



GHOST OF DECEIT

ALICE WINTERS

GHOST OF DECEIT

MEDIUM TROUBLE BOOK 3

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](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also by Alice Winters](#)

CHAPTER ONE



HIRO

“Hey, mister, do you wanna color with me?”

I look down at the child reaching out to me with her small hand. She looks to be about six or seven; it’s hard for me to tell. Why she picked me, I’m not sure. I guess when your other option would be someone like Maddox, I can’t blame her. I might love Maddox with all of my heart, but he’s not always the most... approachable. He’s currently busy talking to some people a few doors down the hallway, so I give the little girl a nod and let her take my hand.

“Sure,” I say, not quite sure where we’re going.

She tugs me into a classroom and sits me down at a table across from the only other person in the room. The lady looks tall squeezed in the tiny chair made for children. She’s leaning on the table, elbows on it while holding her head on her hand and just watching us curiously.

“We’re coloring our favorite pet,” the little girl explains as she turns to her paper that she seems to have just started working on.

“Who is this?” the teacher asks, clearly having a right to question who this strange man the child pulled into the classroom is.

“My friend,” the little girl says as she waves to the pile of crayons, obviously wanting me to participate in this coloring activity.

“Does your friend have a name?” the teacher asks.

“Probably,” the girl says before picking up a purple crayon that she’s using to color in what is either a rock or a dog.

“I’m Hiro Moore,” I say with a smile. “They’re just talking out in the hallway, so do you mind if I join?”

The woman smiles back. “Sure. But if the principal has them, it’ll be a while.”

After squeezing myself into the tiny seat, I pick up a piece of paper and set it down in front of me before grabbing a black crayon to draw an outline.

“Are you doing a kitty?” the girl asks excitedly.

“I am. I’m going to draw my cat Stella. What about you?”

“This is my pig, Pinky!” she says. Clearly... clearly, I was very wrong. It’s a pig, not a rock or a

dog.

“And you?” I ask the teacher.

She smiles. “My dog Otis. He’s a sweetheart.”

“I LOVE dogs!” the little girl says as she swings her arms out wide, knocking over a container of crayons.

“Oh...” The teacher stops as she stares at the girl for a moment, looking confused. “Um... honey... honey, be careful.”

“I’m super careful,” she says as she scribbles wildly across the page. “I’m almost done! LOOK!” She holds up the drawing of her “pig” for all of us to see.

I just barely got the outline done, but I hold up my paper. “That’s awesome. What do you think of mine?”

“She’s so round!” The girl finds this hysterical as she points. “You could roll her!”

“I’ve warned Maddox that she needs some restrictions, but he secretly thinks she’s too cute and gives her whatever she demands. She’s very demanding,” I say, which makes the girl smile.

“What about yours?” the girl asks the teacher.

The teacher holds up a drawing for us to see and I stare at the rough sketch of a man staring back at me. His black eyes peer right into mine, a smile prominent on his face.

“That’s a weird-looking dog,” the girl says, her smile falling.

“What?” the teacher asks, appearing confused before turning her paper around to look at it. “No... no, I’m sorry, let me fix it.”

She grabs the red crayon and starts scribbling over the man’s face. “I’m fixing it, see? It’s getting fixed, it’s going to be all better—”

“You were so bored that you decided to just color all alone?” Maddox asks from behind me.

I jump, startled, and look over my shoulder at the handsome man leaning against the doorway. When he sees my face, his amused expression dissipates. “What’s wrong?” he asks as he steps farther into the room.

I turn back to the table to find that I’m completely alone. The teacher and child must have been spooked by Maddox; the only thing left to show they were even here is the little girl’s container of crayons that’s knocked over.

“You alright?” Maddox asks.

I nod as I reach out to pick up the crayons. “Yes, it was just... so the ghost of a little girl asked me to color. She didn’t seem to realize she was dead... I don’t know why I went with her...” I say, trailing off.

Maddox sets a hand on my shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Is that Stella?” he asks as he looks down at my drawing.

“You like her?” I ask as I push those other thoughts aside and grin at him.

“She’s so round!”

“This is literally what she looks like! You keep feeding her too much,” I say as I stand up and move to toss it in the trash, but Maddox takes it before I can. He folds it up and tucks it into his pocket. I don’t know why something so ridiculous makes me feel happy.

“They said they’re ready for us. Are you good?”

I take a deep breath because I don’t think I’m ever good when faced with a body. I guess I get used to seeing them—hell, being able to see the dead has always pulled me into the path of the recently deceased—but it doesn’t make it easier.

“So the next-door teacher found her body this morning,” Maddox explains as we leave the

classroom.

“Do they know if it happened this morning?” I ask.

“I don’t know much yet. All I know is that her name is Ellen Keefe,” he admits as he leads me down the hallway where others from Maddox’s team are waiting. I’m hoping they weren’t waiting on me while I was off coloring in a classroom like a weirdo.

After putting on gear to keep from disrupting the crime scene, I follow Maddox into the room where the teacher I just finished coloring with lies facedown on the floor, her pink frilly blouse covered in blood.

Like... I knew the teacher I’d been coloring with was dead, but I didn’t realize she was the one we were here to see. She didn’t act like a newly formed ghost, so I hadn’t even thought about it.

“Careful where you move, it looks like she was stabbed over there,” Maddox says as he nods at the desk. I can see the blood sprayed across it, telling me that whoever it was who’d attacked her had done it when she’d been working at her desk.

“Do you see her anywhere?” Maddox asks.

“Umm... well... she’s actually the woman who was coloring with the girl. She acted normal, so I thought nothing of it,” I say. Generally, when someone dies, they’re so distraught over their own death that they don’t move from their death place for a good chunk of time. Even then, they don’t seem to understand how to interact with people, so the way she’d been talking to me made me assume she’d been dead a while and wasn’t the person we were here for.

“So she’s here?” Maddox asks.

“She was.” I look around the room and try not to think about how the poor woman had tried to make a dash for the door to get away from the attacker. How she didn’t get far before bleeding out on the ground. How she seemed quite nice when she was interacting with me, and now she’s dead.

“You alright?” Maddox asks.

“Yeah, I’m going to see if I can find her,” I say as I back out of the room before nearly running into Keaton, a detective who’d worked with Maddox some before he’d been killed. While he was kind of a dick to me when alive, he’s nicer now that he benefits from my ghost abilities. Especially after I allowed him to leave his death place quite quickly. I think he also enjoys being involved and perhaps even likes being harassed by Reggie, Maddox’s friend.

“Sorry,” I say, to which Keaton just grunts, clearly not caring.

A few living people look over at me to see what I’m apologizing about, but I pretend I don’t notice them as I slip through the door. I know that there’s been some talk about what I can do around the department, but I’m still not going to broadcast it. For now, I’m strictly considered a consultant who works with Maddox on certain cases. I still have my bookstore, which is my primary job, but ever since I went to Maddox to help find my brother’s killer, I’ve become an asset.

It’s always so much easier when you can ask the dead who killed them.

When I step out into the hallway, Keaton follows me. “Looks like she’s been dead at least a couple of days,” he says.

“Thinking Friday?” I ask.

“Possibly. I’m sure Maddox can tell better since I can’t actually touch her,” Keaton says with a sigh. I know not being able to be involved bothers him, so I try to do what I can to give him opportunities to work with us because even though his personality isn’t top notch, he’s a good detective and actually nice under his icy exterior.

“She was hanging around this other classroom earlier today, so I’m going to see if I can find her,” I explain.

“Okay,” he says as I head toward it and he trails after me.

“Reggie isn’t attached to you today?” I ask, wanting a bit of a distraction as I look for the ghost.

“I don’t know who that is,” Keaton says, even though he clenches his jaw at the mere mention of him.

“Oh? Never heard of him?” I’m trying not to be amused by his reaction.

Of course, that’s the moment Reggie shows up and goes, “Oh. My. God.” I assume he’s going to go on about how could Keaton possibly not know who he is, but instead, he’s just beaming at us... and a beaming Reggie is rarely a good thing.

Reggie is Maddox’s best friend who passed away five years before I met Maddox. He’s a very attractive and sassy man who has both helped and haunted me since I met him. He initially thought it’d be fun to try to scare me away from Maddox by pretending to be his dead fiancé. I soon learned that Reggie was just an ass who got his kicks by making my life a pain—and was horribly entertained by it. Truth be told, I really do appreciate and care for Reggie, even when he’s a monster. And somehow... he has an odd talent for using my ability to manipulate things normal ghosts could never even touch.

“You two are just”—he kisses his fingers in a whole “chef’s kiss” kind of gesture—“beautiful together. We should all get N to the A to—”

“We’re not getting naked in an *elementary school*,” I hiss.

This doesn’t deter him at all. “What *are* you guys doing here?” Reggie asks as he looks around. “Omg. Are you going to have a baby?”

How he came to that conclusion, I don’t know. “What? Do you think people just come to elementary schools and kidnap children when they want one of their own?”

He shrugs. “God, I’d have loved to have been kidnapped by you two when I was a kid. Oh wait... you’re a baby compared to me. You’d have been an idea in your dad’s sperm pouch still.”

Keaton and I both look at each other with extremely disgusted expressions. It’s nice to share a common ground with him. “You *leave* me with him, and this is what I have to deal with!” Keaton complains.

“Don’t listen to him, Hiro, he likes it. He’s just playing hard to get,” Reggie says as he winks one eye at Keaton and then the other and then back to the first eye. It honestly just looks like he got sand tossed in his face or something.

I set a hand on Keaton’s chest that feels solid beneath my touch. “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” he says.

Reggie throws his hands up in the air. “I even wore my best clothes for you.” He turns around like he wants to give Keaton a chance to see how nice his ass looks in his jeans. Keaton remains completely oblivious until Reggie deflates a little and starts walking away. I watch as Keaton’s eyes drop right down to Reggie’s ass.

They’re very clearly meant for each other.

“Reggie, I’m looking for the ghost of a teacher. A lady in her late thirties,” I say.

He turns to me and holds something out in his cupped hands. Even though I know he’s not holding anything physical, I’m still wary, but like a dumb man, I put my hand out to take what he has to give. When he uncups his hands and puts “it” into mine, I realize there’s nothing there. Honestly, it’s the best possible outcome.

“There, take my heart... I no longer need one,” he cries before passing through a door.

I stare down at my outstretched hand before passing Reggie’s “heart” over to Keaton. “I don’t want it.”

He glares down at it, like there's actually a heart in my hand. "Does it look like I want it?"

"Yes, Keaton, yes it does," I say before "tossing" it at him and continuing on my journey. Even with the three of us separated and looking, we can't seem to find Ellen's ghost. After half an hour, I return to the room her body was found in, in case she reappeared there or Maddox has something else to share.

A quick glance around the busy room tells me she's not there either, so I head over to Maddox as I leave Reggie and Keaton to continue searching. "She's hiding for some reason," I say. "At first, I thought she was spooked about you coming to the room, but I actually think she spooked herself with her drawing."

"Her drawing?" Maddox asks as he stops what he's doing to turn to me.

"Yeah... we were drawing..." I quiet down as Mick, a tech who works with Maddox, walks up. He's never shown me that he's judgmental, but I've never point blank told him I can talk to ghosts.

Maddox glances at him. "Need something?"

"No, the janitor is here, though. Said he'd talk to you when you had a minute," Mick says.

Maddox nods before turning back to me. "Okay. So the picture?"

"Yeah, we were supposed to draw pets and she thought she was drawing her dog but when she finished it, she revealed a man's face," I say.

"What did he look like?" Maddox asks.

"Well... it was done in crayon, and I only had a moment to look before she started scribbling over it. She gave him like... yellow hair so maybe blond? His eyes were solid black but maybe he had dark eyes?"

"If you were to watch a security tape, do you think you could pick him out?" he asks.

I shrug, honestly not too confident. "It was a pretty obscure drawing," I admit. "But I'll try my best. We at least know the person she was drawing was a man, likely blond or light-haired."

"Right." Maddox turns to Mick. "Okay, where's the janitor?"

I don't miss the curious way Mick is staring at me before he leads the way out of the room. As we step out into the hallway, a ghost breezes past me like they're on a mission. I turn to make sure it's not Ellen, but it's a young man, maybe mid-twenties. I consider asking him some questions but before I can, I find Mick introducing us to the janitor and feel it'd be a bit rude to run off.

"Can you tell me anything that could help?" Maddox asks.

The man looks quite distraught as he nods. "I-I saw Miss Ellen on Friday... after school, I mean," the janitor says, clearly shaken up. He's nervously rubbing at his arms as he looks between the three of us. "I always start from this end of the hallway before heading toward the other side. She was still working so I slipped in and did what I could while not disrupting her. She's always the nicest lady... so sweet. She'd help me move desks if I had to mop and always had something nice to say. When I walked into the room, she was on the phone. She seemed upset about something, but the moment she saw me, she got off and smiled like normal. Told me it was just some useless family drama. She said she had some lesson plans for next week to work on, and then she was headed out for a date night."

"Date night?" Maddox says thoughtfully. "Do you know anything about her date?"

"I mean, she'd mention him here and there, but it was generally just in passing. I... I don't even remember his name," he says, sounding apologetic.

"That's okay. Mick, let's see if a family member or a friend knows who she's dating so we can check with him to see if she made it to the date," Maddox says.

"I'm on it," Mick says as he heads over to flag someone else down. Maybe to see if someone who was friends with Ellen knew who she had been dating.

“Did you see her leave the building? What about her car? Was it here when you left?” Maddox asks the janitor.

“I didn’t see her leave, and honestly, I didn’t pay attention to the parking lot. I park at the other end,” he says, pointing. “It’s closer to the janitor’s closet. And the remaining teachers park over there.”

“Nothing else strange?” Maddox asks.

“No. I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help.”

“You were a lot of help. If you think of anything else, please don’t hesitate to contact me,” Maddox says.

The janitor gives him a nod and Maddox whisks me over to the principal. “You have cameras up on the entrances. Mind if we take a look?”

“Of course not,” she says as she leads us back toward the office.

“Hiro, if you see anyone who could possibly fit the description, let me know,” Maddox says.

“I will.” Honestly, I don’t have much hope. The drawing did little to show me what the man looked like.

“What time do you want?” the principal asks.

“Let’s start with Friday morning. I’m assuming doors are locked during school hours?”

“They are, but we had a school activity day on Friday. The twelfth graders take buses over here from the high school once a year to do an activity with the kids. So there were more people than usual inside the building. The teachers did walk the high schoolers in, though.”

She gets the recordings set up. Thankfully, the only entrance is the main one that goes right past the office since the remaining doors stay locked.

“We’re lucky this is an elementary school,” I say. “It’s easier to pinpoint the adults.”

“Definitely,” Maddox says.

A few parents go in with their child, but most leave them outside the door where a teacher stands to guide the little ones inside. The first man who fits the bill heads in fairly early. When Maddox notices me looking, he points at him.

“Who is this guy?”

The principal leans in to get a better look. “That’s Mr. Smith. He’s a fifth-grade teacher.”

When we’re done watching the AM recording, Maddox has made a list of only two names that fit the description.

“She could have been wrong,” I tell him.

“She could have. But I’m going to guess she wasn’t,” he says. “If it was someone she loved or cared about, would she have scratched out his picture?”

“True,” I say.

The principal is watching us, clearly wondering what we’re talking about, but she doesn’t ask. “I also have a list of all the parents who came in to pick up their children throughout the day. We don’t allow the parents into the school, though. They’re allowed to step into the foyer that’s locked, sign out their child, and then the secretary or nurse brings the student to them. They also have to page us to even be allowed in the foyer.”

“Great, thank you,” Maddox says before turning his attention back to the recording.

The issue comes when the seniors arrive. There are about a hundred of them according to the principal and as they flood in, jostling around, it’s hard to keep track of all the people. The camera doesn’t span out to the buses, so we can’t even see if someone joins in the middle of it.

“Could we get some twelfth-grade teachers in here to tell us if there are students who they don’t

recognize? We aren't ruling out that it was a high school student, but I'm guessing the teachers took a roll call when they got back on the buses to go to the high school?"

"I will have some teachers over here immediately to go over that with you," she says before she steps back into her office. While we wait for them, Maddox and I go over the rest of the recording. It becomes clear that by the time the janitor leaves the building, locking it behind him, Ellen had never left.

"I don't think I was much help," I say as I look down at Maddox's long list of people and the times they left the building.

Maddox gives me a reassuring look. "Hiro, everything helps in a case like this. You were able to identify that the victim is afraid of a man, which could cut down our pool by quite a bit."

That's when Reggie steps into the room. "Hiro, I have something you might want to see."

"Maddox, I'll be back. Reggie has something."

"Okay. Call me if you need me," he says.

I give him a nod and follow Reggie out into the hallway.

"Did you miss me?" he asks with a flirtatious look that makes my eyebrows knit.

"Loads," I say sarcastically.

"We can cuddle tonight, I promise," he says with a grin.

"No thanks. What did you want to show me?"

"Come, come," he says as he hurries me back to the room where the teacher's body is.

When I walk in, I immediately see what made him call me in—the ghost I'd passed on the way to the office is currently lying on the floor next to the body.

I put my protective gear back on before walking over toward the body, knowing I'd have to get quite close to interact with the ghost. "Excuse me?" I say quietly, but a tech turns to me.

"What's that?" she asks.

"Oh, sorry, I was..." I just resort to smiling, hoping that makes her return to working.

She looks a bit uncertain but gives me a smile as well and turns back to what she was doing before I interrupted her. Since I can't seem to get the ghost's attention, I reach out to nudge it.

"Please don't touch the body," she says, clearly keeping track of me.

"I... wasn't. I was... there was..." God, this is so fucking awkward. Reggie could, of course, touch them for me, but no, he's off pestering Keaton who is trying to snoop around and calling one of the men a "useless waste of space."

The ghost finally opens his eyes and sees me staring at him. I do some kind of eye flick thing to be like "Hey, dude, come with me." He clearly thinks I like making my eyes roll around in my head because he goes right back to ignoring me. Quickly, I get up and hurry over to Keaton who is breathing down Mick's back while going, "He's so goddamn unorganized. What is this shit?"

"Keaton," I hiss.

Mick *and* Keaton look over at me.

Mick's eyes get extremely wide as he looks around. "Detective Evans is here?" he whispers.

So much for keeping things quiet.

I just give him an awkward look that's somewhere between a grimace and a smile, then nudge Keaton while jabbing a finger at the body. He seems to get where I'm going because he heads over to the guy, *kicks* him, and says, "Get your ass up, we have some questions."

And he thinks Mick's skills are bad.

The ghost's eyes snap open and he looks up at Keaton like he's never seen such a rude person in his life. Honestly... he probably hasn't. But when he tries to close his eyes again, Keaton folds his

arms over his chest and glowers down at him.

"If you want to find her killer then get your ass moving," he says.

"God, he's so hot," Reggie says.

I'm unsure how to comprehend this. "He's verbally abusing a man who probably lost someone he cares about."

"Yeah, while being sexy."

I give up. I literally give up. Ghosts clearly have issues. But at least they're helpful as Keaton drags the guy out into an empty classroom where I can close the door and freely talk to him.

"Hi, my name's Hiro, I'm a consultant with—"

The man rushes up and grabs onto me. "You can see me? You can actually see me? For real? Is it real?" he asks, words coming out in a rush. Since I've gotten better at controlling who can and can't touch me, I let him. I feel like maybe getting to grab onto me and shake me around a bit could help him trust me. That is until it becomes a little painful and I push him back.

"Yes, I can see you. We're trying to figure out who killed—"

His eyes get wide. "I saw him! I saw the man who did it!"

"Do you think if you saw him on a video, you could point him out to me?" I ask.

The man looks extremely eager. "Yes! I can. Where? You have a video here?"

"In the office," I say. "Before that, can you tell me what your name is?"

"It's Ryan Jones."

"Ryan, can you tell me what happened?"

I take out a notebook as he nods enthusiastically.

"Yes! Okay. So I missed part of it... but when I heard her scream, I came running. This man was standing over her as she jumped up. At this point, he'd stabbed her with the scissors. She took off running and he stood right by the desk and watched her go. He didn't even try to chase after her, but she was panicking as she bled everywhere. She didn't make it far before she fell to the ground."

"Can you tell me what the killer looked like?" I ask.

"Umm... yeah... he was like... I think around my height. Wearing... I just... I just know that if I see him, I can recognize him. What are we waiting for?"

"Okay," I say as I lead him out of the room and into the hallway. "Did you recognize him?"

He glances over at me. "Like did I know him, you mean? No. I don't think I'd ever seen him."

I write it down anyway, and when we get to the office, I hand my notes to Maddox who quickly reads through them.

"Okay, we'll play through the video again," he says, which likely leads to the principal questioning our sanity. She's probably wondering how we're planning on pinpointing a guy none of us have seen.

But we sit down and start from the beginning anyway. The entire time, the ghost's eyes stay glued to the screen.

Maddox and I wait patiently, and it's not until the school buses of kids come in that he points. "That guy! Right there!"

"Pause it," I say before pointing. "Here?"

"Over one. Yeah... yeah, that guy. That's him."

While the guy isn't exactly blond, he does have light-colored hair.

"Do you know this guy?" Maddox asks the principal.

"Yes, that's Mr. Hoffman, a high school teacher. He's one of the teachers on the way over to help now," the principal says uncertainly.

“Great, thank you.”

“You don’t... I mean, you don’t think he did it, right?” she asks.

“We have no suspects at this time,” Maddox says, easily dodging the question.

As we head out, Maddox pulls me after him. “We’ll grab him before he comes inside. I want to talk to him at the station.”

“Okay,” I agree as I follow him.

I know that even though we have someone pinpointing the killer, that’s not enough. My information from ghosts rarely stands up in court; even if they’re the victim and point blank tell me who killed them, there’s little I can do without concrete proof. So I follow Maddox out to where we wait for the guy. When he shows up, Maddox simply pulls him aside and I stand back as Ryan waits next to me while just watching.

“Thank you,” the ghost says as he reaches out to me again. “Thank you... I’m so glad she doesn’t have to suffer with her killer loose.”

I give him a soft smile, happy I can help. “You’re welcome.”

CHAPTER TWO



MADDOX

I sit down across from the teacher and slide a bottle of water over to him as he watches me nervously.

Hiro's outside, watching from a different room since he's not allowed to be directly involved as a consultant. Out on the job is a different matter. But it's still nice knowing that he can listen in and follow along.

And on more than one occasion, he's used Reggie or Natalie to snoop if we aren't allowed to be involved.

The man looks nervous, which I guess is reasonable. Hiro always tells me it's in response to the way I use my "face" when talking to them, like I'm some monster able to terrify people with just a look. Clearly, I'm not too scary if he's still with me.

"Mr. Hoffman, you were at the school Friday?"

"Y-Yes," the man says before clearing his throat. "Every year we bring the seniors over. They do an activity with the kids. This year they were making little posters for Mother's Day with flowers and stuff. Is there... did I do something wrong?"

He's sweating a little as he grabs the bottle of water and takes a sip. I can tell it's to give his hand something to do because the moment I shift in my chair, he goes for another.

Through my years working homicide, I've learned a lot about human nature, especially how people give themselves away when they have a guilty conscience. It's the ones who don't that are trickier to deal with. Some killers could look you dead in the eyes and try to convince you that they never touched the very person they killed and make it seem believable. They're the ones to watch out for. The ones who do it to feel something or because they enjoy it.

This man is not like that. If he killed her, there was emotion involved. But the question is... if he killed her before the janitor left... how did he escape the building unnoticed? The windows only open partway; none of them open far enough for a grown man to slip through. The other doors in the building can only be locked with a key and all were locked Monday morning.

"How did you know Ellen Keefe?" I ask.

"I... I mean... I've talked to her some... seen her here and there at the elementary school, but that's it," he says.

“Would you consider yourselves friends?”

He’s fiddling again, and his eyes won’t catch mine. “No.”

“What was that?” I ask loud enough that he looks up at me.

“I... I said no.”

“Did you see her Friday?”

“No.”

“Another teacher said they saw you two talking to each other,” I say.

Hoffman dodges my eyes, almost like he’s feeling guilty. “I mean... I might have said hi or something, but that was it. I didn’t kill her! Why do you think I killed her? You’re... pinpointing me when I did nothing. I didn’t do anything... I just... fuck,” he says as he starts picking at the label on his water, eyes watering. He looks quite distraught for her being a woman he doesn’t know. This is beyond the level of fear at being here.

“Then what did you do to her?” I ask.

There’s the smallest hitch in his movements that he tries to cover up. “I didn’t... do anything to her.”

“But you knew her?”

“I... yeah, I mean we talked some.”

“Did you talk about how you were meeting up on Friday?” I ask.

He freezes. “What? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Well... that was you she was meeting with, right?”

“I’m married...” he says and shows me his hand like I hadn’t already seen the wedding ring.

“I noticed,” I say. “Doesn’t seem to have stopped you.”

“I’m not...” He glances down, guilt eating at his expression.

“Why weren’t you concerned when she didn’t show up Friday for your meeting?”

“I didn’t... it wasn’t... it wasn’t me!”

“I’m sure you don’t mind if we check your phone record then, right?” I ask.

Hoffman shakes his head as he pats his pocket, looking for his phone. “Sure, check it, I have nothing to hide.”

“You know we can see everything, right? Even the stuff that was deleted?”

He’s close to breaking. I can feel it. Another push should do it but as I open my mouth, he sets his head on the table and wraps his arms around his head as he lets out a sob.

“I didn’t kill Ellen, okay? I love her. I really do love her. My wife and I... my wife cheated on me a year ago, and I’ve just... I felt like shit. Thought I’d get back at her with just one night... and then one night turned to two, and then I was going to leave my wife, I really was but then she dropped it on me that she was pregnant. And I thought I could make it work for the baby. Ellen and I just... we still saw each other. But I would never have killed her,” he insists, voice thick with tears.

“Were you afraid your wife was going to find out?” I ask.

“I... I don’t even know if I care if she found out. I wanted to leave her, but the thought of not being there in my baby’s life... it’s hard, you know? Knowing I wouldn’t see her every day.”

“But you weren’t concerned when Ellen didn’t show up?”

“I was concerned. I just... thought she’d had enough. She’d been upset with me lately. Backed out on me more than one time. I thought she was finally sick of me. I didn’t text her because I assumed she’d need some space... I don’t know.”

I go through more questions with him, but I feel like this is all there was to their relationship. Obviously, I could be wrong, but my gut is telling me he’s not the killer.

The ghost claims to have seen Hoffman kill Ellen. Was he mistaken? Did he lie?

After I finish up, I step out into the hallway where Hiro meets up with me.

“Well...” Hiro starts. He seems to be looking to me for my thoughts, but I’m not sure what to give him yet.

I honestly don’t know what to say. Hiro’s ghosts have, generally, always helped. But this time... this time, I can’t help but wonder who is lying to me. Of course I want to believe the ghost, but some things don’t add up, like how Hoffman would have had to have returned and left the building at some point. If she was already set to meet him that evening, why risk getting caught to kill her earlier *in* the school? I suppose they could have had a heated fight that caused it. That would mean he would have needed to come back to the school, but with him working in the district, he’d have known someone would have recognized him if he was caught.

And he really does seem to care about his daughter. Some people like risk, but would a man who remains in a loveless marriage in order to be close to his daughter?

“I don’t want to say that the ghost was wrong but...” Hiro trails off as his dark eyes meet mine, watching me closely. Aside from being handsome, Hiro’s the nicest person I know, and I still consider myself lucky that he puts up with me. I’m even luckier that he’s chosen to help me with all of this. That he put up with me not believing him at first and stuck with me.

“I guess we need more proof,” I say, planning on heading back to the school.

Hiro doesn’t move; he remains leaning against the wall instead, appearing to be lost in thought.

“In these cases, people tend to lie for two reasons. I’m definitely not an expert on this stuff or anything, but it seems like they lie to protect themselves, and they lie to protect someone else,” Hiro says.

“Right.”

“Reggie really wants me to tell you that there’s a third kind of lie which is when he’s ‘lying in your bed with only his panties on.’”

I narrow my eyes at the air around Hiro. I don’t know where Reggie is, since I can’t see him, but he still deserves a good glaring. “Can you imagine being so unhelpful?” I ask.

Hiro gives me a grin and I can’t help but wonder why he falls into listening to Reggie. “He said he was quite helpful when he told me to tug your...” He mimes cupping something that I’m guessing is supposed to be my balls. Then he gives me a shrug.

“Tell Reggie he’s fired,” I say. “I’m heading back to the school.”

Hiro’s grin widens but I can’t tell if it’s from what I said or Reggie’s reply to what I said. Hiro’s always diligent about telling me what they say, but I’m sure some things slip by. Honestly, it makes me feel good he does try his hardest to keep me up on what’s going on. Especially when it comes to Reggie. Even if I can’t see him, there’s some sense of relief knowing he’s still here... but isn’t that selfish? Shouldn’t I want him to move on?

“I’ll go to the school with you,” Hiro says, interrupting my straying thoughts. “I’m kind of afraid I fucked this up.”

“You didn’t fuck it up,” I assure him.

“Why would he lie to me?” Hiro asks.

“I know you’re used to ghosts actually helping, but in this line of work you often run into people who lie to you. Generally, they lie to gain something. My guess is that this Ryan guy knows the person who killed Ellen Keefe personally. I’ll have someone look into him. We know his name, and we know he has some correlation with the school.”

“Great, thank you,” Hiro says.

When we return to the school, Hiro wanders off, which honestly isn't my favorite thing. I'd prefer someone be with him because he seems drawn to trouble. He always assures me that he has at least one ghost pal with him, but that's clearly not what I mean. He rarely listens, though, because that's how Hiro rolls.

Even so, we find nothing new, leaving me to pursue the things we've already come across. Who knows if they'll get me anywhere, but they're what we have to work with.

CHAPTER THREE



HIRO

“Let’s watch some porn,” Reggie declares.

Natalie, who just walked into the room, looks thrilled by this idea. “Yessss.”

Natalie is a ghost I’ve known for a good chunk of my life. She’s pesky, but honestly she’s my best friend. Back when I felt like I had nothing, like I was a freak for having this ability, she was able to pull me out of that mindset and keep me moving forward because I knew she’d always be by my side. While I might have regretted her harassment a time or two, I’ve never regretted her.

“No,” I say.

“Come on, you’re home alone. Maddox isn’t due for like *hours*. Let us enjoy some sexy sex,” Reggie pleads. “The really delish kind.”

“Really?” I ask, not sure I love this idea.

Natalie sits down on my lap and wraps her arms around me before kissing my cheek. “You’re the best, you know that?”

“So much the best,” Reggie says as he comes over to my other side.

“I just want to read my book,” I say in case they didn’t notice how pleasant of a time I was having reading in *silence*.

“If you turn it on, we’ll leave you alone,” Natalie promises.

“If you don’t...” Reggie starts as he gets ridiculously close to my ear, “we will haunt you forever.”

I sigh as I reach for my computer since that was more than enough for me. Although... honestly, aren’t they going to haunt me anyway?

“It’s hard for us to see the computer,” Natalie whines.

“Yeah, Natalie hogs it with her ginormous head,” Reggie says. “Can’t you project it onto the TV?”

“Seriously?” I ask, not sure I want to be showing some kind of kinky sexy time on the TV while I’m trying to read. Isn’t it awkward enough watching it alone? Yet they’d prefer to make a movie night of it?

“Seriously,” Reggie says before giving me a smile like he thinks he can smile away all my worries. It’s actually quite effective, which is irritating, but I decide he can have it. So as I pull up the

laptop and hook it up to the TV, the two breathe down my back like creepers.

“Why are you breathing so heavily? Do you even *need* to breathe?” I ask Reggie.

“We watched man on man last week. I want some woman on woman on man on man on woman on couch,” Natalie says.

“What?” I ask, wondering how this turned from porn to a multi-person orgy. “Is the couch just what they’re on or is the couch a participant?”

“A girl wants what a girl wants,” Natalie says before jabbing at her choice. I click it and the big sixty-five-inch TV is immediately all tits and dicks.

“They’re so perky!” Reggie exclaims as I lift up my book so I cannot be part of this *at all*.

“Mine are perkier,” Natalie declares. “Wanna see?”

“What the fuck is this?” Keaton asks as he steps into the room. “Oh dear god.”

“Just pretend you’re reading,” I say as the “Ohhh yeah... fuck me, you dirty Daddy” goes on in the background.

I turn and lock eyes with Keaton. There’s a long moment where we share something. I’m not sure if it’s pity or maybe it’s shame... but it’s something.

“You enable them,” he decides.

“I don’t! They looked sad and it’s just some porn,” I say. “I’m going to go read in the other room.”

“No!” Reggie protests as he sits on my lap. “If you leave who will switch it to the next one? I get to pick next.”

I lift my book up again, hoping that I can immerse myself in the medieval world of— “Smack me with your titties!” someone on screen yells.

“Are her titties long enough to smack someone with?” Reggie asks in wonder.

“They’re gonna try,” Natalie says as I peek over the book to see how this goes down.

“Ooh, are you Snow White because I want your mouth around my big, juicy apple,” one says just as the door opens behind me.

I freeze, having planned on Maddox never witnessing any of this. The issue is that not only does Maddox get to witness the full-on “Are you ready for a thick, hot sausage?” but Deputy Chief Parker also gets an eyeful of it all.

Maddox, who’s startled by the happenings on TV, stops so abruptly that Parker slams into him, sending him stumbling back with admirable force.

“It’s not mine!” I yell, which makes sense to me when there are three ghosts hovering around me but makes less sense to those who *can’t see ghosts*. Which is every other living person in this room.

I toss my book and grab for the remote, hitting the volume button in the process as a woman squeals out an “*Oh. My. God, Kenny. Your balls are ballicious! I wanna suck on one like a lolly.*” The remote skitters onto the ground and I watch as Reggie quickly stoops down, planning on turning the TV off for me like the life saver he is.

Until I see the wicked grin on his face as the volume goes up and up and up. How dare he use my power that allows ghosts to touch things against me?

“You asshole,” I growl as Natalie giggles wildly while spanking noises blast through the surround sound.

“Dear god,” Keaton whispers as he shakes his head like I’ve disappointed him.

Now there are soooo many moans. TOO many moans.

“*Your man meat makes me so moist! I’m just gush—*”

I hit the TV off, slam the laptop closed and clear my throat. “It was... for... the ghosts,” I whisper.

Maddox and Parker are just staring at me as I consider the possibility of dying from embarrassment. Is that a thing? I think that's a thing. Has to be one. I will haunt this world for eternity in my horrified ghost form.

"I... am leaving... for good," I announce. "Forever, actually. Maddox, keep your ghosts. I don't want them. I'm going to wear a blindfold for the rest of my life so I never see a ghost ever again. Ear plugs. To never hear them again. I will remain in a box. That is where I will live."

"Well... that was thrilling," Maddox says as I glare at him.

They have to believe me, right? "I swear to god that was for Reggie and Natalie. I don't even like..." I wave to my chest.

"Breasts," Parker says. "They're called breasts."

"Right! I don't even know what they're called," I say. I really don't know if I'm saving myself or just digging the hole deeper.

"So the paper?" Parker asks as Maddox smirks.

"You sure you don't want to hang around? Watch some TV with us?" he asks.

Parker takes one look at me before going, "Positive."

I slowly slip away as Maddox heads off to get his paper, a big grin of pure evilness on his face.

That's, of course, the moment Parker sees the painting I have on the wall that the mayor had given me after I'd helped his dead wife move on. The one I call the orgy painting.

"I see Hiro has influenced your... décor choices," she says as she examines it before glancing at me.

"Yeah, it was weirdly the only thing he insisted on hanging up," Maddox says as he returns and hands the paper to Parker. "Sometimes I come out here in the middle of the night and just find him staring at it."

"I do not! Oh my god. It was from the mayor and... it was funny. It's funny... someone laugh... please?" I beg.

Natalie pats my back. "It's okay, Hiro, at least she didn't see the way the lady was deep throating. I bet she could have been a sword swallower in a past life," she says, like this is enough to make me feel better.

"You two are not allowed to ever look at me again," I whisper, but of course Parker hears it and stares at me. I give her a hearty wave like a creep before skuttling upstairs to the bedroom.

I crawl under the blankets and decide to just nap this life away. When I wake up, I will have magically forgotten—

"Wow, that was quite the scene to walk in on," Maddox announces.

"I'm currently unavailable right now and napping," I say from beneath the blankets.

"I just walk in and there are boobs and dicks and there you are, peeping over your book at it all."

"I was *curious*," I whisper.

I feel the bed dip as Maddox lies down on it. He tugs the cover back just enough to grin at me.

"Yeah? Did you like what you saw?" he asks.

"Stop grinning at me!" I say as I try to cover his face up with my hand.

He grabs me around the waist and pulls me on top of him, squeezing me there. "I'm simply allowing my face to look at you."

"Smirking. You're *smirking* at me. I can never speak to Parker again. I can never show my face again. I can never *exist* again," I declare.

Maddox squeezes me tighter. "Did I tell you about the time Reggie and I were having friends over to play a game and he changed my screen saver to this extremely naked woman with these huge

breasts and the group laughed and laughed? Or another time when we were doing a group project and he put a man in a thong as the cover image? I was supposed to double-check it before I turned it in, and you know what I didn't do? Double-check it."

I grin at him. "Did you double-check all your work after that?"

"No, I quadruple-checked it," he says. "I checked it so much. Maybe he taught me a valuable lesson to check the hell out of everything."

"Did you get all flustered?"

"The teacher called us both in and asked us to open our slide. I opened it up and Reggie screamed, he was laughing so hard. I'm talking bent over, smacking his leg, *crying*. I just stood there completely still, like I thought the teacher wouldn't notice me if I ceased all movement."

"I bet you two were a handful to have in class together."

"Reggie was, not me. I was perfect."

"Ah, right. Perfect," I say with plenty of sarcasm. I lean over and kiss his lips. "Soooo perfect."

Bandit, Maddox's orange tabby, jumps up onto the bed to see what we're doing. He decides that rubbing against my face is in order and to do that, he must step on Maddox's face. "He's so cute."

"He's a bad cat!" Maddox says as he pushes him off. "I'm not just a pile of trash for you to parade across."

"Well, that's weird. Why not?" I tease. "You even kind of... smell like it." In reality, he smells ridiculously good, but I can only give him so much praise before he gets too big of a head, especially when he brutally made fun of the minor porn incident.

Bandit leaps onto me and starts kneading me, which consists of ripping the skin from my flesh.

"Aw, look how cute!" Maddox says, clearly mocking me.

"I know... kitty massage from hell. I love it so much. It's my favorite." I try my best not to flinch during any part of that.

"I bet you do," he says as he pushes Bandit off. Bandit decides that he's had enough of this and goes to attacking Maddox's sleeve button. I lie against Maddox and watch him play with the cat for a long moment, glad he finally forgot about the hellshow from earlier.

"Ew," Reggie announces. "You two are so gross cuddling without me."

"Go away," I say but Reggie flops down onto the bed, grabbing both of us, even though Maddox can't feel him without me using a lot of concentration to allow him to do so.

"Reggie's spooning us," I say.

"No!" Natalie says as she leaps on. "Reggie *and* Natalie are spooning you."

"And there's another creeper."

Reggie holds his hand out to the doorway. "Keaton! Keaton, join us! Keaton!"

Keaton continues to pretend like he doesn't exist.

I close my eyes, wondering why being spooned from all directions is oddly pleasant. Maybe because even if they all try their hardest to make my life difficult, they still make my life worth living.

CHAPTER FOUR



HIRO

“Do you want to color with me?”

I’d been walking down the hallway of the elementary with Maddox when I heard the voice that made me stop in my tracks. The school is closed again today, giving us free rein of the place.

Maddox turns to me. “What is it?”

“Go ahead, I’ll catch up.”

He shakes his head, turning into overly protective Maddox like he thinks some ghost is going to shove me off a cliff, or I’m going to get abducted, or maybe have to be shoved through a window where I will then be abducted again. “No, I’m going with you,” he orders, as if he can read my mind.

I hesitate before turning to the little girl. “Do you mind if my friend joins us?”

She debates this for a long time while scrutinizing Maddox. With a scrunch of her nose, she says, “He looks like a gangster.”

I have to bite my lip to keep from grinning about that because I’m not quite sure where she came up with it, but I’d love to use it against him. “Well... he’s not. He just... has the grumpy look perfected,” I say. “Maddox, look nicer.”

Maddox tries to smile, which turns comically bad, making the little girl laugh.

“He’s funny.”

“He is, isn’t he?” I ask.

When Maddox raises an eyebrow, I tell him what she said and in return he smiles for real while shaking his head.

“He can come.” She takes my hand before pulling me into a classroom and sitting down. The tables are made for kids, so Maddox and I have to squeeze into the tiny chairs while she beams at us, clearly excited to have someone to play with. I don’t blame her—who knows how long she’s been here, and she doesn’t seem to have a good grasp on the fact that she’s a ghost.

“Where’s your teacher?” I ask as she picks out a crayon. I know it’s not physical, but it’s manifested from her desire to hold one, telling me she’s an older ghost who can manipulate her own reality by doing things like that.

She shrugs. “I haven’t seen her. Let’s draw our favorite... ice cream!”

“Ooh, I do love ice cream. What kind of ice cream are you going to draw, Maddox?”

“A giant one,” he decides as he grabs a crayon.

“But what flavor?” she asks him.

“Yeah, what flavor, Maddox?”

He scrutinizes the paper for a moment. “Um... every flavor.”

“That’ll take you forever,” she states but seems to approve of it anyway.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Tracy.”

“Do you know your last name?”

“Of course.”

“And?”

“Nelson.”

“Tracy, did you see anyone go into the classroom at the end of the hall on Friday evening? It would have been a few days ago. Maybe you heard a scream or someone fighting?” I ask.

She stops drawing and looks up at me. “No.”

“Are you sure?” I ask because her expression tells me she’s not.

Tracy sits still for a very long time, her eyes flicking between me and Maddox. “I just asked her to play with me. That’s it!”

“She did play with you,” I say.

“I promise I didn’t tell him that I wanted to play with you... I didn’t mean to...” she says, her small hand clenching tightly onto the crayon.

“No, it’s okay,” I say as I reach out and set my hand on hers. “I don’t mind playing with you.”

“Because you’re dead?” she asks, surprising me. Maybe she does understand the situation more than I thought.

“No, I’m not dead. I can just... I have special eyes, okay? Special eyes that let me see you.”

“So... I didn’t kill you too?” she asks.

I’m not sure how to take that and really, *really* wish Maddox was able to listen in on this. The only way I can get him to know what she’s saying without drawing her attention to me is to reword her questions. “Of course you didn’t kill me. Did you... did you think you killed the nice teacher?”

“I just said I wanted someone to play with,” she says. “I didn’t mean for her... I didn’t... I just wanna go home. I don’t know how to go home.”

She drops the crayon and starts to cry as she stands up. I know I can’t let her leave, not when I have the possibility of learning something, so I take her hand as I get up and kneel beside her.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. Do you think you could tell me what happened, and I will try to help you find your way home?”

Tracy nods as she rubs at her eyes. “You will?”

“Of course. Okay... so if you watch a video of the people in this place, do you think you could point out who it was who hurt the teacher?” I ask.

She nods again. “And then I can go home?”

“Then we’ll do what we can to take you home. Do you know what the date is?”

Tracy shakes her head before pointing at the board where the date had been written. She must understand that time is changing but is still stuck in the mentality of a child. A scared, confused, and alone child forever stuck here, unsure of where to go.

“The last time you were... alive... do you remember the date?”

She shakes her head again, so I just give her a warm smile. “Okay. Maddox is going to get the

video all set up for us. Maybe he could bring it in here, so we don't even have to leave, alright?" I say, afraid I'd spook her by taking her out of the quiet classroom.

"I can do that," Maddox says as he quietly gets up and leaves the room.

"Sooooo what kind of ice cream do I make? Maybe chocolate?" I ask.

Tracy stares down at the paper for a long moment before smiling. "Yeah."

I just talk about random shit while Maddox is gone. I talk about Stella, who she remembers from my amazing drawing, about ice cream, and we even get into a discussion on what winged horses with horns are called.

Finally, Maddox returns and sets the laptop on the desk.

"Ready?" I ask.

She gives a nod. "Yeah."

And as it starts to play, she watches it intently. I can tell when she sees the man during the rush of seniors moving into the building, but she doesn't say anything. Her body tenses and she gets misty-eyed.

"Which one is he?" I ask, wondering if she's going to point to the teacher, like the other ghost had.

She starts shaking her head and grabs my hand. "No! He's a bad man, and if you talk to him, he'll hurt you like he did Miss Ellen, and I don't want you to die too."

"It's our job to keep him from hurting anyone else," I assure her. "We'll be fine, I promise."

Tracy shakes her head wildly. "No! You can't! He's wrong."

"This is what Maddox and I do. We find these people so they can never hurt anyone again," I say, playing the recording back to when she started to have the reaction. "Is it this man here?" I point to Mr. Hoffman, the teacher we took in for questioning, but she shakes her head.

"No, not him," she says. "He was nice."

I start moving my finger across the screen, watching her closely until the moment she gives it away with her body language. I stop on a man who is blending in with the group of teenagers. He doesn't stand out too much from them, which had made me think he was a student, but now that I look closely, I see that he does appear older.

"Him?" I ask.

"I don't want him to kill you too," Tracy says and just like that, she disappears.

"She's gone," I say to Maddox. "But I think it's this guy here."

Maddox leans in to get a good look. "Okay, let me see what I can do."

"And can you find her family?" I ask.

"I already have Lexi on it," he assures me. "I sent her a text on the way to get this stuff."

"Thanks. I'm going to stay here in case Tracy comes back."

"Okay," he says. "Please be careful."

"I will."

It's a good twenty minutes that I'm alone before my phone rings. The number is one Lexi uses, so I answer it right away.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Hiro, Maddox told me to call you. So, I looked into this girl. It took a bit of digging because she's been dead for nearly forty years."

"Oh wow. So what did you find on her?"

"It sounds like it could have been a freak accident, but I'd have to do more digging to figure out exactly what happened. Maddox said you wanted to know where her living relatives are. It looks like her father passed away, but her mother is still alive. I believe I've figured out where she currently

lives. Do you want the address?"

"That would be amazing," I say.

"I'll text it to you."

After she hangs up, I see Tracy standing in the corner.

"You want to come with me?" I ask as I hold my hand out.

She nods uncertainly but comes up and takes my hand.

"I don't know what has kept you here all these years if it was just an accident, but let's see if I can help."

I lead her out into the hallway where I find Maddox speaking on the phone. The moment he's off, he turns to me to see what I want.

"I'm going to take Tracy to see her mom. You okay with me leaving? The address looks to be about fifteen minutes away."

"I'll go with you," he says.

"No, you have so much going on here; I can't ask you to come with me," I say.

"Honestly, I have the time. The techs will need to go through things and see if they can find a match. We already have people here who've told me none of them know who he is and that he's not a teacher. He never signed in and apparently entered the building illegally, but we're waiting to see what the techs come back with. They'll check local cameras too to see if we can identify a car or license plate that the cameras here couldn't pick up, so I can slip out for an hour. Alright?"

"Only if you're sure."

"Positive," he says.

We head out to the car together where I put Tracy in the back seat. Honestly, I have no idea what I'm doing or if what I'm doing is right. I nervously glance at Maddox who just gives me a supportive smile, but thankfully, Natalie shows up before the awkwardness gets too heavy.

"Oh. You're so cute!" she says. "Did you guys steal this cutie pie?"

Tracy shakes her head, like she thought Natalie was serious. "They're helping me."

"Aww, they're weird like that. All nice and stuff," Natalie says, which makes Tracy giggle.

I lean into Maddox. "What do I do? Do I tell her mom? Just leave Tracy there?"

Maddox is quiet for a moment before shrugging. "I have no idea."

"Wow, so helpful."

He smiles at me. "I guess... for me it made me happier to know about Reggie. It's been many years for her mom, so maybe it'll give them both some peace."

"Yeah... maybe." Or maybe it'll throw her mom back into depression over the loss of her child. Hell... I hate making decisions like this.

Maddox sets a gentle hand on mine and squeezes it softly. "What I've learned working this job is that no matter what you do, you can't always do everything one hundred percent right all the time. Sometimes you make mistakes, and sometimes you do the very thing that person needed to keep them going. It's not always easy to tell, but it is what it is. Trust me. I might not have ever dealt with something like this, but I've dealt with similar things. It's not always easy, so sometimes, you just have to go with what your gut is telling you."

"Okay," I say, feeling nervous.

He pulls into the driveway of a small house with a front area covered in blooming flowers.

"Are we here?" Tracy asks.

"Tracy, I need you to understand that your mom's going to be a lot older than the last time you saw her, okay?"

“You don’t think I’ll recognize her?” she asks.

Tracy seems uncertain about this but gives me a nod, though I’m not quite sure how she’ll react to this. I’ve rarely dealt with someone this young and don’t want to regret the decision I make. I get out of the car, glad Maddox and Natalie are with me. I take Tracy’s left hand and Natalie takes her right as we walk up to the door.

I ring the doorbell and wait, really hoping the lady is home. I can hear the doorbell echoing through the house but hear no other noise telling me whether someone is coming or not.

“Is she not here?” Tracy asks, gripping my hand tightly.

“I’m not sure,” I admit before knocking. Maddox wanders off the porch before I see him wave at someone.

“Good afternoon, my name’s Maddox, we were hoping to talk to you for a minute. Are you Wendy?”

“I am,” an older woman says as she comes around the corner peeling her gardening gloves off. “Do you... need something?”

Tracy seems uncertain as she stands there, and I question if it’s too much for her to comprehend.

Maddox, thank god, keeps going. “Actually, I’m a detective who is currently working a case at Brighton Elementary School. I believe this is the school your daughter went to?”

Her face falls a little and I already feel guilty. “She did.”

Maddox looks to me and I realize I need to step up.

“Um... I’m Hiro... I work as a consultant for homicide... and I have... a... you know...” She clearly doesn’t know. I just need to get it out there, take her judgment and move on. “So I was born with the ability to see and talk to the dead.”

Now she looks skeptical as hell. Almost a little peeved, like we’re here to con her or something.

“And while at the school, I stumbled across Tracy, and she wanted... to see you,” I say.

I’m not sure whether I’d consider her expression peeved or highly irritated at this point. “This isn’t funny,” she says.

“It’s not a joke. Tracy, can you tell me something only your mom would know?” I ask.

Tracy nervously looks between me and her mom. “Umm... I... um...”

“What about your favorite book that she’d read to you?”

“The one with the horse who was the only horse born with wings!” she says, which I repeat to the woman. She’s watching me warily now but clearly not caving.

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Umm... I don’t know... maybe you could ask me something, and I’ll tell you what Tracy says.”

Wendy seems doubtful and repeats, “This isn’t funny.”

“Please,” I say.

“What was her favorite toy?” she asks.

“Mr. Hopsy,” Tracy says, so I repeat it.

Wendy’s staring at me uncertainly now. “Favorite food.”

“The cupcakes with the blue sprinkles!” she says, which I tell Wendy.

“Because the red ones didn’t taste as good,” Wendy whispers. “She’s really here?”

“She was at the school... and I think she was afraid to move on without you,” I say. “If her passing was truly an accident, then she should have moved on but sometimes kids and people get fixated on something. I’m hoping seeing you will help her move on.”

“Where is she?” she whispers.

I feel uncertain as I walk up to her, but the way the little girl is clinging to me makes me feel like I

can do this. Like this will all be okay.

As I reach out for Wendy, she watches me nervously before holding her hand out to me. When I take it, I draw it over to Tracy and close my eyes and try my hardest to envision Tracy as being solid.

Honestly, I don't know what the hell I'm doing, and I've only ever been able to do it with Maddox and Reggie. For me, helping Reggie was easier. There's something about him that allows him to connect better to my energy and my ability. I also know Reggie and Maddox quite well, which I would have to assume helped. While this feels much different, Tracy's ghost is older and actually more solid. So can I do it with hers?

Wendy seems uncertain, and honestly, I am too as I push Wendy's hand toward her daughter, knowing that if I'm wrong, her hand will go right through Tracy's. A headache almost immediately begins to pound in my head from trying so hard, but I press on. The issue with it is that I haven't quite pinpointed *how* to do it yet. I don't even know what gives me the ability to let me do any of this, so figuring out how to harness it isn't quite something I've perfected yet.

Doesn't mean that I stop trying. When I hear a gasp, I open my eyes and watch as Wendy's hand is stopped by Tracy's.

"Oh my..." Wendy whispers as she grabs for Tracy who she can no longer feel. There's only so much I can do and the pounding in my head tells me that I can't keep it up. "I need to feel her again. Please?" She seems so desperate, but I can't give her what she wants no matter how much I wish I could.

I shake my head which just aggravates my screaming headache. "I can't. It takes a lot out of me to do that."

"Can you talk to her? Tell her I love her and miss her every day?" she asks.

"She can hear you," I assure her. "You can talk right to her."

"I miss her too! So much!" Tracy says as I repeat it. "I want to hug her."

"I'm sorry, I can't make it so she can feel you any longer than I did."

Nausea is already starting to move through me, but I try my best to ignore it as I help the two talk to each other. It doesn't take long before I get the familiar sense that Tracy is preparing to move on. Being lost and alone in the school must have been what was keeping her here or maybe there was some guilt linked between her and her mother, something there that seeing each other again fixed.

