

A young man with dark hair, wearing a black leather jacket over a white t-shirt, stands with his arms crossed. He is surrounded by vibrant blue, ethereal energy or smoke-like effects that swirl around him. The background is a dark, stylized cityscape at night, with illuminated windows of buildings visible. The overall mood is mysterious and supernatural.

GHOST OF TRUTH

ALICE WINTERS

GHOST OF TRUTH

MEDIUM TROUBLE BOOK 2

ALICE WINTERS

Copyright © 2022 by Alice Winters

All rights reserved.

Editing by: Courtney Bassett

Proofreading by: Lori Parks

Cover design by: Natasha Snow Designs

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also by Alice Winters](#)

CHAPTER ONE



HIRO

“Do you know what’s nice about being dead? You can scratch your balls all you want, and no one notices,” Reggie says as I try to ignore him while driving the car. It’s a little harder than it should be (the ignoring Reggie part, not driving the car).

“Yeah?” I say, not actually caring, but also knowing that if I don’t give the ghost *some* kind of reply, he’ll assume I’m ignoring him, and all kinds of dramatics will come bursting out.

“What’s Reggie saying?” Maddox asks from the passenger seat. Since Maddox can’t hear the ghost, it falls on me to dictate everything Reggie—or any other ghosts I come in contact with—says.

Maddox and I had gone out on a date after finding a fraction of time where neither of us were too busy to do so. Of course, the date couldn’t just be the two of us when Maddox’s late best friend caught on to what we were doing and decided he’d make us a “throuple” (his words, not mine).

“Just... the norm. Talking about scratching balls right now. Really, you’re not missing out on *anything*,” I assure him as I turn down a country road, heading back for the suburbs where Maddox’s house is.

“Of course he is. I have the voice of an angel,” Reggie says, which is horribly inaccurate. Reggie tries to show off his “angelic voice” by belting out a high-pitched note that makes me feel like a bird must be dying somewhere.

I’ve been able to see ghosts my entire life, which I’ve found to be both a blessing and a curse. Not a curse in the sense that Reggie needs to be exorcised, but sometimes it’s hard dealing with the dead. Sometimes it’s a reminder of what I’ve lost, but other times, like when I was allowed to spend more time with my brother Sean who’d been murdered by a serial killer, it’s a blessing.

I guess it’s difficult to explain, and sometimes, just as difficult to understand.

I met Maddox through his work as a homicide detective when I’d been looking into the person who’d killed Sean. Seeing the dead gave me a knack for ending up around dead bodies that I really shouldn’t have been near, which is how I continually ended up in Maddox’s path. But when I found out that he was the lead detective for a case that clearly related to my brother, I decided we needed to help each other out one way or another. It’s not too often a detective is able to get the victim’s viewpoint after death.

“Tell him I have the voice of an angel,” Reggie says.

I ignore him.

The thing about ghosts, especially Reggie, is that he’s positive I want to constantly hear him talk. I don’t.

I want to go on a date with Maddox and enjoy the evening *together... alone*. But they don’t seem to get hints—or me straight up telling them that they’re not invited.

“We’re going to have to have a talk because this throuple shit is starting to feel more like a couple and less like a throuple,” Reggie says with his arms folded over his chest.

“We’re *not* a throuple.”

“What’s a throuple?” Maddox asks.

“Tell him it’s what we are when you wake up sandwiched between the two of us,” Reggie says. “You like it, don’t you? Smooshed between two ridiculously hot men.”

“It’s a disease,” I tell Maddox. “It starts by making you feel icky all the time, and then you start hearing this squeaky voice that assaults your ears and—”

Maddox nods as he looks over at me. “Ah, so Reggie but in disease form.”

I point at the handsome man whose blue eyes are trained on me. “One hundred percent.” When I first met Maddox, I wasn’t sure I could figure out how to get along with him. He was short with me, a bit rude, and honestly acted like he’d rather run into anyone else on the planet. But that was before we realized that maybe we had a whole lot more in common than we once thought.

Maddox nods about my explanation of a throuple because he gets me. Reggie, on the other hand, moves through the seat and then through my body—making me shudder because I absolutely despise the feeling—to come to a rest on my lap so all I can do is stare at him while he gives me a look of disgust. “You have hurt me.”

“I’m driving, get your head out of the way,” I snap as I reach out to push Reggie’s head away so I don’t murder us and we all become ghosts. Maybe that’s what Reggie is trying to do.

Ghosts are usually easy to pass through but, for some reason, being around me makes them more tangible to the point where Reggie feels just like a live person as I press my hand against his head and smash him out of the way. Reggie, for some reason, seems to be stronger than the others at feeling real beneath my smooshing hand.

“You want to stay at my place tonight?” Maddox asks as he glances over at me.

“That’d be nice. I don’t have to work tomorrow, so we could do something in the morning, if you want?”

“Sounds good,” he says as something darts out of the woods and right into the road.

I slam on the brakes to keep from hitting it as my seat belt locks up and Reggie disappears. It takes me a fraction of a second to realize that I was trying to give us whiplash because of a goddamn ghost running out into the road. But the expression the ghost has when he locks eyes with me makes me realize something’s wrong.

Three more ghosts step out of the woods as I let my foot off the brakes, still rolling to a stop.

“Hiro, what’s wrong?” Maddox asks in concern, unable to see what’d caused me to nearly send us flying through the windshield.

The car rolls into the ghost on its way to coming to a rest.

“Help me,” the ghost says, invading my space.

“Save him,” another says.

“Death.”

“Something’s wrong,” I say as I throw the car into park.

Reggie might be gone, but the number of ghosts filling the road tells me someone's dying, and they're positive they need me to know about it. Someone's going to die if I don't get to them quickly enough—or have they already died?

I throw my door open as a car blares their horn at us, making me realize I'd never even checked the road, I'd been so fixated on what's happening.

"Hiro, be careful!" Maddox says as I wait for the car to pass to get out.

The smell of burnt rubber from the quick stop fills the air as Maddox fumbles with the hazards.

"Hiro, what's going on?" he yells.

"I don't know. Someone's dying," I say as I check both sides of the road before darting across it and scrambling down a large ditch in the direction the ghosts had headed off to.

"Dammit, Hiro, wait, the car's in the middle of the fucking road!" Maddox yells as he rushes to the driver's seat, but the ghosts are moving out into the wooded area, and I'm losing them. I can't move as quickly as they can, especially when there are trees and brush blocking my path. They're disappearing into the trees, and if I don't catch up, I might lose them. I might not be able to save the person... if it's not already too late, that is.

I lunge over a fallen tree and turn quickly as the ghosts get farther and farther from me. "Wait for me," I yell, but I know they won't. When they're like this, they become unreasonably fixated. There's something about death and the dying that sets them off and makes them unreasonable. They just know someone is dying and they know that they want me to help, but they can't seem to understand how to do that.

And then they're gone.

"Fuck," I whisper as I slow down.

Where'd they go? Why the hell did they disappear?

I hear a noise behind me and whirl to face it, unsure of what to expect. Hell, I could be out here with another serial killer, but when I see the look on Maddox's face, I question if maybe a serial killer would be better.

Maddox doesn't even need to open his mouth for me to realize he's pissed, but I don't have time to deal with that right now. In the back of my mind, my brain is trying to explain why everything I've just done in the past five minutes is ridiculously stupid but the rest of me is like nah, you gotta save whoever needs to be saved.

"What the absolute fuck, *Hiro*?" Maddox growls. He is *pissed*. Maddox has never used this tone with me before, and I can't even blame him.

"I think someone's going to die." It's my only defense.

"I *get that*, but don't just run off alone," he says, anger draining to anxiety. "You're going to give me a damn heart attack."

He waves me out and I realize he's not telling me to go fuck off so I don't terrify him again, he's wanting to put space between us so as we scout the area, we can cover a larger distance.

"I'm sorry," I say as I turn my phone's flashlight on. The moon is making it possible to see, but the flashlight helps even more.

"It's okay... I'm just... why do you rush headfirst into things without thinking them through?"

"I thought I'd lose the ghosts." Even I can hear how stupid it sounds, but if I'd lost the ghosts, the possibility of helping the person could have been next to none.

He sighs, but I know he understands me because he'd do the exact same thing. We break apart enough that we can cover more ground in the hopes of finding the victim, but Maddox can still save my life if he needs to.

“The ghosts seemed to disappear in this direction,” I say as I head toward it.

“Do you think I should call a team out?” Maddox asks. “How confident are you that something’s going on?”

I hesitate because I’m honestly not sure. I *know* that the ghosts seem to think someone’s dying, but whether they truly are or not is up for debate. But if I wait? What if we could have prevented it?

That’s when I see the ghost that’d run across the road. “Here!” I rush forward as Maddox moves after me. I try to reach out to get the ghost’s attention in the hopes he’ll give me a solid answer this time instead of running off. “Can you tell me—”

That’s when I notice the ghost is staring at a man who is lying on the ground. Maddox has his gun at the ready as he grabs me to keep me from rushing right onto the scene. Instead, he surveys the area before slowly stepping toward the body.

A twig snaps under Maddox’s foot and the man’s eyes snap open. He looks between us, eyes settling on Maddox’s gun, and scrambles up.

“Hey, it’s okay, I’m with the police,” Maddox says.

The man grabs his chest as he uses a sapling to help himself to his feet. “You scared me. I didn’t imagine I’d see anyone out here,” he says.

After putting his gun away, Maddox looks to me as I stare at the man uncertainly. The ghosts who’d been going on and on about death and someone needing help sure don’t seem concerned now. A few are watching him, but the rest are wandering off, looking for something else new and exciting to explore.

“Are you out here alone?” I ask, confused why he was just lying out in the trees by himself like this.

“Yeah... I’d assume. I came out to enjoy the night and must have fallen asleep when I lay down. It’s my land and I have private property signs up. Is something wrong?” he asks.

“I’m very sorry to have barged onto your land. We thought we heard someone. We were afraid that someone needed help, and when we saw you lying there, we thought you’d been hurt,” Maddox says.

I glance over at Maddox, feeling uncertain and knowing that he’s not going to want to linger on private property when we have absolutely no reason to be here beyond me seeing some ghosts. And no matter how much I’d love to use a ghost as a witness or proof, I can’t.

“Oh wow. I don’t know. You think someone’s out here?” the man asks as he looks around. “Feel free to look around. Actually, my ATVs are right over there, we could do a quick ride through the area?”

“That would be fantastic,” Maddox says. “If you don’t mind.”

“Of course not,” he says as he starts walking.

“What was your name?” Maddox asks.

“Jude Wilks.”

Maddox gives him a nod. “I’m Detective Maddox Booker, and this is Hiro Moore.”

“A pleasure,” Jude says with a smile.

The walk out of the woods and into Jude’s yard isn’t far from where we’d found him lying. His ATVs are tucked behind a barn that he makes his way toward.

“I have two. If you know how to run it, you can follow me, and I’ll take you on a quick sweep of the area,” Jude says.

“That’d be great,” Maddox says as he goes over to the second ATV and gets on. I climb on behind him, feeling like this whole situation is a bit strange and hoping that Maddox at least has an idea of

what to do if things go south.

This thing is, why were the ghosts so fixated on the man if he wasn't dying? Why did they *think* he was dying? It's not like they had just confused someone who was sleeping and mistakenly thought he was dead. I notice the ghost lingering around the shed as Jude glances back at us to make sure we're good before leading us into the woods.

"The ghost that ran in front of my car is just hanging around here," I tell Maddox.

"You think they were wrong?" he asks.

"I don't know what I think," I realize. "I just... I..."

I what? Ran us around on a wild goose chase because of a ghost? Quite the fun after-dinner date. Why do I have to do this?

"Maddox, I'm probably wrong," I say as the wind whips through my hair.

"Then we're going for a nice evening ride," Maddox says, voice calm like this is no big deal. "Don't fret about it. We'd rather you be wrong than right."

"True," I say as I wrap my arms around him, using the excuse of holding on to squeeze him tightly. It's so strange having someone by my side for my wild goose chases. So many times, during my teenage years and even now, I'd been led off on some chase where I had no idea what I'd find at the end of the journey. Far too often it's a dead body and a ghost waiting for me. At least this time, it might end better.

Jude is thorough, taking us up and down paths he'd made for his ATV before returning us to the farm where we'd grabbed the ATVs. I notice the ghost is gone and no others rush to surround me as they have in the past when someone's recently been murdered.

"Well... I'm glad we didn't find anything," Jude says.

"Me too," Maddox says. "I really appreciate you taking your time to help us check."

"Where are you parked at?" he asks.

"Just down the road. Thanks again," Maddox says.

"Oh, let me drive you," he says as he heads over to his truck, like he's not going to take no for an answer. The truck doesn't have a back seat, so I slide into the middle while trying to keep my legs away from the gearshift. Blocking my view of the window is a large purple ribbon.

Jude must think me being unable to see past it is me staring at it in admiration. "My wife won it at the Wyatt County Festival for the best pie. Best damn pie she ever made. Only good thing she ever made. Rest was like poison."

"Wyatt County?" Maddox asks.

"Yep! About fifty minutes south of here. Where my wife was born and raised and now rests," he says.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Maddox says.

"Thanks."

Jude pulls up next to our car before giving us a caring smile. "That was awfully kind of you two looking out for others. So many would just keep on driving."

"We were hoping to help if someone needed it," Maddox says. "Do you think I could get your number and give you a call sometime this weekend to make sure everything's still okay?"

"I'd love that," Jude says as he jots his number down. In exchange, Maddox gives him his number before slipping the paper he'd received into his pocket.

We get out and Jude gives us a wave before heading back toward his farm.

"He was totally a serial killer," I tease.

Maddox snorts as he intercepts me on the way to the driver's seat. "Definitely serial killer vibes,"

he jokes. "And I'm driving. I'm still recovering from the last time you drove."

"Sorry. It was just a flash... I thought it was a deer or a person or something," I say as I get in the car. "Sometimes it's so hard to get my brain to go 'no, it's a ghost, you'll go right through it.'"

"It's okay," he says. "I never thought about how hard that has to be... how distracting."

I shrug because it's just something I've gotten used to after all these years. "I'm sorry I just wasted our entire evening."

"You didn't waste it," he assures me as he gives me a look.

"I really... they usually don't *lie*."

"Maybe they weren't lying. Maybe something would have happened if we hadn't shown up, you know?" Maddox says.

"True..." But I can't help but wonder what. What was going on... and did we miss something?

"I'll call him tomorrow to make sure everything's still okay," Maddox says as he reaches a hand out to me.

I gratefully slide my fingers between his, thankful for the contact. "I guess I'm just a bit jumpy after everything that happened last time."

"I understand," Maddox says with a smile. "But it's going to be okay."

I know he shares the same fears as me; hell, his own brother and nephew were involved in it. When we found out it was his nephew who'd been killing people in some sick twisted way of seeking revenge for the death of a girl he'd once loved—and had also murdered—we found out that Maddox's brother Ben had suspected what was going on. Because Ben was not an active participant and there was no proof that he actually knew what was happening, he hadn't faced arrest, but he still lost his position as a police officer.

Things have been strained between Ben and Maddox since, but I honestly think Ben never meant to hurt anyone. I think his ideas got twisted in an attempt to fix his son or in the hopes that his son couldn't possibly be the man he feared he was. I can't imagine the pain of having a child you love and care for do something like that. How would you even comprehend it?

Maddox squeezes my hand, drawing me back to him. "Hold on a minute."

"What's that?"

"Are we... are we all alone?" he asks.

I gasp as I look around the car. "Reggie's not here... Natalie's not here... there are no ghosts here."

That's the moment something slams against the window. I squeeze Maddox's hand harder than I should as I leap in my seat. "Motherfucker," I hiss as Spite, my ghost raven, flaps against the windshield like he can't remember that he's a fucking ghost that can go through walls.

"Did I just hit Reggie?" Maddox asks. "Please tell me I just hit Reggie."

The sadistic side of me grins. "God, no, it was Spite, but it scared the shit out of me." I roll down the window as Maddox cruises along, and as Spite slides off the window, I catch him and pull him in. He's overly pleased and I'm overly tired of making my heart leap out of my chest in a chance to escape this body and rush for a different one. "I think my heart needs a break after this." Spite digs his talons into my leg as he does a whole-body shake, ruffling all his feathers. He's actually a rather neat bird even if he does, at times, terrify the ever-living shit out of me.

I run a single finger down his back, over the silky feathers.

"Your heart needs a break? You were the one who just fucking ran off after a presumed serial killer while leaving me *behind*," Maddox says, like I need to be reminded.

I shrug, really thinking we should forget all about that so he doesn't give me a lecture on how

careless I was. "It was nothing."

"You literally have to have ultimate luck or something," he says as he pulls into the driveway of his house.

We haven't technically moved in with each other yet, but we've been spending nearly every night with each other. I think at this point, it's because neither of us have *made* that kind of step in our past that we don't know how to do it now. While we did stay with each other for a time while I was being threatened, it was different from actually moving in. That was Maddox making sure I wasn't getting murdered while also kind of liking me. And at the time we weren't *together* together just yet.

Moving in together is an adult move that we haven't plunged into yet. I would say that I could just move more and more of my things into his home until everything I own is here, but the issue is that he moves more and more of his things into my apartment, so really, we're getting nowhere. But we're with each other nearly every night, and really, that's all that matters.

As we walk into the house, Stella and Bandit, Maddox's two cats, rush up to join us. They were Reggie's cats while he was alive, but after he passed away five years ago, Maddox took over their care rather reluctantly. And even though he claims he's not a cat person and will never be a cat person, he sure gives them the absolute best of care. Even now he has to sigh loudly so *everyone* knows that he's displeased before kneeling down and petting both purring creatures for multiple minutes. Stella, the calico, is a little more standoffish with me, but she's more than pleased to have Maddox at her beck and call.

"You're adorable, you know that?" I ask as Spite perches on my shoulder, eyes on the cats. He loves watching them and pestering them and sometimes, I even swear they can see him.

Maddox stops mid scratch. Stella is not pleased by this and smacks his hand, trying to get his attention. When even that doesn't work, she reveals her claws and hooks his hand, pulling it toward her. "What was that?" Maddox asks as he unhinges her claws from his fingers.

"I said you're adorable."

He scoffs, then scratches the cat again before standing up. "Did you hit your head?"

"Not recently," I say as I give each cat a scratch now that they're done being loved on by him. "Let's watch a movie."

"Popcorn?"

"Absolutely."

He starts working on that as I sit down on the couch and grab the remote. As my ghost bird hops after the cats, the cats make their way to the couch, one sitting on either side of me so there's no room for Maddox. I don't know why it makes me feel so good. Like I'm honored that even Maddox's cats are beginning to love me.

When Maddox returns with the bowl, I scoop Bandit up and set him on my lap so there's room for Maddox. Then I grab a piece of popcorn and toss it down to Spite.

While the bird can't actually eat it, he's more preoccupied with playing with it. Because of his proximity to me and the effect I have on ghosts, he's able to maneuver it just a little and that seems to highly entertain him.

Maddox stares at it, always fascinated no matter how many times a ghost does something around me.

"Are you creeped out yet?" I ask as I give him a grin.

"Not yet. Maybe if it was happening in the middle of the night with you nowhere around, I might be," he says.

"You'd have to come crying to me in the middle of the night to come save you."

“I’d be naked too.”

That makes the scenario even better. “I could get behind that.”

“Please don’t send all your ghosts to come haunt me. There are much easier ways to get me naked,” he says.

I can’t help but grin as I lean over and give his lips a kiss. “Depends how much you annoy me, I guess.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t share my popcorn with you.”

“You should definitely share your popcorn with me,” I say as I see Bandit smack a piece out of the bowl. He goes darting off my lap to get it as Spite flies over to claim this piece as well.

I press into Maddox’s shoulder, loving every moment of this. Maybe I didn’t ruin our date night after all.

CHAPTER TWO



HIRO

A soft nudge wakes me.

“Hmm?” I mumble as sleep tries its hardest to grip tightly onto me.

“There’s been an emergency. We need your help,” Maddox says.

That wakes me up enough that I’m at least semi-coherent as he tugs the blankets off me, revealing my naked skin to the cold world.

“What’s going on?” I ask as I push myself up in an attempt to hunt for clothes. I feel like arriving naked at a crime scene isn’t the best course of action.

“Someone broke into a residence. The boyfriend is dead, but the woman is missing.”

“Did she kill him?” I ask.

“They don’t believe so. The neighbor claims she saw a man dragging the woman out of the house and forcing her into a vehicle, so she quickly called the police before rushing over to see what was happening. The issue is that the neighbor couldn’t get anything on the vehicle in the dark.”

“Okay,” I say as I follow after him while tugging clothes on. Once downstairs, I hurry out to the car with him by my side. “Let’s hope the boyfriend can speak. Far too often, the ghosts of the recently deceased are unable to function.”

“I know, but we have to do something.”

The entire drive is tense, but I’m grateful to be given the opportunity to help. After the last case, I’d asked Maddox if I could still assist him because I feel like this ability I have can be used for good. It could help me save so many lives, unlike sitting behind the counter at the bookstore I own.

Don’t get me wrong, I love my job at the bookstore, it’s just that this is different. This isn’t a job to me. This is a way to help the living and sometimes even the dead. A way to use my ability and feel good about it. I used to hate this power, but doing this makes me feel like there’s a way I can help people.

When Maddox pulls up to the victim’s house, he looks over at me. “Are you good?”

“I’m fine,” I say, unsure what he’s asking about.

“There’ll be a body, and I’m sure it’s not...”

It always makes me feel good when Maddox worries about me, but I give him a determined look

before pushing the door open. "I'm good. I promise. But thank you for your concern."

He nods and gets out of the car, so I trail after him.

There are police cars and officers out and moving around and an ambulance parked along the road. It's clear many of them have just arrived and are trying to get an idea of what's happening while others work to secure the scene from nosy neighbors. They have to work fast in order to find the woman before it's too late, so could I be the difference between them finding her alive now or possibly dead later?

Maddox's entire presence changes as he walks onto the sidewalk leading up to the house. He turns more stoic and determined once he's on scene, and I feel like he's suddenly my bodyguard ready to fuck up anyone who might question why we're here.

I don't know this group as well as the team Maddox works with, but there are a few friendly faces and a few watchful eyes. I've tried my best to keep my ghost stuff to myself, but I know that shit gets around and more than one person thinks I'm a quack. The whole medium thing seemed to spread like wildfire to the point where I've heard a variety of tales about what I can and can't do. The funniest so far has been the temp who thought I was consorting with the devil so I could seduce Maddox.

As I keep my attention on Maddox, I shut myself off from them so I can do my job without getting distracted.

And right now, my job is finding a woman before she's never heard from again.

We're led through the door and into the front room where there are a few people blocking the way. After Maddox clears his throat, they scatter. We don't have to go far before I can see the signs of entry, a broken window and busted door; it's clear the assailant wanted to make a scene. There's blood smeared along the floor near the doorway that we have to avoid.

"Detective Booker," a man says by way of greeting when we enter the room before his eyes flicker over to me. I'm offered no greeting at all. "Do you honestly think your consultant is needed today?"

Maddox's eyes narrow as they fixate on the man who doesn't stand down. He's an attractive man who I've seen around the station here and there but haven't engaged with much. What has stood out to me is that it's quite clear he thinks I'm making all of this shit up and loves to make sure everyone is aware of his thoughts on that.

"Detective Evans, if you have an issue with it, by all means, I'd love to hear about it when we're not trying to save a woman," Maddox says, and I realize that I finally get to meet Keaton Evans. Maddox hasn't talked about him much but did mention that he's been stuck working with him here and there, and they seem to butt heads.

"Right," Keaton says as he looks away. "Forced entry. Neighbor says she heard screaming. Looked out as the woman was dragged across the yard and forced into a vehicle. She called the police before rushing over and finding the dead man. Because she knew the daughter could still be in the house, she went farther in where she found the daughter hiding under her bed. At that point, she took the daughter out the back door and over to her home where she waited for the first ones to respond."

"Is she alright?" I ask.

His expression is sharp as he turns to me, but at least he acknowledges me. "Yes."

Maddox moves farther into the house where the foyer opens up into a kitchen where the table is knocked over and a chair is broken. Lying on the floor is the dead man, face beaten until it looks nothing like the ghost of the man staring down at the body. I guess I still haven't seen enough bodies for it not to bother me at all because I quickly look away from the body, and instead, I fixate on the

ghost to distract myself.

Slowly, I walk up to him as Maddox follows me, and I realize he's shielding me from the dickhead. "What's your name?" I ask the ghost, voice quiet in the hopes of keeping others off me.

The ghost continues to stare down at his own body, expression unreadable as he watches the body lying before him like it might get up and just start moving again.

"What's his name?" I ask.

"Nate," a woman who's passing by says.

"Nate?" I ask. "Nate, I'm here for you. It's going to be okay."

Still, Nate doesn't move. He just stares. He's transfixed by his own body and might remain that way for days; it's so hard to tell.

I step up next to him, careful not to contaminate the crime scene, but I need to get closer to him. And when I reach out, I focus on making him tangible until I'm able to wrap my fingers around his wrist, drawing his attention to me.

He jumps and looks over at me, like he hadn't noticed the room fill up with people. "I'm dead, I'm dead. Why am I dead? I'm dead..."

"It's going to be okay." I try to keep my voice as steady as possible as I hear the uprise of hysteria in his.

"I'm dead! It's not okay!" His voice is breaking as he shakes his head, and I wish I had a better way to comfort him, but I don't have the time. He needs to help me find his girlfriend before it's too late.

"Your girlfriend was taken by the person who killed you. Do you know who killed you?"

That seems to snag his attention as he frantically looks around. "Linda? Linda's gone? Where's Linda?"

"She's been taken by the person who killed you. We need to find her," I say, trying not to take note of the people staring at me. Maddox seems to notice and uses his body to block their view.

"Linda's gone? He took her?" Nate asks as he looks around desperately. "Ella..."

"Is Ella Linda's daughter?"

He gives the smallest of nods. "Where is she? Did he hurt her too?"

"No, she's safe. Linda is not. We need to find Linda," I say. Trying to get the recently deceased to focus long enough to help is generally a pain. They get distracted by everything, fixated on their death, and are often unreasonable or inconsolable. But I won't stop until I have an answer.

"Who killed you?"

"Dave."

Finally, a name. "Who is Dave?" The moment Maddox hears it, he begins working on his phone.

"Linda's ex... Dave killed me."

"Dave has Linda right now."

"He'll hurt her."

"Then we have to find her."

"Find her..." Nate trails off. "I'm dead."

I turn to Maddox. "He's having trouble staying focused. I do know that a Dave was the one who did it. Nate said he's Linda's ex."

"I'm on it," Maddox says as he attempts to get what information he can on this Dave person.

"Nate," I say, trying to rein him back in. "Tell me about Dave."

"Dave killed me."

"Yes. And Dave has Linda. We must save Linda."

He looks frantic but unfocused. “We need to save Linda.”

“What kind of car does he drive?”

“Red... Red car. Shows up. Beats on door. Door... loud... Wakes us. I tried to stop him. He tried to take her. When I stopped him, he hit me with a wrench. Again and again and again. I’m dead...”

I turn to Maddox. “All I can get is that it’s a red car he was driving.”

Maddox nods and returns to his phone as Keaton stares at me from a distance. I catch his eyes for a moment before turning back to the victim’s ghost.

“Where does he live?”

“I have an address,” Maddox says. “We’ll have a team heading to his house in a moment.”

“Not his house,” Nate says.

“Whose house is it?” I ask.

“His brother kicked him out. Came to borrow money. We wouldn’t give him any. He left in anger. Linda said we should just give him some to keep him away. I didn’t. I should have. Keep him away. Should have...”

“He would have just kept coming back for more,” I say. “Do you know where he’s at?”

“No.”

I turn back to Maddox, who now has Keaton beside him.

“He says that the place Dave had been staying was his brother’s, but he doesn’t live there anymore after the brother kicked Dave out. Dave came here, maybe a few days ago, I’m not clear on the time frame, to ask for money. They told him no. Linda wanted to give Dave money to get him to back off. Dave returned with a wrench and beat Nate to death with it,” I say.

“Wrench... ask him why he had a wrench,” Maddox says as he kneels down to examine the body. “For a wrench to do this much damage, I don’t think it was a regular wrench someone would have lying around. Is he a mechanic? What was he doing with this wrench?”

“Nate, what is Dave’s job?”

“Job.”

“Yes. Why did he have the wrench? Is he a mechanic?”

“No.”

“What’s he do?”

“Maintenance. He used the wrench for maintenance.”

“Where does he work?”

“Woodshop. Linda said he was always stealing stuff from there. The boss didn’t like him very much and then he killed me,” Nate says.

I glance at Maddox. “Nate said Dave worked in a woodshop. Can you figure out which one? I’ll help you. Nate won’t be able to follow. He’s too fixated by his death, but I could find another ghost wandering there who might have seen something.”

“Okay, let me see what I can do,” Maddox says as he steps away, leaving Keaton to stare at me.

“This is all shit you could have gotten off the internet,” he says, the very definition of stubborn.

“Is it? Then why are you just standing there and not googling anything?” I ask before turning from him and heading over to Maddox who’s just stepped outside while on the phone.

He turns to me for a moment. “There are two woodshops in the area. A more... commercialized one and a smaller one that’s focused on pallets and such. I’m going to go out on a limb and guess he’s been working at the smaller one and could possibly even be staying there. We’ll have a call put out to the owner and double-check on our way in.”

“Okay,” I say as I follow him out to the car. Before he gets anywhere, Keaton slides into the back

seat.

“My partner’s not here yet,” he explains, like it’s an excuse for why he insists on sticking with us. Honestly, I just feel like he’s staring holes in the back of my head as Maddox drives. I can tell Maddox is not pleased that Keaton is anywhere in our vicinity, but there’s little he can do about it when time is of the essence.

And, of course, that’s the moment Natalie decides to show up.

Natalie is a ghost who has “haunted” me for most of my life. She’s perverted, strange, and my best friend, although the way she takes Reggie’s side makes me want to question how close of friends we really are because no one, and I mean *no one*, should ever take Reggie’s side.

“What the hell are you two doing up so early? I went to crawl into bed with you two frisky fellas and alas, the only one there was Reggie. We spooned for a little bit. He said my boobs were weird and awkward pressed against his back, then asked if he could touch them because he’s ‘curious’ and then he did this really awkward thing, and it felt a little bit more like a mammogram, and so I was like ‘Dude, thanks for the boob check but I hope you’re better at bouncing balls,’” she says.

I just stare at her, not sure how I’m supposed to respond to *any* of that. Even if Keaton weren’t in the car scrutinizing my every move like I’m some freakshow, I’m not sure I’d have answered her anyway.

“Hiro... Hiro... Hiro!” she says as she crawls into the front seat and sits on my lap so I can no longer look out the window and can only stare at her face. “Hiro... did you lose your ghost whisper abilities? Oh my god! Maybe I’m not a ghost anymore!”

I flick my eyes toward the man in the back which makes her eventually look over at him. “My god, he looks like a dick... but kind of in a sexy way, if you get me? Is he a dick? He looks like a dick. But not a dick I wanna ride. Now that?” She points at Maddox. “Is a dick I wanna ride.”

Now I’m glaring at her.

“Oh, it’s okay. I’m not going to go ride Maddox into the sunset and make him realize that I have superior sex skills that will make him mew like a kitten.”

Maddox’s phone rings right then, which is amazing since I was struggling to get the image of Maddox “mewing like a kitten” out of my head. I’ll have to ask him all about that when we’re alone.

I can’t hear much of the phone call, even when I lean into Maddox. “Thank you, we’ll be there in ten minutes.” He talks a bit more before hanging up and turning to me.

“They were able to get ahold of the owner of this place who says that Dave used to work there but was fired two weeks ago. He said there’s a possibility he stole a set of keys before he left. We have permission to search the premises, so they’ll send who they can there now,” he says.

“Okay,” I say, anxious that we’re taking too long. But I guess if he was just going to kill Linda, he’d have killed her back at the house, right? There’s no reason for him to have dragged her all the way out here first. Or was he afraid someone would hear him or stop him? Maybe something spooked him.

“When we get there, you are not to leave my side, do you understand? We don’t know if this man is armed. We don’t know where he is, okay? We’re going to assess the situation, see if we can see his car anywhere and wait for backup.”

I kind of have the feeling that Maddox is saying this with extra sass to it. Like “If you don’t listen, I will never let you come along ever again because you have no ability *to listen*.”

I do listen... but sometimes I also... get caught up in things like last night.

When Maddox pulls the car over a short walk from the location, I follow him out of the car with Keaton close behind us.

"I'll see what I can find," Natalie says as she rushes off.

"Natalie's checking," I say.

"Okay. Backup should be here shortly."

"Help," a voice behind me calls out.

I turn quickly to see where it's coming from, but when neither Maddox nor Keaton turn, I realize it's a ghost.

"Help," another ghost says.

I slowly look at Maddox.

"What?" He already looks exasperated.

"She needs help right now," I say, knowing Maddox isn't going to be pleased about rushing in.

"I know she needs our help, but we don't want to risk lives running in, okay?"

I stare at him as the ghosts start to become drawn to me. Each of them is begging for my help, and I'm not sure I can physically keep myself here if the mere minutes we wait could be the difference between her coming out alive or not. "Maddox..."

Maddox rocks back on his heels while grimacing, but we both know he can't stand back and chance her ending up dead. "Fuck. I swear to god if you're not careful as hell... I'm going to be pissed."

"Okay, I promise," I say as I quietly start heading toward the back of the building where the pallets and other things are stacked. The whole place is dark, the only light coming from a streetlight placed near the entrance. Maddox takes the lead as Keaton follows after us, surprisingly without complaint.

As we near the gate, Natalie appears in front of me. "I don't see the woman, but I just saw a man walking away from a red car."

"That's the car," I say.

"Okay. This way," she says as she slips through the fence.

"Natalie knows where the car is," I whisper.

"Okay," Maddox says as he reaches the gate that'd been left unlocked. He pushes it slowly open, but the metal groans as it swings inward. Maddox takes his gun out, holding it tightly as he looks to me.

This place is absolutely trashed. It doesn't seem like there's any rhyme or reason to where the junk is piled up. It looks more like a hoarder's junkyard than a legit woodshop. But Natalie moves with a purpose as she weaves her way through the piles of junk, and I point each step out to them so Maddox can remain in the lead.

My heart is pounding as I move with him, eager to find Linda and get out of here. Natalie hesitates as she looks right and left. "I went through the pallets. Let me look to see which way is quickest," she says before slipping through a tower of pallets.

Maddox glances back at me so I hold a finger up a moment before Natalie returns and yells. "Look out!"

I turn quickly and shove Maddox to the side as a man comes barreling out from where he'd hidden behind a metal container. He has a sledgehammer in his hands that he slams into the place where we'd just stood, pushing Maddox and me apart.

"Police! Drop the weapon and get on the ground," Maddox yells as the man drops his weapon, swings around and grabs onto me, wrapping an arm around my chest and setting a box cutter against my throat where the cold metal rests against my skin.

"Stay where you are or I'll kill him," the man, who's apparently Dave, says.

Maddox freezes and I'm well aware that I'm going to get a stern talking-to and put in time-out when Maddox gets hold of me. I'll probably never be allowed out into the wild again.

"Drop the gun," Dave says as the blade bites into my throat. Maddox doesn't hesitate. He drops the gun and slides it away from him, but Keaton takes a moment to think before following suit.

"Stay there. Don't move," Dave yells as he starts dragging me back.

I don't know what to do with my feet. Do I follow him? Do I fight against him? I catch Maddox's eyes and can see the pure fear bubbling there that keeps me from feeling reassured.

The man drags me around the corner, pulling me after him as his arm holds me tightly. I feel like he's crushing me as the ghosts around me explode into a panic.

That's not good.

That's not good at all.

Ghosts seem to have a knack for knowing when things aren't going to end well, and right now... right now, they don't seem to think this is going to end well.

As we twist around the corner, I hear something groan then splinter, making me look up. It takes me a moment to realize that the tower of pallets that is hiding Maddox from my view has begun to teeter and tip. Dave seems to notice it just as I do, and he jerks away as I push backward into him as hard as I can to keep him from slitting my throat. As our bodies slam into each other, I'm shoved back since his focus is off me and onto saving his own ass, which he sadly manages to do as he dives out of the way.

One of the falling pallets slams into my back, throwing me down onto my hands and knees, but putting a good gap between me and Dave. I leap up to my feet, but before I can take a single step, he catches my ankle. I twist and kick him in the face and then just run. The panicked ghosts wrap around me, pulling me forward but making me blind to what's ahead. At first, I try to push away from them before realizing that if anyone knows how to get me out of here, it'd be beings that can walk through walls. They draw me into a building barely lit by an entryway light. It's just enough that I can see the woman who must be Linda lying on the ground, body huddled, head tucked.

I lunge for her, knowing that she has to be alive if her ghost isn't hovering above her. I shake her desperately as I roll her onto her stomach and grab for the rope binding her legs. It's like I don't even know how to untie a knot anymore as my fingers feel like they're too big to wield. The door slams open, the loud noise making the woman stir. I drop my hold on the knot, grab the woman by her shirt, and haul her back as the man fills the doorway.

Linda groans as her head tips up, and I feel tension fill her body. "No, no, please. Dave, please," she begs.

I can see the knife in the man's hands, blood running from his face as he takes a step toward us. Where the hell do we go? The rest of the building is dark, but I could pull her into it. The issue is that he knows the area and I don't. He takes a step forward, his eyes fixated on the woman, and that's the moment he goes down.

He slams down to the ground on his knees as Maddox drives him into it, an arm around his throat. The man swings back with the knife, trying to catch Maddox in the side with it, but Maddox grabs his arm with the one that's not tucked around his throat and shoves his arm up. He twists the man's arm in a way that forces him to drop the weapon while Maddox pushes him onto the ground, knee pressed firmly against his back. The grip around Dave's neck loosens as Maddox twists the man's arm up while Keaton moves in with his gun trained on the man.

I can hear noise in the distance as Maddox talks to Dave, but I can't hear him over the ghosts stumbling around me, grabbing for me, touching me, stroking my face. They're pleased I'm not dead

but giving me a little space would also be nice.

Linda sinks into my arms, reminding me she's still bound, so I set to work on freeing her feet as more people move into the room. They handcuff Dave and haul him out before rushing in to help the woman.

As Maddox returns to the room I'm in, I do everything I can not to look at him. I can't look at him. Oh fuck... he's going to kill me.

My eyes flick up and catch onto his as they bore into me.

He's pissed.

He's so pissed.

How long has he just been staring at me? This is it. He's never going to let me help him again. I'm going to have to beg and plead for him to let me ever leave the house again.

He walks up to me as I meekly give him a smile like "Hey, I'm fine. Forget any of that happened."

Maddox grabs my wrist and hauls me up to my feet before putting a hand on both shoulders and shaking me.

Yep, going just the way I predicted. Next will be the grave look, the words so low I can barely hear them, yet they're ten times scarier than if he yelled.

"Hiro..." he starts, voice low.

Yep... we're headed for disaster. First-class ticket ride straight to it.

"I... would just like to state that I'm one hundred percent alive and well and—" I start, but he's having none of it. His eyes are now going wide, like he can't believe I'd bother trying to save my ass.

He swipes his finger over my cheek, coming back with blood. "Hiro..."

"A little bit of missing blood never hurt anyone. I am alive and well and with a little less blood than I usually have, but you love me, and you love how helpful I am, and all my amazing ideas, and keep in mind that I did not, in fact, run off. I just simply... ran from the guy trying to play catch with me."

"Trying to murder you," he grumbles.

I give him a super-sweet smile that doesn't help in the slightest and actually makes his scowl worsen.

But he does wrap me up in his arms and draws me in close, squeezing me so tightly I feel like death is imminent, though it's clear I'd die loved. "For fuck's sake, stop trying to kill me like this," he grumbles. "I just don't think I can do this."

"Thank you," Linda says, interrupting my love-filled abuse.

I glance over at her while Maddox continues squeezing the life out of me.

"Thank you so much for saving my life. Thank you," she says as tears stream down her cheeks. "Thank you."

"Of course," I say while Maddox just gives her a nod.

As she's led away, I look up at Maddox and smile. "See?"

"No."

"Don't be so stubborn."

"I'm the least stubborn man you've ever met. Now come on," he says as he drags me away like if he crushes me with his hug long enough, I'll never run into danger again.

Honestly, I'm just happy we were able to save her before her daughter had to grow up without a mom. I'm well aware what that's like and am glad I'm able to save her from that.

CHAPTER THREE



MADDOX

I stare down at Hiro's sleeping face. He's going to kill me from worry one of these days, and yet, I still listen to him every time he jumps up with one of his wild and crazy ideas.

His bare shoulder is showing, so I grab the blanket and tug it up a little farther. Stella, who is lying on the blanket, gives me a look of pure disgust before immediately falling back to sleep.

I don't know if it's my job or if it's what I'd gone through with losing Reggie, but the fear that I'll lose him makes it hard to even stay focused during times like last night. It's not unreasonable of me to want to keep him safe, but it leaves me feeling stuck in this constant tug-of-war between letting him help because he has invaluable information no one else could ever give me and wanting to keep him away because I need him to stay safe.

It feels never-ending, but I can't stop.

"Reggie says you're staring at me with so much concentration he's positive you're constipated," Hiro mumbles without bothering to open his eyes.

I flip off Reggie. I don't know where he is, so I just wave my middle finger around to make sure he's well aware that he doesn't need to be in the room with us, harassing us.

"Reggie said you're not as scary as you think you are," Hiro says.

"I wish there was a way to fuck up a ghost," I decide.

Hiro grins before opening his dark eyes. His black hair is sticking up, so I reach out and push it back, but it refuses to listen. It always does, but I'll never stop trying to fix it each morning, especially when I get a warm smile from Hiro in return. "Reggie said you can use my hand to spank him."

"Never mind," I grumble.

"Are you still mad at me?"

"I'm not mad at you. I was never mad at you. I was... frustrated," I say as I reach out and catch his wrist before pulling him in close.

"Reggie says we need to leave room for Jesus."

"Tell Reggie you're going to get rid of his ghost cat if he doesn't fuck off," I grumble, which just makes Hiro grin wider before tucking his naked body against mine. I love the way he feels against me,

body pressed in tight.

I slide a hand over his side before drawing my fingers up and down his back. He lets out a murmur of pleasure before closing his eyes again.

“Did you knock over those stacked pallets?” I ask, thinking back on last night.

“No, I think the ghosts did.”

“Were ghosts always so strong around you?” I ask as I notice a bruise on his back that I’m careful of as I draw my fingers over him.

“No... it seems like whenever I’m put in life-or-death situations, they find this inner strength or something. As long as none of them are malevolent, it’s alright. They seem to just want to help, you know?” he says.

But that’s the thing. What if his ability is changing? What if he’s giving them more and more power, and what if he can’t stop the next one who turns out like Millie? I shudder as I think about how close the angry ghost came to killing both of us.

“You’re getting your fret face on,” Hiro says as he pokes my eyebrows.

“I don’t have a... a *fret* face.”

Hiro looks extremely skeptical. “You’re literally wearing your fret face right now. You also have a scowl face, a grumble face, an anger face, and an ‘I’m gonna fuck you up so hard you’re gonna cry mommy when I’m done with you’ face.”

“Are they calling *me* mommy or are they calling *for* their mommy in this situation?” I ask.

“Both.”

“Impressive. I didn’t know I had such a wide range of emotions.”

“Right? What do you think about a movie? We could relax, go watch a movie, have sex, go out for dinner, you tell me I’m the greatest detective in the world, you know, that kind of thing?” Hiro suggests.

“Sounds fun. I could use some fun.”

“See, right now you have your interest piqued face on.”

I kiss his forehead. “Fantastic. My question is, do we have to wait until after the movie to have sex?”

“Nope. We only have to wait for Reggie and Natalie to leave the room and my good god, I’m not giving you two a ‘show.’ Yes, Reggie, I know you want to be the bread of the meat sandwich and yes, Natalie, I’m well aware you want to watch the meat sandwich, but no.”

“I’m going to go brush my teeth and pee and let you deal with them.”

“Natalie says she’s coming to watch you pee.”

“Wow... thrilling way to start off the morning. I’ll make sure to give her a show,” I say as I wander off to the bathroom while wondering how my world turned out so crazy, and why I love it so damn much... and whether Natalie is really watching me pee or not.



“Why are characters in movies such fucking idiots?” I ask as Hiro and I walk out of the movie theater. “I mean, *really*? We’re going to head *toward* the creepy noise, just in case it’s the dog?”

Hiro shrugs, and I already don’t like where this is going. “I’d totally run right into the creepy noise to save my pet,” he admits.

“Dear god, I just can’t with you.”

He's laughing now. "You'd totally run right to a killer to save your cats."

I grumble at him so he's well aware that I'm not an *idiot*... I mean, my chances of taking down the killer would be decent, so I'd probably go save them, but it's not like I'm weaponless with no fighting experience. I would assess the threat level and their abilities first before plunging in.

Hiro is grinning like a maniac, so very proud he's right. "You're totally thinking about how you're going to kung fu your way to your cats."

"No, I would use my gun to threaten them. If they won't stand down, I'd then engage and... no. I'm not falling into this dumb idea," I declare.

Hiro's clearly not done with me. "You already have. You have it all planned out. There are two guys, who are you going to attack first?"

"Who is holding my cats?"

"The one on the left. He's got them in a kitty chokehold."

"Just his hands or does he have a weapon too?" I ask.

"Butter knife."

"Why a butter knife?"

"He was buttering his toast before you came to collect your cats," Hiro says.

"Why is this getting ridiculous?"

"It's not!"

"What's the other guy have?"

"SMG."

"What? So two guys decided to steal my cats. One is juggling two cats and a butter knife and the other has an SMG?"

"Yeah, don't look at me like that. I'm not the one who stole your cats!" Hiro says with a grin.

"What do I have?"

"A paddle and a whip."

"Did I just come from a BDSM party?"

"Nope, just out of my closet," Hiro says, completely deadpan.

"You're absolutely ridiculous."

"Thank you."

"Are you watching?"

"I am."

"Okay, so the first thing I'd do is take my shirt off," I say.

"Ooh, I like where this is going."

"Then I'd wrap it around your head and toss you out of the situation so you're safe."

"I like this less," Hiro says.

"Of course you do."

He sighs, like this is of actual concern. "Now you're just showing off your sexy body for others to see. They'd probably just hand the cats over for a chance to stroke your flesh."

"I'm pretty sure that's not going to happen. You're the only one with that strange fetish."

"Strange? You find me wanting to stroke you *strange*?"

"Only when you're mumbling some type of curse while doing it."

He seems to realize I'm talking about the other day. "Oh my god, I wasn't *mumbling*, I was trying to tell Natalie to keep her greedy little fingers off your chest because it's mine."

"I feel like I'd be horrified if I knew what your imaginary friends did to me on a daily basis," I say thoughtfully. "Like do they really watch me pee?"

“That’s usually just talk but I’ve caught this ghost watching you shower before. It’s this lady in her eighties who just sat on the edge of the tub with her feet kicked up and a bucket of fish sticks on her lap.”

I don’t even know what to say to that. A part of me wants to feel a little paranoid, but another part reminds me that life hasn’t changed at all. And hell, if I was dead, I’d try to find entertainment where I could.

“You really can’t blame them. You’re exciting,” Hiro says. “You’re good-looking, you have a unique job. But I get to tell them you’re all mine.”

Hiro hooks his arm with mine and pulls me in close as we walk toward his bookstore that we’re slipping into to check out something his employee is having issues with.

“Did you have to tell her off?” I ask.

“Nah, she saw Reggie, got a disgusted look on her face and disappeared.”

“Sounds about right,” I say as I pull his arm free of where it’s hooked in mine before sliding my fingers down between his and giving his hand a squeeze. It instantly makes him smile every time I do it.

When we reach the bookstore that Hiro owns, we head inside. Barry, the guy who runs the place when Hiro’s not able to, is reorganizing a shelf. He’s a big guy who spent most of his adult life in the army but is now taking college classes while working here part time. I think he might be more than part time when Hiro’s involved in a case with me, but he doesn’t seem to mind.

“Hey,” Barry says as he sets down the books he’d just pulled out.

“Hey,” Hiro says before turning to me. “While I help Barry, do you think you could call that guy from yesterday? Just to make sure nothing happened?”

“The guy from the woods?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“Sure,” I say as I step outside to make the call since there are customers inside.

I dial the number the man had given us and listen for a few moments before he picks up the call.

“Hello?”

“Is this Jude?” I ask.

“It is.”

“Hey, it’s Detective Booker. I just wanted to make sure nothing ever came up,” I say.

“Nah, nothing at all. My guess is it was some kids goofing around. Thanks for the concern, though.”

“Of course,” I say.

“It’s nice to know I have someone there if I need it! You have a good day, Detective,” he says.

“You too.”

Glad Hiro’s premonition was off (or his ghost senses), I head inside to see if they need help since we have an hour to kill before our reservation at a restaurant. When I walk inside, I see Barry looking at Hiro with something close to horror on his face.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, unsure if this is a “sorry I bumped into you” or “there’s a herd of ghosts coming this way to tell me about a fresh new body.”

Barry looks to me. “Hiro wants to replace all the shelving. Do you know how much work that’d be?” he asks.

Hiro just shrugs. “It’ll look so nice!”

This is definitely more the speed of things I want Hiro involved in. No more throwing him into danger—just keep him nice and safe right here. He might not be happy about it, but honestly... I just

need him safe.

CHAPTER FOUR



HIRO

When Maddox shows up at the bookstore Monday morning, I'm honestly surprised. I thought after the woodshop incident, I wouldn't be allowed anywhere near a crime scene for at least a week.

I leave Barry to it and head outside to meet Maddox, who is acting strange. I mean, obviously he isn't overly cheery every time we head off to a crime scene, but he's usually in business mode. I guess... after years of seeing death, it just becomes a part of life after a while, and I sadly understand that all too well.

It doesn't mean the deaths are easy. It doesn't mean they're meaningless, it just means that it's another day.

"What's... going on?" I ask as I slowly get into the car. I'm ghost free at the moment, which somehow makes it feel even drabber. It's a rare day when I miss Reggie's and Natalie's harassment.

"So... the location of the crime scene... is the farmhouse that Jude lives at," Maddox says. "The man from the woods."

His words settle in as dread fills me. "The man... the ghosts told me was going to die..." I realize. "But you talked to him after, right?"

"I did."

"Fuck... do you think we scared the killer off that first night and they just came back?" I ask.

"I don't know. It's a possibility," Maddox says. "Nothing seemed amiss. We checked the area."

"I should have done something else," I say, not sure what that would be but feeling like I could have stopped it. We should have told someone higher up and put them on alert or something... but what proof did I have? And would they have even believed me? "It's definitely the guy? Jude?"

"That's the name I've been given. I haven't been there yet," Maddox says as he drives, hands tight on the steering wheel.

"Fuck. He was a nice guy too. Dammit..."

Maddox reaches over and squeezes my leg. "You couldn't have done anything else, Hiro. I promise you. I understand how... frustrating this is. But sometimes things just happen, and it's aggravating and discouraging, but just know you tried."

I nod, but I can't help but feel like there's something more that I should have done.

“Do you want to wait in the car while I go in?” he asks.

“No! I... I want to see if I can get his ghost to talk to me,” I say, making sure I put on an expression that shows that I’m more than capable of being relied on. That I can do this just fine and won’t let my own feelings get in the way. If I couldn’t help Jude in life, then I’m going to help him in death.

When we pull up to the farmhouse, we drive past the ATVs we’d ridden just the other night, and I can’t help but wonder if Maddox has told them about our interaction with the man.

“Did you... tell them we were here a few days ago?” I ask.

“Not yet, but I will. We did nothing wrong, so there’s nothing to hide. It might even help since we know he didn’t die before Saturday afternoon when I called him.”

I get out of the car and follow him over to where people are already hard at work. It’s at least not in the middle of the city where they have to worry as much about nosy neighbors trying to get involved, but they still have the area secured.

Maddox just nods at the guy manning the scene as he hurries on past. They’re clearly used to me tagging along at this point.

The moment Mick, a tech, sees Maddox barreling into the thick of it, he hurries over. “Mornin’.”

“Morning,” Maddox says. “What I know so far is that Jude, the deceased, had called for a repairman to come out to fix something a week or two ago. When the repairman showed up this morning, no one answered the door, so he proceeded to call the number he’d been given. When he heard the phone ringing from inside the house, he looked through the window where he noticed what he thought was blood. Am I missing anything?”

“Right, the first officers on scene got into the house and found the body,” Mick says as he follows us. Once geared up, we head into the house together. It seems like Mick just arrived here as well as he follows Maddox toward the noise of people talking in the distance.

When we reach the living room, my eyes are immediately drawn to the body lying on the floor. Around him are candles placed here and there. None of them are still burning, but their wax has melted down into a puddle on their trays. The man’s throat has been slit and blood has pooled out, coating his shirt and the floor where he’d fallen. There’s a smell to the room that makes me want to quickly back away, but I steel myself and try not to focus on it.

But what I notice more than anything isn’t the horror of the scene...

It’s that I don’t know the man who is lying there.

I’ve never seen him in my life.

“Do we have an ID on him?” Maddox asks, clearly realizing the same thing.

A woman turns to us and holds out a tablet before Maddox. “ID matches his photo,” she says.

“Thanks, Lexi,” he says as he takes the tablet from her and zooms in on the picture.

