if he wants to stay here and haunt my ass until I die, then I'm prepared for it."

"He says he's not sure, but I have a feeling he's lying. Maybe he'll tell me later," Hiro says.

"Alright... Reggie, don't harass Hiro too much," I say.

Hiro starts laughing. "Oh, you're hilarious."

"This is why you didn't want to come here, isn't it?"

"Oh, it sure is. He watches me when I pee. Do you know how awkward that is?" Hiro asks. "He comments about it too."

"Does he watch me when I pee?"

"He says it got boring after a few days."

"He's such an idiot. Reggie, stop harassing people. I would think you'd want to treat the only person you can interact with well so you can keep interacting with him."

"Well, he tried attacking me in the car, so I really don't think that's of much concern."

I stare at him as my mind flashes back to the incident in the car. The incident that I'd thought had been caused by some malicious spirit had instead just been Reggie. Is he jealous of Hiro? I guess that'd make sense, but he has no reason to be. And no reason to try to attack Hiro.

"What the hell, Reggie? You don't just... strangle someone!"

"Shit, my noodles," Hiro says as he quickly turns around to his noodles that've probably been boiling too long at this point. "We're good. They haven't disintegrated or burned."

"So it's already better than Reggie's food."

He snickers, clearly pleased he has someone to understand the complications that come with being involved with Reggie.

While we eat, I find myself falling into an easier rhythm of talking to Reggie through Hiro. Admittedly, it's a little awkward at first, but with Reggie's ribbing and Hiro's sass, it just becomes easy.

While spaghetti definitely isn't my favorite, it becomes one of the best meals I've had in a while.

"Reggie's disappeared, and I can't say I'm disappointed. The shit he was asking me was getting a bit sketchy," Hiro says as he gets up to start cleaning up the dishes.

"Just sit, you shouldn't be using your hands that much. I can clean up," I say as I grab the plates. "So he just disappeared?"

"He did. Sorry if you wanted to talk to him more."

"That's okay. Does it hurt your head doing that much?" I ask.

"No, I was just a bit stressed about it, I guess?" he says. "But this kind of stuff is normal. It's things like helping them touch things or touching them myself that gets hard."

"That makes sense. Why don't we go for a walk? I'll clean this up later," I decide.

"Sure."

I head for the door and hold it open so he can follow me out into the cooling night air. Together, we walk behind the house for a bike trail that runs behind my place. It's not too heavily traveled this time of night, so we should have some peace. We're quiet for a long moment before I glance over at him. I know he's respecting my space, but I'm honestly doing okay.

"Thank you," I say.

He gives me one of his smiles that instantly does things to me. "You don't need to thank me. I'm happy I could help you."

I watch him closely as we walk down the paved path. "I'd been in such a... funk lately... and it's

like whenever you're around, you draw me out of it. So, thank you. Reggie was an obnoxious light in my life, and when he was gone, it was just... hard. Weird. Difficult. We'd known each other since I was six and he was four. And then suddenly, that huge part of my life was gone, and I just fell into my work and couldn't focus on anything else. But being around you reminds me there's more to life."

"Because I keep you entertained with my creepy imaginary friend talk?" Hiro teases as he looks up at me.

"Exactly," I say as I grab his wrist and pull him to face me.

His eyes catch mine as his body stills. I want to press into him, touch him, and claim his lips, but he seems hesitant, and I know I shouldn't. Even knowing that, I want to feel him against me.

When I step into him, he doesn't back up, but maybe he can't, he's awfully close to the edge of the trail. Slowly, I lean into him and watch as his eyes flicker down to my lips before going back up to mine but still he doesn't push into me. He doesn't... he doesn't want this, does he? I'm reading into things. I'm throwing myself at the first person who makes me feel human, and he doesn't even want it. Of course this is how it is.

Shit.

I turn away and decide I'll just keep walking like nothing happened.

"W-What?" he asks.

"What?" I ask like I have no idea what he's referring to.

He grabs my tie and yanks me back to him, my mouth crashing against his. It's not pretty at all and the force he pulls me with makes me stumble into him and push him right off the trail and into a tree, but he doesn't stop as his lips move against mine. It's like I'm instantly mesmerized... hypnotized. Something. I can't get enough of him. I can't show how much I need and want him as my lips work against his.

I feel his lips part against mine, tongue teasing, like he's still not certain, even though it's clear he doesn't plan on letting me go. I slide an arm around his waist, drawing him into me as my tongue brushes and dances against his.

Heat and desire are swirling inside me until I hear a bark and Hiro draws back.

Groaning out of annoyance, I turn to look as my eighty-two-year-old neighbor eyes us. Hiro takes off at a rather fast-paced walk like if he walks fast enough, he can just avoid the whole situation.

"Feeling frisky tonight, eh?" Norma says as she struts right by me.

"Hey, Norma," I say, while trying to play it off like I wasn't prepared to devour Hiro right then and there. When I look up, Hiro is a good distance from me and gaining, so I have to jog to even catch up with him. "Why are you running away? Norma doesn't care."

Hiro keeps strutting away like if he power walks fast enough, he can escape, but I'm positive I could outrun him, so there's no sense in it. Quickly, I grab his wrist and pull him around to face me. He immediately rubs at his face, which can't feel good with his hands... grabbing me as hard as he did couldn't have, either.

"Hiro?" I'm startled by his expression. If he didn't want to kiss me... then why did he? I thought he liked me, but have I been reading into things wrong? How disappointing.

He looks extremely upset when he catches my eyes. "I'm such a fucking idiot. I'm so sorry. I just... I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have done that. I feel like an asshole. I'm an asshole. I'm the biggest asshole to have ever asshole. You never want to see me again, right? You never want to even know I exist, right? I'm so sorry."

As I watch the man who seems quite upset, I try to figure out what he could possibly be upset *about*. The kiss was good... more than good. If Norma hadn't interrupted us, I'm not sure I'd have

bothered stopping it until I had to breathe, and even then, I'd probably have said fuck it.

"What?" I ask, which has to be the most intelligent thing I've ever said to someone who has just poured out his feelings to me. God, I'm such an idiot.

"You *literally* just find out your fiancé who has passed is living in the house and talk to him, and I just... force you to kiss me."

"My... fiancé?" I ask, finding myself more and more confused as this conversation goes on.

Hiro's staring at me now as everything clicks into place.

"Reggie... Reggie told you... he was my fiancé?"

Confusion is taking over his expression, but it's better than the hurt that was there before. "Yes?"

"Oh my god. Reggie isn't my fiancé. We weren't even *dating*. I mean, yes, we loved each other, but not like... romantically. We were just always there for each other. We cared about each other. We tried the dating thing back when we were in our early twenties but wanted to murder each other more than love each other. It just... I won't lie, we had sex every now and then, but we weren't right for each other romantically. We were happy loving each other but not *in love* with each other... if that makes sense."

Hiro is quiet for a long moment. "So... your dead fiancé is not living in your house, threatening me for looking at you, and making me feel guilty for liking you?" he asks. "That's all... just... Reggie being Reggie?"

Now I feel awful thinking about all the shit Reggie has put Hiro through. "Yeah... he's a dick. He's probably a bit jealous; we loved... love each other because we were there for each other, you know? But we weren't dating, and we definitely weren't getting married."

"Can I exorcise Reggie?" Hiro asks as he lets out a deep breath. "Lord, I felt like such an asshole. I'm not used to being the asshole."

I smile at him because "asshole" definitely doesn't fit him. "Are you saying that's more my thing?"

He grins at me. "I didn't say that."

"I'm sorry about the misunderstanding."

"It's fine. A mini heart attack is good for everyone."

"Is it?" I ask, uncertain as I notice him fiddling with his hand. "Are you okay? You shouldn't have grabbed my tie so hard. Did you hurt your hand? You could have just been like 'Hey, Maddox, come back here. Stop being an idiot.'"

"Yeah, well... maybe I'm not that smart. I wanted it to be a bit more... dramatic, obviously."

"Obviously," I say.

He jumps and I realize that must mean a ghost has invaded our space. "Natalie," he says.

While I would have preferred more time alone with him, I know I need to just get used to the way things are.

"My bird is here too," he says.

"Ah," I say. Yep... this is normal.

"As soon as Reggie's here, I'm going to have to go back to the house for the salt."

"I thought you said salt doesn't work?"

"It doesn't, but it'll still make me feel better throwing salt at him, you know?" He gets a mischievous look on his face as he presumably thinks about salting Reggie. It's sexy as hell and kind of makes me want to push him up against something and press my lips against his.

"Did you get those pictures?" he asks. "You said you were collecting some pictures for me to look at?"

I take it that now that Natalie is here, I can't just continue where we left off. So I give him a reluctant nod and start walking back toward the house. "I did. I managed to go through quite a bit before I was called off to do something else. Hopefully, we have something of use."

"I hope so too. If we don't, I'll pin my brother down. I'll find his disappearing ass and I'll... make him talk to me or something," he says, completely determined.

When we reach the house, I sit him down at the table with my computer and list of deceased women in the area whose cases had never gotten closed. "I didn't get through the list of missing women yet. Also, the list I made up for you only spans the past ten years at the moment," I say as I clean up dishes.

"Hmm, okay. It's so hard to tell, you know?" he says. "She's pretty strong, so I would assume it's not a recent death."

As I clean up the dishes with Hiro behind me, I find myself oddly at peace. There's something about him that makes me feel at ease, even though work is currently chaotic.

When everything is cleared up, I grab a chair and pull it around beside him. When I sit down, he glances over at me. "I'm... not seeing her. I want to go through them again, though, in case I missed something. People can look different. Like when I met you, you looked like a demon and acted like one too. Now you look like a sexy demon."

I raise an eyebrow at him, which makes him grin at me before turning back to the computer screen. "It's awful that the families of these people don't have closure."

"I know. We try, but sometimes... sometimes it just doesn't matter." This was a hard lesson to learn when I was younger. "Sometimes you have to think about it like you could spend your whole life trying to figure out something that just... isn't going to be figured out or you could move on to help the hundreds of others who need help. It's hard to do and everyone I know hates it, but you just... keep moving forward."

"I bet. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make it sound like you weren't doing your job. I know how hard it is. Even being able to talk to the dead, I often can't figure it out either. But we're going to figure it out this time," he says, giving me a look filled with determination, and I truly hope we do before the next person falls victim.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



HIRO

“Reggie!” I say as I see him sitting on Maddox’s couch.

“Yo, dweeb, what’s up?” he says.

I smile at him as I walk over before grabbing a handful of his hair and yanking his head back. “I will fucking exorcise you, Mr. Not Fiancé.”

He sends a wicked grin my way. “I see you’re trying to move in on what is mine.”

“He’s *not* yours. He said you weren’t even dating.”

“We don’t have to date for him to be mine,” he says. “Now fuck off. Go... do something stupid and boring.”

“I swear I will learn the ancient art of exorcism and exorcise your ass so fucking hard,” I growl.

“I take it Reggie’s back,” Maddox says as he walks into the room.

I quickly let go of Reggie and smile at him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You were threatening someone, I assumed it was Reggie.”

I give him the most innocent shrug I can muster. It’s been over a day since I’ve seen Reggie, and while I would have loved to have spent that day attached to Maddox, I couldn’t because Maddox went to work, and I had to go to my own job. It’s clear at this point that he doesn’t want me to go to work with him, which is... concerning. Is he trying to weasel out of this arrangement?

“Maddox, my foster mom, Patricia, just told me she has a bunch of food from a canceled meeting or something at work and is having the family over, so I’m going to go over there in a little bit. It’ll also be a good opportunity to pin down Sean. He could be hanging around there or following Libby. Want to go with me?”

He stares at me for a ridiculously long time. Far longer than it should actually take to decide. Like... he’s interested in me, right? So then why’s he so damn stubborn when it comes to certain things?

“Hmm...” he says, which is literally the dumbest answer.

Why is everyone in my life so difficult? “Umm...”

Maddox is watching me closely. “Like tonight?”

“Yeah, is that an issue?” I ask.

“He hates family stuff,” Reggie explains. “He’s like this stupid little awkward thing when it comes to family. When his parents split up, it created a huge rift in the family and neither parent was very... good at their job.”

Maddox must notice me looking in Reggie’s direction because he says, “What’s Reggie going on about? Tell him to stop telling you unnecessary things.”

“Tell him that he’s a little bitch boy who needs to grow up before I decide to do the dirty to you instead,” Reggie says as he slides off the couch and wraps his arms around me.

“Um, no,” I say as I try pushing him off me.

“I bet I could make your toes curl,” he says before blowing in my ear.

“Stop it.”

Maddox’s eyes narrow as he stares at the scenario but does little to stop any of it.

“Reggie, I will make you fucking invisible. Do you want to be invisible?” I ask. “Anyway, Maddox, yes or no?”

Reggie sucks my earlobe into his mouth and it’s fucking ridiculous how much I can feel it. Why’s he so damn solid when he’s with me?

“Stop sucking my ear!” I growl.

That gets a reaction out of Maddox. “Why is Reggie sucking your ear?”

Natalie pops onto the scene before conjuring up a bag of popcorn and sitting down for the show, like she thinks this is a performance just for her. “He likes it when you suck his nipple,” she says.

“I swear to god, I’m done,” I say as I shove Reggie off before jabbing a finger at Maddox. “I’m going to take a shower. You decide what you want to do. If I get murdered along the way because I’m forced to go alone then so be it.”

His expression immediately changes. “I’m going.”

I grin at my power of manipulation before wandering off to the bathroom, thankfully alone. Today at work, I’d spent some time trying to do a little landscaping maintenance around the front of my bookstore that’d started to get a bit out of control from my lack of attention, so I’d gotten rather sweaty and dirty. And not smelling like a sweaty dirt ball is probably ideal when trying to coax Maddox into believing I’m the man for him.

I strip and wait for the temperature to adjust before getting in.

As I stand under the beating water, I think about the whirlwind of just... everything in my head. There’s so much going on. Maddox, of course. The killer, of course. But other things as well. Like who is this young woman? What role does she play in it? Does my brother know more than he’s letting on? Do they all know something they’re refusing to tell me?

“Well, hello there,” Reggie says as he pops into the shower and drops his eyes down to my groin.

“Fucking hell,” I say as I cover myself up. “No! All my other ghosts know that the bathroom is a safe zone for me, so fuck off.”

“Nah,” he says as he walks forward until we’re nearly touching before putting his hands on the shower wall on either side of my head, pinning me there. “You’re making moves, I see.”

“No, I’m just... Reggie... I...” Fuck. What do I even say?

“You’re too nice for your own good,” he says as he presses in closer before giving me a smug grin. “You’re just so fucking cute too.”

“I thought you hated me,” I say.

“You can still fuck something you hate. Hate sex is a thing, you know.”

“No.”

He winks at me. “Fine, fine. But I’m still going to watch you shower. What did Maddox say about

me?" he says as he pushes back.

"That he'd help me exorcise you."

That just makes him grin harder. "I've seen plenty a penis before, you can uncover yours."

I narrow my eyes at him as he keeps grinning and takes a seat on the edge of the tub.

"You seem to think I'm the bad guy here, but I simply want to help you after all the wonderfully kind acts you've done for me," he says.

"No, you want to terrorize me while also kind of wanting to fuck me, while also kind of wanting to annoy me. Do I have that all right?" I ask as I turn my back to him. Giving him my ass is probably also not a good idea, but it's all I've got at the moment.

"Maybe," he says, and I can practically feel him blatantly staring at my ass. "You ever think about a threesome?"

I throw a glare over my shoulder which just makes him grin even harder.

"I'm not kidding but fine, be a stick in the mud. There's a ghost who's been... hanging around the house lately that I think has something to do with you. A real bummer of a ghost. Hates my jokes."

I turn to him as dread sets inside me. "Young woman?"

"Yep."

No. No. No. "Fuck."

"She's the one who pushed you off the cliff?" he asks.

"She is," I say.

"I told her to get lost and she basically ignored me. Don't let your guard down. I'll keep watch of you everywhere you go to make sure she's not going to hurt you. That's why I'm in the tub with you right now."

"No, you're in the tub with me right now because you just *live* to harass," I remind him.

This simply makes him laugh because he knows I'm right. "Fine, fine. But I can give real good head."

"Out," I growl.

He grins at me as he slips through the shower curtain.

"Thanks... for trying to run her off, though," I say.

"What can I say? You make Maddox happy, so I suppose I'll suffer a little longer. And if any ghost is gonna off you, it's gonna be me."

"Sure, sure," I say as I shake my head, knowing he's going to say or do whatever he wants anyway.

I finish my shower, thankfully alone (well, unless Maddox wanted to join me, which I'd definitely make an exception for), then get dried off and dressed to find Maddox in a nice shirt and jeans, waiting for me. He smiles when he sees me, and it makes the torture of dealing with Reggie better.

"Ready?"

"Yep. Anything to get away from the shower where Reggie watched me and commented on my ass."

He stares at me for a long moment. "Is this like that *Scary Movie* where you're going to fuck the ghost?"

I raise an eyebrow at him. "I will not and will never have sex with a ghost," I promise him. "I can't... I can't say I haven't *thought* about it, but no."

He starts laughing. "And you admit to it."

"I mean... come on, you would have been curious too, right? I mean... if I was able to solidify ghosts as a teen as much as I can now... I'm pretty sure my first time wouldn't have been hiding in the

closet at the neighbor boy's house. After which he cried, told me he wasn't gay, and ran away."

"Sounds very dramatic *and* traumatic."

"It was. Basically, my penis had the power to terrify men. We were also nineteen, not like sixteen or anything, which made it stranger."

"I hope your second time was better than that," he says.

"No... no it wasn't. Halfway through, the guy's dead *grandma* came into the room, and boy, did she scream. Thought her dear ol' grandson was a, and I quote, 'Good Christian boy, and what would his wife think?' and I go, 'You're fucking married?' halfway through."

"I'm scared to ask about your third experience."

"Good," I say with a grin.

"Sooo... like... is that an issue you have often? Ghosts wanting to... join in or watch?"

"Constantly. Ghosts have nothing better to do than invade the lives of the living," I say as I head toward the door.

"But you've never fucked a ghost? I mean... I'm not going to judge if you have."

I start laughing as I make my way out to my car, but Maddox tugs me back before I can reach the door.

"I'll drive," he says.

"I can drive, I did earlier."

"But your hands."

"Yeah, as long as I don't use the tips of my fingers, it's fine."

"No."

"Fine, fine," I say as I follow him over to his car.

"Don't think I've forgotten that you haven't answered my question about fucking a ghost."

"I haven't... *yet*," I joke.

He snorts as he starts to back down the driveway. "Sounds like Reggie is prepared to be your first ghost fuck."

"Yeah... that's not going to happen. He's already asked if we could have a threesome as well."

"No..."

"He sure did."

"Oh dear god. Is there a way I can threaten him?"

"Of course," I say as I look behind me to see Reggie as proud as a peacock. "He's in the back seat."

"Reggie... I'll fuck you up," Maddox growls.

"Tell him it does things to my loins when he growls at me," Reggie says.

"Reggie said that he has a little penis and most of his jokes come from insecurity," I say with a smile.

"I will murder you in your sleep," he hisses.

"Did he now?" Maddox asks.

"He also said that he's thankful I finally helped him get that off his chest," I add.

Maddox nods approvingly. "Wow... thank you for that, then. Reggie, we embrace you and your small penis."

"OMG. He's *seen* my penis. He knows what it looks like. Have him tell you what it looks like," Reggie says.

"He said that he wishes he looked as good as I do when I'm naked," I say.

"I bet he does wish that," Maddox says.

“Well, you’ve left me with no choice,” Reggie says as he grabs the seat belt and proceeds to yank it.

“Fuck... dammit, Reggie!”

Reggie’s pressing close to my ear now so I’m briefly deafened by him. “Then tell him the truth!”

“He doesn’t need to hear the truth!” I protest.

“I will replace you with someone better,” he growls.

“You can try!” I say. “Fine. Maddox, Reggie wants you to know when you growl at him, it does things to his loins. There? Everyone happy? Can I stop being harassed?”

“Reggie, don’t be a dick,” Maddox says.

Reggie shrugs but lets go of the seat belt. “Tell him that did things to my loins too.”

“He said that did things to his loins,” I say, less than pleased to be relaying any of this.

“Tell him to stop saying the word ‘loins,’” Maddox says.

“Tell him it did things to my raging rod of pleasure penetration,” Reggie says, which I merrily translate.

Maddox just turns silent for a long moment before glancing over at me. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. It shows what kind of person you are to be friends with him,” I say with a sweet smile.

“It does, doesn’t it?” he asks, looking a bit reluctant.

That’s when I remember that I haven’t mentioned that Maddox is coming and should probably warn the family.

Me: I’m bringing someone with me.

Patricia: Is it the hunkalicious Nicolás told me about?

Nicolás: I said hunk. Not hunkalicious. I would like the record straight.

Patricia: Nicolás, is he or is he not a hunkalicious?

Nicolás: Can we stop saying that word?

Patricia: As soon as you admit he is.

Nicolás: Fine. Yes. He is.

Patricia: See, I knew it.

Me: What is happening?

Patricia: You’re bringing Hunkalicious, and I’m providing food. Libby, Vic, and Hailey are coming too.

Me: Please don’t call him that in front of us.

Patricia: I’d never embarrass you like that.

Nicolás: She’d totally embarrass you like that.

Me: I’m well aware.

I look over at Maddox, drawing his attention to me. “What’s up?” he asks.

“Patricia is going to embarrass me.”

“Good, I’m tired of Reggie making everything embarrassing,” he says. “You got along with your foster family well?”

“I did. My first one I hated. I was a mess and upset all the time and they were so strict and unloving, but they eventually moved me to Patricia’s. At the time, she had just gone through a divorce and was leaning toward not fostering, but she took me and Sean as a last minute, ‘here, hold these kids until we find someone else’ kind of thing. And let me tell you, she raised the three of us all alone with not a lick of issue.”

“Did you stay in foster care, then?”

“For a long time, I did. I was running into the issue of being a little older, and sadly, that can

sometimes affect chances of being adopted. I'm not saying that's why, but it could have played a role. But Patricia eventually just adopted all three of us. Nicolás and Sean both were tossed around quite a bit. Nicolás's mother wanted him when she got out of prison but when that time came, she fell right back into her old ways. Sean was bounced back and forth between Patricia's and his biological mom's home before the court finally declared her unfit. It took them far too long, though."

"So there was a time Sean wasn't with you?" he asks.

"Briefly, but he continued going to the same school as me, and most of the time, he'd just go straight to Patricia's anyway. Sometimes it'd be a week before his mom would even come looking for him. She'd storm right up to that door and chew Patricia out for trying to 'take her son' even though he'd been gone for days and she hadn't noticed. After the third time, Sean asked if Patricia could make it stop, so Patricia called the police. When the police arrived, Patricia had Sean locked in the house and Sean's mother had a baseball bat that she was using to bust Patricia's windows in.

"In an attempt to help, I rushed into the mix to pull Patricia inside and his mother bashed me with the baseball bat, fracturing my arm. That was when the police pulled up and Sean was officially available for Patricia to adopt."

Maddox glances at me. "How do you always end up in the mix, yet really don't seem to have any self-defense skills or anything of the like?"

I grin at him. "I don't need them. I'm quick on my feet."

He seems suspicious of this, and I don't blame him. Since I've known him, he's seen me get bashed to the ground by a knife-wielding maniac, pushed off a cliff, and now I'm telling him about getting beaten by a baseball bat. I don't tell him the woman was probably all of ninety pounds but when someone's system is on an overload of drugs, they tend to hit harder.

"What are your thoughts on self-defense classes? Better yet, how about I show you how to shoot that gun?"

The idea of Maddox standing behind me, hands on mine, body pressed up close while he whispers gun-wielding directions in my ear sounds magnificent.

"I'd like that."

"Tomorrow, we're going."

I'd definitely like that. "Ooh... so soon."

"Yes," he says. "Tonight, if we get done early."

"Okay, yeah, sure," I say.

"I'm glad you ended up with someone who did good by you."

"Thanks... I won't say it was overly easy. And I probably wasn't the best kid, but she stuck by me. It took me a while to truly understand that she wasn't trying to take over being my mom. That I didn't have to defend that position. That, instead, she was just there for me."

"Does she know you can see ghosts?"

"Yeah, I told her a few months after I came to live with her, but that's a whole other story. The funny part is that it wasn't Patricia who wanted to adopt or have kids, it was her husband. But she'd found out he'd been cheating on her and the divorce was shitty. He went to stay with the woman he'd been sleeping with and didn't want to take the kids because the new woman didn't want them. So here was Patricia, a woman who'd never planned to have her own kids, suddenly stuck with two before getting Nicolás later."

"I'm surprised she didn't turn it down."

"She'd originally said just for a week or two until a better place came along, but she said she could never find that better place."

He smiles. "She sounds like a pretty amazing woman."

"She is."

When he pulls into the driveway of Patricia's house, I have him park off to the side before getting out. As I walk up to the door, I find myself unsure of how to walk with him. Do I stand close to him? Do I keep a good distance between us? He hasn't actually said anything else to me that makes me think we're even remotely *heading* toward a relationship. So...

I clearly don't have to figure this out because Reggie shoves me off the sidewalk and starts strutting up beside Maddox until Maddox realizes I'm no longer part of the equation.

"You... alright?" Maddox asks.

"Simply stumbled... as in, Reggie shoved me," I say as I hurry to catch up but when the door swings open, it just looks like sexy Maddox is there while I struggle from behind.

"Hey," Nicolás says with a smile.

"Oh my heart," Reggie declares. "My... who is this gorgeous hunk of a delicious man?"

He tries to shove Maddox off as well as he saunters up to Nicolás. "Peasant! Peasant! Come introduce us!"

It takes me a moment to realize that *I'm* the peasant.

I glare at him before moving past to stand next to Maddox. "Hey, Nicolás. You remember Maddox."

"Yes, my memory isn't that awful," he says. "We were literally just texting about him."

I might cringe a little at that. "Uh yeah... anyway... There's this annoying ghost screaming in my ear. He thinks you're hot and really wants me to express this, and I hope now that I have, he'll fuck off."

Nicolás just laughs, but I notice he blushes a little. "How do you attract all these horny ghosts?"

"It's a specialty of mine," I say as I lead Maddox inside.

Libby, Sean's daughter, comes racing up and wraps me up in a hug. "Is Dad here?"

"You're not excited to see me?" I tease.

"Eh..." she says with a grin.

"You little brat," I say as I tickle her.

She giggles and wiggles around, but as I do, I look around for Sean. I don't see him, but that doesn't mean he's not here. I was hoping to kill two birds with one stone with both Libby and Patricia here, but it doesn't seem like I'm going to get lucky. He's really just fucked off.

"So?" she asks.

"No, he's not, kiddo, but I'll let you know the moment he shows up."

"Okay," she says with a smile.

Patricia comes around the corner and heads for Maddox. "I didn't get to meet you when the rest of the family did. I was out of town. I'm Patricia," she says with a warm smile. I remember how warm that smile was when I first saw it. She was going through a divorce and her whole life was being turned upside down when she met me, but she still could spare me that smile, and I won't lie, I needed it.

I needed a lot, but she made me a priority, and I was lucky to have her. At the time she'd already had Sean on and off, and it wasn't long before he became my brother.

"Pleasure to meet you too," Maddox says as he shakes her hand.

"What happened to your hands?" Patricia asks me.

Since my hands were doing a little better, I'd switched them to Band-Aids to cover up the larger cut on the one hand and the scrapes on the other in an attempt for no one to notice or ask about them.

"I fell like a clumsy idiot while hiking. Slid down this rocky area where I scraped my fingers, but I'm fine. Clearly, I'm fine. I had Maddox there to save me. I actually did it so he could save me and fulfill my fantasy of being saved by a sexy man," I say.

Patricia doesn't look overly amused, but my rambling seems to have distracted her enough. "You need to be more careful."

"I am!"

She doesn't seem sure but nods. "Alright, let's eat."

"How'd you end up with so much food?" Hailey asks as we walk into the kitchen where her husband Vic is hovering over the dishes.

"Oh, so we were supposed to have a meeting that was catered and the team we were meeting with ended up with some emergency something or other. Told them I wasn't going to let the food go to waste, so we split it up among my team. I, of course, took all the good stuff. I do the best work, so I feel that's only right," she says with a grin.

"I still say you're going to be running the place before it's all said and done," Nicolás says. "I can threaten a few people if you need me to."

She raises an eyebrow. "No, do you need to go to anger management classes again?"

"I was perfect! I never did anything wrong. That was just that stupid case worker panicking over that one tiny thing," he says.

"You set the shed on fire," I remind him. Honestly, Nicolás really never did anything wrong. He was quiet and just watched. That's why Patricia threw a fit over the anger management class since Nicolás wasn't even considered an angry kid.