I explain to Wendy what's happening, but I know she's not ready. They never are. I wasn't ready for Sean to move on. I wanted to fight against it, but now that I've had some time, I feel at peace. It always feels like you're losing something, and maybe it's selfish of me to put Wendy through that again, but I know that she would go through it all again and again to help her daughter. And I'm afraid without this, Tracy still would have continued to wander the halls of that school.

"Your daddy's up there," Wendy says. "He's waiting for you. He's going to be so happy to see his little girl."

Tracy clings tighter to me, wanting something to hold on to when she can't hold on to her own mother. "I miss him."

"I do too, sweetie. But you're not alone. You'll never be alone again," Wendy says, and just like that, Tracy's gone.

It takes me a moment to get up the courage to tell her Tracy's moved on. She nods as she wipes away tears. "They're happy tears," she assures me.

"I'm sorry. I... never know what's right," I admit.

"Trust me, it was the right thing," she says a moment before a car pulls into the driveway and an older man gets out.

“Everything alright?” he asks as he rushes over, like he’s concerned we’re harassing Wendy.

“Very much,” Wendy says, wiping at the tears that don’t stop coming. She reaches out and grabs onto me, squeezing me tightly. “Thank you. Thank you.”

“Of course. We’ve got to get going,” I say as my head threatens to cave in on itself. Honestly, I just want to get to the car, but she has to thank me again and again before finally allowing me to leave. By then, Maddox has to set a calming hand on my back and direct me over to the door of the car. The moment I’m inside I put pressure on my head, hoping to relieve the pain that’s becoming too much.

“You alright?” Natalie asks.

“Dandy,” I mutter.

Maddox sits down and buckles in. “Can I get you something?”

“No, I shouldn’t have done that. Well... I mean, I don’t regret letting them touch. I just... my head feels like it’s going to explode and nausea is just... coming for me.”

“Let’s get you home,” Maddox says as he starts the car.

“My head has been stuffed into a grater and ground up and ripped apart and then smashed, and yeah... that’s how my head currently feels.”

“I’m sorry you’re hurting so much,” he says as he reaches over and rubs my shoulder.

“Uh-huh... and if I throw up in your car?” I ask.

Maddox gives me a sideways glance. “How about you stick your head out the window?” he suggests. “I could even pull over; you just give me the magic word.”

“Then if your head gets whacked off by a mailbox you won’t have a headache anymore either!” Natalie announces, like this is the best thing she’s ever thought up.

“You’re an asshole,” I say.

“Me?” Maddox asks in surprise.

“No, Natalie.”

She pops her head into the front seat. “Hold on, he told you to stick your head out the window, yet I’m the asshole for telling you what the consequences of that would be?”

“Yeah, but he said it while looking handsome. You did not,” I inform her.

Natalie gasps as she does a hair flick. “I am *very* handsome, thank you very much. I will never forgive you for that,” she decides as I melt into the window.

That is until it starts going down with my head against it, making my face *squeeee* down it. “In case you... throw up,” Maddox says as the wind whips the shit out of my face.

“Hell. You’re mean to me too. Everyone is mean to me,” I mutter, wind whipping in my face so I have to talk loudly to even be heard. “Take me to work. I can be helpful. I’m so helpful.”

“What’s two plus two?” Maddox asks.

“Twenty-two, obviously,” I say as I open my eyes long enough to give him a glare and roll the window up. When we get home, I try to open the door, but I don’t get far before Maddox is over and helps me out. “I’m fine. It’ll let up shortly. And I haven’t thrown up... yet.”

“Yet.”

He helps me onto the couch before throwing a blanket over me. I close my eyes and set a pillow on top of my head while he gets me something for the headache which I gratefully take.

“You can head back to work. I’ll be there in a few.”

“Are you sure?” he asks.

“Yes, you’ve already been gone far too long.”

He’s hesitant but seems to agree. “Okay. I’ll turn your favorite show on,” he says as Reggie announces his arrival.

“Aw, is he sick?” he asks in a very condescending voice. “Let Doctor Reggie fix you right up. We might need to do a rectal exam to make sure you’re A-okay!”

“Take Reggie with you,” I plead.

And that’s when I hear a very distinguishable “Oooh yeah, stuff me like a Thanksgiving turkey.”

I pull the pillow off my head and look at the laptop Maddox has set up for me with a bad porno running strong. “No.”

“I thought you liked this,” he says, trying to look all serious.

I’m trying not to grin. “I’m in pain and you’re abusing me.”

Maddox gives me a look of fake surprise. “What? But I thought I was being nice. This isn’t your favorite show?” he asks with a smirk.

“No. Now give me a kiss and stop torturing me,” I say.

He leans in and gives me a gentle kiss before running his fingers through my hair. “I hope your head feels better soon. If you need anything, let me know.”

“Thank you,” I say as he turns off the porno. I pull the pillow back over my head and close my eyes. Even Reggie and Natalie leave me alone. And Bandit decides that he’ll help with the pressure in my head by adding some weight to the pillow. It’s not too bad after all.

CHAPTER FIVE



HIRO

Seeing as there's nothing I can help Maddox with during this time, I head to the bookstore I opened using the money my parents had left me after their passing. It's small and has nothing on the chain stores in the area, but I do my best to keep the newest arrivals on the shelves.

Thankfully, my headache has gone down enough that it's now nothing more than a dull throb as I park. As I step inside, Barry, the guy who is supposed to just be a part-timer, is arranging a table.

"Hey, boss," he says with a smile. He's a big guy who has been a phenomenal help since he started working here after getting out of the military. He's around my age, I think a little older, with a serious attitude until you get to know him. Then he seems to loosen up and is more eager to talk and interact. Honestly, I'm not sure how I could have tackled this place on top of my consulting work without him. He's a hard worker and doesn't mind taking over whenever Maddox pulls me in for a job.

I feel quite lucky to have him here to help, especially on days like today.

"Hey. I got done a little early today if you wanted to head home. I know you've been doing a lot of extra hours for me lately," I say.

Barry wavers for a moment before shrugging. "You sure?"

"Positive."

"Alright, I think I'll do that. I have a paper to write for class, and I sure as hell don't want to write it," he says. "You want to write a paper for me? We'll do an exchange."

I raise an eyebrow. "Absolutely not. Unless you want to fail."

"I'm sure you would write something better than I ever could. You're smart. Hell, you're literally working as a consultant for homicide. Who can do that?"

Reggie takes that very moment to appear *and* interrupt. "It's just because he's pretty." Reggie proceeds to bat his eyelashes like he thinks that's how I walk around.

I ignore him. "I'm not sure how much help I am. I do alright," I say.

"You're going to be carrying the whole team before long with your massive, strong arms," Reggie says as he strokes one.

Thankfully, Barry can't hear the sass that's currently going on. "Modest as usual," he says as he

starts gathering his stuff after clocking out. "Have a good day."

"Thanks, you too," I say as I take over where he left off as I hear some *tink... tink tink* going on. I look over at the window where Spite, a ghost raven who's been following me around for some time now, stands on the windowsill, pecking away. I swear he does this stuff just for attention when he could easily fly through the wall.

"You know how to get in here," I say, refusing to give in.

Spite cocks his head, watching me closely before pecking away at the window. He creates a steady rhythm after a while, starting a game of "Who will cave first?" The issue is he knows how to be annoying enough to win *every*. Single. Time.

Sighing, I stop what I'm doing and head outside to where the raven stands at the doorway looking proud as a peacock, his black feathers glistening in the sun. He's merrily waiting for me at the front door where he hops a little out of excitement from seeing me before flying up to my shoulder. There, he fluffs his feathers, clearly pleased with himself.

When I return to the books I'd been trying to organize, Spite flies down on top of them and starts the evil task of trying to rip covers off. Thankfully, he cannot, or I'd have a lot of destroyed books by the time he's done with them. He can manage to lift the cover slightly if he's extremely close to me but that's as much damage as he can accomplish. Even so, he seems delighted every time he does. For some reason, his glee at this makes me grin, so I reach out and stroke his feathers.

That's the moment the door opens and Spite startles, surprising me. He's generally not jumpy and I'm not sure if I've ever seen him spooked before. Turning, I plan to welcome the customer before realizing that I can't even *see* them through all the ghosts surrounding them. It's like they're encasing the person as they walk into the room.

Chills immediately rush down my body, making me feel oddly nervous. Usually when ghosts are drawn to someone like this, it means that someone's going to die, instantly putting me on edge. It startles me so much that I'm left staring at them, struggling to find words. "Um... good afternoon," I say, quite delayed.

The ghosts are watching me for some reason, fixated on me to the point where I question if they already know I can see them. I don't recognize any of them, and I can't tell if they know I can see them or not.

"What is this? A ghost orgy?" Reggie asks. "But like *The Addams Family* orgy... wait... no, that sounds wrong. You get what I mean! Like with the grump but not the family part. Right? Get me? Anyone?"

And that's when the man steps forward. Because the ghosts are fixated on me, they didn't move with him, revealing the very last person I expected to see walking into my store.

The same man that Tracy indicated had killed the teacher.

He turns his head and gives me a huge smile. "Good afternoon. Such a nice store," he says.

Quickly schooling my expression, I realize that I have to act like I don't recognize him at all. He has absolutely no idea who I am or even that the police know about him. As long as I act normal, I can contact Maddox and get someone here to take him in and question him.

"Thank you," I say as the ghosts move after him, trailing behind him but still staring at me. Trying to look casual, I pick up a pile of books as I reach for my pocket to text Maddox, before realizing I'd forgotten my phone over at the counter.

"I just moved here so I'm still getting acquainted with everything," the man explains. "Was walking to get a coffee when I saw this place and knew I needed to stop by. I know where my new favorite place to shop is going to be."

“Yeah?” I ask while really thinking it shouldn’t be. I can think of many other places that sound much better for him to frequent. One including a cell and bathroom amenities conveniently close.

Carrying my stack of books, I move toward the counter but the guy gives me a wave.

“Can you help me real quick?”

“Definitely, just let me grab something and I’ll be right over.”

“It’ll just be a second,” he says as the ghosts stare at me. I glance back at Reggie who looks uncertain as hell.

Reggie sidesteps toward me. “What is this? Like a mini ghost cult or something? I’m thinking my orgy idea is out.”

I meet Reggie’s eyes and nod at my phone as the ghosts show far too much interest in me. A perfectly innocent explanation for it is that they could have realized I was interacting with Reggie, but it seems almost like they are fixated on me, which is making me nervous, and after the past few run-ins with ghosts who weren’t quite out there to help me, I’ve gotten wary of who to trust.

Thankfully, Reggie gets the hint and starts fiddling with my phone as the ghosts wrap around me, not yet pressing in close but still making me nervous. They weren’t surprised that I could see them, and they’re acting borderline hostile as they move closer.

“Excuse me?” the man asks, making me realize that the guy had just finished saying something while I was doing a godawful job of pretending everything was normal.

Setting the books down on a random shelf, I give him a smile. “I’m sorry, what was that?” I ask as I turn to pass through the ghosts to grab my phone, but just as I step forward, the tip of my shoe hits into the shoe of one of the ghosts. As I slowly push forward, I realize that I can *feel* their bodies.

No, no, no. I shouldn’t be able to feel them. Not when I’m telling myself to move through them. Why are they solid? Why...

“What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” the guy says, making me spin around only to find him in my space. The ghosts that’d come with him are enclosed around us in a tight circle.

I give him a warm smile and shake my head as I try not to think about the way he’d killed the teacher. “I’m sorry. I have these awful migraines and the lights are just killing me. I took something for it and just can’t stop it.”

“That sounds dreadful. My mother suffered from those. Sometimes she’d have to turn off the lights and shut the door. Want me to do that?” he asks as he turns from me and walks over to the light switch, which he hits off.

“No, I don’t,” I say as I watch him slide the lock on the door into place.

“There we go. Nice and quiet for you,” he says.

“Please turn the light back on,” I say, voice showing that I’m not fucking with him.

My stomach tightens as I back up only to hit the ghosts behind me. They’re keeping me locked in, using the ability to remain solid to aid them, and even when I grab onto one, willing it to no longer be solid, I can’t get through.

I glance over at Reggie who nods at me, telling me he managed to call Maddox using my phone. It’ll only be a matter of time before Maddox will be here and he’ll get this man away from me. Everything will be just fine then.

“Hiro, honestly, don’t be afraid, I just want to talk,” he says. The moment he says my name, chills run through me. How does he know who I am? *Why* does he know who I am? “I simply want to play a game. Do you want to play a game with me?”

“I want you to leave,” I say, voice sharp. I’m not playing this game anymore, especially when it’s clear he knows more than I could have ever imagined. I want him out of the store, even if it makes it

harder for the police to find him.

“Well, that’s not a very nice way to treat your customer.”

I debate telling him the police are headed here, but it might make him react faster. Honestly, I have the dreadful feeling that he’s not the kind of guy to get spooked and run off. “I don’t think I have anything here that would interest you.”

“That can’t be true! What do you recommend?” he asks. “You seem very smart; I’m sure you’d be quite helpful in giving me exactly what I want.”

“I recommend you turn around and leave my fucking store,” I say. “Simple as that.”

He seems to think about it for a moment before grinning. “No, I don’t think that’s how it goes. Just a small, simple game, honestly. How about it?”

I’m unsure if it’s by chance or if they could feel something wrong, but I see Keaton and Natalie enter the store, already looking for me in concern. Hell, maybe I’m just drawn to trouble lately, so they arrive assuming I’ve already found it.

“Get the fuck back,” Keaton snaps as he shoves one of the ghosts that’s behind me. The ghost is so startled, he ends up moving, so I take the opportunity to slip through the opening and turn to run into the back room with the plan of rushing out the back door but when I reach it, I find it blockaded by more ghosts who appear prepared to do what they can to keep me inside.

“Hiro, I’m not going to hurt you,” the man says as he casually follows me into the room. I yank open a drawer, pulling a taser out that Maddox had put in there for me. I aim it right at the man as he looks amused.

He holds both hands up like he can’t even fathom why I’d react this way. “You’re going to tase me? I’ve done nothing yet. I haven’t even touched you. I’ve barely talked to you. You... don’t even know who I am.”

“Yet I’ve told you to leave the store and you’ve refused. Now leave,” I yell and the ghosts closest to me shudder and a few move back.

The man looks absolutely delighted. “Huh... so you can do more than see the dead... this got a whole lot more interesting.”

And that’s the moment I hear sirens. The man doesn’t even look upset that the police are breathing down his neck. No... he can only keep grinning, so pleased by it all as what he just said sinks in.

“You can see the dead,” I realize.

“I sure can,” he says. “Hiro, you and I are very much the same. You just don’t know it yet.”

“I got the door unlocked!” Reggie yells a moment before the police come rushing in, Maddox in the lead. Maddox looks prepared to tear the world apart to get to me, but he doesn’t have to do anything of the sort.

The man doesn’t even flinch. No... he just won’t stop grinning as he raises his hands higher and drops down to his knees.

“We’re the same, Hiro. How’s it feel to know that you’re finally not alone anymore? Feels good, doesn’t it? But we’re not done. I promise you, it has just begun.”

I’m breathing hard as I grip the taser tightly, refusing to move it off him as the ghosts filling the room disperse, just leaving my three and the man grinning on the ground. He won’t stop looking at me. He won’t stop watching me, even as Maddox pushes him down and yanks his hands back.

Only then do I lower the taser, my heart beating wildly in my chest. While Kylie could feel ghosts and help them possess bodies, this is different. This is very much like what I can do. But in the hands of a man like this... I feel extremely uneasy.

And what was he talking about when he kept mentioning playing a game?

What the hell have I gotten involved in?

CHAPTER SIX



MADDOX

Even though everything is okay, I just can't get my brain to agree to that. My entire body feels like adrenaline is coursing through every inch of me and I need to burn it off by making sure Hiro never faces danger again.

"I swear to god you are *drawn* to danger," I declare.

The look Hiro gives me tells me he might fuck me up if I don't retract that statement. We're currently standing in the storage room after Hiro explained what happened and how the man had cornered him.

He waves his arms around like he's so shocked by my statement that he can't quite find the words yet. "Excuse me? I went to *work*. Why would I *fathom* some... psychopath guy would come to *me*," Hiro exclaims. "He didn't even know that we'd figured out that he was involved yet. Why would I even *guess* he'd come here? So nope. Not on me."

The man in question has been led out to a police car, grinning the entire way, like he thinks this is all one big game. I waited until he was securely in a vehicle before leaving him since he made me feel uneasy, like if I didn't see him get taken away there was a possibility he'd escape or something.

I wrap Hiro up in my arms and squeeze him tight, feeling bad that I'd made him believe he was at fault for this. "I know. I'm just frustrated that it seems like danger is drawn to you. It likes you far too much."

"A bit too much for my liking too. He could see ghosts... interact with them, for all I know. I think he made them solid," Hiro says, looking uncertain.

"Did they hurt you?"

"No, they just wanted to keep me from running. I don't know. I'm just glad we caught him. He kept telling me he wanted to play a game but the way he said it was like it was this big joke... I don't know how to explain it."

I hate the idea of Hiro being put at risk like this. It makes me want to never involve him in another case again. But I also know he'd start to resent me if I kept him boxed up. It's so hard to know what's best; impossible, honestly. I can't force him out of mere selfishness to do something he doesn't want to, but I also want to keep him nice and safe, knowing that he wouldn't be in many of these situations

if it wasn't for me.

"You're not putting me in a box," Hiro says as he raises an eyebrow.

"Please don't tell me you've started reading minds," I mutter.

"And if I have?"

"Lord save us all," I say, which makes Hiro grin. "Now we need proof or a confession and we're done. He'll be locked away where he can't reach you."

Hiro looks uncertain again. "And if you don't get either? Will he be free then?"

"We'll get proof," I assure him. "I'll do everything it takes to make sure he deals with the crimes he committed."

"Okay. I know if you put your mind to it, you'll figure it out," he says with a smile.

Why is he so adorably sexy? And clearly has too much faith in me. But when he looks at me like that, it makes me want to move mountains for him. "Thanks for being so confident in me."

Hiro's expression is quite sweet as he says, "I always will be... until it comes to your ability to take care of me when I'm sick by torturing me with *porn*."

I can't help but grin at that. "I felt like that's what you needed to get better faster. I will do anything to help you heal faster."

"You felt wrong," he declares.

I can't help but enjoy the look he's giving me. "Maybe," I say. "I'm going to head to the office. Are you good finishing up here? You can just stay with me until we meet Patricia for dinner."

"I don't need to go with you; I'm fine here, I promise. You have him in custody, so what are the chances of two murderers running into me on the same day?"

I give him a look about that one since he clearly found it *funny*. "You shouldn't run into *one* on any day."

"What can I say? I have a gift."

"I'd take that gift back," I say.

That makes him grin as his eyes follow some of the officers just outside of the storage room door moving through the store. One of them bumps into a display, nearly sending it teetering over. "If I need you, I'll call you immediately, okay? I promise," he assures me.

I hate the idea of leaving him, but he's right, we have the man in custody and Hiro is capable of taking care of himself. Doesn't mean that I don't want to do my best to keep him safe, though. "Is Keaton here?"

"Yep. Reggie wants to know why you trust Keaton more than him."

"Does he actually have to ask?"

Hiro's grinning at something being said now. "Natalie said that she'll fuck up anyone who enters, and Reggie said that she could use her breasts to smother them like they did in that—" Hiro's eyes get wide, and I look over as Mick peeks in the doorway at us. He's currently frozen, like he's not sure if he should discreetly back away or just pretend like he heard nothing.

"What was that?" I ask, taunting Hiro just a little.

Hiro quickly shakes his head and starts straightening some things that don't look like they need fixing. "I didn't say anything. I actually don't think I've spoken in years, really. Nothing from me at all."

"Alright, don't get smothered by Natalie's breasts. I'll meet you for dinner. And for the love of god, be careful. Keep your phone glued to your hand and stop setting it down places!"

"I won't set it down anywhere," he says.

I see a roll of packaging tape on a table, so I grab it and hurry over to him. I smack his phone in

his hand and start winding the tape around both so he won't set it anywhere ever again. I don't care if he has to shower with the fucking thing, he's never setting it down again.

"Stop! I don't need it attached to me!"

"Just you wait until I find some superglue," I threaten.

"You're not supergluing my phone to my hand." Hiro then gets a delighted look on his face. "You should hear what Reggie just said," he whispers so Mick doesn't hear.

"No thank you. Now that phone better still be in your hand when I see you later. And don't listen to Reggie's advice."

"Uh-huh," he says as I turn away.

Mick gives me a look with a rather raised eyebrow. "I feel like... something was going on there that I missed. Oh! Is this about Hiro watching porn when Parker came in?"

Hiro lets out a noise that sounds rather pitiful but makes me grin hugely.

"It is!" I say. "News sure does travel."

"Well... I mean, are you surprised? Hiro literally showed Parker porn. Like I'm scared to show Parker actual reports that she *asks* for," Mick says.

"He's pretty brave. I don't think I'm that brave either," I say as I head toward the door with Mick.

"I didn't show Parker porn!" Hiro shouts after us. "It was on because of... someone else, and she just happened to walk in. I was innocently reading a book, and come on... I'm a decent man, Maddox. They all know I'm good, don't let their opinion of me change!"

"Oh, it's already changed," I assure him.

"It's okay! One time I walked in on my grandpa watching lesbian porn!" Mick says, trying to make Hiro feel better, I guess.

"Thanks, Mick," Hiro says.

The two of us leave Hiro, which I hate, but there are still officers hanging around, so he won't be alone for long before I'll see him again. And I guess Hiro's right. What's the possibility of two killers in one day? Then again, if we're talking about Hiro, it's not exactly impossible...

"So... he really can see ghosts?" Mick asks.

I glance over at him, not sure what to say about that. It's kind of Hiro's thing to talk about and share with those he wants to, but at the same time, it's not like it hasn't already gotten around the department in some fashion. I feel like most people try to pretend like it's not even a thing and others make up these wild ideas about it.

"He can," I say, deciding to simply leave it at that.

"It's just... hard to wrap your head around, you know?" he asks. "I... heard you mention Keaton... so Keaton's around?"

That question surprises me. "He... is."

"Huh..." Mick is quiet as he walks back to the cars.

"Did you need something else?" I ask.

Mick looks startled, like he forgot I was even there. "Huh? Uh, no, just... I don't even remember. Sorry."

"It's fine. See you at work," I say as I get into my car and head back for the department.

Once there, I check in with the others and see what else is going on. I'd love to be involved in talking to the man we'd just brought in, but with Hiro now connected to it, I'll no longer be allowed to talk to him unless there is a specific reason. Instead, I head over to listen in as Parker catches up to me.

"Does Hiro attract trouble?" she asks.

“Clearly, he does. He said the guy can see ghosts as well. He went in looking for Hiro, knew his name and what he could do,” I explain. “I’m starting to think the ghost that gave us the wrong information in the beginning was working with the man we arrested.”

“Heya!”

I turn in time to see Detective Nancy Avery hurrying our way. She just recently transferred over here from a different district to take Keaton’s position, and while she hasn’t been here long, she’s taken on quite a bit. She’s a bit overly bubbly, but Hiro said I’m just a grumpy old man who cringes in the face of happiness. Thankfully, she adopts a much more serious attitude when dealing with cases.

“How is Hiro? Is he okay?” she asks, wide-eyed. She barely hits five foot two so I have to look down at her, but so far, I’ve only seen her use it to her advantage.

“He’s fine. Wasn’t hurt at all. Probably just spooked, but he wouldn’t be reasoned with and wanted to stay at the shop while they were finishing up. He had a few things to straighten up as well,” I say.

“That’s good. He’s such a sweetheart. Poor thing getting treated like that,” Avery says as she pats my arm like she’s comforting me. I don’t need to be comforted by anyone other than Hiro, but I don’t know how to discreetly step away without looking rude.

Instead, I find myself nodding in an awkward fashion. “Yeah...”

“Oh, they’re ready for me! We’ll head in and see what we can get,” she says before giving me one more pat and hurrying off to catch up with another detective. They head toward the room together as Parker and I go into a separate room to watch from a monitor.

“She’s so... bubbly,” I say. “I can’t believe you hired someone with bubble. You’re normally disgusted by it.”

“I am. But she came highly recommended. She told me I looked ‘cute’ this morning,” Parker says as she looks down at her pantsuit that looks like the same boring gray pantsuit she wears just about every day. Then her face scrunches up like she’s disgusted that her attire might be classified as cute. Was she hoping we all thought it was ugly instead?

I don’t know why, but it makes me laugh. Maybe I’ve been hanging around Hiro too long or something. But then Parker starts laughing too as she must realize how ridiculous this all is.

Once the detectives enter the room where the man is waiting, we turn our attention to the monitor.

“I’m Detective Avery and this is Detective Peters,” she says to the man on the other side of the table. “And your name is?”

“You have my ID, you know my name,” he says, clearly not paying attention to her at all.

“Connor Ambrose, right?”

He smiles at her. “It is. So tell me about this consultant of yours.”

Avery gives him a stern look. “Why are you interested in him?”

“I was hoping he’d be here.”

“He won’t be.”

“That’s a shame,” he says, then shrugs. “I guess we’re done here then, aren’t we?”

“No, we’re not,” Avery says. “Did you kill Ellen Keefe?”

“I think I said we were done. Do you... maybe have a hearing disorder?”

“You were caught on camera going into the elementary school before Ellen Keefe was found dead. Can you tell me what you were doing in the school?”

“Funnily enough, I don’t want to tell you. I would like to talk to the consultant. Where is the detective he works with?” Ambrose asks.

“You’re talking to me right now,” Avery says sternly.

He starts laughing. “And I sure wish I wasn’t! You’re dreadfully hard of hearing. I’m going to go out on a limb and say that the detective and possibly even the consultant are listening in. Detective, if you want anything out of me, bring the consultant in.”

Folding my arms over my chest, I glare at the screen even though he can’t see me. “He’s not fucking talking to Hiro,” I say to Parker. “He’s just wanting to get into his head. Fuck him. He’ll talk eventually.”

Parker stares at the screen for a long moment before looking at me. “I don’t like this guy. There are some people that you know are desperate. They kill or do shit in the moment and the guilt eats at them later, but not this guy...”

“I know. We’re going to keep him away from Hiro,” I say, putting my foot down on that and not planning on changing my mind.

He targeted Hiro because he has a fascination for what he can do, but I don’t want to feed into that. And I sure as hell don’t want to put Hiro in danger.

CHAPTER SEVEN



HIRO

“How’d everything go?” I ask as I get into the car with Maddox.

He hasn’t had time to share what happened yet since he got home just in time for a quick shower before we rushed out to the car to meet Patricia and Nicolás at a steakhouse in town. After the police were done and I closed up shop for the night, I’d gone home to wait for Maddox to arrive.

“Not the best,” Maddox says as I buckle my seat belt.

“He’s not talking?” I ask. The man sure enjoyed talking when he was alone with me, but it makes sense that now that he’s been arrested, he’d think he could get out of shit by remaining silent.

Maddox hesitates and I can tell by the way his hands tighten on the steering wheel that he doesn’t love what he’s about to say. “No.”

“Maddox,” I say, giving him a warning tone. “Don’t hide shit from me.”

“I’m not... hiding it. I just...” He turns quiet as he continues driving like I might forget if he just remains silent.

“I love how you prove me right by saying nothing at all,” I say.

“I love how you’re too nosy,” he responds as he glances over at me just to give me a challenging look like he wants to see how well I fight against this.

Slowly, I shake my head, knowing quite well that I will not drop this. “Maddox, I’m not a fragile child who can’t handle it. Tell me.”

“The guy, Connor Ambrose, wants you there and insisted that he won’t talk unless it’s to you,” Keaton says from the back seat. I jump, not having even realized he’d appeared there. “Maddox is mad and refuses to involve you.”

“He wants to talk to me?” I ask Maddox.

“What? Who said that?” Maddox asks like he’s prepared to fuck up whoever spilled.

“Keaton did. Keaton, what else happened since Maddox won’t answer me?”

Maddox sighs loudly, like he wants to drown out anything Keaton might have to say. “I just knew that the moment you heard that he wants to talk to you, you’re going to run right over there. If we can get him to talk without involving you, it’d be best. We know he can use ghosts to manipulate you, whereas those of us who can’t see them probably won’t be affected, so I’d prefer to keep you out of

the situation.”

I think about that for a moment because he’s right, I would have run right over, but could this Ambrose get to me by using his ability over ghosts? I mean... Millie was able to hurt me, but I’ve learned so much since then. I’ve learned how to control my ability more, to keep them from touching me. Hell, I could even manipulate Millie enough at times to make her touch go straight through me. Yet I couldn’t walk through the ghosts at the bookstore when I was in Ambrose’s company.

“So... what did they agree to do with him?”

Maddox turns right into the parking lot of the restaurant and parks before looking over at me. “Well... for now, nothing. Avery will likely try to get him to talk as the evening progresses, and if he still doesn’t budge, she’ll try again tomorrow. Just because he wants to speak with you doesn’t mean he won’t cave before we give him the opportunity to. Let’s just ignore it for now. If he absolutely needs to speak with you, we can set up a video chat, sound good?”

“I suppose,” I say. “You think it’s because of my ability he wants to meet?”

“Probably,” Maddox says, not looking happy about any of it. “Let’s just... forget about it for now. No matter what, we’ll find enough evidence to lock him away, and we won’t ever have to deal with it again.”

“Right,” I say as I see Nicolás pull in next to us.

“My heart!” Reggie squeals from the back seat. When he arrived, I also don’t know. It’s odd for him to arrive anywhere without theatrics and loud noises involved. Instead of grabbing *his* heart, he smacks Keaton’s. “That’s Nicolás,” Reggie whispers into Keaton’s ear.

“I’m well aware who Nicolás is,” Keaton says.

“He once man-meat sandwiched me and Hiro *and* Maddox. It was... extremely erotic,” Reggie says.

“It was *not* erotic,” I growl.

“They were naked.”

“Dear god, we were not *naked*. Nicolás is my *brother*.”

“Not by blood!” Reggie protests.

One time... one single time because I thought Reggie was going to move on, I allowed his dream to come true by squeezing him between the three of us. A single gesture I’d done out of goodwill and mourning has now and will forever haunt me.

“What is going on?” Maddox asks.

I shake my head. “Reggie’s just... making things awkward like normal.”

“Sounds about right.”

Reggie hooks Keaton around the neck while Keaton tries to push him off to no avail. “Keaton, as they pulled me in close, he pressed his quivering pecs against my beating chest, his bulge heavy between his legs—”

“This is like one of those badly written eroticas,” I announce.

“The kind of shit you throw into the shredder,” Keaton says as he gets out of the car, dragging Reggie, who is attached, after him.

“His raging desire—Keaton! Stop! Keaton, come on! Fine, I’ll stop talking about Nicolás’s rod if you stay!” Reggie cries.

I turn to the man in question who gives the two ghosts a sideways glance. While Nicolás can’t see or touch ghosts, he seems more susceptible to things dealing with them, which is heightened whenever he’s around me.

“Hey, Nicolás. Reggie was just talking about your raging rod of desire,” I say as a good greeting.

Nicolás cocks his head and does a little sidestep away from the ghosts like he'd prefer to avoid that. "Wow... I feel..."

"Flattered. He feels flattered," Reggie says.

"Creeped out," Nicolás says with a grin, which makes me laugh. It makes the other two laugh once I tell them what a now glaring Reggie said.

Patricia gets out of her SUV a few spots down from us and beams when she sees us. Probably because she doesn't realize we were talking about raging rods. "There're my boys! I was afraid I was going to be late, but it looks like I made it in time." I love how delighted she looks to see us. She's always made us feel just like family ever since she adopted us. While adoption had been something her husband was more interested in than her, we ended up with her when they got a divorce. And honestly, I couldn't have asked for a better adoptive mom.

As she comes up to us, she tries to hug all three of us at once.

"I'm so glad you could all make it. I asked Hailey and Vic if they could bring Libby, but they were busy tonight," Patricia says.

Libby is Sean's daughter who I still see frequently. Sometimes we have her spend the night when Maddox's younger nephew is over since they're similar in age and seem to have a good time playing.

"That's too bad they couldn't make it," I say.

"Now the real question is... is everyone staying out of trouble?" she asks as she point-blank stares at me like there's a possibility that I'm more of a troublemaker than the rest.

I try to do my best "Oh yeah, super staying out of trouble and didn't have a murderer confront me just today" look which she seems to immediately see through.

"*Hiro*," she growls while her hands fly up and her eyes get wide.

"Yeah, I's all good," I say, acquiring this weird accent that does *nothing* to prove my innocence. If anything, it makes me look extremely guilty. Both Patricia and Nicolás stop and stare at me while Maddox is also trying to look innocent as hell like he's also afraid of Patricia's wrath even though she's this petite woman he could likely toss out of the way.

Then Patricia puts a hand on my face, pushes me back toward the car and links arms with Maddox and Nicolás. "How are my two safe boys doing?" she asks as she heads off without me.

"Hold on a minute! I didn't do anything wrong! Still love me, Patricia!" I protest as I hurry after them.

"No, I can only love those who are safe and good and—"

"Maddox is guilty too! I'm not sure how, but I'm sure he is!" I say.

Patricia hesitates before unlinking her arm with Maddox, and then trying to only escort Nicolás inside. "I always knew you were the best of the boys."

"Took you long enough to figure that one out," Nicolás says with a grin.

"I can leave your ass behind too," she threatens, which makes me laugh.

"I had to bail Nicolás out of jail the other day!" I lie. "Think about him burning down the shed!"

Patricia shifts her eyes onto Nicolás.

"He's clearly lying! What would I get arrested for? Being too boring?"

"True," she says.

"You didn't have agree so readily!"

She laughs as she beckons for those of us she'd ditched along the way.

Inside, we're taken to a booth meant for four people. What the hostess didn't realize is that there are six of us and a bird. As Patricia and Nicolás slide in one side, I slide in the other with Maddox as Reggie looks between us.

“Where am I supposed to sit?” Reggie asks.

I decide ignoring him would be best and perhaps he’ll get the hint to sit somewhere far, *far* away.

“On your face?” he asks as he climbs onto the seat, clambers over Maddox and comes at me, like he’s literally going to sit on my face.

“Don’t you dare sit on my face,” I growl.

All of my boothmates look over at me like they’re concerned by this random declaration while we’re supposed to be perusing the menu.

“Is that like a special or something?” Nicolás asks with a grin.

“It is. Comes with a side of annoyance and a generous dash of irritation,” I explain.

Reggie gives me a look of pure disbelief. “For that I’m definitely sitting on your face.”

Keaton, my savior, drags him off before sitting down on the half partition. Reggie settles for sitting on the tiny sliver of space next to Maddox even though he looks quite unhappy about it.

The waitress sets down some bread before going to take our order. Spite, delighted by the idea of food, jumps up onto the table. I ignore him as he hops around, since there’s little he can actually do. He seems to think the breadbasket is quite interesting as he pecks at it, trying his hardest to drag it even though he can’t grab it.

“And you?” the waitress asks me.

“Yeah, I’d like a—”

The waitress takes a step back and I look over at Spite who is doing his best to move the basket. When it scoots even a fraction to the side, all four of us reach out to grab the breadbasket in order to hold it still like we’re playing some strange game of whoever smacks down the breadbasket first gets first pick or something. “This is the best bread,” I say with a smile even though I haven’t even tried it.

“I do love bread!” Nicolás says.

“Best bread in town!” Patricia tosses in.

And Maddox helps with a simple, “Bread.”

The woman is deeply confused now as I scoot the basket over to myself and cradle it in a death grip. Spite is annoyed that I’ve taken his toy from him and starts trying to tear it out of my hands with some vicious head twists before deciding he needs his feet for this endeavor. His hold is strong enough that he nearly accomplishes it at one point.

She’s staring at the breadbasket that I have oddly tucked against my groin as if it’s taken on a life of its own as I order. I’m almost positive she didn’t listen to a thing I say, but she does scribble something down. Spite, no longer finding joy in life with the basket secured, shows me his back as he looks around the table for something else that could be fun. I see exactly what he’s going for and try to reach out to grab it, but he’s already snatched a hold of the straw and tugs it just a little.

Nicolás then blows on the straw, like blowing it around will make any part of this exchange normal. The waitress is confused as hell why this grown-ass man is blowing a straw toward me. Spite seems to think this is just a challenge to chase it.

“Nicolás, did you order?” Patricia says.

“I’m sorry. I’m just really high right now,” the waitress says.

“Ha ha! So funny,” I say as I reach out and pretend I’m grabbing the straw but grab Spite’s leg instead. He is *not* at all pleased as I drag him across the table while the woman stares at me. Spite’s wings are flapping all about so I have to get him in a hold, pinning his wings down, but now it looks like I’m miming that I want a big bowl of something to anyone who can’t see Spite.

“Do you want... more bread?” she asks.

“I’d love more bread,” I say, not sure why I’d want something else for Spite to play with.

“Great,” she says as she glances down at her notepad, looks between us, and then hurries off.

“I think we pulled that off quite well,” I say as the family looks at me.

“Do you?” Maddox asks.

“Are you holding the bird... on top of the bread?” Nicolás asks.

I look down to where Spite’s standing on the rolls. He’s doing a little dance on top of them out of anger from being restrained. “No.”

Nicolás’s eyebrows rise as I slide the basket back in the middle.

“Do you ever just look at Hiro’s life and then feel so normal?” Reggie asks Keaton.

“I do. It’s like watching a drama unfold,” Keaton says.

“None of you asses are funny. You both could have helped me. Now you guys hold him.” I try to pass the bird off but they both act like I’m handing them a severed head. Honestly, I don’t blame them with the look Spite is currently giving them.

“It’s evil, I’m not holding it,” Reggie says.

I set Spite on the seat. “Stay there, got it?”

He immediately ignores me and proceeds to go back to pushing the basket around. Now that it’s empty of bread that is now on our plates, he seems to find it much easier to move until I keep my hand on it.

As I watch Spite manipulate everything he can get his beak or talons on, I admit something that I’ve been letting fester. “I’m scared my ability is changing too much.”

The three of them look over at me. Maddox already knows this, but I haven’t told the others about it. “There are parts of it that are amazing... like I was able to help a woman whose child died nearly forty years ago touch her child before she moved on. But there are other parts... where I’m scared that the ghosts are going to get strong enough to hurt people when they’re around me.”

“Can you control it at all? Like how much power they’re allowed?” Nicolás asks.

“I try, but if I’m around them enough, like Spite here, they just do what they want anyway.”

Maddox sets a reassuring hand on my leg. “I think your issue is that you’re blaming yourself, Hiro. It’s not your fault if they do something just because they’re around you. If I taught someone how to shoot a gun and they then used that ability to kill someone, would I be the reason they did it?”

“No, but it’s different.”

“How’s it different?” Maddox asks. “Every person, ghost or living, has the ability to make their own decisions. Some people make good decisions and care about those around them, and others don’t care who they hurt to get what they want. Blaming yourself does nothing.”

Patricia reaches across the table and cups my hands. “Maddox is right, so stop trying to blame yourself for things. You’ve helped so many people. You’ve saved lives, Hiro. Don’t ever forget that.”

“I guess,” I say, knowing I need to believe them but also unsure how to get rid of that weird nagging feeling.

“Just think of it this way. You just made our waitress think she was ultra-high. So high she was seeing things *move*,” Nicolás says.

I grin at him. “That is pretty high.”

“Maybe you should try getting high and see what you can do then!” Nicolás suggests.

“Maybe he shouldn’t,” Patricia retorts with a glare.

“He’d probably kill us just driving somewhere, stopping for every ghost that crosses the road,” Maddox says.

I let out a dramatic sigh. “*Once*. One time, I slammed on the brakes.”

“At least once a week,” Maddox mutters.

Nicolás rubs his neck. “No, please... stop... these awful memories are resurfacing.”

I shake my head, just assuring them they don’t need to share any part of the story they’re clearly dying to share.

Patricia pats Nicolás like she has to comfort him for something that happened back when we were teenagers. “He once gave Nicolás whiplash so hard he couldn’t turn his neck for *days*,” Patricia explains.

“It was a ghost dog!” I say, feeling like everyone should understand this.

“If it was a human, you’d have blasted right through it!” Nicolás says.

“Maybe, but it was a ghost dog! I’d never seen a ghost dog before and wasn’t... expecting it!”

“I’m surprised you didn’t bring it home,” Maddox says. “You bring everything else home.” He waves around the table and I kind of feel like he’s including the humans in this as well.

“Hear that?” Reggie asks as he nudges Keaton. “They’re trying to include me in this, but he invaded *my* territory.”

“I would have brought the dog home if I hadn’t caused all of the airbags in the car to go off...” I mutter. “And if I hadn’t thought I’d broken Nicolás’s neck...”

Maddox looks at me in shock. “How hard did you brake?”

“Quite hard. The issue is the car behind me didn’t *at all*,” I say with a grimace. “But it’s okay. Nicolás looks fine.”

“Mighty fine,” Reggie inputs.

“But I was never the same again,” Nicolás says mournfully. “From that day forward, I knew I could never again trust Hiro with my life.”

“Stop being so dramatic! Your life is fine!”

But of course Nicolás isn’t done. “I knew that every time I got into a car with him, I was putting my life on the line. That’s why I pray before I step into a car,” Nicolás says, making the sign of the cross.

“You are just... ridiculous, you know that? You’re making shit up. You’re not as funny as you think you are. And I’ve never gotten a ticket besides that one time I left my car running on the side of the road and ran off. But that was once. And I was trying to help people. Because I’m a helper at heart,” I say with a huge smile that absolutely no one seems to latch on to.

Maddox, the traitor he is, turns to Patricia. “Do you have any stories you’d like to share about how bad of a driver Hiro is?”

“Well... one time he ran the lawn mower straight through my rosebushes,” she says. “*Big*, beautiful rosebushes. I have absolutely no idea how he could have missed them. Did I mention how *big* and *beautiful* they were?”

There’s a long moment of silence before Nicolás goes, “That was me.”

I snort as Patricia’s head whips around to stare at him.

“You let me ground Hiro?” she asks.

“Maybe... you were already mad at me for burning the shed down. I told him if he took the blame, I’d buy him this game he’d been wanting,” Nicolás says.

Patricia shakes her head. “Clearly, I’m raising little monsters. Nicolás, you’re grounded.”

Nicolás, who lives alone, just laughs. “Alright, I promise I won’t do anything. That sounds really nice, honestly. Just go sit in my room for hours.”

“I remember not thinking this through because Patricia grounded me from playing games and there sat the shiny new game.”

“It was only for an afternoon. I’m sure you survived,” Patricia says.

“Barely. But it was worth it,” I decide.

“What else did you two not tell me about?” Patricia asks.

“We were angels,” Nicolás says.

I nod adamantly. “Very much. I can even see the glow of a halo above your head, Nicolás.”

“Maddox, maybe next time we can leave the two liars to do their own thing,” Patricia says.

“Ooh, she’s going to steal your man,” Reggie declares.

“I’m not too worried,” I say to him.

CHAPTER EIGHT



HIRO

Even though it's been nearly a day since Ambrose was brought in, it seems like they've gotten very little out of him. Parker asked Maddox to bring me in, which I feel like he was quite reluctant to do.

My only hope now is to try to distract him as we walk down the department hallway. "What do you want for supper tonight?" I ask.

He glances over at me. "Hmm... want me to cook?"

"Nah, I got it. What about shrimp alfredo?"

"Sounds delicious. Is Reggie here? If he is, tell him he sucks at cooking."

"That was rather brutal and I feel like you're taking your anger at the situation out on innocent... not so innocent bystanders," I say with a grin. "He's not here, but I'll make sure I tell him the next time I see him."

Maddox grins at this like the evil man he is. "Good. He knows what he did and why he deserves it."

"Booker!" Parker barks down the hallway. "Bring Moore too."

We head down the hallway to find her looking quite peeved and impatient.

"This way," she says, hurrying off before any of us can even ask what's going on. She ushers us into a room and jabs a finger at the monitor. Maddox must know how to read angry miming, because he sits down and presses play.

The recording of Detective Avery talking to the man we'd arrested yesterday begins. The time stamp tells me that the recording happened earlier today.

"Hello, Connor," she says.

He just watches her closely, looking like he's absolutely amused or thrilled to be here.

"How did you know Ellen Keefe?" she asks.

"Who?" he says, clearly playing dumb.

"Did you—"

"I don't mean to be rude but let me stop you there. You're adamant, I have to give you credit for that," he says. "But I apologize, you're not the one I want to speak to."

"Well, I'm the only one here right now."

"I'd love to speak with your consultant," he says.

"Why?"

"Because we decided to play a game."

"We decided or *you* did?" Avery asks.

Ambrose keeps on smiling, like this is the best day he's ever had. Like instead of facing years in prison, we've taken him to an amusement park. "If you don't want more to die, you'll let me talk to him. Simple as that."

"What do you mean by that?" she asks, but he remains silent. He simply smiles as he waits for her to leave, which she eventually does.

Parker stops the video and turns to us. "That happened about thirty minutes ago. I'm sure Detective Avery will want to talk to you, but we might not have a choice."

"He... so he's saying more people are going to die, but he's in here..." I say.

Maddox glances over at me. "Right, but that doesn't mean he doesn't have someone helping him on the outside. What a damn mess. I refuse to let Hiro in a room with him. If Ambrose wants to talk, he can talk to Hiro through a microphone. Is that alright with you, Hiro?"

"Uh... yeah, of course. I'll do whatever I can."

Parker's quiet for a moment before nodding. "Okay... we'll arrange it."

As soon as Parker is gone, Maddox turns to me. "Are you sure? Don't feel pressured to do this."

"Yeah, I'm not afraid to talk to him through a microphone," I assure him.

"Can you see ghosts in videos?" Maddox asks.

"Not really. Sometimes I can see like... it almost looks like a blur or smudge on the screen, but I can't see full videos of them, no. If I could see into the room he's in, I could tell how many are with him."

"Okay, we won't worry about it for now."

Maddox sets me up in a room where I can see Ambrose sitting at the table through a monitor. He's looking off to his right and saying something, but there's no one in the room, making me think he's talking to the dead.

Parker glances in and nods at us. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah," I say, honestly not sure.

She momentarily steps out into the hallway before coming back in to take a seat on the other side of me so we can watch as Detective Avery walks in and sits down across from Ambrose.

"Alright, so we have it set up so you can speak with Moore, our consultant," she says. "He can hear and see you."

"Oh? Well hello, Hiro," he says.

I glance at Maddox, not quite sure I'm up to the task of doing this. I don't know shit about dealing with murderers. Usually, Maddox is the one who interrogates them.

"Cat got your tongue?" Ambrose teases.

"So you can see the dead," I say.

"I can. Imagine my surprise when a ghost told me that the consultant looking into poor Miss Ellen's case can speak with the dead," he says. "Why don't you come in here so we can talk?"

"I'm fine talking right here," I say.

"Are you afraid, Moore? Do ghosts scare you?"

"Why did you kill her?" I ask. Maddox had told me Ambrose might try to get under my skin and to avoid it by trying to keep him focused.

"Say her name," Maddox whispers.

“Why did you kill Ellen Keefe?” I ask.

“Why are you hiding behind a wall? Do you think you’re safe behind that wall, Moore?”

Chills race down my neck as I feel ghosts enter the room. I look back at them but refuse to let it deter me. I don’t tell Maddox because I feel like he’d make me stop if he knew.

“You said you wanted to talk to me, so here I am,” I say.

“In person, Moore, in person!” he says. “It’s no fun talking to a wall, now is it?”

One of the ghosts brushes against my back and I have to do everything I can to not let it affect me. I remain sitting still, facing forward, and try not to even acknowledge it.

“You’re going to let multiple people die because you refuse to talk to me? I see how it is. That’s fine. Just know their deaths are on you, Moore. All on you.”

I glance over at Maddox.

“Don’t cave yet,” Maddox says quietly. “Ask him why he’s focusing on you.”

“Why are you fixating on me?” I ask as more ghosts fill the room, making me feel uneasy. I continue to do everything I can to pretend they don’t exist.

Ambrose is silent, just staring at the camera with a soft upturn to his lips.

I glance at Maddox but he gives me an encouraging nod.

“Your ghosts can harass me all they want, it changes nothing, Ambrose.”

Still nothing and it’s getting harder to ignore the way they’re pressing into me, crowding around me.

Maddox reaches forward and puts the microphone on mute before turning to Parker. “What do you want to do? We can keep trying to egg him on to see if he’ll slip, but I have the feeling he’s not going to. He wants to remain on top.”

“I’ll just... go in there,” I say.

Maddox shakes his head. “I don’t think you should.”

“If it gets too much... just like... can’t you tase him or something? That’d break his concentration enough that the ghosts probably wouldn’t be able to use whatever he’s doing to interact with me.”

“We will take precautions to make sure nothing happens to you,” Parker promises.

“Hold on, I don’t think you should go in there,” Maddox says. “If we can’t see him physically doing something to you, will someone even be able to stop him?”

“Then you drag me out of the room. If there really are lives on the line, we have no choice,” I say. “You can go in with me. We’ll make sure there are precautions.”

Maddox seems extremely displeased by this idea to the point where he just sits silently for at least a minute.

“Time is ticking,” Ambrose says.

I turn to look at Maddox who grimaces but nods. “I want at least two armed officers in there as well.”

“We’ll make sure he remains safe,” Parker says as she gets up and leaves the room by passing through the ghosts crowded around me.

Maddox turns to me. “Are you sure about this?”

“Positive,” I say, not sure that I am, but knowing I’ll do what I can to keep people safe.

Once Maddox is assured that I’ll be safe and he’s sternly talked to everyone who will be in the room with us, I’m allowed in the room. Inside, there are two officers—who seem to believe their lives might end if I’m not thoroughly protected—keeping a close eye on the man in addition to Avery and Maddox.

But beyond them, there are at least ten ghosts, all staring right at me as I walk in, creating almost a

barrier between me and Ambrose.

“Step aside, let our guest in!” he says with a cheery tone. The ghosts do step aside, but they don’t seem happy about it as I walk into the room and over to the table where they’ve placed two chairs.

“Are you going to talk to us now or just avoid anything of importance?” I ask.

“Oh, don’t worry. This is all quite important.”

“You said more were going to die. Who else is going to die?”

“Now now, that would be cheating if I told you how the game ends. Alright, here are the rules—”

“We’re not playing a damn game,” Maddox growls.

The man’s face twitches, and he looks over at Maddox with pure disgust as the ghosts press in tight around us.

“Did I ask you? Did I even acknowledge you?”

“If you want to speak to Moore, then you do,” Maddox says, standing his ground, but I can’t bear the way the ghosts are pressing in tight against me. I feel one knock into my chair, and I know they’re using my inability to control my powers against me.

One of them runs their fingers over my throat until I grab their hand. “Do not fucking touch me,” I growl as I lock eyes with Ambrose who is back to staring at me.

A ghost passes through me, the absolute worst feeling, but when I see that it’s Reggie and he’s in the process of shoving them back, I relax as he says, “Back the fuck off, dickhead. I might be small, but I’ll fuck you up. I got my guard dog ready.”

“Am I the guard dog?” Natalie asks as she takes her stance behind me.

“I don’t know but our orders are to protect this booty. Keaton, you get the booty,” Reggie says.

“You have quite the colorful cast,” Ambrose says.

I glance over at his rather normal—if not a bit evil-looking—group. “Thanks. So tell me about these people.”

“Five people are destined to die but you can save them... well... you can save some of them. I think you might be too late for one of them but who knows,” he says with a smile.

“Was Ellen Keefe one of the five?” Maddox asks.

Ambrose completely ignores him. Acts like he doesn’t even exist.

“Was Ellen Keefe one of the five?” I repeat.

He seems pleased that we seem to get how this is supposed to go. “No, she wasn’t. If you find five, dead or alive, I will tell you who the final person is. It’s a simple game, really,” he assures me.

“And if I don’t?” I ask.

“Then something really awful is going to happen.”

“More awful than five people dying?”

Ambrose grins at me. “Well... isn’t that relative? It depends who it happens to, right?”

“So this will be something that affects me so I’ll find it to be worse?” I ask, trying to understand.

“Why do you want to spoil the ending so much? That’s not much fun now, is it?”

“I actually prefer it,” I say.

He laughs, like he honestly thinks this is hilarious.

“Do you have a single person on the outside killing these pe—?”

“Here are the rules,” Ambrose says, interrupting me. “You cannot ask me stupid questions that I’m not going to answer. The end.”

I’m quiet as I think about it, because I honestly don’t know what else to say. This isn’t my expertise. My expertise is dealing with the dead... but maybe that’s it. If he knows how to talk to the dead, the dead might be able to help. “How long do we have?”

“Well, that’ll be no fun if I tell you that, now will it? And honestly... it depends on how well you do your job.”

“Can I ask when the first person dies?”

He thinks about it for a moment before shrugging. “Sure. At four PM today.”

I glance up at the clock and realize it’s already 3:58. Anxiously, I look over at Maddox who doesn’t seem to know what to say or do. If Ambrose is telling the truth, there’s absolutely nothing we can do with two minutes to spare. But there’s always the possibility that he’s fucking with us and wants to watch us panic.

“And the second one?” I ask.

“If you find the first one, I’ll treat you with the time of the second,” he decides. “That’s all. Please, keep me informed. I’d love to know how your progress is going.”