I lean in to get a better look as well and see that the image on screen is definitely the same man. But if that’s Jude... then who the hell did we talk to the other night? “This... isn’t the guy we met.”

“No, and I can tell you that this body has been here for a while.”

“Do you think he died the day... the day the ghosts alerted me?” I ask, trying to wrap my head around this.

“We’ll get a better idea from an autopsy, but my guess is he’s been dead at least a week.”

“So... before we ever got here Friday night.”

“Well before.”

“But the guy... we met... was *he* the killer?” I ask, unsure that I even want to think about that. We could have just been interacting with a murderer and had no idea of it. “Were we talking with the

killer the whole time?”

“He knew the trails well. He knew... everything about the area. There was no hesitation for the keys to the ATVs or the key for the truck. Lexi, could you run the license plate on the truck out there? I want to double-check ownership.”

“Of course,” she says.

“What’s going on?” Mick asks curiously.

“When we passed this place Friday evening, we noted that something was amiss and came to check it out. We met a man in the woods claiming to be Jude, the owner. He took us around the property to make sure nothing was wrong, even talked to me the next day to tell me nothing had happened. And yet... this man is not the man we talked to,” Maddox says.

Mick’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “Well, shit. If that person’s the killer... you know what they look like,” he realizes.

Maddox slowly nods, but it’s clear he’s thinking about it deeper than that. “Right... but why interact with us? Why give me his number?”

“Maybe he was playing with us?” I ask. He didn’t seem like it, but I know murderers can get their kicks in different ways.

“Could be... but that’s pretty damn risky. He could have just as easily told me a different name, said he lived at a nearby house, or given me a fake number. But he didn’t... he gave me everything as if he was this man. Also, he knew the area. He could have just learned it in the past week or he could have been acquainted with Jude in some way. Let me give them an idea of what the man looked like while you do your thing, Hiro.”

“Okay,” I say as I look around the room, but I’m not greeted with the ghost of Jude *anywhere*. If it *has* been a week, he might not still be grieving, depending on his personality, but he’d likely still be around here. Sometimes ghosts move on immediately, but those are generally people who die peacefully. Not a victim of a vicious murder.

Since Maddox is gone, I turn to Mick. “Am I allowed to wander the house?”

“Yeah, just don’t move or touch anything. If you see anything that looks out of place, tell us, don’t touch it.”

“Got it,” I say as I leave the room the body is in and head for the kitchen. I feel out of place wandering around the busy crime scene where half of the people stare at me oddly and the other half ignore me.

When I notice Keaton, I quickly do a one-eighty, but it’s too late, he’s seen me.

He barrels over to me, probably pleased to see that I’m Maddox-less and easier to intimidate. What he doesn’t know is that I’ve been intimidated and annoyed by multiple ghosts for my entire life and actually take quite a bit to intimidate.

“What are you doing here?” he asks.

“Looking to steal something, you know? Add to my collection.”

He stares at me, so I raise an eyebrow. “You’re not funny,” he declares.

“Thanks,” I say before scurrying up the stairs. When Keaton follows, I’m less than pleased. And even *less* pleased when Reggie pops up in front of me.

“There’s someone following you who looks like they want to murder you. Are you in the process of being murdered? The thing is... if you *do* get murdered and you become a ghost... we can be body explorers. It’s like lovers without the icky lovers part. Just where we explore and sex each other all up.”

I glare at him. “Dear god, no.”

“What’s that?” Keaton asks.

I give him an “I’m so normal, don’t mind me” smile. “Nothing.”

“God, he’s a grump. I can feel some unresolved sexual tension between you two,” Reggie declares.

What the absolute fuck? “Don’t just make this some stupid scenario to feed your fetishes,” I hiss under my breath, positive I can’t let Reggie get away with that one.

“Why are you talking about fetishes?” Keaton asks.

“Why do you have such good hearing?” I ask before turning back to Reggie. “I’m looking for a ghost.”

“Well, you found one,” he says.

“A different one. A better one.”

“There is no better one.”

“One that’s not you.”

“Oh, this way,” he says as he wanders over to a hatch leading up to an attic like they have in horror movies. At this point, I’m positive I’m going to be the dumb person Maddox was talking about after the movie if I go climbing up there. But when Reggie floats up through the floor, I have no option but to go up.

The stairs leading up are already pulled down, probably from when they did their initial sweep of the property, but I’m still not loving the idea of going up there, even as Keaton watches me like a hawk. At least if I’m murdered, he’ll have a front-row seat to it and can tell Maddox exactly who did it. Just as I place my foot on the first step, someone shouts for Keaton and, much to my devastation, he’s dragged off, leaving me to explore alone.

It also means that I’m going into the murder attic alone.

When I climb up the stairs, I’m guessing there’s going to be either gobs of spiderwebs with boxes of junk or rows of dead bodies.

That’s just... the kind of thing I’ve learned to expect.

So when I poke my head up and find that it’s a completely finished attic with carpet and legit walls not made out of the bodies of his past victims, I find myself surprised. I mean, it doesn’t mean there isn’t anything creepy up here, but if there is, the killer is very clean and keeps the blood off the carpet.

In the corner of the room is a rocker that faces the window. From here, I can’t see who is in it, but I see it moving just a little.

If Reggie wasn’t standing before it, I’d have been positive it was the killer and run off for Maddox. Instead, I climb the rest of the way up the steps before making my way over to the rocker.

“Will you get your ass out of the way?” the ghost says from her rocking chair.

“No,” Reggie says simply.

“You’re blocking my view.”

“With an even better view,” he says as he waves a hand over his body before doing a turn, in case she’s confused or even disappointed because she didn’t get a view of his ass or something.

“Reggie,” I say, making him look over at me and causing the woman to jump. She turns to look at me, narrows her eyes, scrutinizes me from head to foot, and then goes back to staring.

“Hi, I’m Hiro,” I say.

She looks around herself, then goes back to scrutinizing me. Then she looks up, down, and all around before her eyes lock on to me again.

“Yes, I can see you.”

"You're kind of weird for being dead," she says.

"Oh, I'm... not dead," I say. "I can talk to ghosts."

"So... you *chose* for your hair to look like that today?"

What the absolute hell? Of course this is the sass I'm going to get.

"I told you your hair was sticking up," Reggie unhelpfully adds.

I try to nonchalantly smooth my hair down. "*Anyway*," I say as I look around the small area padded with pillows and shelves stacked with books. "So... do you know where the ghost is of the man who died?"

"My husband," she says matter-of-factly as she kicks at Reggie until he moves out of the way while waving two middle fingers at her.

"I'm... so sorry. I didn't realize," I say.

"Thanks."

Even Reggie must feel bad enough that he puts his middle fingers away and lets her go back to staring out the window.

"Do you know where his ghost is at?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "No. I was gone for a few days—I get bored of sitting here—so I went out to visit my daughter Everly for a bit, and when I came back he was already dead... he left a note, though," she says as she points toward a small writing desk tucked against the sloping wall. I walk over to it and lean in to see the note without touching it. The handwriting is atrociously sloppy, but I manage to pick through it.

Everly,

Don't be upset. I'm finally going home to see your mother again. I wasn't going to make it long anyway. This was for the best.

All my love,

Dad

"Do you... know what this means?" I ask.

She leans back in the chair, hands tightening on the wooden armrests. "Not a goddamn clue. That man was always such an idiot. He had late-stage cancer... doctor gave him three months, so maybe he just wanted to end it."

The image from the crime scene hits me and I grimace, wishing I hadn't recalled it. "Yeah, but... that's not a suicide."

"No, it sure wasn't. Maybe he wanted to go out in style. Hired some... contract killer or something. He was always an eccentric man," she says.

"Do you think he actually wrote this or do you think someone else did?" I ask.

"I'd recognize that godawful handwriting anywhere. It always took a cipher to read much of what he wrote."

I hear a noise behind me and see Maddox walking up the stairs.

"Leave it to you to find the attic. I'm not even surprised," Maddox says as he looks around.

"Hey."

"Find Jude?" he asks.

"No, I found his wife, though. I didn't catch your name?" I ask the woman.

"Meg."

“Meg, this is Detective Maddox Booker. Maddox and I are going to do everything we can to find who killed your husband.”

“Thank you,” she says.

I fill Maddox in on everything I’ve learned so far as he listens carefully while his eyes slowly take in every bit of the room. “Did you describe the man you met to her? Or ask her if there’s anyone around here who would be familiar with the property?”

The woman shakes her head, even though she’s aware Maddox can’t see her. “Our daughter would be the only one around here. Jude wasn’t super social but had a few friends who’d come by for a game of cards or help him out.”

“Any around forty?” I ask.

“Our daughter Everly’s husband would be the only one.”

“Dark brown hair, cut short—”

“No, he has red hair.”

“She said her daughter’s husband has red hair so that wouldn’t be him,” I say to Maddox.

“Okay. We’re going to get a sketch done of the man we ran into. Will you be around for us to talk to later?” Maddox asks.

“Yeah, I quite like my little reading nook he made me. I don’t know that I like being in this house much anymore, though... I might go back to my daughter’s.” She looks uneasy, and I don’t blame her. Her only sanctuary is tainted by the image of her dead husband.

“Can you give me an address?” I ask.

“You’re going to figure out who killed him?” she asks.

“Yes, I also want to find his ghost.”

“I do too. The only reason I’ve waited at this house for so long... but he never showed.”

“That’s interesting. He’s not at your daughter’s?”

“No.”

“We’ll find him,” I assure her.

“What does this note mean? That he’s going home? Is this not his home?” Maddox asks.

She gives a half-hearted shrug. “In a way it’s not. It’s his father’s place. Jude never wanted to take over the family farm, he wanted to stay living where I was raised. We were happiest back at my hometown, but his father got sick and needed help, so we moved here to help him. Ended up just... never finding a way back, you know? But he knew I missed that place. Our daughter Everly lives there. So maybe he did go back. Maybe he’s looking for me there. Typical idiot thinking I left instead of hanging around to be with him,” she says, so I retell it all to Maddox.

After we ask her a few more questions, I head down the stairs with Maddox. “What I just don’t get is how his ghost moved on so quickly. They don’t just move on from vicious deaths like this,” I say.

“Unless what the wife is saying is true? That maybe he wanted an out?” Maddox glances over at me, but I’m not sure if I believe that or not.

“But an out like that?” I ask. “*Would* that give him peace? Would that allow him to move on?”

“I think we should swing by the daughter’s and have a talk with her. Maybe she knows something. Possibly someone he’s been around or something he might have said. I’ll give her a call later to set something up if she’s willing.” He pulls out his phone. “Did we get a last name on her? Never mind, I have it here...”

Maddox stills as he stares at his phone.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

He glances up at me and shakes his head. “Nothing. Just surprised what town it is. Village, actually. Pretty small area.”

“Have history there?”

He stares at his phone like he’s seeing something worse than what he’d seen downstairs. “Could say something like that,” he says, but before I can ask what the history is, someone interrupts us to ask for Maddox’s opinion.

CHAPTER FIVE



HIRO

Helmsdale Village is over an hour from us, so we set out Wednesday morning at eight. Jude's daughter Everly had explained that she'd be in Clinton anyway if we wanted her to come to the station, but Maddox had assured her that it'd be best to talk to her someplace she felt safe.

Basically, we needed an excuse to get into the house to see if Jude is there and show the sketch to Meg, his wife, if her ghost is also there.

Hopefully Meg or Jude immediately shows because it's not like we can wander around Everly's house hunting for her father's or mother's ghosts. I mean, I suppose I could if I asked her to give me a tour of her house including the basement, the attic, and all closets. At that point, I'm pretty sure she'd be so confused she'd request we leave quickly, and I wouldn't even blame her.

After the detectives' initial search of Jude's house, it was apparent that someone had been living there for days after Jude had been killed. That someone was likely the man we ran into in the woods. And until we learn exactly why this man was posing as Jude, we need to keep hunting for information.

"What are you thinking about? You're unusually quiet," Maddox says as he drives.

"How this 'legal' stuff is irritating. Like in movies they just barge in and ransack the house and then leave and no one cares."

"I care," Maddox says. "Because it's *stupid* and illegal."

"Do you find enjoyment in movies? Or just rage when they're done incorrectly?" I ask curiously.

"Both at the same time."

"I wanna do both of you at the same time too," Reggie says as he pops into the back seat.

"And I wanna watch," Natalie says, appearing beside him.

"Yay, the back seat just turned into a shitshow," I declare so Maddox can be aware of my pain.

"A... shit... show?" Reggie asks, highly offended by my descriptor.

"I take it Reggie is here?" Maddox asks.

"He sure is," I say. "So is Natalie. They've become far too close lately. It disgusts me."

"Good," Natalie says as she strokes the side of my face while Reggie strokes the other. It's very strange and terrifying, and I decide that I never want to be touched by either of them again and try to push their hands away.

“Maddox, they’re creeping me out,” I say.

“What are they doing?”

“Petting me.”

“Could be worse,” he decides instead of cussing them out like I was hoping for.

That’s when Reggie quickly smashes my head out of the way before leaning into the front seat. It takes me a moment to realize he’s looking at the city sign.

“What are you doing here?” he asks.

“This is where the daughter of the guy who was killed lives. We’re hoping to find his ghost. Do you think you could help?” I ask.

“Huh...” he says as he looks around like he’s mystified by the area. When I glance over at Maddox, I notice his hands are tight on the steering wheel, making me realize that I’m missing something. That reminds me that Maddox seemed to have had a strange reaction when he heard the name of the place yesterday as well. Do he and Reggie have a tie to this place?

I glance back at Natalie who gives me a shrug, clearly as lost as I am.

My phone starts barking out directions, so I turn my attention back to it, planning on grilling Maddox as soon as we have a moment alone, or at least without Reggie. Although, hell... maybe Reggie would be the better one to ask. “Turn here,” I say, but Maddox flies right by the turn.

“Or... not,” I toss in.

“Sorry,” Maddox says, but that’s all he offers as he makes a different turn. We head down the one-lane road for a while before hopping back onto the main road that goes right through the center of the village.

It’s a small area with one strip of stores, one restaurant that I can see, and then houses that fill in behind it. We’re through the entire main part of the village in under a minute before Maddox follows the GPS into the driveway of a yellow two-story farmhouse.

I notice Reggie is staring out the back window, just watching the main part of the village, like it’s the most fascinating thing he’s ever come across.

“Reggie, I need you to hunt for the man or his wife,” Maddox says.

Reggie jumps and turns to look at us like he’s surprised to remember he’s in the car with us. “Hunt for a man orgy? Is that what he said?”

“Reggie wants to know if he’s supposed to hunt for a man orgy,” I say.

Maddox sighs. “Yes, that’s one hundred percent what I said,” he says as dryly as possible before getting out of the car. “Come on and help out.”

“Got it, Master Mad Maddox,” Reggie says.

“He’s calling you Master Mad Maddox now,” I say with a grin.

“At least I’m not Rickety Reggie,” Maddox retorts.

“Oh no...” Reggie’s eyes snap to Maddox. “He did not.”

“Hold on... there’s a story here,” I say. “I have to hear this.”

Maddox seems more than pleased to share. “Quick story. Reggie shows up telling me how he’s snagged this rich and sexy man. Shows me these pictures of this insanely attractive man. I tell him he’s being catfished. He’s like ‘Oh hell no. This is real. This guy loves me.’ And so I had to go through and show him all the red flags to prove he’s being catfished. But he’s adamant that he’s not being catfished and goes on about how this guy—who probably plans to murder him—is his one true love, leaving me no choice but to look into the guy. I pull some strings and get the techs at the department to help me while Reggie is just seeing hearts everywhere. After a day, we find this guy. And, shockingly, Reggie was right. He wasn’t going to murder him and bathe in his blood because the

guy was in his nineties and would have broken a hip just trying to catch Reggie. He just wanted to snag himself a ‘young’un’ to dance for him and rub lube all over his rickety body.”

Reggie is glaring at Maddox to the point that I wonder if Maddox can sense it even without the ability to see ghosts. “How *dare* you tarnish my legacy?”

I make sure to repeat that to Maddox who doesn’t seem concerned at all. He actually appears to be enjoying every moment of it, and I find myself glad the story seems to have distracted both of them.

“Did you guys meet him?” I ask curiously.

“Of course. Reggie even took him out on a date but said he was so rickety he was scared he was going to break him just by looking at him. You *know* he took him out on that date in an attempt to try to save himself after he was embarrassed horribly,” Maddox says. He’s so pleased that I’ll have to keep in mind to never lose a bet with him.

“I had a wonderful time with... Jerr... Geor... him,” Reggie says. “So much better than anything Maddox ever did for me,” he adds as he gets out of the car, probably before Maddox can tell any more stories about him.

“Reggie’s wandering off so he doesn’t have to deal with you talking about him anymore,” I tell Maddox.

“He loves it when people talk about him,” Maddox says with a grin.

“Just when it paints him in a good light.”

We get out of the car and head up to the front door that Reggie is passing through. Maddox knocks on the door, but we don’t have to wait long before it swings open.

A woman in her early forties looks out at us with a smile. “You must be Detective Booker. I’m Everly.”

“Please call me Maddox, and this is my partner Hiro Moore. Thank you for agreeing to talk to us.”

“Of course. Anything to help. Please come in,” she says as she steps back so we can enter. We follow her inside the warm home that cuts away the crisp outside air. I don’t see any ghosts in the room besides Reggie who is snooping through literally everything. It’s probably a good thing he can’t manipulate much because I can only imagine the way he’d be breaking everything everywhere I go. He’d be like a cat, pushing things off while staring me in the eyes.

“I bet she has a sex dungeon,” Reggie declares as he drops down into the basement, immediately forgetting his job was to look for Jude and his wife... unless he thinks the couple is getting it on in the sex dungeon.

“Can I get you anything?” Everly asks a moment before a man walks in.

“We’re good, thank you,” Maddox says.

“This is my husband, Oscar. Oscar, this is Maddox and Hiro.”

Oscar steps forward and shakes each of our hands before giving us a nod. “Thanks for your work.”

“Of course.”

Maddox sits down. “Do you mind if I record this?”

“Not at all,” she says. As he sets it up, I notice he glances around the room before picking up on something in the corner.

“You have children?” he asks.

Everly nods. “We do! We adopted two little girls. They’re just...” She shakes her head with a soft smile on her face. “Just... the light in my life, you know? We tried for years and finally we just realized if we were doing this, we’d need to adopt. It’s just... so hard Dad isn’t going to get to see his

grandchildren grow up...”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.”

“We’re going to do everything we can to figure out what happened to your father. Over the weekend, Hiro and I actually stopped at the woods that surround your father’s house because we thought we saw something of concern. We stumbled on a guy who was lying in the woods and who claimed to be your father. He was able to show us around the property, like he knew it quite well, and we’ve since found out that he was definitely not Jude. I have a sketch here of him. Do you think you could tell me if you’ve seen anyone like him before?” Maddox asks.

He hands the picture to her, and she looks over it before passing it to Oscar.

She shakes her head. “No... I don’t even know anyone around that age that my father would know... you think he’s the killer?” she asks as she glances back at the drawing her husband is staring at.

Oscar shakes his head as he hands the picture back.

“We’re looking into that possibility now. But your father hadn’t mentioned anyone he’d been talking to, seeing, anything like that?” Maddox asks.

Everly thinks for a moment before looking at her husband who shakes his head again.

“No, most of his friends are people he’s known for years and are all around his age. He has a few friends here too, but none that aren’t our friends,” she says.

“Okay. And your father was suffering from cancer?”

“He was... we were trying really hard to get him to move here. He only had a few months left, and we just... I couldn’t stand him being so far away, but he was ridiculously attached to that house for some reason. It’s...” She takes a deep breath. “It’s just... sorry. I was told about the note he left behind. Can I see that?”

That contradicts what Meg said about him wanting to go home. Odd...

“I have a picture of it, I can show you,” Maddox says before handing it over.

Oscar leans in before glancing up at Maddox. “So do you think he could have... arranged this or something?”

I feel awful for her as I watch her read over it. She’s steeling herself but still looks upset as her eyes run over it. Oscar reaches over and squeezes her leg, trying to give her a bit of reassurance.

“It’s a possibility, but so far, we don’t see any large movement of money telling us that he hired someone. Do you know if he had a lot of money hidden in his house?” Maddox says.

Everly takes a deep breath before turning to us. “I’m sure he did. He was very old school like that. I just... I don’t know how much or where he hides it. I just... I don’t think he’d hire someone to do that but... I don’t know. Sometimes I feel like I didn’t know him as well after Mom died. He was always... living in his books and these wild stories, you know?”

“Well, no sex dungeon. What a prude,” Reggie says, like he had his own sex dungeon in life.

“Okay.” Maddox goes through a few more questions before finishing up.

“Before we go, could I use your bathroom?” I ask.

“Of course,” Everly says as she gets up to show me. As we walk, I glance in any open doors, probably looking like a creeper, but I’m not sure what else to do to look for Jude and Meg. Oddly, I see neither as we go, making me wonder where the hell either of them are at. Are they back at the farmhouse, and I’ve just missed them *again*? Once in the bathroom, I turn to Natalie who has just joined me.

“Find anyone?”

She shakes her head. “Not a soul.”

“That’s weird. The wife claimed she’d be here, but maybe she stayed back at the farmhouse.”

Natalie taps her fingers on the counter. “Possibly. Do you think they’re telling the truth?”

I shrug. “I really don’t know. I’m not like Maddox who’s good at reading people. I find myself wanting to see the best in people—besides you and Reggie, who I already know are evil at heart. I’ll ask Maddox once we’re back out to the car.”

I flush the toilet and use the sink just in case anyone’s listening before heading back out to the main room where they’re waiting for me.

Maddox nods at me and we thank them before walking out to the car as my mind wanders. Who the hell was the man we met? And why didn’t the ghosts explain what was going on? Did they know about the body in the house?

When we reach the car, Maddox turns to me. “Well... that didn’t give us too much.”

“Sadly, it didn’t.”

“No ghosts?”

“None at all that I could see.”

“Shit.”

“Since we’re here, we could just cruise around town to see if we notice anything? If we go in a public place, it’s likely I’ll run into a ghost who might have seen him,” I say.

He hesitates as he looks back at the town center.

“Reggie’s not in the car. He’s off looking for a sex dungeon. So... can you tell me what he has to do with this place?” I ask, *knowing* that has to be it.

Maddox hesitates before taking a deep breath. “This is where he died.”

“I was guessing as much. What happened?” I’m glad I waited until Reggie was gone to ask, but it doesn’t make it any easier. And I’m sure it’s not easy for Maddox to tell me.

“Complete accident. It was just... stupid why he was here. He’d been raised by his dad after his mom left him when he was young since she wanted absolutely nothing to do with him. I remember him telling me about the times he tried to reach out to her and she just... ignored him. Pretended like he wasn’t even a part of her life. She’d moved on and had started a new family with two kids she wanted. Then suddenly, out of nowhere, she reaches out because she wants to reconnect after, fuck, twenty-some years? I guess I hold a grudge better than Reggie, but he ended up agreeing to it, much to my annoyance. I told him again and again that she just wanted something from him. People don’t just change, but Reggie still had some hope. I guess maybe I was feeding my own issues with my family into it and not taking his feelings into account.”

Maddox grips the steering wheel, gazing blankly at the house we’re still parked in front of as he continues. “Sadly, it was as much of a shitshow as I predicted. It was like she’d built up some idea of the kind of person he was or would be and when she met him, he wasn’t anywhere near that. Basically, she made it seem like if he wanted to stay in her life, he’d need to change himself so that he’d be the kind of person to let her walk all over him and give her whatever she needed. Just... the whole thing was a fucking mess and I was absolutely pissed. So... he told me he was going to grab something from the diner before heading home... I don’t know... if he didn’t look, I don’t know. A woman hit him with her car. She tried to blame herself because she’d looked away from the road for just a moment to check on her toddler who’d been coughing. She said she looked back to make sure he wasn’t choking, and when she turned her attention back to the road, Reggie was there and she hit him.”

“I’m so sorry.” I don’t know what else to say. I want to say something else... but I don’t know

what.

“Thanks. I regretted not having gone with him, but I was caught up in something at work and just... I wish I’d have gone. It was... rough. For a long time, Reggie was my rock while I dealt with family shit. And then again while Ben and I were estranged. We just... he was who I had. So yeah... being here is a bit... shitty. But it makes me feel better knowing that Reggie’s still with us. Still being a sarcastic asshole and driving you slowly and steadily insane.”

I smile at him, glad I could give him some relief. “He is *fantastic* at that.”

That’s the moment Reggie pops into the front passenger seat, where I’m sitting.

“Speak of the devil,” I say as Reggie settles onto my lap like it’s now his.

“Hold the fucking fuck on. You two were chatting about me? Was it something naughty?” His narrowed eyes flicker between us while looking excited.

“Very naughty. Maddox was telling me all about you giving that old man a handjob.”

Reggie gasps. “I did not! I didn’t even have to touch it. I just looked at it and the guy was like ‘It’s too much! My shriveled sausage can’t take your smoldering stare.’”

I push open the door, grab Reggie, and shove him out before shutting it. “Go, quickly,” I say, which makes Maddox laugh. The people in the house probably think we’re losing our minds, but I’m positive I couldn’t listen to any more of Reggie talking about a shriveled sausage. Reggie just reappears, sitting on Maddox’s lap where he takes to blowing in his ear.

“There’s a diner here that has fantastic food if y’all are hungry,” Reggie says between blows.

I tell Maddox, who shrugs, having no idea Reggie is now stroking his face while staring at me, like he thinks he’s making me unbelievably jealous or something. “We could eat an early lunch,” he says, since it’s only 11:00. But it’d give us an opportunity to look around and see if I could come across a ghost. And if Reggie is alright with it, it seems like Maddox is too.

Maddox drives to the diner before parking along the road. Together, we head inside the small building decorated in memorabilia from the past fifty years that coat the walls and even the ceiling. There is only one customer, an older man reading a newspaper that he lowers to watch us. He blatantly stares at us as we enter, like we’re extremely interesting to have invaded his bubble.

The waitress also seems surprised to see us but gives us a warm smile as she seats us. “Hi, I’m Kylie. First time here?”

“It is,” I say.

She seems rather thrilled by this for some reason. “What brings you to Helmsdale?”

“Work,” Maddox says, leaving it at that.

With Maddox cutting off any future questions, Kylie gets to work. “Well, our soup special for today is vegetable, and our BLT is our daily sandwich special. If you have any questions at all, let me know.”

“Thank you,” I say.

As we look at our menus, Natalie goes and leers over the old man’s shoulder like she even remotely cares about the news and Reggie sits on Maddox’s lap so I can’t see Maddox’s face, only Reggie’s.

“Did I ever tell you how annoying Reggie is?” I ask as I try to lean to the side to see even a fraction of Maddox’s face.

Maddox shakes his head. “You don’t have to. I lived with him for years,” he says from somewhere beyond Reggie’s body. It’s not even that Reggie is a big enough guy to dwarf Maddox—quite the opposite—it’s that Reggie is making sure I can’t see past him.

Reggie is just content as can be; he even wiggles his ass a little, which makes my eyes narrow.

“So Kylie, the waitress, is *super* chatty. When I was here, she quickly became my best friend because she knew we had a knack for The Gossip.”

I repeat everything Reggie says to Maddox.

“Huh... alright,” Maddox says. When Kylie returns with our drinks, Maddox gives her a nod. “You get many new faces around here?”

She sets the drinks down before pushing her blonde hair back from where it’d fallen out of the bun she has it in. “Not too often. *Love* it when we do. It’s like fresh meat, you know? I get tired of staring at Rick over there reading the paper.”

“Maybe if you read newspapers instead of those ol’ gossip magazines you’d learn a thing or two about respect,” the older man barks.

She laughs, telling me the two pick on each other quite a bit.

“I’m actually a homicide detective working for the Clinton Police Department. I’m wondering if you could spare a moment to look at a sketch and tell me if it seems familiar to you at all,” Maddox says.

Kylie’s eyes practically sparkle at the thought of drama. “Did someone die? Oh! Is this about Everly’s father? Oh, bless his heart. He was the sweetest man. So horrible what happened. I’d love to help.”

Maddox shows her the sketch which she scrutinizes before shaking her head. “Sorry, doll, haven’t seen him around. I’ll keep my eye out though. I’ll ask around too, but if anyone’s cruising through here, it’s unusual that they’d do so without stopping by the diner. I mean, it’s the only thing in town to do.”

“Thanks for your help.”

“Any time. So what can I get you to eat?” Kylie asks.

After we order, she heads off, leaving me to stare at Reggie who has just gotten comfortable on Maddox’s lap at this point.

“What are you thinking?” I ask Maddox.

“That I can’t imagine someone would hire a person to kill them in such a fashion. What if his daughter walked in and found him? That just... doesn’t make sense to me. I know the note makes it seem like he was prepared to die but... it’s not right. He could possibly have known someone was after him, but for what and why?”

“I really wish we could find his ghost, but... if he really did want to die... maybe his ghost already moved on,” I say. It would be good that he moved on but awful for our investigation.

“It’s possible. I’m afraid we’re going to have snooping ears around here, so how about we talk about something else?”

“Have you talked to Ben lately?” I ask.

Maddox’s tone immediately turns sharp. “Hell no.”

“You need to,” I say, knowing that this hurdle might be an impossible one to get over, but I also know Maddox needs to stop being stubborn and brave it.

Reggie leans to the side to get a look at Maddox’s face, letting me also take note that Maddox looks less than pleased by this idea.

“I know you’re upset with Ben. But he’s still your brother. Yeah, he did something shitty, but he wasn’t involved. He didn’t hurt anyone. He was trying to protect his son. Just... take it from me. You don’t know how long you’ll get to be with someone... how long before you never get to see them again, so you need to cherish all the moments you can with him,” I urge.

Maddox sighs and rubs at his head, but I still don’t know if he believes me. “I know. Okay.

Here... I'll reply to the text he sent me last week."

"Okay," I say as I lean over to get a look. Honestly, I never imagined that I'd get through to him so quickly.

Ben: I'm really sorry. Apologies will never cover it. I've fucked up and I know it. I just hope that someday you can forgive me for what I've done. I'm sorry I fucked up.

I wait for Maddox's reply and watch as he simply writes, "You did" and presses send.

I stare at Maddox who is busy putting his phone away, like he's done a good job that he's proud of. "What was that?"

"A reply."

"Oh my god. That was an evil reply!"

Maddox shrugs and it's clear this isn't a hurdle, it's a fucking mountain. "Well, I'm not going to lie to him!"

"Ben was practically begging you for forgiveness." I don't even know why I try when Maddox is clearly not wanting to budge on this.

"Yeah?"

I stare at this man... this most stubborn man.

He pulls his phone back out while grumbling something, writes: "Beg for my forgiveness," and presses send again.

"I just... I can't with you," I realize.

He's pleased with himself now. It shows by the smug expression he's wearing as he merrily sits in his seat.

Before any begging can take place, Maddox's phone rings. At first, I think it's Ben, but I can tell it's not when Maddox answers with, "Detective Booker."

As he takes the call, I look over at Reggie who is stroking Maddox's face while winking at me.

"Why does he get to touch him, and I don't," Natalie whines as she settles in next to me. She reaches out to Maddox from her spot beside me, fingers wiggling. She waves her hand before his face, like she's desperate to touch but can't quite get her fingers to reach that far. Why *anyone* needs to pet him, I'm not sure.

"What is wrong with both of you?" I ask curiously.

"A lot," Natalie says.

"I mean... she's been forced to hang around you her entire life. Can you blame her for having... issues?" Reggie asks.

"What's your excuse?" I say.

He thinks about it for a moment. "My only issue is being too perfect."

I snort because I'm positive that's wrong. Maddox waves to me before leaning in. "Ask her to pack those up to go, please."

"Okay," I say as I slide out of the booth and walk over to the counter where the waitress is harassing the older guy who clearly seems to enjoy it. "I'm sorry, but we're going to have to make those to go. Something with work."

"Of course. They'll be ready within five minutes. Is that alright?"

"That should be fine, thank you," I say.

I go ahead and pay so we don't have to deal with that after. And as soon as I'm done, she hurries off to pack them up to go. When I return with the food, Maddox is gathering up his stuff and sliding his phone into his pocket.

"What's going on?" I ask as I hold the door open for him.

“So... we have a possible match on the guy we met,” he says as he gets into the car. As soon as I’m seated, he hands me his phone. I take it and look at the picture of the very man we’d met in the woods that night.

“That’s the man we’re looking for,” I say in disbelief.

“It is,” he says as he takes his chicken sandwich before turning the car on. “Name is Erick Peters. The funny catch? Erick has been missing for seven days.”

“Missing as in...?”

“They told me to come in for all of the details, so we’re headed there now. It’s a police station about fifteen miles from here, according to my phone,” Maddox says before he starts driving.

I take a bite of my burger while thinking about this. “So the guy goes missing, kills Jude, pretends to be him...”

“Right. Doesn’t scream hired killer to me.”

“No... not at all.”

“This chicken is delicious.”

“My burger is too,” I say before holding it out for him. “Try a bite.”

“Ew,” Reggie says from the back seat.

I ignore him, and instead just enjoy the familiarity that comes with sharing something with someone I love even though there are pesky as hell ghosts plaguing the way.

CHAPTER SIX



HIRO

When we walk into the police station, I feel a little out of place. It's a big station, nearly as big as ours. The man at the front desk directs us over to an older man who smiles and shakes our hands.

"Just call me Aiden."

"I'm Maddox and this is Hiro. He works as a consultant."

"Nice to meet both of you. Come right this way," he says as he leads us into a room with a desk and multiple chairs.

He takes a seat on the far side, so we grab the two chairs facing him a moment before a woman comes in with a dog by her side.

"I'm Bonnie Grand, but just call me Bonnie," she says. "I work search and rescue."

We introduce ourselves while I find myself wondering what's going on with the case. Aiden motions for Bonnie to have the floor.

She sets a folder down on the table and looks up at us. "Seven days ago, we received a call from a woman about her missing husband. We have a metro park that expands out into the border of the city where there are a good number of tourists, hikers, and bikers that pass through it on a daily basis. The metro park covers about five thousand acres. Large, but not too dense of an area.

"The wife said that she wasn't feeling up to hiking for the day, so she stayed behind at the hotel while the husband went for a hike. He's an experienced hiker and these trails are hilly but are pretty well marked. When he didn't return by dinner, she started to get worried, especially when she couldn't contact him. After another hour, she called the park ranger to make sure he hadn't gotten hurt. The park ranger sent a crew out on ATVs to search the path the husband claimed he was hiking before calling in search and rescue."

Bonnie hands us a map with highlighted areas. "We searched the area for days, finding absolutely nothing that led to his location. The area is hilly but no crevasses, drops, or places for him to have fallen into. Some people started questioning whether he left without telling his wife while others questioned if he was attacked. The thing is, the dogs can follow his trail, but it stops at an exit point, almost like he got into a vehicle and just left. And that's all we've been able to find out until you two claimed to have stumbled upon him five days ago at a crime scene."

“Where’s this man from?” Maddox asks.

“Ashla County, about four hours south of here,” Bonnie says.

“The man we met knew the farm and clearly knew the area. We have proof now that Jude Wilks was killed seven days ago. Maybe this man took a bit of time to learn the layout, figure out where keys were, things like that before Jude was killed. Can we speak with the wife?”

“She’s headed here now,” Aiden says.

It isn’t a minute later before there’s a knock on the door and a young man peeks in. “Reba is here.”

“Please, bring her in,” Bonnie says.

We stand up and greet the clearly distraught woman as she enters the room.

“You claim to have seen Erick?” she asks me and Maddox, a look of clear hope on her face.

“We did about five days ago,” Maddox says.

Relief floods across her face. “Oh, thank god. I thought... I thought he’d been... killed or something,” she says, and I notice there’s a ghost hovering behind her.

“Please have a seat,” Maddox says.

As soon as she does, Maddox explains how we met her husband and why she was being called in here. All the while, the woman gets paler and paler and the ghost behind her stomps around, clearly upset with the turn of events.

“This is a fucking load of bullshit. Don’t believe them, Reba. They’re a load of dumbasses,” the ghost says.

“Reba, did your husband know this area?” Maddox asks.

She shakes her head. “No, he’s never been here before.”

“What about this man? Do either of you know him?” Maddox asks as he slides a picture of Jude over to her.

“No. I’ve never seen him. Is that who you’re trying to claim my husband killed?” Her voice is rising now, and I can tell she’s going to become defensive before long.

Maddox shakes his head. “I never claimed your husband killed anyone. He was found at the location where a man died, the same location where Erick was pretending to be Jude. I want to find your husband and see if he can tell us what happened,” Maddox says.

She seems uncertain, but I can only imagine the stress she’s gone through in this past week. Of course she’d start to assume her husband would never be found again after a week, and then to hear that we saw him but now suspect him of murder?

“He wouldn’t kill anyone. Erick can’t even go hunting with his brothers.”

“He’s a shit shot too,” the ghost throws in. “You tell them about the time he cried when he hit that deer with his car. He was so distraught over it and couldn’t even stay when they had to put the deer down. He’s no killer.”

The woman looks between us like we’re the bad guys here. “I just... I don’t understand why you think my husband would have done this. He wouldn’t have. We’ve been married fifteen years. He’s never even raised his voice at me. That man doesn’t have a violent bone in his body. You can’t tell me ___”

Maddox tries to give her a reassuring look, but he’s never been one to easily know how to comfort someone who isn’t me. “Ma’am, I’m not saying your husband killed anyone. I’m telling you only things that I know. Your husband was seen at the crime scene, and we would like to find him to get his side of the story.”

She takes a deep breath, practically sinking in her chair. “I’m sorry. I know... I didn’t mean to say it like that. I’m just... I want to find him.”

“We will. I promise,” he says. When Maddox is done talking to her, it’s clear they want to discuss things without her here, so I stand up.

“I can walk with you,” I say with a smile as I stand up and wave to the woman.

“Thank you,” Maddox says.

She wrings her hands as I lead her through the hallway while the ghost trails behind her. Of course Natalie and Reggie are off doing whatever they do and can’t just tell the ghost I want a moment with him. So as we walk, I reach behind myself and envision him solid enough that when I wrap my hand around his wrist, I can clearly feel him and he can feel me.

“What the fuck?” he asks as he looks down at me in shock.

The woman turns to me. “Do they really think Erick did it?” she asks.

I smile at her. “Trust me. We’re working hard to find the truth of what happened. Detective Booker will do everything he can to make sure this case is done right.”

“But...” Her eyes bore into mine, and I can practically see the war raging inside her. “He’s a good guy.”

“Please trust us. We’ll do everything we can,” I say, really hoping that’s true.

She nods and continues toward the door as her ghost friend slips between me and her.

“You can see me,” he says, almost mystified by his own words.

“I can,” I say.

The woman turns back to me. “What’s that?”

“Nothing, sorry,” I say, and wait for her to leave before turning back to the ghost. “Can we talk in the bathroom?”

There are too many wandering eyes out here, especially in a department I don’t know and would prefer not to make a name for myself at. He thankfully follows me into the bathroom where I shut the door and turn to him.

“How the hell can you see me?” he asks as he waves his hand through me.

“I just can.”

“Huh.”

“Can you tell me what’s going on?”

“How the hell am I supposed to know why you can see me?” he asks.

For a moment I’m confused. “No, not that—”

There’s a knock on the door. “Hiro, it’s me,” Maddox says, so I flip the lock off so he can slip in.

“There’s a ghost following Reba around who is talking to me at the moment,” I explain to Maddox. “During the interview he wanted to add that Erick isn’t the kind of guy to hurt someone. That he doesn’t know how to shoot a gun and can’t handle blood.”

The ghost nods vigorously. “He can’t! He wanted to be a vet tech but had to change his career decision after he passed out when a dog came in with a hematoma. It was the highlight of our Thanksgiving, hearing about how the moment they popped that hematoma open he went down,” the guy says before I tell Maddox.

“What’s your relation to Erick?” Maddox asks, and I always find it surprising when he talks to the ghosts like he can see them. I think it helps them open up to him and also makes me feel good. Not like Maddox could possibly think I’m a fake at this point, but because it shows how much he really trusts me.

“He’s my brother,” he says. “But he wouldn’t do this. He wouldn’t...”

“Did you happen to follow him on his hike?” I ask.

“No... I stayed back with Reba. Reba and I were super close growing up, best friends, actually.

And honestly, watching TV sounded better than trekking around the woods again with Erick. He's a phenomenal hiker. Like this shit? These trails aren't hard. He's hiked some of the hardest trails. None of this shit could have slowed him down, and he didn't just... run off. Maybe he hit his head and forgot or something!"

I can tell Maddox doesn't seem too convinced by this when I tell him, but he just nods. "We're going to look at all possibilities."

"What if we walk the trail he took?" I ask. "There's a possibility there's a ghost there that could have seen what happened."

"I'll go with you," the ghost says.

"What's your name?" I inquire, realizing I'd never asked.

"David."

"Thank you for your help."

Maddox and I step out of the bathroom together, right into the path of Bonnie and Aiden. They seem rather perplexed why we were hovering in the single bathroom together, but Maddox doesn't miss a beat.

"Do you think someone could take us along the trail Erick took before he disappeared?" Maddox asks.

"Of course," Bonnie says.

CHAPTER SEVEN



MADDOX

The ATV we follow takes us well out into the woods. As described by Bonnie, the path is challenging but not overly so. Definitely not too challenging for someone who is experienced, and the trails are wide even for the ATVs.

Hiro sets his head against my shoulder, and I find myself wanting him to wrap his arms around me. I'm sure he would if Bonnie wasn't glancing back at us every few minutes while she explained the path, her dog merrily seated on the back like this is something he's quite used to.

"I feel like I don't always know what to do in these situations," Hiro says.

"How so?" I ask curiously, because for someone who doesn't know what he's doing, he sure seems to figure shit out.

"I feel like everyone just thinks I'm uselessly sitting there mutely," he says. "And then I go run off and hide in a corner and seemingly mumble to myself."

"I don't expect you to jump up and start interrogating people, Hiro. Obviously, I'm more than happy to hear a question you'd want to ask them. But this isn't your specialty and isn't even your job. You're oddly much better at talking to imaginary friends than I am."

He pinches my side gently. "Probably because I don't call them imaginary friends."

"What else would you call them?" I tease.

"Pests. Did you know that you're still quite evil after all this time together?" Hiro asks.

"You like it?" I ask with the growly tone I know he loves.

"I do."

"Good."

Bonnie slows her ATV down, leading me to slow mine. Her dog jumps off as Bonnie rolls to a stop and gets off. "So this is about the end of his journey, about three miles into his five or so mile hike. He moved off the path here," she says as she starts walking into the trees. We follow close behind her, out to a road about a quarter of a mile from the path Erick had been on. When we reach the road, she stops and turns to us. "This is the end here. Honestly, with the way things were looking, we'd begun to fear that someone attacked him and hauled him off. But now... now we're wondering if he had arranged for someone to pick him up."

“Had he called anyone?” I ask curiously.

“No. Phone records show no activity since his text to his wife simply stating that he wanted to try a steak house for dinner.”

“And where’s his phone now?”

“We found it right here,” she says as she points at the ground near the road. I notice she’s looking behind me, so I turn to look as Hiro just takes off at a run, across the road and down the other side.

“He... alright?” she asks as I watch the man of my dreams just run off like his ass is on fire.

“Yeah... he’s fine. He just... probably thought of something.” I say this like it’s normal to run off when one comes up with a good idea.

She seems even more uncertain now. “He just... takes off running when he thinks of something?”

“He’s quirky like that,” I say as I stare at her, just *asking* her to say something else about him. “I’ll be right back.”

I take off at a run after Hiro, not knowing if we’re chasing a ghost who doesn’t want to be caught or like a dead squirrel. Who really fucking knows when it comes to Hiro. What I do know is that I’ll always follow him no matter where he runs off to, and no matter how ridiculous he looks or how ridiculous it makes me look.

“You’re going too damn fast! I’m too out of shape for this,” Hiro yells after something I can’t even see and yet can somehow interact with.

I mean... Millie choking me in the woods was more than enough proof for me, not that I didn’t believe Hiro before that. But that made it a whole lot more... tangible when I could *feel* her hands around my throat.

That’s the moment Hiro misjudges his step and goes flying over a toppled tree before sliding down into the dirt at the bottom of the decline.

“Hey,” I say as he slowly looks up at me. “How’s it going?”

He groans as he pushes himself up into a sit. “Not well, honestly.”

“Imaginary friends don’t want to play nice today?” I slow to a walk so I don’t share the same ending as the decline steepens.

He sighs and looks off in the direction he’d been running. “Spite. He... acted like he saw something, but I’m starting to think that maybe he was just flying around, stretching his wings, and I was running around like a crazy person following him.”

“Possibly,” I say as I hold a hand down to him that he takes, but before I can pull him up, I see something. “Or possibly not.”

I tug him to his feet as Bonnie makes her way over to us. Heading over to what grabbed my attention, I lean down to where something is sticking out of the ground. Bonnie’s dog rushes over to sniff what I’m looking at before sitting and looking to Bonnie for guidance.

“What is that?” she asks.

Only the edge of what looks like a bat is sticking out from where it’d been tossed into the brush, but what draws my attention is the dried blood speckled along the edge of it. I photograph it before pushing the weeds and brush apart enough to get a good look at what’s lying inside.

“Well, damn,” Bonnie says. “Is Hiro your very own search dog?”

Hiro laughs, clearly embarrassed, before walking up to me. “I don’t know if I’m any good at it. I basically just fell on my face and Maddox did the rest.”

“I’m shocked my dog didn’t pick up on it. It’s at the bottom of a hill, and right up there’s the road. It could have been thrown out the window of a vehicle, even,” Bonnie says.

“That’d make sense with the amount of debris stuck to it,” I say as I notice Hiro staring at

something beyond it.

“What do you see?” I ask.

“An older lady. I’ll be right back,” he says as he starts briskly walking.

“This is that... ghost kid, isn’t it?” she asks.

I slowly look over at her, just *waiting* for her to say something.

“I have a friend that works at your department who... happened to... mention him,” she says.

I continue to stare at her to the point where she seems to realize that if she’s going to say something about Hiro, I’m not going to take it well.

She quickly turns her attention away from me and continues to watch Hiro who is standing with his back to us. “You believe in ghosts?” she asks.

“Didn’t used to,” I admit.

“But now?”

“One hundred percent. There’s no way I’d have solved the last big case without him. And I can guarantee you, he’s going to help us solve this one faster than if we worked it alone. Whether you believe or not, know he’s going to give it his best and he will figure out what he can,” I say.

She gives me a nod that doesn’t tell me much, so I head over to Hiro.

“The ghost said that Erick was walking along the trail before heading out to an area to photograph. Said there was a deer with a fawn. The deer spooked and as Erick was lowering his phone, two people wearing hoods came up behind him and one smashed the back of his head with a baseball bat. Erick dropped to the ground where the two picked him up and carried him out to a vehicle. They drove away with him in the back of a black car. Can’t remember a make or model but thinks it was a four-door.”

“What the hell is going on?” I ask.

Hiro shakes his head. “Well, we can’t say he planned it.”

“But then why didn’t he ask for help when we met him?” I say thoughtfully.

“Maybe the wife is right? Maybe he can’t remember because of the hit,” Hiro says, uncertain.

I’m just really struggling with this. “So the guy gets... abducted by two guys... and then somehow ends up at Jude’s farm alone where he takes over Jude’s life?” I ask, trying to piece this together.

“But now we don’t know who these other two are.”

“No... but we have a bat and hopefully our bat has some fingerprints,” I say.

“That’d be fantastic.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



HIRO

As I pull into the driveway of my adoptive mom's house, Maddox turns to me. "I'm glad we made it here without dying."

I glare at him as I realize he *still* won't drop what happened the other day when I might have tapped the brake for that ghost. "My driving isn't that bad. I usually drive right through the ghosts just fine."

"I was scared the whole drive here. The whiplash I got from last time is just now starting to pass," he says as he dramatically rubs at his neck.

I continue to glower at him, which makes him smile as he leans in and gives me a kiss on the lips. Of course he knows how to make me instantly forgive him, even when I shouldn't.

Maddox grabs for the door handle before hesitating. "Oh, while I'm thinking of it, do you want to move in with me? I mean, you don't have to tell me now. Think about it and let me know," he says as he gets out all cool-like, as though that was something boring and mundane to spring on me as we're getting out of the car.

Before I can answer or really register what he just said, Patricia, my adoptive mom, waves at us from where she's busy doing something in the yard with a gun.

"Well, that's not concerning at all," I say.

"You think she's finally offing the neighbor?" Maddox asks.

"I wouldn't be surprised," I say, since the neighbor's routine blasting of loud music has driven her to having Maddox come over to harass them. As we near Patricia, I ask, "Whatcha doing with that gun?"

"Murder," she says. "This goddamn raccoon started stealing my chicken eggs. A few eggs might not have been a big deal. But then he took his little fingers and he tore open the wire on the edge of their coop and went in and murdered two of my chickens last night. So I found where he sleeps, and I went in there ready to just... blow him to pieces and he looked at me with his beady little eyes... and I couldn't shoot him." Her eyes settle on Maddox. "Maddox?"

He doesn't look too reassured by this. "Um..."

She smiles. She's pleased with herself for finding a new gunslinger. "I knew you were going to be

the most useful son-in-law.”

“Great...” he says, seeming less than reassured.

“Okay, you have fun murdering the chicken-eating raccoon, I’m going to go... put the cookies down,” I say as I grab the container of cookies we brought and head for the house, glad to have an excuse not to be involved. Next thing I know, I’ll have a goddamn ghost raccoon following me. A ghost bird and Reggie’s ghost cat are plenty.

When I step inside, Nicolás, my brother through adoption, is in the kitchen snacking on something. “Did Patricia try to sucker you into murdering her raccoon too?” he asks.

He’s always been a kind of quiet guy, but we’ve been close, especially after Sean died. I love him like my own brother, and Reggie loves him in a lust-filled way.

“She did. She set her eyes right on Maddox, so I was free to scurry away,” I say as I set the container of cookies down. “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot,” he says as he pops open the container and grabs a cookie, even though the aroma of dinner is in the air.

“Maddox just asked me to move in with him,” I say.

“That’s awesome,” Nicolás says with a smile before stuffing the rest of the cookie in his mouth, like if he can get rid of all evidence before Patricia comes in, she won’t notice.

“Right? But then why am I nervous about it?” I ask. “I love Maddox, so I should be excited and not nervous, right?”

“It’s because you only know how to live with dead people,” he says. “These are really good.” He eyes the container like a second one might be in order.

“Right? Maddox made them because I had to work late.”

“So... you feel bad that the idea makes you nervous?” Nicolás seems confused by this, which I guess makes me feel a little better.

“Well... yeah, I mean we stayed together for a little bit, so it’s no different.”

“It’s quite a bit different. That was just you two being together because he wanted to keep you from being murdered. This is like a jump forward in your relationship, and correct me if I’m wrong, but haven’t all your past relationships lasted like two weeks at most?”

“You’re wrong.”

“Oh?”

“One week...”

He grins at me as he leans back against the counter. “You’re scared.”

“I am,” I admit.

Nicolás shrugs like it’s no big deal. “Honestly, Hiro, you’re the bravest guy I know. You run headfirst into any damn situation with the hopes of helping someone or saving someone with no concern for your own wellbeing *at all*. So... I think it’s good you’re not dashing headlong into this. Means you really care and are thinking about your future together.”

“You think? You don’t think it means I’m like... an awful boyfriend or something?”

“Totally. The absolute *worst* boyfriend for being concerned you might mess up your super-happy relationship,” he says with a bunch of extra sarcasm tossed in, but it makes me smile. “Feel better about it?”

I watch as he heads over to the soup which he stirs. “Yeah, a bit.”

“I think it’s also hard for people like us who didn’t always have a solid place to call home. We kind of get stuck in our ways. We have a home now, and while this other home would be ten times better, what we currently have we’re safe with. We’re in control. We’re not going to get tossed out.

We make our own decisions, you know?"

I nod slowly as that sinks in. "That makes sense. Sometimes you're smart."

Nicolás gives me a grin. "Just sometimes." He glances out the window and I realize it has been a while since we heard from the other two. "I wonder if the raccoon got them."

"Might have," I say.

"But seriously... I guess just think about it and do what feels best. You're not going to hurt your relationship if you need to think on it."

"I've never even had a roommate unless I count you and Sean."

"And your fifteen ghosts."

"Yeah, but those aren't as messy. Just loud."

"And perverted."

"True."

There's a loud gasp behind me. I don't even have to turn to know who it is.

"Oh Nicolás, the bread of my man meat sandwich," Reggie says as he rushes over to Nicolás and strokes his face. "Peasant, how dare you withhold this information?"

Realizing that I'm "peasant," I ignore him as Nicolás side-eyes the area where Reggie is.

While Nicolás can't see ghosts like I can, when he's around me, he can pick up on little things like Reggie being nearby. He explains it as a presence, or a feeling.

"Is Reggie here?" Nicolás asks as he waves his hand around like he might be able to feel him. "Or Natalie?"

"Right? Only the two perverts would be up in your space like that."

He snorts, but it makes him grin. "Very true."

The door opens and Maddox and Patricia walk in covered in straw. "Were you two... rolling around in the hay?" I tease.

"That fucker jumped at me," Maddox says.

"He doesn't want to die," I respond.

"Yeah, he got his wish," Patricia says. "I might have... screamed, run into Maddox, then thrown him down to the ground where we rolled around as it ran off."