"Once. You ran away like fifteen times. And you got nothing because you were the favorite child," Nicolás says.

"I grounded him and took away the phone," Patricia reminds him.

"His only friends were dead people..." Nicolás says.

"Yeah, well, if I wanted to call them, I couldn't," I say.

"What about you, Maddox? What thing have you done that can be worse than me accidentally lighting the shed on fire?" Nicolás asks.

Maddox doesn't leave time to think about the question before answering it. "Hm... nope. Nothing. I do everything perfectly."

"What about the time you arrested me?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "You willingly came with me."

"You willingly arrested yourself?" Nicolás asks me.

"No! He... conned me with his good looks. Like 'Hey, babe, look at this nice hard back seat, come sit on it.' It's not my fault that when he grumbles, I do things I later question."

"Was that the only thing hard?" Nicolás mutters under his breath so Libby won't hear.

Of course Patricia still hears it as her eyes narrow, but Nicolás refuses to look at her.

"Why don't we eat?" Patricia says.

"Deal."

We dish up our plates and sit at the table that has multiple extra chairs crammed around it. Hailey, Libby, and Vic don't always join us, but I know Patricia loves getting to see Libby and invites them when she can.

Reggie squeezes in until he's sitting on my lap.

"So... Nicolás, is it?" Reggie asks as he stares at him.

Nicolás shifts his attention a little and stares in my direction before going back to eating. "You

always make things feel weird,” he mutters quietly, since the family is now in a heated debate on whether or not the movie *Snow White* is sexist.

“You really have no room to complain when he’s sitting on my lap,” I tell Nicolás.

“Who is sitting on your lap?” Maddox asks.

“Who do you think?” I say.

Maddox waves his hand around my lap, doing nothing to help. “Tell him to get off.”

“Does he ever listen?”

“Hmm...” Maddox goes back to eating which clearly means that no, no he doesn’t listen. “You can feel them, Nicolás?”

“Not really. I can just feel something’s different. Hiro seems to boost something up to make me feel like I could almost sense something out of the corner of my eye but it’s not quite there when I look. It’s only when I’m around him, though,” he says.

“Nicolás... was there anything that Sean was ever involved in with a guy named Franklin Schutt or a woman named Sasha Lopez?” I ask.

“Franklin and Sasha?” He thinks for a moment before shaking his head. “Not that I know of. I don’t know too many of his friends now. Maybe he worked with them?”

“No, Franklin was a dentist and Sasha was a nurse,” Maddox says.

“Yeah, I don’t recall those names.”

“What are you getting into?” Patricia asks, making me cringe a little. I shouldn’t have been discussing this stuff at the table.

“I thought you were busy talking about how sexist something was,” I say.

She’s watching me closely. “Yeah, but my radar is always on the lookout for when something is going on that shouldn’t be,” she says, eyes narrowing right on me.

“Nothing,” I say with a smile.

“I swear if I hear you’re doing something reckless again, I will boot your ass out of this family. I can’t lose another son,” she says.

Guilt fills me as I shake my head. “I’m not being reckless.”

Her eyes narrow further. It’s clear she can see right through me. Nicolás gives me wide eyes, like he would as a kid whenever I’d get in trouble for running after dead people.

Maddox is deathly quiet, like he’s positive that if he doesn’t move, he doesn’t play a role in this.

“I’m watching you.”

“Noted,” I say before I’m forced to join in on the horrible movie discussion.

After we finish eating, I nod at Maddox and hurry up the stairs before Patricia can scout me out to chastise me.

“She’s scary,” Maddox jokes, even though he could squish Patricia if he felt so inclined.

“Right? Try growing up with her,” I say with a grin as I push open a closed door. The room has mostly stayed the same since I lived here, but I notice some of Libby’s toys are scattered about.

“Is Sean here?” Maddox asks curiously.

“No... he’s clearly avoiding me. This was Sean’s stuff as a kid,” I say as I wave to the bedroom. “Doesn’t seem to be much left.”

“He had a room to himself?” he asks.

“Yeah, Nicolás and I shared a room. Sean and I both had our own room until Nicolás came into the equation, and since my room was a couple feet bigger, she stuffed Nicolás in there.”

Maddox picks up a photograph of young Sean, Nicolás, and me squeezed together on a swing that once sat out back. It was clearly not meant for three teenage boys and soon after the picture, it broke

from our weight.

"I'm sorry you lost such a big part of your life. I know he's still... in your life, but it's different," he says.

I smile at him. "It is," I admit.

We look around the room a few minutes, but it's clear there's nothing of use here so I head out to the hallway. Instead of going downstairs, I turn to my old room. "Want to see my old room in all its glory?"

"I'd love to," he says. "Did you have like pinup boys on your walls?"

"Nah, Nicolás had enough sports guys in tight clothes for me to fill my fantasies," I say with a grin as I swing the door open. Sure enough, the old posters are still there, curling up on the corners.

"Patricia always has us spend the night on Christmas Eve, so she's left everything as-is," I say.

"That's fun," he says as he walks around. "Was this one your favorite?" He points to a footballer in tight clothes, holding a football and looking all-around sinful.

"I mean... can you blame me?" I ask with a wink.

He laughs as he walks over to my side of the room to pick up and look over almost everything.

"It's not very exciting, is it?" I ask.

"I think it is," he says as he turns, so I give him a gentle shove toward the twin bed. Pushing him down on it, I lift his chin up and press my lips against his, unable to hold back any longer. His hand hooks around my waist, pulling me onto his lap as his lips eagerly move against mine.

I know I'm being rather rude when anyone in my family could bust in, and likely will, at any moment, but I don't care. I've never had someone to parade around in front of my family, and while I'm not quite sure he's yet mine *to* parade around, the idea that I get to is highly thrilling.

His tongue brushes against my lips and I part them as I rock my hips into him. Thankfully, Reggie is downstairs staring at Nicolás, and Natalie is nowhere to be seen.

Maddox's hand slides under my shirt, fingers tracing up my back, making me shiver. I want more of him... *need* more of him. Pressing into him, I draw back just enough for air before pushing in harder.

"Sorry to interrupt the lovefest, but y'all got company coming," Reggie says as he pops into the scene.

I jerk back with a "Fuck" of surprise and nearly fall off Maddox's lap, and he does his best to catch me. Quickly, I get off and explain what's going on before pretending like everything is dandy when the door swings open and Nicolás walks in.

"What are you two up to?" he asks.

"Uhh..." I feel like a teenager again, having to explain that I was not making out on the bed with the hot guy.

"With Sean. I don't give a shit if you two are sucking face or whatever," he says, looking amused.

"Oh, umm... nothing," I say, then give him my best smile filled to bursting with innocence.

His eyes narrow like I could possibly be lying. "Come on, don't lie to me."

"Just hoping we could find something that'd give us some answers," I say.

"I think you need to stop. This is getting out of hand." He glares at Maddox. "And *you* need to not drag him into it. Hiro is both stupid and smart but far too often, he lets these heroic ideas drag him into something that he should never stick his nose into."

"I know," Maddox says. "I'm keeping an extremely close eye on him."

Nicolás doesn't seem convinced but shrugs and turns around before leaving. I can tell he's a bit pissed, but I don't know what else to tell him. I also can't fathom why he wouldn't be all over finding

Sean's killer. I know he wasn't as close to Sean as I was, but we were all brothers, weren't we?

Libby peeks into the room. "Whatcha doing?"

"Looking through old stuff."

"Oh. Grandma sent me up to see what you're doing. She was all 'They better not be getting into Sean's stuff and stirring up trouble again,'" she says, mocking Patricia's voice.

I grin at her. "There's nothing to get into."

"There is up in the attic. It's filled full of Dad's stuff from his house. Grandma said when I get older I can have it all, but not until I'm older. I'm not quite sure how old I have to be. It's not like I'm a kid anymore."

"Sean's stuff is in the attic?" I ask in surprise.

"Yeah, I was here when Nicolás carried it up there. Grandma told me we had to go somewhere else though, so I couldn't look at it. We went to the movies."

"Can you tell Grandma that we're most definitely not doing anything bad to stall her so we have time to look through it?" I ask.

She thinks about it for a moment. "If you bring me something back."

"Deal," I say as I hurry into the hallway and make sure Nicolás is MIA before I pull the ladder down. I climb up with Maddox close behind and tug the string attached to the light. There's not enough space to stand up here, especially for someone as tall as Maddox, so we have to crawl over to the pile of boxes. I open the first one, but it's just Christmas decorations, so I move on to the next. We go through half the boxes before Maddox finds something.

"This his?" he asks as he waves me over.

I hurry over to him and open a box before looking inside to see Sean's old football jersey on top. "Sure is," I say as I slide that box over to him and open my own.

I start digging in it, pulling pieces out and unwrapping little treasures I haven't seen in a while. It hurts, but I know it'd hurt a whole lot more if I knew I couldn't see him again. How the hell do others deal with this shit?

"Yearbook," Maddox says as he starts flipping it open. "Do you know what grade this would be for him?"

I look at it and think for a moment. "He was one grade above me, so junior."

As he flips through that, I keep digging through the boxes until I find an old keychain he loved but was too embarrassed to admit it. It was from when Patricia took us to Disney World and got us all matching Disney keychains. They each had Mickey Mouse on them, and Sean would go on about how he was too old for a Mickey Mouse keychain, but he cherished the damn thing. Told everyone that he carried it around just to make Patricia happy, but I know it was one of the first things he'd ever been given.

So I slip it into my pocket. Even though I'd love to keep it myself, I have enough of him and I'm sure Libby would love it.

"Why is Sean's picture in this yearbook an old picture? It doesn't match the others, yet people in the back wrote him stuff like he was there," Maddox says.

I scoot over to him and look at the picture of Sean. He does look young in it and the background doesn't match the others, but I never would have noticed it if Maddox hadn't pointed it out. "Hmm... I don't remember that..."

"He must have missed picture day? Was he with his mom at the time?"

"This is the year his mom went batshit crazy..." I say before nodding and tapping my finger on the photo. "Right! His mom pulled him out of this school. This was one of the times where he'd been put

back with her. His mom wanted him in the school *she* wanted him to go to because she couldn't stand taking him to a school Patricia had wanted him in."

"How long was he gone for?"

"I don't know... it wasn't long. Maybe two weeks? Like I said, there was a lot of back and forth. They'd tell him he had to stay with his mom, and he'd just come back here on his own, so it never really *seemed* like he left, you know?"

"Do you remember the name of the school?" Maddox asks.

"No idea," I say as he pulls out his phone and starts tinkering on it.

"Public? Private? Charter?" he asks.

"I... honestly, it was so long ago and there was so much drama... maybe if I heard the name of the school, I could have something for you."

"Dale's Public?"

I shake my head. "No. I know it wasn't that one."

"Magnolia Charter?"

I think for a moment before shrugging. "Maybe? I can ask Patricia."

"That's the school Franklin went to."

"Yeah, but Sean is like two years younger than Franklin, right? I just... you think Sean did something?" I ask, feeling a little defensive. I know it's not right of me, but the thought of Sean... deserving something like this... I can't even fathom that. "Sean was a good guy. I know he had shitty parents, and not the best upbringing, but he wouldn't hurt anyone."

Maddox reaches out to me and takes my hand, careful of my fingers. "Hiro, I am not saying that, and I would never say that. My job is to look at every angle and to never point fingers or make accusations without solid proof. Right now, I'm looking for how they're connected. If I can find a connection, there's a possibility I can stop something from happening to someone else, okay?"

I nod and he knocks the side of his head gently into mine.

"Trust me," he says, voice soft and gentle.

"I do."

"I'm going to do the best I can for your brother, so don't give me that sad look."

"Thank you," I say as he kisses my cheek.

And I really mean it, but I also can't help but wonder what's going to happen next.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



HIRO

As I sit on the couch at Maddox's place and watch him pace, I can't stop thinking about how I want to do dirty, dirty things to this man.

I want him to do very dirty things back to me.

He's annoyed right now. Someone at work is being "an absolute shit with their head so far up their ass, it's coming back out their mouth," however that works. But the way he's growling and raging has something raging in my pants, and I can't help but question my sanity.

It's not right, is it?

Ahhh... when he looks that good, does it matter?

Maddox slams the phone down before looking over at me. "This fucking idiot—"

"Okay, before you tell me everything, I'm extremely interested in listening, but your shirt is dirty, and I think you need to take it off."

"My shirt got dirty?" he asks as he looks down at it, rightfully confused because he looks pristine.

"On the back."

He twists his head to look, and thankfully, his head twisting is none too good or he'd be able to tell I'm lying. So he unbuttons it, takes it off and looks at it as I'm left to peruse his chest. This man is fucking built. He's not overly muscular, but it's clear he takes amazing care of himself. And he's also got more than one tattoo. How the hell did I not know he had other tattoos besides the one on his arm I'd barely glimpsed? Why does that make him even sexier? How is everything he does so fucking sexy? This can't be legal, right?

He's still examining his shirt, oblivious to what's going on.

"So about that guy with his head up his own ass," I urge.

"Right," he growls and tosses the shirt to the ground for dramatic effect, all thoughts of this nonexistent stain gone as he starts pacing again. "Okay. So this fucking asshole gets involved in this bust the other day."

"Uh-huh. Pull your pants down a little. You have a bug, I think..."

"A bug?" he asks as he glances down before looking over at me, eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to get me naked in the absolute strangest way I've ever seen someone try to get another person

naked?”

I try so hard to keep a straight face as I look him right in the eyes. “I don’t know what I’m doing, but you growling at people is making me really fucking horny, and I thought if you were naked while growling at people, it’d just make my entire day.”

“Is Reggie whispering shit in your ear?”

“No, Reggie is off stalking someone. Just you and me and my bird,” I say as I point to Spite who is just riding around on Bandit’s back like that’s a bird thing to do. The level of don’t-give-a-shits I’m experiencing is quite apparent when I don’t even stop to comment on this and just go back to looking at the fine man before me.

Alright, the bird riding the cat is a little distracting.

“So... you want me to suck you off?” Maddox asks with a gleam in his eye.

Never mind, BirdCat is no more, my attention is fully and completely on this man. “Well... I mean... I definitely wouldn’t complain.”

He snorts as he turns and walks up to me before sliding his fingers into my hair and glancing down at me. “You like it when I growl at people?”

“I do. I love your grumbly voice. I love that your chest gets all poofed up, like you think you’re going to kick ass.”

“I’m... this is... I’m starting to feel like you’re poking fun at me now.”

“Maybe,” I tease.

“Then maybe I need to make it so you can’t make fun of me,” he says, voice low and grumbly, making my cock perk up.

Maddox reaches down and picks me up, hopefully to carry me off to ecstasy. I’m careful not to grab him with my sore hands, and instead loop my arm over his neck as I watch him closely before pressing my lips down on his. He murmurs something that encourages me as he carries me into his bedroom where he lays me down on the bed. I immediately reach for his pants, but he snatches up my hands.

“Your hands are hurt. Don’t hurt them more.”

“I’m fine! I’ve made food and worked and stuff.”

“Yes, and you told me you were using your palms to grip stuff. How are you going to grip my pants with your palms?”

As long as I get his pants off, I don’t care. “Magically.”

“No,” he says as he leans back and grabs his handcuffs.

“Oh? What are you doing with those?” I ask as he guides me down onto my back. His hands slide up my arms where he snaps the handcuffs around one wrist before flipping the handcuffs around the bed frame post and snapping them over the other wrist as well.

“It’s the only way I can trust you to not hurt your hands,” he says with a teasing look that makes me decide I’ll do anything as long as he’s naked.

I reach my feet out and hook the front of his pants with my toes before jerking him forward. “Then get these pants off.”

“Maybe I want *your* pants off first?”

“No... I’m pretty sure it’s a requirement that *you* have to take *your* pants off first or mine don’t come off.”

Maddox snorts at this new rule but when I lift my head to watch him slowly unbutton his pants, his eyes are watching me closely. He slides one side of his jeans down before drawing the other down with it, pushing them off along with his underwear, revealing his large cock.

He climbs up onto the bed as my eyes race down his naked body, taking it all in and loving every inch of him. I want him on me, inside me, touching me, but I decide to be patient, at least for now when I can't touch him in return.

No, tonight I'm at his mercy, and I love every moment of it.

"You just like me in cuffs, don't you? This is how our first date went, and how this one is ending," I tease.

"You call the day I took you in to be a date?" he asks with a grin. "Also, I never put handcuffs on you!"

"Ah, right, I forgot, you were harassing and detaining me," I say.

He shakes his head as his hands settle on my stomach before sliding up to my chest and back down my sides. I shiver beneath the touch, heat in my body rising.

"You really did deserve it. People have let you get away with a lot because of that wickedly charming smile," he says as he lowers his mouth to my chest. He plants a kiss right in the middle before sucking the skin. "You just look at them and get your way."

"Maybe you were the only one I was really wanting to get my way with?" I suggest as his tongue finds my nipple. I decide he can believe whatever he wants as he sucks it before running his mouth down my sensitive skin, kissing and sucking until he reaches my pants.

Maddox kisses the spot right above where my pants rest as his finger slides underneath them, brushing gently over my skin and making me shiver in anticipation. He glances up at me as he unbuttons my pants and slides them down my hips, leaving my boxer briefs in place. He slides his fingers beneath the fabric as I feel the heat from his mouth brush me. With teasing fingers, he draws my underwear down, freeing my aching cock.

When he slides his fingers up my length, I moan, even the gentlest touch sending shivers running through my body. He flicks his tongue over the tip as I watch him, mesmerized by this gorgeous man.

I suck in a breath as he takes the head of my cock in his mouth, warmth enveloping me. He moves down my cock as I ache to reach down and touch him. But there's something thrilling about being at his mercy. Being locked here, unable to do anything but squirm in pleasure as his mouth sinks down me, his fingers rubbing over my balls and back to the base of my cock.

And when he reaches down to stroke himself, I can't look away. I can't... oh, but the way he's making desire ripple inside me. Pleasure consumes me as he sucks and licks and rubs until I'm panting beneath him.

He rubs a wet finger between my ass cheeks, sliding down over me, rubbing my sensitive skin before pushing just the tip of his finger inside me. He slides out before pushing in deeper, rubbing against me until I feel his finger graze against that sweet spot inside me.

I moan as he brushes that spot again, making me shiver. He sinks down, sucking me harder as I writhe beneath him, unable to take any more pleasure. Any more of his touches, his strokes. He's driving me crazy.

"I'm going to come," I say, but he doesn't stop. If anything, he sucks me harder.

I moan again as I come, pleasure rushing through me as he continues sucking me and rubbing me. I glance down as he strokes himself, wishing I could touch him or make him feel good but also unable to care too much when I'm being thrown into such bliss.

He pulls his mouth off my cock and groans as he comes.

Sliding his body over mine, Maddox kisses a line up me until he reaches my lips while he smacks around on the nightstand until he finds the key to the handcuffs. He drags it over and slides it into the handcuffs, releasing one hand. I drape my arm over his neck and pull him into me before he can

release the other. I could just press into him, snuggle into his side all night if he'd let me. He draws me into him, pulling me on top of him as his hands run over my body.

I kiss his lips as he reaches out for my other wrist and works on undoing that handcuff. The metal handcuffs fall free as he pulls me closer.

"Oh my god. I can't believe we were able to do that without interruption," I say.

"You mean, we didn't have an audience?"

"I kept them back!" Natalie yells through the door.

I cringe. "They were listening."

"Okay... that's... disturbing," he says.

I start laughing as I tuck my head against his chest. "Shh, we'll pretend they don't exist," I say.

"I think that's for the best."

His fingers run over my back, sliding gently over me as I close my eyes, knowing we'll have to move at some point, but not wanting to go anywhere right now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



MADDOX

“Stop staring at me,” Hiro mumbles.

I open my eyes and look over at him. “I’m not staring at you, but I can now that I know you want to be stared at.”

He grumbles before rolling into me and tucking his head against my chest, bare skin rubbing against mine. I’m not sure I can get enough of that feeling and find myself wanting, no, *needing* more. I slide my hand over his bare waist and draw him in closer, cupping an ass cheek in one hand.

He shakes his head, black hair sticking every which way. “Not you.”

“Just... talking to your imaginary friends again? They’re up bright and early.”

He spares me a sleepy glance as he nods. “Oh yeah. Reggie’s been talking about *Mario Kart* since seven. Just... talking. I’ve been ignoring it mostly. He really thinks I want to hear. And he’s even trying to offend me by telling me the banana peel is the best item.”

I stare at him, completely confused about what’s going on. “Is that like a sex thing?”

He looks even more confused than me, which is strange. “No, it’s an item you toss at drivers to make their kart slip.”

“Their car... slips... on a banana peel?” I ask, *highly* confused. I clearly win the confused award. At least his ass that I’m still cupping makes this whole conversation much better. “This doesn’t sound legit.”

He just tucks his head harder against my chest and I decide they can carry on about this all they want while I just hold him.

My phone beeps and I reach over to see it’s a message from work. “Someone got us in for a meeting at the charter school that Sean briefly attended.”

“Shit... I don’t have Barry covering for me,” he says as he untucks his face. I kind of want to push his face back into me so I can hold him a little longer.

“I can go alone.”

“How will you be able to tell if you have the right picture when I’m the only one who has seen the ghost?”

“Well... I bet my nephew Wes could help you out at the shop so you can go with me. He used to

work at a chain bookstore or something and has been looking for a part-time job. I mean, you don't actually have to hire him, just use him to fill in, if you want."

"Yeah... that would be amazing, but I'd feel bad just tossing him to the wolves day one. All alone. I mean, what will he do if sassy ninety-two-year-old Belinda comes in?"

I grin at him. "He'll be fine. He's pretty smart."

"Okay... yeah, sure. Give him a call if you would. If he's interested, I'll get a shower and be there in thirty minutes."

"Got it," I say as I watch him get out of bed, only for him to glare off in a different direction. I presume someone's said something about his rather nice and naked ass. I can only guess that someone is Reggie, so I glare in that general direction as well after Hiro grabs a shirt to wrap around his waist, disrupting my view. As he walks out of the room and over to the bathroom joining up with the guest bedroom, I call Wes.

"Hello?" Wes mumbles, clearly having been asleep.

"You still looking for work?"

"Yeah... you going to let me join your team? That sounds fun. I watch a lot of crime shows, so I know my perfect woman would be the sassy detective who is tired of being overshadowed by sexist men but needs me anyway."

"No, I think you actually need a little more background experience that doesn't consist of ridiculous drama."

He snickers. "Fine, fine. Whatcha need?"

"I've been dragging Hiro all around and he needs someone to cover his spot at his bookstore here and there. It wouldn't really be a full-time position, more of a temp. Would you be interested?"

"Yeah, I would be. Dad's been acting weird lately, so it'd be nice to just... get away for a bit."

"Why's Ben acting weird?" I ask, wondering if I missed something going on. Any time I hear anything about him acting strange, I feel anxious. "It's not—"

"No! I don't think so. Just weird. Hard to explain but the others were noticing it too. We had a sibling meeting last night to discuss his level of weirdness."

"Okay. I'll talk to him. See what's up."

"Don't tell him I said something. I don't want him to think we're talking about him behind his back. He and Mom probably just got in a fight again or something."

"I won't let him know," I assure him. "Would you be able to today? Say, half an hour?"

"Of course. I'm in bed so I'll need to be like... presentable since I doubt your boyfriend would like it if I showed up half naked. You two dating? Boyfriends? What do you call it now?"

I hesitate because I really don't know what we're doing. We didn't get that far.

"We're... he's..."

"A friend who is a boy who is staying at your house and most definitely hasn't seen your room yet," he teases.

I reach over and feel the warmth radiating from the spot where Hiro had been lying. Ehhhh. He's got me there. "He's... human."

"Oh? That's his title now? Just human? As opposed to an alien then?"

"Correct."

"Ah, no tentacle porn going on then?" Wes teases.

"You're my nephew, act like it," I say.

He just laughs. "Yep. I'll be right there. Tell your human thanks for the job."

"Of course. It probably won't be long."

“As long as your human needs me, I’m his man.”

I shake my head but give him the address and eventually get out of bed to get dressed. I’ll run into work, get a few things done, then make an excuse why I have to go. I know Parker’s not going to be pleased I’ve blatantly ignored everything she’s said and instead chose to go with what I wanted, but tough shit.

I can feel we’re close, and I’m just not going to ignore that.



HIRO

“Greetings, human,” Wes says as I get out of my car.

“Oh...kay?” I ask, slightly confused.

“That’s what Maddox was calling you. My uncle is afraid of gooey words that could indicate some type of affection.”

It clicks what he’s going on about and I grin. “Ah yes, I could see that. He’s got the ideal adult human male look going on, but really is only good at grumbling and pretending he doesn’t like things when he secretly does.”

Wes grins. “Right?”

I lead him inside and quickly go over some stuff with him a moment before Barry walks in. “This is Barry. He’s going to help you for an hour or so before he goes into class.”

“Hey,” Barry says as he shakes Wes’s hand.

“Thank you so much for doing this,” I say to Barry.

“Of course. I’ll be happy to have someone else join,” he says.

“I might even be done in an hour. Wes, please, if there are *any* problems, call me right away. Also, if you feel overwhelmed *at all*, just lock up and leave. It’s not the end of the world. I’ll take over as soon as I’m back.”

“Got it. But I’ll be fine. I promise. Your computer system is pretty much the same as the last place I worked at,” he says. “Good luck. And even better luck with my uncle.”

“Uncle?” Barry asks.

Wes smiles. “Hiro is trying to tame my uncle.”

“He’s not a wild horse,” I say.

“Nah, he’s an elusive unicorn.”

I snort because thinking of Maddox as a unicorn just makes me grin. “Good luck. Don’t burn the place down.”

“Free books for everyone,” Barry says as I shake my head and head out to where Maddox’s car is waiting to pick me up.

I slide into the front seat and look over at him.

Maddox gives me an exasperated look. “Well, my boss is positive I’m ‘up to some shit’ so she probably has the whole force tailing me,” he says.

“She cares that much?”

“Oh yeah. I simply told her I have a meeting that’s a lead, and I’ll let her know what I come back with.”

“And her reply?” I ask.

He just smiles at me, like that's answer enough.

The drive to the school isn't too long and I find myself hopeful we'll come across some answers there. The school is already in session when we walk up to the front doors, so we have to be buzzed in. Once inside, we head to the secretary's desk.

Maddox gives the woman a friendly nod. "Good morning, I'm Detective Booker, and this is my partner Hiro Moore. We have a meeting."

"Give me one moment."

She calls for someone and after a few minutes, another woman comes in and smiles at us. "Hi, I'm Becca, the librarian. We have all of our old yearbooks in the library," she says as she shakes our hands while Maddox introduces us. She leads us into the library where there are kids at computers and sitting at tables. They look up when we enter, immediately finding something to be distracted by.

"Is the library quiet enough or would you like me to find you an empty room somewhere?"

"This will be fine," Maddox says with a smile.

"Great. What years do you want?"

"Let's start off with 2008, if we could."

"Okay. Something specific you're looking for?" Becca asks.

"Trying to identify someone we saw," Maddox says. "Really, just having the yearbooks will be more than enough. I really appreciate it."

"Of course," she says as she sets one in front of us and stacks the rest behind us.

Maddox slides the yearbook over to me. "So there are no deceased girls who fit the description that you've given me that went to school here in the past thirteen years. Of course, she could have died outside of school, since you said it was hard for you to get a good age on her. If so, we could possibly find something. But we're looking for someone who would have interacted with your brother, which is why I think we should start with the year he was here."

"Right," I say.

"Well, I can only work as moral support," Maddox says as I open the first one.

"I know... Let's get going," I say as I start flipping. The pictures are tiny and some of the girls surely look different than they do on an average day, so anyone who vaguely could fit the role, I give Maddox the name of before setting the yearbook aside. The issue is that when I'm done, I don't feel confident about any of the names I gave Maddox. Especially when he spends time on his computer finding different pictures and marking off the women who are still alive, which ends up being all of them.

I go for 2007 next, which is a bust, and work my way down to 2004 before going up. Page after page, I flip and look but find nothing. When I finish up with last year's yearbook, I turn to Maddox. "I'm sorry. It was such a good idea."

"Don't apologize. That's how these things go."

"If my brother would just talk to me... it doesn't make any sense. I don't get it," I say. "I'm trying to see him as the innocent one, but it's hard to when he's just... gone."

"I know. But we can't assume anything until we have proof of something, okay?"

"I understand."

Becca must see our immense disappointment because she hurries on over. "Something else I can get you?"

"I've already looked into records, but maybe I'm missing something. How long have you worked here?" Maddox asks.