I glance over at Maddox, unsure if there’s anything else I should ask or do, but he stands up and waves me toward the door.

“Don’t rush too much, you’re already too late,” Ambrose says before laughing.

Outside the door, I turn to Maddox. “What do we do?”

“We have a location on Ambrose’s house. They’ve already searched it, hoping to find some correlation between him and Keefe, but there could be a ghost there you could talk to,” he says.

“Right! Yeah, let’s go,” I say as I rush after him. Parker catches up to us to let us know that she’ll have a team over to assist.

“We’re working against the clock. It might already be too late, but we have to do what we can,” Maddox says. “We just have to be careful not to walk into a trap. He seems to enjoy manipulating people and we have no idea what he’s capable of.”

“True,” I say. “But we have to stop him from hurting anyone else. Do you think he has a single person out here doing this for him?”

“I don’t know yet. He could be working with someone who he’s already planned this... ‘game’ with. Especially since he already knows the dates and times *if* he’s telling us the truth. We have no idea if he’s being truthful about any of it.”

I sigh as we get into the car, hoping Ambrose’s house will have some answers for us.



Thankfully, working against the clock allows us to get inside the man’s house fairly quickly. It’s still well past 4:00, though, and I can’t help but wonder if he gave us that time to set us in motion and force us to run around or if he really does have things planned.

The house is a small home tucked away in a nice suburb. The landscaping is well kept and the inside of the house looks very nice, like someone took a lot of care in how they arranged things even if the search had left it disorganized. I don’t know why I thought it’d look much different—like maybe it’d show his manic side or something—so I’m thrown off at how neat and organized everything is. I’d also had this fear that when I walked inside, the house would be packed full of ghosts who’d love the idea of my demise, but so far, my three trailing after us seem to be the only ghosts around.

Maddox leads me through the house as people stare at me like I’m some circus animal preparing to do a trick for them. It makes me uncomfortable, but I don’t say anything to Maddox who seems to be focused on the task at hand. I know if I did, he’d rage at them pretty hard and we need to stay on task.

Every room is bare of ghosts and the more I look around, the more I realize we've found a dead end. We're wasting time in a house that has already been searched.

"I found something," Keaton says as we come up on the finished basement that's been converted into a home theater.

I turn quickly as Keaton comes through the wall. "What is it?"

"There's a room back here," he says. "Through this wall."

I walk over to the wall that's completely finished off. "Keaton said there's a room beyond this wall."

Maddox walks over to it and raps his knuckles against it, listening as he moves down the wall. "Ask him where the door is because it's clearly not down here."

Keaton points up. "It's in the ceiling. There's a ladder leading down to it."

"Can you tell something like this from surveys and stuff?" I ask Maddox after telling him what Keaton said.

"According to the last record of the house, the basement was unfinished," Maddox says as he heads upstairs. I follow him over to the room that would be directly above the basement. Keaton pulls himself through the floor where I have to assume the door leading down is.

"Right in this spot where I just came up," he says as those helping us all gather to watch. I try my best to ignore them as I tap the ground with my foot.

"Right here."

Maddox nods as he feels along the carpet, looking for something that would give it away. He has to tug it a little, but when he does, the carpet comes up along the seams. The edge was finished so it looked like a normal stretch of carpet, making it nearly impossible to notice without Keaton's help.

Maddox pulls it back, revealing the spot on the floor where the door was slotted into the wood. There's a mark on it, probably from Ambrose using a tool to open it since any handle or hole could have shown or have been felt.

Mick hands Maddox a tool that he uses to pry the panel open. Since the hole is dark inside, Maddox shines a flashlight down into it.

"What the hell is this?" I ask.

"I guess we're going to find out," Maddox says as he starts climbing down the ladder, leaving me to feel like I should follow him instead of just staring down into the hole.

Maddox must find a light pretty quickly because he flicks it on just as I'm about halfway down the ladder, and I freeze.

The small room is absolutely packed with ghosts. They must have been watching us and filled the room after Keaton left or I'm pretty sure he'd have mentioned them.

"Get back," a man says.

"You're not wanted here," another says, pressing into me.

"Get back. Get back."

"You're not helping."

The yelling and screaming rise up, voices crashing around me as I back up, bumping into Maddox who puts a hand on me to steady me.

"Hiro, what's wrong?" Maddox asks as the light begins to flicker.

I shudder as I feel their touches on me, the way their cold hands wrap around me, trying to push me back and force me from the room. Thankfully, without Ambrose here, they don't have the power they showed with him. Yet they're able to manipulate my own power enough to make it feel like they're pressing into me.

Trying to fight against it doesn't seem to be getting me anywhere, but I can't stand here and do nothing or I feel like they're going to slam me into the wall. I need to retake control of the situation so my fear doesn't run me out of here, making it so I'm unable to help Maddox.

The light flickers again before going out; now the only light down here is what is streaming down into the room from the hole above, making it feel almost suffocating. The ghosts are grabbing me and pushing me while panic starts to seep into my mind as I realize fighting might be futile. They're going to consume me and there's absolutely nothing I can do as I'm pressed against the wall in this suffocating space.

"Fucking hell," I say as I back up until I slam into the ladder leading out. It digs into my back as I feel a crushing weight surround me. It feels suppressing; I feel like I can't breathe. "Get back, get the fuck back."

But they won't listen. They're too close, touching and grabbing and—

And then I feel Maddox's hands on me. His grip is firm and tight and relief washes over me. All because of his touch, I feel like I can breathe again.

"Hiro, they're ghosts. You know ghosts better than anything and anyone. They're *trying* to get into your head. They *want* to distract you."

"I can't push them back," I say, almost feeling small around them.

"Are you sure you can't or are you letting them get in your head?"

I feel frustrated by all of this, even though I know Maddox didn't mean to make it come off that way. "You think I want this?" I ask, irritation creating a bite to my words.

Maddox grabs my hands and squeezes them. "Hiro, look at me. I'm not saying you want any of this or that it's simple to fix or change it. I'm saying that you can't let them get in your head."

And I realize he's right. Maddox is so right and I've just been letting them push me around. Letting them control me because I'm afraid of what they'll do.

"They're getting in your head. They're using your fears against you," he says, voice gentle but firm.

"I don't like being afraid of them. Ghosts have always been helpful, they've been there for me during my shittiest times, yet... I feel like they're not anymore."

"They still are," Maddox says. "I can guarantee you that a lot of these ghosts are just misguided and confused. They don't know what to expect. They're confused and frustrated, stuck in a world they can't leave and they can't interact with. And they weren't lucky enough to have you meet with them and help them first. The ones 'helping' Ambrose have probably latched on to him because he's the first living person who has interacted with them in a long time."

I nod and close my eyes. "Okay."

Using the strength Maddox is giving me, I push all the negativity back. I shove it away and just think about them being unable to touch me. When I open my eyes, they're still there, but their touches don't affect me at all. Ambrose isn't here to give them strength. They can only get it from me, and right now, I'm not giving them anything.

"I don't know what Ambrose has promised you or why you're hoping to protect him, but he's planning on killing people, and we want to stop him before it's too late."

"You can't stop him," a man says.

"You have no hope of stopping him," a woman says.

"Why do you want to help him?" I ask.

They turn quiet and I feel like there has to be a reason there. Why else would they be so fixated on him? Do they believe in his cause? Is there even a cause or is this mere entertainment? It's hard to

tell.

“Can we get some light down here?” Maddox calls up.

“Give me a minute,” someone says. Thankfully, Maddox has his flashlight back on, lighting up the small room that the ghosts are still crowded into, watching me closely like they’re waiting for me to react. The dim light and mass of people make it hard to see around the room, since my brain likes to register ghosts as actual people, but at least they’ve calmed down.

I have a headache brewing, but hopefully, it’ll hold out until I’m done here. And then I can crawl into some dark hole for a while and beg it goes away.

Mick drops down with us into the already small space but turns on a light that brightens up the whole room.

While I’d been worried that we’d find some kind of torture chamber, I’m surprised to see that it simply looks like a small office. There’s a desk with some papers, a bookshelf packed full of books, and little else.

Maddox immediately begins looking around as I stand there, not quite sure what to do. I feel like I’m going to mess something up just by grabbing and searching, so I stand back and leave him and Mick to it while trying not to be in the way.

It’s not long after that Avery looks down at us. “How’s it going?” she asks.

“Looks like a lot of books pertaining to his job as a therapist,” Maddox says. “Nothing stands out so far.”

“Almost seems more like a little office than anything, but then why have it walled in and done up like this?” Mick asks.

“He has to be using it to hide something, we just don’t know what that something is yet,” Maddox decides. “We’ll figure it out.”

“If we think he’s telling the truth and someone is already dead, I’m going to start calling around to the hospitals to see if they’ve had anything that could possibly match what we’re looking for. Are you thinking Ambrose is referring to one killer or five different ones?” Avery asks.

Maddox is quiet for a moment as he examines the contents of a drawer. “He wants us to bring the names of all the victims to him to save or stop a final thing from happening. He’d be putting a lot of faith in one person to accomplish this. The moment that person was caught, his game would be over with... but finding five different people willing to kill for you is extreme when he’s not even out here to pressure them into doing something. How does he know they won’t cave? How does he know that they won’t give in and confess what’s happening? Or mess up... I feel like five is a huge risk, but we can’t discount the possibility.”

“Right...” Avery glances over at me and I question if she’d want to take my place since I’m just a body taking up space, but she pulls her phone out instead. “I’m going to see what I can find. If you need me, let me know.”

“Thanks,” Maddox says.

“Do you want me to leave so someone else who can actually do something can come down here?” I ask.

“No, I want you to watch their reactions,” Maddox says, and I glance over at the ghosts surrounding the room. They’re eerily quiet now that they can’t mess with me. Is Maddox wanting me to watch their reactions to the two of them going through the room? Maybe he thinks they’ll give something away? I suppose they might. They don’t always judge things well after death.

As I watch them, though, they remain totally fixated on me. They don’t even watch Maddox and Mick. Instead, they stare at me like I’m more important than the literal *detective* digging through

Ambrose's stuff. Is it because Ambrose is so interested in me? Is it because there's nothing in the room worth keeping an eye on?

I catch the eye of a woman standing near me. She appears to be in her twenties with curly red hair and light hazel eyes.

"Is Ambrose helping you?" I ask.

She stares at me, either refusing or unsure of how to answer.

"If he was helping you, why are you still here? Why didn't he help you move on before he was locked away? How will he help you now?"

One of them slips through the wall, and it's like a chain reaction until all of them are gone besides the woman still staring at me.

"Maybe moving on isn't what we want," she says before fading off after the rest of them, leaving me ghost free. I feel like a weight has been lifted off my chest and I can finally breathe.

"Here is a list of people that I'm going to guess is an older client list," Maddox says. "Looks like it's dated back to 2018. There's a huge possibility that the people he's referring to as victims or the attackers are clients. We'll have this looked into and see if it is a client list."

"Have you been to his office?" I ask.

"We have. There was speculation that Ellen Keefe could have been his client, but there's no supporting evidence. Of course, we can't tell if someone else was related to her, but he kept a pretty detailed list of clients. He was working alone, not like in a group practice, just out of a rented room in a building here in town."

Curious, I type his name in and find his practice quite quickly. He has glowing reviews that I skim through. Each one talks about how kind, caring, and fantastic he is. It's almost like they're not even talking about the same man. There was nothing in his expression that read "kind" or "caring" to me.

"They praise him so much in these reviews," I say.

Maddox looks over at me then glances down at my phone. "He seemed to be really good at his job."

"Do you think something happened to make him change?"

"Could have... but you often don't know who people truly are beneath what we see on the outside. I've met men who have screamed and cried, telling tales of finding their wife murdered, before learning they killed her without hesitation and no remorse. There are many things people hide; you'd never even imagine what is going on inside their head."

"I mean, look at Reggie," Keaton says from behind me.

I grin at that before realizing the people in the room probably think I'm grinning about Maddox talking about monsters.

"Excuse me, what?" Reggie asks.

"Keaton said look at Reggie," I say.

Maddox laughs, clearly getting it. "Exactly. He looks cute and sweet on the outside but on the inside is an insufferable monster."

"Oh. My. God. I'm not a *monster*. I'm perfect. And super awesome," Reggie says.

"Reggie says he's perfect."

"Perfectly nosy, can't read the room, and seems to think he's cuter than he is," Maddox says.

Reggie lets out the most dramatically long gasp I've ever heard.

"He's at a loss for words," I say.

Maddox stares at me in shock. "Reggie? Reggie's at a loss for words? Are you sure?"

"He is," I say, glad to have something to break up the pressure of it all. Reggie might be bizarre

and goofy, but he does know how to distract me.

He apparently decides the only way to solve this is by falling into Keaton like he's a Victorian woman who'd had her corset cinched too tight. Keaton, who I believe was supposed to catch him, just stares down at where he's leaning against him.

"Keaton... my love... I will forever remember you..." he says, sounding quite dramatic. "Don't... forget... me."

"Who?"

"Me..." Reggie replies faintly.

"Hmm... Do you remember that person I'm supposed to remember?" Keaton asks me.

"Yeah, I think his name was Renaldo," I say.

"I will haunt you until your dying day," Reggie whispers.

I shake my head, not too concerned by it. "Where are the ghosts who were in here?"

Reggie shrugs, clearly already over his dramatics.

"Can you try to find them and see if you can tail them? There's a possibility that they could lead us to the next person," I say. "They might be checking on things for Ambrose."

"Got it," Keaton says as he heads through the wall while Reggie follows close behind.

That's the moment I see someone lean over the hole in the ceiling. "Hiro, can I see you..." Natalie trails off before dropping down in with us and looking around. She does a complete three-sixty, looking at every aspect of the room before her eyes come back to me.

"You... alright?" I ask.

Mick is straight up staring at me now. I turn a bit so I don't have to face him as I talk to her.

"What's that?" Natalie asks.

"I asked if you were alright."

"Yeah... it's weird... I know this place... I think."

I watch her closely for a moment as she looks around the room some more before floating right out of it without another word.

"I'll be back," I say as I climb out after her. I watch as she slowly walks from room to room, glancing around her as she goes.

Honestly, I'm in shock because Natalie never divulges anything about her past. She's always kept it such a secret that even when I've implied wanting to know, she's refused to give me much of an answer at all.

"You've been here before?" I ask after following her around for a good five minutes in silence.

Natalie jumps and turns to look at me. "What?"

"Did you live here when you were alive?"

She shakes her head. "No... never mind. I'm just confused. I'll go help Reggie and Keaton."

I grab her wrist. "Natalie, come on. I've been with you for so many years and you still can't tell me the truth? What are you afraid of?"

"I..." She falls quiet as she looks around. "Honestly, I don't remember much of it."

"Much of your past?"

"Yeah."

"You know you're always welcome to share it with me."

Natalie hesitates and I open my mouth to say something, but her look cuts me off before I can. "I'm not lying. There are just pieces and parts and... it's confusing and I just don't want to think about it... does that make sense? Like I hate something about it so much, why talk about it? It's hard to explain..."

“Like someone killed you?” I ask, knowing I’m prying when I shouldn’t be. I should let her go at her own pace, but I also hate that I can’t help her. “If you just tell me more about you, Maddox could look into it, we could figure something out—”

“Do you want me to leave that badly?” she asks, her voice sharper than it usually is. I can tell I’ve struck a nerve and she’s not wanting to hear what I have to say.

“Of course I don’t, Natalie. I never want you to leave, but isn’t that a bit selfish of me?” I ask.

“Isn’t it human nature to be selfish?” she simply asks before disappearing. I’m left standing in the room alone, questioning what I did to upset her and why she found this place familiar.

I pull out my phone and type the address into Google before clicking on the first realtor site it pops up on. I scroll to the bottom and examine the previous sales on the house. It was sold two years ago to the current owner, who appears to be Ambrose.

I’ve known Natalie more than two years, closer to twenty, so there probably isn’t any correlation between her and the house. The house appears to have had only one owner other than Ambrose throughout the past thirty years, but could they relate to Natalie in some way?

I hurry over to Maddox who is climbing out of the hole.

“Maddox, something weird just happened. Natalie acted like she knew the hidden room. She mentioned it looked familiar before saying she was wrong. But... I think she was lying to me the second time,” I say.

“Which means Ambrose wouldn’t have made it,” he says. “Unless Natalie came here as a ghost, it was like this when he bought the place.”

“Right.”

“It’s not included in the sale pictures or description that I saw, so he probably came across it later unless the previous owners told him it was there. We can ask him that,” Maddox says.

“Can we also look into the previous owners and see if we can figure out anything about Natalie?” I ask.

“Of course.”

CHAPTER NINE



MADDOX

Working against the clock when we might have already failed is never good for morale. I feel like we have absolutely nothing to go on, absolutely nothing to point us in the right direction. We still have no idea what kind of connection Ambrose has to the last victim, but I was hopeful we'd find something that'd lead us to the next possible victim.

Even with Hiro trying to talk to every ghost he comes across, we find nothing.

"Could he be lying?" Hiro asks as I pull into the driveway of our house. It's been dark for hours now and the day is weighing on me.

"Of course," I say.

"Do you *think* he's lying?"

"No," I admit. "He's too... happy to be playing this game. He could be fucking with us, but I really think he has this all staged. However, I doubt this 'game' is impossible. He wouldn't want it to be impossible to play."

Hiro shrugs. "But then he'd win, which I'm sure he wants."

"He could... but I feel like there's something there that we're missing. I think we need to get some sleep and pick back up in the morning. Hell, maybe someone else will have some more information for us when we wake up," I say. Honestly, I'm not the most optimistic about that, but it's still worth the hope.

After parking the car, I head into the house where Stella and Bandit rush to the door. Clearly, they're quite peeved that we've been gone all day *and* missed their evening meal.

"I'm going to feed the cats, then do you want to jump in the shower with me?" I ask.

"I'd love to. I'll go turn the water on and suck up the heat," Hiro says. He stops on his way to pet Stella and Bandit. Bandit warms up to everyone, but I'm glad to see Stella is warming up to him as well. She's a bit more stuck up and sassy but they're both great cats who have even won me over, despite always thinking that I didn't really like cats.

I pick them both up and Bandit immediately starts purring while trying to climb on my shoulder unsuccessfully. He nearly falls, and since I'm holding Stella too, I almost drop him. He saves himself by clinging onto me with wickedly sharp claws while his purrs fill up the house.

I set him in front of his food bowl and give Stella an extra scratch before setting her down and filling their bowls. I never knew how much of a relief it'd be to have them here for me after Reggie passed. Reggie had so much energy and filled the house with chaos but after he passed, it was so unbelievably quiet.

It was hard to come back to this house every day, but the cats, who I'd never been close to in the past, suddenly became a big part of my life. They clearly missed Reggie, but we found some solace in each other.

I reach the bathroom where the shower is running, and Hiro's clothes are stripped off outside it. Pulling the curtain to the side, I peer in at where he's leaning against the wall just soaking in it. Water runs down his naked body as I let my eyes roam.

While I'd spent a lot of time alone and missing what I'd never have again, it feels so nice to have Hiro here with me. He makes all of the loneliness go away.

He opens one eye to glance at me. "Are you being a creeper?"

"I am."

"Strip those clothes off and join me. There's room between me and Reggie if you shove a bit. Oh, and that little old lady that likes watching you shower. She ran right up the moment she heard you were joining."

I shake my head because I honestly don't know if he's telling the truth or not. "How many are actually in the shower with us?"

"Just Keaton," he says, which does make me laugh because I know if there's any ghost in the shower, it's definitely not Keaton. "Join me. Keaton doesn't mind."

"I bet he would."

Hiro's grinning now. "Just you and me, baby. And the old lady makes three."

"I give up," I decide. "Here it is for all to see!" I pull my zipper down before glancing up at Hiro who is watching me. "I feel disappointed there was no cheering for that."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Woo. So hawt. Yes, my man. Let's see that weenie!" Hiro says in some weird half-exhausted cheer.

"Wow, that made me feel unbelievably sexy," I tease as I push my pants the rest of the way down before tossing them in the hamper along with my underwear. Then I remove my shirt and slide the curtain enough that I can step inside. Hiro wraps his arms around me, pulling me into the hot water and pressing his head against my shoulder.

"I think we need a hot tub."

"I could definitely get behind a hot tub," I decide. "Would you be naked in it?"

"Definitely. All the time." He then smacks my ass. "Sorry, the onlookers demanded it."

I shake my head as he laughs into my shoulder. "Are there ghosts watching us?"

"No! I'm just joking. Spite's in here but he's busy trying to get the cat's attention. I think it's maybe Bandit he's trying to pester. But that's it."

"So you just smacked my ass for the fun of it?" I ask.

He smacks it again. "Yes, I quite enjoyed it. It was all for me."

"I'm glad."

"Me too," he says as he grabs both of my ass cheeks now. "Very glad."

I kiss the side of his head since it's all I can get to. "Good."

The hot water beating down on me feels so amazing. I could get used to this just soaking in here, holding Hiro.

"I'm glad you moved in," I say as I start washing us since I feel like we'll never make it to bed if

neither of us start moving.

“Even when I horrify your boss with my pornos and orgy paintings?”

“Even then.”

“Good. I’m glad to be of service, then,” he says as he leans back and smiles at me. “I’m *very* good at servicing things.”

“Oh? Are you?” I ask as I push him back into the water to wash the soap off.

“I’m also good at letting off steam, if you know what I mean... a stress reliever, one might say.”

“I do enjoy having my stress relieved,” I say with a grin. Once I make sure the soap is rinsed away, I turn the water off and grab a towel. Hiro dries himself before grabbing his toothbrush.

“My plan is I’m gonna jerk ya off and then sleep.”

“I’m glad we’re scheduling this out,” I tease as I grab for my own toothbrush. “Do you have it broken down to like exactly how it’s going to go?”

“I do! So first I’m going to brush my teeth for two full minutes as recommended by the Dental Dude Association.”

“Oh, yeah, I’ve heard of them. Real vicious crew.”

“The absolute worst but hey, my teeth are nice. Anyway. Once I’m done with that, I’m going to kiss you.”

“But what if I’m still brushing *my* teeth?” I ask.

“Then I will suck your finger.”

“The finger holding the toothbrush?”

“Seeing as you’re only holding your toothbrush with one finger in this scenario, I’ll pick a different one.”

I nod like I think this is all very important information. “Okay, okay. I’m getting behind this.”

“Then I will head to the bedroom but about halfway there, the cats will find me. Their secret power of *purrrrsuasion* will force me down to my knees where I will pet them. As I’m rising up, Stella will realize that I petted Bandit one more time than her and will strike back, forcing me to pet them again an equal number of times. Rising again, I will hurry to the bedroom, the anticipation of fondling you moving me along before I realize you’re nowhere to be seen. Have you been kidnapped or are you playing a sexy game of hide-and-seek?”

My eyebrows scrunch at this odd shift of narrative. “Ohhhkay.”

“My options now are to climb into bed and entice you out of your hiding spot with my body or begin my fruitless search. I cave quite easily. What if you’ve been taken and I’m forced to join the mob to save you? I must act fast, so I hurry over to my nunchaku display stand and grab my favorite of the chucks. It’s a nice and thick one, some good girth on it, you know?”

DO I know? Is this a euphemism? Am I just wondering where the sexy time went?

“I’m ready. Standing up, I move fast, since I cannot imagine leaving you to suffer as time works against us. The first enemy is a man twice my size—”

“So I *was* kidnapped? We’re no longer playing hide-and-seek? How long were you petting those cats for?” I ask.

“A very long time but it’s okay. I’m on the scene.”

“Do you even know how to use nunchakus?”

“Never touched one in my life, but it’s in my blood,” he says, trying to keep a straight face since I’m pretty sure Hiro’s never worked with any type of martial arts or weapons.

“I’m very curious where this is going.”

“My mom was in martial arts right before she found out she was pregnant with me. She was a

white belt.”

“Isn’t that like the lowest level?”

“Shhh, Maddox. May I continue?”

“Yes, Grand Master Sensei.”

“Thank you. So then I ka-chop him right in the motherfucking face.”

“If he’s twice as tall, how do you reach him?” I ask.

“I brought a stepladder.”

“He was patient enough to wait for you to climb it?” I ask curiously.

“I’m just that fast, Maddox. And as his towering body crashes to the ground, I pluck the keys off him and rush through the door to save my one true love. Dashing in, I pick you up and carry you back to my bed where I make sweet, sweet love to you.”

“Wow... that’s a lot to do in one night. I feel exhausted even thinking about it.”

“Thanks. I have that effect on people,” Hiro says as he starts brushing his teeth.

I follow suit but wait for him to leave the bathroom before I do. As he predicted, he’s stopped by the cat guards who require pats before allowing anyone to pass. I wait for him to head into the room before giving them each a scratch and stopping outside the bedroom door.

“Oh no, Hiro, I’ve been kidnapped, save me,” I say as dryly as possible.

“Umm... let me... find where I left my ability to save people. Hold tight!”

He comes to the door a minute later with a hanger in one hand and a cat toy in the other. “Are you ready for me to kick some ass?”

“So ready,” I say, not sure whose ass he’s kicking but loving the idea of finding out.

Hiro jingles the cat toy so the little bell inside makes some noise then throws it like he’s tossing a bowling ball. Both cats just stare at it sliding on past without even bothering to make a move to go after it. Then he grabs my wrists, tears me into the room and shoves me onto the bed on my back.

“I did it,” he whispers as he collapses on top of me. “I saved you.”

“So brave,” I say.

“Thank you, thank you.”

“I missed the part with the nunchakus, but you know... I can’t have everything.”

“Right, you already have me. That’s enough.”

“It definitely is,” I say as I press my lips against his while I slide my hand down his bare back to his ass. I give it a gentle squeeze.

As I pull him up farther onto my lap, I sit up and scoot us both back so I can reach the lube. “Let me show you how it’s done,” he says as he takes it from me.

“Alright...” I say, oddly worried as he holds the lube extremely close to my face before popping the lid like it’s some erotic display. But he’s squeezing the bottle so tight that the moment the lid pops, lube splashes on my face.

“Shhhhh... ignore that,” he says as he tries to wipe it off but proceeds to just lube up my face instead. “Just the way I like it.”

“You like my face all slippery?” I ask as I grab onto him and try rubbing my face on his. Hiro starts laughing and tries to back away, but I get a pretty good rub in before he can flee.

“No! Don’t abuse me like this.” He’s grinning as he leans back into me and kisses me. “God, your lips are so *slick*. I just slip right off them.”

“Just the way I like them.”

He’s laughing harder now as he squeezes the bottle down toward our cocks. Because he’s laughing, his judgment on where the squeeze of lube is going to land is quite a ways off, running down

his stomach.

“It’s all good!” he says.

“We better not have to shower again after this!”

“Nope. This is so we can *slip* right into bed,” he says with a grin as he slicks his fingers up before running them down my cock.

I pull him in closer, causing his cock to brush against mine as I reach down and rub them together.

Hiro murmurs something against my lips before kissing me, his tongue brushing against mine as he strokes my cock. When he pulls back, he goes, “You taste quite... lubey.”

“Just my natural flavor,” I assure him.

He laughs as he goes in for another slippery kiss. As my hand moves over his length, I listen to him moan. Pleasure runs through me while his fingers brushing over my side make me shiver. Heat rises inside me to the point where I can’t even get distracted by the way the lube on my face makes things awkward. Because I want to touch him, hold him, caress him... honestly, I can’t get enough.

I kiss a line down his neck as I hold him close. My balls feel tight as his finger brushes over the head of my cock before sliding his way back down. We kiss and caress each other as heat rises between us, and a moan leaves my lips as I realize I can’t take much more. Pleasure ripples through me as I come but I don’t stop stroking and touching him as he soon follows me over the edge.

Hiro slides down onto his side and looks up at me. “I’m too tired to get up.”

“How about I get a cloth to deal with the lube massacre?” I ask.

“That sounds lovely.”

After I get us cleaned up as best I can, I slide into bed next to him. Or try to since Bandit and Stella have already taken my place and don’t look ready to move.

I roll onto my side to face Hiro.

“So, the old lady gave us an eight out of ten,” he says. “She said it got a little muddled in the beginning with the nunchaku scene, but we made up for it at the end.”

I raise an eyebrow which simply makes him laugh. “You... there’s something about you. I can’t tell if you’re joking or not.”

“Thanks,” he says as he closes his eyes. “I feel the same about you.”

Turning off the light, I settle into bed and find myself so at ease with his presence. No more nights lying awake, wondering how I could contend with that lonely gap in my life.

I sink my fingers into Stella’s coat and close my eyes, loving the feeling of Hiro pressed against me.

CHAPTER TEN



HIRO

When I wake, I feel like I can't breathe. There's something on my face that I quickly reach for, but as my fingers slide into fur, my body relaxes. It's just Bandit who thought it'd be fun to suffocate me in my sleep. Hell, Reggie probably put him up to it.

I close my eyes again until I get the distinct feeling of Spite pecking at my fingers. "Spite, stop," I mumble, but Spite couldn't give a shit about the sleep I'm eager to have. He's ready to flay my fingers. "Spite," I grumble.

He, of course, ignores me, so I pull Bandit off my face and look over at him, wondering what is so important that he needed to pester me. Honestly, it's probably something ridiculous like the fact that a cat toy he wanted to play with is under a couch. He cocks his head, looking at me before hopping off the bed and moving toward the door. Once in the doorway, he looks back at me and hops in place a few times like he's unsure how I could possibly be so slow.

Grudgingly, I get out of bed and grab my phone to use as a flashlight. I wait until I'm out of the bedroom where Maddox is sleeping to use the light while following Spite.

He makes his way down the hallway then glides down the stairs to the front door. Hopping in front of it, he impatiently waits for me.

"If you woke me up because you want to go outside and have forgotten that you can go *through walls*, I'm going to be pissed," I say.

He doesn't seem to care how pissed I'll be as he hops this way and that. I unlock the door and swing it open, ready to shoo him out, when I see something moving in the dark. Gripping the doorknob tightly, I freeze and try to figure out what I'm seeing. Are they moving toward me?

"Whatcha looking at?" Natalie asks.

I nearly crawl out of my skin as I slam the door shut and spin around to face her. "You nearly *killed me*," I growl.

"It's funny how jumpy you still are after *years* of ghosts. Literal *years*. So many years. You're getting old."

"I'm not old—"

Her eyes dip down to my groin. "You are quite naked, though. Letting it all air out?"

“My sleep-deprived brain didn’t think this through, alright? And anyway, there’s something out there,” I say as I try to peer through the window in the door, but the glass is decorative, making it hard to see in the dark. I flip the exterior light on and move over to a window as Spite follows me, clearly confused why I didn’t want to run out into the darkness where literal monsters could be waiting for me. I press my face against the window and peer out into the darkness as I realize it’s a group of ghosts, all gathered in a circle at the far edge of the yard.

“That’s not good,” Natalie says.

“They usually only gather when someone has died or is going to die, so why the hell are they gathering here?” I ask.

“Go wake up Maddox.”

“I will, though it’s probably just a dead animal or something. And then I’ll wake him up and it’ll be nothing.”

“Go.” Natalie gives me a vicious look, so I grudgingly head up the stairs as she passes through the wall to go see what they’re doing.

When I reach the bedroom, I grab a pair of sweats and pull them on before going over to Maddox’s side of the bed.

“What’s going on?” he mumbles.

“There are some ghosts in the yard that I was going to wander over to, but Natalie told me if I didn’t tell you first, she’d be pissed,” I say. “Honestly, you’re fine here. Just if I don’t come back in a few minutes, maybe come find me.”

Maddox throws the covers back. “I’m not leaving you to get abducted, chased, or whatever you’re up for this time.”

“Well, that’s no fun,” I tease as I watch him grab some sweats and follow me back down the stairs. When I reach the first floor, I’m surprised that Natalie isn’t back from checking it out. Maddox reaches into a cupboard and pulls out a heavy-duty flashlight that he flips on as we step out onto the porch.

“Where at?” he asks, so I point and start heading toward the ghosts. I can’t see Natalie among them, which makes me nervous.

“I can’t tell if they’re looking at something or what’s going on because I can’t see through them,” I say.

“There’s something on the ground.”

“Is it a dead animal? Sometimes they get transfixed by dead animals too.”

“No... I think it’s a box,” Maddox says.

I glance over at him, unsure how to take that. “A box?”

“Yeah.”

I look back to the gathering, unable to see past their bodies—there are too many of them. When I walk up, I realize there are a good ten or twelve ghosts grouped together, apparently not planning on letting me get much closer to the object.

“What is it?” I ask.

All the ghosts turn to look at me, and almost as if my presence disrupted their fixation, they start to wander off, some even disappearing, leaving behind only Natalie and the box.

“What’s... in the box?” I ask, terrified of the answer.

“I could probably open it with your help. It’s not even taped, just folded,” she says.

Maddox grabs me, like he predicts I’m going to just jump right into the box. Clearly, I’m not going to be allowed to get close to it, so I decide to ask him before letting Natalie try.

“You mind if Natalie opens it?”

“Have her gently push it. I want to know if it weighs a lot,” he says.

I repeat this to Natalie before taking her hand. She uses her free hand to nudge the box. It seems to slide quite easily which reassures me a little. “Well, at least we know it’s not a head in there or something,” I say. This was meant as a joke, but I’m gonna be real honest, the thought had crossed my mind.

“I was thinking more of some type of homemade bomb or something, but the box moved like there was nothing inside at all. I guess she can open it, if you can stay far enough back. We can’t write off that it’s nothing, though, so please still be careful.”

“It’s probably just trash some asshole tossed out the window and the ghosts were just pissed someone was littering,” I say as Natalie turns her attention back to the box. It takes her a few minutes to get a hold of one lip of the box and a lot of concentration before she manages to pull it free. Then she looks inside.

“Huh...” she says.

“What is it?”

“Looks like a necklace.”

“Natalie says it’s just a necklace.”

Maddox walks over to the box and cautiously looks inside it before using his flashlight to open the other flaps. When I look into the box I see that she’s right; it’s simply a necklace with a small silver pendant lying at the bottom. There’s a single piece of tape on the chain, probably to keep it from falling out of the box, and an envelope next to it. But what draws my attention more than anything is the word “Sloth” gouged into the cardboard.

“Don’t touch any of it,” Maddox says as he pulls his phone out and makes a call. “Let’s get in the house.”

“You’re leaving it out here?” I ask.

“I want to document exactly where everything was when we found it. Someone’s toying with us and I have to bet it’s Ambrose’s person,” he says before turning his attention back to the phone.

As I head toward the house, my eye catches onto the door cam, so I open the camera app on my phone. After I’d been taken by Jude, Maddox had cameras installed outside and even one inside the house, but would any reach that far stretch of the yard?

I wish I could see ghosts on videos because if I could, I could at least tell what time the package was left. A few cars go by but nothing concerning. Beyond that, I can see nothing leading up to the time where we walked out to the corner of the lot where the camera doesn’t pick up. Whoever did it either got lucky or knew how to avoid our cameras.

Maddox comes over after a bit and glances at what I’m doing. “Anything?”

“No, it’s a blind spot.”

“I thought as much. The cameras focus on the area around the house to pick up anything unusual so they won’t get pinged by people walking or driving by,” he explains.

“I mean, we have some cars that go past we could possibly get a license number on.”

“Okay. Someone will be over shortly.”

“Do you think this is the person Ambrose mentioned today?” I ask.

“I don’t know. We won’t know until we get a better analysis of it. That’s why I don’t want to mess with it just yet. Did the ghosts say anything to you?”

“Nothing. My guess is they were just attracted to it. Usually, they aren’t attracted to things like this, but it tells me that possibly someone was wearing it when they died or when they had strong

feelings about something. It's holding... something that drew them. Was there blood in the box? Sometimes they're drawn to blood."

Maddox shakes his head. "I didn't see anything, but necklaces or things with small crevices like the chain are good at hiding blood if not cleaned properly, so let's have some hope that we can find some evidence there that'll help us."

I turn back to the videos and hope that there's something I missed. A single thing that could lead me in the right direction to stop someone else from dying is all I need.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



HIRO

I stare at the picture that Mick had taken of the letter that'd been sitting at the bottom of the box along with the necklace.

Another dead. How many more will die before you realize that you're never going to win?

Of course it had no clues and was only there to taunt us. Maddox checked and was able to confirm that it's Ambrose's writing. He must have written it and planned every step of this before he confronted me in the bookstore. Was that because he planned to get arrested? Was all of this some big idea he had? He sure hasn't seemed upset about any of it so far.

As I sit at the second chair at Maddox's desk, I feel useless. If there are no ghosts around, there's nothing for me to assist with. Everyone else here has degrees and years of experience and knows what they're doing.

But then why did Ambrose pick me? Why me specifically when I can't do anything? Is it just because I can see the dead? It has to be. But then there has to be a way I can help.

Parker walks up just as I'm contemplating my use. "Detective Avery is heading over to Ambrose's office. Go with her."

"Okay," I say, ready to do anything to help out.

Avery looks up as I walk over to join her after sending Maddox a quick text where I'll be.

"Ready?" she asks with a smile.

"Yeah," I say. "Just the two of us?"

"My partner got held up but hopefully he'll meet us there," she says as she heads toward the door as I follow her. "That must have been scary finding that box!"

"Yeah..." I say, not sure I can even bother to tell her that I'm used to this shit.

"Hiro!" Reggie shouts while rushing after me as we make our way across the parking lot. Keaton looks like he's unwillingly being dragged along. I give Reggie a nod to tell him I see him, but don't bother saying anything since I feel like Avery still thinks I'm at least semi-normal.

Avery gets into the driver's seat so I get in the passenger's side, honestly hoping she drives off before Reggie can make it into the back. Of course, he settles right in as Keaton leans back in the seat and sighs.

“So what kind of consultation do you do, exactly? I’m a bit... foggy on the details,” Avery says as she glances over at me with a warm expression on her face, like she’s genuinely curious.

“You know...”

“I don’t,” she says with a smile.

“Help... with stuff,” I say.

“Ha, he’s such a loser,” Reggie announces to Keaton. “Imagine sounding that dumb?”

“Are you talking about yourself again?” Keaton asks.

“Ha, funny. Hiro!” When I ignore Reggie, he starts up again. “Hiro. Hiro. Hiro. Hey, Hiro.”

“So... do you mostly help Detective Booker, then?” she asks.

“Mostly, yeah. I work at a bookstore, though. Own it, actually—” My seat belt is steadily getting tighter and I look over as Reggie continues to pull it.

“Oh, really? I’ll need to check it out sometime! My fiancé loves to read so I’ll have to pick up something fun for him,” she says.

“Yeah, we get new... stuff in all the time.” I would really love to cuss Reggie out as he tries to minorly strangle me.

“I’m going to keep going until you answer me,” Reggie says as he pulls tighter and tighter.

Honestly, I could pretend to get a phone call and answer, but at this point it’s pure stubbornness that makes me never want to answer Reggie.

He leans forward and starts blowing in my ear and I have to use all of my willpower not to shove him away.

“So you must like to read if you decided to open a bookstore,” Avery says.

“I do,” I say as I tilt my head away. “I’ve been so busy lately that I feel like I haven’t had a lot of time to do so, though. Maybe things will slow down soon.”

“I’m gonna nibble your ear,” Reggie says as he gets closer and closer.

“How far away are we?” I ask as I keep leaning away from him.

“You alright?” she asks since it probably looks like I’m just cranking my neck to the side.

“Very much, yes. Everything’s normal.” I turn and give Keaton a “For the love of god, help me” look.

Keaton, the asshole he is, just shrugs. “Hey, he’s not bothering me for once. I’m all for this. Weirdly enough, I kind of enjoy it.”

“You must help them a lot. The office has a lot of nice things to say about you and a few... interesting things,” she says.

“Ha, yeah. Sometimes things get spread. Who knows. I don’t knooooowww.” Now I sound like a howling dog because of Reggie ramming his finger into my ear.

“Ew,” he says, like I forced him to try to give me brain trauma.

“Everything... okay?” Avery asks.

“Just peachy, actually. So peachy,” I say. “Just...” I wave at my phone. “Stupid text. Drama. A friend being a real pain, you know? He’s one of those friends who you try to like but he continually does something so stupid that you can’t help but be like ‘huh, why am I still friends with him? Maybe I should just cut him out of my life.’”

Reggie gasps. “You wouldn’t! No! Not when I love you with my whole heart... well, part of it...”

“That does sound concerning. Have you tried talking to them?” Avery asks.

“I have! It’s like talking to a brick wall that won’t listen. He *loves* to make you feel uncomfortable... that kind of stuff. And you feel like you won’t get anywhere and that it’s best to just give up.”

“That’s not very good,” she says as Reggie starts trying to crush my body with the seat belt again.

“All I’ve ever wanted is love!” Reggie wails.

“I even got him a cat. I gave him a place to stay... I’ve just... I tried to do so much for him. But you’re right, that’s not good. That’s friend abuse.”

“Sounds like it.”

Reggie gasps while looking to Keaton for help. “No... no! I’m not the abusive one! You are for ignoring me! Love me, Hiro,” he says as he climbs onto my lap like I might want to cradle him for the rest of the drive. When I don’t do anything like that, I watch as he reaches over and sets his hand on the volume dial.

I shake my head as he gives me a grin.

Avery begins, “I hope you—”

The music shoots up blaringly loud, making Avery jump and Reggie smirk.

“What the heck was that?” she asks as she quickly turns it down.

“Ah, I wonder if you just hit the volume button on the steering wheel or—” Something. I was going to say “something” but now that my ears are bleeding again, all I can do is give Reggie a glare as he reaches for more.

“What is with that?” she asks as the AC turns on and cold air starts blasting throughout the car.

Irritation makes me whip out my phone and go, “Hello, Reggie.”

“Hiro!” Reggie says, looking thrilled to have my attention.

“You called? Did you need something *extremely important*?” I ask.

“Yes! I did. I just wanted to tell you that your shirt is on backwards.”

I glance down at my shirt that is indeed backwards. “Ah.”

“God, you look like a mess. Thankfully you’re still cute. That was all. Ta-ta,” he says as he gives my face a good smack and climbs into the back seat with Keaton.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m just so kind and caring, you know?” Reggie asks Keaton.

“Are you?” Keaton asks.

“Selfless, maybe.” How Reggie settles on that, no one knows.

“I’ll have to have my car looked at. That was quite strange,” Avery says as I put my phone away.

“I wouldn’t worry about it. It’ll probably never happen again,” I assure her while wondering why I ever thought it was wise to let Reggie learn how to use his ability to manipulate things. I will likely regret it forever, especially because he seems to keep getting stronger.

When we pull into the parking lot, I try to discreetly rotate my shirt—while Reggie smugly watches, of course—before hurrying after Avery. She’s probably fully confused about what use I have and I wouldn’t even blame her. I honestly don’t think I’m overly useful when my ghosts cause her to drive distracted. So I hang back and follow her into a larger older building. No longer used for its original purpose, it’s now made up of different office spaces and activities. It looks like downstairs is a kind of rec center because I can see what looks like a large open space made into a gym that some teen boys are playing in.

The building has a large staircase leading upstairs that Avery turns to climb. Once upstairs, she heads down the quiet hallway to a room with Ambrose’s sign out front. She opens the door before heading inside with me and my ghosts trailing behind her. Just past the desk he uses, I notice a man sitting on a chair in the back. He smiles when we enter.

“Running a little late, aren’t you?” he asks.

I glance over at Avery, wondering if she’d see me as crazy if I just sat down and started talking to a dead guy. He looks between us, then catches my eyes before looking thrilled I’m responding to him.

Does he know who I am? Did Ambrose possibly tell him before getting locked up or does he not realize he's dead and just tries to talk with anyone who will interact with him?

"Sit, sit!" he says eagerly.

I look back at Avery who doesn't seem to be too interested in leaving. And I'm more than positive she's not going to leave without me. If I wait for Maddox to bring me here so I can talk freely, the ghost might be gone.

"Avery," I say.

She turns to me. "What's up?"

"I can see dead people, and there's a dead guy sitting on that chair over there, so I'm going to go talk to him and you probably don't believe me and that's fine, but just so you know I'm not talking to myself, okay?" I say quickly before hurrying away. My brain must have thought that if I said it fast enough, she'd go along with it without question.

Good god, let's never do that again.

She says nothing as I hurry over to the other side of the too-small room and sit on a couch facing the man.

"Why do you feel like you can't tell people about your amazing ability?" the man asks, sounding concerned.

"Because they judge me and don't believe me," I mutter.

"I can understand that. Connor used to feel the same way," he says. "Grew up thinking he had to keep his magnificent ability hidden away."

"You knew Ambrose as a kid?" I ask in surprise.

"I did! But this is about you, not Connor."

"No, no, it's totally about Ambrose. Do you sit in during his sessions?" I ask as I realize that I might have an in on learning about his clients.

"What's your name?" he asks.

"Hiro. And yours?"

"You can call me Peter if you'd like."

"Peter, what's your last name?"

"Ridley."

"Peter Ridley... Peter, Ambrose is planning on hurting people, so we need to help them before they die. Can you help me?"

"I'm sorry, Hiro. I can't give out a patient's information," he says with a warm smile. "How long have you been able to see ghosts for?"

I hesitate before wondering if he'd open up to me if I played along. "My whole life."

He seems pleased that I actually answered him. "Was it scary?"

"The ghosts never scared me, it was the reactions of others that did," I say, trying to pretend I don't notice Avery listening in. Sometimes I can't help but wonder how strange I appear to others as I visibly talk to myself.

"That's understandable. People seem to struggle with the things they don't comprehend."

"How long has Connor been able to see you?" I ask.

"Come on, now. I know it's easy to want to dodge things that make us feel uncomfortable, but it's truly best to stay on task."

"Peter, Connor has been arrested. He's told us five people are going to die if we don't stop them. We believe one has already been killed but that means we can save four others. You could have heard something, you could have sat in on a session with someone that might get hurt or might hurt someone

else. You can help,” I plead.

He stops trying to interrupt me, at least, but now he’s just staring at me.

“Do you care about Ambrose?” I ask.

He’s still staring right at me, but honestly, I’m not sure what he wants.

“Peter,” I say again.

Then he gives me a smirk. “You honestly think you’re going to change something? You can’t change people who don’t want to change. It’s not a game. It’s not a test. You get too close and you die. That’s how this works. Are you planning on dying?”

“Of course not. But we can’t just let others die as well. We have to help them.”

“Oh? You’re going to help them? You think you can just make everything right? Just fucking snap your fingers and your whole world will turn perfect, is that what it is?” Peter asks as he stands up.

“If I thought it’d be that easy, I wouldn’t be here right now talking to you,” I say, not liking the way he’s moving toward me.

“You can’t be saved. None of them can be saved. It’s all a goddamn lie. Every part of it!” He kicks the table hard enough that it actually moves and I quickly get up, realizing that I don’t love this situation anymore.

Peter rushes into me, slamming into my body so hard I’m flung back onto the couch as he gets up in my face. I try to rise up but he grabs my wrist, clenching it so hard that pain shoots up into my arm. “You can’t save anyone. Once you start digging, you’re going to realize that you’re just digging your own goddamn grave.”

“Have you seen it before? You’ve seen him do this?” I ask.

“Shut up. You know nothing. You understand nothing. You *get* nothing. So shut up,” he growls and the lights flicker as he pushes into me harder.

Fear is igniting inside me, especially without Maddox here, but I know I can push through him if I have to. But I can’t if he could possibly tell me something that’ll help in the case.

The lights are flickering wildly as Peter suddenly grabs his throat while looking at me in shock. He paws at his throat while staggering backwards and hitting the ground on his knees. He opens his mouth but no words come out as he falls to the side and disappears, possibly reenacting his death.

The lights flicker back on and I’m left sitting on the couch with Reggie, Keaton, and Avery all staring at me.

“Well, that was fun,” Reggie says. “Keaton... I’m starting to think we need to put Hiro in a bubble. A thicc bubble. We could have a little peen hole for him and Maddox to still have a bit of fun time but that’s it. We could probably stuff peen-shaped food through the peen hole. It might get awkward but you know what? I’m pretty sure he’s just going to get murdered if we don’t.”

“You seem to forget that ghosts *go through things*,” Keaton says.

“Ah shit.”

“I’m fine,” I mutter as I stand up, feeling a little bit shaky.

Avery is staring at me like I just landed my spaceship and crawled out. “What... just... was... you... lights...” She decides silence might be the best until there’s a knock on the door and all of us, including the ghosts, jump.

She’s now staring at the door like it might unveil a demon from the deepest darkest depths of hell, so I walk over to the door and pull it open. The teenager on the other side of the door looks at me in surprise.

“Oh... I’m sorry, I was... looking for Connor...” He peeks into the room, looks at Avery’s shocked expression and suddenly appears quite uncertain about the whole situation.

“Hey, are you a patient of Connor’s?” I ask.

“Not... really. I just...” He holds up the basketball. “Come here to play sometimes and then Connor and I started talking. Just haven’t seen him today and didn’t know what was going on.”

“Have you seen anyone else here recently?”

He looks uncertain before shrugging. “Yeah, there was a guy waiting outside the door when I came yesterday.”

“For an appointment?” I ask.

The teen shrugs again. “I didn’t ask. When he saw me, he quickly hurried away. I almost thought that maybe... he was trying to break into the office but I’m not sure. I was going to tell Connor today... are you a cop?”

“I’m not, but she is. I’m a consultant.”

“Oh... did something happen?” he asks as he fumbles with his ball while looking a bit nervous.

I really don’t know what to say to that, so I just smile. “Connor’s fine, but maybe you could answer a few questions Detective Avery might have?”

The teenager looks more nervous now. “Uh... I don’t really know anything. What happened to your wrist?”

I look down at the deep bruise that’s already blooming from where Peter had grabbed onto me. There are clear finger marks around my wrist that seem to be deepening in color. “I’m fine.”

“I... think I have to go,” he says as he eyes the staircase.

“Please just tell me what the guy you saw yesterday looked like. We’re afraid someone might get hurt if we aren’t careful.”

He hesitates before nodding. “Uh yeah... okay. A guy in his fifties, maybe? I dunno. He had a buzz cut... oh. He had a tattoo on his shoulder. I couldn’t see all of it because of his sleeve but maybe a bird? Eagle? I don’t know. That’s all I know.” He hugs his basketball to his chest as he starts backing away.

“Can I give you my number so if you think of anything you can call me?” I ask.

He hesitates but nods, so I pat my pockets until I find a receipt and jot my number down on it before handing it over. Luckily for me, as he reaches the stairwell, I see the ghost of a boy a little younger than the teen waiting for him.

I lock eyes with him and he watches me in confusion before stepping to the side to see if I’d follow. When I do, he rushes toward me, grabbing for me. “Tell him you can see me! Tell him you can see Jordan!”

“Does he want to know?” I ask.

“Yes! That’s why he visited Connor! So he could talk to me.”

I’m surprised by that and rush for the stairwell, hoping to stop the teen before he gets too far.

“Jordan is here,” I say.

The teen freezes before looking up at me from the lower stairs. “You can see him?”

“I can. He said Connor would let you talk to him.”

“Yeah... you can really see him?”

“I can. Now will you help me?” I ask.

He twirls the ball a little before nodding. “If you can help Jordan.”

“I will do everything I can to help.”

“Okay. I’ll talk but I’m not sure if I have anything of interest to say.”

“Anything you have could possibly help,” I assure him.

CHAPTER TWELVE



MADDOX

My phone beeps just as I'm heading to my desk. I never know if it's a simple text or if Hiro is getting abducted and his ghosts are trying to reach out to me, so I quickly pull it out and see it's from Avery.

Avery: I don't know what the fuck is going on but there are fucking lights flickering and Hiro said he talks to ghosts and the table moved. It MOVED. Please come and deal with this.

Me: Is Hiro okay?

Avery: He's chasing after a kid.

Me: Please don't let him out of your sight.

Avery: IT MOVED.

Me: Yeah, ghosts seem to do that around Hiro.

Avery: IT MOVED.

Since she seems to only know how to write two words now, I leave her to it and hurry out to my car. By the time I get to the location, everything seems to be perfectly fine besides the size of Avery's eyes when she locks eyes with me and mouths "It moved."

"Maddox!" Hiro says, looking delighted. "Maddox, this is Zion. He knows Connor Ambrose who helps him speak with his brother who passed away."

"Hi, Zion. Detective Maddox Booker. You can call me Maddox," I say, trying my best to put on my easy-going face since kids seem to deal with it best.

Hiro quickly catches me up with what's going on and explains about the man who'd been there the day before. I send Avery off to see if there were any cameras on the building before sitting down with Zion in an empty room. I tell him what I can before I start asking him questions.

The kid fumbles with his basketball, nervously rolling it on the table. "Honestly, Connor was nice and helpful. He said that he'd help Jordan move on or something."

"How long ago did he say that?" Hiro asks.

"A couple of months ago."

Hiro frowns. "Yet Jordan's still here?"

Zion shrugs like he doesn't think it's a big deal. "He said it took time to figure it out."

"And what were you doing to help him in exchange?" I ask, since there had to be something

Ambrose was gaining out of this.

He shakes his head. "Nothing, really."

"Nothing at all?" I ask.

"Well... I'd carry boxes for him or take his mail to the post office... stupid little things like that."

The way he's fiddling with his ball tells me there's more but he's not spilling just yet.

"And then he'd sit with you and let you talk to Jordan?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"And he'd been doing that for a couple of months?"