"I suggested a live trap," Maddox says. "Relocate him or something."

"Isn't that illegal?" Nicolás asks, more teasingly than seriously.

"No one's looking," Maddox says.

"Oddly, yelling 'Shoot him! Shoot him!' while lying on top of Maddox does little to help," Patricia says. "But I feel like I've gotten even closer to your boyfriend, Hiro. On a more... personal level."

"Aw, that's sweet. I'll make sure I don't hang up any mistletoe this year or I'll have to keep a close eye on both of you," I say.

"So funny," Maddox says dryly.

"I thought it was," I say with a smile.



"I've been thinking," I say as Maddox comes out of the bathroom connected to his bedroom.

"That's scary," Maddox says.

I glare at this man I have dared to call my lover. Clearly, I've been mistaken and become a fool.

“Fine. Good night, my evil human that I may have once loved,” I say as I crawl into bed rather dramatically.

Maddox grins at me before flopping on top of the covers and peeling them back enough to get to my face. “I’m sorry, that was quite cruel of me. I meant, ‘That’s terrifying.’”

“Oh, ha ha. I give up,” I joke as his phone starts ringing.

He sighs and pushes off the bed to grab for his phone that’s on his dresser. “Detective Booker... yeah... alright... I can be there in fifteen,” he says before hanging up and looking at me. “Well...”

“Something I can help with?” I ask.

“No, it’s for a case that’s not mine. They just need some help at the office with something that’ll supposedly ‘only take a minute and can’t wait until morning.’”

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll see you in a bit, then.”

“Alright,” Maddox says as he leans over the bed to plant a kiss on my lips. “Have a good night.”

“You too,” I say. “Please be safe.”

“I will be. Please don’t cuddle with Reggie.”

I grin at him as I reach down and pull Bandit close. “Reggie’s not here. Just me and Bandit.”

“Good,” he says before heading out the door.

I had been planning on telling him that I would move in with him, but off he goes before I can. I guess it’s not like it’s an emergency; I can tell him later. I try to read for a little bit, but I can barely keep my eyes open, so I switch the light out and snuggle up close to Bandit whose purrs fill up the quiet of the room.



“Hiro.”

Warmth envelops my face.

“Hiro!”

What the hell does Reggie want? I’m sure it’s something extremely stupid. Like that he can’t sleep without Maddox naked or something.

“HIRO, for fuck’s sake, wake up! Goddammit, wake up!”

I’m shoved so hard my head smashes against the headboard. “What the fuck, Reggie?” I growl as I sit up and freeze.

There’s a shadow standing in the doorway.

The room is dark, so all I can see is the unmoving figure filling up the doorway.

It’s just Maddox... it’s just Maddox, right?

Reggie grabs my face in his hands, but I can’t look away from the shadow. “Hiro, you need to move. Maddox keeps a gun in the drawer on his side of the bed. Get the fucking gun,” Reggie says, telling me that is *not* Maddox in the doorway.

I lunge across the bed as the man realizes what I’m doing and rushes into the room. Barely hooking my fingers onto the drawer, I yank it open as I hear the click of a safety switch off and see the man’s gun focused right on me.

“Don’t move,” the man says.

It’s so dark that I can’t see into the drawer, but I think I can feel the very edge of Maddox’s gun. Do I try anyway? What the fuck do I do?

My heart is pounding in my ears as I hear the man walk toward me.

“Come here,” he says, like he thinks I’m just going to hop out of bed and come rushing over to him.

“W-Who are you?” I ask. “What do you want?”

“You,” he says as he reaches over and grabs me. I spin hard and kick him right in the gut, shoving him back. I dive off the far side of the bed, since he’s now between me and the bedside table, and rush for the open doorway.

“For fuck’s sake, stop or I’ll shoot you,” he yells as I race down the hallway.

“Downstairs. He has another gun in the closet,” Reggie says as the man lunges out and hooks my wrist. I twist my body hard, just barely managing to pull my arm free. I rush for the stairs and start down them as the man slams into me, sending me falling forward. I land on my hands and knees before rolling once and hitting the bottom of the stairs, causing my head to slam into the ground.

The world distorts for a moment, and while I can hear Reggie screaming for me, I can’t seem to figure out how to get my arms and legs under me. I push myself up, only to find myself tipping over, onto my face.

When I open my eyes again, I can feel something unpleasant under my back as I realize I’m being dragged. The grass is cold against my bare back and catching on my boxer briefs.

“Hiro, wake up. You need to fight him. Hiro, stop him,” Reggie yells.

I feel myself hoisted up and shoved hard as my arms are pulled behind my back and a rope is wrapped around them. That’s the moment I finally come to, only to realize who I’m in the car with.

Erick, the man I’d met in the woods. The man who’d been pretending to be Jude when we first met him.

“Erick, please,” I say as he slams the car door and rushes around to the other side. He gets into the driver’s seat before he starts to back out of the driveway. As the fog wrapped around my brain begins to clear, I desperately wish that Maddox would take this very moment to come home.

Reggie gives me a shove as I try to keep my head from swimming. “Hiro, you need to get out now. Out while you still know where you’re at. Where you have neighbors or someone to help,” he says.

Right.

Focus. Focus.

I press my back against the door, reaching for the handle with my hands before swinging my legs up and kicking Erick in the head hard enough his head slams against the window with a loud *crack*. I throw the door open and lunge for it, but Erick grabs me and drags me back in where he presses a gun against my head.

“Move again, and I’ll fucking shoot you,” he growls as he swipes away a bead of blood running down his forehead. When it’s clear I’m not going to go up against his gun, the car begins moving again.

I keep completely still as I try to think about what to do. Reggie is panicked, wanting to help, but unable to. If he were to grab the wheel or something, would he wreck the car? Would the man attack me?

I watch as Erick uses his knee to drive for a moment before picking up his phone and looking at it. “Fucking hell,” he mutters before tossing it down, screen still open. I look between it and Reggie.

I can make him touch living things like Stella and Bandit... but what about something like this?

“Reg,” I whisper.

Reggie looks over at me and I nod down at the phone. He stares at it for a long moment. “I can’t... I can’t touch it.”

“Try,” I say.

“Shut up,” Erick says as he looks at me with narrowed eyes. He starts beating on the steering wheel while screaming, “Just shut up!”

I nod, and instead, I press my shoulder into Reggie and pour everything I can into making him feel real. With my eyes closed, I can almost feel the heat of a live body beside me. A person, a moving, breathing person. He feels so real. So very real.

I open my eyes as he presses a finger down onto the phone and I see the screen change to messages.

Reggie hesitates, like he’s so shocked he’s accomplished this that he doesn’t know what to do next. He presses a finger down again, but this time, nothing happens.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he says, voice breaking.

I press harder into him.

“I’m sorry.” Reggie presses down again, and this time a number shows up. Watching him type in Maddox’s number sends anxiety rushing through me and causes my stomach to knot up. Every moment, I question if the man is going to look over and see what Reggie is doing or if the screen will shut off and we’ll have no way of reopening it. It’s not quick going because not every press works when Reggie’s shaking finger hits it. But slowly, he begins to type “Help H.”

“What the fuck?” Erick asks as he looks over.

“Send it, send it,” I yell, and Reggie taps down on it repeatedly. In my panicked state, I feel like I break the concentration between us as the message sits unsent when Erick reaches for the phone. “Reggie, send it.” I watch as the man lifts the phone to look at what’s happening and as he reaches up to delete it, Reggie manages to tap send.

The text flashes as *sent* and I feel like I take my first breath in minutes.

“What the fuck?” Erick asks again before rolling down the window and tossing the phone out. He looks away from the road to wave the gun at me. “What the fuck?”

I remain still and silent as I sit in the car rumbling down the road, absolutely unsure of what I should do or say. Reggie seems to be in as much shock as I am as he presses into me.

“I’m going to try to... do something,” Reggie says before disappearing.

No, no, no, I don’t want to be alone. I know Reggie couldn’t do much, but alone is worse—so much worse as the car speeds down the road and the spot where he’d been pressing into my shoulder grows cold.



MADDOX

“Hey, what are you doing here so late?” Lexi, a forensics tech, asks as I’m passing her area.

“Got called in for something quick that ended up taking two hours. Headed home now. You?”

“Switched with Davy. Regretting it,” she says as she glances at the clock. “*But* I did see that the results came in. It is indeed Erick Peters’ blood on the baseball bat, but no distinguishable fingerprints on it.”

“Well, shit,” I say as my phone beeps. I pull it out and notice the unknown number. I hesitate, sure it’s some type of spam until I open it.

Help H.

What... what does that mean?

H?

Hiro?

My stomach sinks as I pull up my recent calls and hit the one right at the very top.

The phone begins to ring and ring as Lexi watches me closely, clearly taking note of my concern.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“I just got a message from a strange number to ‘Help H’ and now Hiro’s not picking up.”

“Get me the number the message came from,” she says, so I put my call on speaker so it can still ring while I pull up the message. Lexi takes the number from me and starts looking it up as I end the call.

“I have to go,” I say.

“Okay. Call Ben, he’s closer to the house than you are right now.”

Fucking hell, I don’t want to deal with Ben, but I have no option. As she looks up the phone number, I rush for my car while calling Ben. If he left within a minute, he could beat me by five minutes at least.

“Hello?” Ben asks, sounding groggy.

“Ben, I need you to go to my house and check on Hiro, now, okay? Move.”

“Going,” he says. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. I got a strange text, and Hiro’s not answering the phone. I have to go. Call me the moment you’re there.”

“Got it.”

I call the number that sent me the text, but it rings and rings before voicemail picks up.

“This is Jude, please leave your name and number and I’ll give you a call back if I feel like it.”

Jude... what the fuck is happening? After Jude’s death, we’d been unable to locate his phone. Everly was able to give us an extremely vague description and a number, but the phone had possibly been lacking its battery or something that kept us from tracking it. But if it’s on now, there’s a possibility we could get a location.

Lexi starts calling, so I quickly end the call with Jude’s phone and answer hers.

“It’s Jude Wilks’s number,” I say.

“That’s what I got too, I’m going to get a location on it right now,” she says as I get into my car. “Do you think Hiro sent the message?”

“I have no idea. If so, what the hell would anyone want with Hiro? What the fuck is going on?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” Lexi says. “Let’s make sure he’s not sleeping snugly in bed before we panic, okay?”

“Fucking hell, okay,” I say as the engine of my car roars while I barrel down the street.

About four minutes from home, my phone rings, and I see it’s Ben.

“Is he there?”

“I just arrived. Forced entry. Get a unit here now,” he says.

“Fuck. Be careful.”

“I will,” he says.

My heart is pounding in my chest as I call for backup. How the hell did Hiro get wrapped up in this? Was it because of us running into Erick in the woods? Maybe because of us believing we were trying to help Jude, Hiro became a target?

When I reach my house, I see movement upstairs. Even though I assume it’s Ben, I move carefully into the house.

“Ben?”

“Up here,” he says.

I hurry up the stairs and look at the bedroom. The blankets are dragged off the bed, lying partially on the ground, and the bedside drawer is open.

“Looks like he was trying to get your gun, but he didn’t take it,” Ben says.

“Fucking hell. Why is this...” I feel like my world is crashing, and all I can think about is that call I got telling me that Reggie was dead. Telling me that I would never see Reggie again. And now... what if it’s Hiro’s call next? What if I have to listen to that call? I can’t... I can’t fucking...

Ben puts a hand on my shoulder and gives me a squeeze. “Maddox, you’re the best goddamn detective I know. Focus and figure out what happened.”

His words snap me back to a reality where Hiro is missing, not dead. Where I can still find him and every second counts.

“Right,” I say, ashamed I’d let myself get so wrapped up in the situation. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me,” he says.

I give him a nod and force myself to focus on the scene because I know speed is essential. “Someone broke in, must have made it to the bedroom before Hiro heard. Hiro had time to reach for the gun, but he didn’t manage to grab it, making me think the person had a weapon of some kind.”

“So if he wanted to kill Hiro, he would have done it then,” Ben says.

“Right... he wants Hiro for some reason. We know that it’s likely Erick who took him. He still has Jude’s phone... that means he could be driving something of Jude’s. Let me get a phone call to Jude’s daughter to see if he had more than the truck. It’s possible he had another vehicle that Erick could have taken before we even arrived at the crime scene.”

“I’ll make the call. Look around and see if anything else is missing,” Ben says.

I give him a nod and move out into the hallway. We have to assume they moved toward the stairs to go out, but then where’d they go from there?

As I reach the bottom of the stairs, I see something I hadn’t seen when I’d rushed up them.

Blood.

I kneel down and look at the drops smeared into the carpet.

Hiro’s or the assailant’s?

Fucking hell.

Ben hurries down the stairs, and I wave to the spot for him to avoid it. “Okay, they’re searching now. Can you think of where he’d take him? If he had a use for Hiro... where would he go?”

My phone beeps before I can answer, and I see it’s a text from Lexi. “Lexi has a location on the phone Hiro used to text me. She said it’s not moving. Let’s go.”

I rush out the door with Ben on my heels. Together, we slide into the car and start moving with the hopes we’re going to find Hiro alive and well on the other side, but my dread won’t stay at bay for long.

My car speeds off into the night as Ben directs me on where to go, following Lexi’s directions. I hate to admit it, but I’m glad he’s here with me. Doing this alone sounds absolutely horrible when I can’t keep my mind from traveling to the darkest of places.

A police car joins me, making our travels quicker, since we’re a good twenty minutes from the location.

As we speed down the road, I force myself to focus. Just drive... just get there and do what needs to be done and find Hiro.

“We’re within a mile of it,” Ben says as he examines the location using his phone’s GPS. “I’m...

I'm afraid it's just been thrown out the window because there are no houses surrounding it."

"Shit," I say, but even if we don't find Hiro at this location, I have a decent idea where the kidnapper is headed because this is the exact road Hiro and I took the other day to go question Jude's daughter.

When the police car pulls off to the side of the road, I pull in behind the flashing lights. I have to wait for a semi to pass before we can begin our search. Thankfully, whoever tossed it didn't turn the phone off first, and I'm able to find it lying in water at the bottom of the ditch by calling. I use my sleeve to pick it up before getting back into the car.

"Do you know where to go?" Ben asks as I pass the phone off to him.

"We're headed to Helmsdale until I have another idea." I call Lexi who answers almost immediately.

"Anything?"

"Found the phone. Can you contact Jude's daughter, Everly, for me and see if we can get the passcode? Can you verify with her?"

"Of course. Let me see what I can do."

"Thank you," I say before hanging up.

Come on, come on, where the hell are you, Hiro?

CHAPTER NINE



HIRO

“What the hell are you doing up this late?” Natalie asks as she pops into the spot Reggie had just vacated. “Partying hard and dropping a beat?” She looks me over, then turns and looks Erick over, then looks back at me. “This... isn’t the kind of partying you’re supposed to get involved in... what the hell, Hiro? Are you being kidnapped? Is this some weird role-playing you and Maddox are into? Please tell me it’s that one.”

I give her a minor shake of my head that has a headache brewing inside from helping Reggie with the phone.

“Fucking hell. What do I do?” She looks around in a panic.

Very good question that I’ve been thinking about myself for quite a bit.

“You just be good now, you hear?” Erick asks, probably noticing me moving a bit more than I had been after Reggie had left. “You be good and nothing bad will happen to you. You don’t want something bad to happen, now do you?”

I remain quiet as I try to think. If one of the ghosts did something to the steering wheel, he could overcorrect and crash, but what about the key? Can you turn the key off while the vehicle is moving? It’s an older vehicle, so I doubt it has any safety features in it.

Only one way to find out.

I catch Natalie’s eyes and lean forward so she can see my hands. With a twisting motion of my fingers, I nod at the key, hoping she gets the hint of what I’m talking about.

She seems to be looking in the right direction, so I wait to see what she’ll do. She waits for him to get around a bend in the road, then reaches out and touches the key... which her fingers immediately slide through.

“I’m not sure I can do this,” she says as she anxiously looks back at me.

I give her a reassuring smile and nod her on, hoping and begging that it works. She takes a deep breath—even though I’m pretty sure she doesn’t need it—and tries again but still, nothing happens.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” she hisses as she tries again and again. I even lean against her, hoping that feeling a connection to my body will help, but she’s not as strong as Reggie for some reason. Although... maybe it’s not that she’s not as strong, but the pressure of the key? Pressing down on a

phone takes less effort than even the simple motion of twisting a key.

"I'm sorry. I'm really trying," Natalie says, anxiety filling her words. "Can Reggie do it? Where's Reggie? I'm sorry."

I lean my head against her shoulder in an attempt to tell her she doesn't need to be sorry. It is what it is. My head is beginning to pound from assisting her and Reggie. Hell, maybe that's the issue? I can't even help her as much when it feels like someone is sliding a knife into my brain right behind my eyeballs.

That's when the vehicle slows down and makes a turn, telling me we're heading into the village where Jude's daughter lives. Maybe he's taking me to Everly? Maybe she can call the police?

But instead of moving deeper into the village, he takes a side road leading back toward what looks like a church.

"Hiro, I don't know what to do," Natalie says, but honestly, I'm not sure if there *is* anything she can do.

When the car stops, I can't even see outside the windows. There are so many ghosts packed around the vehicle, it's like they're coating it. They're drawn to me or this man, crowding around us until I feel like I'm suffocating. Maybe they can feel his toxicity? Maybe they can feel the death surrounding him?

Or maybe they think I'm going to die.

A hand smacks against the window, making me jump. A face peers in through the glass.

"Run," the ghost says.

"Go away," another says.

I would love to run. I'd love to get as far away as I can, but I can't. I can't do anything as Erick opens the car door and grabs my arm.

"Run!" a ghost shouts. And suddenly there's a chorus of "run," "flee," and "leave this place."

"Help. Find a way to help me," I say to them.

They don't seem to understand as I come crashing out of the car and only avoid falling because Erick is holding me up. He doesn't wait for me to get my feet under me; instead, he begins to drag me.

I shudder as the first ghost goes through me, and then another. The feeling of cold dread washes over me as my head pounds harder and Erick continues to drag me, not giving me the opportunity to get onto my feet before I'm suddenly thrown forward. Without the ability to use my hands, I end up slamming down onto the grass as Natalie grabs for me like she wants to shield me with her body.

"Hiro, do something," she says, voice quivering.

"I don't know what to do," I say.

"I want to talk to my wife," Erick says.

"What?" I ask. "Your wife... your wife is looking for you."

He looks surprised and pleased. It's the first time I've seen a smile touch his lips since we started this nighttime excursion. "She is?"

"Yes, she said you disappeared. She called the police. She's very worried about you. She thought something awful happened to you. Do you need help reaching out to her?" I ask.

His look of surprise slowly drains until he begins to seem almost livid, and I can't help but question what I said wrong. "That's not my wife."

"Oh... I'm sorry. I thought she was."

"My wife is dead," he growls.

What the hell is he talking about? "Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that."

"I want you to tell her where I'm at."

God, my head fucking hurts and nothing he's saying is making sense to me. Erick's wife... is dead? No... *Jude's* wife is dead... does he still think he's Jude? But...

"TALK TO HER," he yells.

"What's your wife's name?"

"Meg... sweet Meg," he says. "Is she here?"

He still fucking thinks he's Jude.

I need to think. Do I lie? Do I tell him she's here and pretend to speak to her? Do I tell him she's back at the farmhouse where Maddox might look for me?

God, the ghosts are so loud I can't even think straight. Just a chorus of words being beaten into my ears.

Erick grabs me by the throat. "I want to *speak to her*."

"Okay. It takes a moment to connect to the dead," I say. "I need a moment of silence, okay?"

"Fine," he growls.

I try to look around me to figure out where I'm even at, but I can't see beyond my circle of ghosts who I think want to protect me.

"You've had plenty of time!" Erick yells, even though it couldn't have been twenty seconds.

He aims the gun at me as I realize that I need to appease this man before he decides to end my life.

"She's... Just... shhh... I think she's not here. I think she's back at the farmhouse." If he drove me back to the farmhouse, that'd give me more time, and wouldn't Maddox think to look there? Or would he never think of it?

"She is *right here*. Don't lie to me. Don't lie. I don't want to hear your goddamn lies; now tell me where she is."

Fuck. It doesn't look like he's going to drive me off anywhere. So maybe just giving him what he wants is key.

"You'll let me go once you talk to her?" I ask.

"Of course," he says, but I can't tell if he's being truthful.

I close my eyes, planning on making it some theatrical thing to appease him and kill as much time as I can. "Meg? Meg, are you there?"

She isn't. Who knows where she's at. Her daughter's? Her home? Who knows?

But she's not here.

"Meg, Jude is here and wants to talk to you. Jude, do you want to say hi?" I ask.

Jude's expression practically melts to the point where I feel a twinge of guilt about this. How ridiculous to even feel anything after the guy is clearly planning on killing me if I don't perform right.

"Oh, Meg, Meg, Meg... finally. Do you know how long I've looked for you?"

"She said she waited at the house for you, but you never came to get her. She was up in her reading nook you built for her," I say.

He nods vigorously. "I did build it! I... wanted to check. I thought I checked, but I couldn't find her. I wanted to find her. You tell her I know what she did. You tell her I know she's a fucking cheating-ass bitch. And that I wish that fucking night out in the woods when I found out what she had done, that I killed her. Tell her that."

What... the fuck is happening?

He grabs for me, and I jerk back to avoid him. "I-I don't have to tell her, she heard you."

"What'd she say?" he asks, pressing into me.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I thought I was just going to make up some bullshit sweet stuff. I could have thrown in what she said about his handwriting, and about waiting for him. And instead, this is what I

get?

“She said...”

The man is shaking, he’s so close to hysteria, and my head hurts so badly it’s hard to even think fast enough. “She’s not here, is she? Did you *lie* to me? Did you—”

A noise draws our attention away, and suddenly, the ghosts around me shift and move. I look back as a man I don’t recognize slowly walks toward us. “What’s going on? I’ve called the police. Please, put down the weapon,” the man says.

“Fuck you. Fuck you, fuck you.” Erick turns his attention back to me before slamming the butt of his gun into the side of my head. “Tell me what she said!”

“Stop this,” I yell as the ghosts cut between him and me. They wrap around him, like they’re smothering him, and he lets out a strangled noise. I lunge up and ram my shoulder into him, throwing him back as the ghosts follow him when he falls. And just as he drops, his head smashes on a gravestone, but I don’t wait to see what happens, I just run.

Anxiety and adrenaline burning deep inside me, I rush toward the guy heading this way since he’s closest to the church. “Run, he has a gun,” I say.

“This way,” he says as he starts backtracking before looking back at Erick. “What is... happening to him?”

I can’t even see him with the ghosts surrounding him, but the moment I reach the church, I must be too far from them because they scatter, leaving Erick lying on the ground. The man trying to help me grabs my arm, tugging me through the church doors and shoving me back into another door that he pushes me through before throwing a lock in place. Breathing heavily, I say, “We need to lock the church doors.”

“They don’t lock without a key.” He takes his phone out. “I didn’t actually call the police yet, I didn’t know what was going on,” he says as he tries to quickly dial 911.

“Can I talk to them?” I ask.

“Yeah, of course,” he says as he puts the phone on speaker.

“911, please state your emergency.”

“I’m Hiro Moore, a consultant for Clinton’s homicide department. I’ve been taken by a man named Erick Peters... he has a gun.” I look up at the guy helping me. “Where are we?”

“St. Paul’s Church, right outside Helmsdale Village,” he says into the phone.

“The man is armed and acting confused. Can you get this information over to my department, please?”

“One moment.”

I hear the church door open and I still. “End the call.”

The man swallows hard before quickly ending the call. We both listen as I twist so he can see my bound arms. Quietly, he begins to work at the knot, tugging and pulling until he begins to free it as I hear the door just outside this one swing shut. It feels like my heart is crawling up into my throat as tension fills my body.

“Hello?” a voice calls out. It’s definitely not Erick’s voice, and by the look of relief on the man’s face, it tells me that it’s someone he knows.

He switches the lock off before I can tell him otherwise, and quietly pulls the door open. “Pastor ___”

A gunshot echoes through the room, making me jump as the man who was standing beside me is thrown back. He hits the ground on his back as I see Erick switch his gun to the pastor’s head who he is holding against him.

The pastor lets out a cry of alarm as he jerks back with nowhere to go when he's being held by the gunman.

"Come here, come here, Hiro," Erick says, voice cracking in the middle.

I don't know what to do. Protect myself and the man who's been shot? Give myself up to help the pastor?

Erick starts dragging the pastor toward the open door, giving me little time to think about my next move. If I go out to help the pastor, I'd be putting everyone at risk. But if I close myself off from them... would Erick get frustrated and let the pastor go? I reach for the door, but the groaning man is in the way. Thankfully free of my binds, I grab for him and start dragging him back as Erick shoves the pastor away from him and comes barreling toward me.

I slam into the door, throwing it shut, but before I can slide the lock into place, he rams into it. He's a big guy, built athletic, so I'm immediately shoved back. He laughs as he realizes that I'm no match for him as the door slowly starts sliding open farther and farther until it suddenly stops.

I look over and see Natalie beside me and Reggie by her side. Both of them push hard against the door as the ghosts who've haunted me since I arrived here begin to crowd around me, filling in the area around the door. Miraculously, the door slams shut, and I manage to throw the lock into place.

"Run," Natalie says.

I don't know where I'm running to, but I have to get away. I stoop down and grab onto the man, hauling him up as he groans.

"I don't... I can't..." he says, making little sense.

"I'm not leaving you here," I say as I press my hand against the spot where blood is oozing out of the bullet wound.

He hisses in pain but I keep my hand clamped down tightly, throw my other arm around him, and start dragging him down the hallway.

The police know where we're at. We just have to find a place to hide until they arrive.

The man is shaking in my arms. "There are other... doors leading into the hallway on the other side of the church here. He'll make it to another before we get there."

"Okay," I say. "What about a way out?"

"Yeah..." he says, drooping in my arms. His sudden drop of weight makes me stagger, but I can't give up. I have to keep moving, even if I feel like lying down right here. My head is pounding, and I can feel wet blood on the side of my face from Erick's strike, but adrenaline is keeping me moving.

"Hey, wake up. I need you to tell me where to go. Come on," I say as I shake the man, just wanting him to stay with me. He can't die because of me.

He's out, so I drag him into a room and push the door shut. I throw the lock into place and set the man down. Yanking his shirt up, I look down at the wound. My knowledge on wounds is next to none, but I do know I need to get the bleeding to stop because it looks like he's bleeding *a lot*.

I ball up the edge of his shirt and press it against his wound as I hear banging on the door.

"I know you're in there. Come out, come out," Erick says.

The man lets out a groan, and I wince. Fuck.

"I hear you in there," Erick says.

A gunshot rings out, making me jump as the bullet punches a hole through the door.

Fucking hell... There's no way I can drag this bleeding and unconscious man through the window. But can I leave him?

I look down at the wound I'm pressing tightly against. If I let go... will he just bleed to death?

Fucking hell.

The man slams against the door, making me jump and anxiety tighten deep in my stomach.

“I...” *BAM*. “Will...” *BAM!* “Find you...” *BAM*. “And make you pay.”

Sirens cut through the air, and it’s the most relieving noise I’ve ever heard in my life. Erick is still beating against the door as the ghosts file in front of it, like they’re going to hold him back. My very own saviors.

“Thank you,” I say to them, unsure if they hear me or not, but I know I’d likely be dead without them. “Thank you, thank you.”

The door groans, and I know it’s not going to hold much longer. It’s just a flimsy door and the way he’s throwing his body at it, like he has no qualms about what he does to himself, makes me fear the worst. What if they don’t get here in time? What if...

I push those thoughts back and remain low on the ground, holding the man’s wound and begging for Maddox to find me.

The door groans and I hear something break.

“Drop the weapon!” someone shouts and the pounding stops.

Erick screams out something, and that’s when I hear a gunshot go off, making me flinch.

There’s a long moment of silence before I hear a rap on the door. “Police, open up.”

How the hell do I know it’s really them? How do I know Erick’s not holding a gun to his head? How do I—

“Hiro!” Maddox yells as he begins beating on the door, like he’s going to finish the work Erick started. “Hiro!”

I look down at the guy, unsure if I should let up on the hold. “I’m okay. I’m holding compression on a guy who is wounded. Can I let it up to get the door?” I ask.

That’s the moment I hear the lock switch off and Maddox pushes in, rushing through the ghosts as I’m left to question which of them was able to unlock it. Or was it loose enough that one more hit and Erick would have been through?

Maddox comes rushing right for me, eager to grab me, but when he sees what I’m doing, he contains himself. “Hiro! Are you okay?” he asks as his attention turns to the wounded man.

I jump and look at Maddox. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright. Are you okay? The paramedics are on the way. Until then, let us take over,” Maddox says as an officer I hadn’t even noticed kneels beside me. He slips his hand over mine and I leave him and Maddox to do what they can to help the man.

I slowly rise to my feet as my world swims. I stagger and stumble to the side as I reach out for a wall to catch me. When I slam into it, a few ghosts look over at me.

“Shit!” I say as stabbing pains invade my head and I slump into the wall a moment before Maddox grabs me.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, voice filled with concern.

“Just my head... from the ghosts... and hitting my head... I’m fine.”

I start to slip down the wall, but Maddox keeps me up and helps ease me down to the ground. I manage to ask, “What happened to Erick?”

“He was shot but he should be fine. He wouldn’t drop the weapon,” Maddox says.

I lean my head against the wall and close my eyes, just wanting this night to end.

CHAPTER TEN



MADDOX

After the paramedics had insisted that Hiro be taken to the hospital, he was shipped off while I was forced to stay behind. I hated leaving him, but I also understood that it was my case, and I couldn't just run off when Hiro wasn't in danger of dying. Someone took Ben home since he was no longer part of this.

As I finally escape out to my car, my boss calls me.

"Good... morning, Deputy Chief," I say, realizing the night was a thing of the past.

"Drop the formalities, it's too early for that. What the hell is going on?" Parker asks. "Why the interest in Hiro?"

"When I was able to talk to Hiro before he was taken to the hospital, he was having trouble focusing, so I couldn't get him to answer."

"But Erick is in custody... at least we have that."

"We have that, but we don't know who the two guys who attacked Erick were. Or why Erick tried taking over Jude's life."

"That's what we'll need to figure out."

"First, I'm going to go see how Hiro is doing."

"That's fine, you won't be allowed to talk to Erick anyway," she says.

"Sadly. I would love to have a few... words with him."

"Which is exactly why you're not allowed." She's quiet for a moment. "Is Hiro alright?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'm glad you found him. Let me know what you find out," she says before hanging up. She's such a strange woman to work with, but I know deep down, beneath her icy exterior, there's a nice person in there somewhere who kind of cares about us but would never admit it.

When I reach the hospital, I'm escorted to the ER where I'm taken to a small curtained-off section that's currently bedless. One of the two seats is taken up by Nicolás, who I'd called to sit with Hiro until I could make it.

Nicolás glances up as I walk in. "They took him back for a scan. They don't think anything is seriously wrong, but he's extremely nauseous and dizzy," he says. "Hiro's tried explaining that it's

just something he has, but they're mostly ignoring him so far since it's not standard."

"Thanks for sitting with him," I say.

His brown eyes hook onto mine as he watches me closely. And even though he hasn't said anything about it, I can tell he's kind of irritated with me. "No problem. How did Hiro get taken, and why didn't you call me immediately?"

"At this point, I don't know why this man focused on Hiro. Maybe he was coming for me... And I'm sorry. I just panicked and ran off... I should have called you and Patricia."

He nods slowly. From what I've noticed, Nicolás is rather quiet and only really opens up with Hiro. So the nod I'm getting instead of a reply is probably pretty much all I'm going to get.

I take a seat even though I want to stand and pace and demand Hiro return to me.

"Why is Hiro drawn to trouble?" Nicolás asks.

"I think it's because he wants to try his absolute hardest to save and help everyone he can," I say.

"When he told me he was opening a bookstore, I was actually relieved. It was something *normal*. Mistakenly, I thought that he might be good, keep his head down, and stop chasing after the dead and getting wrapped up in shit. And he was okay... for a little bit... until Sean died."

"It had to have been hard for both of you."

"It was. But Hiro got his... hero complex back. Has to save them all. Such a fitting name for him," he says with a sigh as he leans back in his chair.

A moment later, they wheel the bed back with Hiro at least looking more coherent than the last time I saw him.

"Maddox! Demand that I'm fine so I can go home. They won't listen to me but I bet if you take your shirt off and growl at them, they'll listen to you!" he says.

The nurse ignores him. "We'll let you know as soon as the results are done," she says with a warm smile.

"Dammit, Reggie, no. Stop with the meat sandwich thing. It's creepy," Hiro says, like talking about me stripping for a nurse wasn't equally as creepy.

Nicolás and I catch each other's eyes. I'd like to say it's awkward since I'm already sure I know what Reggie is going on about, but it just makes Nicolás laugh, which makes Hiro laugh. And after the night I just had, Hiro's laugh is the best goddamn thing I could hear right now.

"Hiro, just don't listen to the evil ghosts. We've been over this," Nicolás says.

"Reggie says he wants to be *your* evil ghost under the sheets."

Nicolás snorts and I can't help but question if he's bi. Not that it matters, just so Reggie can get his hopes up some more. I'm not sure what kind of ghostly deeds he thinks he can get up to with Nicolás, though, but I bet he'd try them all.

"How are you feeling?" I ask as I walk over to Hiro's bed.

He even has more color to his cheeks as he smiles at me. "Better. Much better. I threw up on Nicolás as a greeting. He had to go get changed. It was really disgusting."

"I'm just glad you're safe and that you now owe me," Nicolás teases.

Hiro grins. "I promised him more of your cookies, Maddox."

"Good," I say, relieved. "He can have all the cookies he wants. Now what the hell was going on?"

"What a mess. So... Erick wanted me to talk to his dead wife," Hiro says. "That's why he picked me up and drove me off and threatened me."

"But... his wife is alive, so...?"

"Meg."

That takes me a moment. “But Meg is Jude’s wife. Why has he just taken over Jude’s life?” I ask, uncertain.

“Right? He literally thinks he’s Jude. So then I lied and told him Meg was there, and he started saying this shit about how he knew what she did, implying that she’d cheated on him. And that he wishes he’d killed her after what she did.”

“So Erick, who thinks he’s Jude, knows that the wife of some man he’s supposedly never met before cheated on him?” I ask skeptically.

“I really don’t know. He was pissed at her, though. When it became clear I wasn’t actually speaking with her, he lost his mind. That’s when that guy who was shot rushed out to help me... how is he? Is he... okay?” Hiro asks, looking worried about the answer I might give him.

“Last I heard, he was sent straight to the OR, but let’s keep our fingers crossed he’s alright,” I say.

“And the pastor?”

“He’s fine.”

“Good,” Hiro says before sinking down on the bed. It’s not a moment later that he’s dozing off, leaving me to sit with Nicolás in silence. I’m not quite sure what to say to him. Clearly, we both suck at small talk. Thankfully, we’re soon saved from the awkward staring not long after to be told that Hiro doesn’t have a concussion and that he’s clear to go, which Hiro is thrilled about.

When we reach the vehicle, Nicolás heads back to his home after giving Hiro a hug. Once Hiro’s in the car, I close the door before heading to my side to get in. He’s already dozing by the time I start the car, so I drive back toward my house in silence. The house has already been searched and released back to me, which means we could stay the night, but I honestly don’t think Hiro would feel comfortable there, and I don’t want to leave Stella and Bandit there either.

I pull into the driveway and get out without waking Hiro. Inside the house, I grab the carrier and set it out before heading upstairs to the bedroom where Stella is asleep on the bed, but Bandit is nowhere to be seen.

“Bandit?” I call as I stuff the half-asleep, half-pissed cat in the carrier. She likes going to Hiro’s but despises the carrier and the car ride, so I don’t take her too often. Bandit couldn’t care less where I shove him as long as he gets to go on an adventure.

So then where is he?

I check all his sleeping spots but come up with no cat as Stella yowls out her complaints. That alone should bring him running.

When Ben arrived, he said the door had been ajar... did Bandit slip out? What about when the crew was here to assess the situation?

Fuck, fuck, fuck. And then all the cars in and out, and all the chaos... would he have run off if he’d found himself outside?

I rush outside and look around, hoping to find him waiting by the door. “Bandit?” I call. Switching my phone’s flashlight on, I stoop down and look under the porch, hoping to see his glowing eyes staring back at me.

What is this shit day? What the hell is this fucking day? He could have gotten hit on the road or run off or gotten lost and... “Fuck!” I yell.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Hiro says as he pushes the car door open.

“Just...” I shake my head as I try to steady my thoughts. Why am I even panicking? I’m sure he’s fine. I’m sure everything is fine.

Hiro walks over to me and presses his front against my back as his arms wrap tightly around me and his head tucks against my shoulder. “Maddox.”

I take a deep breath, close my eyes and just *feel* him there. How the hell can just feeling Hiro make everything better—make all those fears and worries slip away so I can concentrate? How can someone's touch work such magic?

“Everything's a fucking mess. And then Bandit must have slipped out, and what if he got hit or hurt and... what if you got killed and I can't... I just fucking can't...”

He squeezes me tightly and presses a kiss to my neck. “We will do everything we can to find Bandit, and I'm right here. I'm safe.”

“But what if he'd shot you, instead? What if he'd killed you?” I ask, my voice catching. “Fucking hell, Hiro... I just... I thought I was going to lose you and...”

His grip tightens and I try to focus just on him as I set my hands against his.

“I'm sorry you had to deal with that,” he says.

“You're the one who was literally taken and held at gunpoint, you shouldn't be apologizing that I had to go through shit. You had to... go through everything that was so much worse.”

“It's even worse when you're the one that's left behind while the person you love could be hurt or killed. I felt the same way when Millie attacked you. I think it's a part of this life, Maddox. We're able to save people because we're able to take risks. We're able to fight to save others, even if it means that sometimes we have to fight to stay alive.”

“I just... don't like it being *you*,” I say as I tighten my hand over his.

“I know.” He loosens his grip and turns me around so we're facing each other. “But I'm here. And you're here, and we just have to keep moving forward, pushing forward together. I'm here, Maddox. I'm fine,” he says as he cups my cheek. “I'm not leaving you.”

I want to tell him that he can't promise that, but instead, I just kiss his lips gently and pull him into a tight hug. “Thank you.”

“Now let's find Bandit,” he says with a smile as he pulls back. “Bandit? Come on, Bandit!”

I start walking around with him, calling for the cat while letting his words sink in. I hadn't realized how much I'd let everything bottle up. I'm not used to talking to people about my emotions and thoughts. I'm used to keeping it all inside, but I guess with Hiro, I don't have to do that. I have him standing firmly by my side because he's prepared to support me, love me, and help me. I'm not alone.

So I need to stop acting like I am.

Hiro suddenly looks straight up at a tall tree in the neighbor's yard. “Spite says he's up there. That or he's picking on a different cat, which wouldn't be surprising.”

“Up the giant tree?” I ask as I question my climbing abilities.

“Yep.”

We both walk over to it and get into a position where I can shine my flashlight straight up without the light getting blocked by the branches. Sure enough, two glowing eyes peer down at me. From this height, it's hard to tell if it's Bandit or not, but the chances it's not him are pretty slim.

“Well... I could call the fire department and ask them to send out their sexy crew,” Hiro suggests.

“I think that's only in porn.”

He tsks. “Dammit. I wanted to watch them slide down their pole.”

I snort as I stare up at Bandit who seems convinced he's not coming down. He even meows at me, as if to say, “Get your ass up here, I've made a grave mistake.”

“Hmm... you don't by any chance have any ghosts who can bring a cat back to me, do you?”

“Well... Reggie's going to try to convince him down. Let's see if that works. I still feel like cats can sort of sense ghosts, but who knows.”

I decide to climb partway up to help, and whatever Reggie is doing or maybe just seeing me helps Bandit climb down to where I manage to grab him. He's all purrs and claws when I snatch him off the branch and painfully carry him down. Hiro opens the carrier and I plop him in with Stella who seems a little happier now that Bandit is involved.

"Let's go back to your place and get some sleep," I say.

"Sounds amazing."

And it does. Nothing sounds better than to lie down with Hiro and drift off to sleep knowing he's safe in my arms.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



HIRO

“I think he’s waking up.”

“No, he’s just rolling around like normal. I’ve tried sleeping with him before. He just migrates inside my body and it’s really weird.”

“Hold on now... I feel like I’m missing something. He goes *inside your body*?”

“You know, like... rolls into me.”

Dammit all. Why can’t I just be allowed to sleep like a normal person? “You’re missing nothing. Go away!” I growl at Reggie and Natalie.

“Hurry! He’s awake! Let’s get ready and...” Reggie hesitates. “Dammit, Hiro, open your eyes. It’s not that freaking hard. There’s something else hard waiting for you.”

I feel him smack my face, making my eyes shoot open so I can glare at him. “Fuck off... don’t talk about hard... things.” My eyes catch on the fourth person in the room. Nope, not Maddox.

Stripper Ghost.

“It’s Stripper Ghost’s rock-hard abs!” Reggie declares.

“Good morning there, your majesty,” the ghost says with a huge smile as he looms over the bed.

“What?” I ask, extremely confused by what is happening.

“I was told you had a pretty rough night, and you wanted a fireman to save your day,” he says as I realize he’s dressed in a skimpy red outfit that I think is supposed to resemble a fireman’s uniform. Honestly, it just looks like the tiniest red booty shorts with suspenders. His dark skin glimmers, making me wonder if he rolled around in a barrel of oil that makes his muscles shimmer.

He snaps one of the suspenders, winks at me, and starts shimmying his body as Natalie and Reggie clap like they’re beyond thrilled.

Stripper Ghost is a man I met when my brother, Sean, thought I needed a birthday present in the form of a half-naked man gyrating in my space. He made a reappearance after Sean moved on, but it’s quite clear Natalie and Reggie have made themselves a new friend who is now twerking as my half-asleep brain tries to decide what’s happening.

Don’t get me wrong, Stripper Ghost is gorgeous and buff, but he’s also not what I was expecting

at...

I glance at my phone.

Eleven in the morning.

Shit.

I try to get up before remembering I'm naked and pulling some sheets over my groin. "Beautiful way to wake up. Thank you... I just realized after all this time, I don't even know your name," I say as Stripper Ghost hops right up into my face. He grabs my head in his hand and rubs his extremely well-defined pecs on my cheek.

"Antoine," he says.

How the hell can this feel so awkward? "Ah, right. Antoine. Thank you so much for... all of this, I need to get going and—"

He puts a foot up onto the bed so I can see his dick flopping around in his shorts.

"Your... massive dick is extremely close to my face."

"It's *huge*," Reggie says.

I hear someone clear their throat and look over at the door in horror. Then I quickly look away, which means I'm just looking back at the flopping dick flip-flopping around.

"What was that?" Maddox asks as he leans against the doorframe.

"You know... just..." Oh dear god. What the absolute hell?

"Just?" Maddox presses. "I might be mistaken, but I think there was something about a massive dick... in your face?"

"He's enjoying this," Stripper Ghost says as he rotates.

"Smack that ass," Reggie urges.

"It's Stripper Ghost," I say. "Reggie and Natalie thought I needed to be woken by Stripper Ghost and his ass is like right in my face, and I didn't realize you were... listening." My face is just a little red at this point.

Maddox scrutinizes me.

"His name is Antoine. I learned that," I say, like this is useful information.

"I see. Antoine better not be moving in on what's mine," Maddox says, clearly joking, even if he's being completely deadpan.

Antoine gasps. "Never, my dude! This is purely professional!"

Such a professional ass in my face.

"Alright, when you're done with that, we're going to go to the department where you can tell them everything that happened, and I'm going to try not to figure out how to break into Erick's hospital room and punch his face in for touching you, alright?" Maddox says with a sweet smile that reeks of evil.

"You're gonna need to have a moment to decompress after this, though," Antoine says, like he thinks I'm going to be so rock hard I can't even function when he's done.

"I'm professional. I can handle it," I tell him, honestly not sure what that's helping, if anything. I just really don't want to go down as the person who got a stiffy from a ghost while the guy I actually loved watched me from the doorway (while probably questioning my sanity). "How about I get a raincheck?" I'm hoping that raincheck is for some time in the far, far future.

"Deal," Antoine says.

"You can dance for us instead," Reggie says with a smile as he literally shoves me off the bed in all my naked glory.

Reggie whistles and I flip him off as I hurry over to grab my clothes to get dressed in the

bathroom while Reggie and Natalie enjoy the show I left behind. As I get dressed, I notice I have a third cat staring at me—the ghost cat I’d found for Reggie. The cat seems extremely interested in Stella and Bandit, and he likes to follow them around when he’s not stuck to Reggie’s side. I reach down and pet the cat, which always pleases him and irritates Spite who comes hopping onto the scene, wings out, like he’s going to scare the cat off. The cat just boxes him once and Spite struts around the bathroom like he actually won the fight.

“You’re all ridiculous,” I tell them.

And maybe so am I.



Once Detective Keaton is done interviewing me, which was honestly the most painful experience of the day, I’m finally let free to find Maddox.

“How’d it go?” Maddox asks as I walk over to his desk.

“Worse than being with Erick,” I mutter.

Maddox raises an eyebrow. “I’ll have to tell him that.”

Oh dear god. Maddox would enjoy that far too much and then Keaton would make my life a living hell. “Don’t you dare!” I say.

He seems pleased with himself. He likes it most when I suffer even though I am so kind and caring to *him*.

“So Keaton gets to interview Erick even though you’ve done more work than him?” I ask skeptically.

“Yes, since I could possibly be an unbiased interviewer because I have... *feelings* about Erick that I cannot... express out loud.”

“Ah... you’d *never* be unbiased,” I say with mock surprise.

He gives me a smile. He’s clearly thinking about how he’d torture Erick. Scream at him, growl at him, glower at him, and it’d all be just for me.

“You’re ridiculous *and* sexy, you know that?” I ask.

This seems to sate the feral Maddox. “I do. I am a bit... annoyed I don’t get to be... *involved*.”

I think about it for a moment before saying, “You... want to hear what’s going on?”

His eyes damn near twinkle. He seems to realize I might have something up my sleeve. “I do.”

“You can’t even listen in?”

“No, because someone had to go get themselves abducted,” Maddox says with a look aimed right at me.

“How dare I?” I tease. “Maybe if I’d been snuggling with you instead of Reggie, I wouldn’t have been.”

“Did someone say... *Reggie*?” the man in question says as he appears before me, wearing Natalie like a backpack and holding a cat in his arms.

I just stare at the situation before getting back to the wonderfully amazing idea I had. “While you and I cannot go watch the interview... I know two people who can.”

“Ooh, do we get to be bad boys?” Reggie asks as he pulls out a ghost gun. Where the fuck he pulled it out of, I’m not sure. He’s now posing with it while still carrying Natalie and holding Snugglebum, the cat.

“You’re sending your ghosts?” Maddox asks. “Hell yes, send your ghosts.”

“Call me a bad boy!” Reggie cries out.

I ignore him, positive that the moment I start calling anyone, even a ghost, a bad boy, everyone in the office is going to turn and look at me and question my wellbeing.

“You’re a bad, bad boy,” Natalie purrs.

“Thank you, Nat,” Reggie says.

“You two as friends... is highly concerning,” I say. “But anyway, see that guy there? Go follow him.”

That makes Reggie hesitate as his face scrunches up. “Ew, I don’t want to follow Detective Dick. Did I tell you he was laughing with some other guys about you talking to ghosts?” Reggie asks. “He was all ‘The weird one thinks he can see ghosts. He’s so weird. That ghost that follows him around, though, is a hot tamale.’ And I was like ‘Ew, anyone who treats one of my best friends like that can’t call me hot.’”

I stare at Reggie, really hoping he’ll just leave.

Reggie’s face twists into a grimace. “Your stare is creeping me out. Natalie, let’s get away from the creep.”

“Onward, my steed,” Natalie says as she spurs him on with her heels.

“I’m going to head to the bookstore since I’m not allowed to be involved in any of the fun stuff. Maddox, I’ll meet you for lunch where Reggie and Natalie can spill everything?” I ask.

“No,” Maddox says, voice stern.

“What?”

“You have to sit here, right here, and never move.”

“The guy who abducted me *has been arrested*. I’m fine. Goodbye.”

Maddox’s eyes narrow as they flicker down to the chair like I’m just going to crumple onto it if he glares long enough. If he was naked, maybe I would have.

“Lunch,” I say as I hurry off before Maddox can give me his sexy grumble. If only he knew how weak that grumble and smirk make me, he could have put me down in an instant. Good thing he doesn’t know how to wield it.



“Please tell me how awesome I am,” Reggie says.

I refuse to repeat that for Maddox. “What’d you find?” I ask as I unwrap my burger in the passenger seat of Maddox’s car.

“For starters, tell me how amazing I am.”

“Erick claims to remember nothing,” Natalie says.

“Dammit, Natalie!” Reggie yells as I repeat to Maddox everything that’s going on. “Anyway, so he’s playing the victim. Claims that the last thing he remembers was hiking, then he woke up lying on the floor, crying about being shot.”

“I don’t believe that for a damn minute,” Maddox says after hearing what Reggie had to say.

“But he literally acted like he was Jude. He *thought* he was Jude,” I say.

“Yeah, he’s not doing that now. He’s pretty clear about the fact that he’s Erick now. Just keeps asking to see his wife. Asks why he’s being blamed for this. What proof they have. How there’s no possible way he could have been involved in any of it,” Natalie says.

“He sounds pretty convincing too,” Reggie says. “Like distraught as hell. If he’s acting... he’s a

really good actor.”

“What happened when Keaton pushed him harder?” Maddox asks.

“He just started sobbing. Saying that he’d never hurt anyone. Asking why no one cares who attacked him in the woods,” Natalie says.

“But he has no idea who that was?” Maddox asks.

“No. Didn’t get a look at anyone’s face. Just... remembers the impact and hitting the ground. Couldn’t remember how many people were there or being loaded in the car. Couldn’t place either of you two and claims to have never even been to Jude’s farm,” Reggie says.

“What if... he really doesn’t remember?” I ask after repeating everything to Maddox.

Maddox glances over at me. “A week? He just forgot a whole week? I mean, he could have been drugged, but he *seemed* fine when we were with him. His eyes weren’t dilated, no real signs to show that he was. But I’m sure they’ll check him over and we should have our answer shortly. Until then... I guess we just have to be patient.”

“Your favorite pastime,” I say with a smile. He instantly scowls at me which fills me with far too much joy. I have simple pleasures in life.

“My question, then, is how did he know where you’d be and that you could speak to ghosts?”

I shrug. “I mean, I’ve done some medium-style stuff before. I guess any one of my past clients could have said something to him. I don’t keep it a secret, it’s more or less that most people just don’t believe in it, so it’s really rare for anyone to even talk about it.”

“I guess. I still want to look into that further. The moment I get my hands on him—”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “How are you going to get your hands on him? You’re not allowed to be involved, *remember?*”

He gives me a smirk that I may or may not find ridiculously sexy. “I have my ways.” Then he winks like I wasn’t already having enough issues keeping myself from wanting to jump him.

“Oh dear god, I can just hear Hiro’s heart beating overtime,” Reggie says.

“My heart is beating overtime,” Natalie says. “Tell him to take his clothes off.”

This is honestly the first time she’s ever said anything that makes sense.

I decide my heart and Natalie are definitely right in this scenario. “You should tell me all about this... *naked.*”

Maddox watches me for a moment like he’s trying to figure out if something is wrong with me. “I’m pretty sure my chances of getting arrested and dealing with public indecency charges make me feel like I should say no,” he says.

“He’s such a tease,” Reggie throws in, like he wasn’t just chastising me.

Maddox’s phone beeps and he glances down at it. “Huh...”

“What?” I ask as he texts away.

“Do you want to talk to Erick? He’s asking to talk to you.”

“Me?” I ask in surprise.

“Yeah, Keaton says he’s claiming to remember nothing and thought talking to someone who’d been there with him might help.”

“Oh... yeah, sure,” I say. “Now?”

“Yeah, let’s head there now.”

“On the way there, can we swing by the bookshop? I grabbed a ‘get well soon’ basket for the guy who helped me and was shot.”

“Of course.”

“Did you catch his name?”

“Troy, and last I heard, he’s doing alright.”

“Good. I hope he recovers quickly,” I say.

Maddox gives my hand a squeeze.

“So... seems like you’ve been lucky with how involved Keaton is with all of this,” I tease.

“He just got off a big case dealing with Jan Carson, a nasty man who abducted women. So they slid him over to help out. He’s good at his job. Just a bit... irritating is all,” Maddox says.

“Irritating... good word for him.”

“Disgusting,” Reggie pipes in.

“Hot,” Natalie throws out.

I shake my head at the two ghosts, but at least they’re amusing.



When we arrive at the hospital, Maddox isn’t allowed to go with me, much to his disappointment. I believe that it will keep Erick from facing his next life far too quickly, so it’s probably a good idea.

Instead, Keaton is there for me.

Which is a horrible turn of events.

“Hey,” I say.

He grunts.

“Nice to see you again. Twice in one day to be blinded by your charming smile is almost too much.”

He grunts again, which seems to be short for “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Ah, wouldn’t I like to know as well? When we reach the room Erick is being held in, there’s an officer standing outside it that Keaton escorts me past. I notice Erick sitting up in his bed when I walk in, so he must be doing quite well. Keaton goes through a few things before he even lets us speak.