"Twenty years."

“Okay... so have any girls ages... fifteen and up died while attending school here that stand out to you? Long dark brown hair, Caucasian.”

She thinks for a moment. “There were two girls about seven years back that were in a fatal car accident,” she says as she looks through the yearbooks until she finds one, flips it open and shows us the two girls. While the one does fit the bill, she’s not the ghost.

I shake my head. “No... We don’t even know for sure that she went to school here. Do you by any chance remember a Sean O’Reilly? He’d have gone to school here for only a few weeks in 2008.”

Becca thinks about it before shaking her head. “I don’t, but if you give me a minute, I’m sure we have records on who his teachers were. If it’s anyone who’s still here, I’m positive they’d be happy to talk with you.”

She hurries off and I turn to Maddox.

“We’re chasing our tails, aren’t we? Just going round and around.”

“That’s fine. We can chase our tails all day as long as every once in a while, we get a little something to keep us going.”

Becca returns and waves us over, so we follow her to the hallway where an older man stands.

“This is Mr. Markson; hopefully he can help you.”

“I’m Detective Booker and this is my partner Hiro Moore,” Maddox says as he shakes the teacher’s hand before I do.

“Come along. It’s my planning period so I have some time,” he says as he leads us down the hall and into a room. “Who was the student you were asking about again?”

“Sean O’Reilly. You probably wouldn’t have had him long,” Maddox says.

“I have a picture of him,” I say as I pull out my phone and scroll to the top for the youngest picture of Sean I can find.

The man looks at the phone for a moment and kind of nods but looks uncertain. “I can... vaguely remember him. I remember... some family drama or something. A... child services woman picked him up and when his mom arrived to pick him up and he was gone, she screamed and yelled and threw a fit, putting the school on lockdown until the police could come and take her away. But honestly, I remember nothing about the kid himself.”

“That’s understandable.” Maddox looks over at me. “Do you know Sean’s mom? Maybe we could talk to her?”

“I think she’s in prison for armed robbery or something,” I say.

“Worth talking to,” he says. “Thank you so much for your help. If you think of anything, let me know.”

I thank the man and turn toward the door as my eyes fall onto a board by the door filled with pictures.

“My chess club crew,” Mr. Markson says with a proud smile. “It’s gotten popular all of a sudden with that TV show nonsense, so I thought it could be the highlight of the month. All my teams over the years.”

But my eyes are on a picture way at the top that I can’t stop looking at. “This girl...” I say as I point at the teenager, the only one in the picture not smiling as they stand before a trophy. “Who is she?”

“Oh? That’s Millie Brookfield.”

“How’d she die?” I ask.

He looks startled. “I... wasn’t aware she died. That’s sad to hear.”

“We missed her in the yearbook. What year was this?” Maddox asks.

“She wasn’t a student. Instead, she was homeschooled, but our extracurriculars were open to the homeschooled students so she was a part of the chess club... It would be... 2007, I think. She played for us for a couple of years before she just... disappeared.”

“Like... went missing?” Maddox asks.

The older man shakes his head. “Well... that’s the funny thing. It depends who you ask. She stopped showing up to chess club, so I went to her house to see what was going on. Her mom wouldn’t let me see her. Just kept saying that Millie didn’t want to see me and that she’d show up to our club when she was better. But a week passed and then another before I insisted someone do something. The principal called and asked to have her come in, but the mom didn’t show. When the police got involved, the mom admitted that she’d been gone for a few weeks. That she’d run off with her father. Unable to track down her father, it got tossed in this weird limbo of whether or not she was actually missing. The mom wasn’t concerned and didn’t press charges against the father. The father never came forth. The whole thing was strange. And honestly, after a while I lost track of where it went. I... I wasn’t aware she died. When did she pass away?”

“We’re trying to figure that out. Do you know if her mother is still in town here?” Maddox asks.

He looks a bit hung up on the “trying to figure that out” part. “Um... I’m not sure.”

“Thank you. Do you remember any friends she hung out with?”

“She didn’t really have many friends.”

“Thank you,” Maddox says again. “Can I get your number in case I have more questions?”

“Of course,” he says, and they exchange phone numbers as I turn toward the door and jump.

There she is... watching us.

Millie Brookfield.

She knows that we know, and I find myself anxious what she thinks about that.

I know it’s stupid but maybe if she just understands we’re trying to help her, she’ll stop. “We want to help you,” I whisper.

“What’s that?” Maddox asks.

“Nothing,” I say as I watch Millie.

She turns and disappears from my sight, causing a shiver to run through me. Maddox steps up behind me and sets a hand on my back, making me jump.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“Sorry, just... yeah. What now?”

“Now we track down her mother and father,” he says as he guides me out the door.

“She knows we know,” I say.

He looks over at me in surprise. “She was here?”

“She was standing in the doorway.”

Maddox immediately looks concerned. “Don’t... don’t go near her, you hear me? She tried to kill you. Shit... I shouldn’t even have you here with me. Why don’t you go back to the bookstore?” he asks.

“No, I’m fine. I’m helping you. You can’t just write me off because of this,” I say stubbornly.

His expression tightens, and I can tell I’m losing him. Neither of us speak as we sign out in the office, then head out of the school and over to the car. Once inside, he turns to me but before he can speak, I start.

“Maddox, I’m going to find the person who killed my brother. I’m going to find them and I’m going to stop them with or without you. If you’re not with me, then I guess I’ll just have to depend on myself, alright?” I ask.

He clenches his jaw, clearly dissatisfied with the idea of me being so reckless, but I can't just... give up. Not when I'm closer than I've ever been.

"They want you to stop, Hiro. They know you're involved, and they know we're figuring shit out because of you."

I just glare at him for even wanting to kick me out of this. "Yeah? So we're just going to risk everyone else's life because we can't just figure this out and end it? Because you want to go back to poking at everything with a stick when you have someone completely capable of stopping it? I want to see what her parents have to say, and then I want to talk to the ghosts of the victims and see if they're ready to talk. We haven't found Joshua yet. We could keep looking for him."

"Fine. But if she even remotely tries to harm you again, we're done."

I don't bother agreeing, so I just stare at him. He stares back.

It's getting rather stuffy in the car, but he's positive he's going to win this staring contest. I'm positive he's not.

"I will not *move* this car until you agree," Maddox says.

"Looks like we're going to be sitting here a long damn time," I say.

His eyes narrow a little more. "Why are you so fucking stubborn? I want to keep you safe and from being *killed*. Is that too much to ask?"

"No, you want to write me out of this whole damn thing and pretend I don't exist."

"No, I want to keep you *safe*," he says, grumbly voice doing things to me that I wish it didn't. Well... kind of. I just want to win the conversation and the grumbly voice is making me want to give in to his side.

"No, you want to keep me in a box that you're going to place at the top of the highest tower," I say.

He lets out some grumbling noise. "You are driving me insane with your inability to care for your own wellbeing."

"Good. Now suck it up and start driving."

He does not, in fact, start driving and continues to glower at me.

I do not, in fact, give in and continue to glower at him.

Why's he so fucking hot?

No, focus. Angry thoughts, winning thoughts.

He's just too hot. There should be a rule that during an argument you can't use your power of sexiness to win.

There's a rap on the window behind me, making me jump and causing Maddox's attention to shift off me. He rolls down the window and looks out at Mr. Markson.

"I thought of something else. I'm not sure if it has any relation to anything, but I remembered that occasionally she'd walk home with a boy, though I didn't know him and never had him as a student. But after she disappeared, I ran into him one time. I told him that I hoped Millie came back soon and he said, 'She's never coming back,' and it stuck with me. There was something dark in his expression, like he knew something."

Maddox looks thoughtful. "Thank you... I'll ask her mother to see if she happens to know who this kid might have been. I appreciate this."

"Of course," he says before walking back toward the school.

I turn to Maddox. "So that kid might know something."

"Yeah, finding a nameless kid from thirteen years ago might be a bit hard," he says.

"True, unless I can get Millie to tell me who he is."

"She's not going to tell you. She's literally told you nothing of use," Maddox says as he pulls his

phone out.

“But wouldn’t she want us to figure out who killed her?” I ask.

“Not if someone is killing them for her.”

“Could this kid be the killer?” I ask. “Revenge?”

“I don’t know. We can explore that path, though. I’m going to see if I can get my hands on her mother’s address or phone number.”

While he fiddles with his phone, I send the information to Nicolás without bothering to ask Maddox if he minds.

Nicolás: Please stay out of this.

Me: We’re so close.

Nicolás: You’re not a fucking cop, Hiro. You don’t know how to protect yourself or anything. Just leave it to the goddamn professionals before you end up dead. Don’t ask me about any of this. I don’t want to help you just for you to end up hurt.

I stare at my phone for a long moment, unsure of what to say or do, but before I can figure it out, Nicolás writes back.

Nicolás: I’m sorry.

Me: I’m just trying to help.

Nicolás: I know but there is NOTHING that will bring him back. You are my family, Hiro. I have no family. My fucking family *is* you. I can’t lose you too. I’d rather never know than lose you.

Me: I know. I’m sorry for putting you in this situation but I have a chance to end it. I have a chance to keep other families from losing their family member. Isn’t it selfish of me not to help?

Nicolás: That’s what the police are for.

Me: I know. Okay. I promise I won’t do anything that will put me at risk.

Nicolás: Fine. No, I don’t know anything about that name and don’t remember Sean hanging out with anyone else.

Me: Thanks.

I look back to Maddox who is scrolling through his phone. “I have an address. Hopefully, it’s still an active address,” he says as he starts to drive.

“I just... I want to help, but I feel like everyone is pissed at me for trying,” I say truthfully.

Maddox glances over at me. “No one is pissed at you. We all just care about you. We don’t want to see you hurt, and it gets harder when someone is actively trying to hurt you that we can’t even see.”

I sigh as I lean back. “I guess. I just... I feel like I’m being selfish or something. I just...” I rub my head. “Forget it.”

He gives me an encouraging look. “No, don’t forget it. I’m sorry for making you feel like that. I know you’re helping, and I know you’re doing everything to help your brother. We just want you to be careful, okay?”

“I will be.”

“Don’t leave my side.” He holds his hand out to me, and I feel relief as I reach out and slide my fingers between his.

“Okay,” I say.

“And let me know every time you see her so I can be there to assist if something happens, okay?” He glances at me and when I don’t nod soon enough, he playfully smacks my leg with the back of the hand that’s holding mine. “Are you listening?”

“Yes! You didn’t even give me time to nod. You just grumped at me!” I say.

“That’s what I do. I grump at people until they listen.”

I grin at him. "I promise. Okay? Even if we're in a heavily populated area, I'll yell, 'The rage ghost from hell is here, save me, my magnificent and muscular guardian.'"

Maddox looks pleased by that declaration. "Good."

"Turns you on a little when I say it like that, doesn't it?"

"Not just a little," he says as he spares a look at me to wink.

I grin at him. "You were turning me on when we were having our staring contest, so now we're even."

"Oh? Even a staring contest turns you on?"

"What can I say? I'm a simple man."

"You're not at all simple. You're a damn enigma. You're the most confusing damn man I've ever met," he says.

"Nah."

"Yes."

I snort, positive that's not the case but willing to let him get away with whatever he wants because he said it very sexily. Or maybe everything he does or says is sexy.

When we pull up to a nice two-story house, I'm honestly surprised. I'd had this misconceived notion that Millie came from lower income. I guess because most of what I dealt with growing up were low-income families and their issues.

"I don't have a phone number for her, so we'll just go in and see if she's available to talk," he says.

"Okay," I say as I follow him up to the front door. He rings the doorbell, making a dog start barking to announce our arrival.

After a few minutes, the door swings open and a middle-aged woman looks out. "Can I help you?"

Maddox flashes her his badge. "I'm Detective Maddox Booker and this is my partner Hiro Moore. Are you Janet Brookfield?"

"Smith now, but yes... can I ask what this is about?" she asks as a dog tries its hardest to sneak past her to get our attention.

"We want to ask some questions about your daughter, Millie."

I can immediately see the walls go up.

Her entire expression changes. "What about her?"

"Mind if we come in? It'll just be a few questions, if that's alright?"

She seems like she wants to balk but she gives him a curt nod and steps back so he can follow. The dog is ecstatic that we are now within reach and hops between me and Maddox to be petted. "Need something to drink? Water? Coffee?"

"Water would be great. Hiro?"

"Same," I say with a smile.

Janet waves us to the living room before heading to the kitchen. When I hear noise coming from upstairs, I look up, trying to figure out what I'm hearing.

"What is it?" Maddox asks.

"You don't hear that?" I ask in surprise.

"No."

Must be a ghost, then.

Before I can say or do anything, Janet returns with the glasses and sets them before us.

"Thank you," Maddox says with a smile. "You have a very nice dog."

She smiles back at him. “Thank you. That’s Sunny. She’s a sweetheart.”

“She is. How old is she?” he asks.

I’m a bit surprised by the nice-guy display Maddox has going on, but as I look around the room, I realize there are a lot of pictures of the dog as well as dog-themed decorations. The woman is clearly into her dogs.

“She just turned four. We had a little birthday party for her.”

“I’ve always wanted a dog,” Maddox says as he ruffles the dog’s ears. “She’s so well behaved. You must spend a lot of time with her.”

Janet looks proud. “Thanks, I do.”

“Do you mind if I record our session?” Maddox asks.

There’s a brief hesitation and I see the wall start to go back up, but Maddox is one hundred percent focused on cooing to the dog, which seems to distract the woman.

“Umm... no... that’s okay,” she says.

“Thank you,” he says as he sets the recorder up before reading her rights to her. “Janet, I wanted to ask you a few questions about Millie. How long did she live with you?”

“Um... Until she was fifteen.”

“And then where did she go?”

“To... live with her father. What’s this about?” she asks, looking fidgety even to my untrained eyes.

“We’re trying to find your daughter. She likely has some answers pertaining to a case we’re currently working on, and we’re hoping she’ll be able to help us out. Have you spoken to her recently?”

“No... we don’t talk.”

“When’s the last time you talked to her?” Maddox asks.

She gives this half shrug. “A while back.”

“Can you give me an estimate?”

“Probably... when she left,” she says.

“Can you tell me how that happened?” Maddox asks.

Janet folds her arms over her chest, and I can tell Maddox is losing her. “I already explained this when *cops* showed up when she was fifteen. Like they thought something... sketchy was going on.”

“Why’d your daughter leave? What did she do?” Maddox asks, pressing on but with such an easy tone, like he’s keeping his voice steady to keep her from getting defensive at all. I also notice the questions are lined up in a way to make it seem like Millie is at fault, not Janet.

“She was ungrateful and a little brat. I tried raising her well. I tried, but she just couldn’t learn. She couldn’t get better,” she says.

“What couldn’t she learn?” Maddox asks.

“Everything! She had no manners. Was a little slut. I caught her out with these boys.”

“Really?” Maddox asks, sounding as horrified by it as Janet does, and I realize that this man needs an award for acting. “She was sneaking out without your permission?”

Janet leans forward, like she’s excited to have someone to finally understand the issues she had raising her own child. “Yes! She begged to join this damn chess club and I thought fine, I’ll let her do that, but then she wouldn’t come home. Just kept wandering around with boys.”

“Do you know any of the names of these boys?” Maddox asks as I hear a banging upstairs. I glance up, but no one else reacts, so I know it must be a ghost.

“No. I just told her she could never go out to see them again. She knew better.”

Maddox nudges me. "Can you show her a picture of Sean?"

I draw my attention away from the banging. "Yeah, sure," I say as I grab my phone and start scrolling.

Bam! Bam! BAM!

"Hiro?" Maddox asks, snapping me back to what's going on.

"Sorry," I say as I scroll until I find the picture I'd shown the teacher.

She scrutinizes it for a moment before nodding. "Yes! He was one of them. He was one!"

"Can I use your bathroom?" I ask.

Maddox looks over at me, confused.

Janet sighs but waves. "Fine, yes. The bathroom downstairs is being renovated. Follow me," she says as she gets up.

"Thank you," I say as I get up and start walking.

I follow her up the stairs, unsure what I'm even planning on doing. I doubt I'm allowed to just waltz around her house without permission but I have to know what that noise is.

Bam! BAM! BAM!

She hurries me down the hallway, but my attention is drawn to a closed door.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

The noise is coming from right beyond that door.

"What are you doing? Bathroom's down here."

I point at the room. "I heard something in there. Can I look in there?"

"There's nothing in there," she says.

"I heard something. Are you sure? Maybe it's a mouse or something unless you have another pet?"

"A mouse?" She looks irritated as she pushes the door open to what looks like a bedroom, leading me inside. "I don't hear anything. You sure you're hearing something?"

I stop, startled, as I see a man hanging from the ceiling, a rope around his throat. Standing before him is Millie, just watching him as he swings back and forth, banging against the wall with each swing.

Instinct tells me to rush forward, to grab him, to help him, but I know he's already dead.

He's merely a ghost reenacting his death.

Millie, noticing my presence, turns to look at me. I know Maddox told me to yell for him the next time I see her, but I can't. I can't yell for him now.

She takes a step toward me a moment before the ghost hanging from the ceiling comes to a rest. Then I see him appear beside me. Millie stops, startled, then disappears and my attention turns to the ghost who stumbles back and slams into the wall. His head is shoved back, smashing into the wall. He slides down, slumping onto the ground before he begins to be hoisted up onto a bed where a rope appears around his neck. Then I see him dragged up a moment before he sits up, startled. He tries getting away as the slack in the rope is taken up, but before he can, he falls back and begins flailing as he slams into the wall again and again, creating the noise I'd heard from below, feet mere inches from the floor. He can nearly touch it with the tips of his toes.

And then it starts all over again.

"I don't hear anything. What exactly were you hearing?" she asks. "Where was it?"

"I must have been... mistaken," I say, mind rushing through scenarios about what I should do.

She shrugs it off before heading back out into the hallway, but I can't look away.

This time, I find myself walking up to him and as he thrashes, I grab him, unsure if I can force him to be solid enough to hold on. When my hand slides against his waist, I can feel him there and manage

to lift him up. My first attempt to grab the rope around his neck, my fingers slide through it, but on my second try, I concentrate as hard as I can and manage to grip onto it, pulling it free and letting him drop down into my arms.

“It’s okay, I have you. You’re okay,” I say.

The ghost seems startled for a moment before he disappears and lands back at the door where he starts the whole process over again.

“Fucking hell,” I whisper. Does he constantly do this? Or only during the time of his death? Maybe even the day of his death?

“What are you doing?”

I jump as I turn to find Janet looking irritated and confused and Maddox right behind her.

“Ma’am—”

“I thought you wanted to use the bathroom. Were you lying to get into my room?”

“No, I heard a noise. I just said I heard a noise in there and you had me come in...”

“Get out of my house,” she growls. “Both of you.”

I can’t leave. Not until I know. “Who was the man who died in this room?” I ask.

She draws still, watching me closely. “What did you just say?” There’s pure venom in her words now.

And I can’t even keep calm anymore as I wave to the spot where the man is hanging again. “Who the fuck did someone hang in this room? Was it you? Did you hang him?”

Her face twists into a cruel expression. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Then show me a picture of your husband. Did you hang your husband?”

“I don’t need to show you anything,” she says as the ghost slams into me. I hadn’t realized I’d backed into his path. To go around me, he crashes into a cabinet that teeters before falling over. And when it hits the ground, a ceramic thing breaks.

“Sorry about that,” Maddox says as he swoops down to grab the photograph that’d fallen out.

Janet knocks into him, trying her hardest to grab the photograph out of his hands, but before she pulls it free, I say, “There’s a ghost in this room that’s continually being hung.”

Her hand stills.

“Like... he hangs himself?” Maddox asks curiously.

“No, someone else hangs him,” I say. “If I see a photograph of Millie’s father, I could tell if it’s him.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about! You have no idea what you’re talking about,” she says, sounding hysterical. “You both need to leave! I’m calling the police.” And then she storms out.

“Where?” Maddox asks.

I take him over to the side of the room where the ghost hangs. “Here.”

He looks up and then around the room as I describe to him what happened and what the man looks like.

“Why does he keep reliving the scene?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s because something horribly traumatic happened to him? Maybe it has to do with Millie? Or maybe it’s like the anniversary of his death? I’ve seen that happen before.”

“You think Millie killed him?”

“I don’t know... she was here... when I walked in. Watching him,” I say.

Maddox stands back and runs over the scene with me for a moment until the sound of sirens fills the house.

“Shit,” he says. “Come on.”

“Did she call the cops on us?”

“She sure did,” he says.

“Wait, what do you have in your hand?”

“Something fell on the floor,” he says as he flips the photograph over. It’s hard to make out what’s in the photo because written over it again and again are the words “Adulterer.” It’s scratched in so deep in some areas that the white of the torn photo is showing through.

“What’s it a picture of?” I ask.

He steps closer to the window to get a better idea. “Does that... does that look like a man hanging to you? It’s hard to tell.”

I lean in to get a better look. “She did try to grab it from you, but I distracted her with what I said and she ran off... I think you’re right. Yes! Look at the top, you can see the exact spot the rope is. It’s exactly how it is now! Same place. This is... she took a picture of it.”

“Well, shit,” he says.

There’s enough ruckus going on that Maddox decides we should go down to see what’s happening, so we head down the stairs to where Janet is hysterically telling the cops two strange men are threatening her.

When the cop sees Maddox, he looks confused. “Detective Booker?”

“Hey, sorry, we were asking her a few questions after she’d invited us in. We have some evidence that might be proof there was a possible murder in the house, so I would like to take Janet in to ask her a few questions,” he says as the woman gets a look of panic on her face before turning around and rushing for the stairs, possibly to erase any more evidence or in the hopes he never looked at the photograph.

“Ma’am, please stop where you’re at,” Maddox says. She debates not listening to him before turning.

“You’re lying! I never did anything!” she screams.

While the police officers deal with the woman who won’t stop cussing out Maddox while we’re around, Maddox steps outside, but into a spot where he can still watch what’s going on.

As he makes a call, I notice Natalie standing by Maddox’s car and head over to it. I climb in so I can talk to her in peace as my head starts to pound.

“What’s going on?” Natalie asks, so I fill her in.

“I think it’s the husband who Millie was supposed to go with. I think the wife killed him.”

“But if she did... do you think she also killed Millie?” Natalie asks.

“I don’t know,” I say as Maddox gets into the car and passes me his phone.

“Is this the man?”

I look down at the picture he has pulled up. “Yes,” I say without hesitation. “Is that Millie’s dad?”

“Yes. How the hell did this slip by? No one noticed he’d disappeared and when his teenage child supposedly ran off with him, there were no red flags?” he asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Did she stage it in a way that made it not worth looking into?” Natalie asks, so I tell Maddox what she said.

“That’s a good question. I don’t know. I’m going to call Parker, then see if we can talk to Janet. I’ll take her in for questioning as we get a clearer idea of that picture.”

I close my eyes, hoping it’ll ease the headache a little. “Okay... my head hurts from trying to help him. I’m going to just... chill here for a moment, okay?”

“Of course,” Maddox says as he sets a gentle hand on my thigh.

It makes me smile and instantly puts me at ease as he leaves the car.

“Ooh. Someone got the love bug,” Natalie says.

“Shush,” I mutter.

“Reggie told me you were all up in his biz.”

“Don’t talk to Reggie. Reggie is a demon,” I say.

She laughs as she climbs into the driver’s seat. “Nah, I like Reggie.”

“Shhh... silence.”

“Silence,” she says. “Sooo, what was it like?”

I snort before pushing her head away. “Quiet.”

“Fine, fine,” she says with a grin. “I bet he made you see stars.”

My eyes snap open and I look over at her as she grins wickedly.

Of course she’s not done. “Were you screaming his name?”

“He sucked me off. We didn’t have full-on sex yet.”

“Ohhhhh damn, boy. Was he good?”

“I will forget your existence if you don’t stop talking.”

“Did you call him Daddy?”

“He’s nine years older than me. That’s not old enough to be a *Daddy*.”

I notice with horror that Maddox is staring at me strangely. Am I talking loud enough he can hear me? Oh dear god.

“I’m trying to rest my pounding head,” I hiss at her.

“Oh, trying to rest after some pounding, I hear,” Natalie says.

“You are no longer my friend. You are just a wisp of air.”

“You love me too much.”

“I hear... I hear something... ah, just the wind,” I say as I reach into the back and grab one of Maddox’s jackets before I toss it over my head. It smells like him, and I don’t know at what point that became such an amazing thing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



MADDOX

It's really hard to concentrate on the phone call when Hiro is talking about "sex," "Daddy," and "pounding." Honestly... I'm a little confused on what he's talking about, but I shake my head and turn away.

"So... you didn't listen to me?" Parker asks.

"No, I listened. I told you I was going to the school. You told me this had better relate to what my current job was. I said it most definitely did and here we are."

"And now you're wanting me to send out a cadaver dog because your little ghost friend saw a ghost who was dead? Am I hearing this right?"

"I have photographic evidence. If I take this Janet woman in and she confesses to murdering her husband, you... you..." I can't seem to come up with a good comeback that won't get me fired.

"I'll give you a gold star," she grumbles.

"Good. Get ready to hand that star over," I say.

Parker snorts. "Get her to talk, and only then will I talk about having the property searched. Even if she did kill her husband, we don't know that she'd bury him on the property."

"I'm aware, but if his ghost is still here, I wouldn't think he'd be far... I don't know, I'll have to ask Hiro," I say.

"Do you hear yourself?"

"I do."

She is clearly not pleased, but neither is Janet when the men she'd called arrest her and take her off in their car and over to the department. There, I'll question her to see what she has to say about what she did.

When I get into my car, Hiro is asleep in the passenger seat. Interacting with ghosts on more of a physical level really seems to wipe him out. He doesn't stir once all the way to the department but when I pull in, I know I'll need his help, so I set a hand on his leg and nudge him gently.

"Hmm?"

I gently pull the coat off his face. "Sorry to wake you. While you can't go into the interrogation with me, I want you to listen in when I talk to Janet. You can text me anything that stands out or

questions you have.”

“Oh... shit, sorry. I didn’t mean to fall asleep,” he mumbles as he looks over at me, and I’m overcome with the desire to lean over and kiss him, but I know I need to stay focused. So I just give his leg a squeeze.

“It’s okay.”

I get out of the car, and he follows me in a daze. I sit him down at my desk as I prepare and by the time I’m done with everything else, he’s a little more awake. He follows me down to the room Janet is being held in.

Parker takes him with her to the observation area, which I’m not sure he’s overly pleased about, but he’ll be able to listen in.

I go through her rights and then go over some specifics before getting down to the meat of it.

“Janet, why do you have a picture of your dead husband in your room?” I ask.

“I don’t.”

I set the photograph down. “Whose is this, then?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you took it?”

“No!”

“Your husband Tucker is dead.”

Her jaw is tight. “If he is, I know nothing about it. I haven’t spoken to him in... years.”

“So he’s been dead for years?”

Her eyes dart over to the mirror that she might realize Hiro is behind, telling me she’s more stressed about him than me. Something he said really shook her at the house and she’s not forgetting it.

I go over the information Hiro had given me but tell it in a way that makes it seem we’re speculating what happened because of the photograph. As I talk, I watch her expression. She’s not showing the grief of a woman who’s just found out her husband had died; instead, she’s showing flashes of anger. She’s having trouble holding it back. I can tell by the tension in her body, the way she’s digging her nails into her own palms, like pain can’t even snap her out of it.

“Why’d you do it?” I ask.

She grins tightly at me as she leans forward. “I didn’t do it. Where the fuck did you come up with any of this? What even gave you this idea?”

“We can see it in the photograph.”

“You can’t see shit in that photograph.”

“Did your daughter find out so you killed her as well?” I ask.

She scoffs as she leans back, her expression coming back under control. “You’re just full of shit, you know that? You’re just grasping at anything and everything, trying to paint me as the bad guy. Maybe his mistress was the one who killed him.”

“Who was his mistress?” I ask.

“Just some slutty bitch he was fucking behind my back.”

“Is that why you killed him?”

She lets out a roar of anger, shaking her chair back and forth. “I didn’t kill him.”

“So knowing that your husband was dead, and if you didn’t kill Millie... when she went missing, why didn’t you have anyone look for her? What if you could have helped her?” I ask.

“Millie is not dead. She ran away and so be it. The little slut came home pregnant, so I kicked her out of the house. I didn’t kill her. She’s not dead. She’s probably off whoring around with ten babies by now,” she says.

I see a flash on my phone and look down at where I have it hidden on my lap. Hiro's text simply says, "Tell her she's dead."

"Millie's dead, Janet."

She hesitates, like she momentarily believes me and doesn't like what she hears. "No, she ran away."

"We need to know who killed her," I say.