Zion nods.

"And you feel like he was helping you and Jordan?" I ask.

"Yeah... I mean, he was letting me talk to him," Zion says.

"It's really important that you tell me the truth. People could die if we miss anything."

He nods as he fiddles with the ball some more. "I am."

"Thank you, you could really help save lives," I say, laying it on a bit thick in the hopes that he understands just how serious this is.

Zion just nods again and I can't quite tell if he's nervous talking to me because of who I am or if he's hiding something. I could see Ambrose manipulating him by telling him that he could only help his brother if he did something for him. Honestly, this could all be a setup. He could be trying to get us to go the wrong way, search for dead ends and watch us continually fail and fail.

"So the guy you saw, he was about your height, tattoo on his shoulder. Bird, probably an eagle. Bald. Caucasian, right?"

"Yeah... wait, no, buzz cut. Like short."

"I thought you said bald," I say, trying to see if he'll falter on it.

He hesitates before shaking his head. "No, I know I said buzz cut."

"Huh, that's odd, okay."

Zion looks to Hiro, finding him the safer option. Hiro doesn't say anything, just watches the situation unfold to not get in my way.

Zion glances back at me since Hiro isn't saying anything. "No, I know I said buzz cut. It was a buzz cut."

"Great," I say before pulling my phone out. "I'm glad to see there are cameras up here," I add, not exactly lying since there are cameras, just not in the hallway.

He hesitates. "What? There are cameras up here?"

"Must be. What exact time was it, do you think? We'll be able to see you come up not long after him."

He's getting anxious now. "I don't remember."

Hiro is watching something beyond Zion, probably the ghost. "Zion, it generally takes me a day or two to help a ghost move on. If it was a murder or something extremely tragic, it'll take longer. But Jordan told me his death was an accident. Ghosts who hang around because of accidental deaths are generally here because there is someone they really care for hanging on to that guilt. Connor was lying to you. He wasn't trying to help you then and he's not helping you now either. If he was, he'd have figured out what it was keeping Jordan here. He would have told you that Jordan keeps repeating that it's not your fault. Did Connor tell you that? Did he mention that Jordan said that?" Hiro asks, voice soothing.

Zion hesitates before shaking his head. "*You* could be lying. *It is* my fault. If I hadn't left him alone to go play with some stupid fucking people..."

“Jordan wants you to know that he loves you so much and hates to see the pain you’re inflicting on yourself. It’s not your fault. He knew he wasn’t supposed to leave the house. He knew he wasn’t supposed to walk to his friend’s house but he did it anyway. And he never once has blamed you for any of it, so he can’t figure out why you continue to blame yourself,” Hiro says.

Zion’s gripping onto the ball so tightly at this point that his fingers are turning white from the force. He’s watching us closely but I can tell it’s a losing battle and will just take a little more before he caves.

I can see the moment he does by the way the tension in his shoulders relaxes and he looks guilty.

“Connor told me some guys were going to come and that they were trying to stop him from reaching out to the dead... from helping them. He told me that telling you some guy was trying to break into his office would help him. I don’t know what’s right or wrong but...” He turns to Hiro. “I really want to believe you. I want to believe you more than you’d ever know because I want someone to help Jordan.”

Hiro gives him a warm look which seems to calm Zion a little. “I know. How about we see if we can help your brother when we’re done here, alright?”

I decide that if Hiro can help him first, there’s the possibility that he’ll open to us even more. So I give them space and back off where Avery joins me with eyes that seem to be just as wide as when I walked in.

“So there’s talk, you know. Around the office. Things like ‘That consultant? Supposedly he thinks he’s psychic.’ Or ‘It’s just a load of nonsense but he gets these premonitions or something. Summons ghosts or something. Who knows. It’s all just hearsay, really.’ And then the fucking *table moved*. It *moved*. The lights started flickering like out of some... some horror movie and then the table moved and Hiro was physically *thrown back*. He was...” Avery falls quiet as she stares at me. “I’m going crazy, aren’t I?”

“Not that I know of.” Just dramatic more than anything.

“So he really sees ghosts.”

“Yeah. So what all did I miss while I was gone?”

She looks at me in shock like she’s unsure if I was fully listening. “The table... it moved,” she says slowly.

“Yeah. Things seem to happen like that around Hiro. You’ll get used to it,” I assure her.

“Ha... ha ha... buddy, no.”

“So?”

Avery sighs almost like she’s deflated before looking up at me. “Okay... so I heard him say the name Peter Ridley. Seemed to be the... the... whatever he was talking to.”

“Peter Ridley,” I repeat as I pull out my phone and type it in.

“The way Hiro interacted with him almost gave me the vibe he was talking to a therapist or something.”

It doesn’t take long for something to come up. I click on the article before reading the title. “‘Beloved local psychologist Peter Ridley was last seen on August 1, 1998. His wife alerted authorities about her husband’s possible disappearance when he missed their weekly dinner.’ Let me get a police report on this,” I say as I send the info over to the department before continuing my search. “Looks like he went missing on the first. The wife explains that during the summer they generally went out on the sailboat but because of a lack of wind, they chose to go out to dinner instead. When he didn’t show up for dinner, she became afraid that he’d been messing with the sailboat and fell overboard, which resulted in a search of the lake as well. Let’s see... looks like

someone had seen him out on his boat but it was during the lunch hour and he saw a client after that.”

“His throat was slit.”

I turn to face Hiro who had somehow crept up behind us. “That’s how Peter Ridley died?”

“Yeah, he reenacted it before disappearing. You think Ambrose killed him, don’t you?” Hiro asks.

I glance over at Zion who is still sitting in the chair at the end of the hallway. He’s staring at the basketball in his hand, but I don’t think he can hear us. “I do. I’m going to see if we can figure out if Ambrose was Peter Ridley’s patient. They likely had access to patient records if there was an active missing persons case and the possibility of a patient being involved.”

“The issue is if we’re working against the clock, will this help us?” Hiro asks.

“I don’t know,” I admit as I see Zion get up out of his chair and head for the stairwell.

“Were you able to help his brother move on?” I ask Hiro.

Hiro looks over his shoulder to see what I’m looking at. “Yeah, I did… Zion, wait up!” Hiro says as he rushes after him. “I shouldn’t have left him but I wanted to tell you about Ridley.”

“That’s okay,” I say as I follow him down the stairs. Clearly, Zion is planning on going right back to basketball practice because he heads into the gym.

“Zion!” Hiro shouts after him. That’s when I see Zion reach down into a bag that’d been sitting next to a balled-up hoodie.

“Shit,” I say as I pull Hiro back out of the doorway and rush into the room as Zion points a gun at a man who looks like their instructor. The man looks at him in shock for a moment before I see a smirk touch his face.

“Zion, drop the gun!” I yell as I pull my gun out but don’t point it at Zion, instead, keeping it close to my side. I was hoping that just seeing it would convince him to put it away. The other teens are far enough away from Zion that I feel safe pulling my weapon free, but there’s no fucking way I want to shoot a goddamn kid. It was pure hope that it’d scare him into dropping his own weapon.

“I hope you rot in hell,” he says, a quake to his voice just as I see movement to my right as Hiro rushes onto the scene.

“Zion, don’t! It would kill your brother to see you do this!” he says.

Zion flinches, as though the words hit him like a bullet. “No… you don’t… you don’t know anything. You told me Jordan moved on!”

“He might have moved on but he’ll still know what you’ve done. Zion, please, don’t ruin your life like this. Please put the gun down. Jordan adores you. Before he went, he told me so many wonderful things about you. How amazing you are. How he always looked up to you. How you made him laugh any time he was having a bad day,” Hiro says. He keeps moving toward Zion and I can’t have him put himself in danger. He truly thinks Zion won’t shoot him, but he doesn’t know this kid. He literally met him an hour ago.

“Hiro, stay back,” I urge.

But Hiro’s always seeing the best in people. He always wants the best for all of them. “Zion, please, put the gun down. You will regret all of it if you do this. We can help you. We can fix this, okay?”

“Just… get back. I’m not… just…” He anxiously looks between me and Hiro.

Hiro steps toward him and my entire body is telling me to do something. I don’t think the kid would shoot Hiro, but there’s no saying what someone will do when they’re desperate and cornered.

“Hiro, stop!” I yell.

“Zion, please. Do it for Jordan, okay? What about your mom? Do you think your mom can handle losing another son?” Hiro asks.

He grits his teeth and I can see his eyes watering.

“Just set the gun down,” Hiro says. “Please?”

“Fuck,” Zion says before dropping the gun. He puts his hands up as he looks at me. “Please make it stop.”

I glance over at the man he’d had the gun on. “What did he do to you?” The look on the instructor’s face when he’d first seen the gun on him told me all I needed to know. This was the display of someone pushed to the brink while the man he’d aimed the gun at seemed to know Zion couldn’t do it. And only people who push and shove and beat people down know that.

“He won’t stop hurting me and my mom. Every time she tries to leave he tries to fucking kill her. I can’t do anything. I can’t stop it... Connor... Connor told me how to make it end.”

As I move in toward him, Avery comes in and removes the gun from the situation. “We’ll take him in too,” I say, nodding at the man Zion had been aiming the gun at.

Zion had mentioned Connor. So was this all part of Ambrose’s plan? Is this man meant to be the second person? Did he think he could push Zion into it? Or is this simply a teenager pushed too hard who had influence from the outside? Would Ambrose really have instilled his trust for his “game” to a kid who probably isn’t even eighteen yet? I don’t think he would, but I can’t write off the possibility.

I can see that Hiro is itching to help, but he at least stays back as we remove Zion and the man from the situation. Once more help shows up, I make sure to keep them separated.

As I turn away to seek out Hiro in order to explain to him why he should never ever move toward someone with a gun, I remember that all of us had fled Ambrose’s office without locking it back up. Deciding Hiro’s “talk” will have to wait, I get the keys from Avery before heading back toward the building.

Hiro jogs to catch up with me. “I love you,” he says with a huge smile.

“Do *not* think you’re going to distract me,” I warn him, sure my tone is showing how unhappy I am with this situation.

“So much. Like”—he waves his arms around which is definitely not going to distract me—“this much.” He’s all smiles, looking absolutely sweet and happy like he can make me forget what happened.

I feel like I’m unable to get him to understand how serious this is. I’m sure he *knows* but he still likes to believe there’s good in everyone. “Yeah? And if you truly loved me, you wouldn’t put yourself in danger.”

He raises an eyebrow since he’s well aware I don’t mean that, but it’s still frustrating. I sigh. “Hiro—”

Hiro’s cheery attitude seems to deflate a little. “I know, I know. Stop putting my life in danger, but Maddox, he’s a kid. He would have destroyed his entire life and I know he’s a good kid. Ambrose fucked with his head; I know he did.”

“We can’t assume anything,” I remind him.

“You can’t tell me you don’t think Ambrose fucked with him.”

I agree, but I also don’t want to agree with Hiro or he’ll start thinking he can tackle more dangerous situations.

As I step up onto the second floor, Hiro freezes.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“There are ghosts... just... surrounding his room.”

“Shit,” I say as I rush for it with my hand on my gun just in case I need to pull it. The door is cracked, so I use my foot to push it open just enough to see as I hear Hiro calling Avery. It doesn’t

take much to see the person sitting on the couch, back to me. Their head is slumped down and I can see blood splatter on the wall.

“Hiro, tell them not to let anyone leave the building,” I say as I inch a little farther into the room to make sure someone isn’t hiding behind the door that swings inward. When I look to the man again, I see that a silenced gun is in his hand. Did he shoot himself?

And on the table directly in front of him is a box with one single word etched into it:
Wrath.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



HIRO

“You alright?” Barry asks as he sinks into a chair and rolls it over to me behind the desk at my bookstore.

“Just thinking. It’s hard to get my brain to work sometimes,” I say.

Questioning Zion and the man who turned out to be his stepdad led to the mom confessing the abuse the man had inflicted on both of them. She told Maddox how he wouldn’t allow her to leave the house and cut off all support so she couldn’t get help. Zion admitted that Ambrose had given him the courage to do what he did, but said he never pressured him or told him to do it, making us believe that he wasn’t actually part of Ambrose’s game but instead a side effect.

Maddox honestly thinks the kid was manipulated in a way that Zion doesn’t even realize, leading him to do what he did. I’m hoping he can find proof of that and a judge kind enough to take into account Ambrose’s influence and the abuse Zion was going through.

“Were you guys dealing with the body at that big building in town?” Barry asks.

“Heard about that, did you?” I ask.

“Did anyone... *not* hear about it? I’m pretty sure there hasn’t been a single customer who has come in without asking something. Especially those who know you’re dating a homicide detective.”

“Yeah...”

“But... was it a homicide? I heard he killed himself,” he says.

“Uh... it does look like he killed himself but they should know for sure before too long. And don’t go sharing what I say with that pretty lady who comes in every week and looks disappointed whenever it’s me working and not you.”

Barry laughs as he leans back in his chair. “I think you’re ridiculous and that none of that is actually happening.”

“I have a good eye for catching a look of pure disappointment and disgust when someone locks eyes with me,” I assure him. “She even cringed a little when she saw me the other day.”

“She did not!”

“Full on walked in and went ‘Ew, it’s you.’”

“Sounds like a low blow,” Barry says.

“Super low. Groin level, actually.”

“God, I love talking about groins,” Reggie says, appearing just in time to annoy me.

“Me too!” Natalie says.

Both Natalie and Reggie turn to look at Keaton, like Keaton is going to blurt out that he also enjoys talking about such things.

“I like it when neither of you talk,” Keaton decides.

I think that’s a pretty appropriate opinion and I might have to agree.

The door opens and I nearly laugh when I see it’s the woman we’d been talking about. She sees me first before her eyes flicker over to Barry, her expression immediately shifting to a much happier one.

“Aww, that was so devastating. The disgust she held at seeing your face,” Natalie says.

I send a glare her way as Reggie reaches over and starts patting at my face which honestly feels more like abuse than comfort. “It’s okay, Hiro. I think you’re *super* handsome,” he says as he directs his eyes over to Keaton who doesn’t seem to give a shit how much Reggie abuses me.

“Good morning,” I say in greeting to the woman while Reggie falls onto my back hard enough I have to brace myself so I don’t slam face first into the desk. This results in me appearing like I decided to bash the rest of my body into the desk. Reggie sits down on the back of my chair, his legs on both sides of me as his arm wraps around my neck. It’s quite a worrisome position that I can’t get out of.

“Oh, Hiro, you look so *handsome* today,” Reggie says as he stares right at Keaton.

Barry and the woman look over at me as I just give them a smile like everything is good.

“Need help with any—” That’s the moment Reggie decides to stick his finger in my mouth with an “Ooh, you dirty boy!”

Barry and the woman stare at me as I push Reggie’s finger out of my mouth.

“Sorry... bug,” I say as Reggie takes that opportunity to lick my face. “Excuse me one moment. Barry, can you help her find what she needs?” I quickly head toward the back room with every intention of strangling Reggie, but of course he doesn’t follow.

When I look out, Reggie looks everywhere but at me.

“I think Hiro wants you,” Keaton says, looking quite pleased.

“Hmm... I actually don’t think so.”

“Oh, I think he does.” Keaton seems way too excited at the potential abuse I might inflict on Reggie.

“Fine, fine. Hiro, I’m coming, my love. Are you eagerly waiting for me? Oh, what a frisky boy... you wanna do the dirty at work?” Reggie calls as he sashays into the room to join me.

“Come on, Keaton. This is going to be good,” Natalie assures him as they both hurry over to where Reggie is batting his eyes at me.

Reggie is still trying to play it off like I’ve brought him in here with the intent of taking him to pleasure town or something. “Oh, Hiro. So frisky. Where do you want to be? On the desk? Up against the wall? In the window?” Reggie asks, all the while eyeing Keaton like he’s sure one of these things will just make Keaton drop his pants. “I will pleasure you to the extreme wherever you want to be.”

“On your knees,” I say.

Reggie’s startled by this. He’s smart enough to know that I had been planning on chewing his ass out.

“Oh?” he asks as he glances between Keaton and Natalie. “While we have onlookers?”

“You didn’t care out there, why should I care in here with the door closed? On. Your. Knees.”

He drops to his knees as he looks up at me. “Yeah? Now what?”

“Now I want you to close your eyes,” I say.

“Ohhkay. Eyes are closed,” he says as he does so.

I slide my fingers into his hair before gripping tightly onto it and tipping his head back. His eyes immediately open until I glare at him, and then he closes them again. “Did I say you could open your eyes?”

“No. This is getting kinky. Want me to grab a crop? Maybe some handcuffs? I’m ready for some spanking!”

I cup my hand over his mouth. “Silence, please. Now you are going to be a good little ghost. You’re going to stop shoving your fingers where they don’t belong. You’re going to stop *licking* me like a creep. And you’re going to turn to Keaton and instead of trying to *harass me* into getting him to like you, you’re going to say, ‘Hey, Keaton. I like you. We should hang out sometime.’ And if he says no, then you’re going to go, ‘Thank you, I respect your wishes.’ Got it?”

“I don’t like this,” Reggie decides. “It’s not as fun. Are you going to be naked when I open my eyes?”

“There’s no hope for you. None at all. My prediction is you suffered significant brain damage at some point and now have... issues. *Huge* issues.”

He opens his eyes and gives me the sweetest-looking smile. “Yet you still love me.”

“Regretfully.”

“Alright... I will listen to everything you’ve taught me. You are very wise, sensei,” he says as he *crawls* over to Keaton. Keaton’s got a deer in the headlights look going on.

“This is your fault,” Keaton hisses at me like a feral cat.

“Want some popcorn?” Natalie asks, having conjured up some popcorn at some point.

“I wish I could eat your ghost popcorn. It would make this experience at least mildly enjoyable,” I say.

“Keaton, the moment I laid my two perfectly wonderful eyes on your smoking-hot body,” Reggie starts while running a finger down Keaton’s body for emphasis, “I thought to myself, ‘Man, what an absolute dick of a human.’ You were rude, brash, and worst of all, you sassed my dear loveable friend. You called him a useless waste of space—”

“I did not!” Keaton grumbles.

“You said he smelled—”

Keaton lifts his hands up like he doesn’t even know how to deal with him. Honestly, I don’t blame him, but at the same time, I do find minor enjoyment in Reggie’s theatrics.

“You said I smelled?” I ask, acting aghast.

“Do *not* listen to him. I swear to god,” Keaton grumbles.

“You told him that Maddox could have done better,” Reggie says.

Natalie gasps. “Oh *daaaammnn*.”

“I did not! How the hell did this turn against me?” Keaton growls.

“But then I realized that beneath that icy and evil exterior was a man... a wonderfully sculptured man with an actual heart. A heart definitely not too big but in there somewhere. Weeee tiny.”

“This is getting good,” Natalie says. Honestly, I’m confused about how Reggie is planning on spinning this around to get a date, but I have some level of faith he’ll pull it off.

“I saw those pecs. And the way your angry voice pierces straight into my heart and makes my balls *ache*.”

“It’s just getting worse. Every word that escapes his lips is making it worse,” I tell Natalie.

“Do you think he realizes how much of a train wreck this is?” Natalie asks.

Reggie is not deterred. “But I love the way you pretend to dislike all of us, yet you go out of your way for every one of us. I love the way you pore over Maddox’s work in the hopes of helping. Oh! And the way you play hard to get makes me shiver when I think of you.”

“His head is screwed on crooked,” Natalie says.

“Maybe even upside down,” I add.

Reggie shrugs like he could agree to this. “Well, we all saw how much my mom cared about me. I’m sure she tossed me down a time or two when she was sick of me,” Reggie says. “Anyway, back to my extremely sexy confession of love.”

“Is it?” I ask, completely uncertain what point in that confession of love we’re in.

“Maybe his plan is to break Keaton down to nothing so he’s at his lowest when Reggie confesses?” Natalie asks.

I point at her. “Ohhh, that would be a tactic. Not a good one. No. Not at all. But a tactic.”

“Keaton, at night, I dream of you. During the day, I look at you and all I see are hearts and flowers. So. Will you... Keaton... marry me?”

“No,” Keaton says before catching my eyes. “This is your fault.”

“How is it my fault? I told him to ask you to do something with him like a fun date! Not ask for your hand in marriage!”

“I thought that’s what I was down on my knees for!” Reggie says. “Hiro, you’ve lied to me! I’m going to cry now!”

“I didn’t lie. At no point did I mention a proposal!”

Reggie wavers for a moment before falling onto his side in a heap of depression. Keaton just nonchalantly steps over him to join Natalie.

“Does it taste like real popcorn?” he asks.

“You have to think about how you want popcorn to taste and it does,” she says as he takes a bite.

We’re all standing around Reggie who is lying in defeat on the ground, making odd noises that I believe are supposed to be cries of despair. Keaton and Natalie are chowing popcorn, I’m staring down at him and Reggie’s lying with arms and legs thrown about.

“Hiro...” he whispers.

“I can’t hear you.”

“My dying wish...”

“Yeah? It’s hard to hear with you whispering like that.”

“My... My dying wish...”

“Oh, you want fish?” I ask.

Reggie’s eyes narrow. “MY DYING WISH.”

“Oh, got it. What’s your dying wish?”

“I want you to touch your nipple to Keaton’s nipple. That’s it.”

“That’s it, eh? Just... you know, press my nipple toward him?” I ask.

“Yes, please,” he says.

I lift my shirt up and look toward Keaton. “You heard the man.”

Keaton stops midchew. “No.”

“It’s his dying wish, come on.”

“I would rather take him somewhere that is *not* a date than do any of this.”

“Oh? You’d rather do that than a... a...”

“Nipple press,” Reggie helpfully supplies.

I nod. "Right, a nipple—"

That's the moment the door opens and Barry and Maddox look in at me with clear confusion on their faces as I hold my shirt up in the air, chest out for all to see while about to declare a "nipple press." Quickly, I pull my shirt down and straighten up as I contemplate life in general.

"Um... I really regret not knocking," Barry says.

"I was... sweaty and just trying to air off, and you know how it is," I say.

"Do we?" Maddox asks as he glances at Barry, like he wants to see if Barry knows how it is.

Barry nods. "Yes. Exactly."

Maddox raises an eyebrow. "You're just trying to save his self-esteem, aren't you?"

"One hundred percent."

"You deserve a raise," Maddox decides.

I glare at both of them while folding my arms over my chest.

"I brought lunch," Maddox says. He'd called earlier to see if Barry wanted anything, but he had other plans and said he was going out.

"Food? I love food. Let's eat food," I say, hoping this topic will distract everyone else from all other topics.

"Good, and then you can tell me why you were talking about nipples when I opened the door," Maddox says with a sly look.

"Or I could kick you out of my store for harassment."

Maddox doesn't seem too concerned by this as he heads out to where the food is waiting for us.

"Well, I'll leave you guys to your fun talk and see you later," Barry says with a wave.

"Look, now you made Barry uncomfortable," I tell Maddox.

"Was it me who made Barry uncomfortable? Barry, tell me your level of comfort before we walked in on Hiro flashing the wall," Maddox says.

"A solid ten out of ten. Complete comfort. I'm talking like just got done with a full-body massage, lying on a cloud of luxury comfort you can only get from hanging around a man like Maddox," Barry says.

Maddox is enjoying this too much. "And after we saw Hiro?"

"Solid six out of ten. Kind of like when your masseuse makes you feel uncomfortable, but you already paid fifty dollars and don't want to get completely ripped off."

"Both of you may leave," I decide as they laugh at my expense.

"Alright, deal," Barry says as he gives me another wave before heading toward the door. "See you in an hour... maybe. If I don't find a new job before then."

After Barry leaves, Maddox turns to me. "Do I even want to know?"

"It's really self-explanatory," I say as I unwrap my sandwich.

"Is it?"

"Yes, Reggie made me suck his finger and he licked my face, so I took him into the back room where I made him get on his knees and promise me he'll be a good boy. Then he proposed to Keaton, who heartlessly turned down the proposal. In an act of revenge, Reggie told Keaton and me to press our nipples together, obviously."

"And you agreed?" he asks.

"As a joke, of course. I knew Keaton wouldn't agree to it, but I thought it'd be funny..."

"Uh-huh..."

"Instead, you walked in, made me contemplate my life choices, that kind of thing."

"Right... I mean... you've had a busy morning."

“Honestly, that all happened in like a span of ten minutes.”

“Wow, impressive. Sometimes I think it’d be neat to see what you can just so I can talk to Reggie. And then you tell me what you do with your ability and how the ghosts act around you, and I realize that I’d rather pass,” he says, completely deadpan.

I start laughing. “Okay, that is truth right there. You’re a smart man. I appreciate your wisdom. How did your morning go?”

“Well... we found out the victim’s name, and interestingly, despite being in his office, he’s not a client of Ambrose’s.”

“Really?” I ask in surprise.

“That we can tell. Of course, he could be meeting with him without documenting it. It’s... interesting.”

“So we’re clearly working with a whole seven deadly sins thing, right?” I ask.

“Seems like it, but then why is the ‘game’ five victims?”

“He could be considering the teacher one, which means there are six victims.”

Maddox leans back in his chair. “Remember how he said that if we lose, something awful will happen?”

“Losing will leave us with a final victim?” I ask.

“Right. It’s a possibility.”

“So what was Ellen Keefe, then? Which sin warranted her death?”

“Lust would be an easy one,” Maddox says. “She was in a relationship with a man who was married.”

“Did Ambrose have any relation to her or was it simply because he thought it was wrong... or to fit his weird little game?” I ask curiously.

“That’s a question that I’m not sure we will even get an answer to,” he says. “We might never get that answer, but we just have to keep pushing forward and hope we can stop the next person from dying. That’s where I need you to come in.”

“Talk to the man who shot himself?” I guess. I’d tried talking to him right after his death, but he still wasn’t coherent enough to speak to me. That or he didn’t want to. Sometimes it’s hard to tell when they’re newly deceased.

“Yep.”

“Am I allowed to go in now?”

“You are, so once Barry’s back from lunch, would you be up for talking to him?”

“I can try. He wasn’t willing to talk before, but he seemed quite shocked. Which is... odd if you think about it. He knew what he was doing, right? I suppose someone could have set it up as a suicide.”

“Evidence points to it being a suicide. The angle, the residue on his hand, all of it points to him having killed himself.”

“Does he have any relation to the other victims?”

“Not that we’ve found as of yet. One thing that does stand out but doesn’t necessarily mean anything is that he was being seen by a therapist, but she told us that he never showed any suicidal tendencies.”

“Wrath... wrath is pretty specific.”

“What else is interesting is that he was willing to admit it, you get me?” Maddox asks. “Oftentimes in things like this where someone kills a person for a reason and calls them out on it, they aren’t willing to see their own faults.”

“Unless he was blaming someone else?”

“Then why would he have shot himself? Why not them?”

“Hell if I know. I’m a book dude. Like... want a book?” I ask as I wave to my shelves. “You’re better at this than you realize,” he assures me.

“Sometimes I can’t help but wonder if I am. You just heard about my conversation with Reggie. What was that? Why did I think any of that was normal? Why did I have that conversation *at work*?”

“Because they’re your friends and you’re caring enough that you don’t treat them differently just because they’re dead.”

“Eh, I dunno... Sometimes I think I should treat them differently. They’re freaking weird.”

That makes Maddox laugh and honestly reconfirms my opinion as Spite pecks at the glass door, dying to come in.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



HIRO

As we walk back into Ambrose's office, I realize that we might have luck on our side when Peter is sitting on a couch near the ghost of Ricky, the man who'd shot himself. Maddox is still peeved about my bruised wrist that's a very vibrant purple at the moment, but Peter could easily be able to tell us something.

"Hello," I say as I walk in.

Peter doesn't seem to know what to do with me, so he just gives me the silent treatment. Ricky, on the other hand, stares at me like I'm Satan's spawn come to drag him off to hell. He looks almost pissed at me, like any of this is my fault, but I'm still going to see what I can do.

"Hi, Ricky, my name is Hiro," I say.

Ricky gets up and tries to leave the room, but his death was too recent and he can't even get past the walls. "Fuck," he hisses.

"Do you agree with what happened?" I ask Peter.

"Do I... agree with him killing himself?" Peter asks, looking shocked. "You think I'd agree with it? Taking a life is such a..." He sighs as he seems to realize that he forgot he was giving me the silent treatment.

"It's all a game to Ambrose. Ricky was just the third pawn."

Ricky whirls on me. "I wasn't a fucking pawn."

"Weren't you?" I ask. "He told you what to do and how, and you did it. Another pawn."

He shakes his head as I see his anger climbing. His hands are clenched, his jaw is set. He seems irritated, but did he really think he was the only one? Some kind of chosen one or something? "I had to."

"You didn't have to do anything. Ambrose isn't even out here. So why do you feel like you had to?"

Ricky stares at me for a long moment and I see some kind of weird guilt or something in his expression.

"Peter, three or more people are going to die if we don't stop Ambrose. Do you know who the next victim is going to be?" I ask.

Peter crosses his arms over his chest as he watches me closely for a moment before saying, “And if I do, what will you do about it?”

“I will help the next victim, and I will help you.”

Peter scoffs. “What are you going to help me with? I’m fucking dead.”

“I will help you move on.”

He’s quiet for a long moment and I notice even Ricky is staring at me.

“Do you prefer to walk this world or are you tired of it? If you’re tired of it, I can help you move on,” I assure him. “I *want* to help you. I don’t want you to suffer like this.”

“You’re lying,” he says.

“How am I lying? Do you think it’s not possible?”

Peter hesitates, clearly uncertain. “Connor said...” He trails off as he leans forward. “Connor is a chronic liar.”

“I’ve noticed,” I say.

“How?”

I’m confused by the question. “What?”

“How can you ‘move me on’?”

“Generally, something is holding you back. In this case it could be that your family never was able to know what happened to you. It could be that you won’t move on until Ambrose is finally stopped. But whatever it is, the likelihood of you being able to move on after all of these years is next to none *without* my help.”

“I don’t know where my body is,” he says. “But I do know where he killed me.”

“That’s a start.”

“Why are you helping him?” Ricky asks.

Peter looks over at him and shakes his head. “Because I owe nothing to this person who killed me! Because I’ve dreamed about seeing him face revenge for what he’s done for years, but today is the first time I could possibly see Connor face what he’s done.”

“Can I write down your story as you tell it so my partner can follow along?” I ask.

“Go ahead,” he says as I retrieve the laptop I’d brought for this purpose, just in case we were able to get Ricky to talk.

Peter takes a deep breath like he’s trying to gather the courage to do this before nodding. “Okay. I had Connor as a patient when he was a teenager. And one afternoon, he called to tell me that some kids were bullying him. That they took him out somewhere and left him with no way to get home and he needed help. He knew that his mom was already really worried about him and he didn’t want to stress her out, so he wanted to know if I could drive him home. He warned me that if I called anyone or told anyone, he’d hitchhike home.

“Honestly, I didn’t think much of it. I’d done such things before to help my patients if I knew the alternative was going to put them in a bad spot. I wasn’t going to leave this seventeen-year-old to just chance getting in a car with a stranger to get home. I thought that on the way home we’d talk about how we could explain what happened with the bullies to his mom, hopefully figuring out how to get him away from this situation... and I’m going to be honest, I wanted to interact with him outside of my office. He put on the picture of perfection inside it. He was polite, nice, and seemed kind, but there was something about him because he knew how to manipulate our conversations. I’d worked with him for years and he knew how to shift us from topics that could get too close to issues he didn’t want to discuss. But he’d do it expertly. Honestly, what struck me as odd more than anything is the day he’d left the office when he was about fourteen and there’d been a car accident...”

“I’d run out to see what happened but the way he was looking at the victim was wrong. Almost fascinated or thrilled. When he saw me coming up, it was like a switch. He hid his reaction and almost mimicked the panic of the people around us...” Peter fiddles with his shirt as I try to keep Maddox up to date by typing this out. Since Peter’s talking faster than I can type, I try to use abbreviations where I can and hope Maddox can follow along.

“When he called you to pick him up, you went straight there?” Maddox asks.

“I did. I knew I had some time before meeting my wife. She didn’t have a cell phone and I didn’t want to bother her at work. He had also called me from what he said was a payphone, but I honestly don’t know whose phone it was since I later realized that there probably wasn’t a payphone in the area,” he says. “When I arrived, he wasn’t standing where he told me he’d be. Confused, I looked around when I heard someone calling me. It sounded like Connor, so I rushed in after the voice, thinking he needed help.

“It seemed like the voice was quite far away, so I kept moving farther and farther from my car, calling back to him. He was in such a panic, I honestly thought he’d gotten hurt. But something wasn’t quite right with the voice. In my panic, I hadn’t thought it through. When I reached the voice, I realized it wasn’t him at all but a recording of him begging for help. I still remember that it was this little portable player... It was...”

He takes a deep breath. “The moment I saw it, I knew I’d fucked up. It was like this sinking feeling that just... fucking pulled me down. And as he slammed something into the back of my head, I knew I had to fight. But everything went dark so quickly. I remember dropping to my knees, my whole body telling me that I needed to get up, I needed to run, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t get my limbs to work, my mouth to work. I think I remember asking why and in return he simply said, ‘You know too much.’ And I’ve thought about that for years. What did I know? But maybe I was the first person who was able to see through his issues? The reason he saw me was because he was the victim of bullying and his mom thought it’d help, but did no one else see all of these desires he had?”

“Where was this location?”

“There’s a turnoff on the way to West Harbor, or at least there used to be. I’ll show you,” Peter says.

“The next victim, do you know when it’s going to happen?” I ask.

“We have time,” he simply says.

I don’t love how he’s withholding this information from us, but I have to trust that he’ll come through in the end and help us. The issue is that you never really know how truthful anyone will be.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



HIRO

When Maddox pulls off the single-lane road, he has to park the car in a way that it's half in the brush since the turnoff that Peter once used has become overgrown, clearly no longer used.

"This the spot?" Maddox asks.

"Peter says it is," I answer as we get out of the car.

I follow Maddox as Peter looks around. "It sure is overgrown."

"It is," I agree as I try to make a path through the area that was clearly once a small parking lot. There's even some gravel where the brush has worked its way up through. As I follow Peter, Maddox trails behind me.

"So, this was about the area I started to hear the noise," Peter says as he just glides right through all the brush and downed trees while thorns grab my clothes and scratch my skin. "It gets pretty hilly in this area, so I hope you brought your hiking shoes."

"They'll have to do," I say as I trail after him. The trek starts going straight down which is simple enough, but of course it means that at some point, we'll have to go up it. A few times Peter stops and looks around before continuing on.

"I was running pretty hard," he explains when he hesitates again. "And it was a while ago. I used to feel a tugging, you know? Like it pulled me toward my deathplace but it's not there anymore. Is that normal?"

"I think so," I say. "It seems like as ghosts get older, they are less connected to their place of death, which is why they can leave it."

"Peter, why do you hang around Ambrose? I would think you'd resent him enough to stay away," Maddox says.

Peter glances back at him as he effortlessly heads up a hill that is making my legs burn. "At first it was this weird idea of revenge. Like I thought someone would catch him or something and I wanted to be there to see it. But they never did... and I became almost fascinated with him. I've always loved learning how the brain works and that right there is a fascinating case. He's clearly unable to comprehend standard human emotions, yet he knows how to fake them. He doesn't feel guilt and I've never seen him feel sadness, but he's learned how to understand it well enough that he's a phenomenal

liar, if that makes sense. I don't always hang around him, I often follow my wife and my children. But something felt weird the last time I saw him. Like his issues were getting worse and I wanted to know why. And then all this happened," he says before leaving me time to explain the answer to Maddox the best I can.

I pull out my phone and notice that we're losing reception quickly out here. "You have your radio? I have no bars."

"Yeah, we're good," Maddox says as we reach the top of the hill. "Peter, you say you heard Ambrose calling for help, right?"

"I did!"

After I give him Peter's answer, Maddox nods. "You didn't find it odd how loud the voice was getting the closer you got to it? I mean... to have heard it from your car, it would have been quite loud by the time you got to this point," Maddox says as he reaches out and takes the very edge of my shirt, tugging me back to be beside him.

"The wind was carrying the noise," Peter explains.

"Which... would be fine, but according to the report your wife gave, the two of you had planned to go out on the sailboat but because there was no wind and you'd have to use the motor—which she said you didn't like doing—you changed it to a dinner out. Out of fear that she'd misheard you, your wife went out to check your sailboat. They even searched the area surrounding the docked sailboat in the fear that you fell overboard."

"You're honestly surprised the forecast was wrong?" Peter asks.

"Hiro, let's go back, we'll come out later with backup," Maddox says quietly as he gives me another tug.

I glance at him in surprise. We have an opening, an opportunity to get some answers, but if he really doesn't think we should pursue this then I'm not going to stop him. I trust that Maddox knows what he's doing, so I give him a nod.

"Okay," I say as I turn and hesitate.

There's a ghost watching me closely, appearing to be almost shocked. "Can you see me?" the woman asks.

"I... can," I say.

"Help me, please," she says as she rushes for me.

"Maddox, a ghost wants me to help. What do I do?"

"Tell her she can either come with you or you'll help her later," Maddox says as he motions for me to keep moving.

"I don't understand what's happened," Peter says, sounding upset. "You tell me you're going to help me, and now you're acting like I've done something wrong because I can't remember if it was windy or not? Do you know how many years ago this was? What are you even... going on about?"

Maddox sets a hand against my back and pushes me toward the car. As we move along the steep hill, toward the edge that will be easier to travel down, the woman starts running toward me.

"He's here. Please, hurry!"

I turn to look at her just as she screams and reels back like she's seen something horrifying.

"Maddox—"

A gunshot sounds and I jerk back in surprise as I reach for Maddox.

He shoves me hard enough that I'm flung forward and have to put my hands up to stop myself from slamming face first into a tree. Turning quickly, I see a guy come out from behind a tree we'd just been passing, but what draws my attention more is the way that Maddox is stumbling backward as he

reaches for his gun. His hand is red with blood as his foot slips on the edge and he teeters before dropping down out of sight.

“Maddox!” I yell, but it just turns the gunman’s attention to me.

Dodging behind a tree, I feel my heart begin to pound desperately out of my chest. Did Maddox get shot? He had to have gotten shot. He was bleeding. How bad was it? He’ll be okay, right? He has to be okay...

The ghost of the woman reaches me and gives me a shove. “Run!” she screams, and I’m forced to move a moment before I hear a gunshot land right where I’d been leaning against the tree.

The man is between me and Maddox, so I can’t rush back to him, but if I skirt around the side, can I reach him? Or would I be better to draw him away from Maddox? Could I reach the radio in the car? If he stays on me, I could. I could reach the car, call for help, and then get back up here to assist Maddox as quickly as possible because what else can I do?

My foot slips and I start to skid down the hill. I decide to use it to my benefit and take off running, letting my momentum pull me down.

“Please, check on Maddox for me. Please?” I beg the woman.

She ignores me as she gives me another shove. It sends me off balance and I can’t help but question if her plan is to help aid my demise because I fall onto my hands and knees, skidding the rest of the way down the hill before slamming into a tree, but when I see a mark in the tree where a bullet embedded itself, I realize that he’d have killed me if I’d still been standing.

Pushing hard against the ground, I scamper up to my feet while wishing Natalie or Reggie or someone was here because I don’t know if I can do this alone. Especially when I don’t have a gun or a weapon or anything. And every step that takes me farther from Maddox makes doubt grow inside me.

Panic is roaring inside me as I run, now thankful for the brush and thick growth that I was cursing earlier.

“Is he close?” I whisper to the woman.

“Yes, you need to hurry.”

I’m running as fast as I can. My legs are burning and my lungs are working hard, but adrenaline is keeping me going. Adrenaline and an overwhelming fear that Maddox isn’t going to get up again.

A branch whips me across the face but the pain and blood are nothing. I can’t let it distract me. I have to keep moving forward. When I reach the road, I realize I’ve misjudged my direction in my fear. I look right and left but I can’t see the car anywhere on the winding road.

“Stop fucking running,” the man behind me growls like he thinks I’m just going to lie down and die.

“This way!” a ghost shouts, and I hesitate because I’m afraid I can’t trust him. How do I even know who I can trust anymore?

“Go!” the woman yells, making me realize I have to rely on them. They’re just people. If one person fucked me over, would I stop trusting all people?

No... I can’t. I can’t afford to.

Using the tree line to keep me out of the gunman’s direct line of sight, I keep moving and just as I round the bend, I see the car. Scrambling toward the vehicle, relief floods through me until I see the hood open. Did he tamper with our car? Was this all a setup? Did he know that Peter was bringing us and made it so we couldn’t get away even if we escaped his initial attack?

Did he destroy the radio too?

I have to pray he didn’t because every moment I waste in the car is a moment I’ve lost running

from him. I tear the car door open and dive inside, slamming it shut behind me. Scrambling, I grab for the radio and nearly drop it.

“This is Hiro. I need help. Maddox has been shot. I’m... off County Road 2—”

The noise of the bullet hitting the car makes my entire body tense as I try to contemplate what I should do. The car won’t be able to hold up against the gun, but is it more protection than being out there? Especially now that I’ve lost my head start?

I hit the lock on the door just as he tries the handle and looks in at me. He lifts the gun and fires. The first strike makes spiderweb cracks race throughout the window as I dive into the back, trying to put the seats between us, and manually pull the door lock. Throwing the door open, I dive out into the road, rushing across it and leaping the ditch as more ghosts move after me.

“Run!” one yells.

“This way!” another screams.

“There’s a house this way!” yet another shouts.

It’s like a chorus of noise and I’m unsure what to pick out. Going toward a house sounds nice but can I make it there when I can’t even *see* it yet? And then I’d be farther away from Maddox... away from help if it arrives. I don’t know where to go, I feel like I’m going in circles in an attempt to stay close to the car in the hopes that help arrives.

“Don’t go that way!” one yells as I see the trees are thinning. By the time I realize I’m reaching the wooded side of the lake, it’s too late, I’m butted up against it and he’s closing in, leaving me nowhere else to go.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



MADDOX

Pain is the first thing that hits me as I become aware that I'm lying on my back. When I'd gotten here, I don't remember. I don't remember falling either. I don't...

The pain spikes and I look down at my side where blood is oozing out, coloring my shirt red.

I was shot. Fuck, I was shot.

And the gunman is still out there with Hiro. I have to get up. I have to protect Hiro...

My whole world shifts as I struggle up to my feet. The blood oozes out, so I try to place a hand over my side as I realize I need to get moving. I need to hurry. I need to find Hiro, but I can't hear anything, and I have absolutely no idea where he went.

Slowly, I turn around, looking for any sign that Hiro had moved somewhere else.

"Hiro?" I call.

Toward the car, maybe?

Where the fuck is the car? Why am I so disoriented?

Something flashes to my left and I jerk my head to look, nervous it's the gunman. There's absolutely nothing there but I watch as a branch springs back into place.

"Spite?" I whisper as I stagger forward. "Reggie?"

I don't know what it is, but I feel like I need to move forward. I feel like something... or someone is telling me to go this way.

The idea of Hiro being in danger gets me going and keeps my legs moving. It's hard to get myself up to a jog, but I push my body while each step causes pain to spike inside me, though it's not enough to make me stop. I have to assume shock and adrenaline are to thank for that.

All I can focus on, all I can think about is that Hiro has no way to protect himself out here. I should have turned him around sooner. I should have forced him home. I should have brought backup... there are so many should-haves...

I don't see anything else strange, so I have to assume I'm going the right way, but what if I'm not? What if it was simply the wind blowing, and I'm running off like an idiot?

Slowing a little, I try to get my bearings. Could he possibly have headed back to the car because I feel like the car is that way...

A branch in front of me bobs and I know that I can't be seeing things. Someone is helping me.

When I hit the road, I move across it instead of heading down it toward the car. I'm anxious that I'm making the wrong choice, but I have to keep moving farther. The ditch on the other side is deep, and when I try to jump it, it jars my stomach and my world grows black. I feel grass under my hands and dig my fingers deep into the ground as I push myself up. Grabbing onto the bark of a tree, I use it to help myself to my feet.

And that's the moment I see movement as Hiro is flung to the ground by the gunman. He twists hard, trying to get away as the man bats at something in front of his face. In an attempt to stop Hiro, he kicks him in the head as I realize I don't even have my gun out.

Quickly, I pull it free as I see that he's aiming his own gun at Hiro.

My focus is off from the shake of my hand. I'm so far from them that I'm afraid I'm going to miss and hit Hiro, but I don't have time to debate any of it. All I can do is try my best to steady myself, steady my breathing, and focus.

I pull the trigger just before I hear his gun go off.

I don't think my heart has ever pounded so loudly in my life. My ears are ringing from the gunshot but Hiro is alive and that's all that matters.

The man is moaning from where he lies on the ground, writhing in pain, like he's shocked he started a gunfight and found himself at the wrong end of the gun.

My legs can't hold my weight anymore and I find myself dropping to the ground, but the man is still alive and capable of hurting Hiro. I need to help Hiro... I need to...

Hiro pushes himself up to his feet before moving toward the man where he kicks his gun away from him. He scoops it up and shouts something at the man as he makes his way toward me.

"Maddox!" Hiro yells as he rushes toward me, panic filling his expression. "Fuck. I hear sirens. They're close. I need to tell them where we're at. Do I leave? But I have nothing to tie him up with and you're bleeding so much."

"Hiro," I say, feeling unbelievably happy despite feeling like I'm dying.

Hiro puts pressure on the wound, making pain spike inside me. I want to fight him off, but I also know he's doing what he's supposed to do.

"Maddox... Maddox!" Hiro shouts, and I can hear clear panic in his voice. He's screaming for help, yelling for someone but all I can feel is relief that Hiro's fine. That everything's going to be all right because Hiro's okay.

Hiro leaps up and starts running for help as I feel this odd sense of foreboding now that he's gone. I just want him to come back. I *need* him to come back.

"Don't do this to me. Fucking hell, don't do this."

Confusion fills me because it seems like I just heard Reggie. Is Hiro doing this? Is he making it so I can hear Reggie?

I open my eyes and realize that I can't just hear Reggie... I can see him too. He's standing directly in front of me clear as can be.

The moment his eyes lock with mine, I realize what's happening.

The look on Reggie's face confirms it. "No, no, no, Maddox, no, Maddox, you can't..." Reggie's voice is filled with so much terror as he grabs onto me. A woman I don't recognize *shoves* me toward my body... toward my body...

Am I dead?

No, I can't be dead. I can't leave Hiro. No... this is Hiro's ability, right? That's all this is.

"Maddox, you need to fight," she says, voice desperate.

“Natalie?” I ask as I realize who she is.

“No, it’s not supposed to happen like this. We’re never supposed to meet,” Natalie says.

“Maddox, you need to fucking fight. You can do this. It’s only been seconds. Please,” Reggie says as he holds on to me desperately.

And that’s the moment I see Hiro. There are others with him but as soon as he sees me, he stops moving. It’s like he doesn’t even want to come near me even though I feel like I need him more than I need anything. I’ve never wanted him next to me so badly.

The devastation on his face is enough to make the situation sink in as I glance down at my body that people are surrounding.

I look back at Hiro who is on his knees just *staring* at me. I want him to come to me. I want to move to him. I want to comfort him, but I can’t move. I can’t do anything. All I can do is stare at him.

Reggie grabs my face in his hands, tears streaming down his cheeks. “You need to fucking fight, Maddox. You can’t die.”

I don’t know how. I don’t even know how to comprehend what’s happening. Everything around me is like a fog. Like I’m trying to lift up the whole goddamn world and I feel like I can barely stand.

Reggie’s fingers dig into my cheeks so hard that I can *feel* them. I can *feel* Reggie.

“Maddox. Please. I have missed touching you more than you’ll ever know, but it can’t be like this. Not like this.”

I can’t leave Hiro behind. I can’t...

I glance over at Hiro as I realize he’s hiding his head beneath his arms. He’s refusing to even look at me.

“Maddox, please,” Reggie screams and there’s so much pain in his words. So much pain in Hiro’s posture.

And I feel everything go dark.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



HIRO

“Hiro, are you hurt?”

I refuse to look up at whoever is talking. I can't look up because then I'll see him. Then I'll have to face the fact that it's true. That Maddox is dead.

I feel someone pulling me up, but I don't know how to unwind my body. How to draw myself out of this despair that seems to be crushing me.

“He's dead,” I whisper.

“What?” Parker asks.

“He's dead. I can see his ghost. He's dead.”

She drops her hold on me and takes off running. I know I need to go to him. I need to assure him it's okay and comfort him. He looked right at me. He needs me, but I can't get up. I can't face him because the moment I do, I have to admit that he really is gone.

“Hiro, honey, it's okay. They're helping him,” Natalie says as she grabs me and wraps her arms around me.

“He's dead.”

“No, he's going to be okay. They're helping him. They're getting him stabilized,” she says, voice soft and gentle.

Quickly, I look up and when I don't see his ghost hovering over his body, I don't know if I should be relieved or not because what if he crashes again? “He's okay?” I whisper.

“He's not dead,” she says as she squeezes me close. Reggie drops down beside me and leans into me.

“He's tough as hell, Hiro. He's stubborn and tough. He just wanted to say hi for a moment, alright?” Reggie says.

“He can say hi without fucking dying,” I say, my quivering voice showing my pain.

Reggie presses into me and I find comfort in both of them. “You know Maddox, he likes to put in all the effort. He's not a half-ass kind of guy,” Reggie says.

“Well, he could have done this half-assed,” I mutter as I lean into their touches. Right now, they're the only things making me feel balanced.

While I know I need to get up and go to him, I can't get to my feet. My whole body feels weighed down, and I can't tell if it's from the overexertion I put it through or the fact that I can't get myself to face Maddox in the fear I'll have to see his ghost.

"I should go to him. I'm being selfish sitting here," I murmur.

"No, let the professionals help him. There's nothing you can do," Natalie says, voice soft. "He's unconscious right now. He wouldn't even know you're there, and they're getting ready to move him."

I nod, knowing that when they get him up, I'll force myself to my feet and go with him. Parker returns after a moment, and I fear looking up at her.

"He's okay right now. They said that it was only briefly he didn't have a discernable heartbeat. And they have the shooter under control."

"It's my fault," I whisper. "I led him here. And then after Maddox got shot, he had to run here to save me. If I'd have just been able to do something... I could have helped him instead of forcing him to help me."

Parker kneels in front of me. "Hiro... the thing you have to realize about this job is that nothing is ever predictable. We could get shot simply checking out a noise disturbance. Maddox knows that. He risks his life quite often to help and save others. And you can bet your ass he'll still continue to do it because that's how Maddox is. He goes above and beyond for everyone but so much farther for you. That man would move mountains for you, Hiro. So why would he not do that to protect the person he loves? And why would you even remotely feel guilty about it? If you had a gun, could you have shot that man? Could you have shot him knowing that there was a possibility of killing him?"

I don't know the answer to that. I know the fear I felt when he'd had me down on the ground. There was so much desperation, but if I killed him... how much guilt would I have felt at that? And what if his ghost followed me and I had to see what I'd done every single day?

"Come on. They're getting him to the ambulance. You need to be cleaned up as well, but we'll send you with him, okay?"

"Yeah... how did you find us out here?" I ask. "When I ran toward the road to find you, your team was already almost to us."

"I... when I heard you were in trouble, I was close by and quickly arrived. As I came out... I felt like I saw something... I don't know. But it told me to go that way."

That's when I see Spite watching me from a branch. He glides down and lands on my shoulder.

Before I can ask more, she guides me to my feet, and I follow her over to the ambulance. They're quick loading Maddox up, and before I can say anything, Parker puts me into the front. Thankfully, Reggie and Natalie never leave me because they give me more strength than they'll ever know.

When we reach the hospital, I watch them unload Maddox while feeling uncertain but thankful Reggie and Natalie are here with me. What would I do without them?

Someone comes up and smiles at me. "Hey, we were told that you're a little banged up as well. Why don't you let Maddox know that you'll be right back when you're done."

"I can go up to him?"

"Briefly," she says as she guides me over to him.

Afraid I'm going to get in someone's way, I slip up to him and reach out, squeezing his hand gently and hoping with my whole being that everything will be alright.

I swallow back a lump in my throat because he looks so pale, but he's here. He's here and not as a ghost.

"Come with me, please," the woman says.

"Can I stay with Maddox?" I ask, reluctant to let go.

“Not at the moment. So come with me but if I hear *anything*, you’ll know, okay?”
I nod and allow her to lead me off.



The nurses are phenomenal about keeping me updated on how Maddox is doing and when they tell me that the bullet didn’t cause much internal damage, I’m so relieved. Getting the bleeding stopped, a blood transfusion, and care seems to be stabilizing him. So when they finish stitching a few of my cuts and cleaning me up, I’m finally allowed to head to the waiting room. Along the way, Patricia and Nicolás rush up to me.

Patricia grabs me in a hug that nearly sends me back into the ER. “Don’t do this to me,” she says, voice thick with unshed tears.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re going to make us all crazy with the dangerous things you keep getting into,” Nicolás says.

“I really am sorry, and I’m so glad to see you two,” I say as I sink into them. I can barely fight back the tears as my family, Reggie and Natalie included, hug me closely. They’re my strength and I’m so lucky to have them here for me. Losing my parents and Sean was horribly hard; I never want to go through such heartache again.

Once I manage to calm myself, I head to the waiting room where we’re left for hours before a nurse comes to get me and tell me that I’m allowed to visit Maddox.