“You... are Hiro, then?” Erick asks, watching me closely. Even though he’s handcuffed to his bed, I still feel uneasy being in the room with him. I have to remind myself that he can’t reach me. He can’t hurt me. It’s over with.

“I am. And you’re Erick?”

“Yeah... I was told that I abducted you? That I held you at gunpoint?” He looks confused as he bites at his lip. “I don’t... are you sure it was me? I didn’t do that. I wouldn’t do that... why would I do that?”

“It was definitely you. You wanted to take me to the cemetery outside a church to talk to your dead wife,” I say.

He shakes his head while looking distraught. Reggie and Natalie were right, he really does look upset, nothing at all like the man who’d driven me off to a cemetery with a gun to my head.

“My wife’s not dead,” he says. “I just saw her earlier. I don’t... I think someone drugged me or something. I don’t... I didn’t...”

“What about when we met you in the woods?” I ask.

“Like... hiking? We met hiking or something?”

“No, the woods outside Jude’s home,” I say.

“Jude’s the man you people think I killed? I didn’t do this. I didn’t hurt anyone. I’ve never met you in my life.”

The thing is, he could be saying anything he wants to say. And of course he’d do everything he can

not to be arrested, but there's a part of me, a huge part of me, that believes him.

"Can you... talk me through what happened? I want to see if I can remember anything. My past week just feels like a black hole. Like... I feel like I was just hiking hours ago... not over a week."

"Of course," I say and start from the beginning. Maddox had told me that if the man really didn't remember, including descriptions of auditory or other similar things could spark a memory, so I try to include everything I can to help him. I'm not sure if it is, but I want to figure out exactly what happened.

But more than anything, I want answers. And right now, the answers seem unclear.

"Ghosts? You can see ghosts?" Erick asks, clear disbelief on his face as I get to the part of the story where he'd dragged me out of my bed and across the state to then demand I speak to his dead wife that's actually Jude's dead wife.

It doesn't help that Keaton makes a scoffing noise. I turn my sharp eyes onto him, trying to convey he should shut up before something else happens to him that may or may not have to do with Maddox.

"I can. It seemed to be the reason why you wanted me," I say.

Erick's look of disbelief is rising along with his eyebrows. "To speak to some ghosts? Is this a joke? Is this some sick joke? This isn't funny if you think it is."

"It's not a joke. I apologize if I made it seem like one," I say.

He shakes his head, and I can see his irritation bubbling up to the boiling point. I can either just let it slide and walk away or...

"Your brother follows you and your wife around. I met him when Maddox talked to Reba. He told me that you didn't know how to shoot a gun and would never hurt anything. That you passed out while going to school to be a vet tech. I really want to believe him."

Erick watches me for a long moment, but he just shakes his head. "I'm getting a headache, I want to be done," he says.

I stand up, not sure that there's anything else that can be done if he's finished talking to me. "Just know that whether you believe me or not, I do believe something was going on. I would love to get answers," I say as I give him a nod and head through the door with Keaton by my side. "I take it you never told him he dragged me out to a cemetery to talk to his dead wife that's not even his wife."

Keaton shrugs, not at all caring that he left out a vital piece of information when talking to Erick. "Why would I? You lost him the moment you said that."

"But it's the truth."

Keaton clearly doesn't seem convinced. "I feel sorry you believe that."

Ahh... such a dick.

Not wanting to get into anything, I gladly head back to Maddox who is in the waiting room with the basket I'd bought for Troy. "How'd it go?" he asks.

"Was going decent until your consultant started preaching about ghosts," Keaton says as he folds his arms over his chest.

"I didn't *preach* about anything. I told him what happened and it's not my fault you *and* Erick don't want to hear it," I say.

Maddox stands up. He's actually shorter than Keaton, but there's something about his expression and stance that makes him seem bigger. "Is there an *issue*, Keaton?"

Keaton shrugs. "Not a damn one."

"Oooh, there's gonna be a *showdown*. I mean, he's hot but my god, what a dick," Reggie says as he appears before me with a bucket of popcorn and Natalie by his side. Natalie starts chowing on it as I watch the two men stand off. It's all testosterone and grumbles.

"This would be *so* much better if they were both naked," Natalie says.

"So much," Reggie agrees, and I... kind of... have to concur.

But because I'm the bigger man, I set a hand on Maddox's chest. "Let's go."

"Dammit, Hiro! You're such a little fun ruiner," Reggie says as he starts throwing ghost popcorn at me. Spite, appearing from nowhere, starts chasing them down before they disappear.

Maddox leads me away while grumbling under his breath things that I swear include the words "motherfucker," "tiny-dicked asshole," and my favorite, "hell open up and swallow him."

"It's fine," I say.

Maddox lets out a grumble. "It's not fine."

"You *also* didn't believe me when you first met me," I remind him before quickly retracting that statement after seeing the way his eyes go wide. "I mean, the moment I met you, I was overwhelmed by how quickly you believed me and everything I was able to see. I felt so *heard*."

"You bet your ass, you did," he says.

I grin as I get in the elevator and the moment the doors close with Reggie and Natalie on the other side of them, I lean into him and give him a kiss. "Thanks for being ready to fuck some shit up all in my honor."

"You're welcome," he says, and I get the odd impression of a peacock pleased to have chased off other suitors as the doors open on the hospital floor we're going to. I follow him down the hallway and over to a door that he knocks on. A familiar woman answers it and smiles at us.

"Interesting to see you two again," she says as I realize she's the woman from the diner in the village.

"Kylie, right? Is it okay if we come in and see Troy?" Maddox asks.

"It is and of course!" she says, stepping aside.

We head into the room where Troy lies in his bed. He definitely doesn't look as good as Erick did. He looks pale and fragile sitting in the bed.

"Hey," he says. "I'm so glad to see that you're alright."

"I'm... really glad to see you're doing okay. I was... you had me quite worried," I say as I walk over to the bed. "I'm so sorry you got mixed up in that when you were just trying to help. I feel awful about it."

He shakes his head. "No, don't apologize. None of that was your fault at all. I heard what happened. How terrifying. I'm glad I stumbled on you before something worse happened."

"Thanks. I got you a little something," I say as I set the basket on the counter for him to go through later.

"I wanted to thank you as well," Maddox says.

Troy is all smiles. "You're welcome."

"We won't keep you long. You need your rest, but just know I really appreciate it," I say.

"Of course," he says. "Thank you."

When we turn toward the door, Troy goes, "Wait! I forgot to mention this to the detective I talked to earlier... but that guy from the cemetery? He'd been in and out of that area for multiple days. I... I thought it was odd because I'd never seen him before, but I assumed it was someone whose family member had passed away and thought nothing of it. I don't know."

"Did you ever see him do anything else?" I ask.

"I saw him talking to Jude's daughter," Troy says. "I went to visit Kylie at the diner and stopped when I saw him and Everly talking outside the store Everly works at."

"How did she act?" Maddox asks.

Troy shrugs before wincing. “Fine, I guess. Like she wasn’t in distress or anything or you bet I’d have gone over there.”

“Troy sticks his nose into things he shouldn’t,” Kylie says as she waves at the man currently lying in the bed like she really doesn’t need to look any further for proof.

“Kylie, I’m just... born nosy. It’s not my fault Mom didn’t give you the nosy gene. Don’t judge me,” he says, making me think that they are brother and sister.

She snorts. “Right.”

“Thanks for that information,” Maddox says.

“Of course.”

Maddox and I head for the door after issuing our goodbyes again.

“Do you think Everly is lying to you?” I ask.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out,” he says, determined.

CHAPTER TWELVE



HIRO

“What’s wrong?” Natalie asks.

Maddox is gone, that’s what’s wrong. “Nothing.”

She sits down on the coffee table in front of me. “I can tell something’s wrong.”

“Just... thinking is all.”

Natalie stares at me with that all-knowing look, like she thinks I’m an idiot who needs to learn how to get better at lying.

“I feel a little... off at being home alone. I know it’s stupid when Erick is far away from me and can’t get to me. It just... I don’t know.”

Natalie bites her lip as she leans back. “I couldn’t help you in the car, Hiro... Why couldn’t I help you?”

I look at her in surprise. Honestly, it’s been a long time since I’ve seen this level of seriousness from Natalie. She’s always so carefree about everything that I had no idea she was still feeling upset over this. “It’s okay, it ended up working out alright in the end. I’m here, no one died—”

That doesn’t seem to appease her. “But what about next time? What about the next time I fail at this? I... fuck... I’m sorry.”

I reach out and set a hand on top of hers. “Natalie, it’s okay. Shit happens.”

“Can you work with me? I think I could have done it... maybe if I worked harder, I could do it.”

“Sure,” I say.

“Right now. Let’s go... I want to try to start your car.”

“Okay,” I say as I get up, glad for the distraction. Together, we head down to my car where I get into the passenger seat as she gets into the driver’s side. She reaches for the key, but her fingers immediately go through it. “You’re getting impatient.”

She sighs but waits for me to set a hand on her leg and concentrate on giving her control. This time, she can touch it, and I see the key turn a little, but it’s the pressure of turning the rest of the way that she struggles with. “Keep trying.”

“I am.”

“Whatcha two doing?” Reggie asks as he pops into the back seat.

“Trying to learn how to turn the damn key. If I could have turned the damn key, I could have helped,” Natalie says.

“Hmm... I think that’s too much interaction,” he says.

“You try,” she says.

“Hold my cat,” Reggie says as he stuffs the cat in my face like he couldn’t just set him down somewhere else. Snugglebum, as the poor thing has been named, seems indifferent. At first, I thought it was a pet name but nope. Reggie has named him Snugglebum. Clearly, I’m not the only one he tortures.

Then Reggie grabs my arm with one hand to give him strength to turn the ignition with the other. “Well, shit sticks.”

And now they’re both touching me while smacking, hitting, and turning everything in the car until the radio comes on.

“Did I do that? Did you do that?” Reggie asks, mystified.

“I don’t know!” Natalie says, and then they’re both back to smacking at buttons and hitting things as I sit in the passenger seat with Snugglebum who is purring and pleased to have a semi-normal person petting him.

At some point, I must pass out because when there’s a rap on the window, I jump and send Snugglebum flying. I look around, startled to find the car running, the windshield wipers going as fast as they can—making a godawful noise as they *squeeee* across a dry windshield—the radio blaring, and the air is arctic in here even though my ass is more than a little warm.

“Fucking hell,” I whisper as I roll the window down and look over at Maddox.

“I see you’re having a good ol’ time,” he yells over the music.

I smack it off, much to Reggie’s and Natalie’s disgust.

“Do you know how long it took us to get that turned on?” Natalie asks.

“Three hours,” Reggie says.

“What the fuck. We’ve been out here for *three hours*?” I growl.

“Do I even want to know?” Maddox asks.

“I... Natalie wanted to see if I could help her turn the car on, so I naively thought that’d be okay. I didn’t know they’d drain my life force just to turn everything on they possibly could,” I say as I shut everything down and turn the car off. “My body is mush.”

Maddox pulls the car door open and reaches inside. “The things you get up to when I’m not around fascinate me. I really think I need to keep a leash on you,” he says as he picks me up.

“My sexy man, I just sat here and took a nap while these asshats played with the car,” I say.

I’m lifted out of the car, which is honestly my ideal way to travel. Why use my own legs when my brain has become pure mush and a majestic man can carry me around? Actually, napping again sounds like the best idea ever. But first, I must stroke Maddox’s sexy arms as he carries me up the stairs to my apartment. If any of my neighbors saw me now, being carried like a bride while having one hand in Maddox’s shirt, I’m sure they’d be jealous if anything.

“You know, with everything going on and you savagely leaving me while you went to work, and then me going for a midnight stroll with Erick, I never got to say what I wanted to say.”

“Which is?” Maddox asks, blue eyes flicking down to meet mine.

“That you are *sinfully* sexy,” I say.

“You’ve just been holding that inside for that long? Unable to say it?” he asks, like this is of huge concern.

I laugh as he pushes through the door into my apartment. “Fine, fine. I wanted to tell you that I

really do want to move in with you. I'm sorry I didn't answer right away. It just... It's really not that big of a deal, but it's something I've never done before. Everything with you is so perfect that I never ever want to upset that."

He smiles as he sets me down on the couch before kneeling in front of me so he's not standing over me. "Hey, the only person I've ever lived with is Reggie."

"Oh good god, so anything I do will *have* to be better. That takes the pressure right off me," I tease, sad that Reggie's not here to hear my savage jab. It's the only time I've been sad he's not interrupting my quiet time with Maddox.

Maddox grins as he sets a hand on my leg. "I promise there's no pressure. You do realize we're both wary as hell of adult things, right? But this is something we can do together."

I smile, glad to hear that I'm not the only one with these issues. I'm pretty sure after all we've been through, we could tackle anything together and all my worries and fears are for nothing. "It is. Honestly, it's more that I don't want to mess this up than anything," I admit.

"I know, but you won't."

"And... you'll have to get used to me just talking to dead people and running off for no reason—"

"You can chat your heart out, but for fuck's sake, you are not running off. How many times do I have to tell you that?" he growls as he grabs my legs and yanks them forward so I slide down to my back onto the couch.

"I don't remember you ever telling me once," I lie with a grin.

"Oh man, you're going to be the death of me," Maddox says as he climbs onto the couch and straddles me. "I'm going to put a little tracker on you... no! A leash. Tie your ass up every time I leave the house," he says as he pins my arms down.

The thought of this makes me grin. "But I don't wanna be leashed like your ol' pet dog."

"Then you'd better fucking listen," he says. "If you don't..." He grabs a pillow and stuffs it over my head. "You know what's going to happen."

"No! We both know that if one of us is going to off the other, I need to off you so you can have sweet ghost sex with me, and I'll fulfill my dream of being nailed by a ghostly rod."

He pulls the pillow down just enough to reveal my eyes. Probably so I can see the expression he's giving me. "I know a ghost who would *love* to show you his dick."

"No, only yours," I say.

Maddox seems to turn thoughtful, which makes me grin. "Hmm... I might not smother you, then."

"Thanks. I love it when you refrain from smothering me. It makes me feel happy inside."

"I'm glad I can please," he says as he kisses my forehead before sliding the pillow back up until I can't see anything. I can feel his breath on my neck, but I can't see where he's going until he plants a kiss on my throat. "So does this mean I can pin you down whenever I want?"

"You act like you don't just look at me and my clothes fall off," I say.

He laughs and I can feel the vibration of it wherever his skin touches mine. I keep my eyes closed beneath the pillow, submitting to this dark world, but more than anything, to his touch. His touch that drives me crazy as his fingers travel down my neck, dipping under my shirt. His free hand runs over my jeans, cupping me as I push into him. I don't grab him; I just want to be here at his mercy. "I don't know, I usually have to fight off all your multiple suitors before I can even get a moment alone with you."

"Multiple? Try my army of ghost harassers. That's all it is," I assure him.

He pushes my shirt up and then his lips are on my chest, kissing and sucking and licking his way down. His tongue swirls around my nipple, flicking the bud before trailing a line of kisses down my

torso. With hurried hands, he unbuttons my pants and pulls them down, yanking each shoe off before they hit the ground with a *thud*.

When his fingers dip under my underwear, I hook him with my heels, wanting him closer. He doesn't immediately give in to my demands as his hand slides across my skin. Heat rises in me as I feel his breath on my cock while his hands roam up my thighs, leaving me aching for more.

The moment I feel his mouth around the head of my cock, I draw in a breath and find myself reaching for him. A finger draws up underneath my cock as his tongue swirls and his mouth wraps around me, sinking down farther and farther. I moan as he sucks harder, hot mouth sliding down, fingers exploring.

"Touch yourself," I say. Even though I can't see it, I want to know that he's stroking himself as he sinks down on me. That he's running his hand over his thick cock that's all mine just as much as I'm all his.

I hear his zipper slide down and even though I can't see any of it, the excitement of him drawing his hand over himself keeps me on the edge.

I catch his hair in my hand, gripping onto what I can of it before it slides between my fingers. When he moans, I can feel the vibration on my cock as my balls feel rock hard. Unable to handle more of him, I pant out his name.

"I'm close... Maddox..." I say as I squirm beneath him. I'm so close. The heat, the pleasure, the sensitivity all ramp up as he sucks down on me when I come. I moan as I tip my head back and the pillow slides off, but I don't open my eyes. No, I just want to *feel*. And right now, all I can do is feel him, feel the pleasure, feel his skin against mine, his mouth around me.

He pulls off me but tucks his head against me as he comes, and I need him up here with me. I need to touch him and hold him. Pushing the pillow off, I drag him up and press my body against his. He has his pants around his thighs and I'm in some odd state of undress, but it's enough. I roll into him, pressing him into the couch as I capture his lips with mine.

"You're so gorgeous," he says after parting from me. His finger trails over my forehead, pushing my hair up. "And you're going to move in with me... unless you want me to move in with you. Or if you want a whole new house. I don't care."

"Soooo if I told you I wanted to sell both our homes and live in a tent traveling the world...?"

"Um... I will fully support you from my house. I will send you love and even visit from time to time when the weather is pleasant," he says.

"I thought we had undying love?"

"We do... from my nice warm home."

I grin at him. "Okay. Fine. Your house will work better than this apartment. So much more room and we don't have my landlord Randy peeping in like a creep whenever he thinks I'm doing something semi-illegal."

"Isn't he the one that gave you the gun?"

"One hundred percent."

"And told you to blow a hole in the next person who looks at you wrong?"

"Also one hundred percent."

Maddox nods slowly. "Yeah, my house does sound better. But I'm getting a security system installed. This shit isn't happening again. I will also never leave you alone again."

"I hear ya," I say. "The first thing I'm moving is my orgy painting. It's going right in the living room of your house."

He looks over at the painting I'd been gifted after helping the mayor talk to his dead wife. It's a

very explicit painting of two men with giant phalluses pleasuring a busty woman.

“Deal?” I ask.

Maddox is quiet. “I’m starting to regret this.”

“I want it front and center or I can’t move in.”

“If that painting happened to... I don’t know... disappear at some point...” he says.

“I would be heartbroken and have to move back to my apartment where I can think fondly of it.”

Maddox sighs. “It goes in the closet.”

“Front room. First thing you see.”

He lets out another sigh, but I know that he’s going to let me get my way. I grin at the thought, closing my eyes and letting my mind wander to a life where Maddox and I are living together with a giant orgy painting front and center.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



HIRO

I stare at Deputy Chief Parker, positive she's suffering from... something that's given her horrible ideas and even more horrible decisions.

"I said you will go with Detective Keaton today to talk to Everly Walker and some of the other villagers who might know something," she says. "Are you struggling to hear? Do we need to send you out for a hearing test, Mr. Moore?"

I glance over to her dead brother who is currently hovering behind her. He's amused that I'm being bullied into going with an even bigger bully.

"Mr. Moore?" Parker's tone has turned sharper. I have to answer.

"No, it's just... I thought I worked primarily with Maddox, so I assumed—"

"Maddox has something else to do today, so you're going to take your... specialty and assist Detective Keaton," she says.

Specialty? She acts like she doesn't believe in it at all and wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole, yet she's clearly sending me off because of my so-called "specialty."

Dear god, just not with Keaton.

"Okay..." I say, honestly too scared not to agree.

"Good luck!" Parker's brother says, clearly enjoying my suffering.

I give him a grimace that Parker seems to think I was giving her, which results in her narrowing her eyes at me. That shuts me up real fast as I change it to a huge smile and an awkward thumbs up as I hurry out the door because good god, someone save me.

Quickly, I yank out my phone.

Me: MADDUX. Parker is sending me out with Keaton.

Maddox: WHY?

Me: Clearly, they're going to murder me. They're scheming together. Working together to off me, and I'm going to get offed, and I don't want to be offed.

Maddox: Okay, they can both be... disagreeable people, but they're not going to kill you. That's illegal.

Me: I'm glad you think the only reason they won't kill me is that it's *illegal*.

Maddox: I'm sure they don't want to lose their jobs.

Me: ...

Maddox: You got this.

Me: I got what? Damage to my wellbeing after having to be in the same car as *Keaton*?

Maddox: Have fun!

Me: No! Don't do this to me, Maddox. You have some sway with Parker. Tell her you refuse to share me. That you'll do anything to save me!

Maddox: Send me a dick pic when you're done so I know you're alive.

Me: Ass.

Maddox: Oh? I thought that's how this worked?

Me: Asshole.

Maddox: Guess I was wrong. Love you. See you in a bit.

Me: That is if I don't run off and elope with someone else.

Maddox: I bet Keaton would elope with you.

Me: Ha fucking ha.

"What the hell are you doing? Are you even *working*?" Keaton barks.

Slowly, ever so slowly, I look up from my phone to glower at Keaton who looks just as disgusted to have me along for the ride, but with Parker standing by his side, it's clear he can't get out of this.

"You two bring me back something good, got it?" Parker asks.

"Loud and clear," Keaton says, tone sour.

I swear Parker has a smile on her face as she sees us off. "She's enjoying this."

"At least one of us is," Keaton grumbles as he hurries away from me.

"Hiro!" Reggie yells, making me glance over at him. "Don't be alarmed, but you are in the presence of a dick. When faced with a dick you must first back away slowly. If the dick tries to follow, you must use all force necessary. I will find you a weapon." He rushes forward to a desk with a snow globe on it. "Might I recommend a snow globe for bludgeoning power?" He disappears and reappears on the other side next to a stapler. "A stapler for torture?" And then he's back on the other side of the room. "Or simply a pen to stab with?"

"What the hell are you grinning for?" Keaton asks.

I quickly school my expression. "Am I not allowed to have joy in my life?"

"Grinning like a maniac while your head swings back and forth isn't joy in life. It's just fucking creepy."

I swear to god. "I apologize for turning my head. I will make sure I keep my head perfectly straight from now on. Is that alright with you?"

"I'd prefer that I didn't even have to see your face, if I'm going to be real honest," he says.

"I'd prefer you didn't as well," I say as I follow him out to his car.

Finding the willpower to get inside it is the hardest thing I'll deal with today. Reggie is currently trying to shimmy this way and that to keep me from entering the vehicle.

"He's a stone-cold killer, I say!" Reggie declares. "I'm protection! I'm like a condom, Hiro. Trust the condom. Feel the condom."

As soon as Keaton is in the car, I glare at Reggie. "Dammit, Reggie, move."

"Let me envelop you in my latexy goodness."

Please... someone, please save me from this day.

I give Reggie a shove and get into the car where Reggie sits on Keaton's lap.

"Hi, I'm Keaton," Reggie says as he looks over at me while trying to take on Keaton's voice. It

turns out quite squeaky for some reason. ““My ego is as large as my balls. See how I have to sit to accommodate my massive balls?””

I glance at how far apart Keaton’s legs are spread as Reggie tries mimicking him. And as the car starts, I realize this is going to be the longest day of my life.

“While we’re there, I want you to say nothing and engage with no one, do you understand?” Keaton asks.

““There’s not enough room for you with me and my massive balls,”” Reggie adds.

I try to pull my attention away from Reggie. “Yep. I will be just a whisper in the wind.”

“No. You will be nothing because you’ll be completely silent.”

““Because I want to be able to hear the way my extra-large testes swing in the wind, and if you’re whispering over it, it’d throw off my game,”” Reggie says, still mimicking Keaton.

I swear to god, Reggie is going to get me murdered.

“Fine, I will just play dead,” I say with a sweet smile.

““You will after my testicles of doom and boom smash you to the ground,”” Reggie says.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” Keaton grumbles.

“Just... simply... listening to what you have to say. Silently. Or trying to be, but you keep giving me all these difficult tasks for me to follow. It’s hard for someone like me to comprehend them, you know? You use too many big words,” I say while trying to give him my most innocent smile.

“Why does Maddox put up with all of this from you? I used to have a lot of respect for him as a detective. He works hard, he’s extremely intelligent, and he’s phenomenal at what he does. Yet he falls for this conman shit you have going on? Is it just so he can get laid?”

“Definitely. During my teenage years I learned that the only way to hook people and get them to screw you was by claiming to see dead people. The moment I start preaching about dead people, men fall all over me instead of thinking I’m strange, a liar, or have some type of underlying illness. I mean, it got me Maddox, after all,” I say as dryly as I can.

“Ooh, *burn, bitch, burn*,” Reggie yells.

Keaton just grunts and I deem that good enough.

Reggie slides onto my lap, like he thinks I want to stare at the side of his head the whole way there. “You know, I used to think you were a sad little pushover, not good enough for my Maddox, but you’ve *somehow* proven me wrong.”

I would love some clarification on what “my Maddox” means, but I feel like I got to a good sass point with Keaton and don’t want to shatter it by carrying on a conversation with a man who is invisible to him.

The words between the two of us after that are limited to grunts and grumbles, but hey, we both somehow make it to Helmsdale alive, which is impressive to say the least.

When we reach the town, Keaton parks in the parking lot of the church before busting out through the door and hurrying off on his way before I even have a chance to unhook my seat belt.

“Clearly his ass is on fire. Or maybe being on holy ground is burning him because he’s a demon or a vampire and wants to make it quick,” Reggie says.

“Definitely makes more sense than him just being an ass,” I say.

“Sounds more fun than all this boring ghost shit. Man, if I was a vampire, I’d be surrounded by sexy men just begging me to taste their blood. They’d be all rutting into me with their twelve-pack abs —”

I quickly get out of the car, positive I don’t want to hear any more about vampire Reggie and his herd of naked men.

Instead, I end up following Keaton as he powerwalks into the church like he is on a mission to complete *all* of his work in record time *without* me. The pastor looks at us in surprise before smiling—probably because he doesn’t yet know who Keaton is.

“So good to see that you’re well,” he says as he comes up and hugs me.

“You too,” I say, finding the hug a little awkward, but he did get held at gunpoint because of me, so he can have his hug.

“Hiro, right?”

“Yes, and this is Detective Keaton. What was your name?”

“Joseph,” he says.

Keaton decides that’s enough chatting for one day and takes the lead by practically body-blocking me out of the conversation. He asks Joseph questions about Erick, but the man had never seen Erick before that day and has very little to help us with. That seems to up Keaton’s anger-ometer by one percent.

Ignoring him, I turn to Joseph. “Would it be okay for me to walk around a little?”

“Of course. Anywhere you’d like. Nothing is off-limits,” Joseph says with a smile.

Keaton stares at me. “We’ve already combed over the crime scene. You think we missed something that *you* are going to find?”

The anger-ometer is just clicking right up. “I... didn’t say that. I just wanted to walk around for a moment.”

“You do that. I’m going to keep working,” he says, like what I’m doing isn’t work.

“Can I at least have your number, so I know how to find you when I’m done?”

Clearly, I must have asked if I could snip off his giant balls of steel that Reggie loves talking about because that’s the expression he makes as he gives me his phone number.

“You don’t think we should stick together?” I ask. “Isn’t that... what we’re supposed to do?” Maddox has practically made my ears bleed with the number of times he’s clarified that we must stick together and never do anything without the other person. But maybe that’s just because he cares about my wellbeing and Keaton clearly does not.

“Not for this,” he says before hurrying out the door. I honestly don’t know if he’s telling the truth or not, but oh well. It is what it is.

As I walk around the inside of the church, my mind flickers back to the fear I’d felt as Erick had come after me. That feeling of being unable to do something no matter how hard I tried. Of knowing that only a door stood between me and possible death.

I was damn near powerless. Without my ghosts, would I be dead right now? Just another ghost left to haunt the world, fixated on what happened to me? What would I do? Just endlessly haunt this world until something or someone helped me move on? I bet Maddox would tear the world apart to help me find peace.

“You’re looking for Jude?” Reggie asks as he appears on one side of me and Natalie on the other.

“Yeah.”

“I did a quick scan and don’t see him,” Natalie says. “Actually, I don’t see any of the ghosts.”

“I’ve noticed that unless something horrific is happening, like Erick dragging me through the cemetery, this entire village is very quiet when it comes to ghosts. Probably because it’s a small village. Not too many horrible things happen in small villages since they have lower crime rates, you know, stuff that would cause the ghosts to linger,” I say.

Natalie shrugs. “That’s true but we are butted up against a cemetery. You’d think there’d be at least one out there cursing something.”

I walk the path I'd taken nights ago, finding myself back in that same room I'd locked myself in as Troy threatened to bleed out. Why does nothing seem right here? It all seems wrong but why? God, I wish Maddox was here to help me figure out what's going on because *something* is.

When I'm done with the inside of the church, I walk out to the graveyard and over to Meg's grave. Still no Jude and no one else either. I was hoping to at least ask a few questions, but it's clear I'm not going to be given the chance.

I send Keaton a text in case he's in the middle of speaking to someone and I'd be interrupting. Then I head out to the road leading into town since Keaton clearly took his car and drove off without me. The church is about a quarter of a mile from the start of the village, so I begin walking.

Even though the air has a little bit of a crisp feel to it, it's nice because the sun is shining brightly, warming my back as I walk. There's still no reply from Keaton by the time I arrive, so I take a chance calling him. It rings and rings and rings.

Of course he's going to ignore me.

I see his car sitting across the street from the diner, so I head toward it, hoping Keaton is somewhere nearby. There's a small grocery store to the right of the vehicle that I head into just to see if I can get lucky and find him inside.

The person behind the register is a younger woman who is clearly enthralled in a car magazine because she doesn't even bother to look up as I walk in.

"Excuse me?" I ask.

She pops her gum before looking over at me. "Heya there. Sorry. What can I do for you?"

"I'm wondering if a guy came in here. He owns that car there," I say as I point through the glass window.

"Oh, no. I saw him get out of the car, though. He acted like he was going to step in before turning and buzzing off that way," she says with a pointed finger. "Not sure what he saw, but he must have been ultra-interested in whatever it was to have just rushed off like that."

"Thank you," I say with a smile before stepping back outside. When I do, I catch the attention of an older woman. She stares at me quite closely as she walks on by, like I've done something to upset her. I give her a warm smile, but she doesn't bother to return it.

"I don't like this place," Natalie says.

"Yeah, I feel ya," Reggie says, reminding me that this is where he died.

He hasn't brought it up yet, but it has to be bothering him. I'm not sure how it couldn't. "Reggie, if you want to meet me at home, you can, you know? Go see if Stripper Ghost will give you a lap dance."

He gives me a big smile. "Nah, I'm fine. I like watching Keaton make you suffer. It gives me life."

"Ah, wonderful," I say dryly as I start walking in the direction the young woman had pointed. Honestly, the village is so small I'm already running out of areas to look, so I call Keaton once more.

Again, no reply.

I look around me, getting a weird feeling like I'm being watched. Like this small village, that at first glance seems welcoming and warm, is closing in around me.

Fuck, I'm sure it's just because of Erick dragging me here.

With a sigh, I stop at the edge of the last building and pull my phone out to call Maddox.

"Hey," he says.

"I'm sorry, I know you're busy, but Keaton and I split up, and he isn't answering his phone. I'm sure he's just being a dick to me, but I also don't like that I have absolutely no idea where he's at."

"He did *what*?" Maddox asks with a growl. "You two were not supposed to split up. Why the hell

did you split up?"

Here we go. "I wanted to check out the church to see if I could find Jude, and he wanted to continue on..."

"Ohhh if Parker hears about this, she's going to roast his ass," he says, sounding like he'd love to see that happen. "Let me give him a call and see if he's being an ass and ignoring you or if something is wrong. My bet is on the ass part."

"Thank you. I should have known better."

"But *he* knows better. Parker sent you out, even though you shouldn't be involved after what Erick did to you, because you're the *only* one who can do this. You're the only person who can speak to the dead, so she needs you, even if she could get in trouble for involving you."

"Oh... I didn't know that. I feel like I'm not doing a very good job of it, then. It's just like I'm walking in circles or something and getting nothing done."

"You're doing a fantastic job, Hiro," Maddox assures me. "Think of how much we've been able to accomplish because you can see things no one else can. I'll text you what I figure out."

"Thanks."

We end the call, and I'm left standing on the sidewalk with my ghosts who are currently trying to decide if Maddox could take on a bear shirtless. That's when I see a familiar face and smile as Kylie, the waitress from the diner, gives me a wave. "Hey!"

I look both ways before crossing the road, but since I've only seen one car drive past since I arrived, I feel pretty safe. When I reach the other side, I smile at Kylie. "How is Troy doing?"

"Good! So much better. He's so happy to be home. He told me he should get shot more often because he's been pampered like hell. Everyone is bringing him food and games and all this shit to entertain him."

"I'm really glad he's doing well. I feel awful having dragged him into this," I say.

She shakes her head. "Don't blame yourself. There's nothing you could have done differently."

"Have you seen a detective around here?" I ask.

"I have! He came in, asked me a few things, then headed off... oh... looks like he's storming this way now," she says.

I turn to look over at Keaton who is in fact storming. "You called *Maddox* on me?" he growls.

"He's so *feisty*," Natalie says.

"You weren't answering your phone, so I was concerned something happened to you," I say.

He jabs a finger at me. "I was talking to Everly Walker! If Maddox tells Parker, I'm going to be *pissed*," he growls.

"He won't," I say. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

Kylie looks between us in clear concern. "Well... I'll let you two get back to work. Want me to fix you something for the road?" she asks because she's clearly an angel, even when faced with a raging Keaton.

I don't know what to say and Keaton just grunts, so I give her a smile. "That'd be fantastic, thank you."

Keaton must find himself hungry because he at least complies with coming in to order before jabbing a finger at his car. "I'm going back to the vehicle," he says, and with that, he's gone.

"He's a... unique one," she says with a smile.

"He is. Mind if I hit your restroom?"

"Please, go right ahead."

I go inside and use the bathroom before washing up. When I look up, I notice a ghost in the mirror

standing directly behind me. I jump before smacking the water off and turning around.

"Fuck..." I say. "Sorry. I didn't mean to react like that. Do you... have a minute?"

He ignores me but doesn't leave the room, making me feel ill at ease. I guess Millie taught me that not all ghosts are friendly and some... some might try to murder me with a shower hose.

I step outside of the bathroom and find a few more people have wandered into the diner while I was being stared at by a dead man. I head toward a bench to wait, but before I can get seated, Kylie comes back and slides a bag toward me. "Enjoy!"

"Thank you," I tell her as I head out the door and hurry over to the car. When I reach it, I stop because the ghost from the bathroom is sitting in the back seat, and this time he has a friend.

"What the fuck is going on?" I mutter.

"I think they're just enamored with you," Natalie says. "It's your beautiful complexion."

"We all are," Reggie says, voice borderline sarcastic. "Maybe once we get in, they'll be so overwhelmed by *my* beauty, they'll fuck off."

Reggie has strange hopes, but I get into the car anyway and hold Keaton's sandwich out to him. He jumps and looks over at me, like he hadn't noticed me enter the vehicle.

"You alright?" I ask. He's a grumpy asshole, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to notice if he acts even more assholish than normal.

"Yeah," he says before snatching up the sandwich with his usual vigor and hatred.

As the car starts to move, my eyes flicker to the rearview mirror as I realize Natalie and Reggie are gone and their spots have been taken up by more ghosts. I recognize some from the other night.

Unease settles over me as I take a bite of my sandwich.

"Don't do it," one ghost says.

"He's going to do it," another says.

"Don't."

Every time I look back, more ghosts fill the back seat. Why are there so many and what are they doing in the car?

"Don't, don't, don't, DON'T," one starts shouting, each word louder than the last.

"He's going to."

"I'm going to," the ghost from the bathroom says.

"Don't do it."

"HIRO!"

I jump and my attention snaps over to Keaton, but the noise in the car is escalating to the point where I'm struggling to stay focused. "What's wrong with you?" he asks, voice nearly drowned out.

"Nothing," I say as the pounding in my head starts up. There are too many ghosts. Ghosts are starting to fill up every open space around me. I shudder as one passes through me, causing me to drop my sandwich on the floorboard. "Fuck."

"What the hell are you doing?" Keaton asks. "I just cleaned this car."

"Sorry," I say as I reach down for it, but I can't seem to get my body the rest of the way down.

"Don't do it! Stop this!" a ghost yells. No... not *a* ghost. They're all yelling and screaming. I cup my hands over my ears, hoping to block them out, but it's not enough as their voices break through the barrier my hands have created. It's not enough... what the fuck are they doing? Is someone dying? Is one of us going to die?

"DON'T DO IT. DON'T DO IT," they scream.

"What's wrong with you?" Keaton asks, voice barely audible in the hell of the car.

"Nothing! Headache. I'm fine."

I'm trying not to draw in on myself. I'm trying not to...

I feel the car rolling to a stop and realize Keaton's pulling over, so I throw my car door open and leap out into the fresh air. Maybe if I can just get away from the ghosts, it'll be okay. About ten feet from the car, I kneel down and try to calm my breathing, calm the noise, calm it all. I can hear Keaton talking, but it's so loud I can't hear the words he's saying. So I just remain squatting on the ground, hands over my ears, trying to bring myself back.

One... two... fuck... One... two... focus... focus.

I turn to look behind me as the noises grow nearer, and I realize the ghosts are wrapped around Keaton, and the closer he comes to me, the louder they get. "Stop!" I yell, needing them to just go away, and if that means keeping Keaton back, then that's fine with me.

Keaton stops, startled, but the ghosts don't.

I start backing up. "Just stop. Just... stop."

Closing my eyes, I try to drown them out, but they're ramping up. Louder and louder and louder.

And then suddenly...

Nothing.

My head... my head hurts so badly. It hurts to open my eyes, to lift my head to do anything... Nausea rolls through me as I try to calm myself. But when my eyes lock on to Keaton holding his gun, I freeze.

"K-Keaton, what are you doing?" I ask.

His attention snaps over to me and he watches me for a long moment, his hand wrapped so tightly around his gun that his fingers appear pure white. His eyes remain locked on mine as he watches me.

"Keaton, why is your gun out?" I ask, trying to keep my voice calm.

He slides the gun back into the holster and turns toward the car. "Get in the car," he says.

What the fuck is going on?

I grab for a tree and struggle to pull myself up, but the world spins around me and I drop back down.

Suddenly, there are hands on the back of my shirt. "I said to get in the fucking car!" he yells as he starts dragging me backward. I flail against him, twisting and turning as I try to get out of his grasp, but he won't stop dragging me. The cloth tightens where it's hooked on my throat and I claw at it, making my mind flash back to the way Millie had choked me in the shower. The fear at being unable to breathe. The desperation... but the moment he shoves me into the car, the grip loosens, and I'm able to regain my breath. I barely manage to pull my legs in first before he slams the door shut, comes around and gets into the driver's seat then starts to drive.

His phone begins to ring and ring as he drives, and I question why he's not even acknowledging it. Slowly, I push myself back into my seat and slide my seat belt on as silence fills the car around us. It's almost eerie compared to the deafening noise that'd invaded me.

"Keaton?" I ask.

Silence.

His phone rings and rings a moment before mine starts up, and I realize it's Maddox. With shaking fingers, I accept the call and hold it up as I lean against the door, no longer able to support myself with the way my head pounds.

"Hiro? Fuck, are you okay?" Maddox asks in concern.

"I'm fine..."

"Keaton called and said you were having an episode. What's going on?"

"I don't know," I admit, honestly surprised Keaton cared enough to call Maddox. And now what?

Now he's pissed at me? What set him off? My head hurts too much to even think about it.

"Hiro, talk to me, what's going on?"

"There was just too much noise, and it was just... my head... you know how I get when the noise and the... everything," I say.

"Do you know why?" Maddox asks. "Usually it starts when something bad is happening."

"No... they're gone now. They just... left."

"Okay... you're headed back to the department now?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say, knowing I should tell him about Keaton's behavior, but I'll wait until we're done talking and then text him. I don't want Keaton to hear me tell Maddox. "I'll see you in like forty minutes."

"Okay. Please be careful."

"Yeah..."

I hang up and look over at Keaton. "Keaton... please be careful... I'm afraid something is going to happen to you," I say. He's a dick, but that doesn't mean I want him dead.

"Nothing's going to happen to *me*," he says as the car speeds on.

"You're still taking me to the station, right?" I ask.

He doesn't reply, but my head hurts too much to say anything else.



MADDOX

When Keaton pulls up, I rush out to the car and pull the passenger door open. Hiro nearly falls into my lap as I realize he'd been dead asleep leaning against the door. He slowly wakes up and looks around, seeming to be disoriented as I help him out of the car before looking in at Keaton.

"Thank you for getting him back here."

"Yeah," he says. "Excuse me."

And then he starts driving off before I even have the chance to get the door fully closed.

"Shit... I must have... fallen asleep. I'm sorry," Hiro says as he rubs at his head. "What the fuck..."

"What happened?" I ask.

"Maddox, I think... I think something's going on. The ghosts were around Keaton like they are when someone's going to die but then they left him. I think someone needs to keep tabs on him. Make sure he's alright," Hiro says. "I tried to warn him, but he didn't want to listen."

"Of course he didn't. It's Keaton. Alright, I'll talk to Parker, and we'll get someone to check in on him. Then I'll run you home," I say because he currently feels like he's trying to melt in my arms. I'm pretty sure the only reason he's still standing is the arm I have wrapped around him.

"No, don't worry about it, I'm fine. I can drive myself. You keep working."

I stare at the stubborn man until he finally nods and heads out to wait in the car. He couldn't even stay awake to get here; I can't imagine how well he'd have driven home.

When I get into Parker's office, I have to wait for her to finish up a call before she looks up at me. "Yes?"

"Hiro is concerned that Keaton could possibly be in danger," I say.

"How so?"

Here we go... “Well... we’re not sure, but Hiro is normally right about these things,” I say.

She’s already putting walls up. “Yes, but was there a threat against Keaton?” she asks. “I can’t do much on a hunch. I need something.”

“Whenever someone is close to dying, ghosts are drawn to that person. Hiro said a bunch of ghosts were drawn to Keaton today.”

And I’ve lost her. “Ghosts? I’m supposed to get the okay to have someone keep tabs on Keaton over a bundle of ghosts?” she asks, clearly not believing me.

I stare at her until she sighs.

“Fine. I’ll see what I can do but because I don’t have proof, if Keaton is against it, it’s in his right to keep them off his property.”

“I understand,” I say.

“Did Hiro find anything else?”

“I haven’t gotten to talk to him fully yet. The Keaton thing seemed rather important and should take priority.”

“When you’re done talking to him, let me know,” she says.

“I will,” I promise.

I hurry out to the vehicle where Hiro is fast asleep and start driving him back toward his apartment. Even though Erick is locked up, I still don’t feel safe leaving him at my house. At least his apartment is coated in cameras, and he has nearby neighbors to help.

About a mile from the parking lot, I see Keaton’s car pulled over on the side of the road. “What the hell is he doing...” Slowing my car down as I pass his, I see that Keaton’s not in the driver’s seat, so I pull my car in front of his and park it. Hiro doesn’t wake up when I stop, so I get out and lock the car doors before turning back to Keaton’s car. I glance inside and see no one, but the car is running.

“Keaton?” I call out as I climb down into the ditch to the other side of the road. Far out in the field, I realize I see Keaton standing, so I start trudging toward him while wondering if I need to let someone know. But what? That Keaton exited his vehicle? Is a man not allowed to exit his vehicle?

As I get closer to him, I realize I can smell something rotting. It’s an odor I’ve gotten far too used to over the years, an odor I wish I could go the rest of my life without smelling.

“Keaton!”

He jumps and turns his head to look at me as I realize he’s staring at a dead deer.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I hit this deer... and... just I guess I’m glad it’s dead so I don’t have to watch it suffer,” he says.

The deer has clearly lain there for a week or two at this point. He didn’t hit it just now... unless he meant he hit it a while ago, but how strange. It’s not like he could see the deer from the road.

“You alright?” I ask.

“Yes. Nothing some sleep can’t fix,” he says, and I realize he thinks I’m replying to him about hitting the deer.

“No, I mean...”

He turns sharp eyes on me as he starts hurrying back to his car. “What’s that?”

“Nothing,” I say, honestly not sure what else to say. What a fucking mess.

As he gets into his car without another word, I take note that there’s no damage on it. Even if he’d killed the deer recently, I can’t imagine his car would already be fixed without me noticing that he’d been without it. Also, where *is* he going at this time in the afternoon?

I hear the whirl of the window going down as Hiro looks out. “He’s acting fucking weird.”

“He’s usually weird but this is a whole new level of weird.”

“Right. I don’t know. This whole thing isn’t right,” Hiro says.

“I have Parker on him, and I’ll check in on him tonight personally if no one else does.”

“Good. Thank you.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



HIRO

As I sit in my bookstore, I just can't stop thinking about yesterday. Everything was just off. This whole thing seems off. But what could be going on?

Me: What's Keaton doing?

Maddox: I haven't been graced with his scowling face yet, but I know Parker had someone check in with him a few times last night and all was good.

Me: Okay. I just... he won't reply to my texts.

Maddox: He's a dick.

Me: Very true. Let me know if he's still not in within an hour. Is he usually late?

Maddox: On occasion.

I pace around the bookshop that's quiet at nine in the morning. The bigger crowd generally comes later in the day, so I have little to distract me. I do have a few curbside orders for elderly customers who don't want to bother coming in that I could get ready, but I can't stop thinking about Keaton.

Me: Hey, Keaton. I know you've ignored my last three texts, but I thought I'd just try again. Is everything alright?

After ten more minutes, I send a call to Maddox. "Okay, Barry comes in for his shift in half an hour. You're going to pick me up and we're going to Keaton's."

"Okay. I'll be there then."

"Thank you."

"Of course."

I end up calling Libby, Sean's daughter, to distract me. After Sean moved on, it was hard talking to her because I could tell she'd get down every time she'd think about Sean, but we've since learned how to focus on positive things. Honestly, I'm very happy to have her be a big part of my life. And a good distraction.

The time drags, but thankfully, both Barry and Maddox are early. After handing over the reins to Barry, I hurry out the door and Maddox starts driving.

"Parker said we shouldn't worry too much, he'd told her he was going to be late when she called last night," Maddox says.

“Okay. Good,” I say.

“House number 249,” he says as he glances out the side window. When I see the small gray house tucked tightly between two others, I point it out so Maddox can pull up along the road. Keaton’s car is in the driveway, so we get out and head to the front door.

Maddox knocks, but there’s no reply. Honestly, I’m not surprised. It’s like... I know something’s happened to him. Hell, have these damn ghosts made me psychic or a damn pessimist?

“Maddox, we have to check inside,” I say anxiously.

Maddox shakes his head as he knocks again. “I can’t just bust in when I have confirmation that someone has heard from him today.”

All these fucking legalities. “I know something’s happened,” I say as I start checking windows, knocking on each one as I move around until I see just the edge of Keaton’s leg from where he’s sitting in a chair. Or at least I assume it’s him. It’s hard to tell from the way he’s slumped down on himself. I start beating on the window, knowing I’m not going to get a reply but still persistent.

“Maddox! Maddox!” I yell.

He comes rushing around the corner on the phone and looks in to see what’s caught my attention. “Shit, I think we found him. Call an ambulance for me. Quickly. I’m going to see if I can enter and do something until they arrive... Got it,” he says to the person on the phone before hanging up.

I rush back to the front of the house and grab the doorknob, relieved to find it unlocked. Without waiting for Maddox and his “laws,” I shove it open and barge in myself. “Keaton? You better be fucking sleeping,” I yell.

“Hiro, let me go first,” Maddox says, reminding me that Keaton had held a gun in my general direction yesterday, but that was just... an... accident? And maybe... I didn’t mention it to Maddox yet.

But I don’t have to worry because as I come around the corner, I come face to face with Keaton.

His ghost, that is.

“Fucking hell, he’s dead,” I say.

Maddox cusses as he pulls out his phone before even bothering to look for the body. I can’t see it either from where I stand; the ghost seems to be taking up the doorway to the bedroom.

“Keaton?” I ask.

I reach out and set a hand on Keaton’s arm, making him jump but turn to me, opening up the doorway to the room. “Hey, Keaton... it’s okay.”

He just stares at me, expression unreadable, but hell, it’s better than staring at the body I see beyond him. The body slumped in a chair, gun lying on the floor.

Did... did Keaton *kill* himself?

No... that can’t be true.

“Keaton?” I ask the ghost.

“Fucking hell,” Maddox says, moving straight through Keaton’s ghost and into the bedroom where the body is.

“Is his ghost here?” Maddox asks.

“Yeah.”

“Did he say what happened?”

“No, he’s in shock right now. He probably won’t tell me much immediately,” I say.

“Looks like he killed himself. The door was unlocked, though... I suppose someone could have come in and staged it.”

“Keaton?” I say softly to try to get his attention, but he’s back to staring at the body with morbid

fascination. Like he's never seen such a thing. I guess... I guess in a way he hasn't. Working homicide never prepares you for your own death.

All too soon, there's noise outside the house as police and an ambulance arrive, but it's well past that need.

Parker surprises me by also showing up. I guess... when the body is a detective, it draws out the whole force.

"Fucking hell," she says, and I notice her wife is with her, a homicide detective from a nearby jurisdiction.

"I'm so sorry," Elena says.

Parker cusses again before stepping back and rubbing at her head. "You guys... warned me... you guys knew he was going to die," Parker says before grabbing my wrist. "How did you know he was going to die?"

"The ghosts... were acting like they do when someone's close to death," I say.

"Fucking goddamn ghosts," she yells. I'm not sure if that's a "ghosts don't exist thing" or just her way of expressing that she's upset, so I stand there until she walks away. Elena reaches out and squeezes my shoulder.

"Ignore that. She's just upset," she says. "It's hard dealing with bodies. It's even harder when the body you're dealing with is one you know quite well and have made a point to keep safe."

"Thanks," I say. "I'm really sorry. I should have insisted on more."

Elena shakes her head. "It sounds like you did all you could."

I look over at Keaton's ghost.

"I tried." And it still wasn't enough.



MADDOX

"It looks like a suicide," I say to Detective Lambert, the detective who will handle Keaton's death. But then why do I *feel* like it's not?

"Right? All the signs of one," Lambert says.

Since Keaton and I had worked together on more than one occasion, I'll be excused and another team will take over. Honestly, I didn't know Keaton too well, but that doesn't mean I'll be able to examine the scene.

Parker's let us hang around longer than we should because Hiro is trying to console Keaton's ghost who won't pay any attention to him.

"Maddox, did you look at this at all?"

I glance over to what Detective Lambert is holding toward me. "No, what is it?"

"A camera that'd been sitting on the dresser. It was still recording when we arrived." It's clear it's been recording for a while, but Lambert knows where to start it.

I watch as it begins with Keaton turning it on, looking it over to make sure it's recording before holding it aimed at his face.

"*I just want to say fuck you. Fuck this world. Fuck this life. I'm done with it.*" Then he sits down in the chair, picks up the gun without a word and shoots himself in the head.

Clear suicide.

Right?

“He didn’t kill himself,” Hiro says adamantly from behind me.

I turn to look at him. “Hiro... there’s video proof,” I say. “The camera even spans the room. There’s no one in here with him. No hesitation...”

Hiro folds his arms over his chest. “I don’t believe it, and I’ll find proof.”

He’s so stubborn, but I have to trust him. And honestly? I feel the exact same way. “Okay.”

“Not okay,” Parker says. “You don’t just shift your opinions and ideas. You need proof.”

Of course she had to overhear me. “I didn’t say I wouldn’t get it,” I say.

“Proof,” she says before storming out.

Elena gives me a soft smile before trailing after her.



The proof is looking harder to find by the moment. The autopsy tells us what the video already did, even though the video itself raises the question of why he’d record himself. While it’s not uncommon for someone to record themselves, it raises the question of why *Keaton* would. He didn’t strike me as the kind of guy who’d want to show such a thing to others. He’d had no recent life changes, but honestly, he was a pretty private person, which is what makes this so hard. No close family, not too many friends.

There’s residue on Keaton’s hand proving that the gun was shot by him. The gun was in Keaton’s name. There were no signs of forced entry. There’s absolutely nothing that points to anything beyond suicide, but Hiro won’t hear it.

“He didn’t kill himself,” Hiro says right in the middle of the medical examiner’s statement. As Brown shifts his attention to Hiro, Hiro looks momentarily embarrassed before ducking his head. “Sorry, please continue.”

“As I was *saying*,” Brown says. “All signs point toward suicide—”

I look over at what made him stop talking *again*. Hiro, of course. He’s raising his hand like we’re back in high school and everyone is looking at him.

“Yes?” Brown asks, sounding quite uncertain.

“Keaton didn’t kill himself.”

“I heard,” Brown says. “But all of my proof is pointing toward the fact that he did, *in fact*, kill himself.”

Hiro isn’t going to be appeased. “He was being his regular asshole self as we drove to the village and on the way home, he started acting weird. I had a... panic attack and he pulled over. And when I... came to, he was staring at me with his gun out.”

“Excuse me, what?” I growl, wondering if I heard something wrong because there’s no goddamn way I’d have heard about this and not “confronted” Keaton... possibly with my fists if words didn’t work. “You happened to forget to *mention* that.”

“I know, but it was... he was acting weird or strange. I think something was wrong. He wouldn’t have done that otherwise,” Hiro says, seeming certain when he barely knew the guy.

“This would have been pertinent information, Hiro,” Parker says as she folds her arms over her chest.

“I didn’t want to get him in trouble if it was nothing. Anyway, I would like permission to enter his house and talk to his ghost.” Hiro looks determined and if I know anything about Hiro’s determined

face, he's going to get his way or he's going to do something illegal to get it.

Someone in the group makes an offhanded comment and receives a fiery glare from me that shuts them up ridiculously fast. It's a magical moment that seems to make Hiro pleased. I understand not everyone believes Hiro, and honestly, I don't give a flying fuck if they do. But if they're going to ridicule him or make fun of him, I'm going to absolutely help them learn how to keep their thoughts to themselves.