She looks uncertain. "You have proof she's dead?"

I think she knows about her husband... I think she killed her husband, but I don't think she killed Millie. We need more to go on before we make any assumptions.

"I would never hurt my daughter. That asshole got what he deserved but I didn't kill Millie."

"So you killed your husband."

She looks away from me.

Even more questions and time don't get me the answers I need from her, so I'm forced to step out of the room and hope we have enough for a search warrant.

That's when Deputy Chief Parker walks up with Hiro, surely to scrutinize us and rain on our parade. She's already got the arms folded and foot tap thing going on the moment she stops walking.

"This photo is pretty hard to see, but it looks like it's going to be enough for you to get a warrant. You think she killed her husband?" Parker asks.

"I do."

Her foot is still tapping away. "We need more proof."

I refuse to back down. "Proof is the body we're going to find."

"How long ago did this guy die?" she asks.

"I believe before Millie died."

"And how do we know Millie died?" she asks. I know she's wanting me to hand over the proof or at least evidence and I have none.

"Because I've seen her ghost," Hiro says, holding her eyes which is a very, *very* brave thing to do.

Parker snorts, clearly not planning on *ever* giving in to this. "This is a joke, letting you two run around and chase ghosts when you should be focused on evidence."

"Peter says hi," Hiro says.

If I thought Parker was obstinate and reluctant before, it's nothing to the pure *anger* that fills her face at Hiro's words.

She steps up into him, and since she's a tall woman, she looms over him as she gives Hiro's chest a little shove. "Cute, bringing up someone's dead brother. Funny. I don't want to see you for the rest of the day."

She turns around and starts storming down the hallway.

Hiro clearly has a death wish because he's not done there. "He says that you still lost the bet. That he definitely got the girl."

She hesitates—I see a hitch in her step.

"He said she might be in your bed right now, but he could have stolen her with a smile."

Parker turns to look at me instead of Hiro. "Elena tell you that?" she asks.

Hiro continues. "He said that Elena didn't stumble on you that night at the bar, that he told her to go there because he knew you two were meant to be... even if it meant him losing his bet. But he still wants you aware that you owe him fifty dollars... oh... wait. Fifty-six since you made him bring you tacos home. He said that he might have ordered extra sour cream even though he knows you hate it, as

payback for getting the girl.”

She slowly turns to face Hiro. “I swear—”

Hiro’s not deterred. “He also said that on your wedding day when you cried and told him that you wished he was there to see it, that he saw the whole thing.”

Parker opens her mouth, closes it, and then hesitates. “You... fine... we’ll get a warrant and search the premises. If you’re wasting my time...”

“We’re not,” I promise.

Her eyes are glistening, and I realize I’ve never seen her break down over anything in all the years I’ve worked under her. “Then what are you doing just standing around here? Get working,” she says, then she rushes off.

Hiro looks to his right and smiles at something I can’t see. “Thanks... she is quite stubborn, but she has a good heart.”

“Why the hell didn’t you whip that out like days ago?” I ask.

Hiro shrugs. “I really don’t like telling people that their loved ones are still following them unless they ask. I feel like they’ve already grieved once about the loss, so if they know what I can do and they never ask, then they must not want to know... but he told me it was the only way to get through to her, and I’m afraid he’s right.”

“You did the right thing,” I say as I reach over and give his shoulder a squeeze. It makes him give me a warm smile. “Now let’s find ourselves a body.”



“Is finding a body usually this hard?” Hiro asks as we watch the cadaver dog hard at work. The issue is that along with the four-acre property, there’s a wooded area behind the house that seems like a likely burial ground. After we searched the house, we found another photograph, treated the same way, but it looked like a grave beneath all the words scratched into it.

“Quite often. My job would be a whole hell of a lot easier if bodies were easier to find,” I say.

“I bet,” Hiro says as he looks around. He’s already taken me back to the room and tried to coerce the ghost into helping, but he says he can’t even get the ghost to react to his presence. “Can I just wander around in case I see something?”

“Yeah, I’ll go with you,” I say since I’m not letting him out of my sight, especially at a scene like this where Millie could pop up at any moment. He wanders through the property and the trees for over an hour.

“I can feel something. I know he’s here,” he says as he stuffs his hands in his pockets while he looks around. The breeze kicks up, ruffling his hair as he looks out into the trees.

“You can feel the body?” I ask curiously.

He shakes his head. “No... not the body. I can feel his tie to here or something. It’s hard to explain. I can just... feel him here.”

“That’s interesting,” I say. “We’re not giving up. We’re going to keep looking until we find them.”

Hiro turns his head and stares off to the right before taking off at a run.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I don’t know but Millie’s father is running this way,” he says as he picks up speed. I race after him, hoping he can lead us straight to the body, when I suddenly hear a barking dog.

When we rush onto the scene, the handler is praising the German shepherd who is telling us she

found something. We won't know exactly what until the excavation crew is set to work, but we have a pretty good idea.

Millie's father, Tucker, must have noticed that they found his body—why else would he have come running?

I tell Hiro that I could take him home for a bit, but he's adamant about staying and tells me that he wants to try to stay with Tucker to see if he can get anything out of him.

It's dark before they find anything. I'm hungry and exhausted, but Hiro is staring adamantly at the spot beside him. The moment they uncover the body, Hiro reaches out and seems to touch something.

"Tucker, can you hear me?" he asks, and when relief fills his face, I know he does. "Can you tell me what happened?"

As I stand beside him, watching him work and wondering if I'll ever get used to it, I notice others are watching too. Some are staring at him like you would a crazy person, others in wonder. I find myself wanting to shield him from anyone who might judge or hurt him.

"I'm sorry. You can now rest at peace, but before you go, can you please help us? We're trying to figure out what happened to Millie. Did Janet kill her too?" He listens for a moment while I stand here, wishing I could hear what's being said... but do I really? Do I really wish I could speak with the dead? Do I wish I would constantly have dead people surrounding me? Following me?

Some wouldn't be bad, like Reggie, and this Natalie lady sounds alright. But what about the others? I'm not the fondest of people as it is and to constantly be plagued by them sounds horrible.

Hiro grasps tightly onto the man. "No, please, stay a moment longer. I need to know what happened to Millie... Okay, but what about people she hung out with? People around her? Please... don't go yet. Your daughter... come on..."

I notice his hands are starting to shake, telling me he's trying to do something to keep him around.

"It doesn't matter... she cares about you. Anything you can give me..."

His hand closes around nothing and he stumbles before falling to his knees. He immediately looks embarrassed as I grab for him.

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine," I say as I reach for him again.

He waves me off and quickly gets to his feet. "I'm just... it's fine," he says, then walks over to a fallen tree and slumps down on it.

"So?" I ask.

"I swear to god, why are ghosts so fucking stubborn?" he asks.

"What'd he say?" I ask as I sit next to him.

"He admitted to his wife killing him because she found out about the mistress. When I asked if he could point us to some proof, he just said, 'She's the killer. She's the killer, what fucking proof do you need?' And then when I asked about Millie, he just said, 'Millie's dead.' I asked if Janet killed Millie as well and he said, 'The dead don't lie.' Whatever the fuck that means. I tried forcing him to stay a little longer, but he moved on without telling me anything of use."

"The dead don't lie?" I ask.

Hiro's eyes look heavy as he nods. "Yeah. Sorry I didn't get more for you. Fuck. I'm sorry."

"Hiro, we solved a murder we didn't even realize was a murder, and only did so because of *you*. We're starting to piece things together. Maybe now that we have proof, Janet will talk. A lot of killers try to hang on to their fabricated stories in the hope that they won't be found out. Now that we have the body, she has nothing left to grasp onto."

"Okay," he says.

“Detective Booker?” Mick calls out.

“I’ll be right back,” I say as I pat Hiro’s leg, wishing I could grab for his hand or squeeze him gently.

Instead, I head over to talk with the others as they examine the body now lying out before them. I can already see the exact markings that make Hiro’s story ring true, like the damage to his skull where he’d been hit.

“The dead don’t lie,” I whisper.

“What’s that?” a voice behind me says.

I turn to face Deputy Chief Parker who has clearly arrived to see if Hiro was right or not.

“So? Did his ghost tell you anything worth listening to?” she asks.

“He explained how Janet did it, but nothing worth a damn about Millie.”

“Maybe he didn’t have to say anything,” she says as she nods toward her right. I look over at what she’s indicating. It’s dark, so I have to follow her to where there’s a heart etched into the tree.

“I have my doubts Janet did that,” Parker says.

“You think Millie knew where he was buried?”

“Seems likely,” she says. “Sean, the first victim, is Hiro’s brother, right?”

“He is, but his ghost won’t even interact with Hiro anymore. It’s like he’s hiding something.”

“You think he was involved in her death? That this is some kind of... revenge?”

“I can’t say for sure yet, but Millie... Millie doesn’t want Hiro to figure this out,” I say.

“But if she saw her killer being arrested... wouldn’t that make up for it?”

I shake my head because that doesn’t seem to be how Millie sees it. “I think she wants them dead, so she’s feeding into this idea of wanting the killer to succeed.”

“But we know the killer has two left, according to the note left on the wall of the motel. Do you think one of them was her mother? If her mother kicked her out for getting pregnant, that’s a pretty sound reason to hate her.”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “It’s possible. So we have Sean, the first victim; Joshua, the second; then Franklin; and now Sasha. And there’s two more. How did they know each other? They were all within four years of each other.” I’m trying to run it all through my head, hoping for a tie I’ve missed. “Janet recognized Sean and clarified that Millie had been hanging around with a group that she didn’t deem fit to associate with her daughter. So we can now assume the group of them were actively doing something together. I think if we find Millie’s body or at least more about her, we might be able to figure out the tie between Millie and the person who killed the others.”

“I... think your consultant just ate dirt,” Parker says, and I look over at Hiro who must have head dived off his log at some point because he’s currently slumped onto the ground, face buried in the dirt.

“Shit...” I rush over to Hiro who didn’t even bother to wake up during his head dive. I slide my arms around him to help him up, but he’s dead to the world.

“Is he... alright?” she asks in concern, which is quite rare for her.

“I guess interacting with ghosts physically knocks him out,” I say as I shrug off my jacket and lay it out before setting him on it. “I’ll take him back when we’re done here.”



“Hiro?” I ask as I nudge him while holding the water I’d hoped would refresh him.

He’s completely out, so while everyone stares right at me, I scoop him up and start walking off,

like this is normal.

“Awfully familiar there, aren’t you?” Parker asks.

“Would you like to carry him?” I ask as I try to pass him off. Hiro is absolutely oblivious. I’m pretty sure I could drop him at this point and he wouldn’t wake up.

“Nope. But that’s a very intimate hold.”

I toss him over my shoulder, flex my arms and push out my chest as I head off through the dark trees, back toward the light of the house. “Do I look more manly now?”

Parker barely smiles which means she’s laughing inside. “Very manly,” she says. “I’ll walk with you. You can carry him however you’d like.”

“Thanks,” I say. Just as I start to right him back into my arms, I feel him stir.

“What’s... why’s the world upside down?” Hiro mumbles.

“Because I’m carrying you... manly style,” I assure him.

“Manly?” he mumbles before smacking my ass. “I do like the view back here.”

I say *nothing* as Parker slowly looks over at me. Hiro must notice her because he goes, “Oh shit. I mean... rock... dirt. The view of the dirt. Very nice. Very sexy dirt. I like dirt. Do you like dirt? Maddox, down. Put me down. Please. Now.”

I set him on his feet where he wobbles, takes a staggering step to the left and grabs for something neither of us can see before I catch him.

“Oh my god, I think I’m going to vomit,” he says before doing just that as Parker and I stare at each other.

“He likes the view,” she says.

“Like he said, he must like dirt,” I say, itching to go over to help him. I’m not sure what I’m going to help with, but I feel bad he’s heaving over by a tree. “You alright, Hiro?”

“Dandy. I’m glad you didn’t stop to feed me at all today,” he says. “God, my head.”

I can’t stand it any longer and go over to him as Parker scrutinizes us. Who knows what the hell she thinks as I set a gentle hand on his back. “Are you okay?”

“Fine. I’m sorry,” he says as he reaches for the water I’d gotten him earlier. He gratefully takes it and swishes some around his mouth before spitting it out.

“Don’t apologize. I’m just glad you didn’t vomit down my ass.”

He grins at me. “Same.”

“If you’re done, I’ll carry you back.”

“Nah, I’m fine,” he says as he straightens and catches up to Parker. The three of us walk in silence for a bit before Parker says, “Is my brother always with me?”

Hiro looks over at her. “No, not always. Maybe about half the time I’ve seen you.”

“Could I... talk to him... again some time?”

“Of course,” he says. “But not tonight unless you don’t mind me vomiting on your shoes. If you don’t, I’m ready. He’s ready.”

“I quite like these shoes.”

He gives her a smile. “Good. Some other day, then.”

The drive home just leads to Hiro falling asleep. When I reach my place, I pick him up and carry him into the house. I debate whether the right thing to do is to put him in the spare bedroom in his own bed or if we’re beyond that point. Honestly... I don’t know that answer but decide I’m going to be greedy and keep him to myself.

Since his clothes are covered in dead leaves, I pull them off, leaving just his underwear on before laying him in bed. Then I get ready before returning to see both the cats curled up with him. I climb in

and slip beside him then stare at the ceiling.

A full minute of stubbornness passes before I decide to say fuck it, roll over and pull him into my arms. His hand tightens on mine, but he never stirs enough to wake up. I kiss the back of his neck as I wonder how far I've fallen.

It's the first time I've ever fallen anywhere, and I'm not upset at all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



HIRO

I stretch and roll over, coming face to face with Reggie. “Fuck,” I hiss as he gives me a huge smile.

“Hey, love,” he purrs.

“What the hell are you doing in my bed?” I ask.

“Sorry, I just... put you here last night. I clearly shouldn’t have—” Maddox starts, which makes Reggie grin, clearly proud of trying to come between us.

“Not you, I’m over here being spooned by Reggie, and a fucking grinning Reggie is the last thing I want to wake up to,” I grumble as I try to push the annoying ghost away.

He won’t budge, completely ruining my morning. Right now, I could roll over into Maddox’s arms where I could press against him and murmur something that’d make him decide that we’re going to spend all morning in bed and instead... Reggie.

Fucking Reggie.

“You have the most gorgeous eyes when you’re glaring at people,” Reggie says with a grin.

“Thanks,” I say sarcastically.

“Makes my heart stutter.”

“If you had a heart, you’d fuck off.”

“Your bird is here. Make him fuck off,” Reggie says as he points at Spite who is sitting at the foot of the bed watching us like we’re quite interesting.

I try to slide past Reggie but he grabs me in his arms and pins me down. “So... what are you doing with Maddox? Kinky stuff?”

“NO... I don’t even remember coming here. So shoo.”

“So... Maddox drugged you and brought you into his bed without permission? Sounds quite sketchy to me. Or are you drawn to his magnificent peen?”

I decide straight-up ignoring him will be best as I try to get to Maddox. “Maddox, why couldn’t you have been friends with like a nun or something?” I ask.

“Sorry,” he mumbles, sounding not at all sorry. “Just pretend he’s not here.”

He draws me tightly into his arms, squeezing me to him and making me feel like I’m in absolute bliss. There’s nothing like the feel of his bare skin against mine. I pull the pillow over my head and

must fall back to sleep wrapped in his arms because when I wake up, it's extremely bright in the room. What's even brighter is Reggie's smile.

"Hey, love."

"You haven't gotten bored yet?" I mumble.

"No, Maddox told me to tell you he's running into work, but he's taking the afternoon off so he can bang you."

I choke on my own spit. "Excuse me?"

"Oh wait... no... sorry. I mixed it up. So he can teach you how to use a gun, you know, a bang bang."

I narrow my eyes at this awful ghost. "Those *are* quite easy to mix up. I can see why you were so easily confused."

He's clearly pleased. "I know, right? Whoops. My bad. Got your hopes up and everything."

"I call forth God to come down and smite—"

"What are you doing?" Reggie asks.

I stare at him like it's quite obvious. "Performing an exorcism. It seems Maddox's bed has been possessed."

"By an incubus, yes, yes, it has," Reggie purrs as he runs his finger up my bare chest.

"No."

He lets out a defeated noise. "Come on... you and Maddox aren't a... *thing* yet. And I miss the touch of a man."

"Go find a ghost man!"

"But I want you," he says with a grin like that just answers everything.

"Nope. I'm going to work," I say.

"Your bird is evil," he says as he reaches out to Spite who pecks at him every time Reggie tries to get close to him. "No one loves me. I'm loveless. That's the issue here, isn't it?"

"No, you're stubborn, and Spite knows you're trying to bully me," I say as I get out of bed to get ready. I send Maddox a text asking if he needs me, but he quickly replies that he's stuck in the office for now and will let me know. I still feel like he's just finding excuses not to include me, which upsets me a little. But hey, we did a lot of shit yesterday. I can let him brush me off for one day.

I head to the bookstore and open up. It's oddly peaceful working a day here. And I honestly don't mind it, since it gives me a bit to let my brain calm down. Reggie and Natalie, who've become far too close, harass me for a while before disappearing.

That's when I see someone I hadn't expected to see.

"Sean?" I call out.

He turns to look at me. "Hiro."

"Sean, where the hell have you been?" I ask as I rush over to him and grab for him, but just as my hand starts to wrap around his wrist, he pulls back.

He gives me a sharp look and I'm startled still by it.

"Hiro, you need to stop. Please. Just stop."

"But... I'm being careful," I say... though what if that's not why he wants me to stop? What if he doesn't want me to find out the role he played? "You... Sean, who was Millie to you?"

He jerks back at that name, his eyes going wild. "No..."

I reach for him again, slower this time. "Sean, please. Please help me. Who was Millie to you?"

"No, no, no..." He starts to back up faster.

Fuck, no... not again. "Please don't leave. Just talk to me. We can figure this out. We can help you

and her and everyone else. We can keep people from dying.”

“What if we deserve to die?” he asks, and just like that, he’s gone.

Fuck.

I take a deep breath, but it feels suffocating in here, so I walk out the back door, into the alley where I slump down to my ass. I feel exhausted, and it’s only eleven. How the hell am I supposed to face the rest of the day like this?

A noise to my right draws my attention as I see a small gray cat walking toward me. A dead cat, that is.

“Come here,” I say as I hold my hand out.

The cat seems startled at the attention but trots over to me, reaching close enough I can scratch under his chin. “You have someone you’re following around?” I ask.

The cat obviously doesn’t answer, so I pick him up and carry him into the bookstore. If he did have someone, he’d likely jump off and run back to them, but instead, he keeps kneading my shoulder. Even his little ghost claws are painful as they dig in while he purrs.

I send a text to Maddox, close up shop, and head back to Maddox’s because I’m just done for the day. Not even able to care enough to bother Wes or Barry, I decide to leave the shop locked up until Barry opens tomorrow.

Parking my car in Maddox’s driveway, I grab the ghost cat and head inside.

“Well, you’re back already. Sexy time?” Reggie asks, but instead of “sexy time” I hold out the peace offering because I can only fathom how hard it is for him to live in a world where he can’t touch or interact with anything he loves.

“Here,” I say as I stuff the cat into his arms. “Sex demon who I can’t exorcise, meet Cat. Cat, this is the sex demon I can’t exorcise.”

“Oh... my... god,” Reggie breathes. “I CAN TOUCH IT.”

He’s enamored, so I leave him to the mauling and decide another nap is in my future before climbing into Maddox’s bed.



Maddox has been in the room for a few minutes while I play dead... or asleep or whatever. He’s just standing there, like he’s trying to decide what to do with me while I try to decide how long I can pretend this bed is mine and not remove my body from it.

Of course, he’s a fucking mind reader and knows I’m not asleep as he goes, “What happened, Hiro?”

“I don’t know,” I admit as I squeeze his pillow tighter. It’s now my pillow. “Maybe I’m just... having a hard time believing my brother deserved this.”

“You think he did?” he asks, and I hate the question. It’s the same question I’ve asked myself again and again.

“I don’t know what I think, but he thinks he did. He... When I was at the bookshop this morning, I finally saw him, and he asked what if they all deserve it... and what if they do? How am I supposed to stomach that?” I ask.

Maddox sits down on the edge of the bed, making it dip toward him, so I pull the blanket down far enough to look at him. He’s watching me with his steady blue eyes. “There are two ways to look at it. Sometimes guilt manifests in strange ways. A mother or father can feel guilty if something happens to

their child, even if they never played a part in it. A ‘what if’ situation in a way. What if I kept them home from school? What if I listened more? What if I hadn’t looked away? They get this feeling like they deserve something to happen to them because they feel guilty, even though the role they played had no part in their death. So he could be feeling guilty for something like that. He could have been an active participant, but if he was, I can assure you, he’s not some cold-blooded killer, Hiro. He feels guilt. He feels like he can’t tell you what happened because he thinks he deserved this. He feels afraid of what you might think of him, even in death.”

He reaches out and takes my hand, squeezing it tightly as I hang on to every word, really hoping it’s just guilt Sean feels... guilt for something he couldn’t have changed.

“Hiro... just know that whatever you find or whatever you learn, Sean is still your brother. He loves you and you love him. People fuck up sometimes. And sometimes, it’s hard to stomach and it’s hard to deal with, but they do. Even the most wonderful person in the world can fuck up. I could fuck up. You could fuck up.”

I let my fingers tangle with his and squeeze them, thankful for the support when I feel like I can’t talk to anyone else about this. Patricia and Nicolás are so hung up on keeping me out of it, we can’t even talk about it. “Thanks... I really appreciate it. I was just feeling a bit down.”

“How about we get out of the house and do something else for a bit? It’s not healthy to fixate on work so much,” he says.

“Deal. What are we going to do?”

“I’m going to teach you how to shoot a gun. And then we’re going to put you into concealed carry classes, and then I’m going to place you in a safe little bombproof shelter.”

“You... you do realize ghosts can just slip right through walls, right?” I ask.

He’s silent for a moment. “Of course I know that.”

“Yeah? And currently a ghost is the main participant in trying to kill me. I’ll be all ‘Save me!’ but because I’m in this box no one can break into, no one will even hear me to save me.”

Maddox stares at me for a long moment. “Let’s just go. Stop procrastinating.”

That makes me smile and I feel relieved by it. “I’m not procrastinating!” I say as I get up and follow him.

“Your hands feel good enough for this?”

“Yes, they don’t hurt at all. I promise they’re healed and fine,” I assure him.

In the living room, Reggie is just literally rolling around on the ground with this cat while my bird tries pecking him. Spite, seeing me, flies up and lands on my shoulder after getting a real good peck on Reggie’s ear.

“Look! Look at him!” Reggie says, so enamored by the cat he doesn’t even care about the bird’s harassment.

I glance down at the cat who is licking his paw. “Wow, it can lick.”

“What’s... what’s licking what?” Maddox asks, sounding concerned.

“I found Reggie a cat, and he’s finally stopped harassing me,” I say.

“HE YAWNED,” Reggie yells. “Oh my god. Tell me you saw that.”

“Hurry, leave. He’s losing his mind,” I say as I rush for the door before I can be forced to wait for the cat to yawn again.

Maddox just chuckles and follows after me. “I’m glad he has something to entertain him.”

“Besides me?” I ask.

He smiles as he sets a hand on my shoulder and squeezes gently. “Besides you.”

Simply talking to Maddox as he drives to an outdoor shooting range outside the bustle of the city

fills me with ease. I was so stuck in my own thoughts, yet he could just pull me right out of them, allowing me to think about how fun this will be instead. Sexy Maddox pressing me in close, steadying my hand, showing me exactly how to hold it right.

I really think he should just take his shirt off for this lesson. I mean... why not, really? He doesn't need a shirt to teach.

There are a few others shooting, so once he has me fitted with proper eye and ear protection and the right forms signed, he takes us to the far end where I can hear a bit better and not have to worry about the others.

"Okay, the first thing is that you are never to point the gun at someone you're not prepared to shoot," he says. He has to talk loud for me to hear him with the ear protection on, but it's not too bad.

I heard this lecture from the guy who made me sign the papers when we'd gone into the office, but I nod and promise him I won't.

"Your finger stays off that trigger until you're prepared to shoot, got it? Treat every gun like it's loaded, which is why you shouldn't have a loaded gun under the seat of the car with the safety off."

"Yeah... I'm getting that," I say.

"The second thing you need to know about shooting a gun is your stance," Maddox says, getting his serious look on.

I raise a hand.

"Yes?"

"Do you have to have your shirt on for this?"

"I do."

How dare he immediately burst my bubble without a care in the world? "Dammit."

He kicks my foot. "Get into the right stance."

"What? I don't even know what the right stance is."

"That's right, so do you have time to be asking about my shirt? Someone's coming and they're going to murder you. If I'm missing a shirt, what does that solve?"

I think about it for a moment. "It will make my last moments blissful ones because I'll get to see your muscles. Basically, I'll die happy."

Maddox sighs, clearly not impressed with my reasoning, even though I think it's pretty good. "I'm going to show you a couple of different stances and you can use what feels most comfortable to you. But for the first one, I want your feet apart," he says as he knocks into my foot with his until I do what I'm told. "Knees flexed."

I drop down some.

"Too much."

I try to even it up as he shows me himself. "That's what I'm doing."

"What you're doing just makes me want to smack your ass, it's out so far."

"Well... I might not be opposed," I say as he walks up and knocks into the back of my legs. I drop down quite quickly before turning my narrowed eyes onto him. "I can't believe I thought this lesson was going to be sexy! Instead, you're just bullying me!"

"Gun safety is extremely sexy. Here. Come knock me out of my stance. You have to be steady. If you're not steady, you're setting yourself up for failure. You have kickback to deal with as well as if someone tries to get you off balance. Come on. Get me off balance."

I walk up to him and knock into him like he did me. He's like a fucking rock. Of course he's not going to move. He's a demon in disguise. A sexy one... that I can't move.

"Okay... point taken."

“Good. Now you want enough bend to your knees to absorb recoil but not to be knocked off balance,” he says as he gives me a good shake like he wants to be positive I have it down this time. I’m proud to say that I stay semi-still as I’m whipped around.

“Perfect,” he says before taking out his gun and holding it. “Now you see these here? These are the sights.”

“Oh yeah, I actually know that from playing video games.”

“Great, your gun knowledge comes from video games.”

“I’m a really good sniper.”

“Ah, well... I’ll keep that in mind next time I need someone sniped... in a video game.”

I grin at him as he shows me how to hold my arms so the sights are set perfectly for me to see and follow.

He hands the gun over to me and I take it. Then he adjusts my arms and shows me how to line the sights up to focus on the middle of the target.

“Do you feel good?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“The gun isn’t loaded so I’m going to have you run through it all the way to the end, got it? Don’t jerk the trigger, pull it gently.”

“Got it,” I say as I do exactly what he says.

“Alright, start from the beginning. Stand normally and get into your stance.”

After he makes me practice that at least twenty times, he runs me through loading the gun. “You’re going to go from standing normally, into position, and fire, alright? Don’t forget the safety.”

“Okay,” I say.

He nods for me, so I step into position, switch off the safety, line up the shot and fire.

I hit the target, but it’s not a pretty hit.

“Good job.”

“Is it?” I ask skeptically.

“Yes. That was your first shot. You need to relax a little.”

“Okay,” I say.

“Ooh, what’s this?” Natalie asks as she appears in front of me. I jump and Maddox looks startled.

“What?” he asks.

“Natalie.”

“And Reggie! Or just Reggie. We know who is really important here,” Reggie says as he appears with his cat because of course the cat couldn’t entertain him enough to just stay home with it. “Look what he can do.” He puts the cat on the ground and holds his hand out, and the cat jumps up to smack at his fingers. “Look. Did you look?”

I turn to Maddox. “About that impenetrable room you were talking about. Think we could find one a ghost can’t get in?”

“Tell them to fuck off, we’re teaching you gun safety. Shoo,” he says as he waves, and I’m mystified when they all step to the side.

I glare at them because we all know they wouldn’t listen to me that well no matter how much waving, cussing, whatever I’d do.

Maddox runs me through a few more exercises before he eyes me for a second. “Good. Why do you look disappointed?”

I grin. “I’m not. I just kind of suck at this.”

“You don’t suck. You just need practice.”

“You know what would make up for my level of suckage? If we made this like *Titanic*... where you’d be holding me and stuff. I bet that’d make me feel better,” I joke.

He looks mildly concerned. “Which part? When they’re floating off into the ocean and she lets go of Jack as he freezes to death and sinks down into the ocean?”

I’m trying not to laugh now. “No! When they’re on the front of the boat thingy! And he has her in his arms. Instead, you just turn back into Commander Maddox... which is also kind of sexy.”