I head back to the ICU where she takes me past the curtained sections to the corner where she guides me inside. Honestly, I’m surprised to see Maddox is awake and even smiling when I walk in.

“Hey,” he says.

I stare at him, unsure how to even find words to use as my eyes start to water again.

“Hiro, I’m fine. Come here,” Maddox coaxes as he holds his hand out.

“You died,” I whispered.

“Nah, don’t worry about that,” he says. He sounds drugged, groggy almost, but he seems okay. He seems fine, so why can’t my brain be like “He’s fine, be happy.”

I walk over to him and reach a shaking hand out to take his like I’m afraid that if I touch him, it’ll all be a dream. “You almost died. No... you did die. You died and... Maddox.”

“What can I say, I wanted to see Reggie and meet this Natalie lady. You didn’t tell me she was so pretty.”

“Awww... he’s so much sweeter than you,” Natalie says.

“Because all I can see is her evil personality,” I joke, though my voice is shaky.

“You love it and you know it,” Natalie says as she kisses the side of my head.

“There’s... so much shit going on inside me right now that I can’t even... decipher it. I feel relieved yet I also want to melt on the ground and sob, and then there’s anger and happiness and... I’m sorry I led you off to an evil, lying ghost.”

“Don’t you dare apologize,” Maddox says.

“I didn’t even go to you when you were... when I could see you,” I whisper.

“Yeah, because you were *upset*. Hiro... don’t blame yourself. We’ll just call it a fun opportunity to see Reggie since I hadn’t seen him in a while. I’m just disappointed I didn’t get to see Spite. Or tell Reggie that the one time I blamed him for eating my cookies I’d forgotten that I’d already eaten them.”

“I fucking knew it!” Reggie yells. “Think I can unplug him?”

“He’s not on life support,” I say as I try not to let their ridiculousness make me smile.

“Is he threatening to unplug me?” Maddox asks.

“He is.” Gripping his hand tightly, I lift it up and kiss it. “I’m so relieved. And happy. How is your pain?”

“Fine. Honestly, right now, I feel okay,” he assures me. “I feel loopy and weird as hell. Ask them who guided me to you. Someone led me over to where he was trying to shoot you.”

I look over at them but Reggie shakes his head. “I was with you, dude. I was trying to pull forth some ghost jujitsu, and then I realized I didn’t know jujitsu.”

Natalie shrugs. “I was with you too. Must have been Spite.”

“I guess Spite, but how did he know to lead you to me and how could he do it without me close by... like you saw him move stuff?”

“Mostly like... branches moving in odd directions or something. It was so slight that at times I thought I was hallucinating and that it wasn’t actually happening, and I was just chasing the wind. What about the guy who shot me? Is he alive?”

“I have no idea,” I admit.

I grab a chair and pull it up so close to him that my legs are cramped, but I don’t care. I’d crawl right into bed with him and hold him to me if he needed me to.

Maddox becomes silent and I realize he’s fallen asleep, so I just hold his hand while texting Nicolás and Patricia to give them an update.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



MADDOX

“No,” Hiro says the moment he walks into the hospital room like he knew I was going to ask about work. “I’m just here to collect your ass.”

“Yeah, and tell me everything I’m missing,” I say as I sit on the edge of the hospital bed, fully clothed and ready to go. If they would just release me, I’d go on with life quite merrily. The pain has been quite manageable with good drugs. Now the worst of the pain is being stuck in this room. Even though it’s only been two days, I feel like I’ve been here for weeks.

I also feel like I’m being left out of everything. While I now know that the man who shot me goes by the name of Bill Smith, I know very little about him. Using my phone, I couldn’t find anything helpful, definitely nothing to pinpoint why he’d do this. So I need to get out of here and be of use.

That is, once I get past Hiro.

He folds his arms over his chest and gives me a *very* pointed look. “Maddox, you’re healing.”

“I’m back to new.”

“Are you a vampire with magical regenerative powers? Did I miss that revelation at some point? No, you’re not healed enough.”

“Yet the game goes on, does it not?” I ask, referring to Ambrose’s twisted game.

Hiro shifts uncertainly because he does know that it goes on, and that we can’t waste time with me... *resting* or whatever bullshit he wants to pull.

“You were *shot*. Right now, you’re on painkillers making your brain think it’s normal to run around and face the world. You’re not working.”

I give him a look that should hopefully convey that I’m working whether he likes it or not. The look he gives me right back is one filled with pure stubbornness that makes me question if he’ll actually win the who’s-more-stubborn fight.

“Did you have help getting dressed?” Hiro asks.

“Yeah, I asked the nurse to hold my hand,” I say sarcastically.

His eyebrow shoots up as he stares at me. “Have you ever asked for help from anyone other than me?”

“I needed help wiping my ass when I was like one,” I say.

“Ah, right, makes clear sense. And then by two you were like ‘Fuck off, woman, I got it?’”

“Pretty much.”

“I literally left just for an hour and you go full out the moment I’m gone,” Hiro says.

“That’s about right,” I say. “I had to wait until you weren’t around to yell at me.”

The nurse comes in, cutting our conversation short and thankfully allowing me to leave. She’s accompanied by someone from transportation who really thinks they’re going to wheel me out in a wheelchair.

“I don’t need a wheelchair,” I say.

“Get in the wheelchair or you’re staying here another night,” Hiro orders.

I make sure everyone is well aware of my displeasure with a loud sigh as I sit down, disgusted by this show.

“Don’t pout,” Hiro says.

“I’m not *pouting*,” I grumble as the woman wheels me out the door.

“I’m going to head out and get the car. If you’re not in that wheelchair when I pull up, I’m leaving you here,” he threatens.

Of course he knows me quite well, but I’m still allowed to complain about this treatment. Once the woman gets me down to the pickup zone, Hiro arrives with the car and hurries around to help me. I make sure to quickly get in the car before he can, resulting in him sighing and getting into the driver’s seat.

“Let’s head to the department,” I say, determined.

“Okay,” he agrees, surprising me.

“Are you lying?”

Hiro gives me a sweet smile that reeks of lies. “I’d never lie to you,” he says as he turns in the opposite direction. “Relationships built on lies are always so much rockier, you know? Gotta pack this one full of truths.”

“You say as you drive in the opposite direction.”

“Huh... that’s strange. Didn’t know that was going to happen.”

“Didn’t you?” I ask with a raised eyebrow.

“No! Honest mistake. But you’ll forgive me because you love me,” he says with a smile.

“Don’t turn that smile on me,” I say as he slows at a stoplight before turning a creepy smile toward me.

“You don’t like my smile, Maddox? I thought you loved every part of me.”

“That sounds like a threat, but I do.”

“Good because you nearly killed me by making me worry so damn much. You realize you’re not allowed to do shit like that to me, right? You can’t torture me like that.”

“I know,” I say as I set a hand on his lap. “I’m sorry. I feel awful about what all I put you through.”

“You’re always wanting to put me in a bubble but maybe it’s *you* who needs a bubble. I got some handcuffs to attach you to different locations in the house so you can be forced to stay right where you are while I go out and party.”

“I will bust straight through those handcuffs,” I assure him.

“Are you the Hulk now?”

“Handcuff me to anything and you’ll find out,” I warn him.

“While I’d love to see, I also have this weird feeling that you’d tear your wound open out of pure stubbornness trying to get free. Am I right?”

"I'm not that dumb," I protest.

Hiro raises an eyebrow as he quickly glances over at me, like he has to put our lives at risk to make sure I'm aware he's suspicious of my dumb meter. "Reggie thinks we need to play doctor when we get home and Natalie just keeps on saying that she's seen a porno like that."

"Which one? Where I bust through the handcuffs or we play doctor?"

He hesitates a moment before grinning. "She said both but she'd like us to combine the effort to make it extra exciting. Reggie said he'd do me a huge favor and sit on your face to keep you down while I'm gone."

"Oh, lovely. Tell him that I'd rather not be traumatized like that."

"Natalie says that you should accept Reggie's ass gracefully," Hiro says as he turns onto our road.

"And if I don't?"

"Reggie said he'll cry, and I know you might not be able to hear it but it's shrill, so please, if you love me at all, just let Reggie sit on your face."

"The decisions you come up with fascinate me," I realize. "Like *is* that what you want?"

Hiro's grinning as he pulls into the driveway. "I'll carry you into the house."

"Bullshit," I say as I go to throw the door open so I can head into the house myself, but Hiro locks the door. I reach to unlock it and he just locks it again.

"Maddox, my love, you are currently wounded and useless. You must allow me to carry you," he says, and I know that he's mocking my inability to just relax.

"I'll show you how useless I am," I threaten as I use the manual lock to unlock the door and slip out. Hiro hurries after me.

"Stop *speed walking*. Why are you so damn stubborn? You will heal faster if you just rest your body and—did you just *fling* the front door open with all your strength?"

"Nope. I gently nudged it open hard enough it might have hit the wall," I say as I head in while Hiro charges after me.

Once inside, he grabs my wrist, making me stop what I'm doing.

"Maddox," he barks.

I just grunt at him which I feel like is better than *any* reply.

"Maddox, come on. Please?"

"We are working against the clock," I say in case he's forgotten.

"Yes, I know. But it's not like we've just tossed the case off into oblivion. We managed to stop a man who might have been in charge of killing the other victims. There are other detectives working the case. You wouldn't even be *allowed* to question him," Hiro says. It's quite annoying he remembers this. "Just for an hour, sit down and rest. I'll ask Avery to send over anything you can work on while at home if that'll make you behave."

I stare at him until he points at the couch, then grudgingly head over and sit down.

"Thank you," Hiro says as he heads off to the kitchen. He returns with some water and a snack, which he sets next to me before sitting down on the couch. "I sent Avery a text. She'll get us anything she can within an hour." He leans against my shoulder and sighs as it slowly settles into my brain what I've been doing to him. He's been anxious as hell, rightfully so.

If our roles had switched and he'd been the one who nearly died...

I'd be losing my mind. I wouldn't want him out there ever again. I'd never... god, if I just think about how I'd felt when he'd been taken... the fear I'd felt at the idea that I might lose him... and it was even worse for Hiro who *saw* me like that. Who saw me as a ghost.

How awful would that be? How much stress did I put him through? And now I'm acting like a

child wanting to run back out.

He's quiet as he leans against me, his head lying on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry," I say as I lean my head into his.

"For what?" he asks.

"For wanting to selfishly run back out there without considering your feelings."

Hiro's silent for a moment as his fingers slide up onto my thigh. "I'm just... I know this job has many risks and it also has the reward of helping people and saving lives. Sometimes, it's hard for me... losing my parents was just..." He shakes his head. "And then I lost Sean... it's been tough, you know? And it really makes you realize that people aren't invincible. I think when you're a kid, you know about death but you live in this bubble where you believe it won't happen to you. It won't happen to those you love and care about... but it does and once you realize that, it's like you have this fear always in the back of your mind ready to remind you that it could happen to someone you love."

I kiss the top of his head since it's all I can reach. "I'm really sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry, Maddox. I'm aware that it's not a healthy way to think. I know this is your job and I'd never make you change. I know your job comes with so many risks and I also know that you could save many lives doing what you're doing. I just need a moment to feel you here. To know you're safe and everything's going to be alright."

Hiro takes a deep breath, snuggling closer to me as he continues. "And then we can keep moving forward. You are going to rest, but Parker wants me to go back to the woods and see what was going on there. There was a female ghost and a few others who were wanting to help. They could know something or at the very least tell us more about the gunman hiding in the woods."

I hesitate because I really don't love the idea of him going somewhere without me. But I have to trust he'll be safe. "You'll wear body armor?"

"Sure."

"And you'll be surrounded by at least fifteen people who will encompass you in two layers. We will call them your shields." This is not a question but a demand.

Hiro lifts his head to look at me. "You want me to have human shields?"

"Make sure they're taller than you so your head is well protected."

"You're a monster," he decides, which makes me grin.

"Maybe... as long as you're safe, I'm totally fine with being a monster," I assure him.

"Uh-huh... sure."

"Please, really do be safe. I hate the idea of you out there without me. Who else would run across the woods to save you while following what looked like a gust of wind?"

Hiro cocks his head. "Probably not too many people. Especially the gust of wind part. I'm still fascinated by that. How could Spite do so much when I wasn't nearby? Is it because I was in danger? You don't see anything now, do you?"

I look around the room but everything seems perfectly normal. "Nothing. Where is he?"

He points to his knee. "He keeps digging his talons in and looking at me like I'm dramatic if I flinch."

"Well... he saved your life so if he wants to claw the shit out of your leg, I guess you have to let him do it."

"True!" Hiro pets the bird which, to me, looks like he's just miming petting. I'm oddly used to it at this point.

I hook him with an arm and pull him in close to me. "Hiro. Please be careful. You keep me up to date, okay?"

“I will. And you will sit here like a good boy in return?”

I hate this promise, but I nod. “I will.”

“Great. If you’re good, I’ll bring some cheesecake home from that place you like. What else do you want?”

“That’ll be plenty.”

“We’ll just eat cheesecake for dinner?”

“I’d say that’s an appropriate reward for coming out alive.”

“I’ll get two cheesecakes. One for you and one for me so we can just feast,” he says. “If bullet wounds don’t kill us, overloading on healthy cheesecake definitely won’t.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN



HIRO

As I exit the vehicle, I stare off into the trees where Maddox died. Honestly, I didn't think it'd be a big deal coming back here, but now that I'm out of the vehicle, all of those emotions come rushing back.

"Hiro?"

Startled, I turn to look at Avery who drove me in. There's a whole team here that I feel like Maddox played a part in threatening to come. I'm also stuffed into protective gear and carrying a taser that I'm hoping I don't ever have to use, especially because my introduction to it was quite brief.

"If someone comes at you, you stun them in the balls," Reggie assures me.

I open my mouth to say something along the lines of, "That isn't needed," but he may have a point. Instead, I turn my attention to Avery who is watching me with concern. "Sorry, what was that?"

"You good?" she asks.

Even Parker is here, making her presence known by speed walking over to us. "Ready?" she asks.

"Yeah... I'm just..." I look around at the group of people, all here for me. All here because I'm supposed to find the ghosts and see if I can speak to them. It's an odd feeling... like they believe me or trust me or something. I spent so much of my life hiding behind my ability for fear of how I'd be treated that I never thought my life would end up like this.

"So... I mean... I'm not positive they have a connection," I say, scared that if they don't, they'll all conclude that I'm a hoax.

"I don't care. Let's go," Parker says as she ushers me off.

I nod and allow her to speed walk her way off into the woods. Honestly, I don't think she has any idea of where she's going but she's just prepared to go. So I take the lead, heading off in the direction Peter had taken us before luring us to our possible death.

"So this guy that shot Maddox..." I start.

"His name is Bill Smith; he's a construction worker who has absolutely no criminal record or prior signs of violence according to his family and friends. He's described as being kind and caring, the sort of man who would go out of his way for everyone. He has a young daughter who is five, and the two of them volunteer at shelters," Parker says.

"It's strange. He's extremely distraught and I think it's legitimate," Avery says.

"Maybe distraught he didn't succeed in murdering us because he's obviously pretty good at it," I grumble.

"That's what's weird about it. He really won't talk about it or explain why he targeted you two," Avery says.

"He clearly had to have planned all of it from way before Ambrose was arrested, right? How else would Ambrose have been able to dictate all of this without someone noticing?" I ask.

Parker shakes her head. "Ambrose hasn't called anyone or insisted on talking to anyone but you. I guess he asks frequently how you're doing. Can he use the ghosts to communicate with people?"

"I... really don't know," I realize. "I guess he could have that ability, but I can only do that when it's someone close to me. Could he be talking to someone close?"

No one really seems to know the answer to this.

"Do you think I should talk to him again?" I ask.

"Well... you did stop this attack, and he might slip up if he feels like you guys now have the upper hand even a little. Or he might just enjoy it more. He's quite hard to read."

"I'll talk to him again and see if I can get anywhere... I have my doubts, but it's worth trying. The rules are getting a little convoluted. Are there two victims left now since we foiled the plans of the third person?" I ask.

There's a lot of uncertainty about that as we head up a hill that should lead us to the area where Maddox got shot. Thankfully, I see a ghost before I get to that point because the thought of being in that area again gives me anxiety. It's the woman who'd helped me before, but this time, she's sitting up in a tree looking down at me.

"I was wondering how long it'd take you to come back," she says.

"What's your name?"

"Charlotte. And yours?"

"Hiro... did you know the ghost that was here? The one that led us in?"

"I do."

"What about the guy who shot at us? Did you recognize him?"

She shakes her head as she jumps down. "No, I'd never seen him before."

"But you knew he was going to shoot us?"

Charlotte shrugs. "He had a gun... before you arrived, he was on the phone with someone just... crying. Telling her how much he loved her. How wonderful she was and to never forget that she's the best in the world. I thought he was going to kill himself. But when he heard people, he got up from where he was at and turned straight toward you guys. I saw you interacting with that ghost and I just... knew I had to warn you because that ghost... that ghost loves to hang around that awful man... the one who killed me."

"And me," someone says from behind me.

"And me," another one says.

I look around as six ghosts fill in around me. "He killed all of you? Ambrose did?"

Most nod and I notice Parker is just itching to know what's going on.

"I don't want to look rude but I'm going to text a little of what's being said so the others have an idea of what's going on without me interrupting you guys, if that's okay?" I ask.

"Of course," Charlotte says.

"Thank you."

Keeping it to brief bullet points, I text the main stuff I know as Avery and Parker look over my

shoulder to read it.

“Were you killed in these woods?” I ask.

“I was,” Charlotte says. “I died not too far from here. I met him at a coffee shop where he told me his name was Peter.”

“Peter?” I ask. “That’s the name of the ghost who came out here with us.”

She nods, not looking surprised to hear this. “Yeah, I figured that out later. He was pretending to be him, I guess. Told me he was an accountant, and we’d talk whenever he came in which was at least a few times a week... I started going more often in the hopes of seeing him because he seemed really nice. He invited me out for the day, and we ended up going out on a canoe on the river where he was super nice and sweet. At the end he seemed almost a little distracted but invited me to his cabin. I thought it’d be a nice cabin along the water, but when I got there, it was this... run-down thing and I started to get a bad feeling because he was acting weird, and I insisted that I had to go. That’s when he dragged me inside and killed me.”

“Do you know where your body is?” I ask.

She looks out into the wooded area, just staring out into it. “I don’t know. I feel drawn to this area... I feel like it’s out there somewhere... I just don’t know where.”

“But you can feel a draw to it? Do you think you could lead me in the direction you feel it?”

“I could try,” she says.

“You’re playing right into his hands.”

I turn and look at where Peter is watching me. “Ah, come to get us killed again?” I feel uncomfortable with him here, but I can’t let it get to me.

“You don’t think this is fishy? I mean... how convenient to find yourself in the woods where Connor’s supposed victims reside. You really think he would have set it up like that?” he asks.

I hesitate because he’s right. He seemed to have known I could speak to ghosts when he set all of this up. “He was planning on us dying.”

“He had no control over whether or not you’d die. Connor wouldn’t bank everything on the success of one man, now would he?”

I try not to let it show that I get what he’s saying. It makes sense though. Why *would* he have led us to them? Am I trusting them just because they warned me? What if that was also part of this game? I’ve already learned that the ghosts I’ve been dealing with pertaining to this case aren’t always truthful.

Fuck. I wish Maddox could see and talk to them. He’s better at judging expressions and words, figuring out what’s the truth and what are ultimately lies while I just fumble and want to believe the good in people.

“Now you’re thinking,” Peter says with a grin.

“You honestly think I’m going to trust you? You tried to get us killed,” I say.

“Perhaps. But if I hadn’t, would you ever have made it here on your own? You still had absolutely no idea what you were doing. But now you have someone to give you answers. Someone who’s not yet dead,” Peter says, looking wildly smug about this whole thing.

“Don’t listen to him,” Charlotte says. “He’s trying to get in your head.”

I look around, knowing that while I don’t have Maddox to help me, I do have another detective who is likely listening from somewhere. “Keaton?” I ask.

He comes forward with his hands stuffed in his pockets.

“What do I do?” I ask.

Keaton stares between the two of them for a long moment. “I think you have her take you to the

cabin she was killed in. We'll start there."

I give him a nod, glad I can rely on someone who can see and hear what's going on. Maybe I'm too trusting of others, but I find it hard to figure out when they're dragging me along.

"You're making a mistake," Peter says as I turn to Charlotte.

She hurries off, trying to get some distance between herself and Peter, which I don't blame her for. I'd love to get far from him as well, seeing as we don't really have a phenomenal track record. Sadly, I do notice he tags along, smirking the whole way, like he's loving absolutely every minute of this.

I turn to Keaton who I feel the most comfortable with of this group. "Am I walking off to my death?"

Keaton simply shrugs, like that's a good answer to this. "I'm sure you'll be fine."

"Are you?" I ask, not sure I agree with that. He just gives me another shrug, so I turn to Parker and Avery. "So this lady named Charlotte is going to lead us over to the cabin she was killed in. We'll see if we can get anything from that, I guess. They believe their bodies are buried in these woods somewhere but they're not sure where. I'm not sure if cadaver dogs or something could help? I really don't know."

Parker nods. "Let me see what I can find," she says as she falls back to call someone.

Honestly, I'm surprised they're listening. I remember a time not that long ago where she'd have refused to do such a thing without proof that she could also see. I'm not sure how she's pulling strings with the higher-ups, but the only thing that matters is she's doing it.

As we walk, Charlotte gives me details about herself. Her name, age when she died, and the day, which was about six years ago. Then I move on to the others, getting all the information that I can, which Avery writes down. I also make sure to keep Maddox updated with what I can, since I know he'd be unhappy being left in the dark. He's still rather unhappy and seems to believe that he should come help, so I send a message to Ben, Maddox's brother, and ask him to go check on Maddox, aka: prevent him from running.

The two had grown apart after Ben had tried to protect his son who'd been involved in the deaths of multiple people. While Ben hadn't fully known and had, at the time, speculated, Maddox still felt like he should have gone to him so they could confirm what was happening. Honestly, I don't blame him for feeling hurt and upset. I also know that Maddox had some feelings of guilt that this was happening inside his own family and he didn't know.

As we come upon the cabin, I'm not sure what I'm expecting. Something that doesn't look like it's falling down at the minimum.

It's no wonder he had to drag her inside it. No sane person would set foot in this old cabin with the windows boarded up, glass littering the outside, making me think that some kids busted them out before they were boarded.

Charlotte stares at the building, almost like she's fixated on it.

"Charlotte?" I ask, but she refuses to answer anything, so I look to Keaton.

He helpfully shrugs before walking up to the cabin and passing through the wall.

"We can't go inside without a warrant, so let me figure out who owns the cabin, and we'll go from there," Avery says.

"Okay," I say as I leave her to do that.

Since no one is watching me, I move over to a window, hoping to see around the boards, but I can't since the only opening is quite small. Wandering around the back, I check to see if there are any windows open there. That's when I find one above a slanted cellar door that leads straight down into the basement. I climb on top of it, hoping to use the height it gives me to peek in through the slightly

uncovered window to see if I notice any ghosts inside that I could convince to come out and talk to me.

The rusted metal groans as I climb to the top, but it allows me to peek into the window. I find it quite dark inside with all the windows boarded up, but I can see furniture in place, almost like someone had been living here when it'd been deserted.

Pressing my face against the window, I look to the side, hoping to see something. That's when someone hits the window from inside.

Startled, I step back, slamming down on the cellar door that groans under my weight. Suddenly, I feel myself falling. Thankfully, it's not a far fall before I hit down hard on the stairs on my ass, sending pain up my tailbone area.

"Fuck," I hiss as I go to stand up and crawl back out of the cellar before Parker fires my ass for entering without permission. But as I stand, I realize I'm not alone on the stairwell.

I back up quickly, drawing myself deeper into the basement. "Sorry, you startled me," I tell the ghosts.

They move toward me, making me nervous as an anxious feeling bubbles in my stomach.

"What do you want?" one says as they grab for me.

"I'm trying to help—"

"He's not here to help," another says. "He wants to watch us suffer. He wants to—"

The ghosts are closing around me until I feel like they're encompassing me. But it's fine. It's going to be fine because they're panicked. They just need to—

One of them bumps into me.

"I can touch him," he says, and I realize that I need to get away. Quickly, I jerk back as they lunge for me, making fear spike inside me.

"I'm trying to help you," I say as one grabs a hold of my wrist, tearing me forward. I push them off as I try to make it so they can't touch me, but it's hard to focus when there are so many voices around me. They're pounding into my head as they scream and shout and grab for me.

Needing to put some space between us, I turn and rush for the stairs that lead into the house since they're the only clear path. Racing up them, I find myself on the first floor where I slam into a man who just keeps walking without noticing I'd made contact with him. He stops suddenly and grabs for his throat as he tries to scream. Staggering, he drops to his knees.

Then he gets up and does it again.

Slowly, I back away from him until my foot catches on a woman lying on the ground. She grabs tightly onto my ankle. "Please, please, he's going to kill me. Please help me," she begs.

"It's okay," I say, wanting to help her but she doesn't seem to realize she's dead; instead, she's caught in this fucked-up reenactment of her death. She's trying to crawl away, dragging her legs behind her as she sobs for me to help. "I'm so sorry."

She jerks to a stop and then sinks right into the ground.

"Get out," a man says. "Get out, get out, get out!"

"I'm not here to hurt you," I say as I turn to see Charlotte slam against the wall like someone is pushing her there. She's desperately grabbing for the invisible hands wrapped around her throat.

One of the ghosts grabs my arm, tearing me back. The man has tears in his eyes as he clutches onto me. "Why are you doing this? Why?"

"It's okay, I'm here to help!" I say, desperately wishing he'd trust me, but none of them want to listen. They all seem stuck in this hell they can't escape from.

"What did I tell you?" Peter asks as he appears next to me, grinning madly. He looks to be

enjoying this as my head thunders. It feels like someone is repeatedly kicking me in the head from all the ghost activity.

Suddenly, I feel hands on my face and jerk back, terrified.

“Hey, it’s me,” Keaton says.

“Oh fuck, thank god,” I say, realizing that at some point, I’d dropped down to squat on the floor in an attempt to make all of it stop.

“Come on. Get up. Focus. We’re getting out of here.”

“Right,” I say as I grab onto him, hoping he’ll ground me enough that I can get up. But before I turn toward the stairs leading back down, I step up to Charlotte who won’t stop reenacting her death. It’s like this place is filled with so much malice they’re all losing their minds.

Grabbing onto her, I try to hold her still. “Charlotte, it’s okay. Please. It’ll be okay.”

She starts trying to fight me off, hitting and striking me as she gasps, like she’s trying to find the ability to breathe.

“Hey, it’s okay. I’m right here,” I say as she grabs my throat, her fingers tightening around it as she cuts my breath away. Tearing her hand off, I jerk her away from her death spot. “Charlotte, focus.”

She momentarily fights against me before her eyes snap up to mine. “Help me.”

“You’re fine. He’s not here.”

“He’s not here...” she whispers as she looks around, like she’s coming back to herself.

“Charlotte, stay away from him,” a man says as he shoves me back into the path of the man begging for my help.

“It’s okay. We need to stop this man from ever hurting anyone again, but I can’t without your help,” I say.

One of the men slams into me, shoving me back hard enough that I hit a small table which I trip over. Someone grabs my shirt, yanking it up so it’s choking me.

“Then why are you talking to him?” someone yells.

“Hiro, you need to focus! What the hell are you doing?” Keaton barks.

I’m panicking. I fully know that I’m panicking and that I shouldn’t be. I need to make sure everything is okay. I need to—

“Stop!” I scream and the hold on my shirt disappears. Everyone suddenly becomes less solid... less lifelike.

My brain feels like it’s splitting as I use the table I’d knocked into to help me to my feet. “I want to help you but not like this. Not if you’re going to hurt me,” I say as I start backing toward the basement. “Ambrose has been arrested so he can’t hurt you anymore.”

“Ambrose didn’t kill me,” one of the men says.

“What?” I ask, startled. “Who killed you?”

“What are you talking about? I saw you talking to him!”

“Who?”

He points and I turn to look at Peter who is leaning against the wall. He looks quite smug as he folds his arms over his chest. “Ohhh, I can’t take credit for all of them,” he says. “Honestly, I don’t even remember. Maybe that one.” He points at a woman watching him from the corner. “And maybe... hmm... god, they all look the same after a while.”

He seems so smug. So proud of what he’s done.

“Were you and Ambrose working together?” I ask.

Peter just keeps smiling as I hear someone yelling my name.

Quickly, I turn and hurry down the stairs as nausea rolls through me from using my ability to this

extent.

“Hiro! What the hell!” Parker yells from outside the cellar.

“Sorry, I fell through the door and the ghosts wouldn’t let me out,” I say in a hurry as I push past her and rush over to the trees where I throw up. God, my ability hasn’t fucked with me like this in a while to the point where my nausea is this bad.

Is it because there are so many?

“Umm...” Keaton stares at me. “You... going to live?”

“Probably,” I say as I lean against a tree.

“Good... good.”

“Is my head still in one piece?”

“I think so.”

“That’s good. It feels like it’s split into two, and then all that brain stuff is oozing out of my ears.”

“Eh, you look like you got in a fight but the rest of you seems fine.”

I turn as I hear Parker walking up.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah, fine,” I say. “Sorry about that. There was... a lot of stuff going on in there and... I did find out some of the people who died in there weren’t killed by Ambrose but Peter.”

Parker looks at me in surprise. “Like they were working together? Or I suppose Ambrose could have taken over what Peter started,” she says thoughtfully. “We’ll get the warrant and then a team out here to walk the area.” She reaches out and tips my chin. “And you need to go home and tell Maddox that you didn’t get those cuts and bruises on my watch. That you fell on the way up to the house because he’s going to be pissed.”

I pull out my phone and flip the camera so I can see the bruises she’s referring to. Sighing, I wipe at the drying blood but there’s little I can do about the handprint bruise around my throat.

“No, I’m going to stay. They might migrate toward the bodies,” I say.

“And am I going to carry you? You look like you need support.”

“Maybe,” I say as I watch the ghost who’d been yelling at me to leave walk toward me. He doesn’t say anything as he stares between us.

“That’s Deputy Chief Parker,” I tell him as I wave at her. “We’re going to search these woods in the hope of finding the bodies, but there are a lot of places to search.”

He seems uncertain as he continues to stare at me, making me wonder if he’s not going to help. But when he starts walking, I decide to follow him.

“I don’t know who it is,” he says as he moves.

Parker trails after me as we move a good distance from the cabin before he stops, points down and disappears.

“I guess start here,” I say with a sigh.

CHAPTER TWENTY



HIRO

Since it'll be a while before they need me again, I go home with the hopes of taking a nap so my brain can solidify a little bit from the mush-like state it's currently in.

When I walk up to the front door, I steel myself for dealing with Maddox. It looks like Ben is no longer here, which means Maddox will be able to be as dramatic as he wants.

The moment I swing the door open, Reggie jumps in front of me, making me startle and smack my hand on the wall.

"Ow, dammit."

"Where the hell did you go?" he asks.

"Umm... I was out looking for a ghost to explain what happened," I say.

"You left me."

"You could have found *me*!"

"I heard you had frisky time with my one true love," Reggie says.

My eyebrows scrunch as I question how we came to that conclusion. "Who told you that?"

"Keaton did. He said you sweetly took him for a sunlit walk through the woods. As your legs moved upon the ground, you stole embarrassed glances as your fingers were drawn to each other like a bird to a worm. You wrapped your little worm fingers around him and made sweet love—"

I look at Keaton who must have arrived before me.

"Sweet, sweet love," Keaton says very dryly.

"Stop trying to make Reggie jealous. You know that just turns him on more," I say as I hurry past them into the house where Maddox is rushing toward me. My hope is if I'm moving fast enough, he'll think everything is fine. I can't be hurt if I'm still chugging along at a good clip.

"Are you whole?" he demands, stopping me before I can slip on by.

"I think so," I say.

"You better check to see how many holes he has," Reggie says.

"I saw a porno like that!" Natalie interjects.

"You're not checking my holes..." I regret it the moment it's out of my mouth.

"Umm... what?" Maddox asks before he sees the bruise. "HIRO?"

“WHAT?” I yell back.

“WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR NECK?”

“WHY ARE WE YELLING?”

He grabs my arms and pulls me closer. “Who did this?”

“Parker. I was just like ‘Parker, please, I wanna go home and snuggle with Maddox.’ And she grabbed me by the throat and was like ‘No, you whiny little bitch, you work. Work, dammit! Work!’ It was extremely traumatizing.”

“I’m going to fuck her up,” Maddox decides like he doesn’t realize I’m joking.

“Maddox, calm down. It was an extremely upset ghost who didn’t mean to do it. The ghost thought I was working with Ambrose and Peter. It’s okay.”

“I’m going to fuck her up,” Maddox repeats and I kind of feel like maybe he wasn’t joking about attacking his boss.

“Umm... no, you can’t *fuck up* your boss. I fell through this cellar door and was chased into the cabin—”

The look on Maddox’s face tells me that maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned the trouble I found myself in.

“And she just *watched*?” he asks. “She was supposed to protect you *with her life*. Did you forget that your body was supposed to be encompassed by people?”

“She might have been making a call and like a good, well-listening boy, I went around the back of the house where no one could see me and climbed on a super-rusty cellar door to peek through a window before falling in dramatically and rolling down into the basement filled full of ghosts. You know, the norm.”

Maddox beckons me toward him. “Let me finish what the ghost started. I’ll be quick and then I won’t have to fret anymore.”

“No! I don’t want to be choked. I want to sit in a quiet room so my headache can go away. You should be lying down yourself, so come on.”

“And if I do, you’ll tell me everything?”

“Yes.”

As his judging eyes follow me, we head into the bedroom where I strip down to my underwear before climbing in, since we have an audience.

“Tell him to take it off,” Natalie says.

“Natalie wants to see your booty,” I tell Maddox because I also wouldn’t mind seeing it.

Maddox ignores her as he climbs into bed where I shut my eyes and sigh in pure bliss.

“Oh, the darkness is my new friend. This is amazing.”

“Would a striptease make you feel better? I’m a professional,” Reggie says.

“No, no, it wouldn’t.”

“What’s that?” Maddox asks.

“Reggie’s wanting to give me a striptease. While he thought it’d make me feel better, I think that would cause permanent brain damage.”

“I’ve seen his stripteases, and trust me, they do. When we were in college, we had this annoying roommate who kept telling everyone that I was hitting on her. So we staged it that she’d come in as Reggie was delivering his ‘ultra-sexy striptease.’ When I saw it, I was laughing so hard that I was keeled over when she came in. She took one look at what was happening and started laughing to the point she peed herself.”

“It was beautiful! My dancing was beautiful! I will never forgive them for laughing,” Reggie says

as he grabs Natalie and tries to gyrate into her space. She puts a hand on his face and pushes him off.

“Thank you for saving me from that,” I say as I roll into Maddox. “Maybe if you shield me, I won’t have to look at Reggie.”

“I’ll do my best,” he says as he rubs my back.

“Dun duh... dun duh...”

I try to ignore it.

“Dun duuuuhhhh...”

“He’s making noises now, and I want to ignore it. I want to so badly,” I whisper.

Maddox gives me a reassuring squeeze. “Don’t look up, Hiro, it’s not worth the brain cells.”

I feel the bed dip and realize I can’t resist any longer. When I open my eyes, it looks like Reggie is crab crawling toward me but like a seductive crab.

“Did you look?” Maddox asks.

“I did.”

“Did you regret it?”

“Immediately.”

He starts laughing as I give him a look that clearly questions why he finds my suffering amusing.

“I can’t laugh,” Maddox mutters as he winces.

“Does it hurt? Maybe that’s karma for being mean,” I say.

“Possibly.”

“Maybe we should let them have a little time alone?” Natalie suggests.

“I was healing him with the power of my body, but fine.” Reggie doesn’t seem to love this idea as much, but he sets something on my head. I open my eyes to look at his ghost cat, Snugglebum. “Here, Snugglebum will heal you. A cat’s purr is known to heal.”

“Thanks,” I say as Snugglebum curls up on my head, immediately submitting to the idea of sleeping. Honestly, the pressure feels nice, so I leave him. Then it’s just Maddox and me. “I promise I’m fine. I hope I didn’t worry you.”

“Hmm...”

“Maddox.”

“I know. I’m glad you’re okay. I wish I could have been there with you.”

“Maybe you can be soon, but you have to rest up first.”

“I will,” he says, but who knows if he’s telling the truth. Maddox is well known for doing whatever his stubborn ass wants.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



HIRO

As I stand outside the door of the county jail, I glance back at Maddox hovering behind me. It's been over a week since he was shot and he's, of course, forced his way back to work to listen in on my meeting with Ambrose. The killings have oddly died down, making me question if it had something to do with the man who was supposed to have shot Maddox being caught. Could we have stopped future deaths from happening by stopping him?

Parker greets us once inside. She seems to have given up trying to send Maddox off since he refuses to budge, hating the idea that he can't go in the room with me while I speak to Ambrose.

"Before you go in, I have something you two will find interesting," Parker says as she leads us over to a room she has her laptop set up in. "Avery figured this out last night and I told her I'd let you two know when you came in. So Bill Smith's stepdaughter from a previous marriage is Ellen Keefe, the teacher Ambrose killed."

I look at her in surprise. "He admitted this?"

"No. We figured it out. Since he's no longer with that wife, it took some time to really connect them. This is what we get when Avery talks to him."

She waves at the laptop before pressing play and showing us the interview Avery had with him. Parker fast forwards a bit until she gets to a certain time. "He says nothing during all of that... here. Right here."

"Did you do this because of Ellen's death?" Avery asks.

Bill jumps, telling me what Avery had said shocked him.

The man shakes his head like he doesn't want to hear it. *"Stop!"*

"Did you attack Detective Booker because of Ellen's death?" Avery repeats.

"No! No! I had to save her. I had to help her. You don't understand."

Parker pauses the recording and looks at us. "That's all he says. He refuses to answer any more questions or acknowledge anything Avery says."

"So he thinks confessing anything will hurt someone?" Maddox guesses.

"We have no proof," Parker says.

That reminds me of something Charlotte said. "He has a daughter, right? Charlotte said she heard

him calling someone and telling them how much he loved them.”

“Right...” Maddox says. “So we could speculate that someone forced him to do this to protect his daughter. Maybe Ambrose will tell you, Hiro.”

“I can certainly try, but we all know how good he is at answering questions.”

“True.” Maddox watches the screen a moment longer before turning toward the door. “I think I should be permitted in the room with Hiro.”

“No,” Parker barks, and I find myself thankful I have someone here for Maddox to fight with about this that’s not me.

“Yes.”

“No. You’re not even supposed to be here or working *at all*,” Parker growls. “Now don’t ask again or I’ll have you removed from the building. Avery will be with him.”

As if right on cue, I see Avery hurrying down the hallway, smiling the moment she sees me. “Ready?”

“Sure...” I say, not overly thrilled about this idea, but what other option do we have? So we head into the room where Ambrose sits behind the table, all smiles the moment he sees me.

There are multiple ghosts behind him, including Peter who seems much less thrilled about seeing me. It seems like things haven’t been going the way he’s wanted, especially now that they’ve found a few bodies they’re trying to connect to Peter or Ambrose.

The location the ghosts had led me to revealed more than one body that’d been buried in it years prior. But it leaves me to question whether Ambrose killed them... or if Peter did before he died.

“Hiro, such a pleasure,” Ambrose says with a smile. “Are you enjoying our little game? I heard you used some ghosts to help you find some bodies, where has that gotten you?”

“Your game is falling apart,” I say. “We’ve already found bodies. We will connect them to you.”

He looks thrilled that I would think so. “Yeah? Because oddly enough you haven’t gotten very far. You might have stopped the third person, but you have two more. The rules of the game were to identify all of the players. And only then would I help you figure out the final one. Really, finding the players should give you the identity of the final piece. How nice of me, right?”

“So you wanted to kill Detective Booker in the hopes of—”

Ambrose actually looks surprised. “Oh, no, no. The detective wasn’t supposed to die. The person who was supposed to die is the man who shot him. I mean... if you’re going to play the game, you might as well play a part, right?”

He wanted Maddox to kill the third person... he set it up so Maddox would take the blame and in part be playing this twisted game.

“Why do you need to hurt anyone at all? What do you get out of this? Do you enjoy seeing their ghosts? Making them suffer? How can you face them after what you’ve done?”

“Quite easily,” he says. “Their deaths all had a purpose.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Every one is different. But it needed to be done. Maybe someday you’ll be enlightened enough to understand it.”

“Is that what Peter taught you?”

He turns and looks at Peter who is oddly quiet for once. “Oh? So you’ve met Peter, I take it?”

“Sadly, I have.”

“I hope he’s been a great help to you.”

“About as much help as you are. Are you threatening these people? Is that why Bill felt like he had to attack Maddox?”

“You just don’t quite understand, do you?” he asks.

“Should I? You just love dragging me around without ever giving me anything.”

Ambrose opens his mouth as I see Peter walk up and set a hand on Ambrose’s shoulder, squeezing it tightly.

“Did Peter teach you how to kill?” I ask when Ambrose’s eyes flicker past me. I turn to look at Charlotte who must have just arrived along with a good handful of ghosts from the cabin.

“Ah, did you guys already meet?” Ambrose asks, sounding delighted. “It’s wonderful to see some of you outside for once!”

It’s weird they’re here. Have they been following me and I haven’t noticed? Watching where I go to find Ambrose? Charlotte walks past me before setting a hand on mine. I glance down at it, unsure what she wants.

“How well can you feel their touch?” Ambrose asks curiously.

I look up at him, not bothering to tell him more than he needs to know about what I can and can’t do.

“Peter said one was able to choke you,” he says. “What a magnificent—”

And that’s the moment Charlotte wraps her hand around Ambrose’s throat. He’s handcuffed so he can’t do anything to me, but still he tries to throw himself back as multiple ghosts that’d been behind me rush for him. They grab and claw and dig at him. All the while, the guard and Avery can’t even see what’s happening and why Ambrose is throwing himself back in his chair.

His eyes catch mine, a look of panic at what’s happening crossing his face, and even though he opens his mouth, he can’t say anything.

“You fucking murderer,” Charlotte yells.

“I’ve had to watch my babies grow up without me. You’ve destroyed my life,” a woman shouts.

“You need to pay for what you did to us,” another shouts.

Peter’s furious as he faces the ghosts. “Stop that! No! Stop!”

As the guard rushes forward to see what’s happening to Ambrose, Avery jumps to her feet. That’s when it dawns on me that the ghosts have this much power because I’m here. Because I’m giving them the ability to touch Ambrose. There’s no way he’d let them do this to him if it weren’t for me.

I know I need to back away. I need to make it so they can’t have so much strength. But there must be something deep inside my brain that feels like it’s okay for them to do this. For him to suffer like this. To get payback for all he’s done to them.

It feels like I get kicked in the head as the headache explodes. I go to get up but stagger back, tripping over my chair. My eyes catch onto Ambrose’s. His entire face is red, his eyes bulging as he claws and twists and turns, like he thinks he can get free from this.

They’re going to kill him. I can’t let them.

“Stop!” I yell as I fall back toward the door. I’m not sure if the only way to get them to stop will be fleeing from here, but I might have to. “Stop!”

Suddenly, Charlotte falls right through Ambrose and the man gasps desperately for air. I’m leaning against the wall as the living people in the room look uncertain, clearly not sure what happened to cause all of this, but I can hear them calling for a medical team.

Ambrose slumps down in his chair, coughing and gasping for breath as he stares right at me.

“Why did you stop me?” Charlotte asks. I almost feel guilty I didn’t allow her to kill him, but it felt like *I* was doing it. That *I* was killing him.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her. “I know he deserves it but... I couldn’t.”

“Y-You...” He shakes his head. “C-Couldn’t... do it?” he asks.

"I'm not like you," I say as the door opens and Maddox rushes in.

"C-Coward," Ambrose says.

I stare right at him. "Am I the coward or are you? The man who hurts unsuspecting innocents?"

I can tell he wants to say more but he's struggling to talk. Maddox isn't waiting for him as he wraps an arm around me and pulls me toward the door.

"E-Even if you k-kill me, it doesn't end," Ambrose says as I see Peter looming behind him.

Maddox rushes me out of the room where I run into Parker who looks like she's about to sever some heads.

"What the hell happened in there?" she asks.

"Hiro didn't do anything. He never had any contact with him. The man must have had a seizure or something," Maddox says.

"That's what you're going with? A seizure?" Parker asks, sounding incredulous.

"Did you see Hiro make any contact with him?" Maddox asks.

Parker's gritting her teeth, clearly not sure she wants to go that route, but gives him a curt nod. "Go find a place to wait until I'm ready."

Maddox guides me down the hallway and takes me into the first empty room. We're quiet for a full minute just staring at each other.

"Am I in trouble?" I ask.

"You didn't do anything," he says. "Don't let them even think you might have done something."

"Right! I didn't *do* anything. I should have immediately jumped up and run for the door to break their connection to me. Instead, I just sat there. I literally had the thought of, 'What if I don't run or get up? What would happen to him then?'"

Maddox squeezes my arm. "It's okay."

"Is it?" I whisper. "*Is it?*"

"Yes. You didn't lay a finger on him. It's not your fault. None of it is."

While I'm not positive about this, I kind of just stare at him while my head pounds.

"What if I'd let them do it?" I ask quietly.

"It's not like he doesn't deserve it. You know how often I'd love for the victim of someone to be allowed to do something? Far more often than I'd like to admit. It's just not something one exactly... talks about, but I can guarantee you everyone in my department has thought it at least once," Maddox says.

"I guess but dear god... I could have fucked everything up. I might have fucked things up."

"*You* did nothing. You need to remember this so when Parker comes back in, it's clear *you* did nothing, got it?"

I nod and just in time because Parker comes rushing in through the open door. She stares at us as I try not to look like the guilty party here.

"What happened?" Parker asks.

Now I'm supposed to *lie*?

Seeing as I'm not spilling anything, Parker says, "On the record, no one touched Ambrose and they're going to look into the possibility of him having had a seizure or maybe an allergic reaction that closed up his throat that just... miraculously solved itself." I continue staring at her and she stares right back. "But *off the record*...?"

"We saw the exact same thing that you saw," Maddox says.

Parker jabs a finger in my general direction. "Is that why Hiro's expression looks like that?"

My eyes might get a little wider as my ghost group decides to arrive just in time to not help out.

“Tell her you like her hair, women love it when you compliment their hair,” Reggie says. “It looks a bit... ratted in the back but don’t tell her that part.”

“Not all women feast on compliments. That’s a stereotype,” Natalie says. “Tell her that when you’re in her presence you feel like a tiny little worm prepared to be crushed by her feminine prowess.”

Clearly no one knows how to help me.

“Just tell her to calm down and speak to you like a rational human being,” Keaton says, arms crossed over his chest.

Reggie gasps. “You’re so smart... it makes my heart flutter.”

Keaton might grunt, but he looks rather pleased with this.

Taking a deep breath, I try to get rid of the look of terror that had, at some point, crept onto my face. “I feel like you’re accusing me of something that I didn’t do which makes me feel like I can’t explain what actually happened,” I say.

Parker’s once pointed gaze turns laser piercing.

“Ma’am,” I toss out. I don’t know why. It kind of makes the whole situation seem worse for some reason.

“You caved. You can’t cave,” Keaton says. “Growl at her.”

“Tell her to take her sass and shove it,” Reggie says as he mimes shoving some sass up... somewhere. I try not to think about the miming too much.

“Tell her that her strong feminine power makes your knees weak... at least they’re making mine weak,” Natalie says as she fans herself a bit.

I’m surrounded by idiots. That’s all there is to it.

“How long are you going to stare at me for?” Parker asks.

“I guess as long as you’re going to stare,” I say. “I’d... happily tell you what happened, but I also kind of feel like you might murder me if I do.”

“I’m not going to *murder* you,” she growls, sounding very murderous.

“Make her swear,” Reggie says. “Pinky swear.”

I hold my pinky out.

“What?” she asks.

“I was told that to gain your trust and make you drop your walls I should have you pinky swear,” I say, having absolutely no idea why out of all the advice I got, that was the one my brain decided to latch on to.

She sighs as she grabs a chair and slumps into it. “I will not speak of what you’re going to tell me outside of this room. Now tell me everything.”

Huh... maybe Reggie was right. “Um... well, the ghosts of his victims thought they’d do to Ambrose what he did to them. I think they were able to make contact with him because of my ability, but I cannot confirm that.”

“That is why Hiro promptly headed toward the door,” Maddox says.

“Definitely wasn’t promptly,” Natalie mumbles.

“Sloth-like is more accurate,” Reggie agrees.

“I could have run a marathon faster than he walked the three feet to the door,” Keaton tosses in.

“I see,” Parker says.

“You can listen and watch and see that I had no part in it. I never told them to do anything. I had no idea they could even do it. Usually, it’s just the ghosts who are really familiar with me who can... but I’ve started to notice that it’s happening more with ghosts and people who have a lot of emotions

about something.”

“I see,” she repeats as she leans back in her chair. She’s quiet for a moment, so I look over at Maddox who shrugs.

“Well, I guess I better go make sure he’s not having any more seizures or reactions or whatever it is we’re going with. Hell, I’m definitely not a doctor,” Parker says as she heads off.

Just as she does, my phone buzzes. I start to pull it out but catch Maddox’s eyes first.

“So... that went... well... ish.”

“Which part?” I ask. “The part where I blew getting to talk to him? Or where I was nearly devoured by Medusa’s stare?”

Maddox grins at that one. “Medusa, huh... heh.”

“Don’t repeat that! What if she hears? She’ll come back and finish me off.”

“Supposedly, Maddox is the only one allowed to finish you off,” Reggie mutters.

I decide to ignore him as I remember I got a message. Lifting my phone up, I see it’s a message from a delivery app I use for bookstore deliveries. I pull up the message and read it quickly: *Front and back door are locked. Are you on the premises?*

That’s weird... Barry should be there.

I quickly write back: *I am not. If you’re still there, leave it at the back door, I’ll be there shortly. Thank you!*

“I think I forgot to tell Barry to cover for me today, so I’m going to run to my store to deal with a delivery. Is that okay or should I hang around here?”

“It’s not like you were involved in any part of it, so I don’t know why they’d need you. I’ll go with you,” Maddox decides.

“Orrrrrr you go home and rest like you’re supposed to.”

He grumbles at that while ignoring me. “I’ll meet you at your shop,” he says. “I’ll tell Parker we’re headed out first.”

“Do not meet me at my shop. Go home and rest. This isn’t up for debate,” I demand, but I’m positive he isn’t even listening. With a sigh, we part ways and I pull out my phone. I call Barry but he doesn’t answer, so I quickly send a text asking if he’s working today which he replies to almost immediately.

Barry: I’m sorry, I didn’t have it written down. Came down with the flu last night and I think my brain’s not working right. Do you still need me?

Me: No, don’t worry about it! I hope you get feeling better. If you need anything, let me know.

Barry: Thank you.

I get guided out of the building and head out to the parking lot. Before I reach my car, I’m stopped by the group of ghosts surrounding it. It makes me slightly uneasy as I walk up to the vehicle surrounded by bloodthirsty ghosts who probably want my head.

“Sorry... I stopped you,” I offer, not sure what else to say. Like do I tell them that it sucks I couldn’t let them kill their murderer?

“I don’t blame you,” Charlotte says with a sigh. “I’m not sure what came over me.”

A few of them meekly nod. The rest look like they’d love for lightning to strike down on Ambrose and me and blast us to smithereens.

“You promise me you’ll stop him?” Charlotte asks.

“I’m going to do everything I can to try, but I can’t do it alone. Anything you hear, see, or know will help me. I’m literally a man who owns a bookstore. I didn’t go to school for this stuff. I was just tossed into it, and half the time, I’m not even sure I know what I’m doing. Anything you find will help

me,” I assure them.

Charlotte nods. “We’ll keep searching.”

“Perfect,” I say. “Thank you.”

When I reach the bookstore, I head around back and start carrying boxes in. Maddox arrives not much later, clearly eager to help out when he needs to stay at home and just relax.

“You are to sit in the chair and watch me work or go home. You shouldn’t be out.”

“Are you going to open up the shop?” Maddox asks.

“Maybe for a few hours, and then what if I bring something from the steakhouse home?”

“*Or* we could go to the steakhouse.”

I sigh. “Why do you refuse to rest and heal?”

“Alright, I’ll go home and work on what I can with the case, and then we’ll go out. Deal?” he says and then gets up and leaves before I can say anything.

He clearly is only going to do what he wants anyway. Since a few of the ghosts had decided to follow me, I decide that I’ll try to get them to tell me their stories and spend my free time taking notes of everything that happened to them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



HIRO

As I peek into the bedroom late the next morning, I stare in shock that Maddox is still in bed. His body must really need some rest; otherwise, he'd be champing at the bit to run off and do who knows what. Take on a bad guy, mud wrestle... many other things that would cause him to use his muscles for the great good of mankind.

I came to check on him since I was wholeheartedly convinced that he'd snuck out of the house while my back was turned.

"What a perv just staring at him," Reggie says as he peeks over my shoulder, having to stand on his tiptoes to do so. "Makes you wanna do sweet and sexy things to him, doesn't it?"