"If it's a suicide, what'll it hurt? Just humor me," Hiro says.

Silence.

After a long moment, Parker glances over at him. "Fine."

And that is that.

Hiro looks pleased, and really, that's all that matters.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



HIRO

As I walk into the house two days after the death of Keaton, I find that I don't immediately see his ghost anywhere. He's not in the room he died in, and he's not in the doorway where I'd last seen him.

Maddox is behind me, hands tucked into his pockets. "I feel of no use. Anything I can help with?"

"You're good," I assure him. "Sometimes just looking at you is all I need. Sometimes looking at you without a shirt on is even better. You know... those kinds of things."

He shakes his head as he gives me a hint of a grin.

I wander around the house before realizing that he's really not here. What the hell? If he already moved on... why would he have been here at all that first day? He couldn't have moved on already, could he?

I find myself feeling lost as I stand in the doorway of the room he'd been in when I'd arrived here to find him dead.

"If you're looking for dicks-a-lot, he's on the back porch," Reggie says as he appears before me and lessens my life span by at least one year. He grins wickedly at the way I jump, enjoying it far too much. Maddox just watches me jump around because of my imaginary friends who he sadly doesn't get the luxury of being followed, watched, stared at, and sometimes caressed by.

When it's a ghost I don't know caressing me, it gets a bit weird, but I'm just used to Reggie's ways.

"That way," Reggie says as he points toward the back door that leads out into the yard.

I head out to the back porch where Keaton is leaning against the porch railing. When he hears the door slide open, I can see tension in his body, but he doesn't look at me.

"Hey, Keaton," I say, voice soft.

Silence.

I can only imagine how awful it feels for him to have been forced to stare at his dead body for hours before it was removed. To know that life as you knew it was gone. And then to feel alone. Absolutely alone. Nothing could prepare someone for the loneliness of death. But he doesn't have to be alone. Whether or not Keaton killed himself, we can help him. "Keaton, I'm right here, it's okay," I say, but it's like I'm talking to air.

Still silence.

And that's when I get it. That's when the realization of what's happening settles in and my eyes narrow. "Oh. My. God. You're still trying to pretend ghosts don't exist!"

"What's up, Dick Dawg," Reggie says, getting up into his space. I can tell it makes Keaton annoyed, but he refuses to move because moving means he realizes that Reggie is real. "I can cuss you out in person now for being an absolute hot dick. Like you're sexy but you're a dick to my buddy ol' pal here, so I might need to fuck... *you*... up. You ready to rumble? I call it naked boxing." Reggie starts to unbutton his shirt as I wave my hand at him.

"Please don't get naked," I say, absolutely *positive* this isn't the way to Keaton's trust.

"Who the hell is getting naked? Keaton?" Maddox asks.

Keaton's body is visibly tensing up, but he still refuses to look at me.

"No, Reggie. Come on, Keaton, talk to me. It's pretty hard to deny the existence of ghosts when *you are one*," I say.

Still nothing.

"Oh dear god," Maddox grumbles.

"Right?" I say. "Keaton, the jig is up. I don't even know who you're trying to fool. I've seen ghosts my whole life, so it sure can't be me."

Reggie gasps before grabbing his chest and dramatically falling into Keaton who *still* refuses to move. I can sure see the way he's clenching his jaw though as Reggie declares, "Ghosts are real?"

"Reggie—"

"Oh my god, I'm a ghost. I thought I was a real boy!"

He then proceeds to fake sob right there on the porch. He even grabs Keaton's shirt which he proceeds to blow his nose into while Keaton stands stone still. I have to hand it to the man, he's a phenomenal actor. To reward him a little, I simply push Reggie right off the porch and into a rosebush below.

"Dammit, Hiro," he growls as he climbs out of it.

"What is happening?" Maddox asks. "Are you literally doing an 'I told you so' to a dead man?"

I hesitate because that is... *one hundred percent* what I was contemplating doing. It's not my fault Keaton's being such a dick, but at the same time he *is* dead, and that's a lot to deal with.

"Keaton, I've stuck my neck out and looked like a fucking idiot to help you. You can't just pretend you don't see me or that I don't know that you're dead or whatever you're trying for," I say, positive I'm going to stand my ground until he gives in.

He slowly starts to back away, like if he moves slow enough, I won't notice. That is until I grab his wrist and yank him back toward me. The move startles him enough that he catches my eyes.

"How—" That's when he remembers he's ignoring me and pretends like he was just looking at a bird behind me. Too bad the bird in question is Spite who is also one hundred percent dead and currently trying to steal a nut from a squirrel who is not dead.

"Keaton, please, how can I touch you? How can I see you? How can you still remain an idiot even when I'm your only hope of figuring out what happened because you did *not* kill yourself. Everyone else thinks you did besides Maddox and me. I'd bet... something on it," I say.

"Two dollars," Reggie inputs.

"Right. I'd bet two dollars on it."

"I'd sacrifice one," Maddox says. Despite chastising me for harassing Keaton, it doesn't seem like he's much better. I guess we're all petty assholes on the inside.

Keaton's eyes narrow as he stares at me. "Ghosts aren't real."

“Aren’t they?” I ask as I wave around at him and Reggie and at this point even Natalie has joined in.

“Did I miss anything?” she asks.

“It’s just getting good,” Reggie assures her.

“I’m not talking to you,” Keaton decides.

“So you’re going to look me in the eyes and tell me you killed yourself,” I say.

Keaton looks me in the eyes then flips me off with both hands before heading toward the door that Maddox is holding open. I quickly slide it shut. “Only ghosts can go through walls,” I say.

He stares at the handle, like he’s going to glare it into opening. “You could storm off that way, but you also have a gate by your porch that you’d have to float through. Basically, you’re stuck with me until you face the fact that you, Keaton, are a ghost.”

Keaton’s eyes narrow as he sidles up against the gate door and tries to discreetly reach through it, like I might not notice his hand moving around in an attempt to grab it. Of course, his hand slips right through it because he is... in fact, a ghost.

Then he quickly moves through it, like if he’s quick enough, I won’t notice the passage through an object. The moment he’s through, he takes off at a run, away from us.

“Wow, look at him go,” Reggie says.

“He’s running,” I inform Maddox.

“Why the fuck is he running?” Maddox asks.

“Hell if I know,” I say as I swing the gate open and take off after him. The issue with chasing a ghost is that they don’t have legs that scream something incoherent about how I only go for a run when someone is trying to kill me or I’m trying to keep someone from dying. Their lungs also never question if air will ever reach them again. After a good trek through the neighborhood, both of those things start to descend upon me while Keaton continues running with no sign of slowing.

“I’m... going to die,” I inform Maddox who looks like he’s going for a Sunday stroll.

“How long do you want to chase him for?” Maddox asks, all casual like. He hasn’t even broken a sweat.

“I don’t know! I didn’t think this through... my legs hurt.”

“I could start taking you on my runs with me?” Maddox says, like that is at all an answer to this.

“Don’t... don’t say such stupid shit, it’s not attractive,” I say. “I’m... surviving.”

Keaton doesn’t seem to realize that he can just poof his ass out of the situation and go... wherever the hell ghosts want to go, I guess. Or maybe he hasn’t been dead long enough to pull it off and is only able to be this far away from his place of death because of me.

When we reach the end of a field he’d been hauling ass through, he stumbles to a stop before dropping to his knees. I slow down and try to calm my breathing so I’m not gasping for breath as I descend upon him.

“Keaton?”

He sinks down until his head is on the ground and his arms are over his head as I realize he’s having a breakdown. I kneel in front of him and set a hand on his shoulder. I can feel him tense up before relaxing.

“Why am I dead?” he asks.

“I want to help you figure that out,” I tell him.

“Why? Why did this happen to me?”

“Keaton, did you kill yourself?”

“I don’t know,” he says.

“How can you not know?” I ask.

He pushes himself up, eyes wild. “I remember nothing! I remember you... you jumping out of the car, panicking like a maniac, and then... and then I was standing in the doorway of my bedroom, looking at myself... my dead self.”

“So you don’t remember reaching the station? You don’t remember anything at all?”

He slowly shakes his head. “Nothing.”

“Sounds like what happened to Erick,” Maddox says after I tell him what’s going on.

“Right... but what would cause memory loss like that?”

“Possibly drugs, but he was interacting and talking fine with us. No slurred speech... he physically seemed alright,” Maddox says.

“When the hell would I have been drugged, though?” Keaton says.

“Keaton said he doesn’t know when he could have been drugged,” I say. “What about food? If it was something like Rohypnol, could it have been in the food?”

“The issue is that he drove back to the department. I’m not writing off that possibility, but if someone gave him enough Rohypnol to make him forget everything for over twelve hours, yet he never fell unconscious that we know of and was able to talk and function at least semi-normally? Something’s just not adding up. We have a toxicology test we’re waiting results on for both Erick and Keaton, so hopefully, we’ll find some answers then, but it’ll be another week or two for Erick’s and even more for Keaton’s.”

“Keaton, we’re going to figure it out,” I assure him.

He doesn’t seem too convinced if the expression on his face is anything to go by. “Yeah...”

“We need to know everything that happened. Every person you saw or talked to in that village. Any shit you might be keeping quiet. All of it.”

“I saw the video,” Keaton says. “The video of me killing myself. It’s clear I did it. It’s clear I was the one who did it!”

And it should be. I should agree, but I can’t because something *made* him do it. I know it did, even if he’s forgotten all about it.

“Keaton... even if it was by your hand, I don’t think you did it because you wanted to. So let me see what I can do. Until then, I expect you to work with us and help us figure out everything that we could have possibly missed, okay?”

He nods, telling me that he’s possibly decided to stop pretending ghosts don’t exist.

Maddox folds his arms over his chest. “Hiro, what do you think about going back to the village, not on police business, but to see if you can talk to a few ghosts?”

“I’d be up for that if we’re allowed.”

“We’ll just make them aware we really enjoyed getting away from the bustle of the city.”

“Maybe I’ll see if Nicolás can go with us,” I say. “He can’t see or talk to ghosts, but he’s got a bit of a gift when it comes to noticing things.”

“He’ll make us look more casual as well,” Maddox says.

“Keaton, you can come with us too, if you want.”

Keaton looks mildly disgusted by that idea but still nods. Clearly, he’s a masochist.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



HIRO

I'm surrounded by warmth as I nestle in against Maddox. There's nothing better than waking up tucked in his arms. It makes the hell of the past few days feel bearable.

"Morning," I mutter.

"Morning," Maddox says, sounding a little more awake than I am. I feel like I could sleep another hour or two easily, but we have too much to do today to sleep the day away.

I slide my hand up Maddox's bare back and squeeze him tightly as I feel him brush my hair off my forehead. I love moments like this, when we don't have to rush to work or anything else. It makes the idea of moving in together even better.

I open my eyes and lock on to his... green ones?

"Who are you cuddling with over there?" Maddox asks from *behind me*.

Reggie just smiles and squeezes me in tighter. "All mine."

"Goddammit, Reggie!" I yell as I struggle to get free, but the way he's locked around me makes it nearly impossible. "Why are you *naked*?"

"Because *you* were naked, and I thought it'd be weird if you were naked and I *wasn't* naked, and then I was like is it more weird if we're both naked, but then I realized I really didn't know the answer to this so I just went for it. I stripped everything off for you, Hiro." He smashes me against his chest, annoyingly strong for being dead.

"Dammit, Reggie! You're the absolute worst friend."

Reggie seems pleased by this for some reason. "Aww! But I'm still a friend. You love me and you know it. I mean, Maddox has watched you snuggle with me for at least ten minutes and he's not even jealous."

I turn to look at Maddox with narrowed eyes. "You *knew*?"

He looks amused. "I was just wondering if this was a thing, you know? Snuggling with your imaginary friends when I'm not around."

"It's not," I say as I press a hand against Reggie's face until I manage to scrape him off.

"My heart! My fragile heart... has been broken," Reggie says as he dramatically falls back on the bed. I promptly take my foot and just slowly push him the rest of the way off until he plops down on

the floor.

Ah... peace.

Then I roll into Maddox. "I need extra love this morning. I woke up to an evil demon trying to murder me," I say.

"An incubus trying to *seduce* you," Reggie says as I see his hand reach out and slam down on the bed before he slowly drags himself up so he can glare at me.

"I'm so sorry you went through so much. That sounds absolutely awful," Maddox says as he pulls me in close. "You really seemed to be enjoying it, though. You were smiling and squeezing tighter, burrowing your head..."

I narrow my eyes at Maddox. "Don't you *dare* betray me. I thought he was *you*."

He grins at me. "I would never."

"I think we need to find an exorcist."

"We could do that."

"Good, good," I say as I press into him. "God, this feels so much better compared to his tiny body."

"I do *not* have a tiny body!" Reggie protests.

Maddox's grin widens. "He was always so annoyed that he had to get his clothes from the teen section."

"Shut your beautiful face," Reggie yells.

"I love your manliness. Hugging Reggie was like hugging a lamppost. Cold. Tiny. Heartless."

Reggie gasps. "I have a heart. It's just shattered after dealing with you."

Once I'm done getting rid of all thoughts of Reggie, I'm finally able to get up and face the day. It's not easy, but it's going to be faced. Maddox and I get dressed, then head to the kitchen as Spite pecks at the sliding glass door. I head over to let him in, which he is extremely pleased about.

"Want toast?" Maddox asks.

"Sure," I say as I text Nicolás to let him know we'll pick him up in an hour.

"Ooh, the sausage fest reunites," Natalie says as she sits on the counter so Maddox has to reach through her to pull the toast out. "He just touched my boob."

I glare at her since both of the things she just said were purely ridiculous. "Maddox, Natalie wants you to know you just touched her boob."

"Ah... well... um... it felt very boob-like, I guess? I really don't know."

"You never frolicked with a woman?" I ask.

"I dated a few and kissed a few but after the one finally sat me down and asked why I never wanted to go any further, I realized that maybe it was time I stopped lying to myself," he says. "You?"

"Natalie had me touch her boobs when I was eighteen. It was weird. Does that count?"

"He cried a little," Natalie says.

"I didn't *cry*."

"He was like, 'They are so magnificent that I cannot even breathe.'"

I decide to ignore her and just smile at Maddox who seems concerned that I allegedly cried. "I didn't cry."

"I believe you."

"But you sound like you don't," I say.

"Toast?" he says as he slides my plate over to me.

"Thanks," I say with a smile as I pick it up and head over to the table. "Reggie, be of use and pass the butter."

Reggie looks over at me and then reaches for the butter. His hand swipes right through it before he tries again, and after that doesn't give him the desired results, he jabs a finger at it. "You motherfucker, listen up, you're going to move or you're going in the goddamn trash."

This time, he can at least touch it but can't seem to move it. I reach out and he takes my hand before trying again. We watch carefully as he's able to move it forward maybe a quarter of an inch.

Maddox is staring at the item like it's possessed and needs to be yeeted off to the depths of hell. Slowly, ever so slowly, Reggie keeps it moving closer and closer to me. Even as I pull my hand away, it keeps moving closer before coming to a stop right before me.

"Ooh, good job!" Natalie says.

"Thanks, I'm amazing. I'm aware. Praise me, Hiro, praise me."

Maddox is still staring at it. "That's... a neat little party trick you did there."

"Thanks, I'm teaching my ghosts how to play fetch," I say, which makes Reggie narrow his eyes and start scooting it away from me. "Reggie, stop!" It's already out of my area now, making me strain to reach it as Natalie comes over and joins him, which causes the scooting to go twice as fast as it gets farther and farther from me. "My damn toast is going to be ice cold by the time you two are done!"

"Yeah? Then maybe next time you'll think about your actions," Reggie says.

I now have to get up before the butter finds its way off the edge of the table and I have to spend my morning cleaning up butter splatter.

"I thought if we worked on getting them to be able to manipulate inanimate objects, they could help me more," I say. "I was clearly wrong."

"Or scare people. I like the idea of making someone piss their pants. Preferably my ex-roommate," Reggie says.

"Wasn't... isn't Maddox your ex-roommate?" I ask.

"Precisely."

"Well... Maddox, I hate to break it to you, but the reason Reggie can't move on is that he hasn't made you piss your pants yet," I say.

"Ah." Maddox doesn't look the least bit concerned as he butters his toast. "This is probably because of that time he was drunk, and I told him whatever he did, not to drive drunk, and then I dressed up as Freddy Krueger and was waiting in the back of his car for him. And sure enough, he thinks he's going to drive drunk."

"He made me *cry*," Reggie says.

I tell Maddox what Reggie says, but he's heartless enough he just laughs. "Hey, at least you didn't drive drunk."

"You enjoyed that far too much," I tell Maddox who is gloating.

"I did. The way he *screamed*... it could have shattered mirrors."

"This is why I have issues," Reggie explains. "This is why I still haunt him."

"I can imagine," I say. "Did you ever drink and drive again?"

"No, but I also never got into my car again without checking the back seat *and* trunk."

"Hold on, you were in the trunk?" I ask Maddox.

"Well... originally. I couldn't have him look in and see me. So I dropped the seat down just as he was starting the car and came crawling out of the trunk with my knife."

"Fake knife?"

"No, it was a real one."

I stare at this man in disbelief. Once upon a time, I thought he was a decent man. Yes, he was a bit

grumpy and stuck in his ways, but oh how I've learned.

"Moral of the story is that Maddox sucks," Reggie says before pushing the butter knife forward until the tip of it is poking into Maddox's stomach.

Maddox just stares at it. "God, my head just can't wrap around these things."

"I don't blame you," I say, leaving Reggie to stab him some more.



MADDOX

As Nicolás climbs into the back seat, he looks left and right, like he's confused, before turning to us. "Hey, I'm not sure I'm going to be much help, but I'll try."

"More help than most of the people we've had helping," Hiro says. "And we're on... vacation anyway, you know?"

I start to back out of the driveway but notice Nicolás looking around him again. "Are there dead people surrounding me?"

"Oh totally. Three of them are packed into the back seat with you. There's Reggie, who is fighting with Natalie over who should get your lap. They're currently in a heated battle of rock-paper-scissors. And then Keaton who thinks he's not a ghost and would like everyone aware that ghosts aren't real," Hiro says.

"He still on that?" I ask.

"One hundred percent."

"I just want to know why they have to fight over my lap. They can share," Nicolás jokes.

"You're going to regret that joke. Reggie said the three of you are now a throuple. And while he doesn't like the hairy beaver, he'd be willing to share it with you," Hiro says.

"Dear god," I mutter, wondering how people look at me after they know he's been my best friend for most of my life.

Nicolás seems concerned, but he clearly brought it on himself. "Oh...kay..."

"Natalie wants you to know it's very hairy. She died before grooming was the in thing to do. Or maybe she just forgot to landscape a few times," Hiro says.

The look Nicolás is giving his brother is quite relatable. "Of all the ghosts you've come across all these years, why these two? The guy who is a ghost but claims he's not a ghost seems like a much better option."

"Really, the nudist on the end of your road seems like a better option," Hiro says.

"Is that who that is? I stop there every now and then because I swear I can feel someone there. Now that I know it's a nudist... I'm a little creeped out by it," Nicolás says. "I had in my head they were like some lost soul waiting at that very spot for his lover to return or something. Like that's where he last saw her, and he waits in the hopes that they'll be reunited in death."

"Nah, totally just some naked dude who likes to yell stuff like 'Nudists unite!' and 'We are all the same beneath our clothes,' and my personal favorite, 'Suck on my big meaty balls, Jeff!'"

"Ah... okay... interesting," Nicolás says.

"Natalie and Reggie are both on your lap talking about how nice your skin is. I think they want it," Hiro says.

"Fantastic. That makes me... feel... something inside," Nicolás says, which makes Hiro and me

laugh. “So what ridiculous thing are you caught up in this time? You said you’d explain in the car, which I know is your way of trying to get out of explaining anything.”

“Just... family vacay, you know?” Hiro says.

Nicolás doesn’t seem too assured, so Hiro finally breaks down and tells him what’s going on.



“Did you realize they had a festival going on today?” I ask.

“No... but do we have wonderful timing or what?” Hiro says with a grin. “Now we don’t even need an excuse to be here, and ghosts love festivals.”

The main road is closed, but it doesn’t seem too busy, making me wonder if it’s mostly residents who participate. We end up parking at the church before getting out. As I turn around, I notice Pastor Joseph watching us. When he sees me looking at him, he gives me a smile, so I wave before turning to Hiro.

“Want to talk to him?”

“I’ll just say hi. Probably best to make some friends here in case we need some inside info,” Hiro says as he hurries off after him while I hang back with Nicolás.

“Don’t like this place much?” Nicolás asks, hands stuffed deep in his pockets.

I glance over at him, wondering how the hell he figured that out in the span of one minute. I thought I was pretty good at schooling my expression. “Not a whole lot.”

“Something happen?” Nicolás asks, eyes watching me closely. I feel like I don’t know Nicolás super well, but it’s clear the relationship between him and Hiro is pretty solid... doesn’t mean I’m going to open up to him, though.

“Nah, just... shit.”

He shrugs, like he clearly knows I’m lying but is willing to let me get away with it. “If you want to talk, I can listen.”

“Thanks,” I say as I watch Hiro give Joseph a wave before hurrying back.

“So, he said the festival really kicks off this evening. But for now, he recommends we go over to the orchard. They take people out in a hay wagon and pick apples or something and there’s cider... and... stuff. Face painting if either of you want to get dolled up for this evening,” Hiro says.

“You know I’d just *love* to get my face done up,” Nicolás says before doing a hair flick that looks ridiculous on him but instantly makes Hiro laugh.

“Well, off we go, and Nicolás, if you sense *anything*, let me know,” Hiro says.

“I’m sensing something really strange to my left.”

“Yeah, that’s just Reggie hanging on your arm while telling Keaton that it doesn’t matter how hot Keaton is, an asshole is an asshole.”

“Ah, okay... so I’m being used to make this Keaton guy jealous?” he asks.

Hiro laughs like he finds the thought absolutely ridiculous before it quickly dies down. “No... Reggie would... never...” Hiro scrutinizes them. “Reggie just said that you need to keep your nasty ideas to yourself, Nicolás. He said you’re now known as Nasty Nicolás that he’d like to do the nasty with.”

“But he’s still hanging on me?”

“Correct.”

“I see... I really think you need to explain to me why you always draw the absolute weirdest

ghosts to you,” Nicolás says.

“I cannot be blamed for this one. This one is all Maddox.”

Nicolás’s eyes shift over to me, like he can’t quite believe this. I just shrug, but what else is there to do when someone tries to judge you for being best friends with Reggie? Honestly... it’s not my fault, and that’s what I’m sticking to.

As we walk into the village, my eyes keep straying to the spot where Reggie died. By the time I got here after receiving that awful call, he was already gone, but I still can’t stop thinking about it.

Hiro reaches out and squeezes my hand and, without missing a beat, cuts to the other side of the road. “Reggie is now trying to explain why his cat is superior to human life,” he says.

“The cat he named Snugglebum?” I ask.

“Correct.”

“I pity the cat. It had to die, and this is how it ended up.”

Hiro’s grinning. “You should hear Reggie squawk at you. Claiming that he’s a cat whisperer and how he once put ‘crazy cat man’ on the school questionnaire of what he wanted to be when he grew up.”

“I forgot about that,” I say with a grin. “He was *sixteen* and merrily sent it off. It was to help with college or job placement. The guidance counselor was *not* pleased. She told him he had to be serious, and he was adamant as hell that he wanted to be a ‘crazy cat man.’”

Hiro and Nicolás laugh, and it’s almost like I can hear Reggie laughing with us. He was so proud of that moment. And now he’s gone... but he’s still here in a way. Why the hell do I feel almost envious of Hiro who can see him? Would I actually want to be weighed down with the ghosts of the dead?

Absolutely not.

But hell... I’m just happy to know Reggie’s still here to harass us.

“Look at the horses!” Nicolás says. “They’re so big.”

“Natalie says she once rode a horse through a field naked after a dare, so now I have *that* image in my head,” Hiro says. “And Reggie wants to know if she got hair up her... hoo-ha.”

“A valid question,” Nicolás says.

“She says that she was so drunk she doesn’t remember, and it could have been a cow.”

“Again with the question of why do you only draw in the strange ones?” Nicolás asks.

“I drew in Maddox and he’s perfect. Have you seen him with his shirt off? Look at his face when he scowls. Maddox, scowl. Scowl, boy, scowl!”

“I will not *scowl* on command,” I say.

“See how cute that scowl is? He can even do it when he’s trying not to do it,” Hiro says, looking quite proud of himself as we reach the wagon that families and couples are filing into.

“All aboard,” the man driving the horses says as we climb on, taking the last of the seats. We have to squeeze in tight to fit, but no one seems to mind.

I see Hiro hold his hand at a strangle angle before realizing he has it pressed against someone only he can see. Is Reggie not as okay with all of this as he’s pretending, and Hiro is trying to comfort him?

Of course he’s not okay with it, he’s just pretending because being with us has to be better than being alone.

I find myself wanting to reach out to offer the same comfort, but it hurts to know that I can’t.

“Hiro, did I ever tell you about the time Reggie got into the wrong car? He’d just gotten a new car and so he comes out of the store and goes straight to this blue car and hops in. All the while I watch

because it's not even the same make, and there he is trying to ram his key into the car while the owner comes running out, screaming that her car is being stolen. Then Reggie hops out and goes, 'Which one? My friend is an officer, he'll help.'"

Hiro's laughing as he shakes his head. "Reggie is telling me that he was much cooler than that."
"Was he?"

"He said he had decided to turn to a life of crime and was preparing to hotwire the car," Hiro says as the wagon starts to move, taking us away from that forsaken road and out deeper into the countryside.

When we reach the farm, we all file out and head over to where some overly cheerful man is standing.

"*Gooooood* day to you all; for those who don't know me, I'm Hank and this is my farm. We have some apple picking and corn mazing and apple cidering!"

He seems to think his poor grammar is hilarious while the rest of us just stare at him and the kids are too enamored by the dog at his side to pay attention.

"And if you want to get to the apple picking grounds, you must first complete the ultra-spooky corn maze of terror!"

That's when I see someone I hadn't noticed earlier. She must have been hidden on the wagon or already been here when we arrived. I step back to try to hide behind Hiro, but Hiro's over with the kids petting the dog and she's already seen me.

Good lord, what a shit day.

As the group meanders off toward the cornfield or the pen of animals, I try to usher the group of us away as quickly as I can, but it's clearly too late as she hurries over to us.

"Maddox!" she says.

"Hello, Maryanne," I say, and then I start planning to get lost in the cornfield for the rest of the day if it meant that I wouldn't have to deal with this dreadful waste of space. She has an older teenager by her side that I know is her daughter.

"I'm surprised to see you around here," she says.

"Yeah?"

She looks between Nicolás, who is standing beside me, and Hiro, who is still staring at the dog.
"And these are?"

None of your business.

She stares at Nicolás until he gives her a smile. "I'm Nicolás and that's my brother Hiro."

"Brother?" she says as she eyes Hiro from the back. "Different fathers, then?"

"Nope," Nicolás says.

"Different mothers, then," she says.

"Nope," Nicolás says with a smile, which is a clear lie, but he's known the woman one minute and already knows she's godawful.

"I... think you might need to talk to your parents about that one. You know at least one of them is lying to you," she says as she pats his arm like she's doing him a good deed.

Nicolás just smiles at her, so her attention, regretfully, turns back to me. "You're still a detective, then?"

"I am."

"Going about your... ways." She eyes Hiro and Nicolás, like she's unsure who I'm going about my ways with or maybe she thinks I'm going about my ways with both of them.

"Definitely," I say. "Now if you'll excuse me, me and my ways are going to go have fun."

“Ah, how... lovely,” she says with a smile that feels quite hollow.

“Thanks,” I say before setting a hand on Nicolás’s back as I guide him over to Hiro whose back I also set my hand on because I love the look on Maryanne’s face as I parade them off.

“I feel like I missed something,” Hiro says as he looks between us.

“Nope,” I say as I drop my hands.

“Reggie says he wants you to kiss us both,” Hiro says.

“I... don’t need to go that far. She just...” I shake my head.

“Who was it?” Nicolás asks.

“Reggie’s mother,” I say.

“Seriously?” Hiro asks before looking to his right like he’s surprised Reggie didn’t tell him.

“Where is she?”

I look around but Maryanne must have fucked off, which is honestly the best for all of us. “I’m not sure.”

“Reggie says that he wants you to go back and slap her face and then save his stepsister.”

“I’m going to regretfully have to pass,” I say as we enter the corn maze.

“We should let Nicolás take the lead,” Hiro says with a grin.

“Dear god, I got you lost once... *once*.”

“He took me out the wrong side of a mall parking lot and we wandered around lost and confused for like an hour trying to find his car,” Hiro says.

“I will prove to you that I’m amazing at this,” he says as he takes the lead while Hiro grins, and I’m happy to see him relaxed and having a good time. It makes being here okay, even when it feels like it shouldn’t be.

And it’s nice being around Nicolás as well since I don’t have a fantastic track record with getting along with family. Ben and I at least got to know each other better as we got older, and I was happy to be a part of the lives of his children. Maybe I should give him another chance like Hiro wants...

I’m not thinking about that now. I’m going to focus on the fun I’m having. Honestly, I’m enjoying myself enough that a part of me even threatens to forget why we’re here.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



HIRO

“I didn’t realize this shit would go on so late,” Maddox says.

“I know, but supposedly, we have to stay for the fireworks,” I say. “It’s just freaking weird—”

“Hiro! Maddox!”

I turn to see Troy heading our way while waving. His sister, Kylie, is right behind him.

“I heard you two were here,” Kylie says. “Word travels fast when a band of new faces shows up to our little farmer party.”

“How are you?” I ask Troy.

“Good, and excited to get out of the house. Kylie said I’m only allowed to be out for an hour, and then she’s dragging me back, but I think if I manage to escape her at some point, I could hit the beer tent. Ooh! Come have a beer with us!” he says.

“We have to drive back tonight,” Maddox says.

“I can drive,” I say.

Maddox gives me a raised eyebrow. Clearly, he still has some reluctance after the last time I nearly sent us through the windshield. “I’ll drive, you two can have a drink.”

“We have an inn,” someone pipes up behind us. “That I happen to own.”

I turn to the older woman who holds a hand out. “Hillary,” she says as she nudges the man next to her. He hadn’t been paying attention but turns to us and gives us a nod.

“Mayor Franklin, but just call me Hans.”

“Nice to meet both of you,” I say. “We might need to take you up on that.”

“I only have a few rooms left, so let me know when you decide. Until then, I need a caramel apple,” Hillary says before hurrying off with the mayor who I’m thinking might be her husband.

While Kylie and Troy introduce themselves to Nicolás, I turn to Maddox. “What are your thoughts on staying the night? I know you hate this place, but the dead are more likely to come out after dark. It’s like... it’s so weird, I haven’t seen a single one.”

“Sure. Ben can run over and feed the cats. It’s the least he can do,” Maddox says with a grumble.

“Still haven’t forgiven him?” I ask.

“I’m... considering but not committing.”

Maddox is hard enough to gain the trust of but clearly impossible to *regain* the trust of after you piss him off.

Reggie is currently trying to give Spite a peace offering of a stick, but Spite just merrily hops away from him. “Hiro, your bird is a dick.”

I can’t answer with everyone staring at me, so I just shrug as Spite flies onto my shoulder where he perches, pleased with his dick self.

“Hiro, you’re a dick too, rubbing your awesome bird in my face,” Reggie decides.

“Great,” I say.

We head into the beer tent where everyone is gathering. I lean into Maddox. “Should we not drink anything we’re offered?” I ask.

“I’ll keep a close eye on it. If it goes anywhere but from the tap and then to us, we’ll leave it,” he says. “Wait here with Nicolás.”

As I do, the girl from the grocery store comes over. “Hey! You’re the guy from the other day. The detective, right?”

“I’m a consultant, not a detective,” I say.

“Ah, well, still sounds cool,” she says. “I’m Jenn.”

“Hiro,” I respond.

“You’re just picking up all the ladies,” Natalie says.

Yes, and no damn ghosts.

Maddox returns with three bottles and slides one to each of us. “We’re good,” he says. “I popped the tops off myself. Do not let them out of your hands at any point.”

“There’s a dance tonight that you guys will have to join. I’d love seeing the three of you involved in a hoedown,” Jenn says before her attention gets pulled away.

“There’s a ho down?” Reggie asks as he looks around. “Where’s she at?”

“It’s a dance,” Keaton snaps, like he doesn’t realize Reggie is joking.

Reggie struts up to Keaton and pushes right into his space. He’s a good head shorter than Keaton, but that doesn’t slow him down any. “Ah, I didn’t realize that. I’m so glad we have your *massive* brain here to help.”

“They’re totally going to fuck each other’s brains out at some point,” Natalie says. “Hate sex is a thing.”

“It’s totally a thing, but those two?” I say suspiciously. Keaton looks borderline ready to tear Reggie’s head off and Reggie looks ready to throw down. Keaton’s towering frame makes me feel like he might win but if I know anything about Reggie, it’s that he’s resilient as fuck. And annoying. And persistent.

Could he break even *Keaton* down into liking him? He’d be a fucking wizard if he did...

“What are you staring at?” Maddox asks.

“Well... Natalie thinks Keaton and Reggie are going to be a thing, and I think they’re going to murder each other,” I say.

“Huh...” Maddox looks like he’s also struggling to wrap his brain around this.

“Right?”

“Reggie does love a challenge,” he says.

“No! Not you too!”

Maddox shrugs before taking a swig of his beer. “Like I said, he just likes a challenge.”

Reggie smacks the side of Keaton’s face while wearing a grin. Keaton looks borderline manic. How the hell is this more entertaining than this festival?

Then, without a word, Reggie struts over to me and sits on my lap before kissing my cheek and staring Keaton right in the eyes. Keaton's eyes narrow even more, but they don't narrow anywhere near as much as mine do when Reggie licks the side of my face.

"Dammit, Reggie!" I hiss, glad the music is loud enough I can make noise as I discreetly shove him off. "Maddox, save me from this hell."



"Well... this isn't what I was expecting," I say as I peer into the room we'd gotten. The last room the lady had since the "inn" is more or less a large house converted into four rooms.

"I did ask if there was enough room for all of us," Maddox says.

"Maybe Reggie's mom told her we're a throuple," I say as I stare at the one king bed. "I mean... it's just for one night, right? And we've all had too much alcohol to drive."

"I can sleep on the floor," Nicolás says.

"It's a king bed. There's enough room for all of us. It's fine," I assure him. "I'm going to set my alarm early, though, because I want to see if we can catch any ghosts before the town becomes active in the morning."

"Sounds good," Maddox says as he heads into the adjoining bathroom.

"Honestly, I can just sleep on the floor or in the car or something," Nicolás says.

I stare at him until he sighs and sits down on the edge of the bed. When we're all done in the bathroom, Maddox gives no shits and climbs in, so I slip into the middle of the bed and pat it for Nicolás.

"Don't be shy, little boy, join us," I say as I pat it.

"Oh dear god," Nicolás mutters before stiffly lying down beside me. I can tell Nicolás feels the most awkward about this, but honestly, I've shared a bed with him in hotels before and I've shared a bed with Maddox. It's not that big of a deal and the bed is large enough I can't even sense him.

That's the moment there's a shrill scream.

It makes me jump and both Nicolás and Maddox sit up quickly as I flail around for a moment before realizing the scream is coming from Reggie. "Oh my dear heart," Reggie says as he grabs his chest. "Don't tell me I missed it? Don't tell me I missed the man meat sandwich?"

"My heart is pounding out of my fucking chest. Fuck off, Reggie," I snap as everyone in the room calms down besides Reggie.

Reggie will not be calmed. "This is... it's beautiful. It's... magnificent. It's... making my rod rage!" he declares as he slowly climbs onto the bed like a panther stalking its prey. "Where should I lie?"

"On the floor," I say as he just flops down on top of me so he has one hand on Nicolás's chest and the other on Maddox's.

"Hiro, why are you so far away from Nicolás? Scooch closer. I need the bread to gently squeeze the meat," Reggie says.

I clamp a hand over Reggie's mouth. "I swear to god, if you make this more awkward than it already is, I'm going to banish you."

"This was my dying wish, and you will deprive me of it?" he asks.

"You didn't even know the two of us when you became a ghost," I hiss.

"Are you just... raving to yourself over there?" Maddox asks.

“This is how it was like sharing a room with him for our teenage years,” Nicolás says. “I’d be all, ‘Oh, is he sleep talking? Nah... creepier, he’s just chatting to some dead people.’ It was a little much to get used to when I first met him.”

“Should we all get naked?” Reggie asks.

“I swear to god if you get naked, I will salt you,” I say.

There’s the sudden sound of something dropping and I look up in time to see Natalie’s bucket of ghost popcorn hit the floor.

“You’re too late,” Reggie says. “Unless... Keaton, you want to join?”

“I want to go home,” Keaton says from the corner of the room. “I can’t seem to leave Hiro, and this is absolutely miserable. Why did I have to meet any of you?” I’m positive he’s trying to see if he can become one with the corner.

Natalie is now climbing onto the bed. The lights are out, Maddox and Nicolás are trying to sleep, and I have two ghosts climbing on me and a third ghost glaring at me. I’m not sure if he’s annoyed or jealous. I just want to sleep.

“Save me,” I whisper.

No one wants to save me.

“You brought this upon yourself,” Nicolás decides.

“I agree,” Maddox says.

“*Burn*,” Reggie says as he snuggles in close. “Tell them to become the bread.”

“Reggie says to become the bread. He wants to be the meat and I want to not be a part of this conversation,” I say.

“You could have spared our ears,” Maddox says.

“I’m sure I could have, but you expect me to suffer in silence?”

“Yes,” Maddox and Nicolás both say.

“Fine, I will stop sharing my super-awesome stuff with you.”

“Good,” Maddox says.

I flip them both off, shove Reggie toward Nicolás and Natalie toward Maddox and close my eyes.

“Don’t be jealous that I’m now the meat,” Reggie whispers in my ear.

“I’m not,” I whisper back.

“I’m just along for the ride,” Natalie says.

“The man meat express. Express ride down to sixty-nine town,” Reggie says, which is the last thing I hear before stuffing my pillow over my head and pinning it down.

Someone save me.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



HIRO

When I wake up, I'm a bit disoriented for a moment before remembering that I'm at the inn with Nicolás and Maddox. I have to pee but climbing out of the middle of Reggie's man meat sandwich is a bit of a struggle. Reggie and Natalie are still on top of me, and Keaton is staring out the window.

After a minute of trying to fall back asleep, I decide I can't hold it any longer and slither out from under the pile and slip into the bathroom. After I'm finished, I flush the toilet and turn around, coming face to face with Keaton.

I jump, grabbing my heart. "Dammit, you scared me."

"You're jumpy for this being an everyday occurrence," he says.

"Maybe," I say. "What's up?"

"How do you make the nights less endless?" he asks.

"I... don't know," I admit, feeling for him. "Natalie and Reggie usually wander off or sleep."

He seems to think about that for a moment before saying, "I can't leave you for some reason."

"Probably because you're new and would typically still be haunting the area you died but because of me, you're able to tag along. Why don't you try to sleep, then?"

He shrugs and I find myself surprised we're having a normal conversation, even if it's happening at three in the morning. "I don't know how. I tried to, but I can't. I can't shut my brain down. I can't stop thinking. I can't feel tired. I just feel... endlessly feel..." He seems uncertain. "I fucking hate this."

"I know," I say, honestly feeling awful for him, but unsure what else I can do besides help him move on. "I'm sorry. I'm going to do everything I can to help you move on. Once you're not walking this world anymore, things will be so much better for you. Until then, I guess you're going to have to ask Reggie or Natalie. I'll wake Natalie up and you can ask her."

"No, it's fine. Don't worry about it," he says before facing the door. He seems to take a deep breath before passing through it, like he has to steel himself to get through.

When I step out into the bedroom, I see a shadow hovering over Maddox. At first, I think it's Keaton contemplating waking Reggie or Natalie before I realize that it's Nicolás.

He seems to take notice of me and hurries over quietly enough that he doesn't wake Maddox.

“What are you—”

Nicolás holds his finger up and hurries over to the door. Confused, I follow him out into the hallway before coming to a stop. Nicolás shuts the door behind me as I stare at the ghosts that line up and down the hallway.

“What’s...”

They’re staring right at me, sending chills racing down my body. Something’s wrong. Something’s clearly wrong.

“Nicolás, something’s not right,” I say as I reach for the handle of the bedroom door, but before I make contact, Nicolás wraps his hand over my mouth and starts dragging me backward.

Startled, I mumble against his cupped hand as he drags me toward the stairs. “What the fuck?” I hiss, but my words get lost as I try to twist out of his grip. Instead of dragging me down them, he picks me up and carries me down while holding me tightly, keeping me close to his body as I squirm and struggle. Just as he slips through the front door, I twist my body and break free only for him to grab me by the neck and haul me back.

“Dammit, Nicolás, what are you doing?” I ask as I try to turn to face him.

“I want to show you something,” he says, but this isn’t Nicolás. Well... it *is* him, but he’s different. Like Keaton had been.

“Nicolás, this isn’t you. Please, talk to me.”

Nicolás seems to decide that I can stand on my own two feet, but it doesn’t stop him from maintaining the viselike grip around my wrist. “I want to show you something. Don’t you want to see what I want to show you?” he asks as he starts trekking along with me being dragged after him. He’s not hurting me, and I’m not sure if he *would* hurt me, but I’m also positive I don’t want to go like this.

Even so, I twist my arm in an attempt to break free, but Nicolás just jerks me toward him hard enough that I lose my balance and come crashing forward. He wraps one arm around my neck and the other around my chest and resumes dragging me.

“What should we do?” Natalie asks as she and Reggie push through the blockade of ghosts.

“Wake Maddox—” The hand that’d been around my neck smacks down over my mouth. But at least they still heard me. I know Maddox could manhandle Nicolás into listening to him or at least remaining still. I watch as she and Reggie disappear, and now it’s just me and Nicolás and all of the ghosts again.

They’re not saying anything, no, instead they seem to be along for the ride as I’m pulled across the road and dragged out the way the wagon had taken us earlier. I pry at his fingers over my mouth, barely managing to push a few up.

“Nicolás, please, let me go,” I say as I struggle to break free. “You can do it. Let me go.”

“No thanks,” he says as he picks up speed while I’m bent over with my head in some kind of arm lock as he casually drags me along.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

If this was anyone else, I would hurt them. I would kick them, scratch them, bite them... but this is my brother. This *is* my brother... right?

“Nicolás, please,” I say before shoving myself forward, ramming my shoulder into his back. It sends him stumbling down into the gravel that lines the road. He trips and we both go sailing into the ditch.

MADDOX

Something dropping to the floor startles me awake. Quickly, I sit up, and in the light leaking through the thin curtains, I see a cup that'd been sitting on the bedside table scoot off before hitting the ground. For a moment, I just stare at it while comprehending that I'm sure it's just Reggie or Natalie, and even if my brain says it's not normal, it's fine.

But what are they, cats now? Just scooting shit off? Maybe they need Hiro? But then why wouldn't they just call for him?

I reach over to Hiro before realizing that there's no Hiro at all.

Or Nicolás...

What the fuck?

I hit the light on and look at the completely vacant room. Are they in the bathroom? Quickly, I get out of bed and turn the bathroom light on, finding it empty.

"Hiro?" I ask as I look around.

How the fuck did the two of them disappear, leaving me alone? Why the fuck did I drink? I didn't even drink that much and yet this is what happens.

"Hiro?" I ask again. I pick up my phone in case Hiro had texted me something, only to find his phone on the ground. It must have been the first thing that fell.

Fucking hell, I should never have agreed to any of this.

I quickly go over to the window and look out of it, but the town looks quiet. Those hanging around to party have staggered off. All that's left are tents and food stands that will probably be torn down in the morning. That's when a sliver of movement catches my eye in the moonlight. It's so far out that I can't even tell if it's a person or an animal, but something tells me I need to get out there.

At least he's probably with Nicolás. Nicolás might not be any better of a fighter than Hiro, but the two of them together have a better chance than either of them alone.

I rush down the stairs, contemplating whether or not I should call for help. I don't yet know that there's an actual emergency. Hell, they could have stepped outside to talk. Could have run out to the car to get something. There are a lot of innocuous could-haves, but there are a lot of horrible could-haves as well.

I glance over at the spot where Reggie was killed before shaking my head. Focus. I need to focus.



HIRO

"That was awfully dramatic," Nicolás says. Slowly, I look up at the man dragging me along the ground by my arms. I lost a sock at one point and the other is barely hanging in there.

"Nicolás?" I ask as I look back at him.

I'm in a cornfield and can't help but question why I've found myself back in the maze. "Nicolás, what are you doing?"

"The better question is what are *you* doing? Who just flings their entire body into a ditch?" he asks. "You literally found the one rock in the entire area."

"What? You were dragging me off by my throat!"

"Because you wouldn't follow!" He says this like any of it could remotely be my fault. Like being

dragged around by someone who is my brother but isn't at the same time is normal.

Pushing my foot under me, I try to stand up, but Nicolás just yanks me forward, throwing me off balance. I get my feet under me again and this time, I throw myself at him. He cries out as he falls forward, slamming into some stalks of corn. He snaps one as he falls down into the row. Quickly, I leap onto him and try to yank his arm behind his back like I've seen Maddox do with ease.

I quickly realize that Maddox is a fucking magician because this isn't simple at all. Nicolás uses his other arm to lock both arms in front of him to keep me from pulling either back, so there I sit looking like an idiot as I yank and tug at his arm. The thought of choking him out enters my mind briefly, but the idea that I could hurt him keeps me from doing anything.

That's the moment I hear barking. Nicolás freezes and looks to the left a moment before the dog I'd been petting earlier today comes charging our way. Nicolás sends me flying, grabs the snapped stalk and starts waving it around as the dog assesses the situation.

"Foul demon! I will send you back to where you came from!" Nicolás declares.

Spite starts dive-bombing the dog like that's the only way he knows how to make an entrance, and I wallow around in the dirt and mud. The ghosts are chittering, and some are even trying to scare the dog with little success. All the while, the dog seems mildly confused and mildly hungry for human flesh.

Nicolás, who could befriend the scariest of canines, whaps the dog on the head with the cornstalk and then takes off running.

"What the absolute hell is happening?" Reggie says as he and Natalie appear just in time to witness Nicolás racing off in the corn maze with a dog and multiple ghosts on his tail.

"I... don't... know," I admit.

"Well, I got Maddox's attention by whipping your phone across the room," he says, looking highly proud of himself.

"My *phone*? Why didn't you knock off the TV remote or the tissue box?" I ask.

He thinks about that for a moment. "I don't know. Karma, I guess."

"Is it?" I ask, unsure of how it relates but also knowing that I'm going to let Reggie say what he wants because he's gained Maddox's attention. The issue is... do I go to him? It's my fault Nicolás is out here. If something is happening to him like it did Keaton... Nicolás could hurt himself or someone else. Or possibly something even worse.

I can't let that happen.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I take off in the direction Nicolás had run off in, but he's long gone by now. Not even a straggler of a ghost is left to show me the way. And if they're all following him... that means they think something's going to happen to him.

"Natalie, Reggie, quickly spread out and help me find Nicolás," I say.

"Weren't you just... trying to get away from Nicolás?" Natalie asks.

"What if he gets hurt or tries to..." I can't even say it. I can't lose another brother. Losing Sean was hard enough.

A leaf from a stalk smacks my face and scratches my cheek as I stumble through the rows. I'm trying my absolute best to not panic as I question what I'll do when I can't find Nicolás.

That's when I see a ghost. If she's following Nicolás, she'd be able to tell where he went. "Excuse me!" I say as I rush toward her. The ghost is staring at me with such an intense expression that I find myself slowing down as I get near her. "Excuse me, I'm looking for a guy who just ran through here. Did you happen to see him?"

"Go home," the woman says.

"I will as soon as I find my brother," I say.

"Go. *Home*." Her voice is getting sharper as I watch her closely.

"No, I need to find my brother," I say as I move past her a moment before she appears before me again.

"Go home."

Another ghost arrives to my right, moving in on me. "Go home."

"You're not welcome here," a third says, and I can feel the malice wrapped around them.

I slam into one, and they seem to realize that they're not quite so intangible as they once thought.

The moment they realize that, they grab onto me, like they're going to drag me back or keep me from following after Nicolás.

"Don't touch me," I growl, and the female ghost falls straight through me. I shudder at the chill that invades my body but manage to shake off the others and continue on my run after Nicolás. The ghosts clearly aren't done with me, but I seem to be able to keep them off me if I focus hard enough.

I hear Spite ahead and move toward him since the bird seems to have a pretty good understanding of what I need and can see above us.

The ground is hard to run across with no shoes on and only one sock, but I can't let that stop me, especially when the ghosts are already trying their hardest to do so. Their rage seems to be pushing them on. They're adamant about keeping me back, but I push on harder.

The moment I break through the cornfield and out into the orchard, I see Nicolás standing at the edge of the orchard, the farthest point from where the hay wagon had dropped us off. He's standing there, staring at the ground as the dog chews on a cornstalk nearby.

"Nicolás?" I ask as the ghosts wrap around him. It's almost like the ghosts are in a divide. Some helping us and others insistent that I leave.

The ghost of a young woman appears before me. "Go home."

"You're going to regret this," another says.

I shove past them and rush over to Nicolás. "Hey, Nicolás. Please. Come with me. Now. We need to get out of here now."

"Save me," he says as he drops to his knees and starts digging at the ground. His bare fingers scrape at the hard-packed dirt, nails raking across the top.

"Nicolás, what are you doing?" I ask, honestly a little wary, but he's my brother. He might be acting weird as hell, but he's still my brother, and I have to protect him.

"Save me. Save me, save me," he starts chanting as the ghosts that'd been trying to stop me draw near.

The others who'd been with Nicolás wrap around us, like they're trying to protect us. Like they're trying to keep the others away from me or Nicolás as he digs at the ground with his bare hands.

"Save you from what?" I ask as I set a hand on his shoulder, hoping my touch will calm him.

"Them," he says.

I wrap Nicolás up in my arms and pull him back as dirt falls from his fingers. "Nicolás, please, please listen to me. Please come back. This isn't you. Nicolás, please." I don't know what else to do. I don't know if he's been drugged, I don't know what's happening, but I do know that I need to pull him back before he hurts himself.

"Please..." he says.

"Yes, Nicolás, please come back."

Nicolás sinks down in my arms like a heavy weight as I hear a noise behind me. I turn to look, relieved to see Maddox but surprised that he's not alone. There's a man with him and it takes me a

moment to realize it's Hans, the mayor of the village.

"What the hell is going on?" Maddox asks as he rushes over to us. He grabs hold of me, hauling me back from Nicolás like he has to protect me from him.

"That's what I'd like to know," Nicolás says, voice showing his uncertainty as he looks his mud-coated hands over.

"And me as well," Hans says, not sounding pleased. "Imagine my surprise when my wife tells me you were waking up the whole damn inn. What were you two doing?"

I look over at Nicolás and then at the ground he'd been digging at. He didn't get too far with just his fingers, honestly just managed to dig up some grass and claw at the dirt, but it leaves me to question why there. Is there something buried beneath? What did the ghosts not want us to find?

"Come on, this is private property. We don't need some... hooligans out after dark on your drugs or whatever you're on," Hans says. "I oughta call the local police. I'm sure they wouldn't look too well on their 'men of the law' doing shit like this."

"I can assure you no one in our party is on drugs," Maddox says as he reaches out to me. "Hiro, what happened?"

What *did* happen?

Nicolás slowly rises and tries to knock the dirt off his hands, but it does little to get the evidence off. Hans grabs Nicolás's hand like it's proof we were doing something illegal, which I guess we were. But at the same time... something's going on here. Something that Nicolás clearly couldn't control.

"This isn't some playground. This land is someone's livelihood. And no one needs the two of you digging around and destroying it," Hans says. "I think the lot of you have done enough for one day."

"Wait," I say. "Maddox, I... I think there's evidence here. We were brought here because of something we missed."

"Evidence?" he asks as his eyes shift back to the spot where Nicolás had been digging.

"I think there's a dead body buried here," I say, determined.

The mayor barks out a laugh. "A... A dead body? And where exactly is this dead body?" Hans says.

"Buried, right here," Nicolás says as he points. I don't know if he truly believes that or if he's just going off me, but now that I've said it out loud, I believe I'm right.

"This is ridiculous. How about you guys ask the owners before you start spouting ideas and hurting soil that's not yours," he says.

"We will," Maddox says. "We apologize for any inconvenience we might have caused." When I see Nicolás still staring in the direction of the area he'd been digging, I notice a ghost I hadn't seen before kneeling in that exact spot and digging away. He can't actually dig anything up, but it's like he's determined to try no matter what the outcome is.

I walk over to him before kneeling down. "Hey, can you talk to me?"

"Help me. I need to get out."

"Who is in there?" I ask.

"Come along *now*," Hans says as he stares pointedly at me. The dog trots over to see what I'm so interested in before taking a moment to pee on the tree we were kneeling in front of.

"Damned foul demon," the ghost says, and as Hans moves over to me, the ghost disappears.

Damned foul demon... the exact thing Nicolás had called the dog before.

"I said come along, unless I need to get someone with authority to help."

"Come on, Hiro," Maddox says, and I start after him as my thoughts rush around in a whirlwind.