His eyebrow is rising quite a bit. “You think shooting guns is sexy?”

“Umm... No, I’m pretty sure it’s not the gun I want to fondle.”

He scrutinizes me for a long moment. “I’m gonna fondle you so fucking good when we get home but not until you get a bullseye.”

That doesn’t even burst my bubble, it fucking shatters it. “Um... We will be here all day... no... all *week*!”

“Ooh!” Natalie says. “Here! Let me push Reggie’s head in front of the target, I bet you can hit it then!”

She shoves Reggie in front of the target, which is extremely unhelpful.

“Natalie put Reggie in front of the target since she thinks I’ll be able to shoot it better,” I say.

Maddox starts laughing. “Well, if it works.”

“I’m not shooting Reggie. Reggie, shoo!” I say.

He flips me off until Natalie returns with an apple she puts on his head. “Shoot it off,” she says.

I glare at them until they both eventually leave me. It takes far longer than I wish it would, and of course, no one bothers to move until Maddox gives them the look. How the hell can he control things he can’t even see with just a look? And why is that hot?

After Maddox finally gives in to the fact that I am, indeed, useless with a gun, he just smiles.

“Let’s hope the person is the size of an elephant, alright?”

“Yeah, good plan! But does this mean I don’t get sexy time?” I ask.

“Correct.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Guess what? That also means *you* don’t get sexy time,” I say before giving him a wink and heading off.

“Hold on now... I shot my target,” he says.

“Yes, and I didn’t and you were my teacher. Now who looks bad in this situation? The poor, innocent student who is just finding his clothes *far* too constricting, or the stuffy and savage teacher?”

“I guess we should go back and shoot some more then so I can teach you better,” he says.

“Maybe later; I’m going to go home and get all naked and stuff with myself.”

“You can get naked with me,” Reggie says.

“Fuck off, Reggie.”

“Well, if Maddox isn’t performing...”

“Reggie said if you can’t perform, he can. I bet he can also teach me how to shoot a gun,” I say.

Maddox’s eyes narrow. “Where’s he at? I want to push him.”

He starts waving his hands around but misses Reggie entirely. Reggie’s cat, on the other hand, looks offended and jumps out of Reggie’s hands, which leads Reggie to chasing after him. “No! Snugglebum, I just want to love you!”

Annnnnnd he’s gone.

Hooray!

Maddox grabs me just as we slip around the building and yanks me back before pushing me up against the wall. “You honestly think I’m going to let you get away with flirting with him?” he asks,

the grumble of his voice going straight to my cock.

“Hmm?” I ask with a grin. “And what are you going to do about it?” I poke his chest instead of pressing into him like he’s probably thinking I will.

He presses his hips into me so I can feel his cock through his pants. “I’m going to make you pay for it.” His mouth lowers down to mine as I look up at him. Anticipating the feeling of his lips, I lean forward until they’re almost touching before slipping under his arm and out.

“Sorry, I didn’t make my shot, so I can’t play today,” I say before giving him a gentle push into the side of the building. His hands come up to keep from falling into it as he looks over his shoulder at me. I take that moment to press my groin against his ass as I push up on my tiptoes to get closer to his ear. “Maybe if your stance was better, you wouldn’t have stumbled?”

He chuckles, clearly having thought I was going to whisper something sexy in his ear. Instead, I nip his neck before turning around and strutting off.

He grabs me around the waist, lifts me up, and starts carrying me off to the car.

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask as people stop to look at this man damn near carrying me under his arm like a football.

“You were walking ridiculously slow. Like painfully slow. It’ll be midnight before I can strip you at the pace you were going.”

“I was trying to do an ass shimmy shake to get your attention.”

He’s grinning. “No, you were just walking slow,” he says as he reaches the car and stuffs me into it while I laugh. I end up half in the seat and half over the middle console. He doesn’t care. He just takes the seat belt, wraps it around the part of me he can find, which ends up just being my ass, and buckling me in.

“No! We have to practice safety techniques!” I say as he tries closing the door but my legs are sticking out of it, so he rolls down the window, lifts my legs up and shoves them out the window before closing the door.

He comes around to the driver’s seat and gets in as I lie here, strapped down on my side, legs out the window, not looking the least bit sexy.

“I feel... insanely sexy,” I assure Maddox as I glance up at him.

He looks down at me before leaning over and kissing my lips. It’s an awkward kiss since my head is practically upside down and his is to the side, but it’s still one of the damn sexiest kisses I’ve ever had. “You kind of look like a fish out of water,” he says, lips hovering near mine a moment before he leans in again for a simple peck on the lips.

“So... you have a thing for fish, I hear?” I purr.

“You better believe it,” he says as I release my seat belt and pull my legs in before pressing my hand right against his cock as I get up, like I don’t know what I’m doing.

“Oh... sorry. I didn’t mean to grope you,” I say.

“You can grope me.”

“No, sorry, I can only grope you after I get a bullseye.”

He’s grinning as he nods. “Ah, yes. That’s right. But I never said *when* you had to get it.”

I shrug. “Sorry, not interested.”

Maddox glances over at me as he starts to drive. “Not... interested? As in...”

“As in Reggie’s been keeping me satisfied,” I say.

“Not even funny. That’s not even the least bit funny,” he says, even though he’s clearly amused.

“Neither was teaching me in a shirt. I would have been able to focus better if you didn’t have a shirt on. So if I fail at protecting myself...”

"I'll only have this goddamn shirt to blame," he says. "I always knew this shirt would be the end of me. I should burn it."

"Wait... no... I like the shirt," I say since it accentuates his muscular frame, and if he can't walk around shirtless, this is the next best thing.

"But if it's responsible for your inability to shoot a gun..."

"Fine! Fine. I'll take the blame," I say.

He snorts as I look over at him.

"*But...* you need to do one thing for me in exchange."

"I'm all ears."

"I want you to carry me around like a football some more. That was so sexy."

"Better than how I carried you yesterday just before you nearly vomited all down my ass."

"I was just testing to see how into this relationship you were," I say. "Don't you have a siren or something?" Anything to make this car ride shorter.

"You want me to turn the siren on so you can get me naked faster?"

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes."

"I'm pretty sure that's illegal."

"I'm pretty sure everyone would understand."

He seems uncertain. "Would they?"

"One hundred percent. You could just take your shirt off and they'd immediately understand."

"What if they weren't into someone with my body type?"

"Then they have no idea what they're missing," I decide, which sounds quite reasonable to my ears.

Maddox seems to think it's less reasonable.

I decide the only way to make a comeback during this is by losing some clothes. "Oh man, it's so hot in here," I say as I roll my shirt all the way up until it's under my armpits.

"I could turn the AC on higher," he says as he cranks it up.

"Nah, not cutting it," I say as I unbutton my pants. "Hmm... still not sure." I pull the legs of my pants up as high as they'll go before looking over at him. "Much better." I look absolutely ridiculous, but I don't even care.

"Yeah, but I don't want you too hot. That's not very fair," he says as he cranks the AC up until it's blasting, drying out my eyes and whipping my hair back in an attempt to completely freeze me.

"Ah, I love it." I'm positive I'm going to become a popsicle before this ride is over.

"I'm glad," he says as he gives me a huge smile. And now I'm stuck like this as he drives; Maddox is not at all turned on by my attempt to woo him, and instead, I'm left freezing to death.

"You look a little cold," Maddox says, clearly gloating.

"Ah, no, my nipples generally are like that."

"What about the goose bumps coating your body?"

"Those are pleasure bumps. Horny bumps," I explain.

"Ah, makes total sense," he says as he pulls into the driveway of his house.

He turns the car off and comes around to the passenger side where I'm trying to warm up my limbs enough to get them to move. He pulls the door open, grabs my wrist and drags me out.

"Why are you taking so long?"

"Frostbite," I explain.

He laughs as he pulls me into him and swings the car door shut. He starts walking backward, drawing me after him into the house. When we reach the door, he jerks around on the handle as his hand slides up my bare back since my shirt is still tucked under my armpits. I pull him in close, hoping for a quick kiss as he fumbles before the door finally swings open to let us inside. He draws me in after him as his mouth presses into mine, and I'm so pleased at finally getting to have him all to myself. We're not in a public place, there are no pesky ghosts harassing us. Just him... and me.

A murmur of pleasure escapes me as I'm drawn in close.

"You feel very cold," he says.

"Ah, just the frost of my heart being slowly chipped away," I say.

"Oh wow, who hurt you that bad?"

"This mean guy who wouldn't teach me shirtless and then froze me the whole ride home," I say as he pushes me back. For a moment, I question why he'd deprive me of his lips until I see him pull his shirt off and toss it.

"Better?" he asks, voice husky.

"It sure as fuck is." I slide up into him as he grabs my rolled-up shirt and tosses it before pushing my pants down. There's no question. No gently removing each article of clothing. One moment, I'm standing clothed and looking like an idiot, and the next moment I only have my shoes on and my pants around my ankles.

His hand slides down my chest, diving straight for my cock, which is amazing besides the fact that he's trying to draw me after him while clearly forgetting that even though I might look naked, my ankles and feet sure aren't.

I pull back from his kiss. "My shoes!"

"Right," he says as he hoists me up, making his muscles much more apparent from my weight.

"You're so fucking sexy," I say, loving my view until I'm tossed over his shoulder as he tries to figure out my shoes. "This is not sexy!"

"Yeah, but you can look at my ass."

"It's clothed!" I say a moment before he drops his pants and underwear so I'm faced with the perfect globes of his ass. "Well... I suppose that's better."

I smack his ass as he rids me of my shoes and pants before letting me drop back down. I wrap my legs around his waist as he starts up the stairs, carrying me like it's the easiest thing in the world to do.

When we reach his bedroom, he guides me down onto the bed and looks down at me like I'm as magnificent as he is... which really is ridiculous, but he makes me *feel* sexy. He makes me feel like, in his eyes, I'm the most amazing thing in this world right now.

"You're so fucking gorgeous and you're all mine, and I feel bad for having referred to you in the past as Detective Stick-Up-His-Ass," I say.

He hesitates and gives me a scrutinizing look as I reach down and stroke his cock that appears to be eager for my touch. "What's that?"

The way he's looking at me right now just drives me crazy. I wish he was on the bed so I could pull him in and wrap my legs around him to keep him from ever leaving this bed without me. "Oh god, I love it when you look all irritated. I might have lost my mind."

"Detective... Stick... Up His *Ass*? Did I hear that right?"

"I want *your* stick up my ass."

His head cocks to the side as I bust out laughing.

"Oh my god, I should be arrested for that kind of sexy talk," I say.

“Was that sexy talk?” he teases.

“You know what? It was an attempt,” I say as he grabs my ankles and yanks me toward him until my ass slams into his thighs.

“An attempt sure was made,” he says as he leans over me, pressing into me as his hand slides down my cock. He’s hovering above me as I reach out and draw my hand over his back to pull him in closer.

“Turned you on, didn’t it?” I tease, and instead of answering, because he’d *have* to admit he was ridiculously turned on, he kisses me.

His tongue tangles with mine as his hands explore my body and mine find their way down to his hardening cock. I make the strokes slow and gentle, sliding up his length and back down before giving the base a gentle squeeze.

Maddox murmurs something against my lips.

I pull back enough that I can finally form some words. “Lube? Condom?”

“Bedside table,” he says.

I roll up onto my hands and knees and reach over to the drawer, pulling it open. I grab the lube and a condom, but before I can do much else, he takes my hips in his hands and draws me back to him until I can feel his thighs against mine, his cock brushing against my ass. A hand slides up my back, pushing my chest down and pulling my ass up as his hard cock slides between my thighs. As I hear the snap of the lubricant opening, he kisses my shoulder blade, moving up to my neck.

I slide my thighs closer until I can feel his cock between them and rock back, rubbing gently on his cock as his wet fingers run over me. They dip down between my ass cheeks before sliding back up, tantalizingly slow as his other hand runs down my chest to my cock. One finger presses against me before sliding inside of me, making me moan in anticipation.

The scruff on his face runs over my bare skin as his finger moves inside me while the thumb of his other hand rubs over the head of my cock. A murmur of pleasure leaves my lips as another finger joins the first, stretching and stroking me, driving me crazy with each movement.

“Do you want more?” he asks.

“I want all of you,” I say, knowing at this point it’s not even a *want*, it’s a *need*. I need to feel him opening me up, the heat of him, all of him.

His hand leaves my cock to venture up my back. He pulls his fingers free as I hear him tear open the condom while I press my ass back until I feel his cock rub against me.

“Hurry up.”

“I only have two hands.”

“Well, work them faster,” I tease as I look back to watch him rub lube over his cock, condom in place. He presses the head against me and gently pushes into me.

Slowly, I feel him opening me up, filling me, driving me crazy. He rocks gently but moves slow as I feel myself stretch to accommodate him. And only once he’s fully inside me, thighs against me, does he stop. My fingers dig into the sheets as his hand runs down my back.

He rocks his hips just a little, like he’s testing it, and I realize he’s being too careful and push back into him, making him groan.

“Did I say you could move?” he asks, voice rough but teasing. It just makes my cock ache more.

“Hmmm... I was thinking maybe I had to do your job for you.”

Maddox snorts, clearly amused by this accusation, and makes me eat my words by rocking his hips. He thrusts into me, and with each movement, he drives me crazier as pleasure explodes inside me. I moan as I dig my nails into the sheets, balling it up.

His hands are wrapped tightly on my hips, drawing me to him with each thrust, cock driving into me.

He slides out and flips me onto my back before pushing back in, making me arch into him.

“Oh fuck,” I whisper.

“Still think you need to do my job?” he teases.

“I don’t know. I think I need you to hmm... show me a little more before I can make a valid opinion.”

He chuckles as his hand slides down my cock. I grab onto him, desperate to keep him close as he moves in me. Pleasure is consuming me, making my toes curl and my body ache for release. He squeezes the base of my cock before sliding his hand over me as I dig my fingers into him.

Maddox drives in faster, clearly noticing I’m getting close. The way his hand strokes me and his cock rubs inside me tells me I can’t hold out much longer as he moves. I tip my head back as I come. His hand doesn’t let up and neither does the way he presses into me. He feels so good inside me as he drives in with shallow, quick thrusts. He’s getting close as I tuck myself against him until he pushes deep into me, groaning as he comes inside me. He rocks his hips slowly before pulling out of me and collapsing beside me.

For a moment, we just lie against each other, a tangle of body parts, breathing hard. He kisses the side of my head since I have it tucked against his chest where he can’t reach my lips. After a moment, he gets up to clean up the mess before dropping back down beside me and pulling me onto him. He slides his hand over my ass, cupping it gently before moving me up so I can reach his lips. He showers me with soft, gentle kisses as we lie there, enveloped by bliss.

“So? Did you need to do my job for me?” he says.

I give him a thumbs up, which just makes him laugh.

“No words?”

“Nah, you fucked them out of me,” I say with a grin.

“Oh wow... I never... never really thought you could be speechless. The power of my cock is out of this world.”

My laughter fills the room, and it isn’t long after that his does too. “You’re so ridiculous.”

“You’ve forced me to become this way. I much prefer being stoic... manly... man of few words,” he says, even though it’s clear he isn’t truly always that way.

“I like you this way better,” I admit. “Humble, kind, sweet. Oh wait... I think you fucked the sense right out of me because you’re none of those things either...”

“Hey! Now you’re just being mean.”

“Maybe,” I tease as he gives me a gentle squeeze.

We lie in bed for a little while, just wrapped in each other’s warmth before the desire for food starts to get to me.

“I’m starving,” Maddox says.

“I’m close to starvation as well.”

“How about I go order some food, then?”

“Sure. I’m going to jump in the shower. If you get bored, you can join me,” I say with a wink as I reluctantly push up. I dive back down for another kiss just to hold me over until he meets me in the shower.

He smiles at me as he grabs for his phone. “Deal. Let me call them quickly first.”

Even though I could definitely use the shower attached to his bedroom, I go for the guest room bathroom since my clothes are in that room. I feel like I’m in some euphoric state as I turn the shower

on. How can Maddox make me feel so goddamn amazing? He's just...

I sigh as I step under the hot water.

He's just unlike anything I ever assumed him to be. I guess maybe that was just because his prickly-ass attitude was originally trying to keep me away.

I lean against the wall as the water beats over me. We're getting closer to finding the truth. Everything will be okay. We'll find this killer and set Millie and my brother and the others at ease.

I take a deep breath before turning to raise the water temperature. I jump as I realize I'm not alone.

The moment I realize Millie's right behind me, my blood runs cold. Water is beating down on her, like she's solid, like she's a real person as she lets out a scream, face twisting into darkness as she loops the showerhead hose around my throat and draws it unbelievably tight. I stagger back as my air is immediately cut off. My foot slips out from under me and I fall, slamming my head into the back of the shower and stunning me. For a brief moment, the hose loosens, letting me pull in a ragged breath of air before it's torn away from me. I claw at my throat, nails digging into my skin to try to get underneath the hose to pull it free. She's screaming, her eyes dark with hatred, her body shaking from the strength she's using to do anything she can to kill me.

Her strength is too great, and as my vision begins to darken, I reach out to her, *feeling* her. My hand catches a wristband around her wrist and I pull at it, trying to do *anything* to get her to stop.

"Hiro!" Maddox yells as he grabs for me. "She's not here. Make her so she's not here."

I feel Maddox pulling at the hose, doing everything he can to get it off as I start to fade.

Not here... right... not here. Make her not here... I can force her to be less solid...

I can't... I can't even...

Not here...

She's not...

The hose loosens and air rushes into me. I can feel arms on me, and at first, I think it's her and I try to fight them. Try to escape them...

"Hiro, stop, it's me. Hiro..." Maddox says, voice gentle, even though I can hear a hitch in it.

My vision is coming back to me as I choke and cough and try to pull air into my starved lungs.

Maddox pulls me from the tub as I dig into his arm, trying to get air. Trying to sate my lungs while everything that just happened comes rushing back.

She was going to kill me. She'd have killed me. I don't know if Maddox got her to let go or I managed to make it so she couldn't touch me, but I would have died if it weren't for him.

Maddox holds me tightly against his chest, rocking me back and forth. "Fucking hell... fucking... fuck... Hiro..."

He squeezes me and smooths my dripping hair back. "Fucking hell, we need to... I don't know what the fuck to do... how do you get away from something I can't fucking *see*?" he asks, rambling, voice clearly showing his panic.

He lifts me up gently. "Are you okay?"

I nod, not sure I can trust talking.

"Oh god," he says as he kisses my forehead. "You're not helping with Sean's case anymore. You're done." He looks up, like he's hunting for Millie. "You hear that, you fucking bitch? He's done. Leave him alone."

I want to tell him she's not here anymore, but I can't form the words.

He grabs a towel and gently starts drying me off. "We should go to the hospital."

"I-I'm... fine," I whisper, voice hoarse. It's painful to talk, but I feel like I can finally breathe

normally again.

“I need to take you somewhere she can’t find you,” he says.

“S-She’s...a ghost,” I whisper, which really should be like “She’s a ghost, she’s going to find me wherever the fuck she wants, and there’s nothing either of us can do about it.”

But why is she so fucking angry? I’ve met angry and upset ghosts before, but never like this. Never where my life was threatened.

Maddox picks me up and carries me back into the bedroom, even though I’m still dripping water. He sets me down and climbs onto the bed with me, pulling me onto his lap as he kisses me and silently rocks me against him.

It’s clear he’s very freaked out by this, but I don’t know what to say to calm him down.

“It’s okay,” I say. My voice is still hoarse, but at least I can talk.

“It’s not okay. You’re done with this, Hiro. You’re not chasing any more leads. You’re not involved in this at all,” he says.

“If we just... end it, it’ll stop,” I say. “She’ll move on.”

“Stop!” he yells, voice so sharp I’m surprised by it. “No! I can’t... I can’t deal with this, Hiro. I can’t just continually watch you put your life in danger. If we’re going to have anything between us, then you’re done. With all of it. You’re done, got it?”

It takes me a full twenty seconds to really hear what he’s saying before I stab him in the chest with my finger. “I don’t ‘got it.’”

“Then we can’t be together. It was unbelievably fucking hard losing Reggie, I’m not going through losing you because you’re being stubborn.”

I sit up. “Maddox,” I say. “Fine. I’ll stop, but then you’re going to stop too. Not very fair if only *one* of us has to stop the life-threatening shit. I have an opening at my bookstore. You can come check out books.”

He opens his mouth, closes it, narrows his eyes, then opens his mouth again. “It’s different.”

“What? Because it’s you? Because you’re... macho and can fight?”

“Because I have training!”

“Doesn’t mean someone can’t come out of nowhere and shoot you, though, does it? Can you glare off a bullet?”

“Hiro—”

I push myself up, frustrated and irritated as I get to my feet. My throat fucking hurts, I still feel like I’m being pumped full of adrenaline, and Maddox is being an ass.

Although... I don’t blame him. I’d be the same way if someone nearly killed him, but I’m not stopping.

I head off as he rushes after me.

“Goddammit, Hiro, just... stop. Don’t fucking wander off alone,” he says.

“You don’t get it, do you?” I ask, throat sore with each word but the adrenaline pushes me through it.

“What? What don’t I get? How close you came to dying?”

“This is my fucking life. This shit,” I say as I wave my arm around me. “This shit is what I’ve dealt with my entire life. I had to deal with my parents dying in front of me and being led off by their ghosts in their last attempt to keep me alive. I’ve dealt with ghosts coming to me for help, ghosts begging me to save their loved ones. You might be a fucking expert in your field, but that doesn’t mean you can just write off mine. Yes, it’s scary. I don’t know what to do with her. But ghosts aren’t always like people when they’re scared or panicked. They become horribly irrational. She doesn’t

understand we're helping her. We have some... fifteen-year-old pregnant girl who was murdered, and you can't understand how she might want to stop me from saving the people who presumably killed her?" I ask. My voice is killing me and raising it doesn't seem to help. "Dammit, Maddox."

I reach the guest room and grab for some underwear, but before I can tug it on, Maddox grabs my wrists.

"I can't just stand here and let you die."

"I know."

Maddox's expression softens as his hands squeeze gently. "I can't... Hiro, I'm not good at this shit. I grew up with parents who really didn't care a whole lot what happened to us. My brother and I fell apart for years. The only person I had was Reggie, and then to lose him? And now I found someone I can be myself with and I have to be forced to just... let you throw yourself into danger?"

And I get what he's saying, I really do, but I can't stop. Not yet. Not when I can feel that we're close. "But I'm not throwing myself into danger. We, both of us, are working together to keep this killer from killing other people. We have to save them. Now... my throat is killing me, and I'm tired of talking. So let's just... deal with it later."

"You don't need to talk," he says as he pulls me toward him and cups my cheeks. "I'm sorry. It was selfish of me to just push my own thoughts onto you without even hearing your side of it. Without listening to you. I can be a bully... I'm used to getting my way with shit in life, so I wanted to use our relationship as a way to keep you from doing something else dangerous. But I know that's wrong of me. I know that's cruel of me. So I'm sorry," he says as he sets his forehead against mine. "I just need this to end so I don't have to live every moment anxious it's your last."

"I know," I say as I wrap my arms around him. "I'm sorry I got upset. You have a right to be worried."

"I still shouldn't have done that."

Honestly, I don't know what's right or wrong, but if we quit now, more people will die, and I'll never know who killed my brother.

I pull back and sit down on the edge of the guest bed. Surprisingly, Maddox doesn't let me pull away; instead, he sits down beside me and pulls me to him. He kisses my forehead before wrapping me up in his arms and holding me close. How I can get so much comfort through his arms, I'll never know, but it gives me hope that everything is going to be alright.

I lean my head against his shoulder, determined now more than ever that I'm going to end this.

CHAPTER THIRTY



HIRO

After Maddox refused to let me out of his sight for a full day, I finally convince him to let me go to Nicolás's since Nicolás has the day off and Maddox really needs to go into work instead of working from home. Patricia is also planning on coming over to Nicolás's later, which would be even more added protection. Believe me, she's a terrifying force when she wants to be. After Maddox spent far too long talking to Nicolás, it was finally agreed that Nicolás could do an adequate job of watching me.

Because Maddox's helicopter mom stunt doesn't end there, he decides I also can't drive myself, which... I mean, I get he's trying to be protective, but it's a bit much. So that's how I end up in the car with him as he drives me to Nicolás's while going over things he's already gone over like fifteen times in the last hour.

"Call me every five minutes or send a text," Maddox says as he pulls to a stop in Nicolás's driveway.

"Okay," I say as I take out my phone and immediately text him: *Help me. The only thing that'll save me is a dick pic.*

Maddox glances down at his phone before looking up at me with narrowed eyes. "Not funny."

I grin at him, unsure how he could think it's not. "I thought it was hilarious, honestly. And better yet if you actually sent me one."

He's got his "no goofing around" expression in place. "No."

"No?" I ask like I'm heartbroken. "Not even a peek of one?"

He's standing his ground on this one. "You're going to be like the fucking boy who cried wolf. I'm going to think you're wanting a dick pic and you're going to be in the process of being murdered."

I attempt to look serious. "I promise I won't ask for a dick pic while being murdered." I pull my phone back out and text: *I'm dying, the only thing that'll bring me back from the dead is for you to tell me I'm the greatest in the world. I'm just joking. Send a dick pic.*

The moment Maddox's phone beeps, he narrows his eyes at me without even looking. "Be careful."

"The most careful I've ever been," I promise as I lean over and kiss him. "Okay?"

He kisses me again. “Yeah. Please? It makes me so nervous leaving you.”

“I will. I promise.”

As I reach for the handle, he locks the doors so I can’t get out. “Maybe I’ll just take today off.”

I glance back at him. “Maddox, come on. I’m fine. Nicolás and I have plans. And you’re supposed to see if we can get back into the motel and library again to see if we can talk to anyone else. And keep on trying to figure out who the ghost from the library goes home with. We have a lot to do to end this. If I’m not allowed out there, I need you out there.”

He gently brushes his fingers over my neck that has since turned an ugly purple that has been ridiculously hard to try to hide. Patricia is going to lose her mind when she sees it. “Okay.”

Maddox kisses me again, like he can fool me into not leaving if he holds me here with his kisses.

Unlocking the door, I push it open and finally pull away. “I’ll see you after work. Let me know anything and everything you find out.”

“Okay,” he says as I head toward Nicolás’s house. I push the door open without bothering to knock and see Nicolás holding a cup of coffee. He looks at me, hurriedly sets the coffee down and rushes to the door.

“Is he gone?” Nicolás quickly looks out the window then locks the door and draws the curtains. “Oh shit... he’s not gone yet.”

“What?” I ask, rather confused about why Nicolás is acting strange.

“I’m *scared*,” he whispers as he ducks down. “Fuck... did he see me?”

I raise an eyebrow at this rather conspicuous display. “What?”

“That... man... in that car... that’s still sitting in the driveway.”

I look out at Maddox’s car before grinning at Nicolás. “You’re scared of Maddox?”

He steps away from the door and gathers up his phone before clearing his throat and straightening his imaginary tie.

Nicolás holds his phone before himself and begins to read. “Yesterday, 9:00 PM. ‘Nicolás—’ this is Maddox speaking—”

“I got that.”

“Great. Yesterday, 9:00 PM. ‘Nicolás, I hear Hiro is going to stay with you while I work.’ Yesterday, 9:01. ‘Nicolás, if something happens to Hiro, I will come and find you. I won’t tell you what I will do. I would like you to use your imagination.’ Yesterday, 9:02. ‘You will watch him no matter what he does. You will stand in the bathroom if you have to. Do you know what happens to people who don’t? Only Hiro can tell you because he’s the only one who can still talk to my victims.’”

I stare at him with a raised eyebrow. “Funny. What did he really say?” I snatch the phone up and stare at it in horror as I realize Nicolás was reading it verbatim. “Oh... god... I swear I’m not involved with a psychopath.”

“Just a sociopath,” Nicolás says. “What the hell, Hiro? I understand he’s very attractive, but you can—” He stills. “What the fuck happened to your neck?”

I try to shrug it off like it’s the most mundane thing ever. “It’s that little bruise I told you about.”

His eyes get huge. “Little... Little *bruise*? For fuck’s sake, Hiro. That’s not... it’s your entire throat. Tell me what happened truthfully this time. No wonder he’s trying to eat me alive. What the hell happened?”

So then I’m stuck between telling Nicolás what happened, having him berate me for continuing to look into Sean’s killer, and being forced to fight with *another* person, or not telling the truth. I’m not sure I can fight with another person right now. So I give him a huge smile and go, “Funny story, I was

just walking and got... caught up... in a rope.”

“Oh my god, you’re not a fucking dog. Tell me what happened.”

“I know. It was a joke.”

“A bad one. So?”