"Honestly, I'm just shocked," I whisper before shooing the pestering ghost away who grudgingly leaves with Snugglebum in his arms. That's when Bandit darts into the room. I try to catch him but he's oblivious and Spite is right on his tail—literally trying his hardest to grab his tail.

Bandit leaps onto the bed, is surprised to find Maddox still sleeping—it's sad when even the cat is shocked to find him resting—and springboards off his chest straight into the air before coming down on Maddox's face.

"Fuck," he grumbles before opening his eyes and looking at me. "What time is it?"

"Sleepy time. Go back to sleep," I say.

He glances at his phone then continues to stare at it for a dramatically long time. "You... you have allowed me to sleep until 10:45? What is this, Hiro?"

"You clearly needed some sleep and to rest."

"No! What is this? My body... my body has forsaken me. This is utter bullshit is what it is. Something's wrong with me, Hiro. There's no other explanation for this disgusting display."

I sigh as I yank off my shirt, toss it, and then drop my pants before pulling the covers back and climbing into bed. "Or maybe you just needed the rest," I say as I slide up until I can feel his naked skin against mine.

"Hmm... I do like this idea," he says as his hand lands on my stomach and starts to roam downward.

"Oh my god, no. You are *healing*. Just... be good," I say as I wrap my arm around his chest.

“Your dick... is pressed against my hip and I’m supposed to ‘be good’?”

“Very good,” I say as I kiss his neck. “Let’s watch a movie.”

“If we’re going to watch a movie, I need to pee first.”

“Wow, that’s sexy.”

“Thank you. I want your naked body on top of the covers when I get back,” he says before sliding out.

“How about I bring you toast in bed?”

Maddox hesitates. “Only if you make it while naked.”

“Deal. If you’re not in the bed when I get back, I will leave. And I’ll never take my clothes off in front of you again.”

“Fine, fine.”

I slip out and hurry through the house to the kitchen, thankfully coming across no ghosts as I stick some bread in the toaster and get coffee started. When it’s nearly done, I see Maddox peeking around the corner.

“Bed,” I demand.

“But—”

“Bed.”

“Butt.” He eyes my ass.

I shake my head while shooing him off and quickly butter the bread before spreading jelly over it. With coffee in one hand and a plate in the other, I return to the bedroom to resume the position I’d had before the mini side quest pulled me away.

As Maddox eats his toast, I turn the TV on across from our bed and pick a random movie I haven’t seen in years. Maddox sets the plate to the side and slips back down in the covers as he turns to me and pulls me in close, his hand ghosting its way down my hip and side. He knows how much this is taunting me, but I love the touch so much that I don’t say anything to dissuade him. It’s almost hypnotizing.

“I don’t think I’ve seen this before.”

“Really?” I ask in surprise. “It’s a good one.”

His hand travels up as he plays with my hair, and I have to fight to keep from closing my eyes and just living in eternal bliss.

After the first scene where the gunman takes out five people, Maddox nods approvingly. “I think I’ll like this.”

“I thought you would.”

“I could have been an assassin in a past life.”

“I feel like that’s going a bit far, but it sure does sound weirdly sexy. Like... why would an assassin be sexy? They murder people.”

“What would you think if I said that I could have been a chef in a past life?” Maddox asks.

I nod approvingly. “Also weirdly sexy.”

“A teacher.”

“Also sexy.”

“A beautician.”

I hesitate because the idea of Maddox as a beautician puts a grin on my face. “Ridiculously sexy.”

“A hand model.”

“Hmm, the way those hands are making me feel, I have to say also sexy.”

“Basically, you’d find anything I do sexy?”

“You know what? I think that’s what it is.”

He grins at me before kissing my forehead and turning back to the show.

It’s a rare day I get Maddox to just slow down and soak in the quieter side of life, but sometimes, it’s the absolute best.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



HIRO

Just as I'm leaving my shop, my phone rings. Seeing it's Maddox, who is likely off doing something he shouldn't, I answer.

"What are you doing?" I ask. It's been over a week since Barry has been able to come in, so I'm left trying to figure out if I should leave the shop closed or open it during random hours when I'm not busy. Oddly enough, Ambrose has been quiet, and I can't tell if it's because we stopped the man who tried to kill Maddox or if something else has slowed him down.

"Just moving some boulders, climbing mountains, and doing some MMA, you know, things that you and Parker and everyone else must assume I'm doing while healing," he says.

"We just know you better than you clearly know yourself, I guess. Our worries are not unjustified. I have Reggie watching you, and you know what he reported to me that you did today?" I ask as I lock the shop door.

"That I was perfect."

"No, he said you drove around town, went to work, and drove to a department thirty minutes from here."

"Reggie's also a chronic liar," Maddox grumbles.

Reggie, who's been invading my space so he can listen in, gasps. "I would *never*."

"He heard you," I warn.

"Tell Reggie this is a private conversation."

"No, he's doing us all a favor while you're off doing shit you aren't supposed to. Barry is still sick, so I'm going to run over to his house and drop off some food. He assured me he was fine making stuff for himself, but I insisted. Then I'll be home. Did you find anything new out with all your snooping?" I ask.

"No, but the kid who you stopped from shooting his stepdad wants to talk to us this afternoon. Do you have time?"

"Yeah, I decided I'd keep the bookstore closed while all of this is going on. I can't justify being there when we need to see what we can do to help stop this guy, you know?"

"I feel bad about you having to do that, though. Do you want me to see if Ben can fill in? He's

pretty quick at learning that stuff,” Maddox says.

“It’ll just be a few days until Barry’s better.”

“That’s up to you.”

“Okay, I’ll let you know,” I say. “Then I’ll meet you at the office where you’re not supposed to be?”

“Correct.”

“Deal. See you within an hour.”

Once I’ve hung up, I get in my car and pull into a drive-through for some soup for Barry. I’ve never been to his house, so I follow the GPS before pulling up to a rather nice two-story home.

“Ooh, someone’s living fancy. Did you know he was rich?” Reggie asks.

“Doesn’t mean he’s rich... but no, I didn’t.”

“Tell Maddox you’re going to move up in the world.”

“How am I moving up in the world? Am I going to off Barry and just take over his life?”

Reggie shrugs. “I was thinking more of a seduction route, but if murder is what you want to go with, I’m your man. I’ve watched enough TV to know how to cover up a murder.”

“We’re not murdering anyone,” I grumble as I park the car.

“That is if someone hasn’t already been murdered. Look how creepy,” he says.

I glance up to the house and see Barry looking through the second-floor window. Hovering behind him is a ghost, staring down at us. From here, her expression seems odd, but it might also be the distance we are from her.

Barry turns from the window, but the woman remains standing there staring at us.

“God, she gives me the chills. If I’m ever that creepy, you have full permission to just exorcise me right then and there. Turn me into dust and scatter my body across your bed.”

“What... the fuck does that mean?” I ask.

“It means I want you to lie on my ghost dust ashes. You can make sweet love to Maddox on it if you’d like. I give you permission.”

“I don’t *want* permission,” I say, wishing we hadn’t even started this conversation, but naturally this is where we’re at.

The best course of action at this point is to ignore Reggie as I head up to the door, bag in hand. As soon as I raise my hand to knock, the door swings open and Barry looks out at me.

“Hey—”

Reggie gasps. “My dude, if I’m ever that motherfucking creepy, you *burn* my ashes and bury them in the deepest pits of hell never to be found, my god,” he exclaims as he stares at the ghost who is currently draped over Barry. I guess there’s a fine line between his ghost ashes being scattered over my bed and sent down to hell.

“It’s like she thinks she’s a fur scarf or something,” Reggie says. “Honey, honey, that’s not normal.”

The woman is staring right at me, her hollow-looking eyes locked on to mine as Barry probably questions my sanity.

“Thanks,” Barry says. “You didn’t have to.”

That snaps me out of it, and I nod. “Yeah, I know. I don’t mind, though. I just hope you get better soon.”

What is with this weird ghost? It’s like she’s attached to him, but I’ve never seen her anywhere near him before. Maybe if I could get her alone, I could figure out her death. I don’t want to freak him out if she’s just some random ghost who’s decided walking with her own feet is beneath her. And

Barry is so quiet about his past that I don't want to pick at something he might not want me to know about.

"Can I come in to use the bathroom?" I ask for some stupid reason. My hope is that out of curiosity, she follows me into the bathroom where I can talk to her privately.

"Uh... yeah, I guess. I don't want to get you sick, though..."

"It's fine," I assure him as I step inside and wait for him to motion in the correct direction. He does so by just kind of waving his arm without giving me any real good idea where it is. I can't tell if he's extremely ill or seriously depressed, but he looks different. His face looks hollow, his eyes sunken, and he seems lethargic.

"You alright?" I ask Barry.

"Just a cold," he says, but what else do I say to that?

Heading into the bathroom, I shut the door and wait... and wait while hoping the ghost will get curious and wander inside where I can talk to her. After a few awkward minutes of me questioning if Barry is wondering what the hell I'm doing in there, Reggie pops through the door.

"Yeah, that woman is not planning on moving. She won't even acknowledge or look at me. Hasn't said a word. Barry is currently lying on the couch and she's hovered over him, staring at him. It's rather creepy, and even though I'm dead, I'm pretty sure we should leave before I die a second death. M'kay? This is how horror movies start. Do you want to be in a horror movie, Hiro?"

"I don't, but I also care about Barry."

"Yeah, well maybe he just doesn't feel good so Saddy McSadPants over there felt like moping with him," Reggie decides. "That's a good thought. Yeah. That's all it is. Now let's not dally and skitter our asses right out that door before we die."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Let's go."

Reggie must notice me hesitating because his eyes get wide and he stares at me like I'm an alien. "I swear to god. You're the one in the horror movies who is like 'Oh no, someone is here to murder us... let's go toward the chainsaw noises and screams!'"

"I'm not *that* bad," I say as I push past him and head down the hallway. Barry is, indeed, lying on the couch. The woman is standing next to him, staring menacingly at him.

"Barry?" I say quietly, but he doesn't stir, so I stare at the woman, hoping she'll look at me. When she doesn't, I walk toward her and set a hand on her arm. "Hey..."

She refuses to acknowledge me at all, doesn't even bother to look at me as I debate what to do.

"*Leeeeave*," Reggie says. "You know you want to. You do remember that you have this insane ability to get into shit you shouldn't get into and then get kidnapped and nearly murdered. And then Maddox has to come and freak out because you nearly died. And then I have to comfort him by wanting him to take his shirt off, and all the while you're just like 'Let's look for the next creepy thing to get involved in.' She can't touch him or anything. Come back like a month from now or maybe in ten years and see if she's still there."

I sigh since I suppose Reggie is making *some* sense. I'm just not quite sure I want to listen to him. But I nod and turn around to head for the door as Reggie makes some dramatic spectacle about how he can't believe I actually listened to him. "Has to be the first time you ever did."

I ignore him.

"FIRST TIME," he shouts. "You popped your listening cherry."

"You are a nuisance," I determine.

"I am..." He freezes, clearly staring at something before going, "Huh."

“What?”

Reggie starts waving his hands around wildly. “No, no, no. If you come over, it’ll become a huge thing, and you will refuse to leave the murder house with the ghost from hell. We will forever be haunted. We’ll likely have to change our names, our occupations, and move to the Antarctic where no will know us and—”

I push him out of the way and look down at Barry’s table. At first, I don’t see anything too interesting on it, but if it was enough to shut Reggie up, it has to be good.

Stepping closer, I finally realize what caught his attention and pick up a picture of a much younger Barry standing next to someone I recognize.

“Hiro?” Barry mutters.

I turn and look back at him. “Hey, sorry.”

He sees what I’m holding and jumps up before rushing over and grabbing the picture from my hand. “What are you doing going through my shit?”

“I wasn’t... going through anything. I was heading for the door and saw the picture and... I just know... knew that lady.”

Barry looks down at it for a long moment. “You knew her?”

Know. I know her. “...Yeah.”

He stares at me as the ghost moves over to him before wrapping her arms around his neck. “Don’t listen to him,” she says softly into his ear, so quietly I could barely hear it.

Barry just stands there staring at me as the ghost tries to urge him away.

“Barry, you know about me taking clients occasionally into the back room, right?” I ask.

“Yeah...”

“That’s because I’m helping them talk with a loved one who passed because I see... them,” I say, trying to gauge his reaction.

“Them as in... you can see dead people?”

“Yes.”

He snorts and shakes his head. “I don’t feel good. I’ll see you at work, Hiro.”

“And I’ve seen Natalie almost every day since I was ten,” I say.

“Get out.”

“What?” I ask, startled by the conviction in his voice.

“I said get out. I don’t feel good, and I don’t want to deal with this... shit. Please. Just leave.”

I hesitate, but honestly, what else would I say or do? Push him to tell me about Natalie? I may be dying to know what happened to her, but it’s clear he’s not willing to talk. “I’m sorry,” I say instead. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

He doesn’t say anything else to me, just goes over and slumps down on the couch as I hurry for the door. Once out in the car, I sit down for a moment before turning to face Reggie.

“So that went well,” I say quite sarcastically.

“Yeah...”

“Why didn’t Natalie ever tell me she freaking knows Barry?”

Reggie shrugs. “First I’ve heard of it.”

“Can you go find her and drag her ass here?” I ask.

“Sure,” he says as he disappears from the car while I pull out onto the road and head for the department.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



MADDOX

“So... Barry and Natalie knew each other?” I ask in surprise.

“Yeah. Can you do some like magic sneaky shit and figure out how?” Hiro asks as he sits in the chair next to my desk.

I raise an eyebrow at this demand. “Like wave my magic wand?”

“Yeah, something like that. Something magical.”

“Well, I could look into it, but I’ve looked her up in the past and couldn’t find anything about her, remember? The name doesn’t come up with anything that fits her.”

Hiro’s quiet for a moment as he thinks. “You think she made up some random name for me? If she did, it definitely wouldn’t be Natalie. It’d be like... Busty McGee or something weird.”

“Weren’t you like ten when you met her? You sure she would have requested to be called that?” I ask. I mean, yeah, I’ve only met the woman face-to-face once, but she didn’t strike me as someone who’d act like that with a child... then again, I’ve learned that people do the strangest things at times.

“Well, I suppose that’s true. She’d embarrass me quite often, but it was pretty harmless until I got older. Shit, she’s just hiding. She knows something is up and I’m going to hunt her ass down and force her to answer every single question I’ve ever had.”

“Should you?” I ask.

Hiro hesitates before looking over at me. “Don’t make me feel guilty for trying to abuse my friends.”

“I’m not wanting you to feel guilty, I’m just... like maybe there’s a reason she doesn’t want to talk about it. So lightly bring it up and if she doesn’t engage, then just let it slide. She’ll tell you when it’s emotionally time for her, I promise.”

“What about the creepy ghost, then?” Hiro asks like I might have answers to that.

I shake my head. “I’m with Reggie on this one. You leave it alone.”

“What about poor Barry?”

“I’m sure he’s just sick and will feel back to normal soon. It’s not like the ghost can do anything to him. He doesn’t even know she’s there.”

Hiro doesn’t seem overly ready to agree to this, but he gives me a halfhearted nod. “Fine.”

I see Zion being led back, so I get up to greet him with Hiro by my side.

“Is it okay to talk here?” Zion asks as he looks around uncertainly.

“Come this way,” I say as I lead him to a room while Hiro gives him an encouraging smile.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Hiro says.

Zion almost looks embarrassed as he nods. “Yeah... thanks to you guys. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry you were pushed to that point,” Hiro says.

I was able to read up on what happened to the man he’d pulled the gun on. And while Zion will have to deal with the consequences of his actions, his stepdad was arrested after Zion’s mom admitted to the abuse he’d inflicted on them.

When we get into the room, he turns around before I can say anything more and goes, “I think Connor really is a good person.”

The look on my face is clearly enough to make Zion question his words. He looks even more nervous as he ducks his head.

“You feel like this because Ambrose was kind to you?” Hiro asks.

Zion’s body language shows me that I’m now cut out of this conversation as he turns to Hiro. “Well, he seemed to have his own struggles, you know? Like he really understood what I was going through with my stepdad.”

“He convinced you to try to shoot your stepdad, which would have landed you in prison where you’d have rotted away a good chunk of your life,” I say in case he forgot what went down.

Zion’s head falls. “Yeah... I guess... I just, it was nice talking to someone who got it.”

Yet he didn’t think a child being abused was reason to help. Instead, he encouraged him to shoot the man. But I guess I get it. I let my parents be negligent as hell without seeking help, but I also got out of there. I got away from that mess... but could I have without Reggie?

I grudgingly nod since I don’t quite believe what he’s saying but also don’t want to run the kid off if he has something to help us with. “Sometimes when you feel like you’re alone in something, it’s easy to grasp onto others who you feel like you share something with, no matter who they are.”

He seems hesitant to agree with me, but I do get a slow nod out of him. “Yeah... I guess. Maybe I’m an idiot. I don’t know.”

“You’re not an idiot,” Hiro says gently.

Zion takes a deep breath and looks up at Hiro. “So... I came upstairs one time and heard Connor talking to someone. He kept saying that he had already decided on some people. He called them something weird... like ‘These are the chosen ones’ or something. Said that they needed to be punished for what they’d done. I mean... at the time it didn’t sound that concerning because like... I agreed that people who did this stuff to others shouldn’t get away with it. Connor was then quiet for a bit, and I realized he must have been talking to a ghost. The door wasn’t closed all the way, so I peeked into the room. He was just sitting there staring at this dry erase board and on it were a few names.

“As I was watching, he looked panicked, like he was trying to erase it, but I caught a bit of it... one of the names was something like Rays or... something. It was hard to say. It didn’t even seem like he saw me because it looked like he was surprised to see me when I knocked later.”

“The name was Ray?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “No, I know it had an S on the end. I think it was a last name because he’d already erased the first name. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier and I’m not even sure if this relates or is helpful.”

It has to relate. It’s clear it’s connected to this seven deadly sins bullshit he has going on. He

thinks they all deserve it, but why? The teacher had relations with a man outside of marriage... so he deemed her unworthy... but why her? Why not the husband who was cheating on his wife? What about Bill, the man sent to kill me? And what “wrath” did the man who killed himself hold? Family and friends had nothing to tell. But were they all Ambrose’s clients that he had never documented because he picked them from the start? Or did he erase every part of their existence after he picked them? Or were they not clients at all?

“I’m sorry I didn’t mention it earlier. I should have. I just... my head was in a bad spot.”

“It’s okay. This is all extremely helpful,” Hiro says with a soft smile.

It gives us something but with such an uncertain name... what could we do with it? We can check every person in the area with the last name of Rays, but what if Zion had it wrong and we’re left wasting time chasing a dead end?

That’s the moment something hits me.

“Was his last name Reyes?” I ask as I quickly write it out for him to see.

Zion leans forward to look at it. “Maybe? That does look similar. I think I was pronouncing it like Rays in my head, you know?”

I look over at Hiro who is staring at me in surprise. “You think it’s Barry?”

“I don’t know... do you know if he was talking to a therapist?” I ask.

He doesn’t seem to know, so I turn to Zion. “Thank you. If you have anything else, you have my number, please don’t hesitate to call or text. For anything, that is. If your mother ever puts you back in a situation like that, call me immediately.”

Zion nods as his eyes meet mine. “Thank you.”

I give him a pat before hurrying out the door, leaving Hiro to guide him out. Returning to my desk, I try to see if I get any hits on Barry’s name and then Natalie’s name. Nothing to see beyond his recognition for his military career.

When Hiro returns, I get up and grab my keys. “I’m going to go talk to him.”

Parker clears her throat. “Are you allowed to return to work?”

“I was given the okay to do desk work,” I say.

“And it sounds like you’re planning on doing stuff that doesn’t use your desk at all,” she says.

As she scrutinizes me, I pick up the end of the desk. “I’ll just take it with me,” I say until Hiro starts smacking me away from it.

“Dear god, don’t hurt yourself trying to be a smartass. What the hell, Maddox?” he asks, actually looking irritated.

“She said I needed—”

Parker and Hiro lock eyes. “See what I deal with?” he asks.

She nods. “I honestly pity you.”

“I’m simply checking on a friend of Hiro’s; that’s it,” I say.

Parker scrutinizes me. “Go get permission to return to work and I’ll allow it.”

“Fine,” I say, wondering who I could force to move the date when I have full clearance closer.

“I don’t like that look,” Hiro says.

Parker just sighs and walks off, clearly tired of dealing with me, but that is definitely not my fault. Now I only have Hiro left staring at me, but that might be just as bad. He’s quite good at looking judgmental.

“You better listen to Parker.”

“We’re just checking on Barry,” I say.

He sighs and gives me the smallest of nods, like he doesn’t want to agree with me but knows I’m

going to do what I want anyway.



Carrying a new bag of stuff, Hiro heads to Barry's door with the plan of getting him to let us inside. According to Hiro, things didn't end on the best of notes last time and I have a feeling it might go worse this time.

"Stop looking like you're ready to break the door down," Hiro says as he turns to Barry's door and knocks.

Why he says shit like this, I have no idea. "I'm not looking like anything. Normal expression."

He looks annoyingly skeptical about that. "Fine, fine. You're just clearly thinking about something."

"I'm always thinking about something," I assure him.

"Reggie says you're always thinking about two things: me naked and when the next time you can pummel an innocent guy to the ground is," Hiro says.

My eyes narrow. "Once."

"Hold on, wait... I feel like I need to hear this story," he says as he knocks again.

With a sigh, I realize that I might as well give in. "Back in college, I... thought this super sketchy-looking guy stole this little old lady's bag. She shouted that he stole her bag, so I took off after the guy. The guy must have heard me coming and he ran *like a guilty* person. So I just... guided him to the ground to retrieve her bag. Here he had *his* bag and the lady forgot that she left *her* bag that looked similar to his, in the car..."

Hiro starts laughing, clearly finding this funnier than he needed to. "Reggie is reenacting it now. He's telling me that you gave the poor man whiplash."

"I didn't give him *whiplash*. He just had a weak neck and liked to complain."

"Reggie said you had a class with the poor whiplashed guy later and the poor guy flinched every time you reached in his general direction."

"Stop grinning, it's making you look like you enjoy the pain of others. Stay on task and knock again. Is he ignoring you?"

"I just enjoy hearing about the things you've done that you one hundred percent wanted to keep a secret from me," Hiro says as he knocks a third time before pulling his phone out and calling Barry. After a moment, Hiro leaves a voicemail, then a text before turning to look at something. The way he's fixated on an area tells me he's listening to a ghost before turning to me. "Reggie and Keaton said that they don't see him in the house and his car isn't in the garage. He must have gone somewhere."

"That's concerning," I say.

"You really think he's going to... hurt someone? Barry wouldn't." Hiro gives me an anxious look.

I don't know what to say because I honestly don't know the answer. People often don't expect someone in their life to do something like that. But until I know, I'm not going to try to convince him one way or another. Barry might be involved, or Zion might be mistaken and we're trying to connect dots that don't actually connect.

"He might have just gone to the store. Do we wait here for a bit?" Hiro asks.

"Sure. Can Keaton snoop around to see if he finds anything of interest? While he does that..." I grab my laptop bag from the back of the car. "I'm going to do some digging."

Hiro gets into the driver's seat so I'll have more room to open up the laptop in the passenger seat.

“Is it weird that I feel guilty looking into him? It’s like we’re trying to blame him for something he didn’t do.”

“We’re not blaming anyone yet,” I assure him. “Our goal is to help him. Not hurt him. If he really is planning on killing someone and we can stop him before that happens, we not only get to save someone else’s life, but we get to keep him from making a horrible decision that could ruin his entire life.”

“Okay, true.”

“And we also don’t know that he’s the attacker. He could be someone else’s target,” I say. “Has he ever mentioned anything about his life that could be cause for concern?”

Hiro briefly thinks about it before shaking his head. “Not really. I know he was in the military, but he really doesn’t talk about that much so I didn’t push. He never talks about his childhood or anything. If we talk, it’s usually about books or what he’s doing for the evening or something.”

I stare at my screen for a long moment. “Do you think Natalie isn’t her real name?”

“Why would she lie about it?” Hiro asks.

I honestly don’t know, but I also don’t understand why I never come up with anything pertaining to her. Now that we know Barry knows her, we know that she died within the past twenty years. She couldn’t have been dead very long when Hiro stumbled upon her since Barry and Hiro are similar in age with Barry only being a few years older. And if Hiro knew Natalie by ten... “Was Barry much younger than Natalie in the picture?” I ask.

“It was hard to tell but maybe five years younger? I honestly don’t know.”

“Do you know if Barry grew up around here?”

“I don’t know. He hasn’t mentioned. He *really* doesn’t seem to like talking about his early life, so I haven’t pressed it.”

“But Natalie found the room in Ambrose’s home familiar... let me see something,” I say as I pull up the records on Ambrose’s house. The person who sold it to Ambrose was a Leena Graves. And if I see what I can get on Leena... “Looky there.”

“What?” Hiro asks as he looks away from his phone to lean in.

“Leena Graves, the previous owner of Ambrose’s house, had a child named Helena Reyes.”

“That could be Barry’s mother and Leena was his grandmother, right? So Barry could have met Ambrose that way,” Hiro says. “Was the house a private sale?”

“It was. Looks like Leena passed away before the sale. Let me see what else I can dig up.”

“And I will try to look busy doing... something spectacular,” Hiro says. “Like a séance or something. Whip out the good ol’ Ouija board.”

I look over at him. “Do those things work?” I ask curiously.

“Um... are you asking if I’m able to communicate with the dead with a Ouija board? They come parading over wondering what the hell I’m doing, so it’s hard for me to tell.”

“Have you seen others communicate with one?”

“I’ve seen the ghosts try. I think most have this hopeful idea that it’ll work or something. Like Nicolás can get one to kind of work. But I also think he could kind of talk to one using an alphabet and a piece of paper and a lot of concentration.”

“He can actually talk to them?”

“He can get... a feeling, you know? But no, I’ve never seen him communicate fully with one. He probably could with my help, who knows.”

“Alright, you whip out your Ouija board, and I’ll see what I can find using boring internet,” I say. He grins at me. “Deal.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



HIRO

A knock on the window sends me nearly flying out of my seat. I drop my phone before looking up at Keaton with very wide eyes that clearly state that I'm going to kick some ass.

Because I jumped, Maddox jumps before looking around. "What's going on?"

"Just Keaton. What is it?" I ask the ghost in question.

"Barry just drove by," he says.

"Wait, what?" I twist around in my seat, wondering if I can see anything. There's a car at the end of the road turning right that does look like his vehicle.

"He slowed down to turn into the driveway but the moment he saw your vehicle, he accelerated and drove past," Keaton says.

"Shit," I say as I start the car.

"What's going on?" Maddox asks.

"Keaton said Barry drove by the moment he saw us waiting in the driveway. Do you think he knows something's going on? Or maybe he's just upset because of what I said earlier. Should I follow him?"

"Yeah, and try calling him again."

I nod as I back out of the driveway and give Barry a call. Again, it goes straight to voicemail. Handing the phone to Maddox so he can text Barry, I try to catch up by speeding down the road. The issue is he lives in a suburban area so there are many stops and turns. The moment I get to the first one, I glance around uncertainly.

"Anyone see where he went?" I ask.

"Where who went?" Natalie asks as her face pops up right next to mine.

I jump again because my heart clearly can't take all these ghosts.

"You would think he'd get used to this by now but alas, the poor, poor, poor soul never has," Natalie says before patting me on the head like a dog.

"We've been looking for you," I say to her.

"Try going left here. I can kind of see to the right and don't see anything," Maddox says.

"Ooh, are you guys involved in a car chase? An un-ultrafast car chase?" she asks.

"I need to talk to you but right now I'm trying to find Barry's car," I say.

"Barry? Why's that?"

"He's not doing too well, and I want to make sure he's okay."

"So you're chasing him with your car?" Natalie seems rightfully suspicious about this.

Maddox taps at the window. "There! Turn right!"

Making a quick right, I have to push Natalie back since she's making it rather hard to see.

"Natalie, how do you know Barry?"

"From you working with him...?" Her voice shows that she's confused by this question, but I'm honestly not sure why she's still lying to me.

"No, from when you were alive."

"When I was alive? Hmm... did I know Barry?" Glancing in the rearview mirror, I see her thinking. It looks mildly staged, though.

"Natalie, please. Don't lie to me. Barry is involved in some shit. We think Ambrose has targeted him and that Barry is either the next killer or the next victim. Don't you think you could open up to me just this once and let me know?"

"Well... maybe you could listen to me for once," Natalie says.

Why the hell do I have to be driving? It's hard enough to talk to her about all of this without driving but nearly impossible while trying to follow Maddox's guidance.

"I *am* listening to you, but I also saw a picture of you *alive* standing with Barry."

"That's weird," she says.

"Why is that weird?"

"I would speed up if I were you," Natalie says.

She's going to drive me crazy with her insane secrecy.

"Why don't you want me to know anything about this? It's fine if you don't want to tell me about your death, but telling me about Barry could help him. Don't you trust me?"

"Maybe it's not about trust, Hiro. Maybe I don't need you to fix me and figure out everything. Maybe I just want things to stay the way they fucking are. Do you ever think of that?"

I don't know what to say. The idea of pushing her to answer me makes me feel awful, but there's a part of me that also feels awful that I'm not helping her and Barry. "I'm sorry," I say.

"Don't be sorry. I just... I'll tell you anything I know about Barry, will that make you happy?"

"Yes."

"I'm not sure how it can relate. Like... you think this guy has something to do with Barry? Like from his childhood?" she asks.

"We don't know that. We just know that there's something going on and Barry is now avoiding us," I say, not wanting to clarify that he might be avoiding us because of what I said about Natalie.

Maddox points for me to turn to the right as he joins the conversation. "We think what's connecting Ambrose to the victims is some kind of fixation on a sin or something. A woman who had sex with a married man was what first set him off. We're looking for something that would make Barry stand out, either from having done something to someone, or someone doing it to or with him."

Natalie falls silent for a long moment as we try to keep up with Barry's car. That's when my phone rings and I see it's him.

"Barry—"

"What are you doing? You need to stop."

"Barry, we want to help you." I pause and take a stab in the dark based on our current assumptions. "We know that you were talking to Connor Ambrose. But Ambrose is not a good man.

He's currently—"

"You don't know everything, Hiro. Sometimes, you have to just realize that things are meant to go a certain way and no matter what you do or say, it doesn't change shit," Barry says.

"Hey, I've known you for years, and I want to help you because we *can* change things. There are so many different things we can do to help you, you just need to let us know how we can," I say.

"You don't know what I've done," he says. "You don't know anything about the person you're wanting to help."

"Barry, there's a ghost hanging on you. A woman who—"

"You can't change anything!" he yells. "Just let it happen. Let life go the way it wants to. It's going to anyway. I learned from a very young age that the world doesn't revolve around you. It just keeps revolving, and it doesn't give a shit if you're in it or not."

"The world *does* keep revolving, but I'm going to tell you something. If you just let it revolve without fighting, you're going to get swallowed up by it. My parents died when I was young. Their ghosts led me to some random house in the middle of nowhere with the hope that the man inside would be able to help. And as they left me there, I couldn't understand it. They *knew* I could see them, so why would they leave me? I fell into a depression. I lost everything. My life was flipped upside down, so I thought, what's the use of even being involved in it anymore?

"I withdrew from the world. I didn't give a shit what my part in it was. I felt like it was fine just letting life move on by without me in it. It took a while for me to learn how to stop myself from falling into that mindset. It's easy to do, Barry. I know how easy it is. But you have to understand that this is being orchestrated by a man who gets enjoyment out of watching people die like it's a game to him. You can't let yourself fall into this idea that it's okay to feel like that."

"You don't understand anything," Barry says.

"I know that you shouldn't listen to him," I say. "He thinks this is a game."

"Fuck you. No. This is what we deserve. This is to help the ones I hurt. Why should I be at peace when you aren't? When you told me you could see the dead, you even said she's hanging desperately on to me."

"You're in a toxic state right now, Barry. Of course the ghosts drawn to you will be as well."

"Hiro, please. It's enough."

"Did he tell you he could see her? Did he tell you that you needed to do something to help her or protect her or some bullshit? It's all lies, Barry. He doesn't give a shit about you or helping her or any of that. He wants to watch you suffer. He gets his kicks from watching Maddox and me try to help you."

I can see his car ahead of us, but what can I do besides follow him?

Maddox turns to me. "Tell him to pull over so we can talk. Otherwise, I'll have to call someone to pull him over."

"Barry, please pull over so we can talk," I say.

He's quiet, so I put the phone down and nod at the light ahead that's turning yellow. I put the call on mute and turn to Maddox. "I'll jump out when we hit the light."

"No, I will because if he takes off, you won't be able to follow him if no one's in the driver's seat," he says as he lifts his phone up and takes a picture of what I realize is his license plate. I really don't want him to call the police to pull over Barry. I feel like we'll lose any trust he has in us, but I also understand that we can't leave him to hurt someone or get hurt himself.

I take the call off mute as I start to slow. Maddox reaches for the door but before I even get to a stop, Barry floors the car straight through the red light.

“Barry, what the hell are you doing?” I ask but when I get no response, I realize he’s hung up on me.

An oncoming car lays on their horn, but Barry doesn’t seem too concerned as he floors it down the road. Looking both ways, I try to get a break in the traffic to go, but there are so many oncoming cars that I have to wait until they start to slow for a yellow light to slip through.

“Do you see him?” I ask as I pick up speed.

“No, I’m going to put a call out,” Maddox says.

“What if we make sure we can’t find him first?”

“Once you lose him, it’ll be harder to find him. I know you’re concerned that he’ll think we’re working against him, but if we’re too late, he could end up dead or killing someone. It’s not going to be a manhunt out looking for him. Just an alert that will help us identify where he’s going, okay?”

“Yeah,” I say, feeling uncertain but understanding his point.

The clouds are moving in, painting the sky dark as we head down a road lined with trees on both sides.

As I accelerate down the road I’d last seen Barry on, I glance back in the rearview mirror, catching Natalie’s eyes. She watches me for a long moment before pointing to the left.

“Take a left at the stop sign,” she says. “I don’t know if this is right but what’s it hurt, right?”

Without question, I turn left. I don’t want to push her away from telling me where to go or what we’re doing, so I just do as she suggests. Maddox doesn’t say anything about my sudden change in direction; instead, he talks to someone on the phone as I drive. When we get out of town, I find myself stopping at a stop sign that we sit at for a long moment.

“Need help?” I ask Natalie.

“No... I’m just... trying to remember,” she says as she crawls into the front seat before getting out of the car. Glancing at Maddox, I realize I’m not sure what to do.

I put my hazard lights on and get out before walking over to where she stands at the edge of the intersection. Thankfully, there’s not much traffic out this far so I can step up next to her.

Not sure if I should say something, I reach out and take her hand. She glances down at it, but when I squeeze her hand, she squeezes back. “You’re acting like I’m falling into a pit of despair when I really just suck ass at directions.”

“Now you’re telling me about you sucking ass? I’m not quite sure how that’ll help...” I tease.

She gives me a grin. “Okay. So we either turn right or left here. Do I flip a coin?”

“You’re not leaning toward one way or the other?” I ask as I feel drops of rain hit me. Hopefully, it won’t pick up any harder than this.

“I am godawful at directions.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

“I actually think the last time I was heading this way I was in the trunk, but that doesn’t even relate.”

“What were you doing in the trunk?” I ask.

“Hiding from the police,” she says before winking at me and heading back to the car.

I follow her while questioning what she means. Did she get in trouble and was hiding from them? Or was she off doing something ridiculous and she and her friends were stashing something?

“So?” Maddox asks.

“She’s not quite sure. She can’t remember if we should go left or right,” I say.

“According to my GPS, right will eventually lead you back to the city. It winds back after a sharp curve to avoid the river. Natalie, did you guys head back for the city?”

“No, away,” she says. “It was just a nice outlook spot... and like I said, who the hell knows if he’s even headed there. I just know he’d go there some as a kid.”

“Let’s go left, then,” Maddox says. “If it’s wrong, at least we tried.”

I turn the blinker on and take the turn as Natalie watches closely. She doesn’t say anything as we pick up speed.

Maddox leans forward. “What’s that?” he asks as I hit my windshield wipers in an attempt to clear away the rain.

“What?” I ask, not sure what he’s seeing.

“I think there’s a car off the road,” Maddox says as he points.

Slowing down, I finally see what he’s referring to. Barry’s car is down in the ditch, the tail end lifted up, the front crushed, like he’d hit it while going a good clip.

Maddox is already on the phone calling an ambulance and officers to the location before I even get our car stopped.

Throwing it into park, I jump out of the car and rush for the vehicle Natalie and Reggie are already waiting by.

“He’s not here,” Natalie says as I reach the door.

“Can you find him?” I ask.

The car door seems to be caved in from the impact, so it doesn’t look like he got out through it, but the blood smeared across the hood tells me he managed to crawl through the front window that’d been busted out in the impact.

Maddox rushes up beside me before examining the hood. “Call him again. See if you can hear his phone ringing.”

“Okay,” I say as I quickly pull my phone out and start the call.

Listening closely, I hear the muted sound of what I believe is his cell phone. Making my way toward the noise, I beg for him to pick up. To tell us he simply got disoriented and moved off into the woods.

Maddox doesn’t let me get far before rushing after me as I near the ringing sound. I expect it to be hard to find in the underbrush, but when I see the ghost who’d been attached to Barry standing over something, I realize that it’s not going to be too hard after all.

“Hey,” I say, but she doesn’t answer. She doesn’t even acknowledge me. She just keeps staring down at the ringing phone.

Even when I walk over and pick up the phone, she doesn’t say a single thing, just keeps staring at the spot.

“Is Barry hurt?” I ask, wondering if I’ll get any kind of reaction out of her, but still, she says nothing. Feeling like I’ll get nowhere just standing here, I look around in the hopes of figuring out where he might have gone, but hell, maybe we need one of those snazzy tracking dogs. Maybe we need to buy one for all the shit we get wound up in.

That’s when the woman’s eyes snap up, and I realize that for the first time something’s caught her attention. When I turn to look, I see Natalie staring at her, and I realize exactly what it is.

“I see,” Natalie simply says.

The woman, on the other hand, lets out a scream before grabbing for her head.

“I assume he went this way, then,” Natalie says, ignoring the woman who appears to be having some kind of crisis upon seeing Natalie, who looks like none of this is bothering her. I would love to hear Natalie’s side of this, but as she breezes on by the dead woman, it’s clear she’s giving no shits about anything.

The woman's screams are reaching a crescendo at this point, making me give Natalie a glance, but she still walks on without a care in the world.

"IT KIND OF LOOKS LIKE HE WENT THIS WAY," Natalie yells to make sure I can hear over the noise.

I awkwardly talk as loudly as I can without shouting. "Yeah, he appeared to be hurt, so I hope he's okay."

"What are you shouting for?" Maddox asks, reminding me he can't hear the current ruckus.

"Um... well... long story but the... ghost who was following Barry is now screaming at the top of her lungs," I say as I nervously look back at her. I'm kind of getting Millie vibes, and I'd honestly prefer my neck to remain choke-free. It might be too much to ask, though, with all of this shit going on.

"Ah, okay... it's weird how the longer I'm around you, the less I like the idea of seeing ghosts," Maddox says.

"Weirdly, I seem to have that effect on people."

"The more I'm around all of you, the more I question life in general," Reggie says while plugging his ears.

"We're going to spread out to cover more ground," Maddox says. "Ghosts too. We're going to put a good distance between us as we scan the woods. He could be hurt and lying down or he could be running, okay?"

"Yeah," I say as I put a space between us, as do the ghosts helping us. We keep moving deeper into the trees as the rain comes down harder. Before long, we have to move in closer because our visibility is steadily getting worse by the minute. "Where the fuck is he?"

Suddenly the ghost who appears to hate Natalie with an unbridled passion moves in front of me, making me slow.

"What is it?" Maddox asks.

"A ghost," I say as I slowly move toward her while the sound of sirens fills the area around us. Maddox looks behind us where we can just barely see the bright lights cutting through the rain.

"If you want to go back to talk to them, I'm fine," I assure him.

He shakes his head. "I'll just call someone who can get in contact with them."

As he does that, I continue to watch the woman who is at least quiet now.

"Do you want to help him? Don't you care about him?" I ask.

She stares at me for a long moment before taking a step toward me. It stills me and I feel anxious even dealing with her. I look over at Natalie who is fixated on us. What do these two know?

"You must not care if he dies," I say.

She keeps staring.

"Of course she doesn't," Natalie says. "Just ask her how it felt to try to kill him."

She shifts her attention to Natalie, but before she can fixate on her, I step between them and grab her wrist.

"What happened to him?" I ask, needing *something*.

"He's gone," she says. "And you're never getting him back."

"What do you mean gone?" I ask, fearing the worst. Fearing that to her, gone means dead. But if he was dead, wouldn't his ghost be around here? Then again, we haven't found a body.

"Gone... you should never have brought her here," she says as she stares coldly at Natalie.

"Why?"

"Just tell him where Barry is whenever you're done being a cryptic bitch," Natalie says, her words dripping with venom. It's quite clear she's pissed.

"It's her fault," the woman says. "All of it is her fault."

I feel torn. A part of me feels like I should just push past her and keep going for Natalie's sake, but another part leaves me questioning if she does know something about Barry. I glance at Reggie, hoping he could offer some advice, but he just gives me the widest eyes while doing a few hand flicks that kind of look like he's suggesting I just off someone.

"What do you want to do?" Maddox asks.

I glance back at him before realizing that we're getting nowhere just standing here. "Keep pushing forward."

He gives me a nod and starts walking again as I slip past the woman.

"He's gone. He's gone. He's not coming back. You're wasting your time. He's gone," she starts screaming after me.

"She keeps saying he's gone," I tell Maddox.

"Can she clarify?"

"Of course not," I say. Because that would be too easy. Ghosts spend their existence making things dreadfully annoying.

I reach out and catch Natalie's arm as the rain beats down on us. "Natalie, if someone were to want Barry dead... who would it be?"

Natalie stares at me for a long moment as I wipe at the rain on my face. "I just... I think you believe I know him more than I do. I have no idea."

"He has a *picture* of you sitting out."

She rocks back on her heels. "I'm not lying... I truly don't understand why..." She's quiet for a long moment until the sound of thunder cracks. "Let me check on something. I'll be right back." And then she's gone, leaving me standing there.

"I kind of want to be pissed, is that wrong of me?" I ask Reggie who'd been able to hear the conversation.

Maddox reaches out and squeezes my wrist. "You okay?"

"Yeah... I want to go to Barry's house."

"We don't have a warrant. We'll need to—"

"I'm just going into my friend's house. He invited me in already today," I say innocently.

Maddox hesitates because while I'm sure that doesn't fit perfectly with what he's allowed to do, it will make things easier. "I mean... you did tell him you'd be back, right?"

"I did," I say. "He told me to be inside his house this very afternoon."

"I guess you have no choice than to go back and check to make sure things are okay," he says. "I'll stay here and try to help them... I hate leaving you alone, though."

"I'm not alone," I assure him.

He doesn't seem happy about it, but he nods. "I'll have Mick meet you there, okay?"

"Deal," I say. "Please don't hurt yourself. You should still be resting."

"I'm perfectly fine," he assures me, but I know him well enough to know that he'd say those exact same things even if he wasn't fine at all.

I reach up and push back his wet hair. "Please listen and be good. I can't lose you."

"I know. You too."

Parting from Maddox during stressful times like this is always hard, but I know that I can't let it get to me. That I need to keep moving forward so we can protect others from suffering a bad fate.

"Keep me updated," he says.

"Same."

And with that, I head off with Reggie and Keaton by my side, leaving the search to Maddox and the others who are now on the scene. If the ghost is to be trusted, Barry is no longer here, so then... where did he go?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



MADDOX

When I reach the road, the rain isn't even bothering to let up, making the visibility in the area quite poor. The emergency vehicles are setting up a clear caution zone around Barry's car as a few officers head toward me the moment they see me.

Avery, who is aware this likely has something to do with her case, is the first to reach me. "What's going on?" she asks.

"This car belongs to Barry Reyes. We believe that Barry is one of Ambrose's victims after talking to Zion."

"Sorry to interrupt but Parker filled me in. You found his car like this?" she asks.

"He's Hiro's friend and employee. Hiro was talking on the phone with him when he suddenly took off through a red light. Hiro tried following him, but we thought we lost him until we came across his car in a ditch. The rain isn't helping, but when we arrived there was blood on the hood," I say as I lead her closer. "It appeared like he'd crawled out through the broken windshield and ran about twenty feet into the woods where we found his cell phone. From there, we were unable to tell if he went farther into the woods or back to the road."

"Where did Hiro run off to like his ass was on fire?" she asks.

"He wanted to check something of Barry's," I say, remaining vague. "In case..."

I hesitate as I notice something I hadn't seen in the panic to find Barry. Kneeling down, I glance at the front of Barry's car that is currently dug into the dirt. What is barely noticeable from this angle is the red paint on the fender.

"You see this?" I ask.

Avery kneels beside me. "Looks fresh. No rust or anything... you think someone hit him?"

"There's nothing else red out here. Unless he did it recently somewhere else... well shit... someone might have clipped him, sending him off the road."

"Do you think whoever he collided with picked him up?" Avery asks.

"I... honestly don't know. But let's get an alert out there. They could be taking him to a hospital or..."

"They could be the person working for Ambrose," she says.

I nod slowly. “Right.”

She quickly pulls her phone out as she steps away from the vehicle, and I send a text to Hiro.

Me: I have reason to believe Barry collided with a red vehicle. If you see one anywhere around Barry’s house, please do not get out of your car, park a safe distance away and just watch until we get someone on scene.

Hiro: Got it.

Me: You better not be texting and driving.

Hiro: I’m at a stoplight! I’m fine!

Just as I go to reply, I get a call from work and answer it with, “This is Booker.”

“Hey, I have something you might find interesting,” Lexi says. “While Barry wasn’t directly involved, it looks like his mother, Helena, was a suspect in the death of a young woman named Emma Oliver, when Barry was in his early teens. Barry had been at this woman’s house when his mother showed up demanding she hand Barry over. When she didn’t, Helena claims she left. A neighbor heard the argument and called the police. When they arrived, they found the young woman dead, and Barry gone.”

“So she killed the woman before she left?” I ask, wondering why I hadn’t come across any of this in my search.

“She claimed she didn’t.”

“They found proof?”

“No, so she was never convicted. Helena killed herself with a gun she’d had in the car before they could arrest her. Barry was found on the street the following day and taken to his father who had been excluded from his life.”

“Can you send me an image of his mother and the woman who was killed?”

“Yeah, I’ll get that to you as soon as I can.”

“Great. Thank you.”

I return to my text to Hiro and give him a condensed version of what’s happening.

Hiro: The ghost is probably in her forties, so I’m not sure I would consider her a young woman. She almost has to be his mother, right? So then why wouldn’t his mother help?

Me: Sounds like their relationship was toxic. This could be a vendetta type situation if Barry really thinks he deserves what’s happening. Maybe someone blames him for the mother being accused of murder and killing herself. Possibly a relative or someone who had a relationship with her? I’ll see if Barry has any siblings or a stepfather or something.



HIRO

As I reach the house, Mick isn’t far behind. He parks behind my car before rushing over to me.

“You’re... going inside? We need a warrant,” he says.

“It’s okay, Barry gave me permission to enter,” I assure him as I hurry toward the door, really hoping Barry had left it unlocked in the state he was in.

“Umm... you sure?”

“Very,” I say with a smile as I rush off before he can stop me. Technically, Barry did give me permission... it’s not my fault that permission was a few hours ago. There’s no damn way that I’m

waiting for a warrant. Who knows how quickly time is working against us?

When I reach the door, I grab the doorknob only to find that Barry had locked it.

"It's locked, we can't just... bust through," Mick says.

"Reggie?" I ask.

"I'm on it," Reggie says as he turns around and kicks the door like a mule.

I stare at him as Keaton sighs loudly and gives Reggie a shove through the door. "He means to unlock it," Keaton grumbles.

"Ahhhhh, this is why I'm the brawn and you're the brains," Reggie says, even though brawn wouldn't be on my top one hundred list of descriptors for Reggie.

"Hiro, we can't just bust down the door. If you don't have the key—"

The doorknob turns in my hand and I look over at him. "What was that?"

"I'm not getting fired over this, you hear me?"

"I have permission from the owner," I repeat as I walk in to see a beaming Reggie, clearly proud of his door unlocking skills.

Mick doesn't seem so sure about this but beyond manhandling me back to the vehicle, he has little choice as I head inside.

Keaton walks with me. "Hiro, I find it bizarre how surprised Natalie is about Barry having a photo of her. It tells me that maybe they really weren't as close as we were thinking they might have been. So then why would he have a photograph of her?"

"I don't know," I say since Mick is still lingering near the door, clearly not convinced that I have all legalities under control.

I hurry over to the table where I saw Natalie's picture. Noticing it's gone, I start to rummage around the papers looking for it.

"In here!" Keaton yells.

"God, he's so good at this," Reggie says as he rushes off to figure out what Keaton's up to. When I reach the bedroom, I see that Barry has a bunch of papers lying all over the bed. Picking the first one up, I see that it's labeled to him.

You know what you've done. Make it right.

Suddenly, I feel unsure if I should be touching these, so I set that one back in the exact spot I found it in and lean over to read the next one.

How can you live with yourself? She's dead because of you.

Each of them is written in a hurried scrawl that's scribbled across the paper. Some are hard to read, ink smudged and smeared like it'd gotten wet. But each of them has similar messages.

You should have died instead of her.

Your life is worthless after what you've done.

"What the fuck are these?" I ask.

Reggie and Keaton stare down at the letters, reading them with me.

"Clearly, someone thinks he needs to atone for something," Mick says as he examines the bed, having followed me into the room. Quickly, I call Maddox who answers almost immediately.

"Have you been kidnapped, abducted, or are you on the run?" Maddox asks.

"No, actually, I haven't. But I do have something interesting. Barry's bed is covered in these letters that appear to have been sent to him. Things like 'Your time is coming.' And 'End it yourself, before I'm forced to.'" I read him some more as he listens intently.

"All the same handwriting and it's not Barry's handwriting?" Maddox asks.

"Definitely not his. And yeah, same person. They're all folded, like they were in an envelope."

“Okay, don’t touch them. I do have some information; I was actually just about to call you,” he says. “So we found out that Barry’s mother was suspected of killing a young woman before she shot herself. I’m going to send the picture to you, and you tell me if this is the woman hanging on Barry.”

“Okay,” I say, putting him on speaker phone so I can pull up the email he sends work-related stuff to. When I glance at the picture it takes me a moment of staring to even tell. The woman who hung on Barry looked unkempt. Her hair hung in her face and the skin beneath her eyes was dark. She just looked... hollow. Whereas this woman is smiling and her hair is done up, red lipstick standing out on her lips.

“Yeah... yeah, I think that’s her.”

“That’s Barry’s mother, Helena.”

“So does this person think that his mother killing this woman... is Barry’s fault?”

“Check your email.”

I realize I have another email from him that I hadn’t noticed before. Pulling it up, I see Natalie’s image facing me. “Oh shit. This was Natalie?”

“Yeah, I didn’t catch it because it was an Emma Oliver... an Emma *Natalie* Oliver.”

“Why the hell is she telling me she has nothing to do with this, then?” I ask.

“Because I don’t.”

I jump and look at Natalie as she walks over to me, arms folded across her chest. “Natalie, I’m sorry. I know you want no part of this, but I don’t think we have that option anymore,” I say quietly. “Why didn’t you tell me that woman killed you?”

“Because she didn’t,” Natalie insists.

“Well, it looks like whoever is sending these letters thinks Barry is responsible for your death... did Barry kill you?” I ask, afraid of the answer.

“No, and who said these were about me?” Natalie asks as she examines them. “This... ‘she’... I don’t think it’s me. My mom passed away years ago and my dad was pretty absent in my life. I don’t have anyone living who has decided to go on some random vendetta to avenge me.”

“So you think the woman these letters are referring to... is Helena, or would there be someone else?” I ask.

Natalie stares at the letters for a long moment before shrugging. “I’m going to be honest... I really don’t know. But I do know that it’s not about me. I was just... caught in the wrong spot at the wrong moment. I was helping out a kid I barely knew and that was the end of it. I can’t tell you everything that happened because I don’t remember it. I can’t even tell you much about Barry... I just... he was a neighbor kid who I’d often see hiding outside his house. He didn’t seem to have a very good home life.

“On occasion, I’d open my doors to him, honestly not sure if I could help him or not, but I was going to do whatever I could to try. I worked afternoons, so I just told him he could crash at my place. He was always gone when I woke up and arrived after I’d gone to work. But I’d see little signs he’d been there. That was it, Hiro, really. I know you want to build it up into something else, but there’s nothing else to see.”

“I’m not, I just want to help...”

“I know you do but Helena didn’t kill me. She hates me because she thinks I shielded Barry. I came over to that house *one* time and that was because Barry had called me crying. I pushed that bitch out of the way and went deeper into the house where I found she’d locked him in that fucked-up basement. I told her I’d call the damn cops on her and took him with me. He refused to let me call them and then... we never had to worry about it again because the next day was when things went

down.”

“Who would have cared if his mother died?” Keaton asks.

“She sounds like a bitch... would anyone?” Reggie wonders.