The mayor still doesn't seem thrilled, even though we're listening, but he leads us around the cornfield and straight out to the road.

"I'd prefer you don't harass my residents at this time of night with... this," Hans says. "They have children."

"That's okay, I'd have to go through things on my end first," Maddox says.

"What kind of things?" Hans says.

"We'd contact the homeowner to see if we could look over their property and if they decline, which I doubt they'll do, we'll get a warrant. No one wants to have possible bodies on their land," Maddox says.

Hans watches him closely. "What evidence do you have of this?"

The thing is, we have nothing. What can we tell them? Nicolás dragged me around until he started digging a hole like a dog and claiming there were bodies beneath?

"I cannot share those details with you at this time," Maddox says, voice steady but expression telling the mayor to simply not worry about it.

Nicolás is quiet as he trails after us. I glance back at him and find him staring at his hands as he walks. It's like they're something he's never seen before.

"I think it'd be best if you just went home for the night," Hans says.

"Thank you," Maddox says, not looking the least bit thankful as we reach the inn. We head inside, thankfully alone, and the moment Maddox closes the door he turns on us. "I'm leashing your ass."

"Me?" I ask with wide eyes like he could possibly be mistaken, and it totally wasn't me who was dragged off again. I seem to have a knack for it, but I didn't willingly go, "Oh, tonight looks like a lovely night to be dragged around." I sigh, honestly a bit exasperated. "It's not my fault ghosts need help and my brother dragged me outside and through a corn maze by my arms."

"I did?" Nicolás asks, seeming uncertain. "I'm so fucking confused. Can someone explain what's happening?"

"BUT!" I make sure it's loud enough they both look at me. "I have solved the mystery."

"You've solved... the mystery?" Maddox asks, looking skeptical. Why I could possibly be looked at in that way while I stand here with no shoes and one sock, wind-whipped and cornstalk-scratched, I have no idea.

"Possession. Nicolás was possessed by a ghost," I declare.

"I was... possessed... by a ghost?" Nicolás says skeptically.

"...Yes?" The way Maddox and Nicolás are staring at me is making me less certain.

"This is so not going to be the proof Parker needs to get a warrant," Maddox says with a sigh.

"Possession isn't real, right?" Nicolás asks.

I stare at him because I honestly have no fucking clue. I want to say no. I want to say no more than anything, but at the same time I have to look at what just happened. Isn't that what it seems like? "I don't... know. I've never... heard of it happening. I just... it's what it seems like. I've honestly never heard of anyone getting possessed. I remember talking to ghosts about it as a child and none of them ever thought such a thing could be possible, but maybe it is."

No one seems very certain, but I feel like that's all it can be. It *has* to be it.

"I feel foolish that we didn't figure it out before now," I say. "But to our credit... we didn't actually believe in possession."

"But possession... I mean... *is* it even real?" Nicolás asks again.

I hesitate because as I told him, I don't really know, but I feel like it has to be. It's the only thing that would make sense right now.

“Let’s get going before the police are called on us. We’ll talk in the car,” Maddox says as he ushers us out to it.

As we head back to our car that’s sitting in the church parking lot, I see that a light in the church is on. I assume that just means it’s open for anyone no matter the time, but as I get into the car, I notice the front door open and the pastor looks out at us. He watches us for a second before he starts walking over to us.

“He’s going to murder us,” I decide.

“He’s not going to murder us,” Maddox says.

“I’m with Hiro,” Nicolás says, but when Joseph steps up to my window, I roll it down.

“Everything alright?” he asks.

“Yeah, police business. We needed to head out.”

“Okay, please be safe,” he says.

“I have a question,” I say.

“Of course.”

“Did you know Jude Wilks?”

“I did.”

“Did he ever tell you about his wife cheating on him?” I ask. “You know, I’m just... like don’t people tell things to priests and pastors they don’t tell others? Or... something?”

Joseph is quiet as he watches me for a moment. “He did.”

“And do you know who the guy is she cheated with?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I’m sorry, I don’t. I don’t know anyone else who knows about it, so I can’t help you.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“You three need to be careful,” he says, but the way he says it makes me feel ill at ease.

“We will. Thank you,” I say before watching him step away.

“You think Jude possessed Erick and was trying to use Erick to kill whoever his wife slept with?” Maddox asks.

“I don’t know, I just thought if I could confirm she cheated... and we could confirm that Erick never met Jude, we would know that he could have been possessed. It’s one thing to pretend to be someone, but if Erick just met Jude the day he killed him, and then took over his life, would Jude have told him about the adultery?” I ask.

“You really think Erick was Jude, don’t you?” Maddox asks.

“I don’t know. It doesn’t make sense, but at the same time it does...”

“I think we need to get out of here,” Nicolás says. “See if I ever let you two take me out for a ‘good time’ again.”

I look back at him. “I’m really sorry.”

He smiles at me while shaking his head. “Nah, no biggie. I had nothing better to do on my Saturday night than to be mildly possessed by a ghost and illegally dig around in a field like a wild dog.”

“I’m glad we could provide you some entertainment,” I say as Maddox gets his phone out.

“Nicolás, I’m going to toss you under the bus,” Maddox says. “Hiro could get in trouble and taken off the case for trespassing on private property. But if you dragged him onto the property, he had no way of defending himself. You won’t get in trouble because you remember none of it. They’re not going to arrest you for wandering on property that was open to the public a few hours before.”

“It’ll be like the time he burned the shed down,” I say, which Nicolás doesn’t find anywhere near

as amusing as I do.

When Maddox is finished with his phone call, he sighs and says, “This is going to be a long night.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN



MADDOX

Long night was an understatement. By noon, we've accomplished nothing. The owners of the property refuse to let anyone on the premises. There is no amount of talking that will get them to budge; they're not having it.

"We have proof of nothing," Parker says as she stands behind her desk. She shifts her eyes onto Hiro. "Just because your brother 'dragged you off' and started digging at dirt like a dog doesn't mean there's a dead body."

"The ghost wanted it dug up," Hiro says.

Hiro's getting fed up. I've honestly never seen him so frustrated, and I feel bad for him having to deal with this. Someone constantly telling him over and over that he's wrong because whatever he sees or hears is not proof is almost like them telling him it's not real.

It is to him.

"Parker—" I start, but she quickly cuts me off.

"We have Erick, who killed Jude, already in custody—" she starts.

"We don't, though. We have no proof Erick killed Jude. We literally have a man who remembers nothing, who was beaten over the head by a baseball bat."

"Yes, okay, and if you have information on the people who attacked him, I'd love to hear it," she says. "Maddox, you used to be my best damn detective, and now you're so caught up in this that you won't even see reason. Ghost chatter is not goddamn probable *cause*." She seems done with this conversation as she grabs her mug of coffee.

"Just because you can't hear them screaming in your ears all the goddamn time doesn't mean they're not," Hiro snaps, and suddenly the mug Parker was holding is torn out of her hand and slams into the far wall, shattering as coffee begins to run down the wall.

Silence settles on the room because there was no one even close to Parker, and she sure as hell didn't throw it. Hiro looks absolutely horrified.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't... I just... I'm so sorry," he says as he rushes over and starts picking up the pieces in a panic as I'm left standing there staring at the shock on Parker's face.

I've seen the ghosts nudge things... but this? To throw something with that much force...

Parker clears her throat as she sinks down into her chair. "I will... see if I can make it sound a bit more reasonable," she says. "Hiro, please leave it."

He kneels there, broken pieces in his hand. Instead of getting up, he just lets himself fall forward until his head hits the wall. "I'm really sorry." I walk over and set a hand on his shoulder, hoping he knows that it's okay. Everyone gets frustrated, especially when things aren't going the right way and lives are on the line. He never told any of the ghosts to do anything.

"It's fine. The mug was fucking ugly anyway. I hated it," she says. "I'll get someone in here with a broom so you don't cut yourself. Hiro, go clear your head. Maddox, I want you to figure out what you can about this cheating thing. The wife died a year ago. I want to know if there's any way Jude could have figured out who she'd cheated with and if they were somehow involved. Hiro, the next time you're back in Helmsdale, you're going to find your little ghost friends and you're going to preach the fact that you need goddamn proof. Because right now, you're telling me that you think Erick was possessed by Jude and that Keaton was possessed by someone who made him kill himself. And possessed Nicolás went off and found a body that is buried in an orchard. I have a lot of impossible things that won't stand up too well against *anyone*. Concrete, tangible evidence, you both hear me?"

"Got it," I say.

"Yeah," Hiro says as I take his hand and pull him up. "I will do everything I can."

"Good," she says, dismissing us.

As we walk outside her office, I notice Hiro won't look at me. "Hey," I say as I reach out to him. He glances over at me. "It's okay. It's not like you threw the mug *at* her or something. You didn't even throw it!"

"But I was angry... and that just..."

"Who threw it?" I ask.

"Reggie. He just... he just grabbed it and threw it and then seemed shocked he did. He wasn't goofing around or anything. He was genuinely pissed. Like I *made* him pissed enough he did it."

"You didn't make him anything. Reggie's always had a tiny temper that flares up every now and then. I'm sure he's just annoyed because we are," I assure him, but Hiro doesn't seem certain. I can't help but wonder if he's thinking back to how Millie attacked us, but it's not like Reggie would ever hurt us. "Hey, it's okay. It was just Reggie. He's not going to do anything."

Hiro takes a deep breath and seems to slowly steady himself. "Yeah, you're right."

Since no one is looking, I reach out and pull him into a hug. "I'm sorry. I can only imagine how frustrating it must be for you to deal with people like this. People who seem to be telling you that even though you see and hear and feel all of this, you're wrong."

He sinks into me, letting me squeeze him in close. "It's stupid, you know? Like I *get it*. I get they need tangible proof, but at the same time, I just feel useless. Like everything I do or give them isn't worth shit because it's not 'real' to them or something. I don't know. Let's see what tangible shit we can find. Hopefully, we just stumble upon the bad guys and call it a day because I'm tired as hell."

"Me too," I say.



Stumbling on bad guys seems to be a whole hell of a lot harder than we'd hoped, leaving us with nothing of use as we head inside my house. Hopefully, Parker will be able to work her magic and find something decent for us. Until then, Hiro and I are going to eat the food we ordered and sleep the rest

of the day away.

“How about eating in bed?” I ask.

“That sounds magnificent,” Hiro says as we hurry off to the bedroom after properly greeting Stella and Bandit. They wouldn’t let us into the house without paying the petting toll.

I can’t help but wonder if it bothers Hiro to sleep here after the incident with Erick, but he never seems to mind. Even when I ask him, he just smiles and tells me it’s fine, that Erick has been arrested, and there’s nothing else that can be done.

But I bet he still thinks about it.

I strip and climb into bed because while eating in bed sounds fine, eating in bed while naked is clearly even better. We’d been able to get changed and showered earlier today since Hiro’s back was filthy from Nicolás dragging him through the field. He had a few scrapes and cuts as well that he made me promise to never let Nicolás know about.

As he settles into the bed next to me, the cats circle around us like vultures while I pull out the containers.

“I feel like eating spaghetti in bed is a horrible idea,” Hiro says as he pops his lid open. “And yet... I’m all for it.”

“Nah, sheets wash,” I say, positive I’d eat this damn spaghetti anywhere as long as Hiro was beside me and I didn’t have to move more than a foot or two from this location.

“Want a big fat breadstick?” Hiro asks, voice maybe going for seductive but coming out sounding like a creeper.

“It’s mildly concerning you said it that way, but I’m still going to say yes,” I respond as he pulls one out of a container before holding it out to me and smacking the breadstick against my lips.

“You like that, don’t you?” he teases.

“I love it when you smack me with your breadstick.”

He’s grinning now. “Open wide.”

“I don’t want to deepthroat a breadstick,” I inform him.

“Oh? Too much to handle?”

I open my mouth and take a quick bite before I can be greeted with any more suspicious innuendos.

“You liked that, didn’t you?” he purrs.

“Very... garlicy.”

He snickers before passing it off to me, leaving butter on his fingers. I reach out and pull his hand close before licking the butter off. Hiro raises an eyebrow, a mischievous look on his face.

“What are you doing over there, handsome?” he asks.

“Just being your personal napkin, clearly,” I say.

“Yeah? Reggie says he wants to watch you wipe me all over, and I’m not sure if that was supposed to be sexy or just weird.”

“Ah, Reggie is here.”

“Reggie said you don’t sound excited to see him when he was excited to see you,” Hiro says.

“Tell Reggie that he surely has better things to do.”

Hiro listens for a moment before a grin crosses his face and I realize whatever I do, I need to get rid of Reggie now. But before I can say anything that could be considered threatening to a ghost, Hiro says, “Can you go check on Keaton for me? If you do, I’ll have Nicolás let you know the next time he’s taking a bath... Wow... that was fast. He’s gone.”

“What did he say to you before you said that?” I ask.

That grin is immediately back. “Nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me,” I say.

“How about instead of worrying about useless stuff, you just stuff your big fat breadstick in your mouth and let me handle it,” he says with a teasing grin back in place.

“I’m not worried, just a little confused about me stuffing my own breadstick in my mouth. I’m not sure I’m that flexible,” I inform him.

He laughs as he picks up his breadstick and runs his tongue over the tip while staring me in the eyes and trying not to grin like crazy.

“Dear god,” I say. “Don’t distract me. I know you and Reggie had some secret joke between the two of you.”

He bites off a piece while still managing to look insanely sexy. “Yeah? You think so? What do you think it was about?”

Honestly, I don’t know, but I can’t stop watching as he sticks his fork in the spaghetti and twirls it around and then twirls it some more before trying to seductively take a bite and losing half of the noodles on the way. At least they all go back into the tray.

“Trying to look sexy eating spaghetti isn’t a thing. *Lady and the Tramp* lied to me.”

I start laughing, realizing that maybe I don’t care what Reggie said, I just care that Hiro making an absolute mess is still, somehow, the sexiest damn thing I’ve ever seen or experienced. He could be scrubbing a toilet, and I’d still want him naked.

Somehow, by some strange magical force (or maybe we were just hungry), we manage to make it through our meal before I jump him or he jumps me. Once he’s finished eating, he turns to me.

“I wanna fondle your breadstick.”

“Do ya?” I ask with a grin.

“Do you want me to?” he asks with an even wider grin.

I make sure my voice is grumbly, just the way he likes it, when I say, “I want to touch every inch of you and make you squirm.”

“God, you’re so fucking hot,” he says as he slides onto my lap and tips my chin up.

“Not as gorgeous as you,” I say as I press my lips against his while I reach down and grab his ass cheeks in my hands. I pull him forward until his hardening cock presses against mine. He murmurs something against my lips but clearly doesn’t need me to hear it enough to stop kissing me.

Hiro jumps before slowly turning to something beyond me, eyes going wide as they settle on something I can’t see.

“Hiro?” I ask, wondering who exactly showed up to rain on our parade.

He turns back to me and smiles. “Nothing.”

“What was it?”

“Just the shrill scream of Keaton after he appeared. I guess he didn’t like the look of your amazing ass as much as I do. The noise is still echoing through my head, but he’s gone, so all is well,” he says.

“Is it?” I ask suspiciously.

“For us, not him. And I don’t need to be able to hear well to make you come, trust me,” he says with a grin.

This man. This peculiar, irresistible, and absolutely perfect man.

“I do prefer it when you play with me instead of your imaginary friends,” I tease.

“I’m all yours, along with the creepy lady who sits in the corner and knits every time we have sex.”

“Wait... what?” I ask.

He grins before kissing my cheek and whispering, "I'm joking," in my ear.

Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if he's not. But I decide to push that thought to the side. I reach for the bedside table drawer and grab lube that he takes from me before pressing in closer, making his cock rub against mine. As my hands slide up his back, I feel drawn in by everything he does. Every touch, every kiss, every caress. This man is breathtaking and he's all mine. I feel cold lube drop down onto my cock as he nips my lip before kissing the same spot. I reach down and slide my hand down his length, smearing lube down his shaft before running my fingers around the base.

"You like this breadstick better, don't you?" I tease as his hand wraps around my cock.

He snorts as he tucks his face against my neck, peppering kisses along it. "You think you can satisfy me as much as a garlicky goodness breadstick?"

"I'm not sure after seeing the way you devoured it, but I sure as hell am prepared to try," I say as I push his chin up enough to kiss his lips as my hand draws down his cock. His tongue fights against mine like he can't get enough of me, and no matter how desperately I grab onto him, I'm not sure it's enough. As my hand moves down his length, we break apart, breath heavy. I shower him with gentle kisses before moving down to his neck as I push our cocks together and run my hand down both of them as he tips his head back, a moan leaving his lips.

How can this man be so irresistible?

I suck and kiss and lick until I have him begging for release. Tightening my grip on the base of his cock, I slide my hand, already wet with lube, down his ass and run my finger over his hole. He pushes his hips forward, his own hand on my cock hesitating as I slowly press my finger inside him.

"Oh, fuck... Maddox... there..."

His grip on my cock tightens as I run my finger inside him, looking for that sweet spot that I know will make him squirm and lose focus.

"Do you like that?" I ask, voice teasing until his fingers gently tug my balls while the other hand slides up to the head of my cock, instantly shutting me up. It's done in a "two can play this game" gesture as he captures my complete focus until the only thing coming out of me is a moan in response to his touches. It's like he knows how to make me weak to him until I can't even think straight. I can only focus on what he's doing to me and what I'm doing to him. His hips push into me, and I feel his body tense as he comes. I can't hold it back any longer, not when he's making me feel like this. Not when the heat of his body, the stroke of his hand, all of it pushes me over the edge.

We're left, breath heavy, holding on to each other before dropping down onto the bed, knowing we need to clean up, but too pleased to even move at the moment. The only thing I can do is run my fingers down his side and plant a soft kiss on his cheek.

"Is the lady still knitting in the corner?" I ask.

He glances over before looking back at me. "Nah, she said her soap opera was starting and left about halfway through."

I hesitate as I wonder how far he's taking this joke. "Hold on..."

"Hmm?" he asks.

"Was there really an old lady knitting in the corner and judging us?"

He grins at me. "I don't know, do you want there to have been?"

"You, Hiro, are ridiculous."

"She gave us a nine out of ten, though. Told me to grab your balls, which really did shut your teasing right up."

"You are one hundred percent making this up," I say, but all I get in return is his laughter filling the room and realize that I don't care whether he is or not. I'll take the nine out of ten.

CHAPTER TWENTY



HIRO

Reggie walks into the conference room with a cigar in his mouth, leather jacket on, chains hanging from his pants, sunglasses in place, and Snugglebum in his hand. The cat looks pleased even though his one true love is an idiot.

Reggie takes a puff of his cigar before seeming to assess the room. “You know... back in my day we didn’t have to jump through hoops like this, Snugglebum,” he says, voice low and gravelly, which really doesn’t fit him *or* the image he’s trying to create. “We just went in, we fucked shit up, we broke bones, cut off balls, but we got shit done and we saved lives while doing it.”

“Hiro!”

I jump as I realize that someone who has at least half a brain and isn’t fucking weird is talking to me.

“Are you *daydreaming*?” Parker asks, and the way her voice turns shrill tells me that I need to say something highly intelligent to inform her that I was paying one hundred percent attention.

“No?” I ask. Ah shit.

She stares at me like she’s positive I’m lying. Her wife, Elena, who isn’t *as* evil, is standing next to her looking amused.

“I just said that we can’t get a warrant,” she says.

“Hold my cat,” Reggie says as he passes Snugglebum to me, and because the normal reaction of someone passing their cat to you is to grab it, I take the cat before realizing I now look like a fucking weirdo holding a cat that is one hundred percent invisible to everyone but me.

I look each and every one of them in the eyes: Parker (who looks like she’s done with me), Elena (who still looks amused), and Maddox (who goes with it because he’s the best boyfriend either alive or dead).

And as they all stare me in the eyes, I put the invisible cat on the ground. “Anyway,” I say, wanting to move this along, aka get the attention off me and my questionable deeds. “Is there something else we can do to *get* the warrant because I know there is at least one body there.”

“How certain are you?” Parker asks.

“Um... well...” Doesn’t seem like I’m getting off to an overly certain start. “A hundred percent.”

“A hundred percent? So you’d bet your job here on it?” Parker asks.

“Eighty percent.”

“Ah, that is still pretty high. The ghost went, my body is buried here?” Parker asks.

I slowly look over at Maddox for help. He’s generally better at bullying people into believing me.

“Hiro knows what he saw,” Maddox says, coming right to my rescue. He’s even got an arm folded over chest, body exuding power over this conversation thing going on.

But Parker isn’t a weak woman. She does not fold in the slightest. “Right, so I’m trying to decide if he one hundred percent saw a ghost claim his body was buried right in that spot.”

Maddox has his stern look on. “Hiro hasn’t made a mistake yet, has he?” he asks.

Before I can confess that I really have no idea if there’s a body there or not, there’s a knock on the door and Lexi pokes her head in.

“Booker, we got those results. Thought you guys might want to look over them while you’re all together.”

Maddox takes the papers from her. “Well... shit. Erick shows Rohypnol in his system. So... someone is using the drug to lower their state of awareness to then possess them?”

“Oh, you think someone’s in charge of the possessions?” I ask in surprise. “You think someone else can see ghosts instead of the ghosts doing this themselves?” I guess that makes sense, right? Especially now that we know drugs were involved.

“I... don’t know,” he says. “Have you ever come across someone else with your ability?”

“No. Nicolás’s ability to feel things that are odd is the closest I’ve ever seen to someone like me,” I say.

“It’ll be a while before we get results on Keaton as well as Nicolás’s results,” Maddox says. “But we do know that Nicolás was also affected by this, so there’s the possibility that the only way to drop their mental state enough for possession would be with drugs. But man, I watched everything Nicolás drank and don’t know how anyone could have slipped anything in his drink. And it would have been within half an hour of us going to sleep or we’d have seen signs of the drug, which I never saw.”

“We’re honestly going the possession route?” Parker asks in disbelief. “I can see it now. ‘Yes, judge, this man is innocent because a *ghost* possessed him.’”

“She’s *sassy* and calling you a dumb liar,” Reggie says. “Want me to fight her?”

Oh, dear god, what if he backhands her across the room like he did to the coffee mug? “No!” I say.

“No, you’re not?” Parker asks.

“Sorry, that was something else,” I say with a smile.

She seems oddly suspicious of my smile and after my thought of her being backhanded across the room, I don’t blame her.

“Here’s the thing, though, if someone is pushing possession, why was the ghost who possessed Nicolás trying to *help* us? In the past they’ve tried to stop us. Look at Keaton,” Maddox says.

Elena examines the results of the testing before shaking her head. “No, if Nicolás had this much Rohypnol in his system, he wouldn’t have been *walking*. When he was back to normal, he walked out of that orchard, right?”

“True,” Maddox says. “It wouldn’t be out of his system at that point.”

“What if Nicolás is more vulnerable because of his ability?” I ask. “Remember when Millie was able to jerk his steering wheel and wreck his car? Usually ghosts wouldn’t be able to do that without them being in my presence.”

“And... this time they *were* in your presence,” Maddox says. “You were sleeping next to him.”

“Actually, he was sleeping next to me, and *I* was spooning Nicolás,” Reggie states proudly, which oddly seems useless to this investigation.

“But this could mean that Erick is innocent, and Keaton was murdered,” Maddox says. “I mean, I didn’t know Keaton extremely well, but he was a reserved guy and recording his own death really doesn’t match his psychological profile. That doesn’t mean he wouldn’t, but it makes me more likely to question it. Or question why, if he really did it. They were wanting to keep us from questioning whether or not it was a forced suicide by showing the room and showing Keaton killing himself.”

“I can talk to Keaton about it. And maybe if we go with this route of thinking, Erick would be more willing to talk to us,” I say. “Right now, everyone is telling him he kidnapped me and shot Troy and possibly murdered Jude. He’s probably fucking traumatized. But if we were on his side, maybe something would come of it.”

Maddox looks thoughtful. “Parker, can we see if Erick would be interested in meeting both Hiro and me? He was interested in meeting Hiro because of what happened at the church, but if he met the two of us, we could go over meeting him in the woods. It would be even better if we could take him around the woods and even into the house. If this is right, he’s an innocent man. Jude was killed the same day Erick was taken. If Erick really doesn’t remember what happened, we can guess he was drugged.”

Parker slowly nods. “Let me see what I can do. In the meantime, you need to figure out how to get us onto that property.”

“So... how did Erick or Jude know about your ghosting abilities?” Elena asks.

“I... don’t know,” I admit.

“Well, someone had to have told him,” she says.

“I’m sure it’s gotten around... I don’t know. It seems like it spread like wildfire through the department to the point where people think I’m insane,” I say.

“Do you keep a record of who you do ghost... stuff with?” Parker asks.

“Like... people I help?”

“Yeah.”

“I do... kind of. It’s probably not the most extensive but it’s there. We can look over it and see if anyone recognizes any of the names,” I say. “In the meantime, I’ll talk to Keaton about when he could have been drugged.”

She looks over at me. “So... Keaton really is around here?”

“Well...” I haven’t seen him since he popped in on me and Maddox in the nude, but yeah, I’m sure he’s floating around.

“I’m here,” Keaton grumbles.

I turn to look and wonder if he’s just been hiding from me, unable to look me in the eyes after walking in on me and Maddox.

“He is. I’ll talk to him for a bit,” I say.

“The thing is... right now, to the outside world, it looks like we have the killer, who we have arrested, and a detective who committed suicide. We have no proof of anything, so that’s why no one is willing to take those steps forward to allow us onto the property or to make this the bigger deal it needs to be,” Parker says. “Proof. We need proof. Hiro, as you... talk to Keaton, I would like you to document *everything* he says. Okay?”

“Got it,” I say.

We split apart and Maddox sets me up in a room with a computer. Keaton sits down in a chair and Reggie hovers around him.

"I've seen your kind before," Reggie says, now speaking like a cowboy for some reason as he sets a foot on Keaton's chair. "Tall, handsome, absolute dick even when faced with kindness."

"Is there something wrong with you?" Keaton asks.

Reggie leans toward Keaton while I work on getting a document open so I can start to transcribe everything. "No, I fell from heaven absolutely perfect."

Keaton snorts with so much emphasis that Reggie hesitates.

"Excuse me?" Reggie asks.

"Must have hit your head pretty damn hard on the way down then," Keaton says with a smirk.

Reggie pushes up into his space and Keaton quickly stands. Keaton is tall, like six foot four, so he just towers over Reggie, but Reggie doesn't seem to even consider backing down.

"God, I want to climb you like a fucking tree and punch you at the same time," Reggie says as he presses his body against him in what is either an intimidation move or a move to get laid. I couldn't slip a piece of paper between them if I tried... and if they weren't ghosts.

"Yeah? Trust me, you couldn't handle it," Keaton says.

Reggie's on his tiptoes but has his mouth inches from Keaton while I just stare at the spectacle in disbelief. Like what the absolute fuck is any of this? What did I sign up for? Just... save me.

"I could handle your big meaty balls with my hands tied behind my back."

What... the absolute fuck? Please tell me that wasn't a pickup line.

"Yeah? You think you're big enough? You look like a tiny little fucker," Keaton growls.

"Well, this tiny little fucker could take you downtown so fucking hard that your narcissistic head would spin and you'd be screaming my name until dawn."

What is *happening*? Are they wanting to fuck? Fight? Fuck and fight at the same time? I just want to get work done.

"Could we, you know, get back to the matter at hand?" I ask, honestly unsure why I put up with any of this shit. It's clearly an illness I have or something.

"Right," Keaton says as he slips away from Reggie who turns to look at me like I just asked if I could take Snugglebum off to the pound. Then he gets a look on his face. A look I know. A look I hate. A look that absolutely terrifies me.

A look that tells me that Reggie just had an idea.

I decide to quickly ignore I saw that and get started but Reggie decides sitting on my lap so I can't see Keaton is the answer to this.

"So, Keaton, when did you become an absolute dick?" Reggie asks, turning into investigator mode.

"No," I growl as I smash his head to the side and scrape him off so I'm facing Keaton.

"Sorry about that. Anyway, I'm not sure if you heard in the meeting, but there were traces of Rohypnol in Erick's system. When they get the results back from you and Nicolás, there is the likely chance you'll also have it," I say.

"I heard. I suppose someone could have slipped it to me during my visits."

It's hard to write everything down as he talks while also paying attention to what he's saying, but I slowly start to get the hang of it. It does make weird pauses when he talks faster than I can type. "Where did you have anything to eat or drink while in Helmsdale?"

"I was offered a coffee at Jude's daughter's house. Everly offered it to me as soon as I walked in. I told her I didn't need one, but she made one anyway. I drank about half of it."

"Okay, I'm going to be real honest and say I'm not a drug expert—"

"Rohypnol usually starts to take effect within thirty minutes and peaks around two hours," Keaton

explains. “Which could be in correlation with the point where I blacked out.”

“Did you feel weird at all?”

“I don’t know... I just... I don’t remember a lot of what happened. I just... I was driving and you started acting real fucking sketchy,” he says.

It feels weird writing down how “real fucking sketchy” I was, but I keep it word-for-word.

“What was happening?” he asks.

“What?”

“When you were freaking out in the car.”

“Oh, some ghosts had joined us. They started screaming, saying things like not to do it. When they become loud like that, it’s impossible for me to even think. They can’t be reasoned with, and I end up just kind of... like I did in the car.”

“I remember pulling over. I felt weird, you were freaking out, and then I don’t remember anything else,” he says as the door swings open and Maddox looks in at me. “Mind if I join?”

“No, I was just explaining to Keaton what happened after he blacked out. So... when the ghosts had finally disappeared, you were standing there with a gun.”

“Like I was going to shoot you?” Keaton asks in surprise.

Maddox stares at the computer, reading what I write, which I guess is nice in that I don’t have to repeat it to him, and he can still follow along.

“I don’t know, honestly. Once you snapped out of it, you got in the car and started to drive. You took me back to the department.”

“Okay, so if a ghost was... possessing me,” Keaton says in a way that makes it sound impossible. “He clearly knew where the department and my home were.”

“So... someone who’d been watching you...” Maddox says. “Wait! Okay, as we were headed back home, I saw your car pulled off the side of the road. I ran out to see what was going on, and you were out in some field staring at a deer that’d been dead for at least a couple of weeks or more.”

“What?” Keaton asks.

“You said you hit it with your car,” Maddox says.

“I didn’t hit shit with my car. Where was this?”

“On First Street.”

“First Street...” Keaton’s expression shifts. “You’re fucking shitting me.”

“What?” I ask.

“That was where I nailed down Carson. Jan Carson. The fucking pervert,” Keaton says. “He wrecked his car trying to flee the city after it came to light he had all these videos on his computer of young women he’d kidnapped and sexually assaulted. His car was in the ditch after hitting a goddamn deer.”

“He killed himself, right? While in jail?” Maddox asks.

“He did... about... two weeks ago. It was within days of him being arrested.”

“Do you have a picture of him? I can see if his ghost is who I saw,” I say.

Maddox gets to work on his phone before sliding an image of a man wearing a suit my way. “He was a pretty well-known businessman. Probably couldn’t handle the backlash and killed himself.”

I instantly recognize the man in the photo. He’s the same man who’d been in the bathroom at the diner. Who’d climbed into the car with us for the drive home. “Right... fuck... that’s him. That’s one hundred percent him,” I say. “He literally targeted you. He killed you...”

“Wonderful, another thing we can’t prove *at all*,” Maddox says. “But... we can see if anyone visited him.”

“Right. We’re assuming there has to be a person involved who is drugging these people or causing the possessions,” I say.

“Let’s see what we can find,” Maddox says as he stands up. “Sorry, Keaton... for this shit.”

Keaton nods slowly, but he still seems caught up in the realization of what’s happening.

“Here... you can hold my cat... but like for one minute,” Reggie says as he plops Snugglebum on Keaton’s lap whether he wants the cat or not. Keaton stares at the cat for a moment like he’s never seen one, then he strokes the cat’s back as Snugglebum becomes all purrs.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



MADDOX

I follow Hiro into his bookstore that I feel like we haven't visited in a while. I'm used to stopping by here nearly every day for some reason or another.

"Sorry you've been forced to neglect your bookstore so much," I say.

"It's okay. I'm interviewing a few people on Friday to help out Barry," Hiro says.

"What's that?" Barry asks as he looks up from where he's reading a book behind the counter. "I'm just... testing out the products."

Hiro nods. "Looks like you're doing an amazing job of it."

Barry grins as he closes the book and sets it to the side. "Thank you. I got all your new shelves put together. I just haven't moved the books onto them yet, since I didn't know if you wanted them laid out differently."

"You didn't have to do that without me! I told you to wait so I could help," Hiro says.

"I like building stuff, so I don't mind. Need anything?"

"Just picking up some paperwork. You still good to be here for the interviews? I want to make sure it's someone you like as well."

"Of course," he says with a smile. "Excuse me while I pretend that I was hard at work when you came in. I was dusting... or something."

"Or something," Hiro says with a grin as he heads into the office space. He pulls open a drawer at the bottom and takes out a binder.

"Do you have those who come in for your help sign anything?" I ask.

"No... I just tell them that I can't guarantee that I'll be able to find the person they're looking for," Hiro says.

"Okay," I say as I take the forms from him and start flipping through the pages, glancing at the names before one hits me that I recognize. I tap the name. "Maryanne Anderson."

Hiro glances over at it. "Recognize that name?"

"That's Reggie's mom," I say. "You were over petting that dog when she stopped to talk to me at the festival, right?"

"Oh, yeah, I missed her," he says. "I can't believe I missed that. But yeah, she came here about, oh

man... a year ago? Maybe more.” He thinks about it for a moment before rocking back. “She... she didn’t come here about Reggie.”

“I’m not surprised,” I admit. “Was she here about her daughter, Taylor?”

He nods slowly. “She was extremely distraught... she never even mentioned a son... how awful.”

“Yeah... she wasn’t... she definitely wasn’t the ideal mother. I take it Reggie’s not here?”

“No, just Spite.”

“I don’t know what she wished to accomplish by drawing him back into her life. Just money, I guess. She irritated the hell out of me then, and then again when Taylor died. She was obsessed with knowing what happened to her daughter more than she ever grieved over Reggie. I guess Taylor had gone to a party but was found in a ditch two days later. Overdosed on heroin.”

“Was she addicted?”

“Maryanne claimed she’d gotten clean, that someone did it to her and she wanted to prove it. The police could find no proof. People at the party said she was hanging out with the guy they knew was her dealer,” I say. “It was out of my jurisdiction, but I remember paying special attention to it after learning her relation to Reggie, though there was nothing I could do about it.”

“She took me out to the area they’d found the body and had me look all around for her ghost. We searched her home too, but I never found her ghost,” he says. “She had me come back for days and still, I found nothing. I assumed the daughter had moved on. I mean... I guess that’s good, but I felt bad I couldn’t give her the answers she needed.”

“Well, that could explain how Jude found out—his daughter could have heard from Maryanne or she could have told him,” I say. “Let’s see if Maryanne will talk to me. She’s a piece of work, but since she knows you, there’s a possibility she’ll be a bit more open with you.”

“True. Can we talk to her there? There’s the possibility I could corner a ghost or two,” he says.

“We’ll try.”



HIRO

While Lexi is back at the department trying to figure out if anyone visited Carson while he was in jail, I’m back in Helmsdale just staring at the village with Maddox who is here to make sure I don’t get murdered while we talk to Maryanne. Maddox didn’t like it when I said that, but I at least found some amusement in it. And what is life without amusement?

As Maddox pulls over to park along the road, I glance out at the village. I’m not sure we’re the most welcomed crew at this point, but they can’t necessarily throw us out when we haven’t done anything wrong.

I shut the car door and step out onto the sidewalk where I notice something I hadn’t when we first arrived. “What the hell?”

I hesitate as I see a line of ghosts moving toward us. “Not to alarm you, but there are a bunch of ghosts heading this way.”

“Okay... and... while you say the whole ‘not to alarm you’ thing, it sounds a bit concerning,” Maddox says.

“Right,” I say as I turn to face them.

Their eyes set on me all at once in the creepiest movement yet. I stop walking toward them and

hesitate as I realize that I'm afraid.

When the hell did I start becoming afraid of ghosts?

"Hiro?" Maddox asks.

"Help," a ghost calls out. "Help us."

They rush toward me, and I jerk back, slamming right into the car mirror that digs into my back. One says, "They're lying to you."

"Who is?" I ask.

They're encasing me. I can't even see outside them. I can't move. They're just surrounding me, packed around me.

"Tell me who is doing this," I say. "I can't help if you don't help me. You need to help me find who killed you."

"They're killers—"

"Who's a killer?" I ask.

"Killer..."

It's like their voices are breaking, their movements are jittery. It's as though they can't even function properly, but why? What is making them behave this way? Why can't they just tell me what I need to hear?

That's when I see the ghost who'd taken over Nicolás's body. He grabs onto me, cupping my cheeks in his hands. "Help us. Please. Stop them..."

"I can't without help. I need proof. I need—"

One of them drops to his knees and I watch as it appears like he's being dragged back before disappearing. And suddenly more ghosts pack around me, but these ones don't seem interested in my help.

"Get out," one growls.

"Leave," another hisses.

"You know *nothing*. Leave before you're the next one."

A ghost moves toward me, pressing her body against mine as my body starts to feel weird. There are hands on me, Maddox's hands, I can feel Maddox. He's right here with me. It's okay because he's here with me. All the rest of this... all the rest of it doesn't matter because Maddox is right here with me, and it's going to be okay, and it's...

"I told you to leave," the ghost pressing against me says.

"You just wouldn't leave," another says.

"And now it's too late."

I feel myself hit the ground on my back. How the hell did I fall? When did I fall? What's going on?

It's like they're trying to crawl inside me. Like they're trying to manipulate me or something. Are they trying to possess me?

No, no, no, no.

They can't do this. They can't...

"Stop. Go away," I yell. "STOP! STOP!"

They're grabbing at me, clawing at me, I can feel their nails digging into my skin as they scream and claw and tear at me. Maddox is trying to help me, but he doesn't know what to do. He's yelling something, but I can't hear him above the screams.

Chaos erupts around me. The ghosts are thrown off me and some of them slam into the car, and suddenly something is raining down on me, but Maddox hovering over me shields me from most of it.

"Stop, stop, stop," I yell, squeezing my eyes shut tightly.

“It’s okay, Hiro. It’s okay,” Maddox says, and I realize I can actually hear his voice. It’s no longer drowned out by the ghosts because the ghosts are gone. No... not gone; they’re standing in the road watching me. Almost like they’re wary of me.

Maddox guides me up to my feet, and I feel something falling off me, but I can’t look away from them. I can’t stop... What do they not want us to find? Are we getting too close to the truth that they want to keep from us?

“Hiro,” Maddox says, voice gentle. “Hiro, you’re with me.”

I can feel his strong arms wrapped around me, holding me close. I can feel his warmth and hear his soothing voice. He’s trying to draw me back to him, pulling me into him.

“Hiro, you’re okay. Hiro, I’m right here,” he says.

“Yes,” I say as I sink my fingers into his arms. Holding him closely, needing to feel him, to know I’m safe because he’s with me. I look over at him and suddenly realize that he’s bleeding. Blood is dripping from his cheek down onto my shirt, causing red to bloom out. As I reach for him, I realize what’s falling off me is glass. My eyes drift up to the car where the front and side windows are cracked and parts have even shattered, pieces of glass lining the road. “Shit. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Maddox says, voice soft, like any of this could be okay.

“Fuck... Fuck, I’m sorry. They were just... they were just on me, and I think they were trying to fucking possess me or something. And I just... I just yelled at them to go away but they... somehow they got pushed back and slammed into the car. I don’t know... how that happened.”

“Then it’s good you pushed them back,” he says.

“I hurt you,” I say as I reach up to his cheek but don’t touch it, not wanting to hurt him worse.

“I’m pretty sure I’d rather you scratch my cheek than let some goddamn fucking ghosts possess you.”

“Possess?” Joseph asks.

I jump, startled as I realize that we aren’t alone; we’ve gained ourselves a crowd and I’m horrified by it. Kylie is standing in the door of the diner, the older guy who’d been sipping coffee the first day by her side. Everly, Jude’s daughter, is standing next to Pastor Joseph who is slowly making his way toward us.

“I’m sorry about this,” Maddox says.

“I just saw... him drop to the ground and then your car’s windows explode for no reason at all,” Joseph says. “And now you’re talking about possession?”

“No, we’re just... we’ll handle this situation. Please stay back so you don’t get hurt,” Maddox says.

“I think you two are confused, don’t you agree?” Joseph asks. “I think maybe it’s time for you two to go home. I’ll drive you since your car is... less than useable.”

“Thank you for the offer, but we actually have business here, and we’ll need to get this cleaned up,” Maddox says.

Joseph nods. “Then let me help.” He heads over to the grocery store where Jenn, the girl I’d met, is gawking. “Jenn, could you get me a broom so we can at least get the glass out of the road?”

“Yeah, of course! I have a blower for leaves that could probably work to pile it up,” she says.

“I’m so sorry,” I tell Maddox. “I’m... I didn’t mean it. It was just... the ghosts, they were wanting help and then these other ghosts just... decided they’d had enough. That they were going to stop me. For some reason, they seem to be split. Like some of the ghosts want us to help them but the bigger majority want us to stay away.”

I stop talking as Kylie and Rick, the older guy, come over.

“You two like to make a splash wherever you go, don’t you?” Kylie asks with a smile as she starts using her apron to knock the glass off me. “Drawn to trouble like my dad always said about me. He also thought sneaking an extra scoop of ice cream was trouble, though.”

“I feel like this is a little worse than an extra scoop of ice cream,” I say as Spite flies down and lands on my shoulder. He tilts his head to watch Joseph as he starts sweeping a path, and suddenly, everyone is working together to clean up the area and make it safe.

“We’ve got a first-aid kit in the back,” Jenn says to Maddox. “Come along.”

“I’m fine,” Maddox says.

I give him a pointed look. “Go with her. Come on.”

He hesitates before grudgingly giving in and going with her. He asks me to come with him, but I can’t leave everyone out here cleaning up my mess while I go with Maddox just so I don’t have to be away from him.

“Are you alright?” Kylie asks.

“Yeah, thanks. I’m sorry... for making you help out.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. It’s boring time and my only customer is grumpy Rick.”

The man in question narrows his eyes at her. “Excuse me, missy?”

She just grins until she sees the mayor strutting up with Hank, the owner of the orchard, by his side. “Oh, here we go. Just smile and agree and it’ll be over quicker.”

Hans zeros right in on me as he struts up. “What is this? What are you doing back here—and then this?”

“It was an accident,” I say.

He looks at the car and the damage done to it. “What kind of accident?”

I’m sick of this. I’m sick of all of this and I’m sick of getting no answers to any of it.

“Hans, it’s enough,” Rick says.

“Do you realize what these two are trying to do?” Hank asks. “They’re spinning tales to try to get onto my land. To tear it up just to be like ‘Oh, I guess we were wrong.’ This is after they trampled my ground and dug up my property.”

I have to bite my tongue to keep from saying something that will bite me in the ass later.

“They’re just trying to help. I mean... if there really is a serial killer on the loose... how terrifying,” Jenn says as she reemerges with Maddox. “Although, the only possible serial killer is Rick’s cookies.”

Half of the group laugh, including Rick, while the rest glare at Maddox and me like we’re Satan’s spawn.

“They’re here to talk to me,” Maryanne says as she walks up with a small dog in her arms. “I told them to meet me here, so I suppose it’s my fault.”

“It’s no one’s fault,” Joseph says. “Stress is just a bit high after what happened to Jude and then Troy when he tried to help Hiro here. We just need to calm down and work together, alright?”

“Right,” Kylie says. “Maryanne, I can set you guys up in a quiet corner of the diner if you’d like to talk?”

Maryanne nods. “That’d be lovely. Thank you.”

After we make sure everything is set with the car, I follow the two of them into the diner, but I feel like everything’s off. I feel like I can’t really focus after what happened. It’s like the ghosts are split into two here, but who is controlling them? Are they feeding off emotions like Millie had? Or is it something else?

I pull Spite down onto my lap, giving me something to focus on where Maryanne can’t see me

fiddling with him. Spite seems to be interested in staring at Maryanne's dog, but he never leaves my lap. While Maddox gets everything ready, I run my fingers down Spite's rich black feathers. He feels so silky smooth and clearly likes the attention as he watches me closely.

"I didn't realize your... association with Maddox here," Maryanne says to me.

"Oh yeah..." I respond, not sure what else to say.

"So you two are...?"

"He's working as a consultant," Maddox says, even though it's clear that's not what she was wanting to know about.

"Why do you guys care so much about this?" she asks. "Why do either of you give a shit? When my daughter died, no one gave a flying fuck. They just blamed her for being a fucking druggie. No one gave half a shit, yet you two are prepared to tear the world apart for a man who was already on fucking death's door?"

Kylie, who'd been heading this way with three waters, hesitates then quickly turns around. Honestly, I want to just turn around with her. I'm tired of it all. I'm tired of feeling out of control.

"Hiro?" Maddox asks.

I glance over at him. "Sorry, what was that?"

He just reaches over and squeezes my leg before turning his attention back to Maryanne. "I'm sorry for the injustice your daughter faced. I know the detectives on Taylor's case worked hard to figure out if they missed anything. And I know that doesn't make it better. I can look into it. It's the least I can do for Reggie."

"Why didn't you want me to find Reggie?" I blurt out.

"What?" she asks.

"Why have you never asked about him? He's here, in case you're wondering," I say as I glance over at the ghost who'd been trying to discreetly hide in the back.

"I... didn't know Reggie as well. He's here?"

"Yes."

She covers her face in her hands. "Tell him I'm sorry. I'm sorry everything ended this way. Tell him I'm sorry I was the worst fucking mother alive."

Reggie slowly walks over and sits down next to me. "She was the worst."

I don't feel like I should state that out loud.

"But... tell her I said thank you for... apologizing," he says.

"He said that he's still upset but wants to thank you for apologizing."

Reggie leans forward, elbows on the table as he stares at Maryanne. "Tell her that my dad was so fucking shitty. My dad was the fucking worst, and I had *no one*. I had nowhere else to go because my own goddamn mother didn't even care. She didn't even... she didn't care at all. I had dreams where my mother would show up and save me. Where my mother would realize she really needed me. Yet she never came. She never showed up."

I repeat what he says as Maryanne refuses to look at us.

"As I reached high school and Dad became more violent, I gave up. I found family in Maddox. And we were able to survive together because of that. He gave me things my family was supposed to. He gave me love, support, a place to feel safe, a place to call home. All things you should have given me but never did," he says, and as I repeat his words to her, I see her withdrawing even more and find my hate for her intensifying. Reggie has come to mean so much to me in the little time I've known him that I can't fathom how anyone could ever let him go through any of that.

Tears dot her eyes as she refuses to meet my gaze.

“And then when you finally reached out to me, Maddox told me not to go. Maddox told me that there’s no way you changed. There’s no way you’d have neglected me for over twenty years to just... change. But I thought maybe you did. Maybe you remembered me. Maybe you just... cared. But you didn’t. You only cared about your other children. You just wanted more money. I guess you got it when I died, so that should make you happy. I wished more than anything that my money would go to Maddox but nope, you and Dad got everything of mine besides my cats. At least I cared more about my cats than anything either of you ever got.”

“I’m sorry,” Maryanne says. “Reggie, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry I was the worst mother. I’m sorry the only time I came for you was when I wanted something out of you. It was like every time I saw you, I could only think of your father and the abuse he put me through. I couldn’t...”

“What about me?” Reggie asks as I repeat everything he says. “You ran to get away from it all but you were fine leaving me there? You just... as long as you were safe, who gave a fuck about me, right?”

“No! I just... I...” She shakes her head, telling me she can’t even come up with an excuse for why she neglected her child.

“Whatever, I don’t want to hear it. If you want to make up for it, you help Hiro and Maddox. They’re my family. They’re my true family,” he says.

“I wish I could, but I can’t. I have nothing to help with. I don’t know anything. Yes, I told a few people about Hiro’s ability. I’d told Jude after his wife died. I told a few other people before I even met you. I don’t... I don’t even remember who all I told. My other daughter, I told her and who knows who she’d have told at school.”

“What did Jude say when you told him?”

“Not much. I don’t think he believed me. Reggie, really, I really am sorry. I know it’s too late now, and nothing I could say or do would make up for it.”

Reggie just nods, so I set a hand on his and squeeze it.

“If I hear anything, I’ll let you know,” Maryanne says.

“We need access to that orchard, so anything you could give us would be immensely helpful,” Maddox says.

“Okay. I’m not sure if I have anything, but I’ll try,” she says.

“Alright. Thank you,” he responds.

When we finish up, we head out where Maddox nearly runs into Troy. “Sorry about that,” Troy says.

“That’s okay,” Maddox says. “Just out of work?”

“Yep. Getting back into the swing of things. Just taking a few clients at a time. I’m not going to lie, I kind of loved my break, but the only other psychologist in the building is an older guy who has some... different methods and my clients missed me.”

“You work around here?” I ask.

“No, it’s about a twenty-minute drive, but it’s not too bad.”

“That’s good,” I say. “I’m glad you’re doing better.”

“Me too,” he says with a smile before heading into the diner we’d just left.

After we get Maddox’s car situated with a tow truck, we make the walk back to the church where Pastor Joseph is raking leaves. “Ready?” he asks.

“Yes, thank you so much for driving us,” Maddox says.

“Let me get my keys, and I’ll be right there.”

As he heads inside, Maddox turns to me. “You alright?”

“Fine,” I say.

He reaches down and squeezes my hand. “Hiro, please don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying, I’m fine,” I say.

Maddox raises an eyebrow.

“I just feel... overwhelmed by it, you know? I just feel like everything’s gone to shit. I feel like these ghosts are just... out of control. I don’t know. I’m just a bit... off.”

Maddox wraps me up in his arms. “It’s okay. It freaks me out too when it happens, so I can only imagine what it’s like for you.”

I bury my face in the crook of his neck and close my eyes as I just breathe him in and feel him. Spite is pecking the shit out of him, but Maddox doesn’t notice, so it’s all good. “Thank you. I needed this. Reggie, come join us.”

“You don’t ever need to ask me twice,” Reggie says as he squeezes in the middle.

“I’m sorry about your shit mom,” I mumble.

“Thanks,” he says. “And... thanks for talking to her. I know it doesn’t... change much, but it felt nice to just... hear her stupid words or something.”

“You’re welcome.”

The church door opens, so I pull back, even though Reggie stays attached. It’s clear we’re now one as he hangs on to me.

“Ready?” Joseph asks as Rick walks out with him.

“Yes,” Maddox says.

“I hope you don’t mind if Rick goes with us? He wants to get some hunting gear and we don’t have anything like that out here,” Joseph says.

“Of course not,” Maddox says as I head to the car.

My head hurts, I feel exasperated, and I really just want to crawl in bed with Maddox while Reggie and Natalie try to find a way to get involved.

We get into the car, and the moment it starts rolling, I close my eyes and wish away this damn headache. I contemplate leaning against Maddox, which is my very own special home remedy, but it’s not exactly professional to be using the detective as a pillow.

“You alright, Hiro?” Joseph asks.

“Yeah, I have a headache, so I thought less light might help,” I say.

He reaches for the glovebox. “I have some migraine pills. Want one?”

My mind drifts to the drugs someone in this town has been feeding people and I give him a smile. “Thanks for the offer, I already took one back at the diner.”

“Okay. I hope you feel better soon,” he says.

“Thanks.”

I go back to closing my eyes and must drift off to sleep.



“What’s wrong?” Maddox asks.

“It does this sometimes,” Joseph says.

“Don’t go.”

“Stop them.”

“Kill them.”

My eyes snap open as I realize the car is packed with ghosts and Maddox is exiting the vehicle. Joseph and Rick are already outside it as I push past the ghosts while trying to drag my brain back from the sleepy haze I find myself in. Why is Maddox out of the car? What is going on?

“Maddox, don’t—”

I see the gun aimed right at Maddox’s head and hesitate. Shit, shit, shit...

Knowing it’s best *not* to remind them that I’m around, I sink down and slowly reach for my phone, but before I can grab it, the back door opens and Joseph grabs me by the shirt, hauling me out. He pulls out my phone and holds it up to my face to get it to open for him before fumbling with it.

“Make a move and I’ll shoot him,” Rick says, and I can’t tell who he is talking to, me or Maddox, but I sure as hell am not planning on moving.

“Let’s put the gun down and talk this through before it becomes something you can’t undo,” Maddox says. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“Hiro is going to take your gun and drop it on the ground before kicking it to me,” Rick says, voice calm.

“Why are you doing this?” Maddox asks.

Rick shakes his head as Joseph nudges me over to Maddox. “This is something I have to do. I promise you both will be just fine if you listen. I don’t want to do it, but I have to. You two were getting too close. Too close. And we’re almost done.”

“Almost done with what?” Maddox asks.

“Just... shhh.”

“Stop trying to reason with them. They’re the fucking assholes who keep getting in our way,” Joseph says, which *really* makes me question whether he’s being possessed. That or this is a whole new side of Joseph we’ve never seen before.

“If you let us go now—”

“It’s not going to happen,” Joseph says. “Both of you are incapable of understanding the extent of this.”

I catch Maddox’s eyes, hoping he has something in them that tells me what to do. His hands are high in the air, but anything he does could end up in us getting shot by one or both of them. So I reach down, pushing his jacket back and grabbing hold of his gun. He watches me closely.

“What do I do?” I whisper.

“Drop it,” he says.