“Just... bad run-in with someone. It’s fine.”

He looks borderline irate, and I realize we’re just chugging along into “let’s fight about this” territory. “It’s not fine. If Detective Hunk is over here anxious enough he doesn’t want to leave you alone, I think I deserve to know.”

I sigh because I know what he’s saying, but I just... I just want a few fucking minutes of normalcy. “You’ll just get irritated and yell at me for not listening to you, and I’ve already had... words with Maddox. I’m tired of having words,” I say. “I’ll tell you later.”

“But—”

“Later. Like give me a few minutes. Let the effect of Detective Hunk’s irritation wear off, and then I’ll tell you. Did you make coffee for me? We can talk when I’m done with my coffee.”

He clearly wants to start in on this again but closes his mouth and reaches over to his coffee that he pulls in close. “All for me.”

“No...”

“Yes.”

“But... I’m literally your favorite person. And I’m pretty sure a cup of coffee is going to be the only thing that keeps me alive.”

He snorts but goes over to the coffeemaker and puts a cup in to get it going. “So... you and Detective Hunk are a thing now?”

“We’re a... haven’t talked about it because we’re too manly to talk about titles right now thing,” I say.

He starts laughing. “You two need to talk about that shit. That’s not manly, that’s just stubborn.”

“We will. We’ve been preoccupied and distracted. What have you been up to?”

Nicolás shrugs as he sips his coffee. “Just... work. Boring ol’ work.”

“It’s clearly been going well for you, though,” I say.

He smiles as he hands me my finished cup. “It has. I’m really enjoying it.”

That’s when his phone rings and his smile turns to a scowl. “Oh dear god, I swear they can’t even take a shit without me holding their hands. This will be one minute.” His “I’m really enjoying it” seems to go right out the window.

I take a sip of my coffee, letting the warm liquid soothe my throat while not drinking *too* quickly since I promised to explain what was going on when the cup was finished. I can at least talk today without sounding like I’ve been smoking for a hundred years of my twenty-nine years of life.

“Okay,” I say as he answers the phone. I notice I have a text from Maddox who couldn’t have even made it to work yet. I wonder if he had to stop somewhere along the way because if he was texting me while driving, I’m going to be pissed.

Maddox: You alive?

Me: Super alive. I’m so alive right now. Like covered in aliveness.

Maddox: Don’t be a smartass.

Me: Oh no... I’m... I think I’m dying.

Maddox: What did I just say?

Me: I think... I think your sass is... killing me. Your pure cruelty has just... wrecked me.

Maddox: Ha ha. So funny.

Me: But I think a mere... dick pic... will revive me. It will bring me back from the brink of collapse.

Maddox: I'm not going into the bathroom and stroking one off while at work!

Me: You don't have to stroke one off in the bathroom next to your boss's room.

Maddox: You want a flaccid dick pic?

Me: Fine, take your shirt off and snap me a little something. Do something sexy.

There's a picture attached which I excitedly open. It's of Maddox, at his desk with the most stubborn look ever on his face. The thing that delights me the most is the idea that someone in that office had to have seen Maddox take a selfie. *The Maddox*. The grumpy, no fun at work Maddox, snapping a selfie at his desk.

Me: Thankfully, you're sexy no matter what you do.

Maddox: Thank you. You're sexiest when you're not harassing me.

Me: Oh hell... I must be real damn ugly then.

Maddox: You are not! You are very sexy. Don't throw my words at me like that.

Me: I'm laughing now. I'm joking. I will cherish this picture for the rest of my life... which might not be long if you don't send me a dick pic.

Maddox: I thought this picture made up for it!

Me: Eh.

I notice Nicolás wave at me and look up at him.

"Could you do me a huge favor and grab my red folder off my desk?" he asks as he pulls open his laptop while still on the phone.

"Of course," I say as I head down the hallway to his makeshift office.

"Why didn't you tell me we were heading to cutie's place today, I'd have brushed my hair," Reggie teases as he appears beside me.

"Yay, it's Reggie," I say sarcastically. Although I act less than pleased to see him, I am happy to see he still has his cat. They seem rather attached to each other if the cat's look of bliss has anything to say about it.

"Okay... listen, I've been thinking," Reggie says.

"Oh no."

His eyes narrow. "You're not cute."

"That's what you're thinking about?" I ask.

"No! I'm thinking that we should take Maddox and put him here." He's motioning with his hands, which just makes me more confused. "And put you here," he says as he puts me next to Maddox. "And put Nicolás here. And then we strip all three of you and smoosh you all together into a sexy man sandwich for me to watch."

I stare at him.

He smiles back.

"You realize that's my brother, right?" I ask.

"I mean... *is* he? There's no blood there at all. You were older when you met each other. Man meat sandwich. You know you wanna be in the middle of those two."

I sigh, wondering why I even stopped to listen to his thought process. "You literally decided to haunt me at this very moment to tell me this?" I ask.

"It was very important! Don't act like it wasn't important," he says with narrowed eyes.

"Soooo important."

Reggie grabs my wrist, yanking me to a stop. "What the hell happened to your neck?"

“Long story.”

“I seem to have fucking eternity,” he says as I pull free and head into the office.

“Well... the ghost that’s been following me got me in the shower and choked me with the hose to the showerhead.”

He looks genuinely horrified by this. “No...”

“Yep.”

“What the fuck. Why doesn’t she want help?” he asks. “If I was her, I’d be working my ass off to get you to figure out who did it so they could rot in prison.”

That makes me question what *did* happen to him. Maddox hasn’t told me, and I’ve been unsure if I should ask.

I walk over to Nicolás’s desk but I don’t see the red folder, so I slide open a drawer I think I’ve seen him pull it from.

“I just don’t get it,” Reggie says.

“Well... she thinks death is the better option. Maybe she wants them to wander the earth like she has.”

“She’s still a class-A bitch.”

I shrug, not bothering to deny that. “She... she didn’t have the best upbringing. Her mother was extremely strict and cruel. It sounds like she abused her mentally at the very least. She knew her mother had killed her father... maybe she even walked in on it, who knows. And then her mother kicked her out after finding out she was pregnant... I think in life, she was never dealt a good hand, and in death, she’s clung onto the feelings that were strongest... and those ones were of hatred, death, and so on.”

“Hmm...”

The drawer doesn’t hold anything of use, so I open another, but this one just seems to be a junk drawer, filled to the brim with shit. Just as I’m sliding it closed, something catches my eye. It’s the very edge of something shining silver. I pull out the silicone wristband and stare at it for a long moment before it registers why it even caught my attention.

Millie was wearing this. In the shower when I fell and grabbed for her hand, my fingers caught on the band around her wrist.

These things are given out for free during a lot of events, it doesn’t mean it’s the same one, but as I twist it around to look at the writing, I see that it says, “Rock Central 10-Year Anniversary.”

I hear a ripping noise and look over at Reggie as he goes, “Whoops.”

“What are you doing?”

“Okay... so I have this issue where I’m extremely bored and love to nose around. I like to watch Maddox solve his cases and have been watching him. The other day, I saw the notes... the two notes that were left for you warning you off. This is the same paper.”

“What?” I ask, positive he’s wrong.

He waves at the pad of paper sitting on a shelving unit in the corner. “I loved art growing up, took art classes and stuff, so I can tell. The weight of the paper is the same, the edge... one of them was missing a sliver of an edge, yet here it is.”

I still, having to force myself to slowly stand up and walk over to the sketchbook stashed in the corner of the room. A part of me doesn’t even want to look. A part of me wants to just back off, turn around, and pretend I’ve never seen any of it. I just want to go back out into the kitchen and drink my coffee while Nicolás and I chat about mundane shit that really doesn’t have anything to do with the real world.

But something else drives me over to Reggie. As I step up beside him, I will myself to see anything else, but Nicolás isn't an artist. Why would he even have a sketchbook?

I look down at the torn edge that I'm afraid would match perfectly with the edge of the note I'd received. I pick up a piece of the paper, feeling the weight of it and knowing what I didn't want to know.

"Hey, I found the—"

I jump and turn around to face Nicolás. His eyes shift from me over to what I'd been looking at as I realize I have the absolute fucking worst ghost guards ever. And... my phone is in the kitchen.

Of course it's in the fucking kitchen. I'm like one of those stupid people in the horror movies who knows someone's trying to kill them, so they wander off into a dark building with no way out.

"I'm going to have to call you back," Nicolás says to the person on the phone before hanging up. Realizing I still have the wristband in my hand, I slide it into my pocket.

"I didn't know you were getting into art," I say. "You don't tell me anything anymore."

"Good save," Reggie says. "I'll... I'll try to do something."

"I'm not," Nicolás says.

"Oh. Well... probably for the best. You were really only good at sexy stick figures growing up."

He raises an eyebrow. He's clearly trying to decide if I've figured this out or not. It's no wonder why Barry didn't feel anyone stood out on the date the note had been left behind. Nicolás visits the bookstore at least every week, and hell, none of my neighbors would have been surprised to see Nicolás walking the halls of my apartment.

But he can't... he can't be the one who's killing these people. He can't. Not my brother. Not my only fucking brother left.

"I couldn't find your folder. Did you find it?" I ask as I step away from the sketchbook.

"Yeah, I'm an idiot and left it in my bag," he says.

I walk toward him, trying not to look as stiff and uncertain as I feel. "My coffee's getting cold. Did you finish up what you needed with work?"

"Yeah."

I slip past him with ease and head back down the hallway as my mind races. What I need to do is contact Maddox. Just ask him to come back because he'll know what to do. But... Nicolás is my brother. He couldn't have done this. He couldn't...

I reach for my phone but just as my hand brushes it, Nicolás grabs it and steps back.

Slowly, I turn to look at him. "Nicolás, what are you doing?"

"Why do you need your phone?" he asks, a hint of panic rising in his voice.

"Because Maddox is a terror and insists that I message him every five minutes. I told him to send me a dick pic last message, and I'm kind of hoping he did. I mean... if you wanna check it out, so be it. I'm definitely not going to judge," I say as I hold my hand out.

Nicolás's face twists into something filled with pain. "Hiro, I'm not fucking stupid. I know you're not either."

Of course my car isn't here, so I can't just be like, "Alright, perfect, have a good day" and drive the fuck off. Nope. I'm stuck here with no phone and no vehicle unless I can find his keys.

"I don't know what you're talking about... is this about the bruise?" I ask.

Suddenly, Reggie slams into Nicolás, causing him to stumble and trip over a chair before falling onto his hands and knees. My phone goes flying out of Nicolás's hand, skidding across the floor, so I rush for it. Nicolás, seeing what I'm doing, lunges after me. He catches my ankle and pulls it back, causing me to fall.

“Run! Hiro, just run!” Reggie begs.

I scramble up onto my hands and knees and snatch up the phone. I try to hit the side button five times to call the police, but Nicolás pummels me onto the ground and pins me down. Gripping the phone tightly, he tries to pry it free before pressing his knee against my wrist so I can’t pull it toward me.

“Fucking listen to me, Hiro!” Nicolás yells.

“I can’t fucking... you... you can’t be doing this,” I say, unable to believe that my closest family member would be caught up in this.

“Of course I’m not fucking doing this!” he yells. “Yes, I sent you the goddamn notes, but I wanted you to fuck off. I wanted you to stop. I wanted... fuck...”

He slams his hand against the floor. “I feel like Sean’s dead because of me. Sean’s... I feel like it’s my fucking fault, Hiro. And I can’t stand the thought of you dying too because of this. I can’t...I... fucking can’t...”

Nicolás bows his head until it’s resting on my chest. I can feel him shaking as I lie there on the kitchen floor confused, his weight still pinning me down, but he’s pulled away from my arm, telling me I could call for the police if I wanted.

But... I’m not sure I can. I’m not sure what to do. He could be lying to me, but my desire to believe him is enough that I don’t care. I can’t lose my family again.

I wrap my arms around him. “I swear to god, if you’re fucking lying to me, I’m going to haunt you until the day I die.”

The door swings open and Patricia looks down at the two of us on the floor. “Is this a... bad time?”

“I’m the reason Sean is dead,” Nicolás says, his head still tucked against my chest. “It’s my fault.”

Patricia looks startled. “No... no, it... it can’t be. You didn’t... you didn’t kill him, Nicolás. It’s not your fault.” Patricia rushes over to us and basically hauls Nicolás off of me. “Nicolás. You didn’t... you wouldn’t...”

The door slams open and I think nearly all of us crawl out of our skin as Maddox busts in like he’s about to shoot the whole place up. He sees me on the floor, swoops in and snatches me up before staring at the other two like they’re the enemy.

“What the fuck’s going on?” he asks.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“I sent you... your... picture and you didn’t reply... I had a feeling something was wrong, so I immediately headed here,” he says.

“Umm... we’re... just...” What are we doing? Confessing?

“Do you know how fucking fast I drove here?” he asks. “I was already headed in this direction but I still had to haul ass.”

That’s when Patricia gets a good look at me. “What the hell happened to your throat?” She grabs my wrist and I find out that my five two, one-hundred-and-ten-pound adoptive mom is stronger than Maddox as she tears me away from him to scrutinize me. “What the hell happened? What is going on here? I need answers *now*.”

“How about Nicolás explains first?” I say.

Nicolás gives me a slow nod as Patricia ushers us over to the table where Maddox snatches me back and sits me down like he’s going to body block me from any harm. Reggie decides sitting on my lap is ideal, so I have to push his head to the side so I can see.

Nicolás takes a deep breath before he begins. “Not long after I came here, I met this girl named

Millie. At first, I thought she didn't really have a family because she was just always at the park. *Always* there, no matter the time. I talked to her a little but we all know that talking wasn't my strong suit. I would go sit on that hill overlooking the pond and read and she'd always be there reading as well. After a while we started exchanging books but still never really said anything to each other. She'd have bruises on her, but she always looked nice. Dressed nice. And... I came from a home where bruises were just a thing that happened, so it never dawned on me to go to someone about it. Well... one time Sean saw me there and stopped and just... immediately started up a conversation with her. You know how easy it was for him to make friends.

"After a while, Millie stopped showing up. I thought... I thought something was wrong, but I realized that she was hanging out with a group of people, Sean included. I was jealous and annoyed but I just stopped going to the park and stopped caring. That was around the time I was dealing with a lot of shit with my biological parents as well and court and all that other shit. About six months later, when I was walking through the park, I found her sitting in our spot.

"She came to me and told me she needed my help. She told me she was pregnant and her mom kicked her out. She had nowhere to stay and no money and was afraid to be out alone. I was used to secrets. I was used to dealing with bad shit again and again with my parents. I just... hadn't gotten over what my parents taught me. So the moment she needed something, I told her she could stay in the shed. It wasn't too cold yet and since it was my chore to do yard work, I knew no one else would go in there. So I set her up in there for the night." He takes a deep breath and rubs his forehead.

"You could have told me. I would have helped," Patricia says.

Nicolás catches her eyes. "I know you would have, I know both of you would have, but telling myself that back then... I was still in the boat of 'all adults are liars.' I was still so caught up on being unsure if I could trust any of you, no matter how much I wanted to. So I told Millie she could stay for a couple of days until she could figure something else out. Well, a couple of days turned into a couple of weeks and then turned into a month and a half. That's when Sean found her. And suddenly, she was all over him again. I don't know where she was staying then, but she left without telling me. I was so pissed she was just using me the entire time. Just... when her other friends weren't there to clean up the pieces, I was easy. I was of use but the moment Sean or whoever the fuck else came back, she was gone.

"I just... dropped it. I stopped caring. Around then, Hiro and I started to get closer, and I started to realize that maybe Patricia wasn't the enemy. Maybe she would do the things she told me she would do. Maybe she wouldn't make me do the shit my parents did and wasn't going to leave me.

"The last time I saw Millie was a few months later at that rock festival that I used to go to. Hiro and I got tickets, but Sean said he couldn't go. Hiro ended up getting super sick and I was bored so I went alone with the plan to catch up with some friends there. That's when I saw Millie there with Sean and some others, and I saw them fighting with this guy that I'd see occasionally at the park playing basketball. He stormed off into the woods and the others followed after him... I didn't follow them, so I don't know what happened. My friends caught up with me and I kind of forgot about it."

Nicolás takes a shuddering breath. "When Sean came home that night, he looked like he'd seen something awful. He was shaky and... acting weird. I asked him what happened, and he got pissy with me, so I dropped it. But I just... I felt like something had happened so when I saw that guy at the park the next week, I asked him. I didn't know him at all, hell, I didn't even know his name. But he slammed me against the fence and told me that he heard that I'd been forcing Millie to stay in our shed and she was pregnant after I raped her. And that he was going to call the police and have them search that shed because her DNA would still be in there and maybe then they could ship me back to Mexico.

I never even had sex with her.

"I just... let my old anger get the best of me and I beat the shit out of him. Someone from the school saw it happen and called you, Patricia, but I couldn't tell you what happened. And then I just felt like I didn't fucking deserve this shit. So I gave in to my fury and burned the whole fucking shed down. There was no fucking way anyone was getting any DNA out of it then. I'm well aware that was an overreaction but I just... I just let my old anger take over."

"I understand but I really wish you'd have talked to me," I say.

He bows his head. "Yeah... I wish I would have too. But I didn't. I never was good at telling anyone what was happening."

"So after Sean died, why didn't you tell anyone then?"

"I didn't... at that point I didn't connect it. I was a teenager when I dealt with Millie. The man who died a year after Sean, I didn't know him. I didn't even know the cases were connected until you started digging into it, Hiro. Even then, I didn't connect it to Millie at all until I heard about Franklin dying—he was the guy from the ballcourt. After Franklin was killed, I received a letter. It said, 'I know what you did. If you tell anyone, everyone you love will be next.' Also in the letter was a photograph of the motel's sign. I didn't... I didn't understand it. I thought it was some bullshit letter, but I felt compelled to drive there anyway. As I drove to the motel, I saw you there, Hiro. And things started to click into place. I was... terrified and didn't know what to do or say. I was a coward but I was still going to tell you what happened. But as I drove past the motel, I felt the most horrifying presence in my car with me. I can't see anything like you can, Hiro, but I could *feel* something. As I drove back toward my home, I could just... I couldn't shake the absolute feeling of dread... of just... death. And I swear I felt something tug the wheel of my car. I panicked and overcorrected. It's why I drove off the road and totaled my car. When I made it home, I found another letter in my mailbox that told me that they'd kill my family if I stuck my nose where it didn't belong. But Hiro was already in deep. He'd been dying to hunt this killer down, but I couldn't stand the thought of him putting his life at risk. So I tried scaring him into stopping because I knew he wouldn't listen to me. He never listens. He's fucking stubborn as hell."

I reach out and squeeze his hand, hoping to reassure him. "But this is even more reason we have to end this," I say. "If they're also trying to get to you... they think you know something or did something."

"But I don't. I knew Franklin because of our fight, but the others, I didn't know. I have to assume Millie is dead... but at the time, I just... I thought she left. I thought she went with her father like others said she did when I asked. And she'd ditched me, so I just stopped caring. I never stopped and looked back."

"I think she died the night of the festival," I say as I pull the wristband out of my pocket and set it on the middle of the table. "Yesterday, when I saw Millie, she had this on her wrist. She could have been wearing it later, but if you say Sean looked shaken that night when he came home... if no one ever saw her again after that night... I think that's the night she died."

"You think Sean was involved in her death?" Patricia asks.

"I don't know," I admit. "But if we can figure it out, we can stop the last two people from dying."

"Who are the last two?" Nicolás asks.

I shake my head. "I don't know."

Maddox leans forward. "When she was hanging out with Sean and the others, how many were there?"

"Five including her."

“So the killer has killed four, and two are left.”

“Who are the other two?” I ask. “If Nicolás...”

“It could be Nicolás,” Maddox says.

Nicolás looks at him in shock. “Why? All I did was help her.”

“The killer might not see things that way. If Franklin was spreading the rumor that you raped her or something else... the killer might think you’re just as at fault as the others,” Maddox says.

“It could be her mother as well,” I suggest.

“Why this group, though?” Patricia asks. “I don’t even remember Sean being friends with any of them. I would remember their names at least.”

“I think he started in with them while he was with his mother,” Maddox says. “If we begin looking at these people, while they might not all have had schools or neighborhoods in common, there was something else. Take Franklin, for example. He didn’t have a good upbringing. According to police records, the school called the police on him twice for noticeable bruises and tried to get his father arrested, but Franklin would back him up every time.”

“So... they were a group of kids dealing with shit lives who banded together?” I ask. “I mean, the beginning of it started when Sean was stuck with his mother.”

“Right.”

“I’m still confident that if we find Millie’s body, we can settle her soul and help her be less angry. She might be able to talk to me without trying to kill me,” I say. “Nicolás, could you show us where she ran into the woods after Franklin? If we could track down her body... we’d have something.”

He shrugs. “Yeah... I could try. It’s been years, but I think I’d remember.”

I turn to Maddox. “The cadaver dogs would help, right?”

“They can try. I’ll see what I can get,” he says.

Maddox stands up, and I look over, startled at who’d been behind us. “Sean?” I ask.

He turns and disappears through the wall.

“Fucking hell, Sean.” I rush through the door outside in the hopes that he just passed through the wall, but I can’t see him anywhere. “You’re a fucking coward, Sean. I nearly died twice now. Nicolás nearly died. If you’d just fucking help us! If you’d goddamn help us, we could end this.”

Sean appears in front of me and grabs my face in his hands. “Yes, but what if they all deserve to die?”

“I don’t give a fuck, Sean. That’s what the police are for. That’s why we have detectives to determine what happened and to make people pay for their crimes. We don’t just... watch the world burn,” I say.

He shakes his head, like he refuses to hear what I have to say. “Just stay out of it and you’ll be fine,” he says before disappearing.

“Fucking hell,” I yell as Maddox comes up and takes my hand.

“Hey, it’s okay.” His voice is gentle, immediately grounding me.

I look over at him, semi alarmed he’s still on the phone as I’m shouting like a madman. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” he says before kissing my forehead and continuing on with his phone call.

It’s like Sean can see no reason. It’s like he’s blinded by this... guilt to the point where nothing else affects him. The Sean I knew would never let something like this put my life or Nicolás’s life at risk. He’d never do that. He’s not thinking rationally, but I’m not sure I’m fully surprised. Sometimes ghosts seem so fixated on shit that they can’t.

Fucking hell.

Maddox ends the call before looking at me. “So?”

“So... Sean is being all dramatic and shit because he thinks he and the others deserve this. He’s just... so fucking stuck on this ‘We’re getting what we deserve’ mindset that he won’t even listen to reason.”

“Haven’t you said before that ghosts don’t always think things through?”

“I have. It’s like they’re so easily consumed by something that happened to them in life that in death it becomes a fixation.”

“I get that. I’m going to talk to Nicolás a bit more while Parker gets me a team ready. And then we’ll head out.”

“We? I’m allowed to join?” I ask in surprise.

“I don’t want you to,” he admits. “But this case seems to be at a standstill unless you’re working it with me.”

I grin at him. “I just seem to be attracted to danger.”

He grunts at me, clearly not impressed, or maybe he wants to be the only thing I’m attracted to.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



HIRO

“Like I said, it’s been years, but they went that way, I think,” Nicolás says as he motions.

We’re standing in the middle of a field. Once upon a time, it was the location for that yearly festival, but now it’s just a large bean field.

Maddox has a whole team of people, including a few cadaver dogs that I’m really hoping will do an amazing job and save us from days of combing acres of woods. Because if there isn’t anything to give us a bit of guidance, how the hell will we find her? It’s not like we can dig up every spot.

“We’re not going to find a body in this, are we?” I ask, already feeling overwhelmed.

Maddox squeezes my shoulder. “Well... that’s a defeatist attitude if I’ve ever seen it. You have to be determined, Hiro. They were likely on foot. With the crowd around, if they killed her, they could have even left her body out in the open. They wouldn’t have had a shovel or anything unless they went back for it. But the festival pulled in a large crowd. Someone carrying a shovel off into the woods, even in the dead of the night, would have been suspicious.”

That’s true. I didn’t think about that.

“We also have to think that they were, presumably, four kids who really didn’t know what they were doing. It’s harder to find a body when someone is prepared than when you have a group of teenagers who most likely didn’t mean to kill someone,” he explains.

“That makes sense. But why hasn’t anyone stumbled over the body, then?”

“It’s private property. A lot of no hunting signs up, the owner probably does his part to keep people out, but he gave us permission to search the grounds,” he says. “Let’s walk and see if you happen along something.”

“Deal.”

Nicolás stays back with Patricia as Maddox and I head off after the search team. They’re about five minutes ahead of us, but there are things that I’ll see that they never would.

“Are you doing alright?” Maddox asks.

“Yeah, I’m fine, thank you,” I say as I give him a smile. “I’m... upset about my brother but I really hope that if we can end this, he can see things more clearly.”

He reaches out and squeezes my hand. “Me too. Is Reggie here?”

“No, he’s haunting Nicolás. He thinks you, me, and Nicolás would make a nice man meat sandwich for him to watch. Soo... yeah, I’ve been dealing with that.”

Maddox’s eyes narrow. “Have you found a way to exorcise ghosts yet?”

“Nope, not yet. *But* when he thought Nicolás was trying to murder me, he knocked the phone out of Nicolás’s hands, redeeming himself. Speaking of which... I haven’t gotten a chance to check out this dick pic,” I say as I pull out my phone.

“No,” Maddox says as he yanks the phone away and stuffs it back into my pocket.

“But... what’s that!” I say, and he quickly looks at the nothingness I’d pointed to as I pull the phone back out and open the picture. “Ooh la la.”

“No! You can’t just distract me.”

“This is fucking sexy. Did you use the bathroom next to your boss?”

“I sure did.”

“Wow, turning into a bad boy.”

“I... seem to lose a sense of judgment around you, so please... delete that.”

“And *saved*,” I say, but this time when he crams the phone back into my pocket, I let it stay there.

“Do you have an idea of where we’re walking?”

“No, I’m just trying to pick a rather straightforward path. Some place they wouldn’t have had to do much rock climbing or tree scaling,” he says.

I nod. “Makes sense.”

“*Caw! Caw!*”

I look up as Spite comes diving in and lands in front of me. He drops something in front of me and I stoop down to pick it up before it hits me that it’s not an actual item. Some odd thing that he was... able to think up? *Can* a bird think something up like that?

I reach out toward it, unsure if it’ll actually feel real to me. Unsurprisingly, my hand goes right through it, but I don’t need to pick it up to know what it is. When I pull Nicolás’s wristband out of my pocket and show it to him, he tilts his head this way and that as he looks at it. “Did you see me have this?” I ask.

Was he trying to show me something he saw me have... or did he see it on her?

“What... are you seeing?” Maddox asks.

“Spite brought me a wristband... it’s dirty, though. Covered in mud,” I say. “I think he knows where the body is.”

“Your bird? Your... ghost bird knows where the body is?” Maddox asks, clearly disbelieving this.

“He brought me this,” I say, waving to it even though I know he can’t see it. “How would he even know we were looking for it?”

“He... pulled... it off?” He seems skeptical and I don’t blame him.

“No... not like that. Like... they can project things. Make things seem real. Like how they can change clothes or have something. It’s a... I don’t fucking know, but he’s a bird. He’s not going to magic up a wristband that he hasn’t seen before,” I say. “Spite, can you show me where you got this?”

The raven seems full-on confused about what I want as he hops around the wristband, clearly just wanting me to be proud that he found it for me.

“How’s that going?” Maddox asks.

“Just about as well as you’d think it’d be going talking to a bird,” I say. “I think he’s very proud at the moment. He’s doing a ‘Look what I did’ dance.”

“Ah... okay... can he dance his way over to a body?”

“One could hope,” I say as I try to convey this to Spite.

He seems to eventually get bored and starts hopping around a little. When he jumps into the air and flies about ten feet before stopping, I head after him, knowing that I might be losing my mind, but it's better than just wandering.

“We're headed away from the others. Want me to tell them to come this way?”

“I really don't know,” I admit. “He might literally just be flying around.”

“Okay, I'll see if I can get one over this way just in case,” he says as he goes to make the call before groaning. “Of course the reception is shit out here.” He grabs the radio on his belt and makes a call to one of the other teams to get them heading our way.

Spite lands on the ground a moment before I see Millie step out from behind a tree. Startled, Spite leaps up into the air as I draw to a stop.

“What's wrong?” Maddox asks.

“Millie's here,” I whisper as she starts walking toward me.

There's something terrifying about facing something only you can see. Something that's stronger than a human and is determined to kill me. Something that I'm not sure I can stop.

None of Maddox's gun lessons will work here.

“Millie, we're helping you. It might not seem like it, but we are helping you.”

“You're helping yourself,” she says as she moves closer to me. “Let them pay for what they've done.”