“You’d be surprised how codependent toxic people can make others,” I say. “Maddox said he was going to look into whether Barry had any other family members. Do you know anything about that?”

Natalie thinks about it for a moment. “I feel like he had a sister and brother.”

Since I still have Maddox on the phone, I ask him.

“He does, he has a stepbrother and half-sister; the sister is younger and the brother is older. I’m going to get a vehicle check on them,” he says.

Suddenly, Mick, who had gone back to lingering outside for “legal” reasons, comes rushing in.

“I just saw a red car park on the road,” he says.

“Do you think it’s whoever hit Barry?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t get a good look at who was driving, but I’ve called backup so we can find out. But just in case it’s malicious, I need you to get out of the house now in case they try to come in.”

He doesn’t need to tell me twice. I’ve had enough run-ins with people lately that I immediately head right out the back door with him.

“They might run because of our car in the driveway,” I say.

“It’s a possibility, but I don’t want them to realize we’re watching. Come this way,” he says as he cuts through the neighbor’s yard.

“I’m on it!” Reggie yells as he, Natalie, and Keaton take off toward the red car.

As Mick ushers me around the alley into a position where we can observe the car, I see Reggie rushing back.

“It’s a woman, probably in her mid-to-late thirties,” he says.

“I think it’s Barry’s sister,” Natalie says. “I don’t remember her well, I only met her once, but she looks familiar. See what Maddox thinks.”

“Okay. Is Barry in the car?”

“The trunk is dark as hell, but I didn’t see anyone in it and she’s alone in the car. She’s just... staring at Barry’s house. I think she wants to go in it. But Keaton told me to tell you there’s clear damage on the front left bumper and to tell Maddox the license plate number.”

“Okay, give me a second,” I say as I quickly call Maddox back before telling him the license plate number and info Reggie gives me.

“We’re on our way,” Maddox assures me. “You two stay right where you are. The police aren’t far behind.”

“But where is Barry?” I ask. “Do you think she lost him but hopes he’ll come back here or do you think...” She already killed him.

“She didn’t have a lot of time to do much. For right now, let’s secure her and see what we can find,” Maddox says.

“God, you’re so hopeful, it’s adorable.”

Startled, I turn around to see Peter watching me with a grin. He looks absolutely delighted by this whole scenario. “What the hell do you want?” I ask.

“Just to watch. Connor really does enjoy hearing how the game is going. And after you tried to dampen his week, he needs a little... pick-me-up. I see things are going quite well.”

“What do you know about all of this?” I growl.

His eyes get wide like he has absolutely no idea what I’m talking about. I try not to notice the way

Mick is staring in my general direction like I might be borderline crazy. Hell, I might be. Who really knows.

Peter shrugs and gives me his best “I’m innocent” look, as though any of us could actually be fooled into thinking that.

“You’re a dick, just in case you didn’t know,” Reggie says.

Peter completely ignores him as I watch Natalie and Keaton keep an eye on the red car. I see the brake lights come on and a moment later the car starts to pull out onto the road.

“Shit,” Mick says as he hurries toward his car. But before he can get far, I hear sirens. The woman seems to realize what’s happening as panic sets in and she presses down on the accelerator.

Running, I slip past Mick and watch just in time as a police car cuts her off. She tries to drive around it but the space between her and the car parked on the side of the road is too narrow and she sideswipes the parked car, shoving her car back out into the street. She tries to throw it into reverse but before she can, another car pulls in behind, blocking her exit.

Anxiously, I watch as the police demand for her to exit the vehicle, but she’s clearly thinking there might be some better option than this. She throws the car in reverse, trying to spin it around but on this narrow of a road, she’s got nowhere to go.

Natalie comes over to me as the police move closer to her, their weapons drawn. The woman still looks like she thinks she might have the perfect opportunity to run before realizing that with this many people on her, she’s not going anywhere. I see Maddox in the middle of things as he’s been known to do, but I stay back, hoping she has some answers to where Barry might be.

“See anything?” I ask Natalie.

“Nope. She did have blood on her sleeve, but even though Barry was bleeding pretty good from the crash... it could have been her blood.”

Keaton walks up with his hands stuffed into his pockets, Reggie close behind. “I think it was his. Her wound was on the left side of her head, probably smacked into the window upon impact, and the blood was on the outside part of her sleeve. It would have been awkward for her to press that part of her sleeve against her head.”

“God, you’re so smart. You make my heart thunder in my chest,” Reggie says.

Keaton gives him a look that I don’t think Reggie even notices. A kind of... pleased look that I’m pretty sure he would deny for eternity. Really... how long are they going to play this game of indifference?

Probably forever, if Keaton has his way.

Maddox comes up to me looking mildly annoyed. “I’ve been kicked to the curb,” he grumbles.

“Well, you did get shot and aren’t supposed to have your nose in shit,” I remind him.

“Barry’s not in the vehicle, so they’re trying to figure out where he is.”

I nod slowly as my eyes lock on to Barry’s mom, now hanging around her daughter. She’s probably pissed her daughter didn’t accomplish whatever she’d been sent out to do. As Avery talks to her, I walk toward them slowly, knowing that Maddox won’t stop me but someone else might try.

“I can see the ghost of your mother,” I call out as I get closer.

The woman looks over at me with wide eyes. “You can? You’re lying.”

“Help me talk to her,” I say to her mother. “Tell me something only you would know.”

“Tell Nicole I’m so proud of her,” she says with a big beaming smile. Nothing at all like how she’d acted when Barry was involved.

“I will, but I want to tell her something only you will know first so that she’ll believe me.”

Helena nods. “Right, right. Tell Nicole that I never told anyone about her secret between her and

Davy just like I promised.”

The moment I tell Nicole this, her face lights right up. “She’s really here?” she asks, clearly wanting to believe.

“She is.”

“Tell her how proud I am of her for what she’s done for me,” Helena says.

“She wants you to know that she’s distraught over what you’ve done. She said that it was her fault it happened,” I say.

Helena hesitates as what I said sinks in. “You’re lying! How dare you lie to her?”

Nicole is staring at me in confusion. “What? No, it’s Barry’s fault.”

I shake my head. “She said that she realizes now that Barry was just a child. That she had manipulated and abused him. That she’d created this horrible idea that he was a monster but now realizes what she did was wrong and horrible.”

“You fucking liar!” Helena screams. “I hope you burn in fucking hell, you liar!”

“That she never wanted you to hurt him.”

Nicole shakes her head. “No, no, Dr. Ambrose said this was the only way Mom could ever find peace.”

“Dr. Ambrose is a sociopath and a liar. He’s been manipulating you,” I say. I’m not even sure what I’m allowed to say or that I’m legally allowed to lie to this woman, but the thing is... no one but me and the ghosts around me know what Helena is really saying or doing.

“No... but...”

“He was feeding into your pain and fears, making things seem worse than they were. He wanted to push you over the edge so you would hurt someone, and he could enjoy the pain you both felt. He thinks it’s a game, and you’re merely a pawn playing it.”

She’s shaking her head wildly now. “No! No! NO! This is what I needed to do to help her!”

“Then why is she still here? Once a ghost has been helped, they move on immediately. I can help her move on. She said that it’s time to let go. That the only way she can move on is seeing her children happy. She needs to know where Barry is and make sure he’s safe. She needs to physically see him to move on.”

“But Dr—”

I cut her off, unable to fathom why she did this. “He was manipulating you. She just...” I turn to Helena who is irate at this point. She’s screaming at me and trying to grab onto me to get me to shut up. “It’s okay, please stop crying. Nicole wants to help. She was being betrayed by Dr. Ambrose. She’s going to tell us where Barry is.”

“You fucking asshole. You goddamn bastard,” she screams. She’s screaming so loud in my ear that I’m struggling to hear what Nicole is saying.

“I know you’re distraught, but everything will be okay. You’ll be able to pass on soon,” I say even as she spits slurs at me. She’s fucking pissed, and I can’t help but feel pleased by it. Maybe I really am an awful person. But anyone who can treat their child the way she treated Barry deserves this.

“I’m so sorry, Mom. I thought I was doing the right thing. He’s at Dave’s parents’ house. Right down the road. He’s okay. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t go through with it. I didn’t know what to do,” Nicole says.

“Don’t listen to him! Don’t fucking listen to him!” Helena screams as she manages to hit me. She hesitates when she makes contact, and I realize she’s going to make impact if I don’t do something to stop her, so I push everything into making her touch go right through me. But her rage is too much, and she manages to catch me with her nails.

Quickly, I step away from her, hoping she'll let me go, but she keeps coming after me. Rage eats away at me as she moves into my space, but just when I'm about to lose my shit at her, Natalie shoves her back.

"Fuck off, woman," Natalie growls.

If I thought Helena was enraged before, the way she reacts when she sees Natalie throws her into a newfound fury. She starts attacking Natalie as I watch, unsure what to do. "I really wish it was me who fucking killed you!"

"I'm coming! I'm bringing Keaton to kick her ass," Reggie announces. And as Reggie literally shoves Keaton at the woman, I hurry away from them all, hoping to put some space between us. They won't let Maddox "join in," so I go over to where he's being forced to stay out of the middle of it.

Maddox guides me back. "We'll get a location on this house Barry's at," he says. "Good work."

"Thank you. The mom's not overly pleased if the sounds of her shrieks have anything to say about it."

He looks at me in surprise. "You lied to her?"

"Oh, hardcore lied to her. Like the mom was screaming the most awful things she could at me the whole time I was talking... but it got Nicole to talk, didn't it?"

Maddox watches me for a second before grinning. "Is it weird I find your manipulation ridiculously sexy?"

"It'd be weirder if you didn't. Think we can go with them even though we're going to get yelled at for being involved?"

"We'll just tell them that your ghost can check to see if Barry is in the building so we know if we need to force our way in or not."

"You like using my ability to get your way, don't you?" I tease.

"Very much because while these people act like they know what they're doing, I'm positive I know more. For example, I know that I shouldn't still be on medical leave," he says with a grin.

I'm pretty sure he doesn't know that, but I give him a half-hearted smile anyway.

We follow at a distance in the hopes of no one taking note of us as we arrive at the house Nicole mentioned. When we reach it, I send Reggie and Keaton inside who quickly return to let me know that Barry is indeed inside but appears to be unconscious because he's not reacting. After telling them this, there's no hesitation about entering the house as we stay back. As Barry is wheeled out, Maddox wraps an arm around me and squeezes me.

"You did a mighty impressive job today, Hiro," he says.

"You too," I say with a smile. "Now you're going to get your ass back home to rest."

He seems less thrilled by this but once Barry is gone, he's given little choice.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



HIRO

“The time is now!”

I roll into Maddox, hoping the time is never. Not when I want to sleep.

“Hey, love,” a voice that’s definitely not Maddox says.

I jerk awake and nearly fall out of the bed as my eyes lock on to Stripper Ghost aka Antoine, aka the man currently in bed with me.

“What’s wrong?” Reggie asks as he sits up on the other side of me.

“Why are you both in my *bed*?” I demand.

“It’s simple, really,” Reggie says.

“Is it?”

“Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh,” Antoine says as he presses a finger against my lips. “Hmmmm... hmmm...” He hums while doing some weird kind of hand movement over my body. “I’m pulling the stress out of your body. You feel very tight. Have you been taking proper care of yourself?”

“I feel tight because I just woke up with people in my bed who aren’t Maddox!”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it,” Natalie says, and when I look up, I realize she has somehow conjured herself a goddamn easel and is *painting* something.

“What are you painting?” I growl.

“It’s called ‘Three Men, One Bed—The Story of One Man’s Self-Discovery into PleasureTopia,’” she announces.

“I saw a porn like that!” Reggie says.

“Sounds eye-opening,” Antoine says.

“Is porn ever eye-opening?” I ask.

Reggie scoffs. “Ohhhhh boy, it sure can be. This one time I was watching porn with Keaton—”

“No you weren’t,” Keaton says because of course he’s just sitting in the corner watching this all go down.

“And Keaton’s like ‘Take me to HumpNation—’” Reggie starts again.

“No, I didn’t.”

“And I was like ‘Coming right up, you dirty Daddy.’”

“What does this have to do with ‘eye-opening’ porn?” I ask, honestly curious now.

Reggie falls quiet for a moment, seemingly thinking about this. “You know what? I forgot that’s what I was talking about. Alas...”

I stare at him while wondering if there’s going to be any kind of answer to any of this, but he just poses his body and it takes me a moment to realize he’s wanting Natalie to draw him a certain way.

That’s when it dawns on me. “Am I... Am I having a nightmare?” I ask as Antoine squeezes my shoulder.

“Nightmare? More like a wet dream, am I right? Keaton, am I right?” Reggie asks.

Keaton lets out a grunt which Reggie seems to take as “Yes, Reggie! You are amazingly right! So very right!” given the way he beams.

Antoine goes back to trying to massage the tension out of me. “My man, you are quite tight. You need to loosen up. Let me work my magic on you,” he says as he rolls me onto my stomach and straddles me.

“Um no... thank you,” I say as I try to crawl away, but Reggie decides to help by posing over the top of my body. Clearly, he wants Natalie’s portrait to just be of him using my body like some kind of rug.

“How do I look, Natalie?”

“Fuckable,” Natalie assures him.

“Keaton? Keaton, what do you think?”

Keaton grunts again which Reggie clearly takes as a “Dear god, you are divine” by the way Reggie literally preens.

“Excuse me... please...” I say as I slink out from under Antoine, or at least I try to before he grabs my ankles.

“You’re never going to get that tension out by fleeing. You have to embrace your body,” he says as my body, which I had thought was going to be free, falls forward, leaving me dangling off the bed, my head on the ground, my bare ass in the air and my ankles being sat on by Antoine.

“There you go! That’s a nice, good stretch. Work those muscles.”

“Smack dat ass!” Reggie shouts.

“I swear to god, if you smack my ass I’m going to—”

“Going to what?” Maddox asks from the doorway.

Grudgingly, I look up at him. “It’s not what it seems.”

“I’m going to be honest... I’m not even sure what it seems... seems uncomfortable if anything,” Maddox says.

“Save me,” I plead.

“From?”

“Antoine wants to ‘rub the tension out of me’ and Reggie wants to smack my ass and Natalie is painting the scene,” I cry.

“Sounds like a rough start to your day.”

Antoine gets off my ankles and I melt down onto the floor in a naked heap.

“Are you getting a nice strip dance?” Maddox asks.

“No, and I don’t need one. I need underwear and pants and the ability to run. We should run.”

“Where do you want to run to? We could go to the beach,” he suggests.

I stare at him in disbelief. “Do you have any bizarre headaches? Lumps?”

“No, why?”

“Just wondering what caused you to believe that’s a good idea. What part of ‘going to the beach’

sounds good for a recovering victim?”

“All of it,” he says with a grin as he sips his coffee.

“You’re unbelievable. What about a movie? If you’re dying to get out of the house that badly, a movie sounds appropriate,” I say as Antoine comes down to the ground with me and continues to assess my body.

Maddox clearly looks displeased about not being allowed to abuse his body. “If you must deny me the delights of exercising my body so my bones don’t get brittle and snap in a strong gust of wind, then I suppose.”

Reggie gasps, covering his mouth as he does so. “You are so cruel; how dare you treat him so cruelly?” he asks as Maddox tosses me a pair of sweats. I pull them on while ignoring Reggie’s dramatics. Then I sit on the edge of the bed and look up at Maddox.

“Is there something else you’d enjoy doing that includes things like resting?” I ask.

“I know there’s something I’d like to do,” Reggie purrs while staring at Keaton.

“I heard you two were getting married!” Antoine says and I have to stare at him to make sure he’s not talking to me and I’ve forgotten something quite important but nope, he’s talking to Keaton.

“Yeah, Hiro and I have hit it off quite well. We’re in love,” Keaton says dryly. “Our love is overflowing. Look at it flow.”

Antoine seems confused as he glances between us while looking for the overflowing love.

“No! You liar, you’re just playing hard to get,” Reggie says.

I ignore their dramatics while turning my attention back to Maddox.

“Did I miss something thrilling? I’m not sure I’ve ever seen your attention snap that quickly,” Maddox asks.

“Ah, yeah, just Reggie trying to bully Keaton into marrying him.”

“You like that, don’t you?” Reggie says a moment before he stuffs his finger into my mouth.

I swear if he wasn’t a damn ghost, I’d have bitten it off. Jerking his hand out, I turn to give him *the look*.

“Oh, you naughty boy trying to suck me right in. Don’t toy with my heart like that,” Reggie says as he drapes himself over my body and proceeds to blow in my ear while staring Keaton in the eyes. “You like that, don’t you?”

“I feel confused,” Antoine says.

“Don’t we all,” I mutter before turning my attention back to Maddox. “Will you tell your fiancé to stop blowing in my ear and sticking fingers in my mouth?”

“Oh, he’s not *my* fiancé. You might have been gullible enough to believe him when he tried tricking you, but that’s not on me.”

“See?” Reggie says. “He likes it when I blow on your ear. Don’t you?”

I stare at Maddox in disbelief. “You’re going to leave me to suffer like this?”

“You’re forcing me to suffer, why shouldn’t you suffer as well?” Maddox retorts.

“Because I won’t let you gallop around the *beach* with a gunshot wound? You realize most people would still be milking it, right? Lying on the couch, begging for care and blankets, and you’re like ‘Let’s go climb a mountain!’”

Maddox watches me for a second before nodding approvingly. “Mountain climbing... now that’s more my speed.”

“Reggie, I take back everything mean I’ve ever said to you. I *will* marry you,” I declare.

“Yay! Antoine, will you make it official with a prewedding stripathon?” Reggie asks.

And while Antoine whips it off inches from my face, I stare at Maddox while questioning if he’s

enjoying this torture he's put me through. From the grin on his face, I'd say he's enjoying it a lot.

"Natalie, please tell me you're on my side?" I ask.

Natalie takes that moment to turn the painting she's been working on around. Her artist skills are clearly lacking but the image of me upside down with my ass on display while Reggie poses makes me realize that there's only one person in this room I want to share my life with.

We lock eyes from across the room, and there's some general understanding as we both move out of the room and go into the bathroom where I shut the door.

"Keaton..." I say quietly.

"I'm sorry I once thought you were weird and didn't believe you could see ghosts," Keaton says.

"I now realize that you're confusingly sane."

"Confusingly?" I ask, wondering why I can never win.

"But that's okay."

"It is?"

He sets a hand on my shoulder. "Yes."

"Hmm... Why don't you just tell Reggie you like him?" I ask. "What do you have to lose?"

"My sanity. My freedom..."

I raise an eyebrow.

Keaton folds his arms over his chest and stares at me as he realizes I'm actually being serious now. "What happens when one of us moves on? You already said that once you figure out what's... keeping us here, we'll move on. Who's to say what's waiting on the other side for us? Or that one of us wouldn't get stuck here forever? Just sounds fucking stupid."

I lean against the sink countertop as I think about it. Obviously, I've thought about my own pain of losing the ghosts closest to me, but I never really stopped to think about how they'd feel. What would I do if I met Maddox during a time when the possibility of one of us leaving before the other was a reality? Obviously, death is similar, but with ghosts, the goal is to move on...

Reggie glides only partway through the door so I can just see his nose and eyes. "What are you two sexy lads doing in here?"

"Ask if they want me to draw their bathroom wedding proposal," Natalie says.

"NO," I say, and Keaton actually laughs before passing through the wall and out of sight.

After I brush my teeth, I head out to find Maddox and something for breakfast.

"Did you think of something reasonable you want to do?" I ask.

"I did. There's a festival in town, and some... act thing going on. Says something about aerial stuff and dog tricks or something. I don't know. Avery was trying to tell me about it, but it sounded stupid, so I mostly ignored her," he says. "She was so... cheery talking about it." He shudders at the mere thought.

"Yet you want to go now?" I ask.

"If you won't let me do anything else, I have no option. It's that or just wither away as a disgusting husk of my former self."

"Wow, that's dramatic."

"Right?"

I think about it before deciding that it's probably safe for him. "Alright. We're not walking around or anything. We're going, sitting down, and enjoying the show. Ah! I'll get you a wheelchair."

"If you came anywhere near me with a wheelchair, I would literally burn it before I'd sit in it. I would shoot it to smithereens."

"You're going to have some toasty nuts if you burn it before you sit in it," I say.

“You know what I mean.”

“Lightly crisp, maybe a bit of a crunch to them,” I add.

“You’re not funny.”

“A lot of crunch.”

“You’re getting less funny. The only good joke I’ve heard you tell is the one where you thought I’d sit my ass in a wheelchair. Now that’s a good joke,” he says.

“When you cause internal damage to your body, you better bet your ass I’m going to call up a doctor to check on your brain too,” I warn him.

“Ah, threats. Music to my ears.”

“Go rest until then, at least.”

“I’ll consider it.”



“Hear anything more from Barry?” Maddox asks as we walk toward the tent where the performance is being held.

“Yeah, I talked to his father who said Barry was doing well. I asked if I could come see him, but he said Barry was feeling a lot of guilt and asked if I could come tomorrow instead, so I’ll go in the morning. I will lie to his ass as well if I need to. Helena can rot in her own special hell for all I care.”

Maddox glances over at me and smiles. “I love seeing you fired up. I’d go with you, but I have a doctor’s appointment.”

“Why don’t I remember that?” I ask.

“I might have coerced them into moving it ahead,” he says with a grin. “And then things got busy. It’s been plenty of time. I’ve healed three times over at this point.”

“Wow, it’s like you’re magical,” I say while nudging his shoulder with mine.

“Thanks,” he says, no shits given as we head over to get our tickets scanned.

“You’re such a liar,” I say as we get through the line quickly and head inside to our seats. “If you start feeling uncomfortable *at all* we’re leaving.”

“I promise I’m fine. It’s been enough time.”

There’s really no getting through to him, so I just turn my attention to the tent that’s set up in a unique fashion. It’s almost like a circus tent, but the preshow entertainment is two young acrobats.

“You should be in one of these shows. Have your ghosts do magic tricks for you.” Maddox falls silent before his attention snaps to mine; clearly, he’s had a brilliant idea. “We should go to the casino.”

“Aren’t you a man of the law?” I ask.

“Nowhere in their cheating handbook does it say that you can’t use beings come back from the dead to assist you.”

Technically he’s correct, but I’m still pretty sure it’s kind of like those warnings not to bring cats or dogs on the premises. They never mention keeping your pet crocodile at home because they assume you just get it.

“I’ll retire early with all of our winnings.”

Now *that* makes me laugh. “You can’t even sit still for three weeks after being shot. You think you’re going to retire?”

“True.”

“You’d slowly become crazy, then before long you’d be teaching classes on how to get away with the perfect crime,” I say.

“No, I won’t because I don’t want it to lead back to me. We’d do it on the sly.”

I grin at him as I reach over and squeeze his leg. The lights flicker a moment before the host of the evening comes onto the stage and starts his monologue. As it shifts through acrobats and dogs, a comedian, and different random circus-style acts, I can’t help but think about how wonderful it is to get to experience this with Maddox. I love having him beside me and hearing his laugh. And how lucky I am to still have him with me.

Despite thinking the show wasn’t going to be up his alley, he sure seems to enjoy it. As the final act leaves the stage, I find myself thinking about what Keaton said.

“I believe we need a dog now,” Maddox says as we head for the exit together.

“Do you?” I ask with a grin. “You always were more of a dog person, weren’t you? But those kitties just wormed their way right into your heart.”

“They’re persistent.”

“You love them, and you know it.”

“Maybe.”

“But if you want a dog, we can get a dog. If you wanted a zebra, I’d let you get one as long as it loves me most.”

“Interesting requirements...”

“Thanks,” I say. “So... If you knew the person you liked had the possibility of dying, would you still let yourself love them?”

“Well, that took a turn.”

“It was just... something Keaton said,” I admit. “About why open your heart to people who could be gone tomorrow.”

Maddox is quiet for a moment. “Maybe before I fell in love, I would have said no. But if you asked me if I’d rather have never met you or only had you for a short time, I would pick the short time in a heartbeat. And I would cherish every second with you.”

I smile at how warm that makes me feel. “I feel the same way... but I also get that fear. Just like when you were *shot*... the fear that I lost you was unreal. That’s a tough pill to swallow. And now you just act like it was a walk in the park. But I’d still do it again and again just to be with you.”

Maddox nods. “It was a nice walk in the park. I got to meet Reggie *and* Natalie. I don’t know what the big fuss is.”

I’m pretty sure if my eyebrow could rise any higher it’d be crawling off my head. Clearly, my look is doing nothing to inform Maddox that I think what he just said is one of the most ridiculous things to have ever come out of anyone’s mouth. “Please, please think about what you just said and don’t speak again until it’s had time to sink in through your obviously extremely dense brain,” I tease.

“It was good catching up, you know? Putting a face to a name with Natalie. I don’t know what you’re all riled up about.”

“I’m going to poke you so hard right in that bullet hole,” I threaten.

“Good thing I’m all healed, then.”

“You’re going to be the death of me,” I decide. “The absolute death of me. I take back all those nice things about wanting to meet you even if it meant I only had limited time with you. Scratch all of that.”

Maddox is laughing now because he feasts on the torturing of others. He’s just evil like that and he

knows it as he gloats.

“When we get home, I’m handcuffing you to the bed.”

His eyebrows lift and his reaction tells me he doesn’t realize this is supposed to be a punishment.

“I’m not going to lie, that sounds thrilling.”

“This isn’t a sex thing,” I say.

“It’s not?”

“No, it’s an ‘I’m going to handcuff you there so you can properly rest’ thing. You can’t have *sex* now.”

“You’d be surprised what I can do now,” he says with a wink.

“Put your ol’ seductive wink away. I don’t want to see it.”

“Ohhhh, you do wanna see it.”

“You can say whatever you want, but the moment we get home, you’re resting. We can sit on the couch but there has to be at least twelve inches between us.”

“I can put some inches between us,” Maddox says with a waggle of his eyebrows.

“Absolutely not. Not going to happen no matter how much you try to claim it will,” I assure him.

“You’re not changing my mind on this, you hear me?”

“Loud and clear. Quite loud, in fact. Actually... I think my ears hurt more than my body. That’s so strange.”

“Stop being so dramatic.”

“I’m not! I feel almost... traumatized from how deprived I feel. It’s... it’s really hard for me to deal with. I’m... I’m not sure I’m going to make it...”

“I’m going to be honest... I’m not even sure what you’re claiming is killing you at this point.”

“E-Everything. Being... being forced to live in a tiny hole where I can only sit... I barely get to see the light anymore,” he says as he shields his eyes like the natural light is hurting them.

I stare at the man as we reach the car. “We literally just went out to see a show. You remember that? You remember where I caved and took you to sit during a show when I should be making you rest at home, especially after how active you were yesterday?”

He clearly doesn’t remember as he goes around and gets into the passenger seat of the car. I get in and continue staring at him as he goes about his life completely ignoring me like I don’t even exist.

“You are going to be the death of me,” I decide.

“Well... at least we’ll die together then.”

“You are ridiculous,” I state. “Absolutely ridiculous.”

“Yet you still would move mountains for me.”

“Maybe an anthill, but I’m not sure about mountains. You’d have to straighten up for me to do that shit.”

“What do you think about rock climbing tomorrow?”

“Sure, yeah, you do that. Just make sure you sign a contract that if you bleed all over from tearing your wound open that you’re not paying to replace the equipment.”

“It’ll just make the equipment look more realistic, you know?”

“Right! Of course that’s what they’re concerned about.”

Maddox continues to give me ridiculous scenarios for tomorrow on the way home. I’m positive he thinks if he tells me all of this horrible shit he could do before simply suggesting that he could go into work, I’ll feel like it’s no big deal for him to go.

“Get your sweats on, I’m scooping ice cream and we’re watching a movie,” I demand.

“Yes, sir!” he says as he marches back to the bedroom while I get the bowls. By the time I return

with bowls of ice cream, he's got the TV on and is scrolling through it as Spite sits next to him, like he's judging whatever Maddox picks.

"Find anything good?" I ask.

"We have a watchlist around here somewhere, don't we?"

"Yeah, just don't pick the first one on the list. Natalie demanded I put it there and then after looking it up, it's some weird softcore porn horror movie."

"Unique mix... I'm almost tempted but not quite," he says as he clicks a different movie before reaching for his bowl of ice cream.

I pull it away before he can grab onto it. "Before I allow you this bowl you must agree to take it easy, to not threaten the doctor into giving you a pass, and to listen."

He's quiet for a long moment. "And if I don't?"

"Then you get to watch your ice cream melt before your very eyes."

"You'd do that to me?"

I hesitate because I'm not sure I could. "No... I wouldn't let it melt. That's a waste of ice cream. I'd eat it for you."

"That's even crueler!"

"I know," I say, proud of myself. Even so, I hand the ice cream over to him.

Spite eyes the ice cream like it might be something exciting and that perhaps I should hand it over to *him*. When I don't, he starts getting right up close to the bowl and watching each bite before I realize he wants the spoon. So once I'm done eating, I make sure the spoon is facing him so he can play with it.

"Your spoon is haunted."

"Right? Ghost spoon," I tease as Spite flicks it up then dances, proud of himself. He's so easily excited, though never as much as he was when I'd found that locket at my old apartment that I still would love to know more about. I keep it out on the desk so he can stare at it whenever he feels the need to. It used to be on the dresser until he woke Maddox and me up by tip-tapping it all around.

"I'm going to get some water, I'll be right back," I say as I get up before booping the bird on the head. He makes a pleased noise before going back to his spoon attack. As I step into the kitchen, I notice Keaton lying in the backyard watching the stars or the moon or just staring up like a weirdo. I hesitate before heading through the back door to see what's going on.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Just... existing," he says.

"Yeah? You're existing all alone?"

"It's peacefully quiet. Natalie and Reggie went off to haunt the neighbor. They want to see if they can make the asshole down the street scream."

"Aw, that sounds sweet," I say.

"They're... strange."

I nod because that's quite an accurate assessment of them. "We got interrupted before I could say anything earlier today about what you said—"

He scoffs. "What I said was stupid, so don't worry about it."

"I was just going to say that if I had the choice of loving someone... even if it was just for one day, I'd take it. I feel like I'd rather miss them than regret never being with them."

Keaton waves me off even though I know he really does care about this. "I don't think it's anything to worry about."

"I'm not even talking just romance or whatever... I mean with all of us. I know you like keeping

to yourself... and I'm not sure if that's what you enjoy or that's what you're used to. But we're here for you now. Of course we're all going to miss you when you're gone, but I think it's just like with my brother. You miss them but you're happy to know that you were able to help them move on."

He's quiet for a moment, refusing to look at me as he continues to stare up at the sky. "Yeah..."

"And who knows. Maybe you'll be so sick of Reggie by the time those things come around, you'll throw a party as he goes," I tease.

Keaton actually shows a hint of a grin at that. "Maybe I would be. Can you imagine how quiet it'd be here?"

"What would we do with ourselves?" I say. "Anyway, we're watching a movie if you want to join."

"Nah. I'm good... Can I use your phone, though? There's a book I wanted to read that came out today... it was such a random thought... Never mind."

"You want the audio?" I ask.

He's quiet for a moment. "Kind of. I'd pay you back, but I can't."

"I think I'll live," I assure him as I take out my phone and purchase the audio before setting my phone next to him.

"Thanks."

"Of course," I say as I head into the house, leaving him to listen.

"Did you get lost?" Maddox asks.

"I did. I needed your sexy voice to pull me back to you."

He shakes his head as I grin. "Where's your water?"

"What water?"

"The water you went to get. Were you off doing something fun and just lied to me?" Maddox asks.

"I was, it was so much fun. I just can't believe how much more fun I had without you."

"You better get your water. What if you just like... expire or something?"

"I feel like you've been awfully sassy lately. Where the hell did this sass come from?" I ask.

"From my loins."

I raise an eyebrow. "Just... no."

He doesn't seem to have an issue at all with this as I shake my head, leaving him behind to go get my glass of water. When I return to the kitchen, I glance out the window and notice that Keaton isn't alone. Reggie's lying next to him with my phone between them.

When I return with my glass of water this time, Maddox glances up at me. "You look awfully happy. Suspiciously happy."

"This is just how my face is. I'm sorry it disgusts you."

"You are a menace," he decides as he grabs my wrist while I grin. He pulls me down onto his lap and kisses me as I gently try to avoid any part of him that could lead to me causing him pain. He clearly gives no shits as he draws me in tight, wrapping an arm around me and holding me close.

"I love you," I say, tucking myself against him.

"I love you too. Ooh, look, they're going to hack this guy up. Seems romantic, eh?"

"Very." He's so ridiculous, but he makes me grin as he grabs for the remote.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



MADDOX

Hiro and I end up going to Barry's together since my doctor moved my appointment earlier. Thankfully, he okayed me for working as long as I wasn't doing anything excessive or strenuous such as lifting, running, and other things I promised I wouldn't do. He also tried to clarify that it was "desk work," but I'm pretty sure as long as I don't go lift a boulder, all is well. Hiro claims he heard a different story. As we pull into Barry's driveway, Hiro falls quiet.

"Is it weird that I feel nervous?" he asks as I get out of the car.

"Not at all."

"Is it wrong if I lie to him?" he asks quietly. "Like about his mother?"

I shake my head, honestly feeling that it'd be best for him to handle it like he did Barry's sister. His mother is a miserable piece of shit. She can fester in her misery for all I care. Barry doesn't need to beat himself up over shit he didn't do.

But maybe that's just my take on it. Maybe I'm a bit crueler than the average person when it comes to shit like this because I've seen how absolutely disgusting some people can be. And how they can just push the blame onto others because they refuse to ever see their own wrongdoings.

Hiro knocks and an older man answers. "Hey," he says.

Hiro gives the man an uncertain smile. "I'm Hiro and this is Maddox."

"I'm Van, Barry's father. Come in."

We head into the living room where the TV is on and Barry looks a bit wound tight. I can tell he doesn't know how to react with Hiro and probably feels some unnecessary guilt or something. He has some stitches on his face and bruising from the car accident, but overall, he seems to be okay.

"I bet that girl at work will definitely talk to you now. I heard they like scars," Hiro says with a grin.

"You think?" Barry asks.

"I *might* not be an expert on women. I have like one female friend and she's really not a normal female. Like a few weeks ago, she talked me into playing porn on the big-screen TV about two minutes before Maddox's boss walked in. So yeah... don't trust anything I say."

Barry looks relieved and smiles. "I'll keep that in mind."

“Good! How are you feeling?”

“Fine... I’m sorry. I don’t... I don’t know. I think the shit my sister was saying was making me a bit manic, you know? Like thinking back, it makes no damn sense but she and my mom had a way of just... fucking everything up. She told me this guy was helping her talk to Mom’s ghost... that all this shit was going on and then... it just weighed on me. It’s like this guilt I’d buried deep long ago came bubbling up and consumed me.”

“Would it make you feel better to know that the person your sister was talking to was lying?” Hiro asks. “He manipulated her into feeling this way because he wanted to see her hurt you.”

Barry looks up at Hiro. “Why?”

I notice Hiro shift a little and I wonder if she’s here... Barry’s mom. Is she screaming at him like she did before?

“Some people just like to see others suffer,” Hiro says.

“But... I don’t even know him... so why me? Why our family?” he asks.

Hiro shifts a little more, and I wish I could push this dead bitch away, but at least I can help with this conversation. “I don’t know the answer to that. Sometimes there’s not even a reason. Some people just like to hurt others and watch them suffer,” I say.

“I guess...” he says. “What a mess. I’m sorry for dragging you two into it.”

“Don’t apologize. You didn’t drag us into anything,” I assure him.

“Maddox willingly trotted along. Anything to not have to rest,” Hiro says. “I just want you to know that this guilt you’ve been feeling isn’t something you should feel. I don’t know what happened in your childhood but it’s not your fault. Your mother’s job as a mother was to protect you instead of the horrible things she did to you.”

Barry nods slowly. “Thanks. So... you really can see ghosts?”

“Yeah.”

“And... my mom’s really not saying all the shit my sister said she was?” He looks so hopeful and a bit nervous, but Hiro is the perfect actor.

“She’s not. She said that she’s seen her wrongs and didn’t want what was happening.”

Barry looks noticeably relieved as he nods. “Okay... Thank you. I needed to hear that.”

“I’m glad I could tell you,” Hiro says.

The two of them talk for a bit before my phone rings. I see that it’s Parker, so I nod toward the door. “Work. I’ll be right back,” I say as I head out the door and answer it.

“Maddox, there’s been an issue,” Parker says.

“Such as?”

“I was not informed of this ahead of time. Supposedly, Ambrose had suffered some damage from our last talk with him. He claimed to continually feel like he hasn’t been able to breathe since his... attack. He was checked out, all seemed fine. I don’t have the full report yet, but something happened and they wanted to transfer him to a place with a medical team who could help with this matter. On the way there, the transport vehicle crashed. When people arrived on scene, Ambrose was gone. Someone had gotten him out of the vehicle.”

“What happened to the rest of the transport team?”

“The crash knocked the driver unconscious and the passenger was pinned in the vehicle. Another car arrived quickly, but by that point, he was already gone.”

“Did someone help him?” I ask in disbelief. “How did he get out of the vehicle?”

“We don’t know at this point. Hiro’s ghosts... he can use them to unlock doors... could that have happened here? Would he have been able to have the ghosts free him? I don’t know the answer to any

of that.”

“I’m on my way. Give me the location.” I pull open the door. “Hiro, we have to go now!”

Hiro rushes up, hearing the urgency in my voice. “What happened?”

“You don’t want to fucking know,” I say as I usher him toward the car. “Ambrose escaped.”

Hiro’s hip slams into the side of the car since he hadn’t been watching where he was going. He stops and stares at me for a moment, clearly struggling to comprehend this. “You’re joking... right? That’s not a very funny joke.”

“No, I’m not... I wish I was, but I’m not. He escaped and we need to go,” I say as we get into the vehicle.

“Where are we going?”

“It just happened. I want to see how he escaped. Do you think he could have used the ghosts to help him like you can?” I ask.

“He... acted like he couldn’t... I don’t know,” Hiro says. “But yeah, I could see if there are any ghosts lingering that could help us figure out where he’s at. Fucking hell, Maddox.”

Hiro grips tightly onto the door as I start to drive, following the directions Parker had sent to me. I don’t blame him for being nervous; Ambrose clearly has some kind of fascination with Hiro. Especially because I can’t imagine he’s just done with his “game.”

“I won’t let you get caught up in anything,” I promise him. I’ll do anything to keep him safe. Hell, maybe I should take him somewhere now. “Want me to take you to the department?”

Hiro adamantly shakes his head. “No. There’s a chance we can find him now and I’m going to do whatever I can to help you before he has time to get too far away. We’ll find him.”

He doesn’t sound as convinced by his own words as he’s trying to portray, but I still nod because I know that we need to do everything we can to find Ambrose.



HIRO

As Maddox pulls onto the scene, I see that they already have drones out, and if there isn’t one already, there will soon be a helicopter out, looking down on the ground below.

The transport truck is lying on its side facing the wrong direction on the highway. From the marks on the road, it looks like the truck ended up in oncoming traffic before going off the road and flipping onto its side. The police have the whole area sectioned off and are contending with traffic as we come up on the scene.

After Maddox gets us permission to enter, he hurries over to the truck where some police are working while I warily look around, anxious about what this means.

“Any sight of him?” Maddox asks.

“Not yet,” an officer says.

That’s when I see Peter leaning against the transport truck just laughing and laughing. He’s hysterical as he rocks back and forth like this whole scene is the funniest thing he’s ever come across.

“Oh, it’s all going to plan. All of it. You’re just literally playing *my* game step-by-step. How’s it feel to just keep losing?”

“My?” I ask as I stare at him.

When Maddox glances over at me, I tear my eyes away from the crazed man.

“What’s wrong?” Maddox asks.

“Peter is here... he’s just... ecstatic. Mocking us. He keeps saying that everything is going as *he* planned. Maddox, what do we do?” I anxiously look to him, hoping he has an idea that I haven’t thought of, but he reaches out and gives my hand a reassuring squeeze.

“We’re going to find him, okay? Simple as that.”

I really do hope it’s that simple, but I have the awful feeling it won’t be. I stay back as Maddox moves in closer to figure out what happened. In that time, I make a wide circle, looking for any ghosts to help. There’s a new one, telling me someone died in the crash, but they won’t even look my way, they just keep staring off to the right, away from the crash.

“It’ll be okay,” I say, wanting to soothe them as much as I can.

The man refuses to even acknowledge me, so I turn back to Maddox who I find walking my way.

“They said the crash happened about forty minutes ago. There were eyewitness accounts that Ambrose jumped the fence and went running toward that patch of trees near the subdivision. There’s a team over there, so that’s where we’re headed now,” Maddox says as he hurries me over to the fence that’d been crushed in the crash. We easily step over it as he starts walking.

“See any ghosts who could help?” he asks, sounding hopeful.

“Not yet,” I admit as I keep looking. “Do you think he’s hiding?”

“If he is, the dogs will find his trail. He’s probably too smart to sit still; I’m betting he’s going to keep moving.”

A couple of officers catch up with us. Maddox nods at them as I question if they’re helping us look but every time I slow or stop, hoping I see something, they mimic my steps. When I glance at Maddox he doesn’t say anything, so I assume they’re taking precautions in case Ambrose is still out here and sees us walking alone.

When we reach the subdivision, the area is abuzz with activity. Residents are out in the streets questioning what’s going on, people are moving about. I even see a drone fly overhead, telling me they’re taking this quite seriously. The whole thing feels absolutely surreal knowing that the man who has toyed with me for so long is now out here with me.

There’s nothing between us, and I realize how freaked out that makes me feel.

“They’re never going to find him,” I tell Maddox.

“Don’t give up before the hunt has even started,” he says. “We know everything about this guy. We know what he looks like, his name, age, so much more about him than we usually do when we’re in a situation like this.”

I nod because I guess that’s true. But what I don’t love is that the “game” has progressed. While we found three people, we never found the first killer or victim. This might be him moving the final pieces of the game.

“Maddox, should we call our families and make sure they stay safe? What if he targets them?” I ask.

“Alright. We can do that. I’ll call Ben; can you contact Patricia and Nicolás?” he asks. “Let’s have them meet at the department for now. We’ll have Lexi put them in a room until we can get back with them. That alright?”

Patricia is going to literally murder me. “Yeah,” I say as I pull out my phone and call Nicolás who is at work. Thankfully he answers, knowing that I likely wouldn’t call him during the day unless there was an issue.

“Hey, Hiro.”

“Nicolás, there’s some stuff going on and this guy has taken a special interest in me and Maddox,

so I need you and Patricia to go to the station and just wait for a little bit until we have a better idea of what's going on."

My phone beeps but I don't want to switch away from the call when it's clear Nicolás isn't going to handle this well if his silence has anything to say about it.

"What the hell are you caught up in?" he asks, his voice rising.

"Nothing, it's no big deal. Everything will be fine."

"It's no big deal but you want me and Patricia to go hide with the police? You want us both to leave work to hide with the police, but it's nothing?"

"Yeah?"

"Hiro, the only way I'm going there is if you're there when I arrive, got it? I'm not dealing with losing another brother," he says, his voice catching on the last part. It makes my stomach ache to hear it.

"Okay. Deal. Can you please call Patricia for me?" I ask, knowing that if he calls her I won't have to hear her fury.

"Yes. You better be there, do you hear me?"

"I do," I say. "I love you."

"I love you too. Please be careful."

"I'm going to send you a picture of the guy so if you see him, you know who to avoid," I say, really hoping that's not the case.

"You get your ass there right now, you hear me?"

"I do."

"No hesitation."

"None," I promise.

He threatens me one more time before hanging up, so I look down at my phone, trying to think of the quickest way to get a recent picture of Ambrose, when I see that I got a notification minutes ago from my security app.

Stray animals make it go off more often than anything, making me hesitate, but I click on the app anyway.

It brings up the camera facing the front of the house, but with nothing there, I almost click away before something possesses me to click the living room camera.

Stella is lying in a small patch of sunlight on the living room floor, but Bandit is standing up facing the door to the next room. He takes a step forward before hesitating, like he's listening to something.

"Hey there, little guy," a voice says, making me freeze.

The officer who'd been tailing me bumps into me before apologizing, but I can't even say anything to him. I can't do anything but stare at Ambrose who walks into our living room and stoops down in front of Bandit.

"Maddox," I yell as I grab his arm and yank him away from his phone call with Ben.

"What's wrong?" he asks, sounding urgent. And that's the moment his eyes hit the phone.

"Fucking hell," he whispers.

"Do I hit the alarm?"

"No. We don't want him to know we know," Maddox says. He calls someone as he starts running back toward his car with me right behind him. From the grimace he has as he clambers up a slant, I know it's tugging at his side, but there's absolutely nothing I can do while he yells for them to get police over to our house.

I can't stop watching as Ambrose scratches Bandit's chin and pure fear races through me that he's going to do something to the cats. He can destroy the house all he wants as long as Bandit and Stella are okay.

As we reach the crash site, I just see Peter laughing and laughing. "You're so fucked," he yells after me.

I head toward our car, still transfixed by the video, but Maddox pushes me toward a marked vehicle that we get into, which makes more sense when we need to move quickly.

My eyes drop down to the camera as Ambrose looks straight into the lens.

"Hiro, you're steadily losing the game. I thought for sure you'd try harder," he says.

I hesitate before pressing the button that allows me to speak to him. "What the fuck do you want?"

"I simply want to win. Because once I win, I can get these fucking monsters out of my head," he says as he picks Bandit up and spins a circle with the cat in his outstretched hands. "Shut up, you fucking ghosts, I'm not going to kill the cat. That gets me nowhere. That's no fun at all, now is it?" He sets Bandit back down before walking straight up to the camera and lifting it so it's pointed at his face.

"There's only two ways for this to end, Hiro. Either I die or you end all of this," he says as he waves his arm around. That's when he tips the camera and what I see makes my stomach clench in agony.

Patricia is lying on the ground, wide eyes watching the man. I don't even have long enough to look at her to know if she's okay or not, but what I need to do is get her out.

"How convenient that when I arrived, she was dropping something off. I couldn't believe my luck that she even had the passcode to get in! If *anyone* steps into this house, Hiro, I will kill her. Do you understand?" Ambrose asks.

I'm speechless. I don't even know what to say as I stare at the screen. That's when Maddox takes the phone from me and presses the button to talk.

"What do you want in return?" Maddox asks.

Ambrose's expression immediately sours at hearing Maddox's voice, like nothing irritates him more than that. "Nothing from you. I want to speak to Hiro," he says, voice a low growl.

"Well, Hiro's right here and he's listening as well. You want something from Hiro and I'm going to help him. So tell him what you fucking want, do you hear me?"

"I'm listening," I choke out. I'm not even sure how I manage to get the words out of my mouth, but I do somehow.

"Fine," Ambrose says. "Make it stop. Make it all end."

"Make what end?" I ask.

"This fucking game," he growls.

Maddox glances at me as I try to figure out what he's talking about. I'm confused and feel panicked knowing that Patricia is in his hands and nothing is making sense.

"I thought you wanted to play the game," I say.

"I did because I wanted you to *end* the game, but you failed. Again and again, you failed."

"Because we stopped people from dying, you deem that a failure?"

"Shut up, shut up, SHUT UP," he screams as he grabs for his head. Then he falls quiet for a long moment as I realize that it's not us he's yelling at.

"You want the voices to stop," I say matter-of-factly.

"Did Peter make this game?" Maddox asks. "You didn't make the game, did you? Peter did."

Ambrose pauses before glancing back up at the camera. "How well do you know Peter?"

“He’s been talking to us... he tried to trick us into trusting him,” I say, realizing I’d never actually told Ambrose this. I guess I just assumed he knew that his fucking dreadful friend has been tugging us along.

“Of course he did,” Ambrose says.

“We’ll help you; you just have to let her go,” I say.

“That’s what he told me too. That he’d *help* me,” he says. “Now look where I’m at.” He points the camera over at Patricia who looks at him with fear in her eyes. “You have three hours to beat the game or all of this ends. Don’t forget that if anyone, I mean *anyone* tries to come in here, I’ll kill her. We’re both already aware I’m not worried where I’ll end up. As long as you win the game.”

“What is the requirement to win?” I ask.

He grits his teeth like he’s angry he has to spell this out for us. “You need to kill—”

Ambrose freezes, and for a moment, I’m unsure what’s happening as he drops the camera and I hear it clatter against the ground. But before it did, he’d had a look of surprise on his face. There’s a moment of silence before I see his fingers as he wraps them around the camera, picking it up and putting it back onto the shelf it was originally on, making it so I can no longer see him. He’s also quiet now so I can’t hear him either.

“Is there someone in there with him?” I ask.

“I... don’t think so. Any time I hear anything, it’s just him or Patricia.”

“He must be talking to a ghost, then. Maybe Peter.”

“He likely has some sociopathic tendencies that are being driven to the extreme by his ability to see the dead,” Maddox says.

“Does he want to never see the dead again? Is that what he thinks we can accomplish?” I ask. “He started to say that we had to kill someone, but does he really think we’re going to fucking kill anyone? Is this how he gets others to do shit for him? Just push them until they have no choice?”

Maddox is quiet for a second before shaking his head. “He saw something when he was talking about killing... he saw someone that shifted his expression to terror.”

“So there was someone else... you’re meaning a ghost, right? Peter?” I ask.

“We know he killed Peter when he was younger. Around seventeen... Peter has clearly followed or haunted him since.”

“You think he wants me to get rid of Peter? What if this is just another fucking dead end? We have three hours.”

“Get him on the camera again. Tell him you have a single question about the rules.”

I don’t want to deal with him again, but I’ll do whatever it takes to help Patricia.

“Ambrose, I have one more question,” I say.

His reply is almost instant but I still can’t see him. “I’m listening.”

“Pretend you don’t hear him. I want to see him,” Maddox says.

“Ambrose, are you there? I have a question,” I repeat.

“I said I’m listening,” he growls.

“Ambrose? Dammit. Come on, Ambrose?”

I hear noise as he grabs the camera and thwacks it against the shelf before looking at it. “I said I’m listening.”

I turn to Maddox, not sure what my question is supposed to be now that I have him in view.

Maddox stares at something closely on the small screen before taking my phone and screenshooting it.

I press the button so Ambrose can hear me speak again. “Did Peter make you kill him?”

He grins at me. “Why would he do that?”

“Then why would you kill him knowing he could haunt you for the rest of your life?”

Ambrose falls quiet before simply setting the camera back down. “Your time is ticking. Do you really want to waste it asking such stupid questions?”

I glance at Maddox, unsure if he got what he wanted, but the way he goes to my pictures and zooms in on the screenshot tells me he did. He points at Ambrose’s neck where the skin is clearly quite red.

“I bet you Peter did that. He’s keeping Ambrose from telling us how to ‘win’ the game.”

“So you think to win it, we need to get rid of Peter? Fucking hell, Maddox. We have three hours... less than three hours. I don’t even know shit about Peter. He died years ago.”

“Right. What’s keeping him here? Peter seems to just enjoy toying with you and leading you the wrong way, so if he was hoping for you to help him pass, I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t be doing the shit he’s been doing,” Maddox says.

“True... but I also don’t feel like he’s trying to stop me. He’s just... enjoying it. It seems like he’s enjoying it as much as Ambrose... maybe more.”

“This is pure speculation, but we have Peter, an adult man who started working with Ambrose when Ambrose was a teenager. Both of them clearly have a tendency for murder, so we can speculate that Peter possibly helped Ambrose learn how to kill. The ghost even said that many weren’t killed by Ambrose but by Peter,” Maddox says.

“Right... So what if solving this moves Peter on but he doesn’t want to? Often people will only move on if it’s exposed how they died. We believe Ambrose killed Peter... so what more would we need?”

“Maybe we’re not right. Or maybe there’s more to it and this stupid game is supposed to show us that.”

“Can you take me to Ambrose’s office? I want to speak to the ghost there,” I say.

“Yes.”

The officer driving flips the sirens on and the car starts moving as Maddox calls and tells Parker what is happening. The moment the officers pull up to the building, I jump out of the car and take off running into the building, hoping I can do something while waiting for someone to open the office door for us. Desperately, I beat my fist against it.

“Ricky, I know you’re here. I know you didn’t want to kill yourself or you wouldn’t be stuck here roaming like this. I can help you. I can help move you on,” I say, hoping the ghost is still stuck in the room and able to hear me. “You won’t be trapped in this room staring at these walls all alone for years.”

I watch as Ricky passes through the door and looks at me. “You can’t change anything.”

“I sure as hell can,” I say. “Why did you kill yourself?”

He’s quiet for a long moment as I notice his eyes flick around. “Because I couldn’t kill someone else.”

“Who were you supposed to kill?”

“I don’t know. An older woman... I was told that my family would be safe if I killed her... I tried to fake it by sending you the box like I was supposed to. But I’d actually just stolen her necklace. That’s when... things... started happening. I could... feel it. I could... These ghosts Ambrose uses... I swear they were haunting me. And I knew the only way to keep my family safe after what I’d done was to kill myself. It was like they were watching me to see if I actually did it or not...”

“Was this woman connected to you in any way?” I ask.

“Not to me—” He suddenly stops talking as his eyes get wide. “No! No, no, no.” Quickly, he backs up and disappears through the door as I turn my head to look at Peter standing behind me.

“What are you doing, Hiro?” he asks.

“Stopping you,” I say as I turn from him because I know now what I needed to hear.