I nod as I slowly wrap my fingers around it. “Please help us,” I say to the ghosts packed around us. “Please.”

“You don’t need help,” Rick says. “I promise it’ll be alright. Just drop the gun, and let’s go.”

As I shift my attention over to Rick, I can’t help but wonder if he’s being possessed too. His demeanor is a bit different, but I don’t exactly have any previous experience with him holding us up with a gun to compare it to.

Pulling the gun free, I hold it tightly. I feel like I’m giving up the last moment of freedom by dropping this, but in my hands, it’s practically useless. I lower down to the ground before setting it down and glancing up at the hovering ghosts. They need to help. They have to help, but they’re just standing there and watching. Why is it that this group has been so adamant about me helping them, yet don’t seem concerned about helping me at all?

“Help,” I say, hoping to spur them into action, but they just keep watching, even as I kick the gun away from me.

Joseph gives me a pair of handcuffs before shoving me toward Maddox. “Put them on him.”

I walk up to Maddox who lowers his hands, but that's not good enough for Joseph.

"Behind the back," he growls.

Maddox lets out a displeased noise but grudgingly puts them behind his back where I wrap one cold metal handcuff around his wrist before snapping it into place. Maddox is our only way out of this. He's the only hope we have, so... what the hell do I do now? The moment I snap the last cuff on him, I feel like I've doomed us.

But with two guns pointed our way, I have little chance to do much else.

With a deep breath, I close the handcuff over his wrist, keeping it as loose as I can, but that doesn't matter because the moment I'm done, Joseph pushes me away, tightens the cuffs, and pushes Maddox forward. "Let's go."

He keeps a good distance between himself and Maddox as they start trudging through the woods. Not given much choice, I follow after them, wondering why they didn't bother to handcuff me. Maybe they don't think I'm a threat, and maybe I'm not until I get these damn ghosts to listen.

"You need to help us," I say as I catch the eyes of the one who'd possessed Nicolás.

"People will come looking for us," Maddox says.

"We'll play our roles and keep anyone from getting too worried," Rick says as Joseph keeps pushing us forward. "Like I said, I'm not going to kill either of you if you two just listen."

"We're listening," Maddox says.

"Right you are. So I'm glad I haven't had to hurt either of you yet," Rick says. "That would suck. I kind of like both of your faces and to see you both dead would be a real bummer."

He's definitely been possessed or else this is a side of him none of us have witnessed before.

"Why won't you tell us what's happening?" Maddox asks. "We're trying to help."

"No, you're trying to get those who are actually working hard to see a better and brighter future arrested. You don't care, you've never cared," Joseph says.

"Maybe some don't, but we do," I say.

"I'm done dealing with people like you," he says as we're paraded over to a lone house in the middle of the woods where no one will probably ever find us. We're taken inside and immediately down into the basement. When we reach the door leading to what looks like an old wine cellar, Maddox hesitates. It's clear that if we pass through this door, that's it. This is the end, and what then? What do we do then?

"In," Joseph barks.

"Let us help," Maddox says.

"You've already helped enough. You have law enforcement breathing down our necks. You got an innocent man killed. You've helped enough."

Innocent man killed?

"In *now*."

Joseph shoves me forward and Maddox tries to block me to keep me from stumbling into the dark room, but the gun against his back pushes him forward. "Oh, here, enjoy," he says as he tosses a bottle of water into the room. The door swings shut, the sound of it echoing through the room before we're locked inside.

"Fucking hell," Maddox yells as he kicks the door. "Fucking, fuck..."

"I'm sorry, I couldn't get the ghosts to listen for some reason," I say.

"It's okay. It's not your fault."

"Well... it is. If I hadn't tossed the ghosts against the goddamn car windows or whatever the fuck happened, we'd have been in our own car, and we wouldn't be in this situation." Maddox is still

beating on the door as I walk over to him and press my body against his, needing to feel him for just a moment. I can feel the tension in his muscles, the way they're drawn tight as he contemplates how to bust this thick door down.

"It's not your fault," he says. "It's okay."

"It's not," I say, squeezing him tighter. "It's not alright at all. The only good thing is we at least have a kind of answer about who is involved."

"Do you think Joseph and Rick were possessed?" Maddox asks.

"They sure seemed like it, but it's hard to tell."

"So... unless one is possessed and the other isn't, we have no answer. But we do know they feel cheated somehow. There's an almost vendetta feel to it. They believe the police are incapable of doing something, so they've taken it into their own hands," Maddox says.

"Kind of like Maryanne was saying about her daughter?" I ask.

"Possibly," he says.

"But if Maryanne could deal with ghosts, why would she come to me?"

Maddox sighs and lets his head drop against the door for just a brief moment before turning around to face me. "Okay. All of that is put on hold until we get out. Let's wait until we don't hear them anymore to try anything. We have a small window here, but the glass blocks it's made up of will be damn near impossible to break." He scrutinizes it for a moment. "If we did break it... do you think you could fit through there?"

I stare at the small rectangle. "Maybe greased up and naked," I say, which is supposed to be another way of saying *no*.

"I do have a packet of lube in my wallet."

"Wow, yeah, no, that was supposed to be sarcastic," I say as I join Maddox on his journey. The walls are blocks, not drywall that we could possibly break through. The door is metal that doesn't make a peep as Maddox gives it a workout.

"So... have you ever been in this type of situation before?" I ask.

"No, can't say I have. Honestly, I go through a lot of firsts with you."

"We were going to start our moving-in process this weekend," I remind him. As if this weekend wasn't bad enough, the one thing I've been looking forward to is clearly being put on hold.

"Right... and it's the fucking weekend when people probably won't even notice we're missing. Shit... do you have any plans this weekend that might gain attention if we don't show?" he asks.

"Nope... Patricia's dinner Sunday evening but nothing before then."

"Fuck. Fuck..."

Reggie, Keaton, and Natalie take that moment to pop onto the scene. It couldn't have been earlier when we *needed help* but now, when we're locked in here with no clear way out.

"I literally... *literally* leave you alone for an hour... and this is what happens," Reggie says.

"I think they secretly like it," Natalie decides. "Like this is basically an example of Hiro's entire childhood well into adulthood."

"This is not my fault, and I do *not* draw trouble to myself," I growl.

"Is that why this shit started happening to me?" Maddox asks. "Before I met Hiro, my cases were pretty normal."

I turn my glare onto him, but it does amuse me a little bit. Doesn't make the situation much better, though.

"You didn't fight them or anything?" Keaton asks.

"No, Keaton, we didn't karate chop their asses because number one, there were two guns pointed

at our heads. And number two, I don't know how to fight!" I say.

Keaton tsks and it just sends me over the edge as I get up into his space.

"What was that?"

"I said nothing," he says, eyes defiant.

"Ooh, snap. There's gonna be a beatdown," Reggie says.

"Who are you putting money on?" Natalie asks.

"One hundred percent Keaton. Hiro doesn't stand a chance. I literally saw him fall on his face trying to catch a spider the other day. Nose bleeding everywhere."

"He told me a perp did that!" Natalie says.

"Nah, one hundred percent his own incapability of using his two legs to walk."

"I'm going to fuck every single one of you up if you don't shut up," I say.

"He wallowed around on the floor for a bit too as I laughed and I laughed," Reggie says.

I smack his face, throwing him into silence as everyone stares at me in shock.

"My... my cheek," Reggie says as he cups it while looking at me like he's seeing a new side of me.

"Listen up, I need you three to band together, merge into one super-awesome ghost and punch your way through this door," I say.

"We'll be like a Transformer," Natalie says.

"Can I be the penis? I'll transform *into* the penis," Reggie decides, already forgetting about the slap.

"Transformers don't have penises."

"Then how do they make baby Transformers?" Reggie asks.

I slowly turn to Maddox.

"Can they help?"

"We're doomed."

"You're not doomed," Keaton says. "But I don't know how we're supposed to help when we can't touch anything."

"Here's the plan. Are you two idiots listening?" I ask.

"Hear that, Keaton?" Reggie asks like I could possibly be talking to Keaton.

"When they come, Maddox and I will be back away from the door, and I need you three to attack them," I say.

The three look highly uncertain about this plan.

"What if I can't touch them?" Reggie asks.

"I could barely turn a car on," Natalie adds.

"Right... but there's a possibility. If you could even just distract them, Maddox and I could possibly do something," I say.

"Fine, okay," Natalie says. "I'll... choke them."

"I'll do something amazing," Reggie decides.

"Do either of you even know how to fight?" Keaton asks.

"I literally just look at people and smile and they fall to my feet and suck my toes," Reggie says as he shifts his look onto Keaton and bats his eyes.

Keaton does not fall to Reggie's feet and suck his toes, which, let's be honest, none of us are surprised by.

"Keaton, do you think you can be away from me for long periods of time?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "If I'm not with you, I immediately get snapped back to the room I died in."

“I want someone to tail them, see if they can hear something or learn something, but at the same time, I don’t know if being here to help us would be better,” I say before turning to Maddox. “What do you think?”

“What about another ghost? That strip—”

“I’ll go get Stripper Ghost,” Reggie says as he runs a hand over Keaton’s chest before sliding through the wall.

“He keeps *stroking* me,” Keaton says as he tries to rub the touch off.

“Don’t act like you don’t like it,” Natalie says.

Keaton’s eyes narrow.

Not ten minutes later, Reggie returns with Antoine in tow. The man smiles at me, looks around, and becomes highly concerned.

“Please tell me this is kinky role-play time,” he says.

“It is not, we’re stuck in here and could possibly be murdered, so I need your help,” I say.

Reggie licks a finger and runs it over each of Antoine’s rock-hard abs while staring Keaton in the eye. Antoine doesn’t even seem to notice as he listens to my instructions to see if he can learn anything from the guys who brought us here.

“Of course,” he says before patting Reggie’s head and slipping through the wall.

The way Keaton’s eyes narrow as Antoine pats Reggie’s head doesn’t go by unnoticed by me, but Reggie clearly misses it. “Aren’t you... jealous?” Reggie asks Keaton as Antoine disappears.

I ignore their idiocy and turn to Maddox. “Antoine is checking the area. Reggie, Keaton, and Natalie are staying here to help us.”

“Okay.”

I hear a tapping noise on the window and look over at Spite who is trying to peck his way through the glass. “Oh, and Spite.”

“Glad Spite is here to save the day,” Maddox says as he starts working on the door again.

“Maddox, you’re going to hurt yourself,” I say.

“Better to hurt myself than to be stuck in here,” he says as he kicks it again and again.

“Maddox...”

“I’m getting you out of here,” he says, determined.

“Okay,” I say as I step up beside him and start kicking with him. All I’m accomplishing is making my foot hurt, but I refuse to say anything about it because if we can get the door open, it’ll be worth it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



HIRO

“Maddox, it’s been hours,” I say as I sink against the wall. Between moments of trying to break out, we’ve done everything else we can, but what I quickly found out is that with no tools and no way out, there’s nothing *to* be done. Antoine told me pretty quickly that the two who’d taken us were long gone and that he tried to follow them into Helmsdale but was stopped at the entrance by a group of ghosts who wouldn’t let him pass.

“Maddox, please, come sit,” I say. “Breaking a bone will accomplish nothing.”

His eyes are on the window and it’s clear that even my pleading isn’t going to snap him out of it. “I think the window is the weakest point.”

“We can’t get our legs up that high and your hands are behind your back. If I tried to punch it, I’d probably die. Reggie and Natalie have tried, and it won’t budge.”

Maddox won’t be reasoned with. He’s positive he’s getting us out of here even if he has to bust through a solid wall. “But we have to—”

“Maddox!” I snap.

He stops raging around the room and turns to look at me.

“Calm down. We need to calm down and just... think. You know? Think for a moment,” I say.

Maddox walks over to me and leans against the wall next to me.

“I’m sorry for snapping at you,” I say.

“Don’t apologize. It’s quite excusable for tensions to be high,” he says as he presses his shoulder against mine. “I was being unreasonable.”

I take a deep breath and find some relief from feeling him there beside me.

“I think that when I get out of here, I’m going to destroy this whole goddamn motherfucking village until someone gives me something I want to hear,” Maddox decides. “I will tear it apart piece by piece and destroy everyone inside it until they tell me what I want to hear.”

“I’m with you. I hate the place,” Reggie says. “Imagine if someone murdered me instead of me killing myself with my own stupidity.”

I stare at Reggie for a long moment. “Wait, what?”

He looks up at me like he’s confused. “What?”

“Reggie, how did you die?” I ask.

“I was drunk, I went to my mom’s to cuss her out, and I... fell down the stairs... hit my head,” he says, sounding slightly hesitant. “Why?”

“Reggie, you were hit by a car; at least, that’s what Maddox said.”

Reggie’s giving me an odd look as he thinks about what I’m saying.

“Hiro, what are you talking about?” Maddox asks, and I quickly tell him what Reggie said.

Reggie slowly shakes his head, almost like he doesn’t want to hear what I’m saying. “No, I... god, I don’t know, it’s fucking hard to remember... I remember... I went to the diner, they serve alcohol at night, and I got drunk. I felt like I hadn’t drunk that much, but I must have because I was feeling rough when I got up. And then I walked to go tell my mother what I thought of her, and I slipped and... I just... woke up dead.”

“Next to your body?” I ask.

“No... I never saw my body.”

“But where’d you wake up?” I ask.

Reggie’s starting to get anxious, I can tell by the way his ghost is getting jittery. “I don’t know. You’re freaking me out. It was... somewhere. I don’t know.”

I rush over to him and grab his hands. “Reggie, just focus. You need to focus. Where did you wake up as a ghost?”

His hands twitch in mine as he shakes his head. “You think I was like... killed or something?”

“Reggie, the report says that you were hit by a car,” I say. “Were you hit by a car?”

He shakes his head slowly. “I don’t know! I was drunk. Maybe I was!”

“But where did you wake up?”

“Outside my mom’s house... I think. I don’t know. I just... stop asking me this stupid shit,” he says, voice rising. “Stop it! Stop it! Fucking hell, Hiro!” he yells before shoving me so hard I’m flung back. I trip over my own feet before hitting down on my ass.

“Fuck,” I hiss as I try to push myself up just to find Reggie’s gone.

“What the hell is going on?” Maddox asks.

After I explain what happened, I say, “If Reggie died somewhere else, wouldn’t it be clear?”

“I guess it depends how he died and how quickly after he was struck by a car. You think he was already dead when he was struck by the car?”

“I don’t know what I think. Reggie just seems confused. I’m sure it’s nothing and he’s just confused and had assumed he knew how he died and feels flustered that it was wrong.”

“Was he ever tested for drugs?” Keaton asks, which I relay to Maddox.

Maddox shakes his head. “No. I lived with Reggie, he would never have used drugs and they claimed no signs of foul play, so they just... never tested him. I wasn’t allowed to be involved in the case at all, but...” Maddox falls silent as he hovers over me, unable to help me up, but standing close enough I can feel him. Honestly, I can’t tell if it’s for my own stability or his.

“What the absolute hell is happening?” I ask.

“I don’t know.”

When it’s clear I’m not quickly clambering to my feet, Maddox ends up sitting down on the floor next to me.

“I’m sure he’s just confused,” I explain. “Death confuses people, and when you edge too close to it, it seems to upset ghosts.”

“Yeah,” Maddox says. “I’m sure that’s what it is.”

But we both sit in silence hoping Reggie will come back before too long.

MADDOX

As the darkness presses on, Hiro ends up falling asleep tucked against my side. Even though he hasn't said anything about his head, I know it must be killing him. This much interaction with ghosts has to be hard on him.

I can't sleep. I can't stop thinking about Reggie.

If something else happened to him, and I've done *nothing*... I've done nothing at all. What kind of fucking *detective* am I to have done *nothing* when the only light in my life during my darkest times died? What kind of *friend* am I?

Fucking hell.

I swallow hard and knock my head back against the wall, wanting to feel *something*. Maybe punishing myself for what I've done? Fuck if I know. Fucking fuck fuck.

Taking a deep breath, I try to calm myself. I try to think about how I could have even known it wasn't anything but a freak accident. How would I have guessed any of it... how would I...

Fucking hell.

I mean, Reggie's still here, right? That should have been proof enough. Hiro's always told me ghosts only stay when they were unjustly killed or for a reason. Would an accidental death have been an unjust death? Some could see it that way, but the Reggie I knew would never punish himself for an accident someone else caused. So there had to have been something else. There clearly must have been another thing, and I was too fucking happy just to have his ghost around to realize that there was a reason he was still here.

Being stuck in this room is horribly suffocating, but at least I have Hiro beside me. I know I shouldn't find comfort in that when Hiro should be outside, but it's still nice having him with me. It's quiet—I don't think anyone's been back to the house since we were locked inside—and I can't help but wonder what it'd feel like to see the ghosts around me. To see the ghosts filling the room. Is it just Natalie and Keaton? Or are there more wondering what the hell we're doing and why we keep getting drawn into the most ridiculous of situations?

Something hits my shoe and I draw my foot back, startled. I stare at the small pebble lying innocently on the ground in the moonlight from the window, previously left there unnoticed. For a long moment, I stare at it until it makes the smallest jump forward.

"Reggie?" I ask hesitantly.

For some reason, I feel like it's Reggie. It's probably Spite or something, but I *feel* like it's Reggie. It has to be... right? Or maybe it's just that I want it to be Reggie so badly.

I watch the pebble bounce again, rolling to a stop right beside my shoe. Slowly, I scoot my foot out and roll the pebble back the way it'd come from. This time, it rolls back just an inch, and I can't help but smile.

"I'm sorry," I say quietly. "I'm so sorry."

"He says there's nothing to be sorry about," Hiro whispers, still tucked against me, eyes closed.

But there is. There's so much I should feel sorry for. "I should have kept looking. I should have ___"

"Reggie says to shut your beautiful mouth unless you want to use it to make sweet, sweet... just... you know what? I'm going back to sleep," Hiro says as he snuggles against me before sighing loudly.

“Okay, Reggie, I’m up, I’m up. Reggie wants to see if he can touch you.”

“You think he can?” I ask in surprise, unable to imagine what it’d be like to feel something that I can’t even see. “We’ve tried before.”

“Yeah, but I think I’m getting better at it now,” Hiro says as he uses a hand to stifle a yawn. “I think I’m getting a better handle on controlling or fixating on it or something. I don’t know. I want to try. We never know if we don’t try, right? Just... don’t get disappointed if I can’t do it.”

“Okay,” I say, wishing I could hold my hands out instead of keeping them cramped and aching behind me. Hiro pushes my sleeve up and faces me before reaching out to who I presume is Reggie.

I can’t keep myself from anticipating the feeling and the thought of it seems so strange. It’s not that I don’t believe Reggie is right beside me—hell, he pesters me every day and says things that only he would know—but there’s still something to it. Something about actually *feeling* him. Feeling his touch...

But I feel nothing.

“Both of you have disappointed vibes going on. Reggie, you need to concentrate. Maddox, maybe concentrate a little less. Why don’t you close your eyes so your mind isn’t trying to claim there’s nothing there?”

“Okay,” I say as I close my eyes and try to relax, but I can’t. How the hell can I relax in this place or when I’m anticipating his touch?

“Reggie says you look like you ate something sour,” Hiro says. “Like you sucked on sour balls.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” I ask as I glance at him.

Hiro is smiling, and somehow, that puts me more at ease than trying to think about being at ease. “Hell if I know, I’m just the messenger.”

“I want to say that things get lost in translation, but I’m positive they don’t, Reggie is just freaking weird,” I say with a smile.

“That he is. Just remember that it was you who graced me with this... anomaly,” Hiro says. “Oh god, now he’s bitching.”

“Isn’t that his life? Creating drama and bitching?”

“He says that you forgot to mention his fabulous personality and that it’s really hard to concentrate when we are both being ‘jealous savage bitches.’”

“Ah, makes sense. Sorry, Reg, I’ll try to be quiet,” I say as I go back to trying not to concentrate. “Reggie, if you were good at this ghost shit, it wouldn’t be this hard.”

“Reggie said that’s what she said.”

“Of course he did.”

And that’s the moment I feel the gentlest touch breeze against my wrist. It wasn’t even enough that I’d call it a touch. My mind is trying to tell me that Hiro simply brushed into me, but I know that’s not it.

“I felt him,” I say, almost mystified by my own words.

“He wanted to let you know that he stroked you instead of touching you,” Hiro says.

I grin as I open my eyes. “I wouldn’t expect anything else. Can he do it again?”

“We can try,” Hiro says, so I close my eyes again and just let the world fall into peace around me until I feel the distinct sensation of fingers on my wrist. The odd way they wrap around makes me hesitate. It’s almost like a chill or a brush of something, yet I can distinctly feel the way his fingers wrap around my wrist, squeezing tightly for just a moment before I feel them retracting.

My eyes snap open, somehow hoping to catch the smallest glimpse of him, but I’m alone in this dark room with just Hiro.

“I don’t want to use too much more of this... ability in case something happens or someone comes back. I’d be flat out on the ground or something,” Hiro says. “But maybe we can do it again, and no, Reggie, both of us can’t be naked next time.”

I grin at him as my mind drifts back to the fingers tightening around my wrist, holding me there. They felt cold yet comforting at the same time. But more than anything, they felt real.

It felt so real.

“Are you doing alright?” Hiro asks me.

“Yeah. Just... mind reeling, you know. Like it’s one thing for you to interact with them, and another to feel Reggie, you know?”

“He said that if we practice every day, we should be able to handle a threesome by Christmas.”

“Oh dear god,” I say with a groan. “No. Dammit, Reggie. Don’t ruin a happy moment.”

“Oh, he’s happy, alright. He’s cackling like a fiend. He’s enjoying every minute of this.”

I shake my head, honestly not expecting much else from him. “I would be enjoying it more if we were going to find our way out.”

“Same,” Hiro says. He leans into me before closing his eyes.

“Does your head hurt after doing that?”

“Not too bad. Maddox... six months ago, I had trouble feeling a ghost if they were recently dead. Now I can... almost manipulate them, make them do things like when they turned the gun on Wes... I don’t know why it’s changing.” He doesn’t seem overly thrilled by this change, so I press into him, pushing my body as close to his as I can in hopes of giving him comfort.

“I’m sorry, this has been a lot for you. And I’m sure it doesn’t make it any easier with everything that’s been going on. Maybe you could always do this, but because you’ve been forced to interact with ghosts that are different than your usual, things feel like they’re changing?”

Hiro thinks about it for a moment before sighing. “Maybe. I just want out.”

“I’m going to get you out,” I promise.

And I really hope I can hold true to that promise.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



HIRO

“We’re never getting out,” I say. “I’m starving to death. It’s been an entire damn day and they haven’t even come back. What if they don’t come back?”

Maddox doesn’t answer because I’m positive he doesn’t want to lie and be like “Oh, it’s fine, I’m sure they’re just preparing a steak for us.”

“Ohhhh, a steak...” I whine.

“Ooh, with garlic butter on top,” Reggie says.

My stomach grumbles about that one. “No! You’re making it worse...”

“Baked potato and a fresh salad slathered in Italian dressing,” Natalie says.

“I hate both of you,” I grumble.

“Caramel cheesecake,” Keaton adds.

“I hate all three of you,” I say.

“Are they literally just rattling off types of food to you?” Maddox asks.

“They secretly hate me,” I whine. “They like to see me in pain. I’m dying. We’re going to die here and no one will know, and of the people who care about me, only one cares enough to not torture me with thoughts of food.”

“Shrimp,” Reggie tosses in.

Natalie nods vigorously. “Lobster.”

“I banish all of you to someplace else,” I say.

“What about a Chinese restaurant? We could be banished there,” Reggie says.

“I do love lo mein,” I muse.

“No more food talk,” Maddox barks and *of* course they all instantly listen to him because they’re assholes who love to see me get tortured. How did I ever get wrapped up with such assholes?

A ghost pops in front of me and I slam into him. “Fuck,” I hiss as I reel back, nose stinging. Who the hell ever knew a damn ghost could be so solid?

“You have to help us,” the man says. I recognize him as the one who’d taken over Nicolás.

Another materializes behind him. “They’re killers. Murderers. All of them,” the second man says.

“Okay...”

“You need to stop them before it’s too late. They’ll just kill all of you as well.”

“Who is?” I ask.

“It’s a group of them,” the first man says.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“They killed me a while ago and buried my body in that fucking orchard. I tried to show you, but they caught on and needed to stop us.”

“The mayor stopped us. Are you saying he’s involved?” I ask after telling Maddox what they’re saying.

“I don’t know. I just know that I need you to help me.”

“Why do you skirt around every question I ask?”

He swallows hard as he looks around himself. “Because they’re watching.”

“Who is?”

“The other ghosts. They don’t want me to tell you anything. They don’t want my body to be found. My name is Darren—”

Another ghost appears in the room and Darren falls silent.

“He’s lying to you,” the young female ghost says. She’s one of the ones who seem to be adamant about stopping me any time I get close to something.

“And you’re hiding everything,” Darren says.

“We’ve been *forced* to hide things because no one will help us. No one cares. And no one cares about your body rotting in that orchard, Darren,” she says.

She takes a step toward him and he takes a step back. Darren only has one other ghost with him, but the young woman now has a flock of them behind her.

“We want to *help*,” I growl.

“Then go away,” the woman says. “We don’t need your help. We have a fucking mighty fine handle on this.”

“No, there are people dying. Innocent people,” I say.

“How do you even judge who was innocent?” she asks.

“I fucking died,” Keaton yells. “What sins do I have to atone for?”

She turns to look at him before chatter starts to erupt behind her. The noise is pounding in my ears as I start to lose track of who is saying what.

They’re chanting about a killer, screaming about death. It’s just an influx of noise that makes me step back.

I hit something before realizing it’s Maddox. He says something to me but I shake my head, unable to listen because of this goddamn *noise*.

The noise is reaching a crescendo. It’s thundering in my ears as the ghosts wrap around me, words and screams colliding. This isn’t what I wanted. This isn’t what I needed. I wanted them to help me get out. I didn’t want this.

One of them touches me, and then another grabs onto me, and I feel them pressing against me, like they’re wanting to become one with me. Are they trying to possess me?

What have I done? What have I created?

“Stop,” I say, but my voice is immediately lost in the cacophony. They keep moving forward as chaos, pure chaos erupts around me.

The noise. So much noise. I drop to my knees, hoping, no *needing* to get away from it.

“STOP,” I yell. “Stop this!”

My yells get lost in the world around me and there’s a burst of energy as I wrap my arms over my

head and plead for it to go away.



“Hiro!” Maddox yells.

There are hands on me, touching me, shaking me.

“Hiro, I swear to god if you don’t get up, I’m going to make Natalie stuff your face between her boobs,” Reggie says.

“I don’t want Natalie’s boobs,” I say, realizing the noise is gone.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, you have just ignored me for like five minutes,” Maddox says as I’m nudged around some more.

As I open my eyes, I realize this is in part due to Maddox being unable to lift me up or touch me. Instead, he can only hover over me from where I lie in a huddle on the ground.

“What happened?” I ask.

“You yelled at some ghosts and the room fucking *shuddered*. Like I was afraid the house was coming down, and then you collapsed on the floor where you’ve now been for the last ten minutes,” Maddox says.

“Oh...”

“You did bust the window, though,” Natalie says with a smile.

I crane my neck back to look at it in surprise. “I broke the window with my ghosts?”

“I... guess?” Maddox says. “But you still wouldn’t respond.”

“Sorry, my head was pounding so much I was just... god, I feel like shit.”

“Maybe, but you still look handsome,” he assures me.

“Do I?” I ask curiously. “I’m starving to death, I’ve had barely any water today, and I feel like I shoved my head through a brick wall.”

“Yep, and now you’re going to save us,” Maddox says.

“I am?”

“Yep. Come on,” he says as he urges me to my feet. My head swims, and I realize that I very well might vomit all over if I move an inch again. Instead, I sink back to the floor and let my head settle. Maddox doesn’t let up, though. “Do you know your directions? Like north and west?”

“Yes, north is up.”

“Which way is north right now?” Maddox asks.

“Up.”

He lets out a deep breath before nodding to my right. “That way is north.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Okay. Perfect. Once you’re out the window, you’re going to search the house for a key—”

“The door doesn’t have a lock on it? Can’t I just switch the lock off?” I ask.

“I don’t think it’s that kind of lock, but definitely check. If you can’t find a key, you’re going to travel north. About four miles from here is a main road. Don’t stay on the road, we don’t want the wrong person to see you, but you’re going to look for a house. You’re going to tell them you need to use their phone and call Parker. She will likely yell at you. Just push through the yells.”

“Got it. What I don’t get is how you think I’m going to fit through that window,” I say as I point. “I’m not a tiny guy.”

“But you’re slim. Doesn’t matter how tall you are, it matters how slippery you are to get through,”

he says. "Ready?"

I chance pushing myself into a sit and find that my stomach doesn't want to turn itself inside out, so I deem it good enough. Using the wall, I get to my feet and walk over to the narrow window. My likelihood of making it through that window is as slim as the window itself. At least it didn't break like a glass pane would have, so there are no shards left behind to cut myself on.

"Can you boost me up?" I ask. "I feel like if I try to pull myself up and through it, I'll make a fool of myself."

"Of course," Maddox says as he squats so I can stand on his thighs. I clamber up and put my hands on the windowsill before hoisting myself up and quickly figuring out I'm too bulky to get through.

"This isn't going to work," I decide as I try to wiggle a little. As Maddox steps away, I'm stuck dangling from the window. "Maddox... don't leave me hanging here."

"Ha!" Natalie says, even though I most definitely wasn't intending it to be a pun.

"I think you have too many clothes on," Reggie says.

"Your shirt is holding you back," Maddox decides.

I stare at the two men who clearly hate me. "I seriously have to get naked?"

"I have lube in my pocket, we can lube you all up," he reminds me.

"Why do you have lube in your pocket?" I ask.

"It was one of those travel ones that I maybe might have grabbed in case we got bored or horny or something," he says.

"Aw, my little boy is growing up to be a man," Reggie says, which is the most annoying thing he's said yet today.

I take my coat off and set it down. Then my shirt and jeans, which I also drop onto the ground. With a sigh, I turn to my onlookers.

"I think you gotta get into The Nude," Reggie says.

"I'm not getting completely naked," I growl.

"What if your underwear gets caught when you're halfway through?" Maddox asks.

"I'd rather my underwear get caught than my dick be dangling out."

"You could put a sock on it," Natalie says.

Keaton lets out an inhuman noise of anguish. "I cannot understand how this is now my life. How the hell do any of you accomplish anything of worth?"

"Don't be jealous that I want to get Hiro naked," Reggie says as he steps close to Keaton.

"Does it *look* like I'm jealous?" he says with a deep scowl lined with a hint of jealousy. Or maybe I'm making that up because I don't want to be involved in this, and Reggie's lack of a love life sounds more interesting.

Reggie presses up into Keaton's space looking like a Chihuahua wanting to take on a Doberman. It'll be interesting to see who makes it out alive. I'm currently rooting for the Chihuahua who has some clearly slick moves, which is seen by the way he presses a finger under Keaton's chin.

"I will absolutely fuck you until you're shaking in your booties and screaming my name, but I need to help my friend first," Reggie says. "So just give me a few minutes, wontcha dear?"

Keaton scoffs but never makes a move to back away. Instead, he just stands there trying to look badass and not at all infatuated with Reggie. It's an impressive move, if I'm being honest.

"Staring off into space isn't going to get us out of this," Maddox says.

"I wasn't staring off into space, I was watching Reggie and Keaton go at it," I say.

"Ah, who is winning?" Maddox asks as he turns around, presumably so I can pull the lube out of his wallet.

“Reggie, hands down,” I say.

“Reggie isn’t winning *shit*,” Keaton declares.

“Uh-huh, sure,” I say as I pull the packet out before thinking better of it. “I’m not rubbing this all over myself.” I’d been so into what was going on with Reggie and Keaton that I was distracted into *obeying*.

“When you’re stuck in the window while the men who may or may not want us dead come back, it’s not my fault,” Maddox says.

“Fuck, fine,” I growl as I tear it open and pool it into my hand. “Why is there so much in this little packet?”

“Value pack, I guess,” Maddox says as he turns around so he can use his handcuffed hands to rub it all over my back.

“I saw a porn like this once,” Reggie says.

“Fuck off, Reggie,” I say.

“Yeah, he was definitely screaming that as well,” Reggie says as Maddox yanks my underwear down a little and rubs it over my hips.

“I am *not* getting naked,” I say, feeling like an idiot. Imagine if the bad guys had a camera and were watching this spectacle. Boy, would we be entertaining. Me rambling nonstop to people no one else can see. Maddox raging at everything in the room before pinning me down and lubing me up.

“Ready?” Maddox asks.

“I feel as ready as I’m ever going to,” I mumble.

“First time is always the most awkward, but after that you’ll be an old pro,” Reggie assures me.

I glare at him because sometimes a good ol’ glare is the only thing to really make me feel better when dealing with Reggie. Maddox gets back down into position, and I step on his thigh before realizing that I must have gotten the slick shit on my foot as I slide off his leg and slam into the wall.

This is my life. This is likely how I’m going to die. Half naked, lubed up, and with a bloody nose.

“You alright?” Maddox asks.

“Yep, splendid. I just wanted to caress the wall with my face before I never see it again,” I say as I push myself back up before wiping away the blood. This time, I make sure I find a dry patch to step on before hoisting myself up.

I put my arms and head through first and then wiggle forward until my shoulders and chest get through. The crisp air chills me, especially in all the areas I’m still lube slicked.

And that’s when I reach the spot with my hips.

“I’m stuck,” I declare. “I’m stuck here and I’m going to die stuck in this wall.”

“This *also* reminds me of a porn I used to watch,” Reggie says.

“It’s the underwear. If you’d taken the underwear off, you’d have slipped right through,” Maddox says, which I have to say is utter bullshit.

I am now stuck in the window where I will reside in my underwear until I either starve to death or someone comes and saves us.

“If I’d taken my underwear off, I would’ve scraped off my dick,” I inform him.

“I could have gently cupped your peen as you went through. I still can,” Reggie says. “Natalie, you get the balls.”

“On it,” Natalie says.

“You two are *on* nothing,” I growl as I thrash and flail since I can’t see what Reggie and Natalie might be up to, and just the mental image of them cupping anything makes me realize just how urgent it is for me to get through this window *now*.

"I can't reach your underwear with my hands, I'm going to have to use my teeth," Maddox says.

"For fuck's sake, what the hell is this?" Keaton asks. "Why is this my life? Is this actually hell? Have I been confused and thought I was still walking the living land, but instead, this is my very own purgatory?"

"Keaton, stop whining and take notes, I'll do it even better to you later," Reggie says.

"You aren't doing *shit* to me, *buddy*," he growls. "This *is* hell. No one can fool me."

That's when I feel Maddox's teeth on my ass.

That makes me jerk forward and ram my hip into the frame. "You *bit me*!"

"I was trying to get the cloth!" Maddox says.

"This *also* reminds me of another porn I used to love," Reggie says.

"You need to show me all this porn," Natalie says.

"Maddox, just stand behind me so I have something to push off from. My thin underwear isn't what's making me *stuck*."

"Like push against your legs?" he asks.

"Yes!"

"No!" Reggie cries.

"We wanted to see you chew his underwear off," Natalie whines.

"I just want to go home," Keaton grumbles. "Can I go home? I'm tired of hell. Hell sucks."

I push hard off Maddox which allows me to squeeze the rest of the way through before crashing onto the ground. Since the window is at basement level, I don't have much of a fall at all. Only a few inches before I'm oozing out onto dirt and leaves that instantly stick to the lube all over my body.

Honestly... I'm just pleased I didn't get my underwear bitten off.

I right myself and go back to the window. "I need my clothes."

"You look rough," Maddox says.

"Is it the bloody nose? The lube-slick body? The leaves stuck to me?" I ask.

"He looks like he usually does. I honestly don't see much difference," Reggie says.

"His hair is a little messier than normal," Natalie inputs.

"Clothes?"

"I guess you have to come back in to get them," Natalie says, which is *not* going to happen.

Maddox has to stoop down and grab them with his bound hands before I reach through the window to take them from him. Once I've knocked away as many of the leaves as I can from my body, I get dressed and hurry back into the house. Keaton stays out on watch, which I think he was grateful to do, and I head inside and rush down the stairs to the room we'd been led into.

Maddox is right in that the only way to unlock the door is with a key. I start rummaging around, but I know I have to look in places that are hidden because my ghost buddies have already searched anything that's out in the open.

"I don't think it's here," Natalie says as I rip open another drawer. The house has clearly been abandoned, which makes searching easier.

I lean against the door after spending far too long looking for a key that I feel like I'll never find. "Maddox."

"You need to go," he says.

"I can't leave you here."

"They haven't come back in a day, they're not going to come back the moment you leave. I need you to start heading north and find some help, okay?" he asks.

I grip tightly onto the doorhandle until it digs into my palm. I know Maddox is right. Every

moment I waste here is a moment later in saving him, but the thought of leaving him alone kills me. What if they come back and see that I'm gone and hurt Maddox or even kill him in an attempt to find me? And I know Maddox would never tell them where I went, even if it meant he got hurt over it.

"Hiro, you have to go. Please, be careful. I love you. You're the absolute strongest person I know. I know that if anyone, absolutely anyone was going to get us out of this mess, it'd be you," Maddox says, making my body ache.

"Don't... don't say all this sappy shit and expect me to go brave the world," I mutter.

"Okay, fine. Hiro, what da fuck ya doin'? Get your ass out there and fuck some shit up and bring me a motherfucking chicken sandwich back, you hear me? Extra pickles."

I grin as I press my forehead against the door, wishing I could feel him. "Got it. I love you. Extra lettuce."

"Extra pickles!"

"I like your pickle," I say before pushing off the door and rushing through the house.

"That's my boy," Natalie says as she runs after me. I'm one hundred percent positive that she's not complimenting me on my ability to get away from the house and find help but about my pickle comment.

"I need one of you to stay here and tell me if they come back. Keaton can't since he's not able to be that far away from me yet."

"Reggie's stronger at interacting with the world, so I'll stay back," Natalie says. "I will protect him with my life."

"You're dead," Reggie says.

"Shhhh," Natalie says like I might not know that.

I sigh but reach out and squeeze her hand. "Thank you. Please let me know if anything happens."

"I will," she promises.

And off I go at a run as I stay clear of the road and push deeper into the woods. The afternoon sun is shining brightly, so it's not as easy to stay hidden, but hopefully there won't be anyone even out here to see me, especially if I keep moving forward. I want to run, but I also know that I would likely die before reaching my destination, so I keep up a slow jog. Reggie rushes ahead to scout out the area and to look for a house I can run to.

Keaton keeps a little ways ahead of me, but he can't seem to go too much farther without feeling the draw to return to me. After nearly an hour of moving through the woods and switching between a jog and a walk, I find my legs burning, but I've run out of hidden areas to move through.

My options now are to cross the road and slip into a cornfield or another field that's already been harvested for the year.

Reggie pops up in front of me and points. "There's a house about two miles that way... maybe a little more."

"Okay," I say as I look both ways before darting across the road and slipping into the cornfield. I'm heading away from the house Reggie noticed, but I have to get deep enough into the field to hide among the drying cornstalks.

Of course the rows weren't made in the direction I'm going, so it slows me down having to squeeze through each stalk without tripping. "Maybe I could go out onto the road and you guys watch for me because this is a bitch," I say as my foot catches on a snapped stalk that trips me.

"What if we miss something? Just keep moving. You're doing good," Reggie says.

I sigh but nod and push forward. I have to keep moving constantly forward.

Keaton suddenly stops and turns around to look behind me. "What was..." He glances around, so

I turn to see what caught his attention.

“What was it?” I ask.

“I... thought I saw something... but I must not have,” he says.

“Could have been a ghost.” I really hope it wasn’t because heaven knows who the hell I can trust around here. Right now, I feel like I can’t trust anyone that I don’t already know.

Exhausted, I press on. Who knew how much thirstier I could get after running a few miles? My mouth feels unbelievably dry, but at least the hunger deep in the pit of my stomach has been replaced by my lungs questioning what I’m putting my body through.

But knowing that Maddox is waiting back in that house at the mercy of anyone who enters, I can’t stop. I can’t hesitate. I have to just keep moving forward.

My foot catches on something and I trip, slamming into a few stalks, but my cheerleading crew won’t let me stop.

“Keep moving,” Keaton says.

“You can do it. It’s only like two more miles.”

I look to Reggie, absolutely *positive* that I heard wrong. “Oh... my... god... you said that... like ten miles ago,” I pant, eyes wide in disbelief.

“It wasn’t *ten*... it might have been like five. *But* remember... you’re doing it for your one true love. Me,” Reggie says.

“You are *not* my one true love, but you are one of my best friends. So distract me so I can focus less on dying of hunger and thirst and my lungs bursting.”

“Okay, of course. I can do that. So, once upon a time when Maddox and I were teenagers, there was this guy we both liked. Since Maddox hated my throuple idea, I decided that we would see who could woo him in a whole ‘let the best man win’ kind of thing. So this guy was the absolute sweetest and I made him laugh and laugh and Maddox took him to the movies and out to dinner. And then I barged in during the dinner, declaring my love, and then we all just sat down together after the manager said that we were being loud and obnoxious and if we didn’t sit, he’d throw us out. So then the two of us were in this heated competition of getting this guy to love us *more*. And after the dinner, the guy took us to this quiet bench in the middle of the park and said that he wasn’t even gay. He just didn’t know when a good time to tell us was and didn’t want to hurt our feelings, so he didn’t know what else to do. Then four years later, we run into him at a bar and there he is with his fiancé, a dude.”

“So you guys harassed this poor guy until he decided to be straight just to get away from you two?” I tease.

Reggie laughs. “One hundred percent. He thought we were into some kinky shit or something and got scared.”

“There’s something wrong with both of you,” I realize.

“Right? So, Keaton?” Reggie asks.

“No,” Keaton says, not even waiting for what Reggie is about to ask.

“Tell me about your past lovers,” Reggie says.

“No.”

“Do you want me to tell you about your future lover?” Reggie asks as he slides right in front of Keaton. Keaton slams into him since he hadn’t been prepared to suddenly have a Reggie-sized obstacle in his path. Reggie goes tumbling through the air and Keaton picks up a bit of speed.

“Weird...” Reggie says.

“What, that even Keaton doesn’t want you?” I ask.

“What’s the ‘even’ part about?” Keaton growls.

“No, I just... I thought I saw someone too... I think we’re being followed. Hiro, I know you’re dying just a wee bit, but how about you pick up the pace?” Reggie says.

“Oh fuck me,” I whimper before pushing back up to a quicker jog. My legs have become overdone noodles at this point, and I’m positive I’m never going to make it.

“You’re doing good. Come on, Keaton, help me cheer for him,” Reggie says.

“Um... yay... bravo,” Keaton says, completely deadpan.

“You... guys... suck,” I say through labored breaths. Just because ridiculing them makes me feel a little better.

When I break through the field, I finally see the hint of a house in the distance. It gives me the smallest sliver of hope, urging me on as I race toward it.

I can do this. I just need to find help and then leave.

When I reach the house, I see that the driveway winds around back, so I can’t tell if there’s a vehicle here or not. I rush up to the front door, begging there’s someone here while I hammer on it.

There’s no doorbell, so I wait a moment before starting up again.

“There was someone here when I checked the last time...” Reggie says before slipping into the house as I continue beating on the door.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I hiss as I beat harder. “Keaton, can you help Reggie look?”

“I’m on it,” he says as he slips through the door into the house. I rush around back in case they’re in the yard or the garage. I find the garage door open but no one inside. “Hello? I need help, please. Hello?”

Nothing. Fucking nothing. Nothing at all.

Goddammit.

There is a truck here, though. If I could find the keys to the truck... Quickly, I try the door and find it unlocked, so I pull it open and look inside. Digging around in the cupholder, the visor, and in the middle console leaves me with nothing.

“Fuck,” I hiss as I slam the door shut and see movement in the side mirror. I turn around a moment before something slams into my back. I fall into the side of the truck door before turning quickly to face my attacker. The issue is that I can’t even *see* them beyond the line of ghosts that have decided to descend upon me. I duck down, pushing off the truck to surge forward.

“The door is unlocked, quickly,” Reggie yells from the back door of the house. I race for it, yanking the back door open and rushing inside before swinging it shut. I slam the lock in place before turning to the unfamiliar home.

“Lock the front door,” Keaton yells as I run for it, but before I can reach it, a wall of ghosts appears before me. I slam into one of them, knocking me back into a chair that slides back with a squeal.

“Get back,” I growl.

“They’re trying to help,” a female ghost I’ve seen before says.

“You’re making this worse,” a man says.

“You’re destroying everything.”

“Maybe you should die?” another suggests.

“Go away,” I growl as I push into them, and they disperse like I’m made of acid. I rush toward the door as it swings open, and Rick looks in at me. Did the ghost that Reggie and Keaton thought was following us show them where to go and how to find me?

“Let’s go,” he says.

Quickly, I look around before my eyes settle on a vase filled with flowers. I scoop it up and chuck it hard at the man. He puts his arm up to shield his face as I hear someone beating on the back door.

“We’re helping. We’re just helping,” Rick says.

“They just want to help,” a ghost says.

“You wouldn’t have slammed my head into the fucking truck if you wanted to *help me*,” I yell.

“True,” a ghost says.

“Shut up,” another says.

I back up until I see I’m in line with the stairs and rush up them, not sure what I’m going to accomplish up here but positive anywhere is better than with them. Once on the landing, I dodge to the right, but I can hear them right behind me. I race into the last room and slam the door shut before finding out the damn door doesn’t have a lock on it. I grab the dresser and shove it with help from Reggie and Keaton. Once in the room, I hurry over to the window, yanking the screen out and looking out over the porch roof.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Their vehicle is sitting along the road and running,” Reggie says. “If you can make it there, you can get away.”

“Okay. I can do this,” I say as I hear someone slam against the door.

Desperately, I scramble through the open window and out onto the roof. Scared my feet will slide out from under me and I’ll crash off the roof, I crouch down to move. When I reach the very edge, I look down at the jump that’s farther than I’d like and decide it’s now or never.

I slide down, my legs dangling as I hang off the roof.

“They’re coming, Hiro, drop!” Reggie says, and I let myself drop down onto the ground. My ankle hits hard, making me stumble and nearly fall. When I push myself up to my feet, my ankle cries out in complaint, but it’s not broken, and I can run. Letting Reggie lead the way, I rush for the car that’s running along the side of the road. Both doors are left open and it’s tipped down into the ditch, showing that they’d clearly been in a hurry.

Hearing noise behind me, I turn my head to see the two men racing straight after me, but I have a decent head start. As long as I can keep it, I’m positive I can get out of here.

When I reach the car, I slide into the driver’s seat, throw the car into drive and press down hard on the gas. The tires squeal, spitting up dirt and rock. My breath stops as I beg the car to gain traction because the men are getting closer. The tire grabs onto something and the car shoots ahead. I have to steady the wheel to keep from fishtailing as I swing up onto the road. The car was aimed away from Maddox and honestly, I don’t know what to do. They have to know I’m free now, so what about Maddox? What’s going to happen to him? Should I go back? Ram the fucking car into the side of the house until I break a hole for him to get free?

Fuck...

“Reggie, quickly look for a phone. Maybe one of them left a—”

Suddenly, the car fills with ghosts and I can’t see anything. They block my vision, keeping me from seeing anything as I slam on the brakes. I try to keep the wheel steady but in a road that’s constantly winding, steady and straight might not be the best.

“Go away,” I shout, but the moment I feel the front end of the car dip, I know it’s too late. The tires squeal as I try to stop the car, but it does nothing as the car surges into the ditch and flips forward.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



MADDOX

I can't stop pacing. I know pacing back and forth won't help anything, but I can't stop. Knowing that Hiro is out there alone has me on edge. He's likely safer outside these walls, there's a huge world out there to hide in, but the possibility that someone could be watching or lying in wait makes me uneasy.

And alone.

I don't know if I've felt this alone since I lost Reggie. I try to envision him here with me, but I have to assume he went with Hiro.

"Fuck," I mutter as I take up pacing again.

It has to have been over an hour. Honestly, I have no idea how long it'd take for Hiro to get help here. It could take him over an hour before he could even find a house and someone to help him, but hopefully, it doesn't.

I hear the crunch of tires on gravel and rush over to the small window. I can't see anything outside since it doesn't face the driveway, but I can hear it. And I can also hear talking.

Taking a deep breath, I head over to the door and step over to the side that the door will open into. I press my back hard against the wall and wait, hoping it's someone to help and not the people from the village returning.

"Definitely got loose, ransacked the place. Last I heard they were following him," a voice says, instantly destroying my hope that Hiro was getting away from this.

I hear the lock turn and the door swing open. Waiting until I hear their footsteps, I slam my body into the door, ramming it into the person who'd been halfway through it.

"Fuck!" Oscar, Jude's son-in-law, cries as I beat into the door a few more times before he can slip through into the room with me. He's cupping a nose that looks decently broken as he howls out. I rush out into the hall and swipe my leg into his, knocking him off balance as he crashes to the floor before I turn to the other one.

"Yeah, nah," the second man says as he slowly backs away and trots out the door without another word.

Fucker.

I turn to Oscar who is groaning on the ground. "What the hell am I doing here?" he mumbles.

Not sure if the guy is no longer possessed or just had momentary memory loss, I step on his throat to keep him down. He struggles a little, but when he sees me glowering down at him, he stops.

“Do you have a handcuff key?” I ask, voice steady.

He seems to have forgotten the definition of key as he starts pulling everything out of his pockets and throwing them at me. When one ends up being a cell phone, my eyes lock on to it. I stoop down, careful to not let him up. It’s like trying to do the damn limbo drunk as I reach for the phone with my bound hands. My hands slide along the floor before I manage to catch onto the edge of the phone and drag it toward me. I can’t actually get it up to my face, but I feel around for the side buttons before my finger reaches one. I press it five times and a siren starts going off before a call comes through.

The issue is that I can’t put the call on speaker, so all I can do is shout “Send help” and hope it goes through. I don’t disconnect the call, but I do drop the phone as I start searching further for the key. The call must disconnect and start up again because I see it incoming from where it’s lying on the floor. Quickly, I kick my shoe off and tug my sock off with my other foot before using my toes to hit the speaker button.

“This is 911—”

“This is Detective Maddox Booker of Clinton’s homicide department. I need assistance. My partner and I have been taken hostage outside Helmsdale Village about forty minutes from Clinton. I’m not positive on exact location but we’re off County Road 412.”

“Are there any visible landmarks around you?”

“We’re in the woods. A house. I’m handcuffed and can’t navigate the phone. I have a man down who attacked me, but he seems disoriented and doesn’t appear to be armed. Once I have him situated, I will walk out to see if I can find an address. My partner is trying to find help. Have you had a call in from Hiro Moore?”

“Give me a moment.”

I step away from Oscar who is trying to play dead. “Go inside the room,” I say.

He slowly rises to his feet, looking at me uncertainly. “What’s going on? Why are you doing this?”

“I just want you to go inside.”

“I don’t know why I’m even here.”

“Go inside the room,” I growl.

He seems hesitant but does listen and as soon as he’s inside, I turn my back to the door to pull it shut and use the key stuck in the handle to lock it. Once the phone is back in my hands, I slip on my shoe and rush outside and look around, but I have to run all the way to the end of the long driveway to find an address which I give the woman.

“Can you connect me to Deputy Chief Parker, please?”

“One moment.”

It takes more than a moment but eventually I’m transferred to her.

“What the hell is going on?” Parker asks.

“Yeah, you know that completely innocent group of people who aren’t hiding dead bodies? They fucking took us hostage and have shoved us in some goddamn basement since yesterday. Hiro got out through a window about an hour or two ago; I don’t know where he’s at. I need to find him because I know they’re following him.”

“You need to remain where you are, someone will be there within ten minutes,” she says.

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen. I need to find Hiro.”

“Maddox,” she says. “Calm your ass down, there are multiple units heading your way. Just sit down and think for a moment.”

“Fuck,” I hiss as I storm back toward the house.

“Who all was involved?” she asks.

So I explain to her what happened before telling her that I need to momentarily put her on hold. What I’m planning on doing won’t work as well once the police get here. I unlock the door and push it open before stepping into the room. Oscar looks at me with wide eyes.

“Oscar?”

“Y-Yes.” He seems less than pleased by my arrival.

“You’re going to tell me who the fuck is behind this,” I say.

“I don’t know—”

“Do you want to go to prison for the rest of your life for threatening the life of an officer?” I ask.

He’s shaking his head wildly. “N-No! I didn’t! I didn’t do anything.”

“You did. You locked me in this room, and you left me and my partner to die,” I say. Even though it might not have been him who did it, he’s still playing a part in this.

Oscar’s looking a bit panicked now, and I know that’ll make it easier for him to break. “But I didn’t.”

“Then you’d better tell me something I want to hear. Who is behind this? Being married to Jude’s daughter, you *have* to know something about this. Something about Jude, something about any of this.”

“I don’t know—” His eyes get wide as I step in toward him, and his back is pressed hard against the wall. “Okay! So... so all I know is that a week before Jude died, he came over asking Everly what she’d said. She said she didn’t know what he was talking about. He kept saying that she did. That she was the only one who knew besides the others involved. She said that she’d kept it a secret. That she hadn’t let anyone know. It didn’t sound good. It sounded bad but when I asked Everly about it, she brushed me off. Said her dad was a bit of a drinker before I knew him, and he did a few things he shouldn’t have but it was all fine now. Everything was fine.”