“Tell me what they did to you, let me help you,” I say as Maddox hooks an arm around my waist and pulls me back.

“There's only one way to stop you,” she says as I back up in a rush, not wanting to face her again. I project everything into being able to pass right through her. I focus on making her nothing more than air to pass through me and when she does, I feel a sense of satisfaction until I feel Maddox's arm jerk back.

She's wrapped her hands around Maddox's throat, preparing to choke him. Being around me gives her the strength to tighten her grip, and as Maddox gasps for breath, his hands grab for her but of course he can't feel her. He can't touch her at all as his hands go right through her. My presence is *making* her solid enough to hurt him, but I'm not making him able to touch her.

“No! Stop! What are you doing?” I yell as I grab for her, but my hand passes straight through her. “Millie, we are *helping* you.” I drop my hold on making her insubstantial, and all too suddenly, I can feel her, but as I pull and drag her with me, she won't loosen her grip on Maddox's throat. It's not like I can hurt her. It's not like I can choke her off him. She's dead.

And she's going to kill Maddox.

He staggers backward, his back slamming into a tree as he tries to fight against her, instinct pushing him toward it.

“Millie, please, we're helping you. We're fucking helping you.”

“No, you're helping your brother. Don't fucking pretend you're doing any of this for me.”

Maddox starts to slide down the tree as I realize that I don't know what to do. I don't know how to stop her. How to save Maddox.

Wait...

Her power... her power is this great around me. Only around me or she wouldn't need a person to kill the others. She wouldn't need someone to do any of this.

If this doesn't work... if this doesn't stop her... I'll have condemned Maddox to death.

“Fuck,” I yell as I release her and turn. I take off running as quickly as I can, racing away from her

as my heart thunders in my chest. The thorns and branches grab at me as I run. I have no idea how far away I have to get from Maddox, but I know I need to get away. I need to get away from everyone who might be hurt by her, and pray it's not too late, because I can't help him. I can't go back to him.

I see Spite up ahead. He leaps into the air as Millie appears on my right and shoves me hard. Missing my step, I trip and slam my shin into a log that sends me diving over it.

"Just going to run away? You just left him there to die?" she asks, voice sharp.

"It got you away from him," I say. I don't know that for sure, but I have to hope that I got away quickly enough. I push up to my feet just as she grabs for my throat, but I concentrate hard enough that she passes right through me.

She lets out a rage-filled scream, but I'm back on my feet. I'm moving as quickly as I can, praying that this bird knows what the hell he is doing.

"I will *kill you*," she screams.

"You can't touch me," I yell back.

Her face is twisting into something dark. "You can't keep your concentration up that long. I saw how you were after finding my father. I'm not concerned," she says.

And she's right. If I were to focus for too long, I'd eventually pass out and she'd get a free ride to killing me. So the moment I'm away from her, I have to drop my focus and hope she doesn't get a sneak attack in on me.

Suddenly, she appears directly in front of me, waiting for me to run to her, since that's where Spite is headed, so I don't even hesitate. I push forward, sliding through her as she grabs for me and screams when she can't make contact.

"I will *kill you*," she roars.

Spite flies ahead before dropping down out of sight. I realize he's gone down a steep hill that I know I'll have to descend. While trying not to fall, I find it hard to concentrate on her, so my focus must slip a little because she shoves me from behind hard enough that I fall forward. I miss my footing, slamming down onto my face before rolling down to where a tree stops my descent. She drops upon me as I slip around the side and push back up and over to where Spite is scratching at the ground.

That's when I see what he's digging at.

The very edge of a silicone wristband.

I grab a rock and start digging at the earth. If the wristband is toward the surface, the body can't be far behind. It seems to be an area that deals with a lot of washouts, so the surface might have been worn away by years of rain.

"No! No! Stop!" she screams as she grabs for me, but I won't let her touch me. My hands, while healed from her pushing me off the cliff, still aren't up for digging in the dirt. I clutch the rock tightly, scraping away the ground.

The rock snags on something that looks like cloth, but I don't stop. "Millie, listen to me, we're helping you," I say. "We found you. We found your body. We will figure out what happened. We'll finally lay you to rest as you deserved to be."

"No, no, no," she screams. "They have to die. They have to die."

Spite hops down where I'm at and pecks at something shiny that I appear to have snagged with my digging. Taking it in my hand, I run my finger over it, knocking away the dirt and revealing something metallic. I'm not sure why it strikes me as odd until I realize that the ghost of Millie is not wearing a necklace at all.

"Die, die, die, die, they all have to die," she screams as she tugs at her hair. She's becoming more

out of control since finding the body, not less.

Did her killer put this here? Did they add it after her death?

I yank it out and she stops screaming as her eyes latch on to it. Then I toss it away from me but pay attention to where it lands as her face settles.

“Millie, we want to help you,” I say as I hold a hand out to her.

She drops down to her knees before reaching down to her body still covered in dirt except for the cloth I’d unveiled.

“Millie, it’s okay. I don’t know what happened to you, but we’re going to help you. We’re going to find peace for you and for your baby,” I promise.

Her eyes flicker up to mine, catching them as I grab her wrist. “It’s okay.”

It’s like I can feel the malice that’d filled her body dissipating. I don’t know if it was finding her body, the necklace, my words... but she feels like a ghost who has finally met with peace.

“You’re okay now,” I say as I wrap my arms around her. I know she could very well start choking me again, but I can’t stop myself from trying to comfort her. “Millie, it’s over. You’re okay. Can you tell me who killed you?”

“F-Franklin did,” she says. “The others never stopped him. No one ever came back for me. They just left me here. They left me here. All of them.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Please... please get my baby back,” she says, and just like that, my arms fall through thin air, telling me she’s moved on.

For a long moment, her final words circulate through my mind before nausea hits me and I lunge up to my feet and make it at least a few feet from the crime scene before throwing up everything.

I need to get to Maddox. I need to make sure he’s okay. I need...

I only make it a couple more feet before passing out.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



MADDOX

Air slams back into me as I roll onto my side, coughing and gasping. It takes me a moment to even think about what just happened.

Fucking... ghost tried killing me. She nearly killed me.

That was... horrifying...

I've never been up against something that I can't deal with. That I can't touch or even... pull off me. It wasn't like I could shoot her or do anything.

All I could do was just stand there and let her kill me.

But she didn't... she didn't kill me. She's gone, but so is Hiro. Where the fuck is Hiro?

In a panic, I push myself to my feet and look around the quiet woods, questioning where he went. Which way were we headed? God, I feel turned around. I'm dizzy and my throat aches.

"Detective!"

I jump and turn to face the team heading toward me. It must be the K9 team I'd requested. The handler rushes up to me, noticing something's wrong. "Are you okay?"

"I..." Fucking hell, being choked is the worst. "I... think they went this way..."

I head off at a jog now that I have my bearings. I need to find Hiro. I need to do whatever I can to find him. What if she gets ahold of him again? What if she already has?

"What happened?" the handler asks. "Who attacked you?"

And what the fuck do I say? The ghost of the girl we're trying to find who is able to touch me when she's in Hiro's presence?

I just shake my head and keep moving, looking each way for where Hiro might have gone.

"There's a trail this way," she says as she points at a footprint I'd missed in my panic. Since she seems to be much better at her job than I am at pretending like I know how to track, I follow her.

What if we're too late? What if I've lost him? What if I've lost another huge part of my life? What if I led him out here only to lose him?

When we reach a flat area, her dog seems to pick up something. He sniffs for a bit before latching on to a scent and rushing right toward it. He heads straight down a hill, moving faster as we barely manage to keep up, but if Hiro found it, then the dog might lead us straight to him.

The moment we hit flat ground, I see the spot that'd been tampered with. I don't even need the dog to tell me anything, it's clear we've stumbled upon the scene. That's when I see Hiro lying about ten feet from the grave, unmoving.

Panic fills me as I rush over to him. Desperately grabbing onto him, I reach down to find a pulse, but I don't have to because he opens his eyes.

"You're alive," he says with a smile.

"You're alive," I whisper. Fucking hell.

I feel exhausted as I rest my head on his chest. He's going to be okay. He's alive... and he's okay.

He wraps his arms around me, squeezing me tightly. "I'm sorry I nearly got you killed. I should have run away sooner. It just... you know, instinct is to help the person, not run away from them. I'm glad running helped."

"It's not your fault. Who the hell thought this would happen?" I ask as I sit up. He doesn't let go of me, so I end up dragging him up with me.

He tucks his head against my shoulder. "She's gone. She moved on. There was... something... I thought that when I revealed her body and she saw we found it, it'd allow her to feel at ease. But what I noticed was that she had a necklace lying on her body that she wasn't wearing as a ghost. When I tore it off, I flung it over there, and it was like a switch. She just... stopped."

"What do you mean? That necklace could make her... act like that?" I ask, rightfully confused.

"My head hurts too much to piece it all together well. Honestly, I don't know about that, but I know that if a ghost is filled with something as they're dying—hatred, remorse, whatever—they often fixate on it. What if the person who buried her filled her with these feelings of hatred? What if that necklace was theirs?" Hiro says.

"So the serial killer is the one who buried her?" Is that what he's implying?

"She said Franklin killed her."

"But did he bury her? Say the serial killer presumably knew her. Stumbled on her body and promised to avenge her death. In the process he built an evil spirit?" I ask, uncertain. I think we all are.

"Oh! And she asked me to promise that I would help her baby."

"Her baby?" I look over at the grave. "If she gave birth before she died... but then what happened to the baby?"

"Right. I have no idea."

"Do you think she could have been controlling the killer?" I ask. "But if that malice was put in there by the killer..."

"I don't know," Hiro admits. "I really don't know how it'd work. I've never dealt with anything like this before. It's all new territory for me."

I honestly don't know how any of this would work either, but I hope we find something at the grave that leads them straight to the man who killed Hiro's brother.



I'm thrilled to have Hiro back with me, but I also know he needs some rest and for someone to look him over. "Hiro, I'm going to have someone escort you out to get looked over, get something for your head that I'm sure hurts, and get you to Nicolás and Patricia."

"Nah, nope, I'm fine," he says, even though he's a complete deadweight in my arms. The hug has

now turned into full-on support. The only reason he's managing to stay sitting up is because he's hanging on for all he's worth.

"Hiro."

He sighs extremely loud, like I'll just give in because he's dissatisfied about the whole ordeal. "*You* should go to a doctor after she hurt you."

"I'm already doing better," I assure him. "And *you* didn't go to the doctor, and she choked you for longer. I wonder if she died by being choked and that's why she choked us."

"Oh... I didn't think about that."

"It'd make sense why that's her go-to for offing us. You promise she's gone?" I ask, hating that I can't tell for myself.

"Promise, promise."

One of the team members comes up with a bottle of water that she hands to Hiro. He thanks her and clutches tightly onto it but can't seem to get the cap off with his shaking fingers, so I remove it for him.

"Okay. I'll walk you out to the others and come back. Come on," I say. "There's nothing I can do here until the team is ready to excavate the body. Before you go, can you show me where you threw the necklace?"

He nods and points off in a general direction that I have one of the team mark for me.

"Thanks for your help," I tell her.

"Any time," the tech says.

"I'm going to run Hiro back. I'll be back as soon as I can," I promise them.

"Got it," the K9 handler says.

I stand up and help Hiro to his feet, and for someone adamant about staying behind for whatever reason, he can't seem to remember how to lock his legs. They give out a couple of times before he gets them under himself, steps a couple of feet and then throws up all over my shoes. There's something to be said about not even caring when someone soils your favorite pair of shoes. I feel like we've reached a new level in our relationship.

"I'm *so* sorry," he says after he recovers and swishes his mouth out with water.

"I've stepped in worse," I assure him. "Being a homicide detective is a little like being a nurse or a doctor. You've seen it all, you've smelled it all, after a while it's just whatever. Besides maggots. I still can't get over maggots."

He doesn't look too good after I talk about the maggots. "Please... don't make me throw up again."

"Sorry," I say as I lead him out of the area. We make it about twenty feet before I realize this will just be easier if I carry him. I stoop down and he looks at me funny.

"What?"

"Get on my back."

"I can walk."

"Yeah, we'll get there by tomorrow if you do."

"So? Wouldn't you love an entire day with me and your vomit shoes?"

I debate this. "Maybe on a day where I haven't been choked by something I can't see, dealing with a dead body, and have you looking half dead. How about we make it a date for in the future?"

"I'd love that," he says as he just flops his body against me. I'm oddly reminded of a starfish.

I grab under his thighs and hoist him up as his arms drape over my shoulders.

"You probably regret ever having me help," he says.

“Not yet.”

He tucks his head against my shoulder. “That’s impressive.”

“I’m just an impressive kind of guy.”

Hiro squeezes me a little. “You are. Impressive, kind, sexy, sweet... the whole package. You have a nice package too.”

I never knew hearing someone compliment me could feel so wonderful.

He starts fumbling around.

“What are you doing?”

“I thought if I could look at that picture of you, it’d rejuvenate me and make me less nauseous,” he says.

“How about I show you the real thing at a later date?”

He slumps back against me. “Dealio. You know... for as much of a monster as Millie was, I feel awful for her.”

“I know,” I say as I give him a gentle squeeze. “It’s sad... how some people are just broken down to doing what they do. That they’re abused and hurt until they just break and do something that they’ll forever be condemned for.”

“At least she never actually killed anyone. Her soul can rest easily.”

“She sure tried,” I say, as I think about my rather sore throat. At least she didn’t seem to damage anything. She more or less just cut my airway off. “How’d you find the body?”

“Spite led me.”

“Your imaginary bird.”

Hiro chuckles. “Yep. Imaginary bird of the year award goes to Spite. He’s a good boy.”

“He here now?”

“Nah, he’s off doing bird things with his bird trophy.”

“Makes sense.”

“Maddox?” he asks.

“Hmm?”

He’s quiet for a moment. “I really like you. When this is all over, I really want to do normal things like go on dates and learn more about each other and find out that you secretly love chick flicks or something else that goes against this whole bad boy routine you have going on.”

I find myself startled by his words. Not that I’m surprised by them, because it’s clear Hiro likes me, but because I really couldn’t have said it better myself. And I’m not a relationship guy. I was always too caught up in work and other shit. Reggie was my go-to whenever I was bored and we both knew it was just that. But I find myself loving the idea of all of that because Hiro makes me happier than I’ve ever been. Being around him makes me feel at ease. Makes me feel like there’s more to life than work. And I wish I was as good as him at words so he’d understand that.

“It depends. Are you going to tell me all of your embarrassing secrets?” I ask.

“Dude, I’ve already sat before you while carrying on conversations with imaginary friends, rolled around with imaginary friends, crawled around on the ground after imaginary birds... I’m really not sure how much more embarrassment I can take. Oh wait... I also vomited on you.”

I start laughing and even if it hurts a bit, I can’t stop. “I honestly can’t wait to take you out on a real date. And I promise I’ll show you my... my collection of ‘How to Be a Cat Dad’ books I bought after Reggie passed on... or stuck around to haunt me.”

He laughs. “Cat dad?”

“It was all they had.”

“You’re a pretty sexy cat dad. I think you need a couple of cat tattoos.”

“Now you’re just talking crazy,” I decide.

“This is nice,” he says. “I can almost forget everything else that’s going on. Almost. Just almost.”

“Good.”

“So does that mean you’re mine, then?” he asks.

I can’t help but smile at Hiro’s words. “I’m all yours as long as you’re all mine.”

He squeezes me. “One hundred percent.”

Hiro must fall asleep after a few minutes because he becomes slack in my arms, so I carry him out to the main area where Patricia and Nicolás are still waiting. The moment they see him not walking, they run for me, but I give them a smile in hopes of reassuring them.

“He’s alright. Dealing with a ghost exhausted him,” I say. “We found the body, so I need to go back and help out there. You two head back to the station, since a team member wants to talk over a few things with you, Nicolás. While that’s going on, I’ll have Hiro looked over to make sure he’s okay, and then someone will drive him to the station where you guys can sit with him until I’m done.”

I carry him over to my car to wait until I can get a paramedic onto the scene. “If anything happens to him while I’m gone, I will misuse my power and have you both arrested.”

“Such a lovely young man,” Patricia says as she gives my arm a smack. “He’s my kid, boy. You think I’m going to let something happen to him?”

“I suppose not. Now the reception is pretty bad out there, but if he needs me, he can reach out to Ben who can contact someone to radio me. We believe the threat from Millie is gone but that doesn’t mean the killer has been captured.”

“Understood,” Patricia says.

“So does that mean you found her? Her body?” Nicolás asks, voice quiet.

“We believe so. I’ll have more information for you as we come upon it,” I say. “Just head to the station now, and hopefully, you’ll be done by the time Hiro arrives.”

“We will,” Patricia says.

After getting Hiro, who is still out, set up with a paramedic and an officer, I see another car pull up and notice it’s Elena. She gets out and gives me a stern look.

“You didn’t invite me to the party,” she says.

“I assumed your wife did.”

“She just now mentioned it. Said you were off chasing ghosts again,” she says.

“Did she tell you we found the body?” I ask.

Elena gives me a look that tells me Parker must not have mentioned it yet. “She did not. Well, damn... you found her?”

“Hiro did.”

“I’m starting to get concerned that your position is going to be replaced by Hiro,” she teases.

I grin at her. “I’m not even sure I’d be mad. I feel like I’ve just been running around, following in his shadow, but I don’t care. We’re closer than we’ve ever been. We uncovered a string of murders that we’d never have even known about if it weren’t for him.”

“He’s pretty talented at doing the unbelievable,” she says as she follows me into the woods.

“I think Millie’s child is still alive,” I say.

Her eyebrows shoot up. “What makes you think that?”

“She asked Hiro to look out for them. If the child had died in utero or upon birth... wouldn’t she already know where he’s at?” I ask.

“Beats the hell out of me, I don’t get a lick of this,” she says. “But now we have just a stray baby

floating around?”

“Right.”

“Complicates matters a bit.”

“One step at a time. Let’s see what the team’s dug up and go from there.”

Elena nods as she walks beside me while my mind races.

Someone buried the body. While the body isn’t deep, it doesn’t mean it once wasn’t. The area is low and was likely washed away as time went on. But that means someone came back with a shovel.

Franklin? The one who killed her?

Someone else who’d felt guilt from her death?

What part did the others play in this? And is one of the teenagers who had been there with her that night responsible for killing the rest? Nicolás didn’t seem to think there was anyone else.

When I get back to the body, Elena and I look over the location while we wait for the others to start on recovering the body. It’ll take a while, especially with an older death like this one, but we’ll have enough to do to keep us occupied for a little while.

“So the nearest road would be back at the festival, right?” Elena asks.

“Yeah, but say they killed her, they wouldn’t run back to the festival, they’d likely run out that way. Maybe send someone away to get the car,” I say.

“But then someone came back with a shovel. You can’t walk through the festival with a shovel without drawing attention,” she says.

“True.”

We toss ideas back and forth for a bit before I head over to see how the team is doing. Her head wasn’t too far beneath the surface, and there’s some kind of cloth covering her face that’s been pulled to the side just a bit to see her skull.

I kneel down to get a better look. “Huh.”

“What?” Elena asks.

“I guess I was under the impression that she’d been choked, but I was wrong. She was stabbed. I mean, I’ll have to wait to get a better idea, but isn’t that what you’re leaning toward?”

She gets in next to me to examine what we can see. We really won’t know for sure until the scene is a bit more uncovered, but it’s pretty apparent. “You’re right. So one of the boys had brought a knife...” she says.

“I mean... it’s not unbelievable, but Nicolás claimed that they exited the festival and ran right out into the woods. The thing was, after the first year, the festival always had a metal detector you had to pass through to enter because they had that drunken brawl the first year where someone pulled out a knife.”

“That does complicate matters.”

“So Nicolás said they’d exited out the far gate into the trees. The far gate was generally just for people who walked, so we can’t even say one of them went back to the car to get it.”

“How much do you trust this Nicolás kid?” Elena asks.

“I... felt like quite well, but what if I missed something? Fuck. I need to talk to Hiro,” I say as I stop to look at the necklace that’s currently being photographed.

“Do you know where this necklace was positioned on the body?” Mick asks as my eyes latch on to it.

Fucking hell...

I grab my radio and take off at a run toward my car, knowing I need to get to Hiro, and I need to get to him now.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



HIRO

“Aw, Sleeping Beauty has emerged from his slumber,” Reggie says as I open my eyes.

“Maybe he needs a little more sleep, then,” Natalie says. “He looks an icky shade.”

“I think that green hue brightens his face right up,” Reggie inputs.

I wave my arms around in the hopes of making them disperse. “Both of you... are demons from hell.”

“He just said I’m as sexy as sin,” Reggie says.

“You *are*,” Natalie adds.

Grudgingly, I open my eyes enough to glare at them. “Where am I?”

“In my loving embrace,” Natalie says as she pets my forehead like I’m a dog.

“So loving,” I say with an excessive amount of sarcasm.

Reggie’s eyes narrow. “Didn’t make him any less sassy. What if we force him to love us?”

Natalie shrugs. “That’s what I’ve been doing for *years*. Years, I say.”

“I feel awful for you,” Reggie says as he hugs her in an attempt to comfort her.

“Where am I?” I ask as I sit up, realizing I’m in the back seat of a car I don’t recognize.

Natalie shrugs. “We assumed you knew.”

“I... don’t,” I say as I look around.

The door opens and Ben gets in, startling me. “Ben?”

“Hey, you were out. Maddox said you weren’t feeling well, but he didn’t tell me you’d be dead to the world.”

“Oh, yeah, when I do stuff, it just kills my brain. He’s back at the crime scene?” I ask.

“Yeah. He’ll give me a call when he’s done, but it’s going to be late. So I’ll just take you home.”

“Can you take me to my brother’s? Well, I can have him pick me up. Since it’s a far drive. I’ll just do that,” I say, realizing I’m rambling. “Just in case Maddox needs you or something.”

“Okay, I’ll take you to my place, then,” he says as he starts to drive.

My head is pounding as I buckle my seat belt and lean my head against the cold window, wanting some reprieve.

“I’m going to go see what Maddox is doing,” Reggie says. “You want anything? Want me to flash

you or anything before I go?"

I glare at him which just makes him grin before he disappears. "You have anything for headaches by any chance?" I ask Ben.

"I don't," he says. "I do at my house, though. Kacey gets them. I'll grab you something before your brother picks you up."

"Okay," I say as I doze a bit more.

I don't know how long I'm out for, but when he pulls into the driveway, I wake up.

"Come on," he says as he opens the back door and grabs my wrist to help me out.

"Did you call Nicolás? Dumb question... you don't have his number. I need to call Nicolás," I say as I pat my pocket down. "Do you have my phone?"

"No, I don't. Did Maddox have it?" he asks.

I try to think back that far. "I really don't think so."

"You can use my cell," he says as he guides me through the front door where I'm immediately startled to a stop.

The entire front room is filled with ghosts.

Packed full of them.

The only time there are this many ghosts around is when someone's about to die.

And I'm afraid that someone is me.



MADDOX

"Ben, answer your fucking phone," I yell.

It rings and rings as my mind races. It can't be... no, it's not... what would Ben even have to do with this?

But that necklace. That was our mother's necklace, I would recognize it anywhere. When our parents had split and Ben had gone with our father, our mother had given him the necklace. He grew to hate her so much that I'm surprised he'd even kept it. It can't be a coincidence. It can't be...

"Fucking hell," I growl as my phone starts to ring. When I notice it's Nicolás, I quickly answer. "Nicolás?"

"Yeah, we're done at the station but Hiro's not here yet. This is where we're supposed to pick him up? Or was I wrong?" he asks. "Is he okay? Did they have to take him to the hospital? I thought you said he was okay." His voice is showing his rising panic with each question.

"Nicolás, I need you to ask around for Officer Ben Booker. Ask if anyone's seen him," I say.

"Okay... what's wrong?"

"If anyone's seen him, have them call me immediately. Stay right there."

Elena catches up to me. "You think Ben has something to do with this?"

"Hiro either never made it to the department or went with someone else," I say.

"Who'd you send him with?" she asks.

"I left him with the paramedic who was going to pass him off to Officer Richards to escort to the department if he was doing okay, but she's not picking up."

"Fuck, let me see if someone can identify her vehicle."

I call for backup to get to Ben's house, though I know I'll feel like a complete asshole if I'm

wrong.

That's when I think of the absolute stupidest thing I've ever thought of. "Reggie?" I ask.

How the hell will I even know if he's here? He could be at home or off haunting Hiro or who knows what?

"Reggie, if you're here, I need you to tell Hiro to stay away from my brother. I need you to tell Hiro to call me, go to the nearest police station, or call for help. Just do not go with my brother."

Please, please, let him be following me today. Please.

"I have units heading to Ben's house," I say as I notice Elena watching me.

"Reggie?" she asks.

"Just... long story."

She gives me a nod, having known Reggie from our years of working together. There was more than once that I'd invited her over to the house where we'd bullshit while Reggie snooped right into whatever we were talking about.

The moment I reach my car, I jump into it and gun it straight for Ben's house, not knowing where else to go.



HIRO

"Help, help!" a ghost screams.

"Dying..." one cries out.

"Save me."

Another bumps into me. "Save yourself."

"You're going to die," one says.

"Ben, I feel like I'm going to throw up, can you excuse me?" I say as I try to back up toward the door.

If he ever responds, I can't hear it through the screaming ghosts. All I can see is their bodies jostling around. Ben's mouth is moving, but I realize he's not even looking at me. He's looking at what stands beyond the line of ghosts.

But as I turn toward the door, Ben grabs my wrist.

Reggie suddenly appears before me, making me jump. "Hiro!" he says. His voice gets lost in the chaos as he says something else.

I cock my head as I step back and slam into another ghost, but Ben's hand tightens on my wrist as I'm torn forward.

Suddenly, I see what Ben is so focused on as his son Wes walks between the parade of ghosts that push back to keep from touching him like he's coated in acid.

Surrounding Wes are Franklin, Joshua, Sasha, and my brother.

"Dad, you have to let me end this," Wes says, holding a gun that's trained on us. His presence seems to have quieted the ghosts some.

"Why are you here?" Ben asks.

"Because I knew you wouldn't be able to handle this. I knew I couldn't trust you to do the right thing," Wes says.

"You're right, I saw your car there, and I knew I had to get him out of there. I knew you were

watching him.”

Wes shrugs. “You didn’t need to. You were supposed to just walk away and let me deal with him.”

“He hasn’t done anything,” Ben says.

Wes’s eyes get huge. “Hasn’t *done* anything? He fucking tore apart everything I worked for. He fucking destroyed it, and now I hear he found her body? I tossed Grandma’s necklace into the grave with her, Dad... I’d been planning on giving it to her that night. It’s only a short time before they figure out just who did it. But then... then I got to thinking that they won’t suspect it’s me, they’ll think it’s you.”

“What are you talking about? I have no tie to any of this.”

“You knew.”

Ben pushes me back but still won’t let me go. “I didn’t fucking know. I... I knew you had tendencies. I knew... I speculated when I couldn’t find Millie, but I had faith in you. I had faith that you didn’t do it. And when her mother said she’d gone to live with her father, I believed her. I know you didn’t do it. Tell me you didn’t do it, Wes.”

Wes gives him a cruel smile. “If you believed in me so much, then why did you try to take Hiro from me? Were you going to hide him? Why’d you come back here? Was it because you didn’t have your gun and thought you forgot it here? Were you going to shoot me?”

“No, I was going to stop you. Did you take my gun?”

“You could have arrested me,” Wes says.

Ben’s face scrunches up as he looks away. “Wes... you are my son. I love you, and I want to help you.”

“You wanted to cover it up? Wanted to make it look like it never happened? Okay. Deal. If you want to be father of the year, I want you to kill Hiro and take the fall. Simple as that,” Wes says.

Ben shakes his head. “I’m not going to take the fall for your crimes.”

“Then why didn’t you turn me in when you figured it out?” he asks.

“Because... because I didn’t want to believe it! I wanted to still believe you were my son who’d never do this. Wes, you could have told me what was happening. I could have helped you before it got to this.”

“If you want to help me, then kill him. Your gun is right there.” He waves at the table. “Kill him.”

I glance over at the gun sitting on the edge of the table, grip pointing toward Ben for him to grab.

“Wes, I freed Millie’s soul,” I say. “I freed her so she could move on. You aren’t doing this for her. You’re doing it because you want to.”

His narrowed eyes shift onto me. “I loved her,” he says. “Dad, pick up the fucking gun.”

“Yes, well, I loved my brother who you killed,” I say, not understanding why Ben won’t just let me run out the door. “Ben, let me go.”

Wes looks irate, which seems to upset the ghosts around him. “If you let go of him, I’ll shoot him in the goddamn head.”