Maddox follows me as I run for the car.

“Can you get them to take us to that old cabin?” I ask.

“Yeah, of course,” Maddox says as he guides me into the back seat of the cruiser.

As the car moves, I pull out my phone and call Barry who answers almost immediately.

“Hey, you alright?” he asks.

“What’s your connection to a Peter Ridley?” I say, putting him on speaker.

“Peter Ridley?” Barry asks, sounding surprised. “He’s my sister’s father. An affair, I guess. What the hell brought that up? I haven’t heard that name in years. I’ve never even met the man.”

“Thanks. I’m going to have images and names sent to you, okay? To see if you recognize any of them.”

“Okay... I really don’t know anything about the guy.”

“That’s fine,” I say before issuing my goodbye.

“So you’re thinking all of the victims are connected to Peter, right?” Maddox asks.

“Yeah... our focus had been how they were connected to Ambrose but there was none. The connection was strictly to Peter. Ambrose has been playing Peter’s game with people who’d been a part of Peter’s life.”

“Why? Payback for what Peter did? Or maybe drawing our attention to him?” Maddox asks.

“Peter doesn’t care. He doesn’t have the emotions or connections to care. He doesn’t bat an eye when people die, which I would think Ambrose would know.”

“Right... but maybe it still gave him some kind of satisfaction to destroy things that had some connection to Peter.”

“Peter’s so carefree, though. He doesn’t seem to give a shit about any of it. I feel like there would be better ways, like ‘Hey, there’s this crazy ghost haunting me, can you please help?’”

Maddox shakes his head. “That’s not how his brain works. He sees nothing wrong with using people’s lives as stepping stones to get what he wants.”

I just can’t comprehend that, but I guess that’s what makes us different from people like Peter and Ambrose. “I know they found some bodies, but we haven’t found Peter’s body yet. I strongly believe he’s buried in the woods. I feel like Peter was telling us some truths as he led us off, he just left out a few key details.”

“Do you have a brilliant plan I haven’t quite thought of yet about how to find his body?” Maddox asks.

“Well, since you’re the smart one, I assumed *you’d* have the plan,” I say with a hopeful look.

“They already searched the area with cadaver dogs... I’m never going to be as good at finding a body as a cadaver dog.”

“Yeah... maybe... but we have ghosts on our side,” I assure him.

“Okay...” Maddox looks a little less than hopeful as he pulls out his phone and starts calling for more help.

Honestly, I want to push the car faster. I can’t help but wish I was driving, but I also know they need to be careful.

Anxious, I pull out my phone just to give my hands something to do, but all I can do now is stare at the clock and watch the minutes quickly tick by. We’re losing too much time already. What if I’ve

fucked up going here? What if I needed to do something else? Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Maddox sets a hand on my knee and squeezes it gently. His touch soothes me more than anything could at this point. "It's okay," he says gently.

I nod, not so sure it is, but I'm thankful for his touch. "Okay."

"Good," he says with a smile.

"Where do you want me to stop at?" the driver asks, making me realize we're getting close.

"Maybe where he had us pull in last time?" Maddox asks me.

I nod, not sure if that's right but willing to give it a try. We'd end up driving past the turn for the cabin, but we can always go back. Or maybe we could send the officers off that way to see if there's anything—

I jump as Peter enters the vehicle.

"You're making a mistake," he says.

"No, I'm—"

Peter slams into the driver who jerks his arm to the left involuntarily. The car slides off the narrow road, tire catching the gravel as the vehicle fishtails, the driver trying to regain control, but it's too late as the front catches something that swings the car hard to the left, making the vehicle dip before slamming to a stop.

My seat belt locks, digging into me as I'm thrown forward. Everything happens so quickly that I can't even follow it until I find myself leaning forward from the way the car is dipped into the ditch.

"You okay?" Maddox asks as he starts grabbing for me.

"Fine," I say as I nervously look around for Peter. I can't see him, but I can hear him laughing. I release the seat belt and fall against the seat in front of me. The driver is conscious, but blood is rushing down his face as he looks around like he's confused. The passenger is trying to push against the door that won't seem to open for him.

"You two alright?" Maddox asks.

"Yeah," the passenger says as he climbs over the driver to push the door open. Once he does, he yanks my door open before helping the driver out.

"What the hell happened?" the passenger asks.

"S-Something fucking shoved me," the driver says. "I felt it... I felt... something."

Maddox looks at me, knowing that I can confirm what the others couldn't see.

"It was Peter, I saw him do it," I say as I get out only to find the man in question sitting on the hood of the car still laughing. He's clearly enjoying every moment of this.

As Maddox climbs out after me, he winces but quickly covers it up the moment he notices me looking, and I realize he must have hurt himself since he's still supposed to be taking it easy.

"You alright?"

"Perfect," he says.

"Don't lie to me," I say as I look around. Of course, now we either have to wait for someone to get us or walk, both options causing us to waste time we don't have to waste.

"The cabin isn't far from here, I'm going to walk there," I decide. "Why don't you stay with these guys?" The moment I'm finished talking, the laughing stops, which is even eerier for some reason. I try to ignore Peter out of fear of what he's planning on doing to stop us now.

"Absolutely not," Maddox says.

I glance at the car only to find Peter watching me with a horribly twisted expression on his face. The way he's staring at me makes anxiety ripple through me, but I can't stop now. Not when Patricia's life is on the line.

“Come on,” I say as I turn toward the cabin, but Peter is instantly in front of me.

“You’re not going anywhere, you hear me?” he growls.

I ignore him and push forward, passing straight through his body as the odd feeling chills me. I hate it, but I have to keep going.

Peter is pissed and shows it by screaming at me as he rushes after me. He clearly wants to drag me down and watch me suffer, but I take Maddox’s hand in mine, squeezing it so I can use the strength I gain from him and focus. As long as I don’t let my mind stray, I can do this. I can push forward.

“Hey!” Reggie says as he appears with Keaton and Natalie. “Patricia is okay, alright?”

I nod, not trusting my words because I have to stay focused. I take a deep breath and tell Maddox what Reggie said.

“We need to figure out where Peter is buried. Hiro is hoping we can find something that pinpoints why he’s still stuck here,” Maddox says.

“Wouldn’t it be because he was killed?” Keaton asks.

“It could be, but usually once it’s common knowledge who killed them, they will feel at peace and pass on,” Natalie says.

My mind is straying again as Peter rages behind me. I need to stay focused. “Distract me, please,” I say.

“Um... umm...” Natalie looks around before yanking Reggie’s pants down. “Oh my god, I thought he’d have underwear on!”

“Nah, I like to go wild and free, baby,” he says.

Keaton coughs while blatantly staring right at Reggie’s junk.

“Flash him your boobies,” Reggie suggests.

“I’m not sure that’s the kind of distraction he wants, but sure!” Natalie says as she grabs for her shirt.

“No, I don’t want any of you naked!” I protest.

“Hold on, what?” Maddox asks.

“This is why you don’t ask them for distractions,” I say as Reggie shuffles along with his pants around his knees. “Pull your damn pants up.”

“I saw a porno like this once,” Natalie says.

“Running naked through the woods?” Keaton asks like he’s actually curious.

“Yeah, he was ‘looking for bigfoot’ but didn’t know the only bigfoot out here was between his legs,” Natalie says.

I regret asking them for help. “Just... go ahead of us and get the ghosts to see if any of them can help us.”

“On it,” Natalie says before smacking Reggie’s bare ass and taking off.

“Are they helping?” Maddox asks.

“I... guess...” I say, honestly not quite sure but hoping.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



HIRO

When we reach the cabin, there are already five ghosts waiting for us. Charlotte is at the front, almost eager to see us.

“Anything you want, I’ll help with,” she assures me.

“Thank you... we need to figure out anything we can about Peter,” I say.

“I have someone,” she says as she hurries into the cabin.

Since the place is locked up, I go around back to the snazzy opening I’d made with my ass the last time I was here. Maddox follows me down into the basement, but I don’t have to go far before Charlotte shoves a man toward us.

“Jacob, please, you were here before Peter died, anything you might know,” she says, and I realize it’s the guy that was quite pissy with me the last time I was here.

He’s watching me, his eyes cold, and I realize that he vaguely looks like Peter. Maybe he’s related to him?

“What do you want to know?”

“Do you know how he died?” I ask.

Jacob looks completely nonchalant as he says, “Yeah, the kid killed him.”

“Ambrose?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“How?”

“Peter forced him to,” he says.

“What do you mean he forced him to?”

“He was dying of cancer, hadn’t let anyone know about it because when he found out, he only had a month or so to live. So he got this fucked-up idea that if the kid killed him, he wouldn’t pass on. He’d be able to stay here and speak to the kid,” Jacob says.

“He told you this?” I ask after telling Maddox what he was saying.

“No, I overheard it. I was dead by then. He didn’t know I was listening. The kid said he didn’t want to, but Peter threatened to kill his whole family if he didn’t, so the kid did it,” Jacob says. “Honestly, I think he’d already trained the kid enough that the thought of killing was attractive to him.

He probably didn't even give a shit about his family."

"Do you know where the body is?"

"Peter already had it planned. He had the hole dug and everything. I followed them out to it and..." He draws silent and when I turn around, I see why.

Peter is walking down the steps as the aura of the room shifts. One of the ghosts falls to his knees with a cry. Another grabs her throat. It's like they're all tossed back into the terror of their deaths.

"Jacob, please, you have to tell us where," I beg. I try to step between him and Peter so he stays focused on me, but it's like he's staring right through me.

Jacob groans as he grabs his head and backs away from Peter.

"Why don't you fucking stay out of this shit?" Peter screams.

"You and Ambrose dragged us into it," I say.

"We were simply going to play a fun goddamn game and then Connor just couldn't fucking listen," he growls.

"You pushed him to it."

"He's *weak*. He could have been perfect but he's weak," Peter says as Jacob falls to his knees and all the ghosts who'd been eager to help flee the room.

"Stop!" I yell and Peter stumbles to a halt. I see Jacob lift his head in relief as he fights to stand up but it's like he can't even find the strength in his legs.

Peter looks even more enraged now.

"Peter, you might believe that you'd do anything so you won't disappear and can keep ruining the lives of others, but this time, it looks like you pushed Ambrose too far," I say.

He's laughing but it's cold and makes me feel hollow inside. "He was just too goddamn weak."

"You drove a child to kill!"

"He should have gone so much farther. The day of that car crash, when I saw him staring at the body in wonder, I thought he was just like me, but later when he confessed what he could see, I realized it was the ghost he was staring at. He has the desire to kill, I didn't instill that in him. He just needs to fucking enjoy it," Peter says as he tips his head back like the thought of killing fills him with pure bliss.

"I'll take you to the body," Jacob says as he rushes past Peter.

Peter stops suddenly, his attention snapping to Jacob. "Don't you fucking dare," he screams.

"Come on," I tell Maddox as I realize I'm going to have to go through Peter's body to get out.

"Don't let him get in your head," Maddox urges.

I nod and use the strength I gain from Maddox to rush for the open door. Peter grabs for me and when his touch feels solid, it makes my stomach sink. "Don't touch me," I yell, but his emotions are driving him. He manages to grip onto me, his hands wrapping around me as fear bubbles up inside me.

"Hiro, tell me what to do," Maddox says anxiously.

Right. Maddox is here to ground me. Everything's fine. Everything *has* to be fine.

If I can't fight Peter, I need to give the others the strength to do so. "Back off," I growl, hoping Reggie and Natalie can keep Peter away, but what comes instead is even better.

I watch as Peter's victims rain down on him, grabbing and tearing at him now that he's distracted. He lets out a howl of anger as he twists and turns against them, but I take the opportunity to push past, back out into the daylight.

"Hurry," Reggie yells from a good distance ahead of me. I realize that he's following Jacob, who doesn't seem to be waiting for us. Maybe he knows he has to keep far away from Peter so he isn't

stopped again.

“Are you okay running?” I ask Maddox.

“Of course I am,” he says, and I know nothing I say will stop him as he does. We keep moving farther from the house as the sinking, dreadful feeling leaves me behind with only anxiety. I focus on my feet landing with each step as we move through the brush and over the roots.

The thick trees part ways for a large creek where Keaton is waving us past. It doesn’t look overly deep, so I step into the cold water that eats through my pants and start moving deeper into it until it’s up to my hips, slowing us down.

That’s the moment I feel something wrap around my ankle and yank my leg back. As I stumble to try to get my feet under me, I can’t step down. Falling forward, I reach out for Maddox but I miss him, smacking down into the water a second before I’m dragged straight under. The water isn’t even that deep but I can feel something pressing me down, pushing me straight down to the ground where all I can feel are sharp rocks that scrape against my hands and knees as I struggle.

Having not been prepared to dive down into the water, I hadn’t gotten enough air and I flail as I feel hands wrapped around me. They’re pulling me, trying to drag me up to the surface, making me realize that these hands are Maddox’s. These hands are trying to help me. I want to reach out to them, to grab onto them, but the weight is keeping me held down.

Panic is setting in since I need air. I absolutely need to breathe but I can’t. I can’t breathe at all. I’m fighting hard as the pressure holds me down tight but as hands wrap around my chest, I realize that I’m letting fear cloud my vision, which is giving Peter this strength. I focus on Maddox’s hands as I feel the pressure lessen a moment before I’m pulled up out of the water, gasping for breath.

Maddox’s grip tightens as his fingers dig into my skin while he drags me out of the water and lowers me onto the ground where he takes my face in his hands. “Are you okay? Hiro, are you okay?”

I’m coughing too much to answer and he refuses to wait before picking me up and pulling me farther from the water’s edge. I grasp desperately onto him as I look over at the water where Peter stands.

“I-I’m fine. Put me down before you hurt yourself,” I say.

“What the fuck was that?”

“Peter,” I say as I struggle to get down. “Maddox, please.”

He hesitates before lowering me to my feet. My legs feel weak, but I manage to remain standing. Reggie, Keaton, and Natalie are crowded around me, touching me and asking me if I’m okay, so I just nod.

“We have to keep moving,” I say.

“Hiro... I can’t let you keep walking into danger,” Maddox says.

I grab his hand, squeezing it tighter than I probably need to. “You can’t see them without me. Now let’s go.”

“Hiro—”

“Maddox, please,” I say. “You got shot. This was nothing like that.”

He doesn’t seem sure about any of this but as I get my weak legs to start moving under me, I manage to make my way forward, hoping to figure out where Jacob had gone.

“You aren’t going to win. Finding my body will do nothing,” Peter yells after me.

“This way,” Natalie says as she grabs my other hand.

“Wait. What do I get to hold?” Reggie asks. “And Keaton wants to hold something too!”

“No, I don’t,” Keaton says.

“I’ll take the back, you take the front,” Reggie says as he jumps onto my back. “I am now your

ghost shield.”

I’m not sure if that’s comforting or slowing me down, but I let him cling to me anyway, appreciating the feel of him.

That’s when I find Jacob standing just beyond a patch of trees staring down at the ground where a tree has grown up.

“Here?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

I clearly didn’t think this through as I realize we can’t just dig it up with our fingers.

“I’m going to get the coordinates to my team,” Maddox says.

“What do we do? If the team comes, they can’t just... dig this up. They’ll need permission to dig here and a reason why we think the body is here... Maddox, we don’t have time for all of that.”

Maddox stares at the spot on the ground that trees have grown up over. It wouldn’t be an easy feat digging up a grave unless the body was toward the top, but if Peter planned it... he wouldn’t have made such a simple mistake.

“Aw, that’s devastating,” Peter says as he walks toward us. “How sad.”

“Maddox...” I say.

“I know, I’m thinking...”

“Clock is ticking,” Peter says. “Can you hear it ticking down?”

I try to ignore him, but I know he’s not lying, the clock really is ticking down. “I will dig this fucking thing with my fingers if I have to.”

Maddox shakes his head. “No... there has to be something that will work. It’ll be okay,” he assures me but I’m not sure how it will be. “I’ll explain the situation to Parker, and we’re going to go talk to Ambrose, okay?”

“But I have nothing to show him for it. Nothing that’s changed,” I say.

“Please trust me,” Maddox says as he takes his outer shirt off and ties it to a branch. “I have the coordinates down, they’ll find it.”

“Okay,” I say as he pushes me back toward the road.

“Already running away, are you?” Peter taunts.

Turning away from him, I keep moving but he won’t stop following me. I’m terrified he’s going to try something else but about halfway back to the road, I hear sirens.

Mick comes running as soon as he sees us. “I’m so glad to see you guys are okay.”

“Do you have a car?” Maddox asks.

“I do.”

“I need it. And I need you to do everything you can to get them to dig up that damn body, okay?” Maddox asks.

“Yeah... okay. I can try,” he says as he hurries us over to his car and passes Maddox his key. Maddox puts the siren up on the car and after making sure the others know exactly where they’re going, he heads for the driver’s seat.

“I can drive,” I say, feeling like I need to do something.

“No, you can keep our car from crashing,” he says.

I didn’t even think about that. Now that Peter knows he can fuck with us...

“Call Ambrose,” Maddox instructs.

“Okay,” I say as I pull up the security app now that I have reception. I can’t see or hear anything, so I call for Ambrose.

“Ah, Hiro, have you accomplished what I needed to get done?” Ambrose asks.

Before I can say anything, Maddox pulls my phone closer to him. "We found the spot where Peter made you kill him. We know about him forcing your hand and we know where his body is. They're in the process of digging the body up now, but these things take time. That doesn't matter because Hiro doesn't need the body to send them away. He just needs your help," Maddox says.

Ambrose is quiet for a long moment. "What the hell do you expect that I'll do?"

"Hiro's power allows him to send people off," Maddox says, which most definitely isn't true. "But with someone strong like Peter... he's going to need your help. Which means he's going to need to be in the house with you."

Ambrose laughs. "God, do you think I'm stupid?"

"It doesn't matter what I think of you. What matters is that at the end of this, Patricia is alive. I'm not going to risk her life or Hiro's for fucking bullshit, do you hear me?"

"God, I hate hearing your grating voice," Ambrose says.

"Well, it won't be long and you won't have to hear it ever again. Now Hiro is going to come into our house and help you," Maddox says.

"Alone."

"No, I will be with him."

"Alone or I'll shoot her. If I even fucking *see* you, I will kill her."

"Fine. But if you hurt Hiro, I will fucking kill you," Maddox growls.

Maddox disconnects and hands me my phone as I stare at him in shock that he's going to let me in the house alone.

"Here's what's going to happen. You're going to have Reggie or whoever get the ghosts from the cabin to help you, okay? You're going to go in alone. You're going to feed that asshole whatever bullshit he needs to hear about how you're going to stop Peter. The ghosts are going to distract him and only once you're positive you're safe to, you're going to pull Patricia back into the spare room downstairs. That matters because that's the only door with a lock on it, okay? Lock the door, I'll do the rest. But you have to promise me you'll be safe."

I nod, not in love with the idea of dealing with Ambrose but knowing I'll do anything to get Patricia out. "I will be. I promise."

Maddox nods but when he reaches out and takes my hand, I can feel a quiver to it that tells me he's regretting this idea. He lifts my hand up and gives it a kiss. "I love you."

"I love you too, Maddox, but this is going to be fine."

"We're going on a long fucking vacation after this. Like... the beach or somewhere. Resort. Maybe a cruise ship. Just float off away from all of this stress."

I smile at the thrilling idea. "That sounds nice."

"And then maybe we'll get married at some point."

I glance over at him in surprise. "Are you... proposing to me?"

"No, not yet. Just... a statement. We're not going to look back and go 'Oh, remember how sweet the proposal was on the way to hopefully not get murdered?'" Maddox says.

I grin at him before squeezing his hand. "That's true. I think I'd like a... you know, kind of normal proposal. But I'm pretty sure I'd say yes."

"Pretty sure?"

"Like... ninety-nine percent sure," I tease.

"And what would make that one hundred percent?"

"If I could have my orgy painting at the wedding. I want it behind us as we kiss," I say.

He raises an eyebrow. "I'm already regretting this."

“No, don’t regret it!”

“It’s done... it’s either me or the orgy painting.”

I give him a look like I can’t believe he’d do this to me. “No... this is kind of like one of those moral choices where you can only save your loved one or a big group of people full of children and the elderly...”

Maddox glances away from the road to look at me. “Is it?”

I nod solemnly, which makes him grin. That’s when Maddox turns into our neighborhood and all joking drifts away as anxiety builds. As he nears our house where the road is blocked, I start to wonder if I can even do this. I’m not strong like Maddox. I don’t know how to fight or make up shit on the fly.

Maddox parks and turns to me before grabbing my face in his hands. “I fucking love you.”

“Stop. It’s okay,” I say as I lean in and kiss him gently. “I love you too.”

Reggie pops into the car with me. “Tell Poppa I love him too.”

“Reggie called you Poppa and says he loves you.”

“You better keep him so goddamn safe, Reggie.”

Reggie gives a curt nod. “I will.”

“Hiro, stand where I can see you in the camera. I won’t be able to see the ghosts, so I won’t know when you’re ready for us to move in.”

“Got it. I’ll give you an okay sign with my left hand, okay?”

“Good.”

I lean in to kiss him again as Reggie goes in at the same time, causing it to end up as a strange three-person kiss.

“Why do you look so disgusted by that?” Maddox asks.

“Because Reggie joined in, and it was awkward, and I feel like maybe there was some tongue...”

“There could have been,” Reggie says as he licks his lips and smacks my cheek.

“Alright, they’re not going to let us do this, so I’m going to tell them we’re going to go around back and you’re going to have to sneak in,” Maddox says as he gets out. He opens the trunk and stuffs me in a bulletproof vest as he explains what’s going to happen.

As Maddox spins some story to the others so they let us get closer to the house, I turn to my help.

“Reggie, are the ghosts ready?”

He nods as he hurries after me. “They are; I told them to stay back until we’re in position so he doesn’t look out the window and see them.”

“Okay,” I say as I head toward the house alone, which has to be one of the hardest things I’ve ever done, knowing that if I fuck up, Patricia might not make it out alive and... I might not either. I head to the locked back door and pull out my key as Reggie alone goes with me. I know the others will come, but we didn’t want them to spoil things before we even get inside. I slide the key into the door and swing it open.

“It’s just me. I’m alone,” I call.

“Have your hands up,” Ambrose says as he watches me from the doorway to the living room. I swing the door shut behind me and lift my hands straight up in the air. “Slowly lift your shirt and turn around.”

“I have a vest on, but that’s it. They made me put it on before letting me enter,” I say as I pull my shirt up to show that I’m not hiding any weapons on my body. “We found the location of Peter’s body after leaving the cabin and crossing the creek. It’s on the other side of the creek about a hundred or so feet.”

Ambrose looks pleased by this information as he nods, telling me we must be right. “Then why’s he still here?”

“I think it’s your connection to him, but we can work together to—”

That’s the moment Peter arrives. He grins as he looks between us. “Connor. Sweet, stupid Connor. You don’t actually believe that he can help, do you? He’s lying to you. They’re planning on having him distract you as they come in and kill you. Then you and I will be stuck together for eternity. How fun will that be?” Peter asks as he slowly walks up to Ambrose. Ambrose’s eyes shift over to me.

“He’s lying. He’s been trying to stop me this entire time. He tried drowning me in the fucking creek,” I say.

The look on Ambrose’s face tells me that he’s actually afraid of Peter. It’s the same look he wore when the ghosts tried killing him in the county jail.

“You can’t escape me,” Peter growls. “Nothing you can do can stop me. *THIS* is the end because you made it the end, Connor.”

I want to move farther into the room, but Peter has me blocked in the hallway. I can’t even see Patricia from here. “He’s getting in your head... you’re letting him get in your head,” I say.

Peter rushes me, but the moment he grabs for my throat I push into him, stepping straight through him.

Ambrose looks at me in pure shock, making me realize that this is something he can’t do at all. They can touch him... but he’s never learned how to *keep* them from doing it. “How did you do that?”

Peter screams as he tries to grab onto me.

“I can show you. I can help you,” I say, holding my hands out to him as I take another step toward the living room where I know Patricia is.

“Don’t fucking move,” Ambrose says as he lifts up his gun and keeps it aimed at my head.

“I can’t help you out here. You have to let me help you or we won’t get anywhere,” I say calmly.

“He’s lying to you,” Peter yells.

Ambrose grabs for his head as he starts to groan. It’s like he’s literally being driven insane by these ghosts. Is it because he can’t drop his focus on them like I can? Like how I can get reprieve by being away from them? When I’m constantly exposed to emotional ghosts it causes my nausea and headaches to be extreme, but I can still handle it.

“Why won’t you fucking *die*?” Ambrose growls as Peter grabs onto him, wrapping his arms around his neck.

“I will always be with you,” Peter says. “Always. Even in death. Not even killing yourself will get you away from me.”

Peter starts tightening his hold around Ambrose’s neck and the man staggers back to get away. I quickly try to move in, but Peter must tell Ambrose what I’m doing because he loosens his grip enough that Ambrose can aim his gun at me.

“I told you not to fucking move,” he growls, but at least I can see Patricia now. Her eyes lock on to mine as fear fills her expression. She’s now tied to a chair with tape over her mouth. Thankfully, the chair isn’t too big or I’d struggle to get it through the door when I decide to move.

“You killed me,” a ghost says from behind Ambrose.

“No! Get back! Get away from me!” Ambrose yells and I can see a sinking feeling cross his face before he glances back. He screams as he shoots at the ghost even though it’s quite clear he can’t hurt her. I take the distraction to rush forward as the dead fill the room, screaming and grabbing for the man who looks horrified. I hear Ambrose’s gun go off again as I latch on to Patricia before realizing that I didn’t give Maddox the signal... as if this chaos wasn’t enough for him to see what was going

on.

“Stop! It’s not my fault!” Ambrose yells as the ghosts drag him down.

“You killed me!” a woman screams.

“He made me!” Ambrose shouts.

“Yet you were the one who did it,” she says.

Ambrose is fighting against the ghosts that seem to be dragging him down. I debate rushing for his gun while he’s distracted, but I know I’m not skilled enough to do anything other than fumble. So I pull Patricia into the spare room and slam the door before locking it.

I hear Ambrose throw his body against the door while the cries of the ghosts fill the house.

I turn from the door, planning on dragging Patricia away from it, when I slam into Peter.

“You have fucking destroyed *everything*,” he screams.

“Back off,” I growl.

“I will fucking tear you apart. I will drive you to the brink. I will haunt your every fucking move for the rest of your goddamn life. I will be there for every fucking moment of it. I will ruin it all until you give up like Connor did. Do you understand what you’ve done?”

And I realize that maybe I don’t. Maybe I didn’t consider how horrible it’d be to have Peter there for every moment of my life. Never able to escape his abuse.

He reaches out to grab onto my throat but I refuse, stepping into him. “You will not touch me.”

“I will destroy you,” he threatens.

“No, you’re going to disappear. Drop down into hell for all I care. I will never, *ever* let you do to me what you’ve done to Ambrose.”

“Don’t you get that you have no control? All of this... all of this control, it’s all mine. Do you not understand that?”

“NO,” I shout as I step into him again and I see a strange emotion flick across his face. He takes an involuntary step back before hesitating.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Don’t you dare touch me,” I growl.

He stumbles back as he looks down at his hands. “What are you doing to me?”

“I’ve done nothing to you. You have no reason to remain here any longer; there’s nothing left for you here, Peter.”

He rushes at me before passing straight through me. With a yell he stumbles back and passes through the door, but it’s clear he won’t be in this world much longer and I’m quite pleased to see that, though that still doesn’t mean we’re safe.

But what fills me with relief more than anything is hearing Maddox outside that door.

Quickly, I tug at Patricia’s binds, using a pair of scissors to cut them away before pulling her into a hug once the tape is off her mouth. There’s a shake to her fingers as they sink into me.

“I’m so sorry,” I say as I hear noise fill the house. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m just glad you’re safe,” she whispers. “I can’t lose another son.”

“And I can’t lose another mother,” I say as I squeeze her in close and wait for Maddox to tell me I can leave the room.



I can't stop staring at the goddamn hole in the wall.

Ambrose has been removed but was raving like a madman as he was dragged off. Patricia has been checked over but was deemed fine, as was Hiro. Yet I can't stop staring at the damn hole in the wall.

"I kind of like it," Hiro says as he walks up behind me. "It signifies that I was so lightning fast I didn't get shot."

"No," I growl.

"I think I'm going to put a picture frame around it. Kind of make it a statement piece. 'Here be the day Hiro outran a bullet.'"

"If you put a picture frame around it, we're selling this house and buying a new one," I decide.

"No one wants a house that's clearly haunted," he says as he looks around... probably at the ghosts, who knows. "And who would watch you bathe if we moved away and the old lady couldn't follow?" He squeezes me to him. "Maddox, I'm fine. Your plan worked perfectly. The bullet wasn't even in my direction. He was shooting *at the ghosts*."

"I still regret it."

"Well... Patricia is safe and Ambrose is headed off to rot and Peter's gone, soooooo I don't."

With a sigh, I lean into him before kissing his cheek. "I guess. We're going on vacation and while we're gone, someone's filling in that damn hole."

"But I like it. We'll..." Hiro stops short. "Oh my god."

"What?" I ask in a panic.

He rushes over to his orgy painting. "He shot my motherfucking orgy painting! He shot her nipple clean off!"

I can't help it. I start laughing. It's like the anxiety of these past weeks all goes melting away at once.

"Don't laugh at my misery!"

"Her nipple! It's gone!" I say as I start smacking my leg. "Oh my god, it's actually gone..."

Hiro stares at me like I'm a heathen. "How dare you!"

"Oh... I needed that. God, this has been a mess, but I think it's finally over. Right? Please tell me it's finally over."

"I haven't seen Peter. So... I think! He moved on, much to his disgust."

"Good," I say as I pull him into my arms, relieved to have him to hold. I love the way he sinks into me.

"I'm glad you're safe as well," Hiro says. "Vacation after this."

"Deal," I say.

Together, we head outside where some people are still working and Patricia is sitting with Nicolás.

Patricia pulls Hiro in and squeezes him close. "You're going to be the death of me, kid."

"I promise I won't be. We're going to be super good after this," Hiro assures her.

"I feel like that's what you said last time and look where that ended up," Patricia says.

Hiro conveniently acts like he can't hear her and just continues hugging her. It's such a relief to feel that things, at least for now, have finally calmed down.

CHAPTER THIRTY



MADDOX

Following Avery, we walk into the county jail.

“I swear to god I’m not even sure why I’m part of this case when he refuses to talk to me,” she says. “He only wants Hiro.”

Hiro shrugs. “What can I say? I’m pretty wantable.”

“I agree,” I say.

Avery laughs as she shakes her head. Even though they gave it some time after Ambrose’s second arrest, they’ve gotten nothing from him beyond wanting to see Hiro. We still waited, hoping he’d cave but when he never did, Hiro eventually agreed to see him. I think, more than anything, he had this fear that he’d run into Peter when talking to Ambrose, even though he saw Peter moving on.

When we’re led into the room, Ambrose perks up, eyes only on Hiro. He looks absolutely delighted for a man facing life in prison.

“You did it,” he says excitedly.

“I did... what?” Hiro asks warily.

“You got rid of Peter. Peter’s gone. He’s finally gone. For the first time in years, I can hear myself think. He’s not there constantly in my ear, always telling me what to do. Making me play these... games, these... he’s gone.”

“Are you going to tell us everything, then?” Hiro asks. “I mean... if I won the game, I should get that at least, right?”

“It was Peter. He wanted to play the game and kill the people. It wasn’t me,” Ambrose says.

“You still killed them, though,” I say.

Ambrose immediately sours at hearing my voice. Clearly, he hasn’t warmed up to me. “Peter told me to.”

He doesn’t get it. He doesn’t mentally understand that Peter still needed Ambrose to make the kills, but I guess that’ll be for someone who is much better in that field than I am to dig through. So, I just sit back and let Hiro ask the questions I’d given him before we entered.

“How did you convince the people to play this game with you?” Hiro asks.

“I simply told them that I would kill their loved ones. People go to extreme lengths for the ones

they love. You can attest to that, can you not?" Ambrose asks.

"But you were in prison."

"Did they know that?" he asks.

Honestly, they probably didn't.

"It was simple, I told them they were going to do these things. When one hesitated, I showed him by killing that teacher who was like a daughter to him. They knew then. They knew they had to listen. Peter was the one who wanted to play the game. He thought it'd be fun to manipulate others like he had done to me, but the joke's on him because they were all people he cared about," Ambrose says, clearly not getting the point where Peter gave zero shits about these people. Just because they were a part of Peter's past life doesn't mean he cared about them.

"But... then why Barry? He has no relation to Peter."

"You can't tell me that man couldn't have killed his sister! Wouldn't that have been even better?" he asks, sure looking pleased by the idea.

Clearly the man didn't know Barry because he'd never do that. Instead, Barry basically caved to his fate.

"And the guy you sent for Maddox to kill. He even tried to kill me—"

Ambrose lets out a noise of discontent. "He wasn't supposed to hurt you. You don't fucking understand, do you? We were hurting Peter. I was leading you along so you could learn more about Peter!"

I stare at him while wondering why he thinks us chasing people around the city taught us shit about Peter. None of these people seemed to know much about Peter or even care about him. Barry's sister barely knew him. Looking in deeper, we found that the man who shot at me was Peter's half-brother who'd met him a few times. These people were just innocents dragged into a fucked-up game that only made sense in Ambrose's head.

"See, I couldn't be blatant about it or Peter would know!" Ambrose says, sounding thrilled to be explaining this. "So the moment he suggested this game, I planned it all out. I found those connected to him and I picked away at him. All the while, he never noticed but it led you closer and closer to him."

He never noticed or never cared?

Hiro looks over at me, clearly feeling the same way.

Ambrose doesn't seem to notice our expressions as he goes on. "It was fucking brilliant! He would never have let me come to you to tell you that I needed him gone. I figured it all out and it worked. Peter is gone! You don't understand how it was having him in my head constantly, and if I didn't listen, he'd try to kill me. He'd drive me insane. He'd..." He trails off, his expression turning grim. "Ah, doesn't matter. You won! *I* won! We are all winners!"

"Are we? What about all the people who had to die to get here?" Hiro says, a bite to his words.

Ambrose hesitates. "They were necessary sacrifices. Peter did it."

"After Peter's death, he didn't have the means to kill these people. *You* did," Hiro says, rightfully getting emotional about it.

I set a hand on his leg because he can't let his emotions sway this conversation.

Hiro seems to know what I mean because he solemnly nods. "I just don't get it."

Ambrose watches Hiro like he's truly confused. "What the fuck is there not to get? Peter is gone! Now everyone is saved!"

"What about the boxes? The seven sins stuff," Hiro says.

"That was simply to distract Peter. Smart, wasn't it? He thought it was funny. I was hoping you guys didn't get too caught up in it. I had it all fucking planned out. *AlIII* planned." He laughs like he's

loving this. Like he's thrilled by the idea that he gets to share what happened.

"How did you get Bill Smith, the guy who shot Maddox, to wait out there?"

"I told him he'd know the day to go out. Peter was strong enough he could move things and it worked well to persuade them. He simply used their own fear to push them. Bill let his own fear drive him out there," Ambrose says.

Hiro asks a few more questions, but it's clear Ambrose isn't planning on being much help. He just keeps going on and on.

"I think that's enough," I say, knowing we're going to get nowhere when he's stuck in this bizarre mindset.

Ambrose doesn't seem to think anything of it as Hiro and I leave the room and reconvene with Avery outside.

"He just doesn't get it and it pisses me off so much. He killed so many people. He ruined so many lives but all he can think of is himself. He just thinks he's so brilliant... I just..."

I squeeze Hiro's shoulder. "I know. It's inexcusable but he doesn't see it that way and he likely never will."

"You guys have been a lot of help on this," Avery says. "The only missing piece is that we haven't quite yet figured out who the woman the necklace belonged to was. I guess as long as she's safe..." She pulls out her tablet and brings up a picture of the necklace. "We have an alert out in case anyone inquires about it missing, but that's the most we can do."

"Let me see that," I say, realization dawning on me. Something I'm surprised didn't hit me before. "Hiro... doesn't that design look a lot like the locket Spite found?"

Hiro hesitates as he examines it. "Um... I guess? I don't really remember."

"Spite?" Avery asks.

"A bird," I say. "It's probably nothing. And I'm likely wrong, but I'll look into it and see what I can find."

"Great," she says with a smile. "I heard you two are going on vacation next week."

"We are," Hiro says, sounding very excited. "It'll be so peaceful and wonderful."

"You two deserve it," she says. "Good job."

"You too," I say.

I'm not sure we were able to get the answers we wanted from Ambrose, but at least we have something more than we came here with.

"I need to stop at the bookstore. I told Barry I'd cover for him during lunch," Hiro says.

"And I shall join you," I say.

"You know I'm okay to go alone, right? Like I'm not going to run off, get abducted, any of that jazz?"

"I feel like you said that before."

"*Again.*"

"Oh, you won't do that stuff *again*?" I ask, quite suspicious.

He grins at me as he heads for the way out with me by his side.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



HIRO

“Do you know what I heard is good for the soul?” I ask as I look around the quiet bookstore Barry just left. He’s back to normal, which is a relief. I haven’t seen his mother lately either, so hopefully she’s fucked off.

“Kittens? Ice cream?”

“A quickie in the back while Barry’s gone,” I say as I point to the storage room. “Especially now that you’re completely healed.”

Maddox’s eyebrows quirk up. “I’m not going to lie, I’m really turned on right now.”

Waggling my eyebrows, I kick off with my rolling chair, skidding toward the back room.

“What if someone comes in?” Maddox asks.

“Then I guess we’ll have to be quick,” I say a moment before I sexily slam into the table I’d just organized this morning. My beautifully decorated books teeter before toppling. “That hurts my heart a little but I’m horny enough that I don’t care.”

Maddox laughs as he walks toward me.

“Push me, my love,” I say as he grabs the chair and gives it a quick spin.

“Dear god, no. This is not what I had in mind or planned or any of that,” I say as I put a leg up to stop myself by slamming my foot into his thigh. He grabs the leg before I accomplish any of this and then starts dragging me into the back by my foot. Like sexy people do. When we reach the doorframe, the chair gets stuck, so he just keeps pulling as the chair begins to tip and I start to slide off.

“You’re going to make me fall!”

“Nah, it’ll be fine,” he says. “Come now. Into the closet with you.”

I slide out of the chair as Maddox drags me into the back room by my leg before swinging the door shut inches from my face.

“There we are. Why are you still wearing clothes?”

“Maybe... just *maybe* it has something to do with you dragging me in here.”

“You’re saying if I dragged you hard enough, it would’ve pulled the clothes right off your body?” he asks. He yanks a shoe off and whips it then tosses my second shoe to the other side of the room. “I really hope no one comes in and you have to help them because it’s not gonna be easy to find all your

clothes.”

“You’re enjoying this way too much,” I say with a grin as he starts yanking me all around by my pants. Somehow, he eventually gets them tugged off, but I’m also not sure my cleaning skills justify wallowing around on the floor, so I push myself up.

“You’re so sexy,” he says as he grabs me, picking me up and setting me down on a box that I immediately crush with my body. I feel like the box is trying to swallow me whole as Maddox steps back to cackle. “I really thought the box was full!”

“Well, it’s not. I hadn’t broken it down yet... until my body did, that is.”

“This is my favorite package to open up,” he says as he peers inside where I feel like I’m not looking the least bit sexy crammed in a box far too small to fit my ass.

I shimmy around a bit until I manage to pull my underwear off and fling it at him.

“I didn’t think my new package could get any better and it just did,” he says as he whips my underwear while I laugh.

“You’re so ridiculous,” I say as I hold my hand out. “Now help me escape.”

“Why the hell would I ever want to do that?”

“Because this is supposed to be a quickie, and currently, it’s not quick at all as I wallow around stuck in a box and—”

I hear the door ding. “*Fuuuck.*”

“Finish getting undressed, I’ll handle it,” he assures me.

“Some people spend like an hour in here,” I say. “We should have put the ‘away at lunch’ sign up.”

Maddox grins at me. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure they’re gone within minutes.”

“You’re making it sound like that’s a good thing! Don’t abuse my customer... and you’re gone.” I watch the door swing shut and sigh while wondering what I should do. First order of business would probably be getting my clothes that were flung around the room.

I crawl back to where the shelves and boxes I haven’t gotten to yet are stacked. Seeing a shoe, I stretch up for it as a ghost I’ve never seen before waltzes into the room.

The woman stops and goes, “Huh,” while staring at me currently wearing only my shirt and socks.

Hoping she’ll just move on, I try to continue on like I don’t even notice her there. If I give her no reason to even believe that I can see her, she’ll likely wander off just like she’d wandered in. I just would kind of love if she didn’t stare at my ass before leaving.

I’ll simply get dressed.... that is, if I can figure out where the hell Maddox chucked my underwear and pants. I swear to god, he just made them vanish into thin air or something, all while I was suffering in a box. But if I hold something over my ass, she’ll probably wonder why I’m shielding myself when no one’s in the room.

That’s when another ghost wanders in.

“Holy hell, Linda, what are you doing?” the new ghost asks.

“I think it’s a perv, Irene.”

What. The. Hell?

“Might be. What’s he reaching for?”

“His shoe. He must have stripped in such a frenzy that he sent shit everywhere. He does have a nice ass, though, but man... what a weirdo.”

Why am I being both complimented and harassed in the same sentence?

“I’m waiting for him to turn around,” Linda says.

“I wanna smack that ass,” Irene decides as I quickly jump up and grab the shoe that’d ended up on

the top shelf.

“Look at that nice ass shake. Jump, boy, jump!” Linda says.

Dear. God. Save me.

Holding the shoe over my groin, I turn around in a new search for my underwear that Maddox had to have destroyed because how else can I not find a trace of it? This room isn’t *that* big.

“What a tease! Drop the shoe!” Linda yells.

“I’m gonna smack that ass,” Irene decides.

Maybe if I get my clothes on, they’ll leave. Screw the underwear, I’ll just tug on the pants and...

The door swings open and Maddox steps inside before yanking his shirt off and chucking it at my face.

“I told you to be naked,” he says.

“Holy fuck,” Irene declares. “Holy fuck. Now I wanna smack *that* ass too.”

I do too.

“The customer is gone?” I ask, trying to ignore the whistles coming from far too close.

“Completely gone. May never return but that doesn’t matter. What matters is this,” he says as he drops his pants and underwear right there.

“Dear baby Jesus!” Irene calls out.

“Hallelujah, ya mean?” Linda asks.

“Oh, he can hallelujah all over my face,” Irene says. “They both can.”

Here I am, clutching my shoe like it’s some kind of cock saver while Maddox looks sinfully sexy. The issue is the two ghosts seem so invested at this point that I’m afraid that even if I ask them to leave, they’ll refuse. But I don’t think they’re going to get bored.

I mean... can anyone blame them when they’re looking at Maddox?

I sure as hell think not.

Maddox steps up to me while I’m still just staring. He cups my face as I feel his breath on my lips. “Do you need help?” he asks as he takes hold of the shoe.

“I sure do, big daddy,” Irene says.

“Ride ’em, cowboy. You ride ’em!” Linda says.

I watch him drop it as he cups my face in one hand and my ass cheek in the other and draws me into him, mouth clashing against mine since I’m preoccupied by Linda’s face up in my space.

Maddox nips my lip, like he’s trying to pull my attention back to him, and let me just say, he sure does know how to draw me in even when peeping ghosts are harassing me.

“Irene, what are your thoughts on making this our new home?” Linda asks.

“No!” I shout.

“No?” Maddox asks.

“Not you. Yes to you, yes all day.”

“Ooh, you yes him hard,” Linda says.

“No to you,” I say as I jab a finger at Irene who is so close I could have kissed her too.

Irene jerks back then scrutinizes me.

“Reggie here?” Maddox guesses.

“No, some random ladies who I was hoping were going to move on,” I say as I stare at them.

“He can see us,” Irene whispers.

“He can’t see us. They’re roleplaying. I’ve heard of this before. I want them to play doctor! Yes, please,” Linda says as she takes a seat and rubs her hands together like she’s getting ready for a show.

“Yes, I can see you, *Linda*. Please move on, like... out of this room.”

Linda freezes as Irene backs up next to her. “I told you that motherfucker can see us.” Irene raises her hand like she’s a student and I’m suddenly the teacher. “What?” I ask. “May I join in?”

“No, shoo. Out, please. Go.”

The two women lean into each other and whisper for a moment before Irene settles in next to Linda. “We’ve decided not to. Thank you,” Irene says.

“You... getting close to being ready?” Maddox asks.

“Oh, he’s gonna be real close soon. Tug his balls. My husband loved it when I tugged the balls,” Irene says. “Twist the nips and tug the nuts is what I always say.”

“Your husband loved it when I did it to him too,” Linda says.

Irene glares at Linda. “Did we not agree that we wouldn’t speak about that, *LINDA*?”

“You literally choked me... to death... I’m pretty sure I get a pass.”

“Dear god, you act like you didn’t come back to life. You were fine.”

“What is happening?” I whisper.

“My nuts are getting cold, that’s what’s happening,” Maddox says.

“Did you two kill each other?”

“Nah, nah, we got over that. Became besties then died in a flaming ball of a drunken boat crash but really, don’t worry about that,” Irene says. “Please, continue. Pretend we’re not here.”

“Which one would you rather fuck?” Linda asks.

“I have to pick? Both at the same time, hands down,” Irene says.

“Two’s not too much?”

“Did you forget I had *your* brother and husband at the same time to make up for you shagging my man?” Irene says.

That’s the moment Keaton decides to grace us with his presence.

“Hiro, I—fucking fuck...” he says as he tries to shield his face. “Why? *Why*? My *eyes*! You’re at *work*.”

“Keaton, can you take these two lovely ladies and drag them out of here?” I ask.

Keaton is still in the process of cringing and crying about his eyes.

“I will make sure Reggie can’t pester you for a whole day if you do,” I say.

“Right this way,” Keaton says as he grabs their wrists and starts dragging them.

“Wait! No! We wanna watch!” Irene says.

“Can I call you Daddy?” Linda asks as Keaton drags them from the room, leaving me in complete silence.

“Problem solved,” I announce.

“I... am horribly curious about what just went on.”

“I know you are, but lunch break is just dwindling away and a ghost told me to tug your balls, so...” I say, reaching down under to cup his balls.

“You’re getting sex advice from ghosts now?”

“They honestly didn’t sound like the best people to get advice from, so maybe I’ll just do my own thing.”

Maddox holds up the lube he must have grabbed from my bag. “I think you do a mighty fine job at it, but I might be a bit biased.”

He squeezes my ass cheek as he pulls me into him, a wet finger trailing over my skin as my lips press against his. How much nicer it is now that we’re alone to just enjoy each other without anyone judging or observing us. As I reach down, taking his thick cock in my hand, his finger presses against

me, pushing until he slips inside, rubbing me as he grinds his hips into me, causing his cock to move against mine. Taking the lube from where he'd set in on a shelf, I squeeze some into my hand before running my fingers over his cock, circling my thumb over the head before letting my fingers slide down his length.

Maddox presses another finger inside me, making me moan as his other hand strokes me. "Still alone?" he says with a grin.

"Very much," I say as he pulls his fingers out of me before grabbing my hips and turning me around. As I press back into him, his cock rubs against my ass, leaving a trail of lube over my skin. He presses the head of his cock against me, slowly pushing inside of me as I feel myself stretching to accept him. One of his hands is on my hip, the other gripping tightly onto my cock as he kisses my neck gently while he slides inside me. But it's not enough. I need to feel him. I need him to drive me crazy.

"More," I breathe.

He shifts his hips before thrusting into me, making a moan escape me as his hand strokes me. He picks up a quicker rhythm, moving inside of me, as I grip tightly onto the shelf I'm pressed against. He slides his hand under my thigh, lifting my leg so he can go in at a better angle, driving himself in deeper.

"Fuck... yes... there," I whisper, afraid someone might slip into the store without us hearing. He's driving me crazy with each thrust, pushing himself deeper inside me as I clutch onto the shelf to hold my weight.

The sounds of pleasure coming from Maddox makes my own bloom inside me, makes my body ache as it builds up inside me.

"I'm close," I say, not really wanting to do any massive cleanup when we're done but also in no position to tell Maddox to do anything other than what he's already doing. I feel like if I even let go, my legs aren't going to hold me as he buries himself inside me.

My balls tighten as I press back into him with a moan as I come into his hand. Pleasure ripples through me as he keeps moving, kissing and sucking my throat as his cock pushes deep inside me until he comes.

After Maddox pulls out of me, I turn around to face him, breath coming heavy as I lean into him.

"I guess we better get dressed before anyone comes in," he says as he goes over to his neatly piled clothes while I look around the room scattered with my stuff.

"Yes, that sounds lovely, now where are my underwear?" I ask.

Maddox looks around for a long moment before shrugging. "Huh. I don't know. What did you do with them?"

"*You* are the one who flung them off into oblivion after cramming me into a box!"

"Hmm... that sounds like a pain, but here's your shoe," he says with a grin. He even reaches down and tries to put it on me like I won't notice that I'm missing the other items. "Funny."

I drop the shoe and get my shirt on before collecting my pants while still having absolutely no idea where my underwear is.

Maddox even starts hunting with me now that he's fully dressed before glancing at his phone. "Barry's set to be back in five minutes. I'm going to just put it out there that your underwear are in a super-safe place where I believe they're going to stay. Just go commando."

"And what happens when Barry *finds my underwear*?" I ask.

"Nah, just tell him you'll take care of the room, and we'll find it some other day." He's all innocent smiles as I raise an eyebrow at the fiend.

“Oh my god,” I say before deciding that I’ll get cleaned up and if Barry isn’t still here when I’m done, I’ll go back to my search.

When I return to the storage room, I find Natalie and Reggie there.

“Keaton told me you were flashing innocent ladies,” Reggie says.

“No, that didn’t happen, but you know how much I love you two?” I ask.

I hear Maddox walk in behind me. “You’re now conning your friends?”

“One hundred percent. I might have lost my underwear in here and need to find them. So can you please look?”

“What do we get in return?” Natalie asks.

I stare at them while trying to think of what I could possibly give them before backing up beside Maddox, turning him around and yanking his pants down.

“I’ll take it,” Natalie says before hurrying off.

“I require an ass smack,” Reggie says, so one smack later, I have two more on the job.

“Sometimes... I just... question your sanity,” Maddox says, making me laugh.

“You’re the one who whipped my underwear into oblivion!” I say as I join the search.

As I do, I can’t help but think how lucky I am that the ghosts who decided to haunt me are people I love. What if it was someone I hated? How dreadful would that be? Then my mind strays to what is keeping them here. Natalie claims, and Barry’s mother confirmed, that she didn’t die the way the police thought she did. But do I want her to move on? I don’t...

And then there’s Keaton... what’s still holding him here? Is there more to his story? There must be more to all of their stories.

“This is ridiculous,” Keaton grumbles. When I look up, I realize that he’s helping too. I thought he did me a favor so he didn’t have to hang around Reggie, yet here he is?

“You should ask for a reward like we got,” Reggie says.

“What kind of reward?” Keaton asks.

“Maddox’s naked ass,” Natalie says.

Keaton growls, clearly not satisfied with that option.

“Reggie, can you look behind that box?” I ask.

“This one?” Reggie asks before sighing and bending over so his ass is sticking out.

“Yeah, that one,” I say, feeling like that’s a good enough reward for Keaton who is side-eyeing what’s going on over there.

“There ain’t shit down here but cobwebs and desperation,” Reggie declares.

“Ah, too bad,” I say as I hear the door ding. “I have to go get this, but please keep working hard.”

“Good thing we love you,” Natalie says.

“Good thing,” I agree as I step out with Maddox to see who’s walked in.

“Huh,” Maddox says as I look over to see him pull my underwear out of his pocket. “Lookie there.”

I raise an eyebrow at him as he grins and quickly shoves it back in. “Are you serious?”

“I vaguely remember doing that, now that I think about it...” he says. “Should we tell them?”

“I suppose we should... or we could make them suffer a moment longer. Just a small moment.”

Maddox grins at me before squeezing my hand. “You know it makes me hot when you’re evil.”

I start laughing as I lean forward and sneak a kiss while the bookshelves keep anyone from seeing us. How this man can make every moment so delightful, I’ll never know, but I’m thrilled I get to experience it for the rest of our lives... and maybe even beyond that.

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:

www.facebook.com/groups/AliceWinters

Or joining my newsletter at:

www.alicewintersauthor.com

You will also be the first to know about what's next! 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!

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

I need to thank my wonderful team who helps me with so much. I couldn't have done it without all of you!

A huge thank you to Courtney who always goes above and beyond. She does a wonderful job with beta and editing work and I couldn't do it without her.

I also want to thank my mom who has always been a huge support and has always read everything I've written!

I also want to thank my wonderful group of beta readers including Savannah, Meredith, Kat, and Sam who are always there to help make my book shine! They are so supportive and helpful through every step of a book's journey!

I also want to thank Lori, my proofreader! She's not only fantastic at what she does but is always very encouraging!

And thank you, Natasha, for the beautiful cover!

I couldn't do it without this wonderful group. I appreciate all of you so much.

ALSO BY ALICE WINTERS

Medium Trouble

[Ghost of Lies](#)

[Ghost of Truth](#)

[Ghost of Deceit](#)

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 \(Ace's Wild Book 3\)](#)