I need to talk to Everly. I shut the door and rush back over to the phone where Parker is nearly in a rage.

“Don’t you *dare* ignore me like that,” she growls.

“I wasn’t. I was talking kindly to my resident kidnapper.”

“Yeah, and what’d he say?” she asks, sounding clearly displeased but also nosy, so I tell her. “Did you get my message about Carson?”

“The guy who possessed and killed Keaton?” I ask.

Parker hesitates. “The guy who Keaton arrested.”

“And then was possessed by.”

“Yes,” she says, eventually giving in. “Did you get that message?”

“No... must have been after we were taken in.”

“He *did* have a visitor in prison. And surprise, surprise, it was Jude Wilks.”

“Well, that answers that.”

“Yep.”

“So Jude... Jude is clearly involved,” I say. “We found no clear connection between Jude and Erick, but that doesn’t mean it wasn’t hidden. We now know that Jude and Carson were involved in something. So Carson was arrested after an intern found multiple videos on his computer of him assaulting incoherent women.”

I pace while thinking this through out loud. “Hiro said there were two groups of ghosts. Ones who keep stopping us every chance they can get and others who were trying to help. They keep telling us that they were killed and asking for help but they evade a lot of our questions. Okay... so what if the

reason why the one group is trying to stop us is that they believe they're involved in some type of... vendetta thing? They keep claiming that we're not helping and maybe it's because they're trying to take out people like Carson and Jude who they believe need to atone."

Parker makes a thoughtful noise. "So we know why Carson was involved, but you're saying Jude was working with him?"

"I don't know. If Jude visited Carson, he clearly knew him. It's quite possible that what Carson did wasn't a solo effort. There could have been a group of men who were drugging and kidnapping women, recording them, and who the fuck knows what. Maybe it didn't stop with Carson. Maybe they were selling the footage or something. I think Maryanne Anderson's daughter was involved. Maryanne feels like no one helped her because everyone wrote her daughter's death off as an accidental overdose. Her daughter would fall into the age range of the victims. She was previously known to have been addicted to drugs and had heroin in her system."

"You think she's behind this, then? The mother? She's the one orchestrating these things?" Parker asks.

"I don't know... I think the person behind it has to be someone who has a connection to the dead like Hiro. Maryanne came to Hiro for help. If she could speak to the dead, why would she need Hiro?"

"True."

That's when I hear sirens cutting through the still area.

"I think we're looking at someone who has been victimized by this group of men. So we're looking at someone young, someone who would have been on their radar. The first young woman who comes to mind is Kylie Davidson. Can you look into her, please? See if there's anything in her past that could connect her to this case?"

"Of course."

Fucking hell. Now I just need to figure out where the hell Hiro is.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



HIRO

“Dammit!” I hear a young woman say.

“Hiro, wake up,” Reggie says, voice coated in concern. “Hiro, please wake up.”

“What the fuck is this? I asked you... I asked you to bring him here, I didn’t ask you to kill him.”

“He’s not dead. He’s fine,” a woman says.

I can feel hands on me. “Hiro, wake the fuck up. If I have to deal with your ghost ass, I’m going to be so pissed. I’m going to be the most pissed ghost in the universe. I will... I will... I’ll haunt you so fucking hard,” Reggie says.

I slowly force my eyes open and look up into Reggie’s. Relief fills his face as he falls down on top of me in what is supposed to be a hug... I think. “It’s okay, Reggie,” I say as I try to reach for him before realizing my arms are taped together behind me.

“Reggie?” a woman asks.

My body aches as I look around and see that beyond Reggie, I have an audience. And the person looming over me is Kylie.

“Hey, I’m so sorry. I... I didn’t mean for you to get hurt,” she says as she gives me an apologetic look. “I just... sometimes they don’t listen. It’s not... it’s not like I can control them...”

I let that sink in for a moment, not quite sure what else to say. From where I lie, I can tell that we’re in a vehicle, but that’s all I can figure out beyond the aching in my body.

“I’m so sorry that you got hurt,” Kylie says.

“Fuck off, bitch,” Reggie says as he tries to block her from me.

Kylie glances in his direction.

“You’re the one who is doing this?” I say in disbelief.

“What?”

“You’re making ghosts possess people.”

“I can explain,” she says.

“Fucking hell, I’m an idiot,” I groan.

“Hiro, you can see the dead,” Kylie says, like she’s mystified by it. But if she can help ghosts possess people, why would she be so shocked by it?

I slowly try to push myself up as my body screams out its complaint.

“Don’t try anything. We still have Maddox, and if you do *anything*, we will have to hurt him to get you to listen,” Kylie says, stilling me.

No, I can’t let them get to Maddox. I can’t let them hurt him.

That’s when my eyes drift over to the front seat where they settle on the woman who’s clenching the steering wheel so hard her knuckles are white, and I realize it’s Maryanne, Reggie’s mother.

“Is this about your daughter?” I ask Maryanne.

“It’s more than that,” she says.

“So much more,” Kylie says.

“Don’t listen to her,” Darren says as he appears before me. “She’s a liar. She’s a murderer. She knows how to sweettalk you before she kills you like she did to me.”

“She’s a killer,” another says.

“You’re the killer,” a ghost of a young woman that I’ve seen several times now says. “You sick sonofabitch. You’re trying to play victim, but what about all the lives you destroyed?”

Darren gets up close to the female ghost, sneering as he stares down at her. “You act like you had any other use.”

“Fuck you, fuck you,” she yells. “You’re all the fucking same. We can trust no one. We can only trust each other. Fuck you.”

“Go away,” Kylie growls, and the ghosts flicker out of the car.

“You can see the dead,” I say, unsure of what’s happening or who to even trust.

She shakes her head. “Not really. I can feel them. I can see glimmers and I can hear parts of what they’re saying but I can’t hold a conversation with them. What I can do is sense if they’re good or bad. And let me tell you, those ghosts who have been feeding you shit, those ghosts you’ve been listening to and following are the bad ones. They’re the ones who have hurt and raped so many people.”

So was that what the ghost was just referring to? Have the ones supposedly helping us just been using us?

“Did you kill them?” I ask her.

“I’ve killed none of them,” Kylie says.

“But you can push their ghost into a human body? You can... use the ghost to possess someone?”

“I can.”

“So that’s how you communicate with them? Once they’re sharing the body of someone living?” I ask.

“Just... I don’t need to answer all of your questions,” she says.

“I want to help the victim here, but at the moment, I don’t quite know who the victim is. Did you use your ability to possess others to kill them?” I ask.

She’s quiet for a moment. “Not all of them. I just... suggested it to some of them. That if we could get rid of the men who have hurt us, we could stop them from ever hurting anyone else.”

“Why are you doing this?”

Kylie shakes her head as she bites her lip. “I have to make it end. I have to stop them. The nightmares will only end once they’re all gone,” she says. “Look around you, look at the victims.”

When I look around, all I see are the ghosts who’ve stopped me at every turn. Almost all of them are young women, but some are young men. They don’t seem pleased to see me, and I have absolutely no idea why Kylie thinks they’re the innocent ones, but clearly, I’m missing something.

“I need you to stop alluding to shit,” I ask. “All everyone has done is kept secrets from us. So

hopefully you're planning on giving me some truths."

She leans back against the car door. "It's hard to trust you enough to give you anything when all you and Maddox have done is shown me how you rush to the aid of someone like Jude, but not those of us who are truly suffering. It's funny how much you care about Jude dying or any of the others, but when I went for help, no one cared. No one cared at all. They pushed me off because of my past."

"Kylie," I say, hoping I can reason with her or get her to pull this car over, call for help, and get Maddox away from them.

She shakes her head. "No!"

"I'm sorry. Can you please explain what's happening? Why do they need to die?" I ask, trying to keep my voice calm and not sound accusatory at all.

"They're monsters," the female ghost that'd fought with Darren says.

"They need to burn in hell, and we won't let you stop us," another says.

"Because no one else did anything to stop them," Kylie says. "Because men like Jude and Carson were able to prey on young women, hurt them, abuse them, and then use their power to get away with it. Do you know how long Carson got away with it before someone did something and got him arrested? Even then, he'd have sat pretty in prison for years, never really atoning for what he did. These men who... who... kept the victims drugged and blindfolded so they couldn't figure out who was hurting them. Then when they were finished with them, they'd just toss them out on the road. They knew to prey on people with bad pasts who no one would believe or care about," she says, her voice rising.

"And this happened to you?" I ask, voice gentle. I want to say, "This happened to all of you" as I look out at the ghosts that seem to be surrounding her, protecting her from *me*. Like they can't even trust me.

She won't catch my eyes. "It... it didn't matter what I told the police because there was no one who would listen. They just took a look at my record and pushed me off, but I had to live with what those men did to me."

"And Jude and Carson did this to you?" I ask, honestly feeling for this woman who'd gone through so much.

"They thought they were sneaky enough. They thought I would never recognize them after they dumped me off in the middle of fucking nowhere. I was confused. I could barely remember anything and it took years for me to even begin to piece it together. And maybe I never would have even connected Jude to it until about six months ago when he came into the diner, and I could... his smell... the cologne... the sound of his shoes. It all came rushing back. I knew it was him. I knew. It doesn't matter how long ago this happened to me, the moment I realized he had been involved, I knew I'd do everything I could to keep him from hurting anyone again. And that's when I turned to those who wouldn't ignore me, wouldn't push me away."

The dead.

I'd always felt that way as well. When my parents died and I knew nothing about what was going to happen to my life, ghosts were the one constant that never left me.

"So they're Jude and Carson's victims?" I ask.

"Not all of them. Only a few, but the rest... the rest are people who understand what I've gone through and are here to help. They're victims of similar crimes who've come together. Maybe to find some justice here when they can't find their own justice. Together, we want to make these men suffer for what they did.

"When I started following Jude, I saw he had a connection to a few other men. One gave up what

happened quite quickly before one of the ghosts—one of his victims—killed him with my help. But before he died, he told me all about Carson and Darren and Jude and Erick.”

So then are the ghosts that surround Darren and Carson, and presumably Jude, a part of this or just drawn to them because of their darkness? Are they also people who have preyed on others that don’t even relate to this? I wouldn’t be surprised; ghosts seem to clump together during times like this.

“Erick’s involved too?” I ask, not even sure I’m surprised anymore.

“He’s really good at playing the victim, isn’t he? I thought if I made it look like Erick killed Jude, then maybe the media would take notice. But things... things spiraled out of control. The plan had been for Erick to kill Jude and then visit Carson. Once Carson heard about how his image and what he’d done was going public, he couldn’t live with himself anymore and killed himself, just as I’d hoped. After that, the woman possessing Erick’s body was supposed to return to me... but when he did, he attacked me and ran away. I didn’t know that Jude had entered Erick’s body until it was too late.”

Kylie chews on a nail for a moment before continuing. “It’s hard for me to make out who is who or talk to them until they possess someone. But I can feel the toxicity of the ghosts who keep trying to help you. Haven’t you ever wondered why they didn’t fully speak the truth to you, Hiro? Why they cried victim but didn’t tell you who hurt them or killed them? It’s because once you knew the truth, they knew you wouldn’t listen. They were afraid you’d find their bodies and find proof of what they’d done. They’re already dead. At this point they only care about themselves. They thought they’d use me and my ability, they’d take control when I’d lose it and they’d do things like... like Jude taking you and nearly killing my brother. Or Carson killing that detective.”

That explains why they loved to give me the runaround. I wonder if Darren wanted his body to be found, since he’s the only one who even remotely gave us anything.

“If you couldn’t control them and they were hurting innocent people, then why didn’t you *stop*?” I ask.

She looks away from me, biting her lip. “I... I tried but things started changing. They began to be able to possess people without anyone being drugged. And... and I came to realize what it was... it was you. Being around you makes them stronger or me stronger or something. You’re the one letting them invade the bodies of others.”

“Me? I’m not... I’m not doing anything. I didn’t even know possession was real. I don’t have the ability to... to do something like this.”

Kylie seems hesitant. “But... your brother. I didn’t do that. You did.”

I shake my head. “I sure as fuck did not.”

She seems confused. “But I wouldn’t have put Carson into the detective’s body. It’s... I know they’re hard to control, but... I... fuck. *They’re* doing this. Even in death, they’re controlling. They’re manipulating... fucking hell.” She grabs for her head as her eyes drop and I can see immediate guilt written across her face. “I didn’t... I didn’t mean for that to happen. I had just wanted to use the detective to get to Erick. I didn’t... I never planned for Carson to invade him... It wasn’t supposed to happen like that, but it’s like the ghosts... they get in my head. They fill me with this anger. But... when I’m around you, everything is clearer.”

“So they’re using me to amplify your ability? I don’t...” I guess it’s a bit like what I do with Nicolás and the ghosts. “Why wouldn’t they just kill you, then?”

“Because then they’d be stuck walking the world as ghosts.”

Right... they can’t kill the only person allowing them this ability. Is that also why they never gave her up? Maybe some of them want to be found, like Darren trying to get us to dig up his body so he

could get one last blow by having his killer found. That's why Jude has avoided us fully. He thought he could remain a victim. That's why they've created more confusion for Maddox and me than helped us. They're trying to get us to trust them. They probably don't understand this ability or know that they need to get me close to Kylie to get it to work.

"And what about Reggie? How did Reggie get wound up in this mess?" I ask.

"That was the night one of them took me five years ago," she says. "I don't know what happened to him."

"I don't know either," Maryanne says.

"Okay. So why don't we just pull over and Maddox will help you. It's clear now that you're the victim in this, Kylie."

"There's just... Erick left and then we're done. We're all done. You can... you can fucking arrest me if you want. I will fucking die happy. And I'll be able to sleep again. I know I will. I know it'll all be okay."

"Kylie... if you'd have talked to us—"

That snaps her hard expression back into place as her eyes search mine. "You'd have what? Arrested me? What the fuck would anyone have done? No one believes me. I spent my childhood being called a liar; people constantly thought something was wrong with me because of what I could see. It was endless. I felt like something was wrong with me. I felt like I was an outcast. Even my parents didn't want me. Troy and I had to face the world and sometimes I got sick of it. No one believes someone who sees shit. I guess not everyone could be like you."

Clearly, she doesn't know me if she thinks I got off easy. "My parents didn't believe me until they were dead, Kylie. I spent a lot of my life being called fake, a quack. I am lucky I do have some people now who believe me. But I understand the pain of not being believed. I understand feeling like you're alone, but right now, Kylie, right now we're here. We'll help you. We're ready to help, okay? You have your brother. And so many people in the village care about you. They wouldn't want to see you suffer anymore when we can *help*."

She shakes her head. "No. It's too late," she says. "This ends today. I don't care what happens to me. I don't care about anything. I just care that it fucking ends."

"Erick's in jail, Kylie. Now that we know what he's done, he *will* go to prison. He will have to deal with his crimes."

"No, he'll just get out. He'll find a way to get out. The nightmares have to end," she insists.

"So, what? We're going to infiltrate the jail and get one of your possessed people to kill Erick?" I ask.

"Yes. That is where we're fucking heading. We're heading to the damn jail and with your help we're going to have one of his victims possess someone and kill him. We're going to fucking kill him so he can never hurt another person again. Okay?"

Not okay. "And what happens to the possessed person, the innocent person who kills him? What happens when he gets shot?" I ask.

"Just shut up. Shut up, okay?" she growls.

Kylie's quiet for a few minutes as my mind reels and I try to think of what to do. Her little army of ghosts seems quite annoyed any time I look at her, like I could possibly be the bad guy in all of this.

Suddenly, Natalie appears before me. "Hiro, Reggie and I did it. SO! Maddox is about ten minutes behind you in a police car. Reggie and I came together and it only took us like ten minutes but we typed J-A-I into his phone!"

"Jai?" I ask, confused.

Kylie looks over at me.

“No, like jail,” Reggie says. “Goddammit, Hiro, don’t burst our bubble. He’s heading this way. We just have to stall them so Maddox can catch up!”

We’ve practiced just how to stall them... can they do it under pressure though? “Natalie...”

I nod forward and she looks confused for a moment before her eyes get huge. “Fuck! Yes!” She climbs into the front seat as Kylie’s ghosts seem to notice something is going on.

“Hey, what are you doing?” one says.

“I can’t do this alone,” Natalie says as she turns to Reggie.

Reggie seems uncertain. “I’m... not sure I can help but I’ll try.”

Natalie reaches back and sets a hand on my leg and reaches out to the key in the ignition.

“Stop that!” the ghost of a young woman says as she grabs for Natalie.

“Do not touch her,” Keaton growls, making the ghost slowly draw her hand back.

“That’s my man,” Reggie says.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Natalie says.

“You can do it, Nat. Pretend you’re tweaking a nipple,” Reggie says.

“What?” Natalie asks.

“Nipple twister.”

How the fuck is that helping?

The car turns off.

How the fuck did that help?

Maryanne seems confused as the car starts slowing and the keys hit the ground. “Throw them out the window!” Reggie yells.

“I’m not that good!” Natalie yells back.

But this is okay. This is good. Every minute counts when Maddox is heading this way.

“What is going on?” Kylie asks.

“The... the car quit,” Maryanne says as the car drifts to a stop. Thankfully, it takes her a moment to realize the keys are missing, and even longer to figure out where exactly the keys went.

“Did you do that?” Kylie asks.

“Do what?” I ask, playing dumb.

“How can they... they can interact with things? You...” Kylie looks blown away by this and that’s perfectly fine because it means she’s not looking when Reggie pops the unlock on the door. I grab the handle with my hands, push it open, and basically roll out of the car and onto the side of the road. Kylie leaps out after me, probably regretting not taping my legs up and only my arms.

She grabs for me, but I push hard into her, causing her to slip down the slope a moment before Maryanne comes barreling out in a hurry. I yank my arms back and forth hard, trying to put as much strain on the duct tape as I can. It’s tearing at the hairs on my arms, but I need to get it off and quickly.

I make it through the ditch before Maryanne reaches me, but by that point, Reggie and Natalie are nearly screaming with joy as Maddox comes rushing onto the scene. How he doesn’t nail the back of Maryanne’s car as the police car squeals to a stop, I’ll never know. I jerk my arms down, not snapping the duct tape, but stretching it enough that I can slip half of one arm through. I hook my arms down over my ass and pull hard until it loosens enough that I can get one arm through.

“Fuck,” Maryanne says as Maddox gets out of the police car with an officer not too far behind him.

“Get on the ground,” he yells as he rushes toward us.

“No,” Kylie says as I turn to face Maddox and see him stumble to a stop. “You’re going to help

us.”

Maddox takes a step toward Kylie as she watches him. He steps up to her and backhands her so hard she hits the ground on her side.

“I’m going to kill you, you stupid bitch,” he says, making me realize that right now... that is *not* Maddox. That isn’t... Maddox would never do that.

“What did you do, Kylie?” I yell.

She sits up, looking positively horrified as she faces off with Maddox.

“It’s Jude,” Natalie says. “It’s fucking Jude.”

“No, you’re not... no...” Kylie says as she takes a nervous step back when Maddox lunges for her. The thing is... Maddox knows how to fight. He has the body frame to take over someone as small as Kylie quite easily. And if Jude is in control...

I slide in front of Kylie as Jude lunges forward. “Maddox, stop him,” I yell, not knowing if he can actually hear me or not but knowing that I have to stop him. “Maddox!” Maybe my hands on him will get him to feel me like he does whenever the ghosts are attacking me. Maybe it’ll help him come back to me. I press my hands against his shirt, sinking my fingers into it.

“Get the fuck out of my way,” Jude growls as he wraps Maddox’s hand around my throat. This would kill Maddox if he knew what he was doing. This would absolutely...

His hand tightens and my mind flashes back to Millie, instantly making me forget everything Maddox has ever told me about what to do if I was ever choked.

“M-Maddox—”

Suddenly, Reggie shoves himself at Maddox, pushing so hard that I see Jude fall out and slip right into the body of the man who’d been with Maddox. The issue is that this man has a gun.

He pulls it out, fumbling with the safety as Kylie starts backing away quickly. Jude seems to forget about wanting to keep Kylie alive to use her ability as rage fills him and he aims the gun toward her.

“Stop,” I order, voice as strong and commanding as I can make it. If I can control ghosts, does that mean I can control him even when he’s like this? Could I even stop him?

“I said stop,” I yell as my ghosts step up before me, creating a barrier between me and Jude.

“You can burn in hell too,” Jude says as he switches the gun onto me, but not before Maddox slams into him, driving him to the ground. He’d been so fixated on me, he hadn’t even noticed Maddox.

Maddox tears the gun out of his hands, ripping them down before punching the man in the face.

“Maddox, don’t hurt him!” I yell, but maybe it wasn’t Maddox that I needed to warn because the ghosts of Jude’s victims are on him. They grab onto him, tearing him out of the body kicking and screaming.

It’s like they’re ripping him apart, but that’s not right... ghosts can’t be torn apart, can they? Maddox backs away as Jude disappears beneath the mass of ghosts. I don’t know if it’s because I’m so close to Kylie or something else, but I’m not sure I want to find out. I just know that I need to get away from her.

The police officer groans as he gets to his feet, confused about what’s happening before he sets his eyes on Kylie. “Get on your knees!” he yells.

I hear the noise of sirens as others begin to descend upon this place, but my head is starting to pound horribly.

“Maddox, I need to get away from Kylie before this happens again,” I say.

“Of course,” he says as he starts pulling me back while others rush onto the scene, but Kylie and Maryanne aren’t resisting at all.

When we're at a good distance, Maddox pulls me into his arms, squeezing me tightly. "I saved you."

"Uh-huh," I say as I look up a moment before he kisses me. I smash his face off me before he can go tongue deep. "Dammit, Reggie. Get out."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I'm Mighty Maddox," he says as he squeezes me in a death grip of a hug. "Feel my muscles roar."

"You are *Reggie*. Get out, *now*."

"Do you want me naked?"

"No!"

"Just a quickie behind the bush?"

"Fuck off."

Reggie sighs loudly as he kisses my cheek again and then lets go of me before stepping back. He pulls his pants out far enough that he can look into them before going, "Hello, old friend" and jumping out of Maddox's body.

I catch Maddox before he hits the ground, and instead, slowly ease him down. He's opening his eyes before he even gets settled as Reggie turns to Keaton. "Were you jealous?"

Keaton scoffs as Maddox looks around.

"What's going on?" he asks.

"An incubus possessed your body."

"Is that why I feel so disgusting?"

"It is," I say as I sink down next to him. "The police have Kylie and Maryanne."

"What? I'm so sorry I didn't help," he says.

"You did. You helped quite a bit, just... Reggie was manning you."

Maddox looks less than pleased by that idea. "Your ghosts told me where to go."

"I heard..." I fall silent, unsure of what to think about that. "Do you think they're gaining the strength on their own or is it from being with me so much?"

"I have no idea."

My grip on Maddox tightens. "What if I become like her someday? Overcome by the power of it all?"

"You would never, Hiro. You're too strong for that. You're also far too kind."

"But when I'm upset or angry—"

"Everyone gets angry or upset. It doesn't mean you're going to lose control," he says even though my mind flickers back to Parker's mug shattering. "I believe in you, Hiro. So many of us believe in you."

"Reggie says he believes in the power of nudity," I say as Reggie butts in.

"Of course he does."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



HIRO

I sit down across from Kylie with Maddox by my side. She'd insisted on talking to me even though they'd gotten her statement. I eventually got them to get her to agree to Maddox joining after explaining to her how Maddox believes me and how he trusts me and my ability. After Maddox goes through her rights, she turns her attention to me.

"I've told them that no one else is at fault, but they don't believe me," she says as she settles across from me. "They say they have proof that others were involved, but they won't believe me when I tell them that I was controlling them. I don't want others who had no idea of what was happening to get in trouble because of me."

"It's hard," I tell her. "So often we get bogged down by needing proof of things, and here we have something we can't prove. But we're going to work hard to keep those who were innocent out of facing consequences. Trust me, I know how frustrating it is. I deal with it during every case."

"I did it all alone," she says, but I know that's not true. I know the village was by her side, ready to protect her. And I'm relatively certain that there weren't ghosts possessing them every time they interacted with us. But that's the issue. I don't know that for sure. I'm not positive, and neither is Maddox, and without being positive, there's nothing we can do.

We've told our side of the story, but what becomes tricky is that the court knows that Kylie was using drugs to control her victims. So were they actually there attacking us or were they drugged (even though we know they were likely possessed)? There's no saying what will happen yet to Maryanne, Erick, and Joseph, along with anyone else who was involved. Someone is looking into whether Everly was aware of what Jude was doing to his victims, too, but it's out of our hands.

Kylie's prepared to take the brunt of it, that's her choice, and I don't bother saying otherwise. I know that might not be the moral thing to do but after learning what these men did to these women... I'm prepared to let them suffer as ghosts and walk the earth with no peace in sight. It's not like the villagers were off killing people; they were simply protecting her.

Once they searched the orchard grounds, they found two bodies. One belonging to Darren and the other belonging to Jerry, the man who'd confessed everything to Kylie.

"They're wanting to claim I'm mentally unstable because they don't believe me," Kylie says.

“Claim that I did this because of my PTSD. That I...” She trails off.

“I’m sorry about everything you went through, I’m sorry there weren’t better detectives on your case,” Maddox says. “I can... I can only imagine how frustrating that was for you to have gone through what you did and never have anyone believe you. But do know that Erick will be properly punished for his crimes. That we now know what the others did. I wish you’d have come to us, but it’s too late to fix anything.”

She nods slowly. “I know. I just don’t want others to suffer for things I made them do. I’m not upset about what I did. I firmly believe they were horrible people who enjoyed the suffering of others. They were the worst of the worst, and I regret none of it,” she says. “And finally. Finally, my dreams are better. I feel like I can sleep for the first time in five years.”

I see a ghost materialize behind her and look up at the young woman. It’s the same woman who’d harassed and distracted me every step of the way. The same woman who’d yelled at Darren for what he’d done to her.

“Can I... have a word with her?” the ghost asks.

“Yeah, of course. Kylie, a...” I look to the ghost.

“Fran.”

“A Fran wants to speak with you.”

Kylie looks around in surprise before catching Fran. “She’s here?”

“She’s beside you.”

“Yes... she was... she was there when I was taken. I never knew what happened to her until I thought I felt her... beside me later. I always wished I could hear her. Talk to her.”

“Tell her I said thank you,” Fran says. “I was homeless when they took me. I had nothing left. I felt like every day was worthless... and... it wasn’t until after I died that I found peace. Weird, isn’t it? To find peace after you were killed?”

I tell Kylie what she’s saying. Kylie swallows hard. “I could always feel Fran there, but I never knew exactly who it was. I just knew... I just felt like we had each other.”

“Tell her that my time is ending here, but I can finally feel peace because you brought it to me,” Fran says. “And, Hiro, I know I... I was an absolute bitch along the way but... when anger and vengeance are pushing you on, things aren’t always reasonable. I was a kind person in life but in death all I cared about was protecting Kylie and finding an end for those who’d hurt us along the way.”

“I understand,” I say. “I realize how hard it is at times to reach out for help beyond those you love and trust. Just know we’ll be here to make sure those who hurt you and Kylie get the justice they deserve whether they’re dead or alive.”

She nods. “Thank you.”

And with that, I watch her disappear. Kylie must be able to feel it because she lets out a sob.

“T-Thank you. I never... I never thought I’d be able to hear her or talk to her. So thank you. What about the ghosts of those who hurt us?” she asks.

“I haven’t seen them since. There were four, right? Jude, Darren, Carson, and the fourth guy... Jerry.”

“Yes.”

“There were others that encouraged them, those who probably feasted on the pain of others. Same with the ghosts of the victims. Like you told me, not all were the victims of those men, but they were drawn to each other.”

“I hope they’re gone. I hope... I hope they rot. And I hope the victims find peace. And I’m sorry.”

I'm so sorry for the pain I caused everyone else," she says.

"It's okay."

"Hiro... I don't know what will happen to me, but... do you think you could visit me sometimes? I would love to know what the ghosts who I feel around me are saying."

After I give her my assurances and we finish up, I'm left sitting alone with Maddox. Kylie's been taken away where she'll stay until someone decides what will happen to her, and Maddox has warned me that may take months or more.

"It's going to be a strange case," Maddox says. "She didn't physically harm anyone. She never touched any of them. She claims she buried them alone, but there's no way she hauled men of that size out there to bury them. The court will only see the facts. They'll see a victim. They'll see what happened to the others... Hopefully, they'll listen to her and the others won't suffer for what she's done."

"Is there anything I can do?" I ask, noticing that a ghost has stayed behind.

"Maybe. We'll see what Parker says. I just wish someone would have taken her seriously. And taken Maryanne seriously. I don't understand how things just slip through like this. Why the victims become victimized even more," he says.

I turn my attention to the remaining ghost.

"Meg," I say.

She looks at me.

"You knew what your husband was doing?"

"Not until after death," she says.

"Then why didn't you help us? We could have stopped him."

"Because I didn't think you could deliver what he deserved. But maybe I was letting hatred fill me with misguided ideas. Maybe I was struggling to understand the gravity of my actions. I feel like death causes confusion. I would never have done this in life but in death... I'm sorry I didn't do more."

I'm not sure what to say to her, but I give her a simple nod. At this point, it is what it is.

I lean back in my chair and look over at Natalie who is leaning against the wall. She hasn't said a single word this entire time; instead, she's just quiet. It makes me wonder again what happened to her. What does her story have to say? And why isn't this the end of Reggie's?

"We're being faced with things that we never believed to be true, but let's hope that we can help a few along the way," Maddox says.

"That would be amazing."

Natalie's holding my eyes.

What story do you have to tell?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



HIRO

“We’re moving one box at a time?” Maddox asks.

“I packed four boxes!” I say. “I was just... I didn’t know if it’d be too overwhelming if I brought too much, and also... packing is a lot of work. Why’s it so much work? When did I collect so much? What do I need this for?” I ask as I hold up a strange contraption that I think peels potatoes. “Or this?” I wave at something that I don’t even know what it does. “I think it’s a puzzle.”

“It looks like a mouse trap,” Maddox says as he picks up the orgy painting that I have leaning against the boxes that are set to go out to the car and nonchalantly tries fitting it in the trash bag.

“Don’t you *dare*,” I say.

“Huh? What?” he asks as he looks around like he has positively no idea why I might be yelling at him.

“Pack it in the car. I want it seat-belted in,” I say.

He sighs but picks it back up along with a box and heads for the door. When I turn around to get back to my packing, I notice Spite sitting on the balcony railing. I slide the glass door open and step out onto the balcony as the cool fall breeze instantly hits me.

“Hey, bud, you’re going to miss this balcony, aren’t you?” I ask.

He twists his head to look back at me, beady eyes watching me close.

“When we first met, were you drawn to me or this balcony?” I ask. “Is that why you hang around here?”

He jumps down and hops over to the corner where he starts digging at a decorative casing around the post.

“Whatcha looking at?” I ask as I stoop down and push at it until it slides up and a small silver locket falls out.

Spite seems absolutely thrilled over the find and starts grabbing for it while flicking his tail. He seems quite excited, and a little annoyed, when he can’t pick it up, so I pick it up for him and hold it out.

“This what you want?” I ask.

He starts making funny noises, so I set it down right at his feet. He takes his beak and starts trying

to move it closer to me.

“You want me to have it?” I ask as I slide it back my way. That seems to please him, so I pick it up and examine it. I can’t get the locket open, it seems to have been out in the weather for quite a while, so I just hold it.

“Hiro?” Maddox calls.

“Coming,” I say as I stand up and hold my arm out. Spite hops onto it and continues to do his dance on my shoulder while making strange noises. “Sorry, Spite found something and was extremely happy to have me bring it along.”

I show Maddox, and as soon as he tries to pick it up, Spite is perplexed how I could ruin his life like that. He puffs up and starts making noises at Maddox to state that he is quite displeased by this turn of events.

“He’ll give it back,” I assure the bird as I scratch him, which seems to appease him.

“Huh. Maybe he knew the person who had this locket,” Maddox says. “You’ll have to see if you can find them and see if they know anything about Spite.”

“That’s true... I bet we could get an idea of who used to live in the apartment. Would you like that, Spite?”

Spite has no idea what I’m saying but just seems pleased Maddox handed the locket back.

“Alright, I got the boxes loaded. We can do the rest this weekend,” Maddox says.

“You mean I missed you carrying them out shirtless?” I ask.

He grins at me. “You sure did.”

“How disappointing,” I tease.

“I am... meeting Ben for breakfast on Sunday, but besides that, I’m all free.”

“I’m glad you’re meeting with him. Promise me you won’t just glower at him the whole meal,” I say.

“Why do you have to make everything so difficult?”

“I’m just evil like that.”

When I head out to the car, I see that the orgy painting has been left on the hood of the car like Maddox is hoping we’ll drive off without remembering to put it in the vehicle.

“Ready to go,” he says as he gets in.

“How dare you forget the painting?” I ask as I grab it and hold it on my lap as I get into the passenger seat. “Sometimes at night when I’m feeling lonely, I like to caress it a little bit.”

Maddox laughs as I caress the frame. “Uh-huh...”

“Jealous, huh?”

“Extremely,” he teases as he drives toward his house.

“This is oddly exciting,” I say. “Like on one hand, it’s like I’m going to your house again, it’s nothing super new, but on the other hand it’s exciting and feels new.”

He looks over and smiles at me. “Good.”

When we pull into the driveway, Maddox grabs a few of the boxes while I cling onto the painting, and we walk in together.

“Well, Hiro. Welcome home,” Maddox says.

I can’t keep the smile off my face as he sets the boxes down.

“To show how much I love you... I even put a nail right here for you,” he says as he walks over to the wall that’s first noticeable when I walk in.

“Did you really?” I hurry over with my painting and hang it right on the nail. “Oh my god.”

“You like it?” he asks with a smile.

"I love it. Thank you... so much," I enthuse as I stand back to look at the masterpiece.

Maddox kisses my cheek, making me look over at him with a smile. "I'm glad you like it."

"I love it. You're the best."

I turn to him, draping my arms around his neck as I wonder why I ever even hesitated. It feels so foolish now.

"So... what if you give me a tour?" I ask as if I've never been here before.

"Oh, definitely," he says as he takes my hand. "This is called The Great Orgy Fest." He waves to the painting. "Then you have a living room, kitchen somewhere that way, but the real magic is upstairs."

"Ooh, what's upstairs?" I ask as he grabs my hand and starts hauling me up them.

"The most unique thing about this whole place," Maddox says as he backs right into the bedroom and waves to the bed.

I gasp. "What is it?"

"This grand piece was once known as My Bed but is now known as *Our* Bed."

"Ooh. Can you show me how it works?"

"Gladly," he says as he whips his shirt off.

"Wow! We have to be naked to observe it?"

"Completely," he says with a grin as his lips meet mine.

I pull back from the kiss. "Just how naked?"

"Fully," he says as he unbuttons my pants and drops them in a hurry. There's no rhyme or reason to where our hands are going, they're just determined to make sure anything with clothing gets yeeted across the room.

"Well hello there, naked man," I purr.

"Hello, equally naked man," Maddox says. "Do I need to say hello to anyone else? Do we have an audience?"

I look around the room. "Completely alone."

"Imagine that. No knitting grandma?"

"Not today."

"No cat?"

"Nope, he's in the windowsill downstairs."

"Well hot damn. I guess it's just you and me."

"And one more makes three!" Reggie yells as he pops up to my left.

Fuck.

"Settle your balls. I'm just grabbing something," he says before smacking Maddox's bare ass and waltzing through the door.

Maddox is staring at me expectantly. "So?"

I clear my throat. "All good."

"Is it?"

"One hundred percent."

"Good," he says as he grabs me and hauls me down onto the bed. I push into him, rolling him onto his back as I lie down on him and kiss his lips.

"I do really like *our* bed," I say between kisses.

"Yeah?"

I sit up, leaving him lying down, as I reach out and grab his cock in one hand. "It's even nicer with such a magnificent view."

“Oh?”

Taking the lube out of the bedside table, I turn back to him. “Now I get to lube you up like you did to me before ramming my innocent body through a window,” I say as I pop open the lid and let a glob drip down onto one of his nipples.

“My nipples don’t need to be lubed up,” he says.

“I didn’t think mine did either,” I remind him as I drip some onto the other nipple.

“I feel like there are a few... hard feelings here.”

“Oh? Nah. Something else is hard though,” I say as I watch the lube drip down onto his cock.

“That’s *very* cold.”

“Yeah? Is that an issue? What about my naked body being shoved through a window and into a pile of dead leaves?”

“That was just sexy,” he says as he sits up and captures my lips.

“Was it?”

“So sexy,” he says as he grabs my ass cheeks in his hands and pulls me closer so my cock rubs against his. “My favorite part was when you got up and everything was stuck to you.”

“Yeah?” I ask as I rock my hips forward, rubbing into him as he wipes a lube-slicked finger between my ass cheeks. His wet finger runs over me as I push into him, anticipating his next move. His finger presses gently against me before sliding in.

Maddox murmurs against my lips as I stroke his cock. He holds me close, adding a second finger as I rock into him, hand stroking both of us. His lips run a trail down my neck, kissing and sucking until I feel like I can’t wait any longer. Especially when he has my cock in one hand and is rubbing me with the other. I sit up, pulling away from his hold as I reach down and take his cock in my hand. I lean back until I feel the head press against me and slowly, I lower onto him until he opens me up.

As I slide down onto him, his hand grips my cock, stroking it gently as I settle down on him, his cock deep inside me. I rock my hips, moving slow at first before drawing up and pushing down again and again. His hands are all over me, like he can’t get enough of me. Like he needs to touch me all over, feel every inch of me, and I get it. Because it feels like I need all of him.

I draw him in close, rocking my hips as his hand quickens on my cock, falling in rhythm with my movement. A moan escapes me as pleasure courses through me. Heat burns deep inside me as I struggle to keep up a steady pace. The pleasure makes it hard to keep up as I sink down on his cock until I can’t take any more. His grip tightens as his fingers slide up my length, thumb rubbing over the head of my cock as I rock up, moan, and drop back down on him as I come. I dig my fingers into his back, pushing him close as he thrusts up into me, his breath heaving. His pace quickens as he slides a hand to my hip and groans as he comes inside me.

For a moment, we stay pressed together, holding and touching until he lays me down, pulling out of me and sinking down behind me. He keeps me close, my ass against his groin as he kisses a line down my neck.

I roll into him so I can face him. “Well... we’ve broken in *our* bed. What else do we need to break in?” I tease.

“All of it,” he decides.

“Oh god, I’m not sure I’m that young anymore,” I joke.

He grins at me. “I love you, Hiro.”

“I love you too. And here’s to a new life together.”

“You, me, and your imaginary friends.”

I can’t keep the smile at bay. “Someone sounds jealous.”

“Jealous? Of you getting a stripper ghost whenever you want it? And being harassed? And made fun of? And having imaginary pets? Nah,” he teases.

“Sounds like jealousy.”

He leans forward and kisses my lips. “The only thing I’m jealous of is that orgy painting.”

“I’ll see if the mayor will sell me one for you,” I joke.

“I can’t wait.”

Even though a lot of things haven’t been answered, I know that they’ll come in time. Someday, Natalie will feel like she can open up to me about her past. And maybe we’ll figure out why Reggie and Keaton are still here. Is there something else they’re needed for?

“What are you thinking about?” Maddox asks.

“How you should never wear clothes again.”

“Might get a little chilly.”

“You can use my body to warm you up.”

“That sounds mighty fine.”

I grin at him. “Thought it would.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



MADDOX

I'm sitting at my desk unable to focus on anything when I see Hiro enter the office.

"Hey," he says. "What happened?"

"What are you doing here?" I ask, not sure if I can talk to him right now.

"Well, Natalie told me you looked like you'd seen a ghost and then Reggie and Natalie cackled over that for a while. Then I texted you asking for a dick pic and you just sent me a thumbs up, so I knew something was wrong. I was in the area anyway. What's wrong?"

"Is Reggie here?" I ask as I look around the room.

"No, he got distracted by the 'hot delivery guy that he must show to Keaton in order to make him jealous.'"

"Oh..."

Hiro gives me an expectant look. "What's going on?"

I get up and head to an empty room and Hiro follows me. It takes me a moment to gather my thoughts before I say, "Erick confessed today. He confessed to being involved, claiming that he and the others had met online before forming this plan of preying on unsuspecting women, drugging them and then making videos and selling them online. They would then toss the women back out into the street and had 'never meant to hurt' any of them. How he couldn't understand that he was hurting them, who knows, especially since we know several ended up dead.

"He gave up his involvement and confirmed that he'd been in Helmsdale five years ago meeting up with Jude when he set his eyes on Kylie. He hadn't planned on taking her, he just wanted to spend the night with her because he was enamored with her. But when he found her talking to Reggie, he said she was acting too enthralled by him and kept flirting with him. He thought if he got Reggie out of the picture, she'd focus on him. So he slipped the drug into Reggie's drink. Kylie remained disinterested, so he slipped her the drug too and left. He said he lost track of whatever happened to Reggie after he took Kylie with him."

"So Reggie must have come out to chew out his mom, and in his haze, fell into traffic, which is why he doesn't remember anything."

"Right. I still don't know why he thinks he died elsewhere. I've looked into his case again and it

just must have been the drugs making his memories fuzzy.”

“Okay, so... I mean it’s good that we know what happened. We have more on Erick to keep him locked away,” Hiro says.

This is exactly what I’ve realized too and why it bothers me so much. “Yes... but it also means that... we’ve fixed what is keeping Reggie here,” I say. “It means he can move on, right?” It’s so selfish of me to hope I’m wrong. To hope that something else is keeping Reggie here.

Hiro hesitates as what I’m saying settles in. I can see his expression fall before he quickly plasters a smile on his face. I can tell he’s not feeling it even if he’s trying to as hard as he can. “But this is good! It’s good. It’s definitely good. I mean... that’s the best outcome, right? I mean... that’s... Sean moved on. He had to move on. That was good...” His voice catches at the end and he quickly looks away from me so I can’t see the way his eyes are watering.

“Is it?” I ask, honestly feeling like it’s the worst thing. I’ve already dealt with his death once. It shouldn’t be that hard to deal with it again, right? It should be easier. It’s not like I can even see him or talk to him. “What if I’m not ready for him to move on?” Oh, but the first time I dealt with his death was absolute hell. Was... fuck. It was such a horrible time in my life and now I have to do it again? “Reggie can’t go. I can’t lose him again, Hiro. I fucking can’t.”

Hiro looks a little panicked. “I guess... I guess we don’t get a choice. I guess we have to realize that this is what’s best for him. And we just... have to know that what’s going to happen is... for the best...” Hiro is starting to sound as displeased by this as I am.

“Fucking hell,” I say.

Hiro rushes up to me and wraps his arms around me. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“I just... I just fucking got him back, you know?” I tuck my face against Hiro’s neck and squeeze him closely as I fight back tears. I will not cry. How fucking absurd. “I’m sorry. I’m being ridiculous.” Thankfully, Hiro’s touch calms me a little, but god... I don’t think I can do this. How is this worse, knowing what’s going to come?

“You’re not. Let’s... let’s do something exciting that Reggie would love, okay?” Hiro asks, fake smile plastered over his face. “We were meeting Nicolás tonight anyway, and you know he loves using Nicolás to make Keaton jealous. Oh! And Keaton should move on with Reggie. His case is closed. We know what happened to him and he’s going to get the justice he deserves. They can move on together and harass each other wherever they end up so he won’t be alone.”

“True,” I say, still not sure I’m pleased by any of it.



HIRO

“Ooh, all my favorite men in one room,” Reggie purrs as he rubs his hands together and gives Keaton a side-eye like he wants Keaton to jump out and shield Reggie’s eyes from the rest of us so he can keep him all to himself.

Instead, Keaton folds his arms over his chest as I look to Reggie. I can’t look at Maddox because he looks absolutely devastated and every time I look at him, it makes me want to cry. Maddox is so strong that for him to be like this is absolutely wrecking me.

“If you had one wish, what would it be?” I ask Reggie.

Reggie is already excited, and I’m already prepared to regret this, but if it’ll make him happy, it’ll

be worth it. “Ooh, one wish? Oh! I want to be the middle of the man meat sandwich. I want you all naked!” he decides.

“I do too,” Natalie says.

“How about we take our shirts off instead?” I ask.

Reggie doesn’t seem as pleased by this, but the look Nicolás is giving me tells me this is the furthest we’re going with this. “Fine.”

“Alright, stand in the middle,” I say.

“OMG. Is this my birthday present or something? My birthday is like six months away but I’m in,” Reggie says.

“This is—” Maddox starts. I’m sure it was going to be something like “ridiculous” or “fucking stupid,” but if this is Reggie’s goddamn dying wish, he’s going to get it. “So exciting,” he says extremely dryly instead.

So as I give Nicolás and Maddox the eye, they both dutifully pull their shirts off. It’s like we’re in awkward gym class or something.

At least I told Nicolás what we were doing; otherwise I’m positive he’d be even more creeped out.

“Come, my preciouses,” Reggie says, using a creepy voice that I’m assuming is supposed to be Gollum. “Come closer.”

The three of us close in on each other in this awkward shimmy. It’s so awkward. We’re all shirtless. We’re trying not to look at each other. Natalie looks jealous. Keaton looks horrified. Reggie is fucking ecstatic.

We’re getting closer. I’m the only one who can fully see Reggie, so I have to direct the others with my hands. Maddox takes my right hand, Nicolás takes my left. We now look like we’re doing some satanic ritual or maybe playing Red Rover.

“Closer,” Reggie says as he grins in the middle. “Closer, my lovelies.”

“This is fucking weird even for you guys,” Keaton says.

“Shut up, Keaton, and be jealous,” Reggie snaps.

We’re now shimmying inward, trying to press flesh against flesh. We don’t know what to do with our hands or our bodies or even our eyes. Maddox and Nicolás, who don’t have Reggie to look at, are looking around wildly. I think Reggie is holding his breath—even though he doesn’t need to breathe. Maddox is staring at the ceiling. I can’t tell if it’s out of horror or he thinks he can keep himself from crying by doing this. It’s this weird mixture of sadness and ridiculousness.

“Awww, I love it so much,” Reggie says as he grins like a maniac in the middle. “The best part of all of this is how much it’s hurting them. They totally think I’m moving on or something.”

“You’re not?” I ask in surprise.

“God no, I feel spry and young and ready to rumble. Sean told me he got a feeling before he moved on, and I have no feeling at all. I’m feeling good and meaty amongst my men. Keaton! Keaton, join in!”

“Reggie says he’s not moving on,” I say.

“Oh, thank fuck,” Nicolás says as he reels back.

“What. The. Absolute. Hell,” Maddox growls, switching from sadness to pure grump. “How dare you make me feel like this and you’re not even moving on?”

“Oh. My. God. Talk about passive aggressive. Guys, come back. Squish me some more,” Reggie says.

“We’re done with the hug from hell,” I say, but Reggie grabs me since I’m the only one he can

hold on to.

“NEVER! Keaton, come join.”

Keaton flips him off.

“I’m gonna fucking mount that man,” Reggie says.

“Yeah? It’d be less creepy if you didn’t whisper it in my ear,” I say.

“I’m going to MOUNT that man,” he says, *much* louder, but still in my ear.

“So... did we... not... figure out what happened to you?” I ask.

“I have no idea. I just know I’m not going anywhere soon. Maybe it’s my love for all of you. I’m here to stay, baby.”

“I’m so sorry, Nicolás,” Maddox says.

“You know what? It’s not the weirdest thing Hiro’s made me do,” Nicolás says, and I can’t help but wonder how often I’ve scarred him.

I wrap my arms around Reggie and squeeze him to me. “I’m glad you’re staying. I’m not sure I’d know what to do without you pestering me,” I say.

He hugs me back tightly. “I need to protect your ass because who knows what you’re getting yourself into next.”

“That’s very true,” I say.

“I’m going to get my coat,” Nicolás says, and he wanders into the other room. Natalie and Keaton follow him to get away from our “weirdness,” but before Maddox can also run off so he doesn’t have to use “feelings,” I grab his wrist as well as Reggie’s.

I pull Reggie to me so his back is against my front and then pull Maddox in. “Close your eyes,” I tell Maddox.

He hesitates but does as I ask as I push Reggie forward so he’s pressed up against Maddox.

“I’m... I’m not sure if you two can feel each other. But... I think you both need to know that even if you’re worlds apart, you two will always be there for each other. And you’ll always have each other whether it’s in memory or... in life. That even... when Reggie moves on, it’s not the end, okay? Losing Sean was hard and losing him a second time was horrible, but I feel blessed we had more moments together. So right now, I just want you two to know that even though Reggie could move on tomorrow or ten years from now, every moment you have together is a moment you never thought you’d have and just... just to be happy, and when the time comes for him to move on, be happy that you had this extra time together,” I say.

Reggie lets out a choked sob as he grabs desperately onto Maddox. I can’t tell if I’m helping him feel him or if he’s just trying to mimic holding him. “Walking this world alone and just watching Maddox for five years was the hardest thing in my life. I felt so happy to see him but so absolutely devastated that I’d never get to spend another moment with him,” he says, leaving me a moment to repeat it.

“Goddammit, you’re not allowed to make me cry,” Maddox says. “Remember when we promised we were tough men and we wouldn’t cry anymore?”

Reggie nods as a laugh escapes him. “Yes. Yes. I do.”

“I... didn’t know how to even... function in life. There were honestly times I thought about what use life even had anymore. You were my fucking rock for years, Reggie. And then... but now... now I don’t think I’ve ever gotten to tell you just how fucking happy it makes me that you’re in my life again. How fucking happy I am every day I know you’re pestering the absolute hell out of Hiro. Sometimes... sometimes I get jealous that it’s not me that can hear you or talk to you, but I’ve quickly learned that I don’t have to hear a damn word out of your mouth to still feel you here beside me. You

are my family, Reggie. You're the best damn family I could have ever asked for."

"Tell him to STOP. I don't want to cry. I want to think about my man meat sandwich. I want my sandwich back," Reggie whines, so I tell Maddox who starts laughing. "Honestly, I don't know why I'm not moving on. I don't know if I'm just not ready yet or..."

"Or if we haven't truly figured out what happened to you."

He shrugs. "It's fine either way. I'd rather hang around and pester all of you a whole lot longer."

"I feel like I might vomit on you both if I try to make you solid any longer," I warn Reggie as I pull back, nausea rolling through me. But it does make me question what we're missing. Everything seems to tell the tale that Reggie stepped out in front of traffic that night, but what if we're wrong?

"God, I love you asshats," Reggie says with a smile.

Maddox quickly ducks away, and I can tell he's wiping away tears but is too damn "manly" to cry in front of us.

"Let's go and enjoy the night," I say.

"Did I tell you guys I got Keaton to smile today?" Reggie asks.

"No!" I say and then tell Maddox.

"I don't believe it," he says as I reach over and give his hand a squeeze.

I know this little family made up of ghosts and people isn't quite the norm, but honestly, I would never want it any other way. Especially with Maddox right by my side.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Do you want to read a short story about Reggie and Keaton? Check it out for free just by joining my reader group:

facebook.com/groups/AliceWinters

You will also be the first to know about Medium Trouble 3's release. In the group, I do fun things like put up teasers, giveaways, and short stories that you won't want to miss. Or you can follow my upcoming releases and read some short stories by joining my newsletter here:

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!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My wonderful team helped me bring this book to life and get it into your hands. They are my support and help me get my books to where they're at.

Of course I need to thank Courtney who has been an amazing help. She's a wonderful beta and an amazing editor (and friend). She helps push me to do the best I can.

A huge thank you to my mom who is always there to support me and read everything I toss her way.

I want to thank my wonderful beta readers: Savannah, Sam, Meredith, Kat, and Courtney P who always go above and beyond. They are always trying their hardest to help my book become the best it can. I couldn't do it without this wonderful group.

I also want to thank Lori for her fantastic proofreading and her encouragement!

I also need to thank Greg for taking this story and these characters and bringing them to life with his wonderful narration.

ALSO BY ALICE WINTERS

Medium Trouble

[Ghost of Lies](#)

[Ghost of Truth](#)

Phoenix's Quest

[Nixing the End of the World](#)

Winsford Shifters

[Of Secrets and Wolves](#)

[Of Betrayal and Monsters](#)

[Of Redemption and Vengeance](#)

The Hitman's Guide

[The Hitman's Guide to Making Friends and Finding Love](#)

[The Hitman's Guide to Staying Alive Despite Past Mistakes](#)

[The Hitman's Guide to Tying the Knot Without Getting Shot](#)

The Former Assassin's Guide

[The Former Assassin's Guide to Snagging a Reluctant Boyfriend](#)

VRC: Vampire Related Crimes

[How to Vex a Vampire](#)

[How to Elude a Vampire](#)

[How to Lure a Hunter](#)

[How to Save a Human](#)

In Darkness

[Hidden In Darkness](#)

[A Light in the Darkness](#)

[Deception in Darkness](#)

[Dancing In Darkness](#) (short story)

In the Mind

[Within the Mind](#)

[Lost in the Mind](#)

Demon Magic

[Happy Endings](#)

[Familiar Beginnings](#)

Seeking Asylum

[The Sinner and the Liar](#)

[The Traitor and the Fighter](#)

Standalone Titles

[The Last Text](#)

[Dear Cassius](#)

[Just My Luck](#)

Other Titles

[A Villain for Christmas: A Snow Globe Christmas Book 4](#)

[Rushing In \(Ace's Wild Book 3\)](#)