Ben shakes his head like he’s trying to think of a way to magically make everything alright.

And while Ben’s busy with that, my eyes lock on to my brother. “Sean! Sean, I need you to help me.”

Sean’s eyes snap over to mine, like he’s noticed me for the first time.

“Sean, he took your life. He took you away from me and your daughter.”

“Hiro?”

“Sean, he’s going to kill me.”

“Hiro?”

Ben grabs for the gun but as he lifts it, he aims it at Wes instead of me. Wes doesn't even hesitate as he shifts his gun onto his father and pulls the trigger. I know Ben would never have shot his own son, he was likely trying to threaten him, but there wasn't a flinch or any hesitation when Wes decided he was done with Ben.

With a groan, Ben falls back as chaos caused by the ghosts erupts around me. They're screaming again and shouting, pleading with me to save them. It's nearly enough to knock me down, and when Ben's arm yanks me back, I fall with it. When I hit the ground, I reach for the gun Ben had dropped just as I see Wes lunge for it.

Reggie shoves the gun hard enough it slides toward me.

“What the fuck?” Wes says, startled by what's happening.

I scramble along the floor for it, snatching it up as I switch the safety off and point it at Wes and fire.

The gun clicks.

No, no, no.

Why's it empty?

Wes laughs. “You really thought I was going to give him a loaded gun? I just wanted him to prove to me how loyal he actually was, but I got my answer. I saw just how far family truly goes.”

He aims his gun at my head as I lie on the floor, clutching the empty gun in my hands. “This isn't what I wanted, but I don't even care anymore. After you're gone, I will finish what I started and move on. Can you really blame me for what I did? I loved her. You know they took away the very thing I loved? She left me for them, so I had no choice. She picked them. So I took the very thing she loved most in the world.”

“Where's her child?” I ask.

Wes shakes his head as he looks at me in disbelief. “You still haven't figured that out yet? What an idiot,” he says, gun still aimed at me as I realize I'm going to die. I have nowhere to hide, no way to fight back. I glance over to the counter, but it's still a good five feet from me and since we're only feet apart, he'll have plenty of time to shoot me. I lurch forward as Wes pulls the trigger just as Sean slams into his arm, driving the gun off to the side. The bullet embeds in the cupboard next to my head as my heart beats out of my chest.

That's when I realize that I don't need a fucking gun to stop him. I don't need any weapon.

“Help me,” I say as I project upon the ghosts the ability to allow them to interact with their surroundings. While Millie was able to use her malice to make it happen, could they use my strength? “Sean, *help me*. This man unjustly *killed you*. Franklin, Joshua, Sasha, this is the man who slaughtered you. Millie is at peace. Millie has moved on. Stop letting your guilt eat you up and stop him.”

Wes looks around, trying to figure out who I'm talking to as I slowly climb to my feet. “You're really fucking crazy, aren't you?” he asks until his gun starts to move.

He looks down, clearly perplexed at first, before it turns to horror. He jerks his hand back like he can escape it as the ghosts turn on him, creating a protective barrier around me and consuming him. I can't even see him anymore, I can only hear his screams.

He deserves it. He deserves all of it. He killed them. He killed them all. He—

“Hiro.”

Sudden hands on me snap me back to reality as I look over and catch a glimpse of Wes whose arm is bent at a grotesque angle, gun aimed straight at his own face.

“No, stop, please, stop,” Wes begs but it falls on deaf ears as the ghosts move in tighter.

“Hiro, stop them, don’t make them become killers. I have this,” Maddox says.

Right... right. What the hell am I doing? What am I doing?

I drop my hold on them and the gun falls from Wes’s hand a moment before Maddox is on him, pinning him to the ground as the ghosts around me vanish, like they’re pleased no one is going to die.

Legs weak, heart pounding so loudly I feel deafened by it, I drop to the ground on my knees.

I can see people rushing in, but my ears are ringing as the hands of Sean, Joshua, Sasha, and Franklin are on me. They’re touching me, saying something, but the pounding in my head is enough that I can’t focus on them.

Then Maddox is kneeling in front of me, forcing Sean away from me.

“Are you hurt?” he asks.

Even though I hear his words, the pounding in my head makes it impossible to decipher them. “What?”

“Are you hurt?” he asks.

“I nearly killed him,” I whisper.

“You didn’t.”

He doesn’t understand. “I would have if you hadn’t stopped me. He’s your nephew, I nearly killed him.”

“He was holding you at gunpoint, Hiro. You can’t blame yourself for that,” he says.

“Ben! Ben got shot. Is he okay?” I ask, suddenly remembering him.

“The ambulance is on the way. He’s alert.”

“Oh... I didn’t know... I’m...” I don’t even know what to say. That’s when I realize Sean, Joshua, Sasha, and Franklin are all gone. Quickly, I look around, hoping to find Sean somewhere. “No... Sean! Sean!” No, no, no. Did Sean move on? He can’t move on. He can’t, he can’t just leave me here without him. “Sean!”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Maddox says as he wraps me up in his arms.

“I can’t find Sean. I can’t...”

“It’s okay. Maybe he just left for a moment.”

No, no, no... “He’s gone... he didn’t even tell me goodbye. He just left. He’s gone. He has nothing else holding him here,” I say.

“Hiro, come on, you need to get out of this room,” Maddox says as he pulls me up. I’m unsteady as I follow him, but the adrenaline keeps me going as I’m led out of the house and into the cool air.

Maddox wraps his arms around me and just holds me as I sink against his chest and try not to think about what I’ve just lost.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



MADDOX

“I don’t get it,” I say as I sit down next to Ben. “I don’t...”

I’d left Hiro sleeping at Patricia’s. I didn’t want to leave him, but he was mentally exhausted anyway and I needed to help out at the department. I’ll be pulled away from the case with the killer having been my nephew, but for now, no one’s said anything to me so I’m free to stick my nose wherever I want.

Ben’s staring at the wall in the hospital room as he has been for the past ten minutes that I’ve been here. “Goddammit, Ben!” I slam my hand down on the counter, making him jump.

“I didn’t... I didn’t know,” he says. “I knew... I knew there wasn’t something right with Wes for a long time. He didn’t have empathy like a normal kid. He didn’t always care what he hurt or who. But I never thought he’d... kill someone. He became infatuated with that girl—that Millie girl—and I thought it was a good thing. He was finally doing things like a regular boy. That’s when he told me he got her pregnant. Instead of feeling remorse or worry, he was... thrilled. He told me there’s no way she could leave him. I could feel how toxic it was, but I thought as long as I kept him away from her and got him some help, everything would be fine.

“When she had the baby, she didn’t want anything to do with Wes and was pushing for full custody, but when we found out she didn’t even have a home, we told her we’d take the baby. She agreed for my wife and me to adopt the baby. She was involved for a short time, but then... she never came back.”

All this had to have happened while we were estranged, which explains why I never knew that the baby wasn’t theirs. “So... Jonah’s not your son.”

“No.”

“But you raised him like he was.”

“I did. You and I hadn’t talked in years. Shit was rough with my wife, and I didn’t trust Wes to care for him, so we adopted him. We were in the process of moving anyway, so people we associated with wouldn’t notice my wife was never pregnant. And I just... went with it. Lying became easy after a while, it was easier than explaining the truth.”

“But you began to speculate that it was Wes,” I say. “You know, killing people now.”

He hesitates. "I... I didn't know, but I worried that something had happened."

I just can't understand any of this. I can't even figure out how to wrap my mind around it. "And you never came to me? You just... let it happen?"

"Sometimes judgment gets lost when it's your kid. You don't understand the lengths you'd go for your own child sometimes, Maddox. I... I was holding out hope so much that it wasn't Wes that I just... started to believe it couldn't be him," Ben says.

"You know he killed her?" I ask.

"Millie?" Ben asks as he catches my eyes.

I nod even though I don't have confirmation of this. "He killed her because he couldn't have her."

Ben stares at me. "He wouldn't."

"Wouldn't he?" I ask. While I don't have proof of this yet, I know I'll get it. I believe that while Franklin might have been the one who initially hurt her—I actually speculate that Franklin and the others thought they killed her—Wes probably finished the job. It's not right of me to tell Ben that without truly knowing, but I leave it sitting between us anyway.

Honestly, it doesn't even feel real. What kind of detective am I to not even notice what my own nephew was doing? I hadn't been as involved in his life as I had been with the others, since by the time Ben and I had started getting along again, Wes had already grown up, but he's still family.

There are still many questions that aren't answered, but I've had enough for one day. Someone else will likely question Wes, and honestly, I'm not too upset about it. I'd be happy to hand all of it over in an attempt to make it seem like nothing happened.



I sit down on Hiro's bed, the weight next to him waking him. I know I should have waited for him to get up on his own, but I think right now, I just need him.

"Hey," he says, voice quiet.

We're still at Patricia's, so the little twin bed barely holds us as I lie down behind him and gather him into my arms. I pull him in close and squeeze him against me. He takes my hand and brings it up to his lips, kissing it.

"How's Ben?"

"Alive."

"Good... I'm sorry, Maddox," he says.

"How awful of a person am I to have not seen this happen?" I ask.

Hiro raises his eyebrows. "How awful of a person am I to not know my brother was involved?"

"You're not awful at all. How can you blame yourself for that?"

"How can you blame yourself?" Hiro says, throwing my own words back at me. "Maddox... family often makes things a bit blurry. You trust them. You don't ever expect them to do something wrong. Lines blur. You can't blame yourself for something like that."

"I'm still going to."

"I know you are because you're stubborn as hell. But please, just listen to me."

I want to, but honestly, I'm not sure how.

He kisses my hand again. "It takes time."

"I know."

"So give it time," he says as he rolls a little more to face me.

I cup his face in my hand and run a thumb over his cheek. “Thank you.”

I kiss his lips gently, and for a long while, we just lie there in each other’s arms listening to the rumble of the TV downstairs.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



HIRO

It's been three weeks since everything went down. Maddox has been so busy with everything, I feel like there's been no time to just be together that doesn't involve countless other people. That doesn't mean we don't see each other every day, but usually there are a bunch of other people around asking questions I don't know how to answer.

They want to know exact details and how to make sense of things I figured out. They want to know how Wes's arm got broken. They want to know how the shot Wes took missed me. They want to know how I found the bodies and how I'd known what had happened to them. All things I explain, yet they refuse to listen to anything I say. After a while, it seems like Maddox and Deputy Chief Parker just form a fence in front of me, leaving the questions and specifics behind and blocking me from having to answer any more questions.

I moved back into my apartment now that the threat is gone, but I'll be the first to admit I miss staying at Maddox's. It's not like we don't still share a bed on most nights, yet there's just something different about it. But we'd be rushing things if we suddenly agreed to move in with each other.

Just as I sink down into my chair at my bookstore, Maddox knocks on the locked door. It's after hours, so I have the place locked down tight. Saying I'm a bit paranoid is an understatement. For a few days, I strangely felt like I couldn't trust anyone. Like I had to keep assuring myself that no one else in my life was harboring a huge secret. It's ten times worse for Maddox and I can't imagine what his family is going through.

"We're closed," I shout through the glass door.

Maddox smiles at me. "You don't want me anymore?"

"Hmm... you are awfully sexy. I suppose I'll have to let you in just for that," I tease as I slide the lock off. "What brings such a handsome man here so late at night?"

"I thought I'd pick up another handsome man and take him through an extremely fancy drive-through on the way to taking him back home," he says.

"Can I get a Coke?"

"No, only water. It's not that fancy," he says as he waits for the door to swing shut before locking it.

“Locking me inside?”

He smiles at me, but I can tell he has something on his mind, so I wave him over to a table and sit.

“What’s the word?”

“Final word is that Wes had followed the group when he saw them leave the festival. He was jealous and pissed because Millie told him that she was going to remove parental rights from the family and make it so he couldn’t have any time with the baby. I really don’t think he even wanted the child; it was her he wanted. So as he followed them into the woods, he heard Millie accuse Franklin of knocking her up and leaving her. I guess they’d been dating at the time she’d gotten pregnant. When Wes heard that, he said he became so angry he doesn’t remember much of what happened next, though he claims that Franklin kept trying to push her back but Millie was hysterical. She was beating on him and screaming and when the others grabbed her to pull her off, one of them pushed her. She fell down that hill and smashed her head on a rock. Franklin started shouting that he killed her and instead of calling for the police or checking, they all ran off under the belief that they’d really killed her.

“Unbeknownst to them, Millie had still been alive. Wes said that all he remembered was black rage and next thing he knew he was kneeling over her with a knife in hand. He said that he decided it was their fault that this happened. That if they’d never gotten involved, none of this would have happened, and he promised to get revenge for her death before proceeding to bury her.”

I think about it for a moment. “So that must be why she thought Franklin killed her. She was unconscious when it happened. I was really thinking someone must have choked her, but I guess not. But... why wait so long to kill the others?”

“Wes said that when he saw Sean one day at the bookstore he worked at, he knew the time had come to take revenge for what had happened to Millie. I think it just snowballed from there. Some weird desire where he felt like he *had* to kill them. He *had* to get rid of them.” He takes a deep breath, so I reach across the table and squeeze his hand. “I guess he invited each of them to the places where Millie had told him they’d hung out as a reminder of what they did... even though he couldn’t face that he was the one who hurt her most.”

“Why was Sean different? He actually attacked Sean. Did the others meet him at the locations?”

“He wouldn’t explain it. My guess is that it was his first time so he was messier. Or maybe Sean wouldn’t meet him like the others did.”

“And the tape over their mouths?” I ask.

“Again, he hasn’t delved into it, but at this point we’re thinking it was to symbolize how they kept quiet about her death. I really think he has convinced himself that they’re the ones who killed her.”

How the hell did my brother end up having to die over this? “It’s not easy to deal with...”

“I’m really sorry,” Maddox says.

“Thanks. Same for you.” I squeeze his hand tightly before lifting it up to my lips and giving it a kiss. “What about Ben?”

“I don’t know about Ben yet. That’s completely out of our hands. We can try to press that he didn’t know what was happening, but then the question comes in of why did he pick you up? Was he really protecting you? If so... why didn’t he take you to the department and tell someone?”

“Who were the last two Wes was going to kill?”

“Millie’s mother... and Nicolás.”

That thought makes me feel sick. “Nicolás? He wasn’t even there that day, was he?”

“No, but he ‘took’ Millie from him and ‘hid’ her away. Wes talks like Millie was *his*. Like she was his property that these others stole from him. I just... I don’t know how I didn’t see this before. I hate how useless I was for this whole thing.”

“Useless? Maddox, you were the opposite of useless. Don’t ever think you were useless at all,” I say.

He takes a deep breath. “I just feel that way.”

“Well... don’t. You protected a lot of lives with this case and so many others. It sounds like you were never as close to Wes as you were to the other two. He was already grown up and off to college when you and Ben started talking to each other again, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Just... don’t beat yourself up over it. Come on. I’ll even treat tonight. I’ll let you get a cookie if you’re extra good.”

Maddox smiles at me. “That’s awfully kind of you.”

“You have to share it with me, though,” I say.

“I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

“I wonder what people would think if they knew how sappy you really are?” I tease, hoping to make him smile and distract him from everything plaguing his mind.

“They’d go, ‘Wow, how is Maddox so much nicer than Hiro? It’s all been a lie!’” he says, but his voice has a teasing tone, telling me I accomplished what I set out to do.

I get up and check the place over before shutting the lights off and reaching out to him. “Let’s go feast.”

I shut the door behind me while wondering what else I’m closing the door to. Sean? This case? What’s left without this? I’d spent so much time obsessing over figuring out who had killed Sean that even now, after it all, I’m not sure I feel any better. Nicolás was right... it’s not like it was going to bring Sean back. Instead... it took him even farther away. At least he’s now at peace, right?

“What are you thinking about?” Maddox asks as we walk over to his car. He’d dropped me off this morning, so my car is still back at my place.

“Everything.”

“Wow, that’s a lot to think about,” he says as he pulls the car door open for me. “What about something specific?”

“Hmm...” I slide in while feeling like royalty. “About how I’m like a prince.”

“You are,” he says as he starts to shut the door.

“Hold up! My seat belt.”

“Oh! Your highness, I’m quite sorry,” he says as he grabs the seat belt and wraps it around my arm, then under my leg before buckling it. “Well there you go, Prince Hiro.”

I glare at him as he grins back before shutting the door. By the time he gets in, I have it fixed.

After picking up the food, we drive to my apartment and head inside. “Want to eat on the balcony?” he asks.

“Sure, we can grab chairs from the table.”

He shrugs. “Who needs chairs?”

Snatching a blanket as we pass through, I follow him outside to where the stars are shining brightly. It’s a gorgeous night—sky clear, moon almost full. I lay the blanket on the ground so there’s at least some cushion before sitting across from him.

“So? What’s actually on your mind?” he asks as he hands me my chicken sandwich.

“I’m wondering if I can still be of use... with your work...” I admit.

He looks at me in surprise. “You *want* to be? After everything you’ve gone through, you still want to work as a consultant?”

I nod because this is something that’s been on my mind for weeks now... I just didn’t know how

to bring it up when Maddox was still so anxious about the shit I'd ended up wound up in. I was afraid he'd immediately tell me no. "I do... very much. I want to help people. I feel like I have this... ability for a reason," I say before taking a bite. "I used to hate it."

"Was it hard for you?" he asks, unwrapping his own sandwich.

"It was... scary at times... confusing. At first, my parents just thought I had an overactive imagination. Then as I got older, they thought I had something wrong with me. I was taken from doctor to doctor for scans and tests. I started to feel like it was so wrong that it got to the point where I wanted to avoid them. I just wanted them to go away. I think I was eight or nine when my grandpa died and his ghost showed up at the funeral. I tried to get my parents to understand that he was right there, but they didn't want to know or hear or something. It wasn't like they didn't care. They did. They cared so much. But they also couldn't figure out how to listen.

"Honestly, I just started hiding it better. I'm sure if I sat them down and told them with confidence what it was, they'd have tried their best. Instead, I hid it because I hated it. I pretended like I couldn't see ghosts anymore because that's what made them happiest. They didn't want me to suffer for being different."

"When did you first start talking to Natalie?" Maddox asks.

"When I was about ten, I think. She was just around. I tried ignoring her for a while, but she knew I could see her and was very good at harassing me until I'd respond."

"What made it change?" he asks.

I chew as I think about his question. "My parents' deaths. I've never told anyone the full story."

"Am I pushing you too much?"

"No! Not at all. I wouldn't tell you if I didn't want to. So... I was in the car when my parents hit a patch of ice and drove off the road. The impact killed them both immediately."

"I'm so sorry," he says.

I give him a soft smile. "It's been so many years that I handle it okay. It knocked me out for a bit, and when I woke up... I saw their ghosts sitting in the back seat with me. They were... just begging me to get up. When I finally saw them, I could see the relief on their faces. I remember calling their names and they looked at me in such shock. I'd been unconscious long enough for them to have realized what had happened. But they weren't prepared for me to see them.

"I was bleeding, freezing, and confused. And my parents knew that no one would see our car for a long time, especially since the blizzard was getting worse. So they told me they needed to get me out. Of course they couldn't help, but they at least knew where to take me, so I climbed out through the broken back window and out into this goddamn blizzard. And even though I couldn't see a fucking thing, I clung onto my mother's and father's hands as they led me through it.

"They got me right up to the door of a house I'd never have found on my own. At that point, I was freezing but I'd have been dead if I'd stayed in that car that was steadily getting coated in snow. And I remember as the door opened and the older man who opened it looked out at me, I could feel my parents leaving me. Their ghosts had stayed behind because they knew they needed to get me somewhere safe. They knew if I was left alone, I'd probably die, but now that I was with someone who was calling the police and getting me into their warm house, they didn't need to stay..."

I take a deep breath. "I fucking *begged* them to stay. The man thought I was suffering from trauma or a concussion or something as I pleaded and begged, but I don't think they had a choice. I think when it's their time, it's their time... after that, I stopped hiding it. I didn't tell others too often, no, but I let the dead become my family. They became my one constant. There was a ghost of an old guy at my first foster home who was crotchety and evil that I loved and eventually helped pass on. Natalie who

has been around for so long. And so many others that come around. Sometimes, it's hard helping them move on but there's a bittersweet happiness to it, because you know they're moving on," I say.

"I bet. I'm so sorry you went through all of that as a kid, though. That had to have been really tough."

"It was, but that's the past. I've come to terms with it. Now I have the future to look forward to. And ghosts like Reggie and Natalie to harass me."

He smiles at me. "They do love harassing you."

"They're like a harassing duo now," I say with a grin.

As we finish up our decadent meal, Maddox grabs me around the waist and pulls me back until my back is flush against his chest. Then he squeezes me in close. "To answer your question from a while back, I'd love to have you continue to help us. Anything to get more answers and less awful people in the world. You're good at it. But I also need you to be more careful. I can't risk losing you. So you need to promise me you'll always listen and never wander off toward danger."

I tip my head back and kiss his lips. "I think I can handle that."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



HIRO

It's strange standing in front of Sean's grave. While others mourned his death, I never had to fret about not seeing him. I was able to pull him right back into my life.

"So... Sean... you're a fucking asshole for leaving me without telling me goodbye. You can't fucking leave me like this. I came here to say all these kind things, and to tell you that it wasn't your fault, and that I love you so much. That you're the best damn brother, and instead, I'm just..." Fuck.

I take a deep breath, trying my best to choke back tears.

"Let me try again," I say.

"Good, because that just sounded mean as hell, if I'm being honest."

I jump before quickly turning around and coming face to face with Sean.

"Fuck," I hiss as I grab my heart. "Sean! You're... you're still here. You're... oh my god, Sean."

He smiles as he holds his arms out, and I rush forward to grab him, pulling him into me. "Hey, little brother."

"I thought you left without telling me goodbye. I thought..." I don't even know what to say.

"I know, I'm sorry. I... I can tell I don't have long, but I wanted to see you before I go," he says.

"Where the hell have you been?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I don't know. I just know I need to go. I want to stay. I want to cling to you and Libby but... Hiro, I'm scared to go."

I take a deep breath and do my absolute best not to let emotions get the best of me. "Sean, I promise it's not scary. The peace all the other ghosts feel that I've seen move on is just... it's hard to describe. It's hard to even tell you how at peace they feel. It's wonderful that you'll no longer be stuck here," I assure him.

He gives me a warm smile. "I bet."

"And did you hear that you're not at fault for Millie's death? Wes killed her," I say.

"I... I shouldn't have left her," he says. "If we hadn't left her—"

I take Sean's shoulders. "Sean, it's over. It's done, Millie has moved on. You can't hang on to regrets." I want to ask him so many questions, but I don't want the last moments we have together to be all about Millie.

He takes a deep breath and gives me a smile. "You're right. I'm sorry. I truly wish I'd have told you the truth from the beginning. In life I spent so long keeping my guilt and my secrets hidden that in death, I couldn't get past them. Can you do one last thing before I go?"

"Sure."

"Can I say bye to Libby?"

"Of course," I say. "You're good to come with me?"

He nods before following me out to my car. The whole drive to Libby's house, we talk about everything ridiculous and fun we'd had happen in our lives. The best times we'd had. The times we'd shared with each other. And even though I'm not looking forward to telling Libby, I still feel at peace as I get out of the car and walk up to the door with Sean by my side.

"I wanted to be here when she had her first kiss so I could haunt the boy until he never came back. I wanted to be around to see her get married..." he says, and I can hear him choking up.

"Sean, you're still going to watch over us. You just won't be stuck here."

"You think?" he asks.

"You'll be able to actually live. You won't be stuck floating endlessly. I promise," I say.

He gives me a nod and when Vic opens the door, I give him a smile and ask to see Libby.

I head to her room with Sean by my side and shut the door. "Libby, can we talk?" I ask.

"Yeah, what's going on?" she asks, looking uncertain.

"You know how it's been a while since I've seen your father?" I ask and she nods. "Sean's here with me right now and wants to tell you that he's moving on."

Her expression shifts from excitement to worry. "What? But I don't want him to."

I walk over to where she's sitting on her bed and kneel in front of her before taking her hands in mine. "Libby, this is an amazing thing. This means that he's not stuck here anymore. But it doesn't mean he can't still watch over you. He'll still be watching over you all the time, but he'll be happier. He'll be free from what kept him chained here."

She still seems uncertain, but I do my absolute best to keep smiling at her. "It's a good thing?" she asks.

"It's the best thing."

"You promise?"

"I promise with all my heart. I would never lie to you," I assure her. "That Sean can do this means that he's very happy."

"Okay."

For a while, we talk, the three of us. And when Sean starts to get distracted, I know his time here is coming to an end.

"Libby, Sean has to go now."

"Tell her I love her more than anything," he says, so I tell her.

"I love you a million times more, Dad," she says.

He smiles down at her. "Tell her that I'm the luckiest father in the world to have such a wonderful, kind, caring, and sweet daughter."

I'm doing my absolute best not to tear up as I convey to her everything he's saying. She's not holding it back nearly as well.

"And, Hiro, you taught me what it means to be family. You showed me how to care for someone, and how to be cared for. You are the best brother anyone could have ever asked for. I love you both more than you'll ever know," he says.

"I love you too," I say, and I see a smile on his face a moment before he disappears.

"Is he still here?" Libby asks.

"He'll always be with you," I promise as I kiss her forehead. "I might not be able to see him anymore, but I can tell you that he's always going to watch over you."

She nods, but it does little to stop the tears. At least Hailey comes in at that point and the two of us do our absolute best to distract Libby.

The drive back to Maddox's place is one of the longest in my life, but thankfully, Spite sits on my lap to distract me. As I get out of the car, Maddox must notice something's off because he rushes out.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"I... saw Sean... nothing's wrong. He moved on, and it was just... I had to tell Libby and..."

"I'm so sorry," he says as he wraps me up in his arms. Just being in his presence gives me unbelievable comfort. "I hate seeing the person I love upset, but I promise you all of this is for the best, right?"

"You love me?" I ask.

"Of course I do... maybe I'm kind of bad at... saying things... and this probably wasn't the best time," he says, all flustered now.

"I love you too," I say, filled with so many emotions, I feel like I'm overflowing with them.

"I'm sorry this was a bad time, when you were sad."

"No, it was the best time," I say. Because I needed something to pull me out of my thoughts. He squeezes me in tightly until I hear a noise to my right.

"Baby, don't be sad!" Natalie yells before grabbing on.

Reggie appears to the side. "I'll make you feel better with a meat sandwich. Please call Nicolás to finalize the meat sandwich," he says as he squeezes me in tightly.

"No one invited you," I say with a grin.

"What's going on?" Maddox asks.

"Reggie and Natalie are joining in on our hug and Reggie's asking to invite Nicolás to finalize the meat sandwich."

"Oh lord. Reggie, what is wrong with you?" Maddox asks.

"So much. You will never understand how much," Reggie says, but he looks quite pleased with himself as I tell Maddox what he said.

"I'll call Nicolás and let you sit on his lap," I say.

"Can he be naked?"

I glare at him. "No. That'd probably be quite strange to ask if he could show up naked."

"I'm with Reggie," Natalie says.

"Of course you are."

"What about me?" a different person asks.

I turn at the unfamiliar voice and look behind me at Stripper Ghost.

"Ooh motherfucking la... who is this?" Reggie asks excitedly.

"Sean told me you might need a little pick-me-up and I just knew I would be your man," he says as he starts shimmying over to us.

"You're my man, alright," Reggie says.

"We're good!" I assure him as I start laughing. "Maddox, the stripper ghost is here."

"Umm..." He seems uncertain about this.

"The only way for him to go away is if you two have a strip dance-off," I inform him.

"The only way, huh?" Maddox asks.

"Yes," I say with certainty. "Will you do it?"

“I don’t know if I can,” he says.

“It’s the only way,” I say with a grin. As I stand there, surrounded by people who care about me—and Stripper Ghost—I realize just how lucky I am. Maddox is still trying to get out of a strip-off, Stripper Ghost is now egging him on, and I’m having to translate since Maddox still doesn’t understand ghost talk too well.

And I know that this next chapter in my life is just going to keep getting better with the man I love by my side—and all these pesky ghosts.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Want to know what's next? Check out book two: [Ghost of Truth](#) that will release in January of 2022. Eager for more of my stuff including teasers, short stories, and more? Join my reader group:

www.facebook.com/groups/AliceWinters/

You will also be the first to know about my next book's release. In the group, I do fun things like put up teasers, giveaways, and short stories! Or you can follow my upcoming releases and read some short stories by joining my newsletter here:

www.alicewintersauthor.com/

Thank you so much for taking the time to read, and I hope you enjoyed! If you have a moment, please consider writing a review. Reviews greatly help books find more readers!

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